

Equality prescribed? Contextual determinants of citizens' support for boardroom gender quotas across Europe

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Abstract

We provide the first cross-national comparative study of citizens' support for affirmative action policies in the economy using the example of gender quotas for company boards. In contrast to previous studies, we focus on the contextual level and analyse how factors related to political institutions and actors, and economic and social structure, shape citizens' support and the gap in support between men and women. We apply multilevel regression analyses of the 2011 Eurobarometer data for 27 European countries. Levels of support, and gender gaps in support for boardroom quotas vary largely between countries. Contextual factors related to gender equality in social and economic life, and societal support for state intervention are the most important determinants of cross-national variation. Citizens' endorsement of the quota is low in countries with high levels of gender equality in social and economic life, while support is higher in countries where interventionist policies are widely accepted.

Key words: affirmative action policies, gender inequality, discrimination, political sociology, Europe, multilevel regression analysis

JEL classification: J7 Labor Discrimination

1. Introduction

The implementation of group-based policies represents a possible means of redressing inequality and unequal opportunity faced by underrepresented groups in various societal arenas. According to proponents of group-based rights, individual rights have shown to be insufficient to fight structural discrimination against members of underrepresented groups (e.g. Young, 1990). Affirmative action programmes constitute an outcome-based example of such group-based policies, as they imply that members of underrepresented groups are given preference over others in selection processes for leadership positions and/or public offices (Harrison et al., 2006). The contentious issue of the promotion of women to leading business positions has taken hold in the European public sphere. The EU parliament put this topic in the foreground of the political arena with its non-binding resolution of July 2011, asserting that boardroom quotas should be implemented in all EU member states to raise the level of female board representation to 30 percent by 2015 and 40 percent by 2020 (Armstrong and Walby, 2012). Since then, several European countries have implemented quotas which are binding on companies (Kirsch 2017a). However, large disparities in the proportion of female board members remain across European countries, ranging from 37.1 percent in France and only 8.8 percent in the Czech Republic in 2016 in the largest stock-listed companies (European Commission, 2016). Consequently, the issue of affirmative action policies toward women has gained in salience, started to polarize actors in the public debates (e.g. Chaperon, 2015) and contributed to the rise of anti-gender movements in several European countries. It therefore comes as a surprise that we know little about the contextual determinants of citizens' attitudes toward gender quotas for corporate leadership positions, as the scientific debate has so far been concentrated on affirmative action policies in the U.S. and attitudes of (white) Americans toward (existing or hypothetical) programmes for ethnic minorities (e.g. Harrison et al., 2006; Krysan, 2000). Therefore, the empirical literature is mainly based on national samples and focuses on individual and group-related determinants of attitudes toward affirmative action policies. However, as previous cross-national research on various political attitudes has shown, individual factors represent only one side of the coin, while at the same time contextual factors related to political institutions, social structure, and social norms exert substantial influence on individuals' attitudes (e.g. Mau, 2003; Svallfors, 2007).

This article aims to fill this gap by providing the first cross-national comparative study of citizens' support for affirmative action policies in the economy using the example of female representation on company boards. Using the 2011 Eurobarometer data as our basis, we will investigate the role played by political institutions, economic and social structure, and social

norms on citizens' support for affirmative action policies across EU countries. The attitudinal measure we analyse is the support for legislation introducing weak preferential treatment of women on company boards (hereafter "support for gender quotas"). Weak preferential treatment implies that "members of the target group are given preference over others if and only if their other qualifications are equivalent" (Harrison et al., 2006: 1014). According to the attitudinal measure provided by Eurobarometer 2011, the support levels among citizens for affirmative action policies vary largely between European countries (see Figure 1). Furthermore, not only the average level of support for affirmative action policies, but also the gender gap in support varies considerably across countries. Therefore, besides the general relevance of contextual factors, we investigate the differentiated role that these factors might play among the target group (women) and the non-target group (men) of the policy. Therefore, our research questions are, first, what country-level factors influence citizens' support for a gender quota; second, how do these factors impact (a) the overall level of support and (b) the gap in support between the target and the non-target group. Our main findings point to the importance of contextual factors related to gender equality in social and economic life, and societal support for state intervention in explaining cross-national variation in support for gender quotas: citizens' endorsement of the gender quota is low in countries with high levels of gender equality in social and economic life, while support is higher in countries where interventionist policies are widely accepted. Furthermore, members of the target and non-target groups tend to be similarly affected by contextual determinants in their support for gender quotas.

[Insert figure 1 here]

The article is structured as follows: in the next section, we will first explain why target group members are more likely than non-target group members to support affirmative action policies. Then, we will present the theoretical influence that policies, political parties, factors related to social structure and the labour market, and social norms might exert on citizens' support for affirmative action policies toward women. We will conclude the theoretical framework section by discussing the effect such contextual determinants might have on the gender gap in support for affirmative action policies. Thereafter, the data, operationalization, and methods will be described. We conclude by highlighting our main results, describing their theoretical and policy implications, and addressing limitations of our study as well as issues for further research.

2. Theoretical framework

Gender quotas represent interventionist policies and clearly surpass regulations only guaranteeing equal treatment (e.g. Krysan, 2000). The endorsement of affirmative action

policies in the form of binding quotas therefore differs from more general attitudes toward gender equality since it does not only imply support for equal rights for men and women, but also an acceptance of governmental intervention in entrepreneurial freedom. This may explain why gender quotas are such a contested issue despite high and rising levels of gender equality in Europe. Support for gender equality and for affirmative action policies toward women are therefore two distinct attitudinal dimensions. In line with the principle-policy gap highlighted by Krysan (2000) with regard to racial policy attitudes, one can endorse the principle of equality but reject the idea of state interventionism in this matter. The acceptance of the gender quota for company boards might therefore be more strongly tied to whether someone belongs to the target group of the measure or not as compared to more general attitudes towards gender equality.

The individualistic and group-based perspectives of previous research on affirmative action policies consistently highlighted the importance of interest-based explanations for understanding variations in citizens' support for such policies (e.g. Harrison et al., 2006). The interest-based explanation is derived from the rational choice theory. Accordingly, individuals who are likely to (or who expect to) benefit from a policy are more likely to be supportive of this policy (Mau, 2003). This explanation can be applied to attitudes toward affirmative action policies, which are designed to provide a group-based solution to a group-based problem; i.e., unequal treatment based on membership in specific demographic groups (Harrison et al., 2006: 1015): members of the target groups are more likely to be in favour of affirmative action policies that are believed to help their own demographic group (Harrison et al., 2006). By contrast, members of the non-target group are likely to oppose such policies because they perceive members of the target groups as competitive threats for valued (but scarce) social resources, statuses and privileges (Bobo, 2000). Previous studies have consistently provided evidence confirming this interest-based explanation (on support for gender equality see e.g., Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; on support for affirmative action policies, see e.g., Harrison et al., 2006). This leads us to draw the first hypothesis: *women are expected to be more supportive of gender quotas than men* (Hypothesis 1).

However, the position and opportunities of target and non-target group members vary according to their social context and the degree of equality achieved in a society. Therefore, societal factors have to be included in an explanation of support for affirmative action policies. Political institutions, social norms, and structural factors have repeatedly been shown to be relevant in explaining political attitudes in general. Political sociologists argue that public policies alter the opportunity structures of citizens and thus influence their demand for governmental redistribution and intervention (Ferrarini, 2006; Svallfors, 2007). Previous

results from social psychology and social values research show that individuals' socialization in a society's normative framework shape individuals' perceptions and attitudes toward conformity with existing social norms (Inglehart, 1977; Paxton and Kunovich, 2003). Furthermore, individuals' opinions are shaped by 'exposure' to different social groups, diverging ideas and beliefs in everyday life (Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004), whereby the propensity for contact to different groups and beliefs depends on the social and labour market structure of a country.

