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Regular Research Article

EUP

European Union Politics
1–18
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DOI: 10.1177/14651165241299117
journals.sagepub.com/home/eup
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More equal than different? Gender and legislative turnover in the European Parliament and west European legislatures

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Abstract

The article investigates incumbent exit rates of women and men parliamentarians in the national chambers and European Parliament delegations of eight West European countries after elections. Relying on original data, the article uses a multi-level model to analyse the fixed effects of gender, type of delegation, and the politico-institutional context

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Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article.

on incumbent exit rates, while also assessing random effects produced at the country level. The study finds that incumbent exit rate of men is significantly higher than women's. However, this result is significant in the European Parliament, not national legislature delegations. Additionally, we find that men are pushed towards the exit by gender quotas and proportional electoral systems. Finally, our findings show different dynamics with respect to countries and types of delegation, thus expanding our understanding of the gendered implications of political careers and institutional frameworks across different parliamentary contexts in Western Europe.

Keywords
Gender equality, legislative careers, parliamentary turnover, representation

Introduction

Worldwide, scholars have devoted much attention to the inflow of women[1] in legislative assemblies (Dahlerup, 2006). While most studies emphasise the importance of entering the arena (Fox and Lawless, 2004), there is a notable gap concerning our understanding of the departure of women incumbents from parliamentary positions. An exception can be found in the context of the United States, where the topic has garnered considerable academic interest (Fulton et al., 2006; Fulton, 2012; Lawless and Theriault, 2005; Palmer and Simon, 2003, 2005, 2006). However, this issue remains relatively underexplored within the European political landscape, especially regarding the European Parliament (EP). This state of the art (for more, see the Online appendix) is somewhat surprising, for the composition of legislatures can undergo significant fluctuations depending on one's capacity to retain their position. Lower exit rates enable women to solidify their mandate, enhance their expertise, and build political-electoral networks within the legislative body. When exit rates are notably high, sustaining and expanding their representation becomes more challenging (Darcy and Choike, 1986). Since women newcomers may initially have limited policy influence due to a lack of experience and adequate partisan-parliamentary support, stable incumbency and integration become crucial components to effectively influence institutional norms and practices (Beckwith, 2007; Sevi, 2023).

The significance of retaining women representatives in parliaments raises a series of fundamental questions about legislative turnover and gender in European legislatures. Is legislative turnover in the cohort of women incumbents equal or different than men's? Are women legislators more or less likely to retain their seats in the EP vis-à-vis national legislatures? Which factors can significantly influence the turnover rate of men and women incumbents? Do these factors differ between domestic politics and the supranational level?

To address these questions, we map and compare incumbent exit rates (IERs) in the cohorts of women and men legislators in the EP (1979–2019), as well as across eight unicameral or lower chambers in Western Europe: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (UK) (1945–2019). Essentially, we seek to observe the dynamics of supranational incumbents in a *sui*

generis legislature (Hix, 1998) that has increasingly evolved to become more professionalised and similar to national assemblies (Marzi and Verzichelli, 2023). The decision to focus on a homogeneous group of well-established Western parliamentary democracies responds to the need to neutralise the impact of varying democratisation processes (Gouglas et al., 2018) and to pragmatic reasons. Indeed, our study relies on data from two research projects, one on EP legislators since 1979 (Marzi and Verzichelli, 2023) and one on legislators in West European assemblies since 1945 (Gouglas et al., 2018). Our study is the first to combine internationally comparative, historically comprehensive data on legislative turnover and gender in the EP and West European legislatures.

This approach allows us to investigate gender-related legislative turnover and whether said patterns significantly differ when comparing national legislatures and the supranational level. Additionally, we seek to explain variability (or lack thereof) in legislative turnover rates between women and men incumbents. We do so by developing and testing a series of hypotheses, drawing upon multi-faceted literature spanning from classical studies of representative elites (Cotta and Best, 2007) to comparative analyses on parliamentary turnover (Matland and Studlar, 2004), as well as research on women's representation (Wängnerund, 2007), and the EP (Marzi and Verzichelli, 2023; Muyters et al., 2022). Therefore, this article positions itself at the crossroads of these various domains, fostering a dialogue between normative studies of democratic representation, empirical investigations over parliamentary turnover, the EP, and the specific research on gender balance in democratic institutions. The ultimate goal of this study is to provide a thorough – although still preliminary – exploration of the exit rate of women incumbents vis-à-vis their men colleagues, as well as the factors that may affect legislative turnover.

Our data shows significant differences in IER of women (WIER) and men legislators (MIER) in the examined European legislatures. Specifically, MIERs after elections are significantly higher than WIERs. Moreover, while investigating the determinants affecting IER emphasises how both cohorts are equally affected by electoral volatility, the diffusion of gender quotas (GQs) leads to a significantly higher MIER. Additionally, men incumbents are more likely to be pushed to the exit by proportional (PR) systems. When specifically looking at the EP, our data confirms existing literature on the chamber's high turnover compared to national parliaments. However, this is far from the only difference between the two macro-levels. MIERs are significantly higher in EP delegations, whereas there are no gender differences in national chambers. Finally, the diffusion of GQs is associated with significantly higher MIERs in national legislatures but not in the EP.

