Working Paper

Contextual Determinants of Citizens' Support for Gender Equality in Leadership Positions across Europe

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UNIVERSITÄT MANNHEIM

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Arbeitspapiere – Working Papers
Nr. 169, 2017

Möhring, Katja:
Contextual Determinants of Citizens' Support for Gender Equality in Leadership Positions across Europe / Katja Möhring; Céline Teney – Mannheim: 2017
(Arbeitspapiere - Mannheimer Zentrum für Europäische Sozialforschung; 169)
ISSN 1437-8574

Not available in book shops.
Token fee: € 3,00
Purchase: Mannheimer Zentrum für Europäische Sozialforschung (MZES)
68131 Mannheim
www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de

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Acknowledgements

We thank Christopher Buss and Nate Breznau, the participants of the Paper Workshop at the SOCIUM, University of Bremen, and the participants of the Paper Workshop at the Collaborative Research Center SFB 884 "Political Economy of Reforms", University of Mannheim for their helpful comments.

Abstract

This article constitutes the first cross-national comparative study of citizens' support for affirmative action policies using the example of a binding legal gender quota for company board positions. In contrast to previous studies, we focus on the contextual level and analyse how factors related to political institutions and social structure shape individuals' attitudes as well as the gap in the attitudes toward such interventionist measures between target and non-target group members. On the basis of multilevel regression analyses of the 2011 Eurobarometer data for 27 European countries, we show that levels of support as well as the gap in support for affirmative action policies vary largely between countries. Contextual factors related to the tradition of equal rights, women's integration in the labour market, and their visibility in leading positions as the most important determinants of cross-national variation. Our results lead to the overall conclusion that affirmative action policies are more accepted by citizens in countries where gender equality levels are low, whereas it is likely that they create reluctance among citizens in countries with high levels of gender equality. Yet, the results also provide evidence for exposure-based explanations showing that affirmative action policies gain less support when inequalities are less visible in society.

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1. Introduction

Ensuring equality and equal opportunities to every citizen regardless of their socio-demographic characteristics or social and cultural background constitutes a core principle of liberal democracies. Despite the implementation of anti-discrimination laws and programmes in most Western democracies targeted at the enforcement of this principle, citizens who diverge from the dominant groups and norms are still likely to face unequal participation in various societal arenas, such as the political, economic, or cultural one. Women, homosexuals, and members of ethnic and religious minorities constitute the main underrepresented groups suffering from unequal partition of power in Western democracies (Fraser 1997). The conceptualization of underrepresented group is based on their status subordination and not on their demographic importance. The implementation of group-based policies represents a possible means of redressing inequality and unequal opportunity in various societal arenas. According to proponents of group-based rights, individual rights have indeed shown to be insufficient to fight structural discrimination against members of underrepresented groups (e.g. Parekh 2006, Taylor 1994, Young 1990). Affirmative action programs 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).