These previous results for political attitudes can be transferred to the issue of affirmative action policies. Consent to state interventions to foster equal opportunities for specific underrepresented groups will therefore be dependent not only on individuals' self or group-based objective interests but also on their perception of the societal status quo, whether they believe the current situation to be fair or just, and on the socialization of equality norms represented by the institutional and political context. Furthermore, individuals' general attitude toward state intervention in markets and business plays a role in the support for gender quotas. In the following, we will therefore review possible country-level determinants of the support for affirmative action policies and the gender gap in support, focusing on three areas: (1) politics and policies; (2) economic and social structure; (3) social norms. All factors are expected to influence the support for affirmative action policies in two ways: they will impact the *overall level of support* in a country and shape the *gap in support* between the target and the non-target group.

With respect to the overall level of support, we differentiate two basic mechanisms underlying the relationship of contextual factors and citizens' attitudes toward gender quotas for company boards. On the one hand, we can expect a positive link between contextual factors and citizens' political orientations and policy preferences: political institutions are likely to alter citizens' attitudes through the introduction of policies and by leading the political debate, while citizens' attitudes in turn are also likely to shape politicians' decisions to introduce policies (Ferrarini, 2006). With respect to the exposure mechanism, it can furthermore be concluded that higher levels of equality imply more intergroup contact that then leads to greater support for affirmative action policies. By expanding these considerations to the other contextual factors, we can assume that institutions, policies, and social norms have formative influences on citizens' attitudes, leading individuals' attitudes to conform with the normative principles embedded in the institutional structures and promoted in society. Consequently, we would expect a positive relationship between citizens' support for affirmative action policies toward women and the contextual factors representing gender equality.

On the other hand, owing to the strong governmental intervention implied in the introduction of gender quotas, we may also assume a reverse relationship. The need for government intervention may in fact be accepted more, the lower the actual level of equality in a society, and vice versa, the level of support for gender quotas might diminish when high levels of gender equality are achieved. This would be in line with the findings of previous research showing an inverse relationship between public policy and public opinion (Wlezien, 1995). Moreover, Giger and Nelson (2013) show that support for social spending is impaired by perceived economic strain. Transferred to the analysis of affirmative action policies, citizens might reject further state intervention in countries where gender equality has already reached a high level or where they believe the intervention is too economically costly.

Consequently, we would expect a negative relationship between citizens' support for affirmative action policies and contextual factors representing equality. In the remainder of this section, we will discuss these two mechanisms for the different contextual factors that may influence the support of affirmative action.

2.1 Politics and policies

Political institutions can influence citizens' attitudes in various ways. First, the introduction of public policies may alter the opportunity structures for citizens in terms of the incentives, possibilities and constraints they produce. The implementation of public policies can modify the behaviour of citizens targeted by the policies (Svallfors, 2007). Besides affecting citizens' behaviour, public policies may also shape citizens' perceptions, orientations, and norms: the implementation of specific public policies can influence the visibility of social phenomena (Svallfors, 2007) and can have a signalling role in pointing to the behaviours that are considered appropriate (Sjöberg, 2004). Institutions therefore have a function of embodying and setting norms about what is fair and just: by implementing public policies, they can influence the way citizens perceive the rights and obligations shared by members of their political community (Mau, 2003; Svallfors, 2007). We assume that the current legislation on quotas for women, the female representation in the political process and the position of parties as key political actors to be important dimensions of political institutions with possible impacts on citizens' support for affirmative action policies.

An existing gender quota can induce a favourable climate for gender equality as it creates positive spillover effects (e.g., Kunze and Miller, 2014), but quotas might also cause resentment among citizens who reject state intervention in the economy. European countries show a large variation in the implementation of gender quotas for company boards. Only a minority of European countries (eight out of 27) had established binding quotas by 2011, the year the

Eurobarometer survey we use as our data source was conducted; and these regulations were mostly not implemented before 2010 (European Commission's Network, 2011). In addition, the female representation in politics is likely to impact citizens' support for affirmative action policies (see Ruedin, 2012 on citizens' attitudes toward women as political leaders). As the field of politics constitutes a societal arena in which leaders and representatives are highly visible, women in leading positions may create positive spillover effects within the general population by inducing higher acceptance of women in leading positions. Moreover, it has been argued that women in politics can act as gatekeepers to push for more gender equality (Beauregard, 2016; Ferrarini, 2006) or for more family-friendly policies (Misra, 2003). Based on the two conflicting mechanisms described above, we formulate two competing hypotheses for the relationship of political institutions and citizens' support. First, we assume that *the higher the level of gender equality in policies and politics, the greater will be the support for gender quotas among citizens* (Hypothesis 2a). Second, we assume that *the higher the level of gender equality in policies and politics, the lower will be the level of support for gender quotas among citizens* (Hypothesis 2b).

As political parties belong to the most prominent actors in the public and media debates, they are likely to shape citizens' support for affirmative action policies. For our research question, two main ideological orientations among political parties are relevant: positions tending toward libertarian values and positions tending toward an interventionist role of the state. Indeed, supportive attitudes toward equal opportunities for underrepresented groups are related to a libertarian ideological dimension. Owing to the strong state intervention concomitant with affirmative action policies, political parties' endorsement of strong libertarian values, on the one hand, or preferences for an interventionist role of the state, on the other, are likely to influence citizens' support for affirmative action policies. With respect to the impact of political parties, we assume that *the more parties endorse libertarian or interventionist positions, the greater is the support for a gender quota* (Hypothesis 3).

2.2 Economic and social structure

The actual degree of gender equality in a country shapes the everyday experiences of its citizens (intergroup contact) and the norms of equality in society. The underlying mechanism here is exposure: regular interactions with members of the target group, such as interaction with colleagues and supervisors from both genders in the workplace, are likely to reduce stereotypes and prejudice against the target group, and to provide examples of situations in which target group members suffer from unequal treatment (e.g. Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004). This, in turn, may influence the support for affirmative action policies of both members and non-members of the policy's target group. With regard to target group members, their interactions with non-

target group members increase the likelihood of experiencing (or perceiving) unequal treatment. This in turn would lead target group members to consider affirmative action policies as a necessary means to redress inequality against their own group in the labour market. Regarding non-target group members, those who interact with target group members in the workplace are also more likely to be supportive of affirmative action policies. Exposure to women at work has indeed been shown to reduce bias against female leaders among men (e.g., Finseraas et al., 2016). Moreover, non-target group members who witness the unequal treatment of target group members are more likely to acknowledge the existence of inequality and to become more supportive of policies aimed at improving equal opportunities. In contrast, a high degree of gender diversity in the labour market and an already high proportion of women in positions of leadership might also lead target and non-target group members to believe that interventionist policies are not necessary and, as a consequence, diminish citizens' support for affirmative action policies for women. With respect to the impact of the economic and social structure we again draw upon the two conflicting mechanisms described above and assume that *the higher the level of gender equality in economic and social structures, the greater will be the support for affirmative action policies among citizens* (Hypothesis 4a); and *the higher the level of gender equality in economic and social structures, the lower will be the level of support for affirmative action policies among citizens* (Hypothesis 4b).

2.3 Social norms

With respect to citizens' support for affirmative action policies benefitting women in leading positions, two forms of attitudinal factors are relevant: the support for gender equality and the acceptance of state intervention. These norms are the result of historical processes and have been settled and shaped over a long period of time. This, in turn, implies that such social norms can only evolve slowly and gradually, in contrast to the implementation of public policies or the orientations of political parties (Eicher et al., 2015). Previous research has indeed repeatedly shown that individual attitudes are framed significantly by the surrounding public opinion (e.g. Eicher et al., 2015; Paxton and Kunovich, 2003). Consequently, we assume that norms supporting gender equality and state intervention will provide a favourable climate for affirmative action policies. Therefore, we assume that *the more the public approves of gender equality and state intervention, the greater is the support for a gender quota* (Hypothesis 5).