Theory

To explore the differences (or similarities) in the exit rates of women and men incumbents, we employed an adjusted version of the standard supply and demand model of legislative elite recruitment (Best and Cotta, 2000; Gouglas et al., 2018; Norris, 1997) to reflect the gender effects produced by the (supra)national political-institutional context (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). According to the existing literature, legislative turnover is the result of decisions made by various actors: *contenders*, which include

both challengers and incumbents; *selectorates*, comprising party leaders, central figures, and members; and the *electorate* (Best and Cotta, 2000; Gouglas et al., 2018; Norris, 1997). Departing from the notion that the politico-institutional context that shapes these decisions produces gendered results (Frech, 2025; Norris and Lovenduski, 1995), we expect our model of legislative elite recruitment to affect the IER of women and men differently.

Concerning *contenders*, we anticipate women and men incumbents to employ a different 'cost-benefit calculus' (Lawless and Fox, 2005: 30) to their decision to stand for re-election, which may reflect different ambitions and willingness to remain in office (Fox and Lawless, 2004; Fulton et al., 2006). Alternatively, there may be dissimilar rationales behind what makes politics attractive, such as the overall ability to influence policy (Lawless and Theriault, 2005) or the homophily notion related to the appeal of a parliamentary cohort to its members (Van De Wardt et al., 2021). Thus, next to the traditional problem of women not wanting to enter politics, the politico-institutional context may push women incumbents to quit political life more readily than men.

For *selectorates*, political parties are projected to exhibit biases against women (Duverger, 1955; Kittilson, 1999; Niven, 1998; Sanbonmatsu, 2002a) once a certain threshold of women on the ballot is reached, thus leading to deselection. At the same time, affirmative action on the part of party elites may dilute said bias (Dahlerup, 2006), leading to higher retention rates for women incumbents by pushing men towards the exit.

With respect to the *electorate*, it is likely that women incumbents do not benefit from incumbency advantage (Mayhew, 1974) the same as men due to voter bias (Duverger, 1955) and other elements (Fulton, 2012; Sanbonmatsu, 2002b). In particular, this electoral vulnerability can manifest itself in socio-political environments where local gender norms concerning the place of women in society are more traditional (Lassébie, 2020).

Our study's hypotheses deal with all three elements of the supply and demand model of legislative elite recruitment. It is worth noting that our focus presents different degrees of depth for each element, given the nature and limitations of our available data; consequently, we acknowledge that the results of our analysis may require additional scholarly exploration.

Given these premises, our first hypothesis posits that incumbents are more different than equal, with gender bias significantly affecting the political trajectories of men and women in distinctive ways:

> *H1*: The WIER after elections is significantly higher than MIER after elections across all legislatures.

In keeping with our model for elite recruitment, we formulated additional hypotheses (*H2* to *H7*) concerning the potential disparities in legislative turnover rates of men and women incumbents. In doing so, we drew insights from past studies on parliamentary turnover, which underlined the role played by a series of politico-institutional factors in shaping politicians' careers: structure of opportunities (Schlesinger, 1966), partisan competition, voting patterns, and electoral systems (Gouglas et al., 2018; Matland and

Studlar, 2004; Verzichelli, 2018). Controlling this broad set of factors by providing a comparative and multi-level analysis will allow us to reach a first robust asseveration of the 'more equal than different' argument and refine new avenues for future research on the stability of women incumbents.

Our second hypothesis (*H2*) examines the extent to which WIER may be affected more than men's due to swings in voter preferences that hide voter biases against women incumbents (Duverger, 1955). According to one strand of literature, electoral outcomes are not gender-neutral (Pearson and McGhee, 2013). Women incumbents may face a more competitive electoral environment (Palmer and Simon, 2006) and be more vulnerable due to gender stereotyping (Sanbonmatsu, 2002b) and voter hostility (Fulton, 2012). Large swings in electoral volatility (i.e. swings in voter party preferences) make marginal seats more competitive, leaving them more likely to be vulnerable to voter biases than their men counterparts.

H2: An increase in electoral volatility will yield a higher WIER.