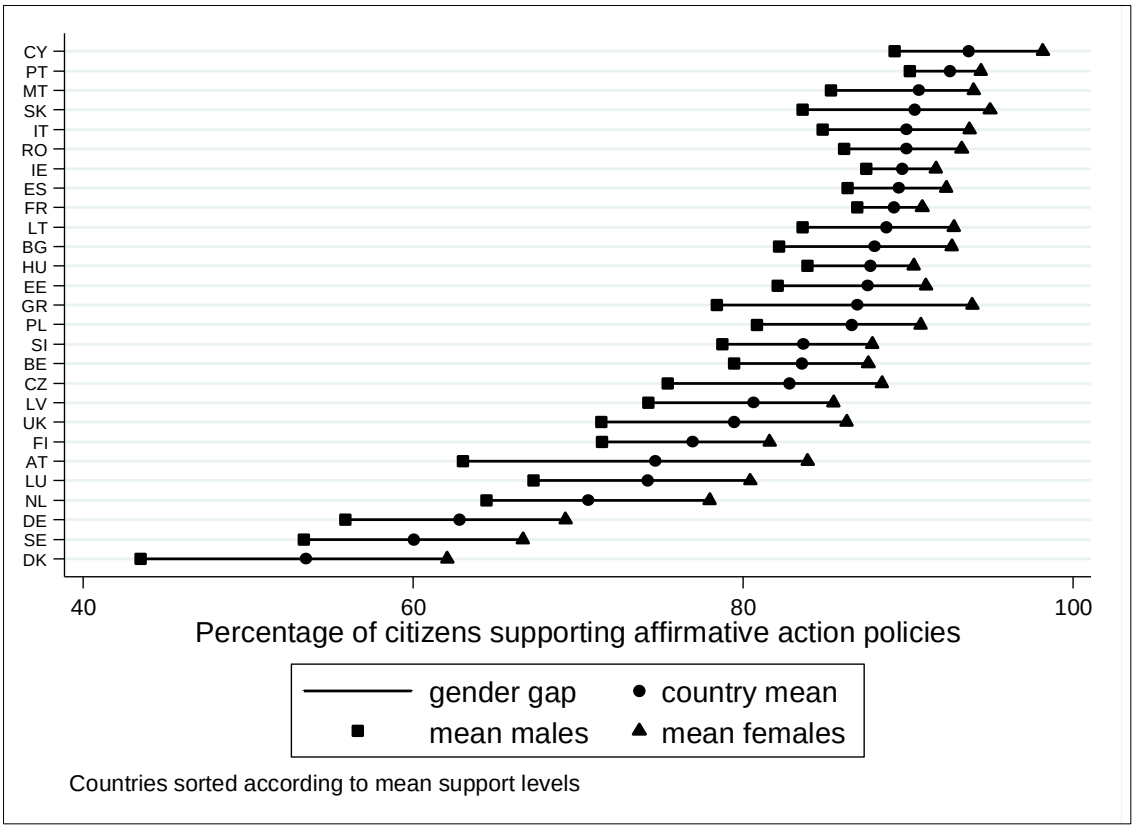
The contentious issue of affirmative action has conquered the European public sphere regarding the promotion of women in business leading positions. The EU parliament has put this topic in the foreground of the political arena with its non-binding resolution of July 2011. This resolution states that quotas should be applied in all EU member states to raise the female board representation to 30 percent by 2015 and 40 percent by 2020 (Armstrong and Walby 2012). In addition, several European countries have implemented legal quotas which are binding for companies. Consequently, the issue of affirmative action policies has gained in salience and has started to polarise actors in the public debates of various European countries (e.g. Amann et al. 2016, Chaperon 2015).

Previous research has shown that the performance of companies with a high diversity among board members is equal or better than of those with a more homogenous leadership (Erhardt et al. 2003, Smith et al. 2006) and that the visibility of women in leadership positions has a positive spillover effect on general gender equality (Matsa and Miller 2011, Kunze and Miller 2014).[1] However, the disparities in the share of female CEOs remain large across European countries, with 37.1 percent in France and only 8.8 percent in the Czech Republic in 2016 (European Commission 2016). Furthermore, not only the actual representation of women in company boards but also the support levels among citizens for affirmative action policies in this field vary largely between European countries (see Figure 1). It therefore comes as a surprise that we know little about the contextual determinants of citizens' attitudes toward affirmative action policies. Indeed, the debate has so far been dominated by U.S. scholars who focused on attitudes of (white) Americans toward (existing or hypothetical) affirmative action programs for ethnic minorities (Harrison et al. 2006, Krysan 2000). Therefore, the empirical literature is mainly based on national samples and focuses on attitudinal as well as socio-demographic, hence individual, determinants of attitudes toward affirmative action policies. This has led to the neglect of the contextual factors in the assessment of citizens' support for affirmative action policies. However, as previous cross-national research on various political attitudes has shown, individual factors represent only one side of the medal, while at the same time contextual factors related to political institutions and social structure exert substantial impact on individuals' attitudes (e.g. Ferrarini 2006, Mau 2003, Svallfors 2007). Indeed, plotting the average level of support for affirmative

1 Some research also shows that the share of women in company boards is negatively related to the subjective assessment of stock-based performance by financial market experts (Haslam et al. 2010).

action policies for women by gender clearly shows that the overall mean of support differs largely across EU countries (Figure 1). Moreover, also the gap between the target group (women) and the non-target group (men) varies considerably. Figure 1 clearly highlights the importance of the context in which both target and non-target group members of such affirmative action policy live.