2.4 The impact of contextual factors on the gender gap in support for a boardroom quota

Besides the impact of contextual factors on the *overall support* for gender quotas, they may influence the *gap in support* for a gender quota between target group and non-target group

members, i.e. the difference between women and men. In technical terms, we have to differentiate between the *main effect* of contextual factors and their *interaction effect* with gender. As described above, based on the self-interest perspective women should be generally more supportive of affirmative action policies than men. Moreover, previous research has shown that the perception of inequality against the own group is indeed significantly related to larger support for affirmative action policies among women (Tougas and Veilleux, 1988). Therefore, support for affirmative action policies among women is likely to be shaped by the actual status quo of gender equality in their country. The more women believe their group position in society to be disadvantaged and the less they feel their group interests to be represented in the political process, the more they will support policies enhancing their position. Following this argument, women as target group members might show greater sensitivity for contextual factors related to gender inequality than the non-target group of men. Consequently, we assume that *women as the target group are more susceptible to contextual factors than men* (Hypothesis 6); and *the lower the institutional, political and societal support for gender equality and state interventionism in a country and the more disadvantaged the actual position of women, the larger will be the gender gap in support for affirmative action policies* (Hypothesis 7).

3. Data and Methods

3.1 Sample description and operationalization of individual-level variables

We use the data from the Eurobarometer wave 76.1, administered in 2011 in all 27 EU member states, for our analysis. The sample is composed of 19,412 respondents. The dependent variable is an item measuring support for affirmative action policies with regard to the introduction of a gender quota for company boards. It was phrased as follows: “Some European countries (e.g. France, Spain, the Netherlands, Italy, Belgium and Norway) have already taken legal measures to ensure a more balanced representation of men and women on company boards. Are you in favour or opposed to a legislation on this matter under the condition that qualification is taken into account without automatically favouring one of either gender?” Respondents could answer on a four-point scale ranging from 1 “totally opposed” to 4 “totally in favour”. There exists some variation in the set-up of company boards across European countries. In most continental European countries, such as Germany, companies typically possess a two-tier leadership comprised of an executive board and a supervisory board. In these cases, quotas typically apply only to the supervisory board of external non-executive directors (Kirsch, 2017b). In other countries, especially the Anglo-Saxon countries as well as France, one-tier corporate boards are

predominant that combine the supervisory and the executive body in one board of directors (Gabaldon et al., 2017). The Eurobarometer question was adapted in each sampled country by taking into account the national specificities of the set-up of company boards and by applying the term for company boards commonly used in the respective sampled countries. This adaptation of the question to the national specificities aims to ensure a functional equivalence of the measurement across countries (Harkness, 2008).

The empirical analyses focus on gender differences in support for affirmative action policies. Therefore, our main independent variable of interest at the individual level is gender, which is measured by a dummy for male with female as the reference category. To control for the respondents' general agreement with gender equality on company boards, we include in the model their answer to the question "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Given equal competence, women should be equally represented in positions of leadership in companies?" with the same answer categories as for our dependent variable. Other control variables at the individual level are: age (centred) and its squared term; labour force participation, measured by a dummy, and its interaction with gender; left-right self-placement on a scale from 1 ('left') to 10 ('right'); educational status, measured by a variable indicating the age a respondent finished full-time education (categories: under 15 years of age or no education as reference category, aged 16-19 years, aged 20 years or above, still studying) and its interaction with gender; marital status, measured in four categories (married as the reference category, cohabiting, unmarried/single, divorced/separated/widowed) and by a binary variable indicating whether the respondent had children younger than 16 years old; financial situation, measured by a variable indicating difficulties paying bills (coding 1: most of the time / from time to time, 0: Never); and the level of urbanization of the place of residence, composed of three categories (rural area or village as the reference category, small or mid-size town, and large town).

3.2 Operationalization of country-level variables

We will assess the role of politics and policies with four variables. First, we use a binary variable indicating whether a country in our sample had already taken legal measures to achieve gender balance in company boards that was binding at the latest in 2011, the year of the Eurobarometer survey. This includes the countries that are listed in the Eurobarometer question as examples. Information for this indicator comes from Seierstad et al. (2017), the European Commission's Network to Promote Women in Decision-making in Politics and the Economy (2011) and the Gunda Werner Institute (2016). Second, women's political power is operationalized with an indicator summarizing information on female representation at the

ministerial, parliamentary and regional assembly level in 2010. This indicator is provided by the European Institute for Gender Equality (2015) for all EU countries. The higher the value on this indicator, the higher women's political power in a country. Next, political parties' orientations across countries are assessed by using the Chapel Hill Party dataset. This cross-national expert survey was conducted in all EU countries with the exception of Malta, Luxembourg, and Cyprus, and contains items evaluating political parties' positions on the libertarian/traditional ideological dimension and on the laissez-faire/interventionist dimension (Bakker et al., 2012). The libertarian/traditional orientation item (the so-called GALTAN dimension) refers to the position of parties in terms of their views on democratic freedoms and ranges from 0 (most libertarian) to 10 (most traditional). The laissez-faire/interventionist orientation item relates to the position of political parties toward the role the state should adopt in economic issues and ranges from 0 (pro interventionism) to 10 (pro laissez-faire). To compute the average position of political parties in each country, we weighted these items with the percentage of votes each party obtained in the national election that took place around 2010. In this way, we used a measure of the average position on these two ideological dimensions among political parties for each country that is weighted according to the parliamentary size of each party.

We operationalize the social structure and the labour market characteristics across countries with four variables. First, we use an indicator of gender equality in economic and social life in a country as provided by the European Institute for Gender Equality (2015), with higher values indicating greater equality. The 2010 female employment rates and the 2010 sectoral gender segregation rates are used as measures for the labour market integration of women (Eurostat, 2017). The latter is approximated with women's participation rates in the sectors of craft and engineering, two traditionally male-dominated fields. Accordingly, higher values indicate lower levels of gender segregation in the labour market. Lastly, women's economic power is measured by means of the 2010 proportion of female board members in the largest quoted companies of a country (supervisory board or board of directors) (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2015).

Our last group of macro-indicators concerns the measurement of societal norms and is composed of two variables. First, as the indicator for the general support for gender equality in a country we calculate for each country sampled the proportion of respondents who agree with the item "Given equal competence, women should be equally represented in positions of leadership in companies" asked in the 76.1 Eurobarometer wave. Accordingly, higher values for this variable indicate greater support for gender equality in the economy. Second, as the indicator for the support for state intervention, we use the item on whether governments should reduce differences in income levels provided by the European Social Survey (ESS) 2010.

We use the weighted country mean of respondents' answers on a scale from 1 "Disagree strongly" to 5 "Agree strongly". Unfortunately, the 2010 ESS did not cover Latvia, Malta, and Romania. Furthermore, for Austria and Luxembourg we have to use information from previous ESS waves. Table A.1 in the Appendix gives an overview of the sample with case numbers, means, standard deviations, minima, and maxima of all variables. Online supplementary material includes Figures S.1 and S.2 with a correlation matrix, scatter and density plots for the country means of the dependent variable and all country-level indicators.

3.3 Estimation strategy

We use multilevel regression analyses in order to account for the hierarchical structure of the data, with respondents nested in countries. Recent studies criticize the estimation of country-level indicators in multilevel models as these may suffer from bias due to the rather low number of cases on the macro-level (Jenkins and Bryant, 2016). We therefore follow the recommendations provided by Elff et al. (2017) and estimate restricted maximum likelihood models with the degrees of freedom for the country-level estimators adjusted to reflect the actual number of cases on that level. Therefore, degrees of freedom are calculated as

$$df = m - 1 - 1$$

with m being the number of macro-level units and 1 being the number of macro-level estimates.