H3 and *H4* revolve around the role of party selectorates (Matland and Studlar, 2004), with a particular focus on right-wing parties and GQs. Within partisan oligarchies, women are thought to constitute an 'outgroup' in comparison to the inner circles of men-dominated elites (Niven, 1998: 61), which results in undue pressure and disproportionately higher standards (Erikson and Josefsson, 2019) vis-à-vis their men counterparts. However, the extent to which this happens depends on party attitudes toward gender equality and the identity of party selectorates. The literature shows that political actors on the right side of the political spectrum are less likely to prefer women candidates both at the national (Kittilson, 1999; Krook, 2010) and supranational level (Lühiste and Kenny, 2016). This aligns with the traditional reluctance of said parties to embrace gender equality (Dahlerup, 2006; Lovenduski and Norris, 1993) and their rejection of affirmative action (Weeks, 2018) in favour of a gender-neutral approach concerning access to political power (Chiva, 2014). Beyond party attitudes on gender equality, right-wing parties usually comprise smaller cohorts of women incumbents and candidates, while party selectorates feature predominantly men gatekeepers. Therefore, women incumbents would be more inclined to exit such an environment (homophily hypothesis, see Van De Wardt et al., 2021) or face greater challenges in re-selection.

H3: A higher share of seats held by right-wing parties will result in a higher WIER.

In contrast, we expect the introduction and implementation of GQs to have the opposite effect, as they effectively open up the previously exclusive domain of political nominations by compelling party selectorates to increase the proportion of women candidates (Dahlerup, 2006). As political actors try to increase the number of women representatives, likely, men incumbents may voluntarily retire, be deselected, relegated to less safe list positions, or lose to the new challengers. Given the ever-growing number of voluntary party quotas, paired with the implementation of legislatively mandated quotas in

several countries, we expect that forcing selectorates to nominate more women candidates will affect the stability of men incumbents.

H4: The higher the diffusion of GQs across parliamentary parties, the higher the MIER.

Electoral systems can also protect or expose incumbents to partisan deselection and ballot defeat, potentially affecting the decisions of all three elements in the legislative recruitment model. Matland and Studlar (2004: 98) argued that there is 'a clear distinction between PR representation systems and majoritarian systems'. Empirical evidence suggests that proportional systems positively influence legislative turnover due to their lower emphasis on personal reputations, making incumbents more vulnerable to the whims of selectorates and preference swings (Matland and Studlar, 2004). Electoral institutions, though, are known to produce gendered effects (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2012). Research shows that PR systems are associated with more women in office (Thames, 2017). Likewise, it is plausible to expect that incumbent vulnerability across PR and majoritarian systems is also gendered. To begin with, the individual motivation of women incumbents to stand for re-election might be higher in a non-zero-sum game system like PR (Matland, 1993). In contrast, men might be less satisfied with parliamentary work in constituencies that shift away from traditional intra-party in-group domination dynamics. Research has shown that constituents are more likely to contact women than men in bigger districts associated with PR (Butler et al., 2022). The advantage for women incumbents is that while the job may be more challenging, it is also more engaging, placing them in a stronger position to represent their constituents. Second, research has shown that parties in PR systems 'may protect vulnerable incumbents from intra-party competition to maximise the incumbent's re-election probability', thus creating a source of incumbency advantage (Redmond and Regan, 2015: 244). Third, powerful men incumbents – especially marginal ones – may be more electorally vulnerable due to intense intra-party competition. In particular, this may be more likely as candidate turnover increases, party lists are strategically diversified to better reflect the socio-demographic composition of the constituency, and parties create strategic advantages for more vulnerable candidates. If this holds true, we expect women and men incumbents to be disproportionately affected by electoral system dynamics.

H5: In proportional systems, WIER is lower, whereas MIER is higher.

Should we expect legislative turnover after elections to fare differently in national delegations than in the EP? Recent literature highlights several key differences between the supply and demand patterns of legislative elite recruitment between the EP and national parliaments. Specifically, Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger (2014, 2015) have shown how the relatively high gender balance of the supranational assembly is the direct product of the differential impact that national party organisations have on candidate recruitment vis-à-vis the other political spheres. Moreover, the *sui generis* nature of the EP (Hix, 1998) significantly impacts the overall stability of incumbency. The supranational assembly is more likely to be used either as a retirement house for

veteran officeholders or as a stepping stone for accessing a domestic political career (Daniel, 2015; Scarrow, 1997). The enduring second-order nature of European elections (Hix and Marsh, 2011) constitutes yet another layer of complexity to the likelihood of members of the EP (MEPs) retaining their seats, given the high turnover rate.

> *H6*: MIER and WIER after elections are significantly higher in EP delegations than in national chamber ones.

Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that women MEPs may project lower IERs than their men colleagues. Frech (2025), for instance, argues that women MEPs may be more likely to want to remain in the EP, which may be due to the gendered nature of political markets (i.e. the structure of opportunities). In essence, women incumbents in the EP may be more inclined to stay because the institution's women-friendly setting is more likely to counterbalance existing gender biases. Additionally, party and voter biases may be lower in supranational ballots when compared to domestic ones. As Muyters et al. (2022) suggested, parties may have fewer incentives to weaken their delegation in the EP. Since citizens experience the EP as more distant, mainstream actors are said to have more difficulties enlisting new candidates and invest fewer resources to recruit for their EP lists. Fringe political formations are inclined to keep their loyal 'old' candidates, as the pool of recruiting new ones from the electorate is significantly reduced. In the context of low candidate turnover, women incumbents may want to stay in the EP, whereas men may be keener to pursue a political career elsewhere.