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



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

This article aims to fill this gap by providing the first cross-national comparative study of citizens' support for affirmative action policies using the example of women's representation in company boards. Based on the 2011 Eurobarometer data, we will investigate the role played by political institutions and social structure in citizens' support for affirmative action policies across EU countries. The attitudinal measure we analyse in this article is the support for a weak preferential treatment of women in company boards (hereafter "support for affirmative action policies"). A weak preferential treatment/affirmative action policy implies that "members of the target group are given preference over others if and only if their other qualifications are equivalent, thus assigning a small positive weight to target group membership" (Harrison et al. 2006, p. 1014).[2] This entails interventionist policies actively pushing the improvement of minority groups' positions and clearly surpasses regulations guaranteeing equal treatment (e.g. Krysan 2000, Sears et al. 1997). Our focus on women as a target group of affirmative action policies has the main advantage of enabling the

2 By contrast, strong preferential treatment affirmative action policies "give preference to members of the target group even when their qualifications are inferior to those of nontarget group members, thus potentially assigning a large weight to demographic traits" (Harrison et al., 2006, p. 1014).

comparison of attitudes among citizens belonging to the policy's target group and citizens from the dominant group. Indeed, in contrast to other underrepresented groups which might be the target of such policies, women compose the largest demographic group and are sufficiently represented in general population samples for the purpose of statistical inferences. This in turn will enable us to investigate the differentiated role that political institutions and social structure might play among members and non-members of the policy's target group. For instance, men and women have been shown to be differently affected by contextual determinants in their attitudes toward traditional female roles (André et al. 2013). In order to better understand the role of political institutions and social structure in shaping citizens' support for affirmative action policies, it is therefore indispensable to investigate to which extent they affect the target group members and the non-target group members in a similar way. Therefore, our research questions are, first, what country-level factors (political institutions and social structure) are important determinants of citizens' support for affirmative action policies and, second, how these factors shape (a) the overall level of support and (b) the gap in support between the target and the non-target group.

The article is structured as follows: In the next section, we will present the theoretical mechanisms at the contextual level underlying citizens' support for affirmative action policies and the associated gender gap in support and discuss the potential impact of institutions, political parties, gender structure, and segregation on the labour market. Thereafter, the data, operationalization, and methods will be described. In the results section, we first discuss the direct effect of contextual factors on the general support for affirmative action policies and then examine the way in which contextual factors moderate the gender effect on support. We conclude with highlighting our main results, describing their theoretical and policy implications, and addressing limitations of our study as well as issues for further research.

2. Theory and previous results

The analysis of citizens' support for affirmative action policies in previous research is dominated by an individualistic perspective. Interest-based explanations suggest that citizens' support for affirmative action policies is mainly determined by the respective individual position vis-à-vis interventions, i.e. whether citizens would personally profit from a certain regulation or not, or even view it as a threat to their position. Accordingly, individuals who are likely to (or expect to) benefit from a policy will be supportive of it (Mau 2003). Applying this explanation to attitudes toward affirmative action policies is straightforward: individuals who belong to the affirmative action policy's target group will support the policy to a larger extent than citizens who belong to a non-target group. Following this theoretical perspective, members of the target groups are more likely to be in favour of 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 affirmative action policies because they perceive members of the target groups as competitive threats to valued (but scarce) social resources, statuses, and privileges (Bobo 2000). Previous studies have consistently provided evidence confirming this interest-based explanation with regard to political attitudes (on support for gender equality see, e.g., Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; on support for affirmative action policies see, e.g., Harrison et al. 2006).

The contextual perspective points to the significance of factors related to political institutions and social structure for the formation of citizens' attitudes and interests. Previous research in political sociology and social psychology has repeatedly proven the importance of societal factors for political attitudes in general. Several mechanisms underlie the assumed impact of these contextual factors: first, 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); second, previous results from social psychology show that social norms shape individuals' perceptions and attitudes toward conformity

(Stavrova 2014); third, the argument of exposure predicts that individuals' opinions are influenced by their socialization in a society's normative framework (Inglehart 1977, Inglehart and Norris 2003) and by their actual contact with different social groups in every-day life (e.g. Bolzendahl and Myers 2004). These previous results can be transferred to the issue of affirmative action policies. Consent to state interventions to foster equal opportunity for specific underrepresented groups will therefore be dependent not only on an individual's objective interest but also on their perception of the societal status quo, whether they believe the current situation to be fair or just, and the socialization of equality norms represented by the institutional and political context. In the following, we describe the mechanisms underlying the impact of contextual factors and derive hypotheses regarding citizens' support for affirmative action policies. We distinguish factors related to (1) political institutions and rights and (2) social and labour market structure. Furthermore, we argue that contextual factors not only have a direct effect on attitudes but also moderate the effect of gender on attitudes, i.e. alter the differences between the target and non-target groups.