For example, a model testing one macro-level estimator and additionally controlling for GDP in our dataset of 27 countries sets the number of degrees of freedom to 25 when estimating these coefficients.

Our key research interest is to identify the main effects of the country-level indicators and their cross-level interaction effects with gender. Therefore, we first estimate a linear multilevel regression model with all individual-level variables and a random slope for gender. Afterwards, we estimate a series of random slope multilevel regression models with the macro indicators, always controlling for all individual-level variables as described above. We first examine each country-level indicator, including the main effect to test Hypotheses 1-5, and then the cross-level interaction effect with the dummy-coded variable for gender to test Hypotheses 6 and 7. We use the gross domestic product (GDP) as purchasing power parity per capita, and the binary variable on established gender quota as macro-level controls in each model. To detect influential outliers, we calculate DFBETA values and perform repeated regressions by always leaving out one of those macro units that have DFBETA values above the cut-off value (Van der Meer et al., 2010).

4. Results

We first estimate a random intercept model including only individual-level variables and then add a random slope for gender (Models 1 and 2 in Table A.2 in the Appendix). The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) amounts to 0.066 for the empty model and to 0.075 for the gender slope model which is comparable to the ICC of a previous cross-national study on the support for quota laws in politics in Latin America (Barnes and Córdova, 2016). The random slope for gender is significant (variance: 0.004***), meaning that the difference between men and women in their support for a gender quota varies significantly between countries. In the next step, we estimated further random slope multilevel models for the main and interaction effects of the macro indicators. The coefficients of the main effects of the contextual factors are presented in Figure 2 and stem from stepwise regression models as shown in Tables A.2 and A.3 in the Appendix. Gender is highly significant in all models, indicating a gender gap in support with higher approval rates among women (see Tables A.2 and A.3 in the Appendix). This confirms our first hypothesis regarding the self and group-based interest perspective. In the following, we will examine, in what way country-level characteristics are related to the level of and the gender gap in support for affirmative action policies.

4.1 Contextual effects on the level of support for the boardroom quota

In a first step we estimate the main effects of the macro indicators on citizens' *overall* level of support for affirmative action policies (see Figure 2 and Table A.3 for the corresponding regression models). For the indicators representing gender equality in policies and politics as well as the orientations of political parties, we find the following relationships. Whether a country had already implemented a gender quota in the survey year 2011 is significantly associated with citizens' support for affirmative action policies: in countries that implemented legal measures to rise the female share in company leadership before 2011, the support for boardroom quotas is higher than elsewhere (Coef.: 0.081*). However, the coefficient for the implementation of a legal gender quota is only significant as long as we control for the other contextual characteristics related to political institutions, showing that gender equality in politics and the implementation of a quota are highly related. Female political representation shows a significant negative relation with citizens' support for affirmative action policies: the larger the female political representation in a country, the lower the support for a gender quota (Coef.: -0.129**). The ideological orientations of parties do not show to have a significant effect on citizens' support for boardroom quotas.

[Insert figure 2 here]

The indicators representing gender equality in the economic and social life of a country play a larger role for citizens' support for affirmative action policies. The gender equality indicator, the proportion of female directors, and the female employment rate are significantly related to citizens' attitudes toward affirmative action policies. All factors reveal a negative relationship: citizens' support for affirmative action policies is lower, the higher the overall level of gender equality (Coef.: -0.133***), the higher the female employment rate (Coef.: -0.067*), and the higher the proportion of women in boardroom positions (Coef.: -0.092**). Only labour market gender segregation (measured by the proportion of women in the sectors of craft and engineering) does not show a significant main effect on citizens' support for affirmative action policies.

With respect to social norms, we find a significant association with citizens' support for affirmative action policies only for interventionist attitudes: the larger the overall societal support for state intervention, the higher the individual's support for affirmative action policies (Coef.: 0.165***). By contrast, the societal support for general gender equality in leading business positions is not significantly related to individuals' support for affirmative action policies.

Interpreting these results in the light of our hypotheses leads us to distinguish between the effects of institutions and social structure. Indeed, our significant contextual indicators measuring gender equality in social life and on the labour market show a consistent negative association with citizens' support for affirmative action policies. In other words, the greater the *de facto* gender equality in political representation, and economic and social life, the lower the citizens' support for affirmative action policies. This provides support for Hypotheses 2b and 4b: citizens in more egalitarian countries seem to oppose the implementation of affirmative action policies to redress gender inequality in leading positions more than citizens in less egalitarian societies. In contrast, the significant positive coefficient of existing gender quotas does confirm the assumption that existing regulations have a positive impact on individuals' attitudes. Furthermore, the significant coefficient for the indicator measuring acceptance of state intervention gives some support to Hypothesis 5: citizens are in favour of affirmative action policies to a larger extent in countries with higher acceptance levels of state interventionism.

4.2 Contextual effects on the gender gap in support for the boardroom quota

In order to assess the extent to which target and non-target group members are affected differently by contextual factors, we test their interaction effects with gender (coded as female, with male being the reference category) in the second step of our analysis (see Table A.3 in the

Appendix). We find significant interaction effects only for the sectoral gender segregation and the societal support for state intervention. The marginal effects of these significant cross-level interactions for different values of the contextual indicators are presented in Figure 3. Both indicators are negatively related to the gender gap in support: the higher the societal support for state interventionism and the higher the sectoral gender diversity in a country, the smaller the difference between men and women in their support for affirmative action policies. This decrease in the gender gap is due to men's support for affirmative action policies being more affected by the level of societal support for state interventionism and the level of sectoral gender segregation.

[Insert figure 3 here]

If we interpret these results in the light of our last two hypotheses, we find only very weak support for Hypothesis 7 and need to reject Hypothesis 6. Indeed, we assumed that women as the target group of affirmative action policies would be more sensitive to contextual factors (Hypothesis 6). However, the fact that almost all cross-level interaction effects are insignificant does not confirm this assumption; rather, men and women within a country mostly seem to be similarly influenced by the contextual factors we considered in this study. Furthermore, the significant cross-level interaction effects plotted in Figure 3 show that men's support is affected to a slightly greater extent by the sectoral gender segregation and the societal support for state interventionism. Thus, these two contextual factors play a larger role in the support for affirmative action policies expressed by members of the non-target group as opposed to that of the target group. Finally, our last hypothesis stated that the more disadvantaged the actual position of women in a country, the larger will be the gender gap in support for affirmative action policies (Hypothesis 7). Only the significant cross-level interaction effect on sectoral gender segregation provides some evidence for this hypothesis: differences between men's and women's support for affirmative action policies are significantly lower in countries with a higher proportion of women working in craft and engineering.

4.3 Robustness analysis

According to the DFBETA values of our first range of regression models, ten countries are potentially influential outliers for significant macro indicators (results not depicted). To further test the robustness of the results of the contextual indicators, we estimate repeated regression models by always leaving out one of these countries. The results of these estimations show that the coefficient for the proportion of female directors is driven only by Sweden, which had the third highest proportion of women on company boards in the sample. Leaving out Sweden, the

coefficient is still negative, but becomes insignificant (p-value of 0.092 as compared to 0.021 before).

5. Conclusion

A fine-grained understanding of citizens' attitudes toward group-based policies that aim to redress inequality is essential for the assessment of the challenges facing the implementation of such policies. Large differences between countries do not only exist in the proportion of women in such leading positions, but also in citizens' levels of support for binding quotas and the gap in support between men and women. Gender quotas for company boards have been and still are a widely disputed topic in many European countries. Assessing the role of contextual factors can help to understand the sources of these cross-national differences, which might be of particular importance to policy makers and interest groups aiming to push forward gender equality.

Our results provide some evidence for interest-based explanations at the individual level but also show the significant role of contextual factors related to the actual level of gender equality and position of women in society. In line with the interest-based perspective, target group members—women—are significantly more supportive of affirmative action policies than non-target group members—men—in all countries. However, both groups seem to adjust their opinion to the actual national conditions. Hence, the relevance of self and group-based interest in the support for affirmative action policies is context-dependent.