> *H7*: WIER in the EP national delegations is lower, whereas MIER in the EP is higher (Table 1).

The fundamental empirical research questions (RQs) of the study are as follows:

RQ1: Does legislative turnover, measured as IER, differ across the cohorts of men (MIER) and women incumbents (WIER)?
RQ2: Is MIER and WIER explained by different factors? And which ones?
RQ3: Do MIER and WIER differ across EP and national chamber delegations?
RQ4: Do explanations of MIER and WIER differ within each specific type of delegation?

Empirical approach

Data

To achieve our goal of answering these questions and testing our hypotheses, we brought together two novel datasets comprising original legislative turnover data on the EP (1979–2019) and eight European lower and unicameral chambers from 1946 to 2019: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

Table 1. Expected effects on IER.

Hypothesis	Explanatory variable	Effect on IER
H1	Incumbent cohort sex	WIER (+)
H2	Electoral volatility	WIER (+) MIER (+) stronger effect on WIER
H3	Right-wing parties	WIER (+)
H4	Gender quotas	MIER (+)
H5	PR electoral system	WIER (−) MIER (+)
H6	Type of delegation – EP	IER (+)
H7	Type of delegation – EP	WIER (−) MIER (+)

Note: The table reports the sign (in parenthesis) of the expected impact of each explanatory variable on the dependent variables: IER: incumbent exit rate; WIER: women incumbent exit rate; MIER: men incumbent exit rate; EP: European Parliament; PR: proportional.

Theoretical, empirical, and pragmatic considerations drove our case selection. Considering the existing evidence on Central and East European Countries (Semenova, 2017), our study's empirical and theoretical focus was set on longstanding democracies in the Western part of the continent. The selected country cases constitute a representative subsection of the European polities that enjoyed a continuous, uninterrupted democratic life roughly since the end of the Second World War. Pragmatic considerations reflect the availability of legislative turnover data on European assemblies so far back in time. To properly compare national chambers and national delegations in the EP, the study combined two original datasets measuring turnover from different projects (Gouglas et al., 2018; Marzi and Verzichelli, 2023).

Our main dependent variable (DV) is measured at the chamber-gender-cohort level. It is identified as WIER and MIER after every (supra)national election. Following the path traced by the literature, the DV was operationalised as the overall percentage of elected officials who entered a given legislature after an election at time t-1 and did not re-enter parliament at time *t*. This was measured for the lower houses or unicameral legislatures of the eight countries selected (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) and their national delegations to the EP.

We calculated WIER and MIER by analysing 64,292 data points, which correspond to (supra)national elected officials over 224 elections (national: $N = 166$; EP: $N = 58$). This process was performed by hand-coding information from different sources, such as online parliamentary databases, (supra)national assembly yearbooks, and biographical registries.

The independent variables (IVs) of interest comprise measures for the politico-institutional context that are expected to affect legislative turnover rates: *Incumbent Cohort Sex; Type of Delegation; Electoral Volatility; Right-wing Parties; Gender Quotas;* and *Electoral System*. *Incumbent Cohort Sex* is a binary variable (women and men). *Type of delegation* is a binary variable (national chamber, national delegation to the EP). *Electoral system* is a binary variable (non-proportional, proportional). *Electoral volatility* is a continuous variable based on the 'total electoral volatility' data retrieved from the *Dataset of Electoral Volatility in the EP* (Emanuele et al., 2019) and an updated version of Emanuele's (2015) *Dataset of Electoral Volatility in Western Europe*. *Right-wing Parties* is a continuous variable that measures the percentage of seats held by parties on the right side of the political spectrum. To

construct this variable, we relied on data from the *ParlGov* dataset (Döring et al., 2023). We identified every right-wing party as a political formation scoring at least 5 on the dataset's L-R 10-point scale. *GQs* is a continuous variable that measures the percentage of seats held by parties who apply a GQ rule. If GQs are legislated at the national level, we consider the proportion of seats held by all the parliamentary parties that implemented the quota regulation. In this respect, the case of France is a clear example of the above statements, for parties often opt to be fined rather than implement the legislated parity rule. Information on GQs was retrieved from the *Gender Quotas Database* (International IDEA, 2023), the *Gender Quotas Blog* (EUI, 2023), and Zamfir (2023).