2.1 The impact of contextual factors on the *level* of support

Political institutions can influence citizens' attitudes through public policies in various ways. For instance, the introduction of public policies may alter the opportunity structures of citizens by structuring citizens' possibilities, incentives, costs and constraints (Ferrarini 2006, Svallfors 2007). The implementation of public policies can thus modify the behaviour of citizens targeted by the policies. In addition to this direct effect of public policies on citizens' behaviour, institutions may also shape citizens' perceptions, orientations, and norms: the implementation of specific public policies can affect the visibility of social phenomena (Svallfors 2007) and can exert 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 (Mau 2003, Svallfors 2007): by implementing public policies, they can influence the way citizens perceive the rights, obligations, and norms shared by members of their political community (Svallfors 2007, p. 12). This in turn is a paramount factor for the development of a "moral economy of social welfare," which refers to a socially and politically validated conception of social justice shared by the members of a society (Mau 2003). As Svallfors puts it, "the notion of a 'moral economy' is useful for complementing a purely individualistic perspective on preferences and attitudes, in that people's notions of social relations are guided by normative ideas of reciprocity, obligation, and responsibility, which cannot be reduced to merely a question about who is benefitting in different processes of redistribution" (Svallfors 2007, p. 11). The link between public policies and citizens' orientations, norms, and preferences will then constitute a positive feedback loop: while institutions are likely to alter citizens' orientations and norms through the introduction of social policies, citizens' attitudes in turn are also likely to shape institutions' decision to introduce specific policies (Ferrarini 2006). Previous research has shown that welfare state regimes are associated with both the level and the type of solidarity endorsed by citizens (Arts and Gelissen 2001, Gelissen 2000). On the basis of these considerations, we can assume that institutions, policies, and societal norms have formative influence on citizens' attitudes leading to consonance of attitudes and the normative principles embedded in the institutional structures.

However, there is also evidence in previous research that public policy and public opinion can be in conflict, displaying contradiction. Wlezien (1995) shows that public attitudes are a "thermostat" to policy outputs, indicating when spending levels and state interventions are no longer in line with public demands. Accordingly, he shows for the U.S. context that an increase in government spending levels is related to decreasing support levels among citizens and vice versa. Transferred to the analysis of affirmative action policies, citizens might not perceive problem pressure in countries where gender equality has already reached a high level and therefore might not support further state intervention in this area. In the following, we will describe the contextual determinants of support for affirmative action policies and derive hypotheses for the empirical analysis on the background of these two possible contractionary relationships.

2.1.1 Political institutions and rights

With respect to political institutions and rights, we assume the current legislation on women's quotas, the history of equal rights, and the position of parties as important political actors to influence citizens' support for affirmative action policies. European countries vary in the existence of women's quotas, in the degree to which these are voluntary or legally binding, and in the timing of their implementation. Only a minority of European countries (eight out of 27) had established binding quotas until 2011, the year the Eurobarometer survey was conducted, and these regulations were mostly not implemented before 2010 (European Commission's Network 2011). A legal binding quota can induce a favourable climate for gender equality as it creates positive spillover effects (Matsa and Miller 2011, Kunze and Miller 2014). By contrast, it is also possible that a strong state intervention by means of a binding quota causes reluctance among citizens.

Not only output-centred mechanisms, such as the implementation of public policies, but also input-centred mechanisms, such as the ideological orientations of political actors, can affect support for affirmative action policies. Exposure to influential content-specific messages or socialization agencies such as the media constitutes a main factor in the processes of political socialization and attitude formation (Recchi 2014). As political parties belong to the most prominent actors in the public and media debates, they might shape citizens' attitudes and orientations. Two main ideological orientations among political parties are likely to shape citizens' support for affirmative action policies: positions toward libertarian-traditional values and positions toward a laissez-faire/interventionist role of the state. Indeed, supportive attitudes toward equal opportunity for underrepresented groups load on the libertarian pole of the libertarian-traditional ideological dimension. Furthermore, affirmative action policies imply a strong state intervention. Therefore, the endorsement of strong libertarian values and preferences for an interventionist role of the state among political parties are likely to increase citizens' support for affirmative action policies. However, according to the contradiction argument, also a reverse relationship is possible.