Generally, contextual factors related to the actual social and labour market structure play a pivotal role in citizens' support for affirmative action policies and political institutions also show to be relevant. The institutionalization of equality norms in legislation, i.e. the implementation of quota laws, is positively related to citizens' acceptance of these laws. By contrast, the higher the actual level of gender equality in a society, the higher the female employment rate, and the more equal representation of women in politics and leading business positions, the *lower* is the citizens' support for a gender quota for company boards. The support for affirmative action policies thus seems to reflect adverse conditions in a country: approval of a gender quota among both the target and the non-target group is high where gender equality in the labour market and in leading positions is low. By contrast, affirmative action policies are supported less in countries where gender equality in the economy and the social structure and in political representation is already at a high level. These findings provide some indication for a backlash: the higher the level of gender equality in a country, the lower is citizens' support for further interventionist policies aiming at redressing gender inequality. Because of the cross-sectional characteristics of the data analysed, we are unfortunately not able to test the causal link directly.

A further interesting finding of our study concerns the fact that support for affirmative action policies toward women and general gender equality norms represent two distinct attitudinal dimensions. The overall societal level of support for gender equality is not significantly related to the approval of a gender quota. By contrast, societal support for state interventionism plays a significant role in citizens' preferences for affirmative action policies: the higher the societal support for state interventionism, the higher citizens' approval of the implementation of gender quotas for company boards. This association between societal support for state interventionism and preferences for a gender quota is stronger for the non-target group members—men—than for the target group members—women. Moreover, men living in countries with less gender segregation in the labour market support gender quotas to a larger extent, while the sectoral gender segregation is less relevant for women's attitudes toward gender quotas. This supports the 'exposure' argument that contact between target and non-target group members has a positive impact on the attitudes on non-target group members.

Our results yield to the importance of promoting general gender equality on the labour market and in middle management positions. A quota for such specific positions as the board of directors may lack a broad public support not because of an underlying opposition to gender equality, but due to the interventionist character of such policies. Therefore, it is important to strengthen gender equality through a bottom-up process in addition to the implementation of quotas for top positions. For instance, several policies have proved to be beneficial for females' careers, such as more flexible working hours, provision of public child care, and an overcoming of the outdated perception of leadership as related to steep hierarchies and extensive overtime.

To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to investigate the role of contextual factors in shaping support for affirmative action policies in the economy (but see Barnes and Córdova, 2016 for citizens' support for quota laws in politics in Latin America). As a pioneering study, it also suffers from several limitations, which will hopefully be tackled in future research. For instance, we use data from a survey in 2011 as there is unfortunately no newer data source available. While the public discussion on gender quotas was already ongoing in this year, quota laws had been established in different European countries very recently at that time. Given the changes in quota laws over the last few years, a new data collection on this topic would be helpful to assess reactions to these more recent changes. Furthermore, we made the assumption that the contextual factors shape public opinion on affirmative action policies. However, citizens' attitudes are also likely to influence the implementation of policies, political parties' ideological orientations, and the extent to which underrepresented groups manage to hold visible leading positions in various societal arenas. The cross-sectional structure of the data we used for this study did not allow us to assess these feedback loops in more detail. Moreover, our

analysis focuses on support for affirmative action policies for a specific underrepresented group (women) in a specific societal arena (leading business positions). Future research which includes a larger set of attitudinal measurements could shed light on the generalizability of our findings to other underrepresented groups and societal arenas.

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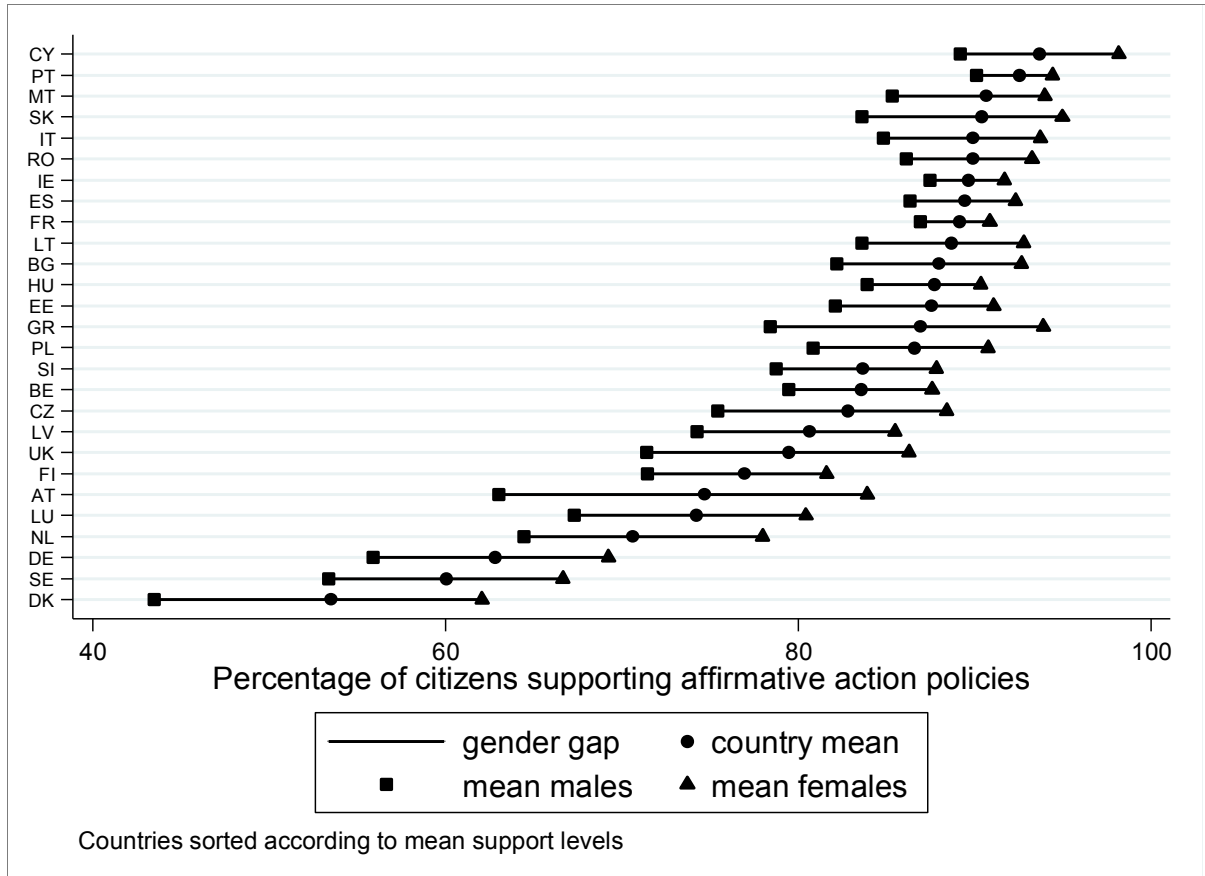
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Figures