Given that electoral systems are complex multidimensional macro-variables, we also controlled for mean district magnitude and the level of disproportionality in the allocation of parliamentary seats after each election. *District magnitude* is a continuous variable measured at both the first and average tiers. For reasons related to robustness, we relied on both. Information on district magnitude was retrieved from the *Electoral System Change in Europe* project (Pilet and Renwick, 2015) and the *Electoral System Design Database* (International IDEA, 2023). *Disproportionality* is a continuous variable measured by the Gallagher least squares index. For national chamber elections, this index is available in the *Election Indices dataset* (Gallagher, 2024). We manually calculated the Gallagher index for each supranational delegation for EP elections.

Estimation approach

Our data is hierarchical, meaning gender-cohort level turnover is strictly nested in specific countries. For this reason, we employed a multi-level model (MLM) analysis with two levels. The lower level (Level 1) comprises the DV and all predictor variables, which are expected to produce fixed effects based on the abovementioned theory. The upper level (Level 2) consists of eight countries. Theoretically, we expect these countries to produce random effects on the intercept of the models (random intercepts), which will produce different country means for the DV. Practically, this means that countries are expected to have significantly different levels of legislative turnover when the value of all predictor variables is zero. By contrast, there is no valid theoretical reason to expect that countries will also produce significant random effects on the slopes of the lower-level predictors of the models (random slopes). Theoretically, we do not expect the associations between IVs and our DV to vary significantly across country contexts. Our models were fit using Restricted Maximum Likelihood with a Kenward–Roger approximation. This approach produces less biased estimates for variance components when the sample size is small and the number of clusters is less than 10 (Luo et al., 2021). The covariance type was set at variance components.

We ran ten models (M1-10) using the abovementioned MLM to answer our empirical RQs. Our first two models test whether gender significantly affects incumbency. The baseline model (M1, $N = 448$) comprises only the predictor *Incumbent Cohort Sex*, while the second one (M2, $N = 448$) adds the remaining variables for which fixed effects have been specified (*Type of Delegation; Electoral Volatility; Right-wing*

Parties; Gender Quotas; and *Electoral System*), including the two control variables (*District Magnitude* and *Disproportionality*).

To test whether explanations by incumbent sex cohort differ, we split the data into two groups: WIER and MIER. For several reasons, we opted for a subsample estimation strategy rather than using a model with interactive terms. First, to avoid collinearity issues created by the multiplicative terms inserted in an interactive hypotheses model. Second, to increase the interpretability and presentability of the data, given the nominal nature of many IVs. More importantly, the subsample approach allows us to observe whether certain effects are present in one group but not in the other. Following Kam and Franzese (2007: 107–109), the statistical significance of any differences in parameters that were estimated separately across the subsamples was tested using difference tests of each coefficient and its standard error (for more, see the Online appendix).

Models 3 (M3 – DV: WIER, $N = 224$) and 4 (M4 – DV: MIER, $N = 224$) analyse the effects of IVs for which fixed effects have been theorised (*Type of Delegation; Electoral Volatility; Right-wing Parties; Gender Quotas;* and *Electoral System*), including the two control variables (*District Magnitude* and *Disproportionality*). We also split the data by type of delegation to examine whether incumbent cohort sex affects national chamber delegations differently when compared to the EP national delegations. Model 5 (M5, $N = 116$) is an MLM on IER in national delegations in the EP that tests the fixed effects of our main IVs (*Incumbent Cohort Sex; Electoral Volatility; Right-wing parties; Gender Quotas;* and *Electoral System*), including the two control variables (*District Magnitude* and *Disproportionality*). Model 6 (M6, $N = 332$) is the same MLM with respect to all specifications, but the subsample focuses on national-chamber-only IERs.

To answer the question of whether the politico-institutional context affects WIER and MIER differently in national delegations in the EP, we ran two MLMs (Models 7 and 8) comprising our standard specifications and IVs (*Electoral Volatility; Right-wing Parties; Gender Quotas;* and *Electoral System)* plus controls (*District Magnitude* and *Disproportionality*) on WIER (M7, WIER-EP, $N = 58$) and MIER (M8, MIER-EP = 58). To address whether explanations of WIER and MIER differ in national chamber delegations, we ran two MLMs (Model 9 and Model 10) comprising our standard specifications and IVs (*Electoral Volatility; Right-wing Parties; Gender Quotas;* and *Electoral System)* plus controls (*District Magnitude* and *Disproportionality*) on WIER (M9, WIER-NP, $N = 154$) and MIER (M10, MIER-NP, $N = 154$).

Results

Table 2 reports the effects of our predictors on the outcome variable for each of the 10 specified models. The baseline (M1) and full (M2) pooled-sample models provide an answer to our first RQ, whether legislative turnover differs according to gender. They both show that IER after elections in the cohorts of men incumbents is likely to be higher than that of women incumbents (*H1*), thus disconfirming our main hypothesis according to which IERs are gendered disfavouring women

Table 2. Effects of predictors on IER.