Besides the immediate impact of political actors, existing institutions, and regulations, public opinion towards the inclusion of minority and underrepresented groups may be shaped by the tradition of civil liberties in a country (Etzioni 2000). The historical establishment of equal political rights for men and women is therefore expected to influence citizens' support for affirmative action policies for women. Previous research has demonstrated the strong interrelation of the introduction of women's suffrage with welfare state development (Aidt and Dallal 2007, Lott 1998). However, results on the impact of women's suffrage on the voting behaviour are inconclusive. Previous research for the U.S. has reported more liberal voting behaviour of women compared to men after women's suffrage had been introduced (Lott 1998), while comparative studies for Europe reveal that political attitudes of women in Europe throughout the 20th Century are more conservative than men's (Inglehart and Norris 2000).

2.1.2 Social structure

With regard to social structure, we are interested in the actual degree of gender diversity in a country, as this shapes the every-day experiences of citizens and the norms of equality in society. The underlying mechanism here is exposure: regular interactions with members of the target group in both everyday life and in situations in which target group members are likely to suffer from unequal treatment (such as on the workplace) as well as exposure to norms of equality and emancipatory ideas increase support for equality of underrepresented groups (e.g. Bolzendahl and Myers 2004). These two forms of exposure are assumed to lead to a stronger 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 are likely to 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 mean to redress inequali-

ty on the labour market against their own group. Regarding non-target group members, those who interact with target group members in the work place are also more likely to be supportive of affirmative action policies. Exposure to women at work has indeed been shown to reduce bias against women as leaders among men (Finseraas et al. 2016, Boisjoly et al. 2006). Moreover, non-target group members who witness unequal treatment against target group members in the labour market are more likely to acknowledge the existence of inequality and might thus become more supportive of policies aimed at improving equal opportunities. The extent to which non-target group members are exposed to target group members and the probability of witnessing situations of discrimination at the workplace is dependent on the female employment rate and the gender segregation on the labour market. Furthermore, the female employment rate represents the degree of gender equality on the labour market. Therefore, we may again expect divergent effects on the support for affirmative action in line with the consonance or the contradiction assumption.

The same applies to the proportion of women in leadership positions within a country that can be positively or negatively related to citizens' support for affirmative action policies for women. As our dependent variable focuses on gender equality in leading positions in the economic field, the share of female board members in large companies composes a straightforward way to measure gender equality in leadership. Apart from the economic field, the share of women in leadership positions in the field of politics is also likely to impact citizens' support for affirmative action policies. Indeed, the field of politics constitutes a societal arena in which leadership positions are highly visible in the public sphere. Moreover, it has been argued that women in politics can act as gatekeepers to push for more gender equality and that women in leading positions create positive spillover effects to lower levels (Ferrarini 2006, Matsa and Miller 2011, Kunze and Miller 2014). Paxton and Kunovich (2003) have shown in a cross-sectional study that predominant gender norms in a country are significantly related to the share of female representatives in the national parliament.

We assume that these different contextual factors exert an impact on the support for affirmative action policies. However, as described initially, this relationship can be characterized either by consonance or by contradiction. Therefore, we test two opposing hypotheses on the impact of political institutions and rights as well as of the degree of gender equality in social structure. First, according to the idea that institutions and structural characteristics have a formative impact on individuals' attitudes, we assume that *the higher gender equality is in a country's political institutions and on the labour market, and the more political parties endorse libertarian and interventionist positions, the higher the support for affirmative action policies* (Hypothesis 1a). Second, in line with the contradiction argument of a possible conflict between public policy and opinion, we assume that *the higher gender equality is in a country's political institutions and on the labour market, and the more political parties endorse libertarian and interventionist positions, the lower the support for affirmative action policies* (Hypothesis 1b). Furthermore, to what extent citizens perceive problem pressure may depend on the visibility of inequalities. Therefore, we assume that *the higher the gender segregation on the labour market in a country, the lower the support for affirmative action policies* (Hypothesis 2).