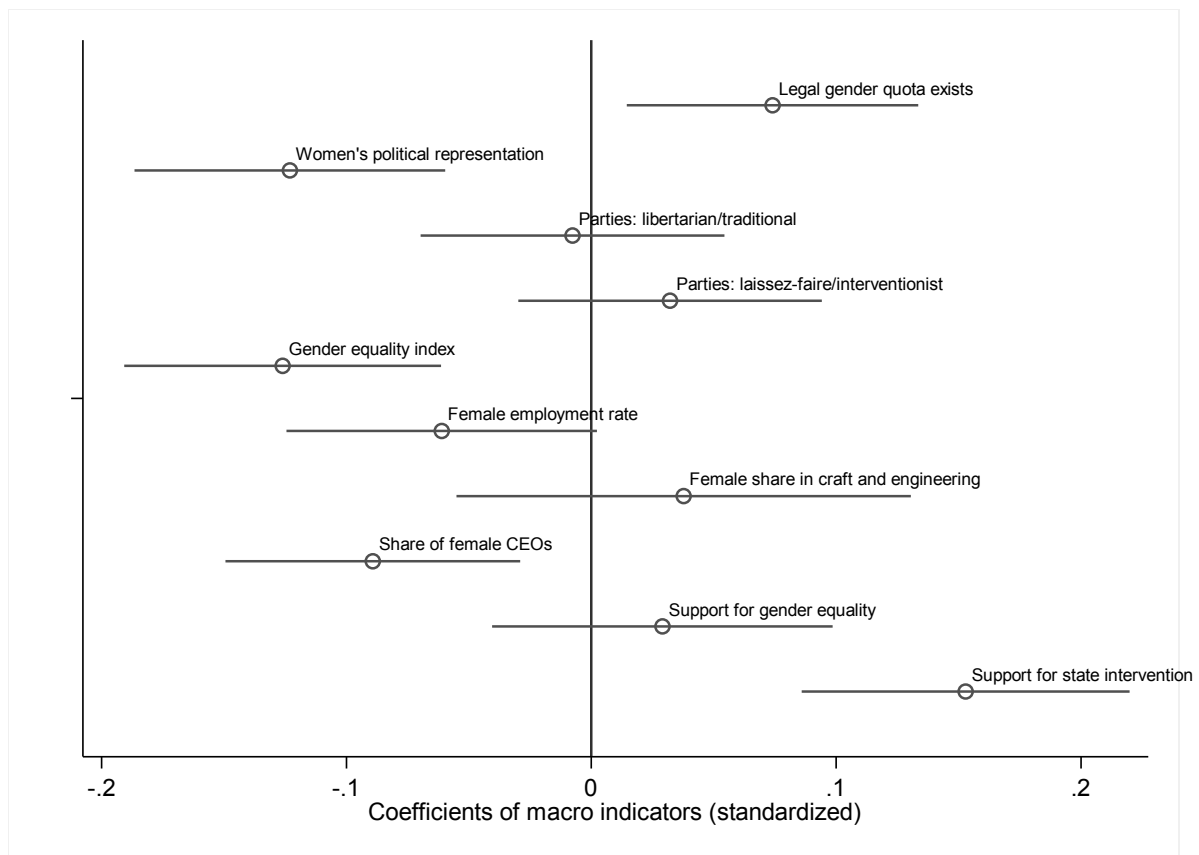
Figure 1: Average level of support for a gender quota for company boards, by gender and country



Notes: For this Figure we recoded the information from the variable support for a boardroom quota into two categories where 0 refers to “totally or rather opposed” and 1 refers to “totally or rather in favour”; further information on the coding of the variable is provided in the section “Operationalization of country-level variables”.

Source: Own calculations using Eurobarometer 2011 (76.1.).

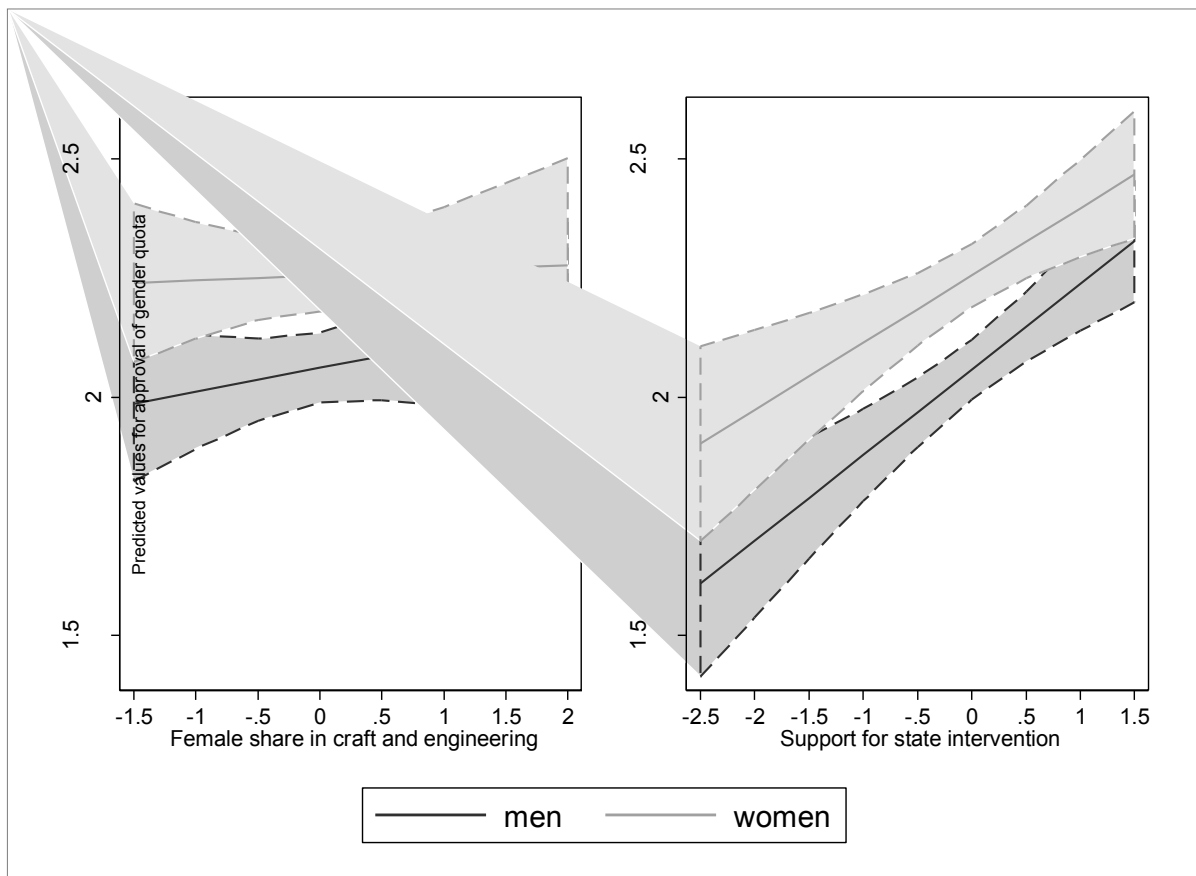
Figure 2: Coefficients of contextual indicators (standardized) with 95% confidence intervals from multilevel regression models of support for affirmative action policies (dependent variable: approval of a gender quota for company boards)



Notes: Degrees of freedom for macro variables adjusted to number of macro units (Elff et al. 2017). Please refer to the Appendix Table A.3 for full regression tables; estimations based on Models 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13 and 15.

Source: Own calculations using Eurobarometer 2011 (76.1.).

Figure 3: Marginal effects for the cross-level interactions from multilevel regression models of support for affirmative action policies (dependent variable: approval of a gender quota for company boards)



Notes: Please refer to the Appendix Table A.3 for full regression tables; estimations based on Models 10 and 16.

Source: Own calculations using Eurobarometer 2011 (76.1.).