	Models									
	M1	M2	M3 WIER-all chambers	M4 MIER-all chambers	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10
Variables	IER Baseline	IER full			IER-EP	IER-NP	WIER-EP	MIER-EP	WIER-NP	MIER-NP
Fixed effects										
Incumbent cohort sex (reference women)	2.97* (1.75)	2.97** (1.34)			5.09* (2.61)	2.15 (1.49)				
Type of delegation (reference NP)		14.15*** (2.02)	10.36*** (3.39)	16.86*** (1.94)						
Electoral volatility		0.86*** (0.11)	0.91*** (0.19)	0.84*** (0.10)	0.55*** (0.18)	1.00*** (0.15)	0.51* (0.30)	0.56*** (0.19)	1.17*** (0.28)	0.90*** (0.13)
Right wing parties		0.03 (0.07)	0.08 (0.12)	−0.02 (0.07)	0.31 (0.19)	0.13* (0.09)	0.43 (0.32)	0.18 (0.21)	0.05 (0.14)	0.08 (0.08)
Gender quotas		0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.04)	0.05* (0.02)	−0.10* (0.05)	0.06** (0.03)	−0.09 (0.08)	−0.08 (0.06)	0.06 (0.06)	0.07** (0.03)
PR electoral system		3.02 (3.42)	−2.83 (5.36)	6.14* (3.32)	−13.58 (12.71)	−1.64 (4.17)	−7.43 (21.43)	−22.85 (13.87)	−5.47 (6.05)	2.08 (3.60)
District magnitude		0.05* (0.03)	0.02 (0.04)	0.05* (0.03)	0 (0.09)	0.06 (0.06)	−0.02 (0.10)	0.02 (0.10)	0.02 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)
Disproportionality		−0.01 (0.25)	−0.04 (0.42)	−0.14 (0.24)	0.32 (0.84)	0.35 (0.28)	−0.15 (1.24)	0.63 (0.93)	0.14 (0.48)	0.21 (0.24)
Random effects										
Austria	−2.45 (3.29)	2.16 (2.91)	0.88 (2.43)	1.11 (3.35)	−1.30 (4.78)	1.63 (3.34)	0.89 (4.16)	−5.50 (5.63)	0.64 (3.24)	1.28 (3.13)
Belgium	1.63 (3.21)	3.57 (2.96)	1.15 (2.43)	3.64 (3.40)	1.54 (4.66)	1.24 (3.50)	−0.10 (4.10)	3.00 (5.50)	1.39 (3.29)	0.66 (3.28)
France	6.21* (3.29)	1.40 (2.99)	−0.10 (2.49)	4.50 (3.43)	7.40 (4.94)	−3.77 (3.60)	3.78 (4.14)	6.46 (5.84)	−3.20 (3.48)	0.28 (3.35)
Germany	−3.92 (3.29)	−3.59 (3.41)	0.38 (2.66)	−7.42* (3.83)	−7.25 (6.05)	6.76 (4.79)	−2.17 (4.43)	−10.39 (7.22)	3.19 (3.96)	1.70 (4.47)
Italy	11.00*** (3.29)	8.83*** (2.80)	2.79 (2.39)	11.45*** (3.25)	9.04* (4.81)	7.91** (3.17)	2.30 (4.14)	12.99** (5.68)	3.46 (3.21)	9.85*** (2.97)
Netherlands	1.08 (3.22)	−3.69 (3.27)	−1.17 (2.63)	−4.29 (3.69)	−5.56 (4.31)	−5.72 (6.07)	−2.12 (3.95)	−6.62 (5.10)	−1.35 (4.21)	−3.53 (5.85)
Sweden	−3.83 (3.26)	0.65 (2.88)	−1.07 (2.42)	2.18 (3.33)	5.51 (4.78)	−0.88 (3.28)	0.61 (4.16)	9.53 (5.63)	−2.03 (3.21)	−0.21 (3.08)
United Kingdom	−9.72*** (3.26)	−9.33*** (3.08)	−2.85 (2.53)	−11.17*** (3.51)	−9.37* (5.27)	−7.18* (3.67)	−3.19 (4.31)	−9.47 (6.21)	−2.11 (3.50)	−10.03** (3.42)
Pseudo-R2	0.14	0.49	0.33	0.71	0.35	0.45	0.16	0.56	0.28	0.64
No. of observations	448	448	224	224	116	332	58	58	166	166
No. of groups	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
ICC	0.13	0.10	0.02	0.19	0.22	0.14	0.06	0.41	0.05	0.24

Note: ICC: intraclass correlation coefficients; IER: incumbent exit rate; WIER: women incumbent exit rate; MIER: men incumbent exit rate.
The table presents estimations of fixed and random effects and standard errors in parenthesis. Significance levels: *** at 1%; ** at 5%; * at 10%.

parliamentarians. Additionally, the full model confirms that IER are higher in the EP than in national legislatures (*H6*).[2]