2.2 The impact of contextual factors on the *gap* in support

So far, we have described the expected general effects of contextual factors on citizens' support for affirmative action policies. However, it can also be assumed that the impact of contextual factors varies between the target group and the non-target group members, hence, that contextual factors *moderate* the gender effect on support for affirmative action policies toward women. From the self-interest perspective, individuals support policies which enhance their position in society, as described above. Therefore, women should be generally more supportive of affirmative action policies that promote their position. The position of women in society, however, differs cross-nationally, as we find a large variation in women's involvement

in the labour market, in the share of women in leadership positions, and in policies supporting gender equality among the countries of our sample. Therefore, support for affirmative action policies should be driven by the actual status quo of women's position and gender equality within a country. The stronger women believe their 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. By contrast, if gender equality on the labour market and in political institutions has already reached a high level in a country, the interest to further enhance the own group's position may be weaker and thus the demand for additional interventionist policies among women may diminish. Following this argument, women as target group members might show a higher sensitivity for contextual factors related to gender inequality than the non-target group of men. Previous research on support for traditional female roles confirms this (e.g. André et al. 2013). This leads us to our final two hypotheses: *women as the target group are more prone to contextual factors than men* (Hypothesis 3a); *the lower the institutional and political support of gender equality in a country and the more disadvantaged the actual labour market position of women, the stronger the support for affirmative action policies among women* (Hypothesis 3b).

3. Data and Methods

3.1 Sample 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 19,742 respondents. The dependent variable is an item measuring support for affirmative action policies with regard to the introduction of a legal binding 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 0 "totally opposed" to 3 "totally in favour". We recoded this information into a dichotomous variable where 0 refers to "totally or rather opposed" and 1 refers to "totally or rather in favour."[3]

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 reference category. Other variables at the individual level are used predominantly as control variables: 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: below 15 years or no education as reference category, at 16-19 years, at 20 years or above, still studying) and its interaction with gender; marital status, measured in four categories (married as reference category, cohabiting, unmarried/single, divorced/separated/widowed) and by a binary variable indicating whether the respondent has 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 reference category, small or mid-size town, and large town). Table A1 in the Appendix includes the summary statistics for the independent variables at the individual level.

3 Before recoding the dependent variable, we estimated ordered logit regression models for the original item with four categories. As both versions led to the same results, we used the more parsimonious binary coding and logit models similar to Brady and Finnigan (2014).

3.2 Operationalization of country-level variables

The independent variables at the country level cover the areas of institutionalization of equality norms, political parties' orientations, women's political rights, labour market integration of women, and the visibility of women in leadership positions. Table 1 gives an overview of all included country-level variables and the country mean of the dependent variable. Assessing the role of the institutionalization of equality norms on citizens' support for affirmative action policies implies considering public policies that specifically promote gender equality. Some countries in our sample had established binding legal gender quotas for company boards before 2011, the year of the Eurobarometer survey. We therefore use a binary indicator informing whether such a quota was already implemented in 2011, relying on information from the European Commission's Network to Promote Women in Decision-making in Politics and the Economy (2011) and the Gunda Werner Institute (2016).

For the measures of political parties' orientations, we use the Chapel Hill Party dataset. This cross-national expert survey was conducted in all EU countries with the exception of Malta, Luxemburg, 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). Parties with a low value on this dimension favour expanded personal freedoms (such as access to abortion, same-sex marriage, or active euthanasia). By contrast, parties with a high value on this dimension reject these ideas and value order, tradition, and stability. The laissez-faire/interventionist orientation item relates to parties' position toward the role the state should adopt in economic issues and ranges from 0 (pro interventionism) to 10 (pro laissez-faire). Parties with a low value on this item prefer the government to play an active role in the economy, while parties with a high value want a reduced economic role for governments (e.g. being proponent of privatization, lower taxes, less regulation, less government spending, and a leaner welfare state). To compute the average position of political parties in each country, we weighted these items with the percentage of votes each party obtained at the national election that took place around 2010. In this way, we use 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.

As an indicator for the historical establishment of women's political rights, we use the year of the full recognition of women's rights to vote and to stand for election. Information on the introduction of women's suffrage is obtained from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016). The countries of our sample display a broad variation in the development of women's suffrage, with the earliest introduction in Finland in 1906 and the latest in Portugal in 1974.