Appendix

Table A.1: Descriptive sample statistics

	N	Mean	St.dev.	Min	Max
Individual-level variables					
Support for affirmative action policies (boardroom quota)	19412	2.13	0.89	0.0	3
Gender=female	19412	0.53	0.50	0.0	1
Approval: Gender equal representation in leadership	19412	0.90	0.30	0.0	1
Employed (RC: not employed)	19412	0.50	0.50	0.0	1
Left-right self-placement	19412	5.29	2.16	1.0	10
Place of residence					
Rural area or village	19412	0.34	0.47	0.0	1
Small or middle sized town	19412	0.36	0.48	0.0	1
Large town	19412	0.29	0.46	0.0	1
Age finished full-time education					
Below 15 years or no full-time education	19412	0.17	0.38	0.0	1
16-19 years	19412	0.43	0.49	0.0	1
20+ years	19412	0.37	0.48	0.0	1
Still Studying (and age<20)	19412	0.03	0.17	0.0	1
Age	19412	49.28	17.76	15.0	98
Level in society (self-placement)	19412	5.45	1.58	1.0	10

Marital Status					
(Re)Married	19412	0.53	0.50	0.0	1
Cohabiting	19412	0.11	0.31	0.0	1
Single	19412	0.17	0.38	0.0	1
Divorced, separated or widowed	19412	0.18	0.38	0.0	1
Children age<15 in HH	19412	0.26	0.44	0.0	1
Country-level variables					
GDP per capita (PPP, centered)	19412	1145.92	12392.50	-17988.1	58203
Legal gender quota for companies	19412	0.21	0.40	0	1
Women's political representation	19412	51.05	20.51	15.2	92
Parties: libertarian/traditional orientation	18521	-0.03	0.62	-1.2	2
Parties: Laissez-faire/interventionist orientation	18521	0.01	0.53	-1.5	1
Gender equality index 2010	19412	51.87	11.62	35.0	74
Female employment rate 2010	19412	65.57	6.90	38.8	77
Female share in craft and engineering	19412	13.24	5.18	5.6	25
Share of female CEOs	19412	15.95	6.69	4.0	29
Support for gender equality	19412	90.15	3.95	83.7	98
Support for state intervention	17777	3.90	0.34	3.0	4

Source: Own calculations using Eurobarometer 2011 (76.1.)

Table A.2: Multilevel regression models of support for affirmative action policies (boardroom quota), individual-level variables

	(1)	(2)
Gender: Female	0.195*** (0.017)	0.195*** (0.021)
Approval: Gender equal representation in leadership	0.770*** (0.020)	0.768*** (0.020)
Employed (RC: not employed)	-0.089*** (0.019)	-0.088*** (0.019)
Female * Employed	0.088*** (0.024)	0.086*** (0.024)
Age finished full-time education (RC: Below 15 years or no education)		
16-19 years	0.047* (0.018)	0.047* (0.018)
20+ years	-0.014 (0.020)	-0.014 (0.020)
Still Studying	0.036 (0.042)	0.036 (0.042)
Age	-0.002*** (0.000)	-0.002*** (0.000)
Level in society (self-placement)	-0.016*** (0.004)	-0.016*** (0.004)
Left-right self-placement	-0.019*** (0.003)	-0.019*** (0.003)
Place of residence (RC: Rural area or village)		
Small or middle sized town	-0.002 (0.014)	-0.002 (0.014)
Large town	-0.006 (0.015)	-0.007 (0.015)
Marital Status (RC: (Re)Married)		
Cohabiting	-0.021 (0.021)	-0.021 (0.021)
Single	0.041* (0.019)	0.041* (0.019)
Divorced, separated or widowed	-0.008	-0.008

	(0.017)	(0.017)
Children age<15 in HH	0.001	0.002
	(0.015)	(0.015)
Constant	1.658***	1.655***
	(0.061)	(0.062)
<hr/>		
var(Gender: Female)		0.004**
		(0.002)
var(Constant)	0.038***	0.042***
	(0.011)	(0.012)
var(Residual)	0.661***	0.660***
	(0.007)	(0.007)
<hr/>		
N	19412	19412
Wald chi sq.	2323.233	1986.350
Log likelihood	-2.36e+04	-2.36e+04

Standard error in parentheses; ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, + p < 0.1; REML; source: Own calculations using Eurobarometer 2011 (76.1.)

Table A.3: Multilevel regression models of support for affirmative action policies (boardroom quota), macro variables and cross-level interactions

	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Gender: Female	0.195*** (0.021)	0.194*** (0.020)	0.191*** (0.022)	0.191*** (0.021)	0.195*** (0.021)	0.194*** (0.021)
GDP per capita (PPP)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Legal gender quota	0.081* (0.032)	0.087** (0.032)	0.094** (0.033)	0.093** (0.033)	0.066* (0.031)	0.066* (0.031)
*Female		-0.026 (0.017)				
Women's political representation	-0.129*** (0.034)	-0.135*** (0.034)				
*Female		0.025 (0.017)				
Parties: libertarian/traditional			-0.007 (0.034)	-0.005 (0.034)		
*Female				-0.005 (0.018)		
Parties: laissez-faire/interventionist			0.025 (0.034)	0.018 (0.034)		
*Female				0.027 (0.017)		
Gender equality index					-0.133***	-0.138***

					(0.034)	(0.034)
*Female						0.022
						(0.016)
Constant	1.651***	1.652***	1.613***	1.612***	1.647***	1.648***
	(0.056)	(0.056)	(0.058)	(0.058)	(0.056)	(0.056)
var(female)	0.004***	0.003***	0.004***	0.003***	0.004***	0.003***
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
var(_cons)	0.022***	0.022***	0.023***	0.022***	0.022***	0.022***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.007)
var(Residual)	0.660***	0.660***	0.660***	0.660***	0.660***	0.660***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
N	19412	19412	18521	18521	19412	19412
N countries						
Wald chi sq.	2010.350	2036.476	1900.939	1918.320	2010.984	2028.547
Log likelihood	-2.36e+04	-2.36e+04	-2.25e+04	-2.25e+04	-2.36e+04	-2.36e+04

Standard error in parentheses; ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, + p < 0.1; REML; DF for macro-variables set to m-l-1; controlling for individual-level variables; source: Own calculations using Eurobarometer 2011 (76.1.)

Table A.3 cont.: Multilevel regression models of support for affirmative action policies (boardroom quota), macro variables and cross-level interactions

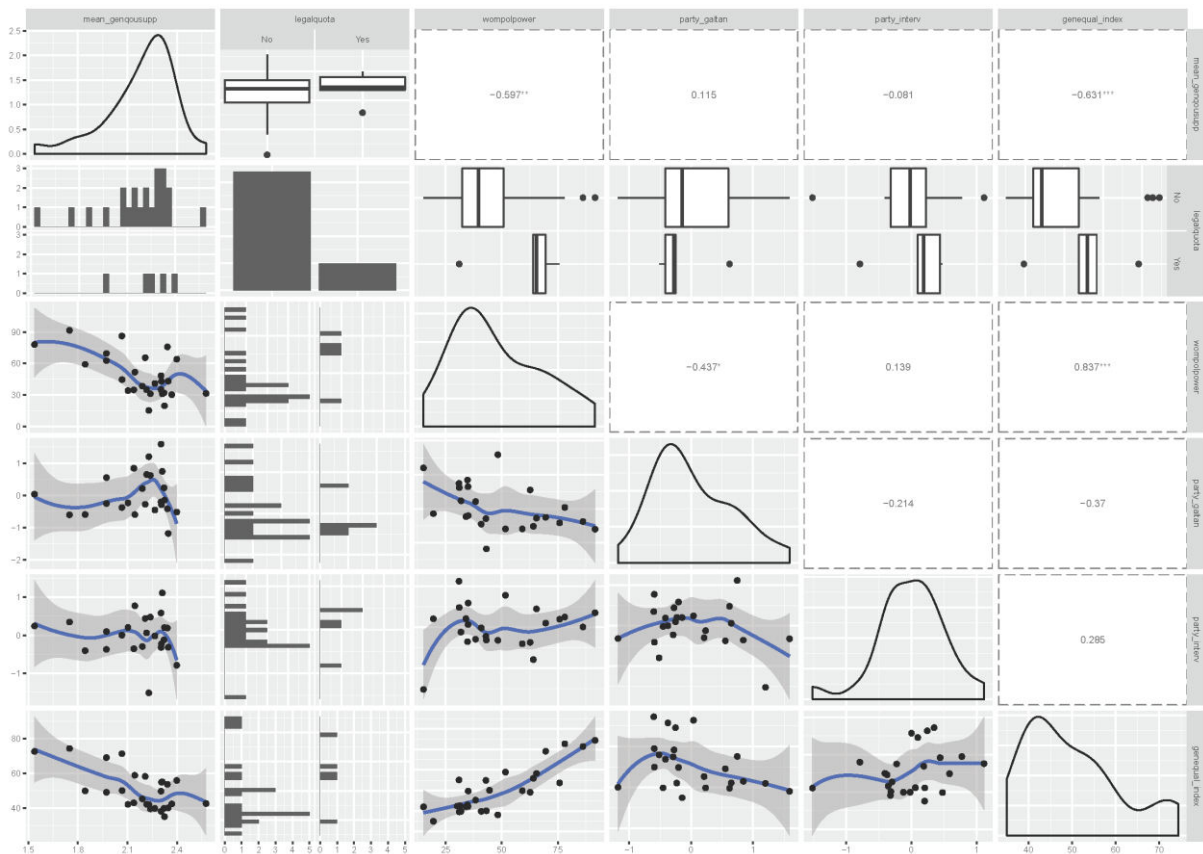
	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)
Gender: Female	0.195*** (0.021)	0.193*** (0.020)	0.195*** (0.021)	0.195*** (0.021)	0.195*** (0.021)	0.195*** (0.021)	0.198*** (0.023)	0.196*** (0.021)
GDP per capita (PPP)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000* (0.000)	-0.000* (0.000)	-0.000* (0.000)	-0.000* (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Legal gender quota	0.041 (0.037)	0.040 (0.037)	0.057 (0.034)	0.057 (0.034)	0.042 (0.038)	0.042 (0.039)	0.048 (0.028)	0.047 (0.028)
Female employment rate	-0.067* (0.034)	-0.071* (0.034)						
*Female		0.012 (0.016)						
Female share in craft and engineering	0.053 (0.049)	0.062 (0.049)						
Female		-0.037 (0.016)						
Share of female CEOs			-0.092** (0.032)	-0.094** (0.033)				
*Female				0.010 (0.016)				
Support for gender equality					0.032 (0.037)	0.035 (0.037)		