To answer RQs 2–4, we resorted to data splitting by sex of the incumbent cohort (M3-4), type of delegation (M5-6), and a combination of the two (M7-M10). The rationale for this approach is detailed in the *Estimation approach* section above. Models M3 (WIER-all chambers) and M4 (MIER-all chambers) allow us to answer our second RQ about the factors that explain IER in the cohorts of women and men and whether these differ as we initially expected. Testing for hypothesised fixed and random effects according to the two subsamples of the variable *Incumbent Cohort Sex*, the results are telling. Our hypothesis that electoral volatility negatively affects women incumbents more than men (*H2*) is not confirmed. Electoral volatility significantly increases both MIER and WIER across chambers. The comparative effect test between the two subsamples shows no significant differences. We also found no effects for what concerns right-wing political actors, thus disconfirming the party ideology hypothesis *(H3*). By contrast, we observe that some effects occur only on the subsample of men incumbents but not on that of women. M4 reveals that MIER is significantly influenced by GQs (*H4*) and proportional electoral systems (*H5*). These findings support our hypotheses, indicating that the implementation of GQs and the presence of PR electoral systems increase the likelihood of men incumbents being pushed toward the exit.[3] M3 and M4 reconfirm that both MIER and WIER incumbents are significantly higher in the national delegations in the EP than in national legislatures (*H6*). In terms of idiosyncratic country effects, the MIER is significantly lower in Germany and the United Kingdom and significantly higher in Italy. In contrast, no country effects are detected for WIER. The comparison of effects across subsamples (for more, see the Online appendix) showed that the difference in effects produced by type of delegation, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom are significant across genders, but only at the 0.1 level, the exception being Italy at 0.05.

To answer our third RQ, whether gender affects the exit rate of incumbents in the EP and national legislatures differently, we split the data according to *Type of Delegation* (EP or national). Gender significantly affects incumbent exits in the EP subsample (M5) by increasing MIER but not in national delegations (M6). Our hypothesis that women incumbents' exit rate is significantly lower in the EP is not confirmed. However, our expectation that the exit rate of men would be higher is confirmed (*H7*). The comparison of the effects across the subsamples (for more, see the Online appendix) shows that this difference between the subsamples is not significant.[4]

Finally, to answer the fourth question of the study about whether explanations of WIER and MIER differ in each type of delegation, we created four new subsamples combining gender (WIER, MIER) with each type of delegation (EP or national): WIER in the EP (WIER-EP; M7) and MIER in the EP (MIER-EP; M8); WIER in national legislatures (WIER-NP; M9) and MIER in national assemblies (MIER-NP; M10). Our results show that explanations of WIER and MIER across delegations do not differ but for one very crucial factor. The diffusion of GQs in national legislatures significantly affects the exit rate of men incumbents, pushing them to the exit, but not in the EP delegations. GQs do not affect women incumbents. Italy significantly increases the exit rate of men incumbents in both the EP and national legislatures, whereas the United Kingdom

reduces the exit rate of men incumbents only in the national legislature. The difference in parameters across the subsamples is not significant for any of the variables for which differences are tested.

Discussion

When it comes to legislative turnover, are men and women legislators more equal or different? Given the increasing levels of women's representation in legislative assemblies worldwide, this question raises a series of issues related to democratic legitimacy and good governance. An increase in women's descriptive representation does not necessarily entail their enduring presence in a legislature, which is crucial for reaching apical positions in parliament and a greater degree of influence. Given the scarcity of comparative research on this topic in Europe, we sought to offer a cross-sectional, comparative, longitudinal, multi-level analysis of the relationship between gender and legislative turnover in the national chamber delegations of eight West European legislatures (1945–2019) and the respective national delegations of these countries in the EP (1979–2019).

Our results reveal that gender affects legislative turnover, but often in other ways than our initial theory predicted. Contrary to what we initially assumed, we found a remarkable parliamentary resilience on the part of women incumbents. Our analysis showed that MIER after elections is significantly higher than WIER. To understand the factors influencing the exit rates of women and men incumbents, we tested the effects of a series of politico-institutional factors, which we hypothesised would produce gender biases and thus affect WIER and MIER differently. In contrast to many of our initial hypotheses, we found a much more nuanced reality.

Electoral volatility increases the overall IERs of both men and women with no significant gender differences. On the *selectorates* side of our model, right-wing parties do not make a difference either on WIER or MIER or IERs at large. In contrast, the expansion of GQs seems to be successful in replacing men incumbents, thus corroborating past studies (Dahlerup, 2006; Tripp and Kang, 2008; Krook, 2010). The electoral system also matters, as PR systems lead to a higher MIER. Despite a continuous increase in power and influence, our findings for the supranational level confirm that the EP still presents significantly higher IERs vis-à-vis national chambers. Additionally, national chamber delegations show some different dynamics when compared to national delegations in the EP, with the latter presenting higher MIER.

Our study provided a wide array of insights into the literature on the topic. Women incumbents' stability corroborates an increasing number of studies showing that women parliamentarians are re-selected and re-elected at the same – if not better – rate as men (Fulton, 2012; Semenova, 2017; Sevi, 2023). In this sense, it may be argued that men are 'pushed' or decide to exit as the political system tries to make parliaments more gender-balanced. The drivers of this rebalancing can be seen to some extent in the models we tested, especially concerning GQs and electoral system effects. In this respect, it may also be argued that political parties might create strategic incumbency advantages by protecting vulnerable incumbents as they attempt to strategically balance their tickets (Butler et al., 2022). This, of course, is an interpretation that requires more testing.

Frech (2025) in this special issue corroborates some of the abovementioned arguments for the European level by offering evidence that women MEPs are less likely to leave the EP due to de-election. Part of the explanation can be linked to the effects of different electoral systems, with women incumbents displaying a higher likelihood of being re-selected and re-elected in open-list systems, as well as 'strategic party decisions and a preference of voters for women incumbents' (Frech, 2025: 20). All in all, the evidence presented should be commended as part of a success story in the politico-institutional context.

However, it's also worth reiterating some of the limitations of our study. Although theory points to a series of elements related to the supply and demand model of legislative elite recruitment, our variables only capture a partial – yet notable – section of the issue at hand. Our data does not allow us to distinguish voluntary from involuntary exit, as well as involuntary exit forced by selectorates vis-à-vis the electorate. Given the challenges that women politicians face, perhaps only a select group may be able to run and hold office successfully. Thus, self-selection could explain why women incumbents appear so resilient (Fulton, 2012). To this end, future research ought to pursue the topic by integrating our results with quantitative and qualitative analysis concerning the impact of intra-party competition and party organisations' candidate recruiting (for more, see Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2014, 2015). Moreover, our study solely investigates men and women incumbents after elections, although there may be an argument in favour of analysing both mid-term IER (for more, see Daniel and Metzger, 2018) and a combination of the two. Including said parameters may help in providing an even more detailed picture of the current status of gender and legislative turnover. It ought to be kept in mind that gender biases may be 'lingering' – as Högenauer (2025) argues – or concealed (Fulton, 2012), affecting women incumbents in more nuanced ways (Pearson and McGhee, 2013). Equality in outcomes does not necessarily result from gender-neutral inputs (Pearson and McGhee, 2013). Although this is not something we can infer from the evidence in our study, we need to be alerted to the fact that many 'hidden' gender-relevant challenges require our attention instead of just ensuring equality in outcomes. More research is necessary to understand what is happening beneath the surface. Qualitative-based studies might also aid in exploring gender-based differences concerning office-seeking ambitions. As both cohorts may have different evaluations of the benefits of office (Palmer and Simon, 2003; Fulton et al., 2006), men may be more willing to exit the arena and take the opportunity to jump up the office hierarchy (for more, see Frech, 2025). Finally, scholars might choose to build up on the path traced by the present article by expanding the selected number of countries observed. Each one of these future avenues of research will bring the literature one step closer to a better understanding of the nuances and dynamics of gender and legislative turnover. As the representation of women in legislative assemblies continues to increase, it is imperative to ensure that their presence is not only symbolic but also substantive and enduring. By addressing the challenges and barriers that women face in political careers, we can work towards a more inclusive and equitable political system.

Acknowledgements

A previous version of this article was presented during the Italian Conference of Political Science (SISP) of 2023. We are grateful to Francesca Feo and Clint Claessen for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this article. A big thank you goes to James Hughes and Jacob Minihane, who prepared the dataset on Germany as research assistants to Athanassios Gouglas at the University of Exeter.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Research Foundation Flanders (FWO Project GWO G061514N) has supported the participation of Athanassios Gouglas, Bart Maddens, and Marleen Brans in the present work by having funded the collection of historical legislative turnover data in Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom for the period 1945–2015. The University of Exeter has supported the participation of Athanassios Gouglas in the present work by having funded the collection of German data, as well as the update of information on legislative turnover in Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (2015–2022).

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material (Online appendix) for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The terms ‘men’ and ‘women’ are used in alignment with the current policy of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee and Delivery Group at SAGE Publishing.
2. Although interesting from the point of view of explaining IER, the remaining results in the full model are not relevant for answering the remaining gender-related questions of the study, as they assume effects that are equal among incumbent men and women.
3. Although not part of our set of hypotheses, M4 also shows that district magnitude (Control 1) significantly affects MIER. In essence, bigger districts have a higher likelihood of pushing men incumbents towards the exit.
4. Irrespective of gender, an interesting and puzzling result is that GQs significantly decrease IER in the EP, whereas they significantly increase IER in national legislatures. The difference between the two sub-sample parameters of this variable is significant.

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