*Female						-0.012		
						(0.017)		
Support for state intervention							0.165***	0.174***
							(0.034)	(0.034)
Female								-0.037
								(0.017)
Constant	1.652***	1.651***	1.649***	1.650***	1.659***	1.660***	1.672***	1.673***
	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.058)	(0.058)	(0.061)	(0.061)	(0.059)	(0.058)
var(female)	0.004***	0.003***	0.004***	0.004***	0.004***	0.004***	0.004***	0.003***
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
var(_cons)	0.032***	0.031***	0.027***	0.027***	0.036***	0.036***	0.018***	0.018***
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.006)	(0.006)
var(Residual)	0.660***	0.660***	0.660***	0.660***	0.660***	0.660***	0.669***	0.669***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
N	19412	19412	19412	19412	19412	19412	17777	17777
N countries								
Wald chi sq.	1986.061	2041.050	2002.601	1996.847	1986.324	1982.662	1791.545	1856.382
Log likelihood	-2.36e+04	-2.36e+04	-2.36e+04	-2.36e+04	-2.36e+04	-2.36e+04	-2.18e+04	-2.18e+04

Standard error in parentheses; ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, + p < 0.1; REML; DF for macro-variables set to m-l-1; controlling for individual-level variables; source: Own calculations using Eurobarometer 2011 (76.1.)

Supplementary material (online only)

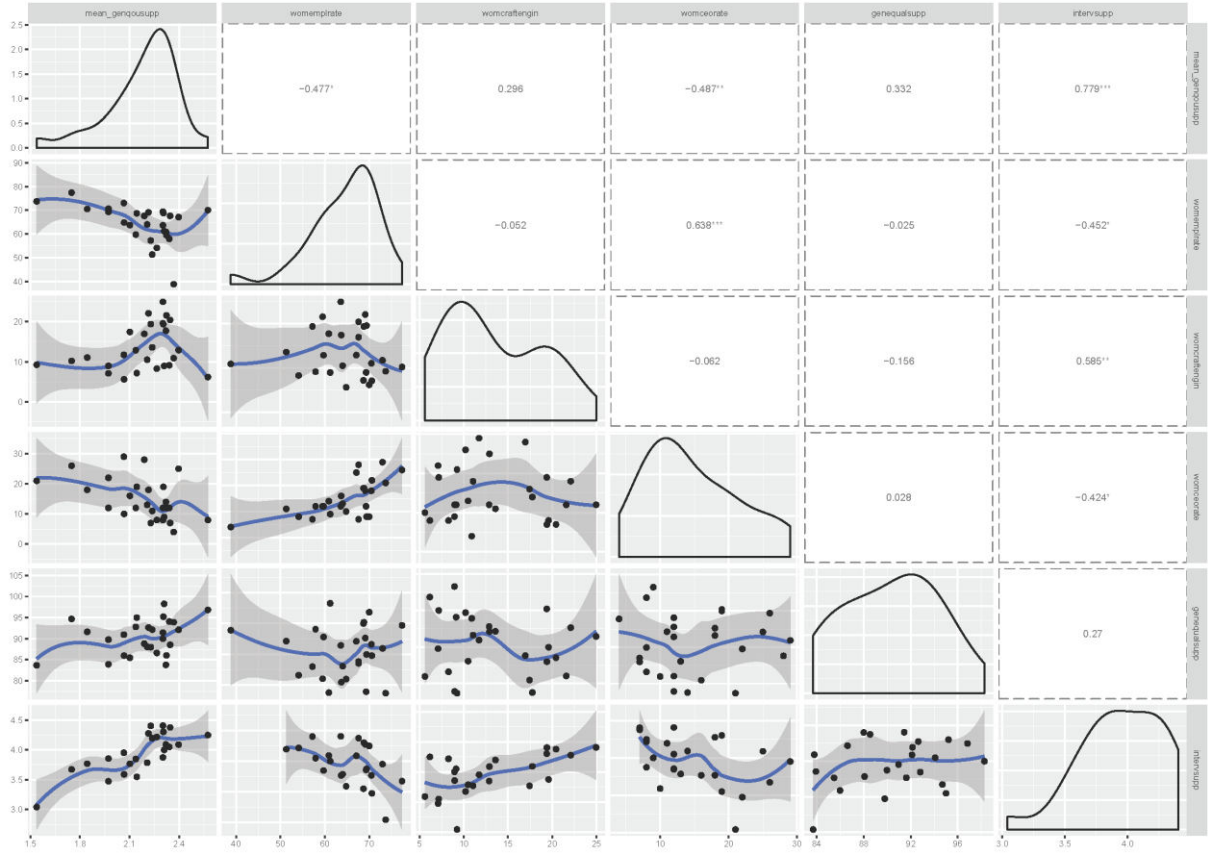
Figure S.1: Density plots, correlations, and scatter plots for the country means of the dependent variable and the macro variables, part 1



Notes: The variable names refer to the following indicators:
 mean_genquosupp: Mean approval gender quota
 legalquota: Legal gender quota exists
 wompolpower: Women's political representation
 party_galtan: Parties: libertarian/traditional
 party_interv: Parties: laissez-faire/interventionist
 genequal_index: Gender equality index

Source: Own calculations using Eurobarometer 2011 (76.1.).

Figure S.2: Density plots, correlations, and scatter plots for the country means of the dependent variable and the macro variables, part 2



Notes: The variable names refer to the following indicators:
 mean_genqoupsupp: Mean approval gender quota
 womemplrate: Female employment rate
 womcraftengin: Female share in craft and engineering
 womceorate: Share of female CEOs
 genequalsupp: Support for gender equality
 intervsupp: Support for state intervention

Source: Own calculations using Eurobarometer 2011 (76.1.).