The female employment rate and the sectoral gender segregation are used as measures for the labour market integration of women. To operationalize the sectoral gender segregation, we use information on the participation of women and men in the sectors of education, human health, and social work activities and estimate the gender gap in participation in these sectors. Accordingly, higher values indicate a larger separation of men and women on the labour market. Both indicators refer to the year 2010 and are derived from Labor Force Survey data as reported by the European Institute for Gender Equality (2015).

Lastly, two indicators are used for measuring the visibility of women in leadership positions: the share of female board members in the largest quoted companies of a country (supervisory board or board of directors) in 2010 and the share of female members of national parliament (both houses) in 2010. These indicators have been computed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (2015) for all EU countries. All continuous variables are centred on their grand mean for the multivariate analyses.

Table 1: Country means of the dependent variable and values of country indicators

	Mean support (Dep. Var.)	Women's mean support	Men's mean support	GDP per capita (PPP)	Legal women's quota	Parties: Libertarian	Parties: Interventionist	Women's suffrage (year)	Sectoral gender segregation	Female employ-ment rate	Female CEOs (%)	Female MPs (%)
AT	0.74	0.84	0.61	44029	1	5.47	4.73	1918	18.3	69.3	9	29
BE	0.84	0.88	0.80	40946	1	4.33	5.54	1948	27.2	64	10	39
BG	0.88	0.92	0.82	15278	0	6.91	4.78	1945	15.4	63.6	11	22
CY	0.94	0.98	0.89	32983	0			1960	11.5	70	4	13
CZ	0.82	0.88	0.75	28604	0	5.60	5.31	1919	18.9	63.7	12	18
DE	0.63	0.69	0.56	42080	0	5.55	4.70	1918	20.7	70.5	13	32
DK	0.54	0.63	0.43	43314	1	6.13	5.35	1915	29.8	73.7	18	38
EE	0.87	0.91	0.82	23576	0	5.51	5.69	1917	21.1	69.4	7	23
ES	0.89	0.92	0.85	32674	1	2.33	5.29	1931	15.6	57.9	10	34
FI	0.77	0.81	0.73	40251	1	4.87	5.10	1906	29.9	73	26	40
FR	0.89	0.91	0.87	37325	1	6.33	4.31	1944	21.9	67.1	12	20
GR	0.87	0.94	0.78	26676	0	2.82	5.08	1952	14.1	54.1	6	17
HU	0.88	0.9	0.84	22524	0	7.38	3.58	1945	19.3	57.2	14	11
IE	0.89	0.92	0.87	44913	0	6.72	6.22	1918	26.4	61.2	8	15
IT	0.90	0.94	0.85	35901	1	8.44	5.58	1946	18.5	51.3	5	20
LT	0.89	0.93	0.85	22530	0	5.84	5.16	1918	21.3	69.1	13	19
LU	0.74	0.81	0.66	91469	0			1918	17.9	64.8	4	20
LV	0.80	0.85	0.74	19406	0	5.58	4.81	1918	21.4	67.6	23	22
MT	0.90	0.94	0.85	28178	0			1947	21	38.8	2	9
NL	0.71	0.78	0.64	46388	1	5.73	5.20	1919	28.8	70.6	15	39
PL	0.86	0.9	0.80	22334	0	5.33	4.75	1918	19.2	59.7	12	18
PT	0.92	0.94	0.90	26932	0	2.33	4.79	1974	20.3	67.6	5	30
RO	0.90	0.93	0.87	17363	0	5.26	5.31	1918	12	59.5	21	10
SE	0.61	0.67	0.54	43709	0	5.17	5.45	1919	32.9	77.4	26	47
SI	0.83	0.88	0.78	28492	0	2.66	4.88	1945	18.7	68.8	10	11
SK	0.90	0.95	0.82	25066	0	4.80	4.98	1919	21.4	60.9	22	18
UK	0.80	0.87	0.72	36549	0	4.89	5.88	1928	28.2	68.7	13	20

Source: Own calculations using Eurobarometer 2011 (76.1.)

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. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) shows that 10.3 percent of the variation of our dependent variable stems from the country level. Our key research interest is to identify the main effects of the country-level indicators and their cross-level interaction effects with gender. We therefore estimate a series of logistic regression models, always controlling for the individual-level variables as described above and additionally using the gross domestic product (GDP) at purchasing power parity per capita as country-level control. The results for the individual-level variables are reported in Table A2 in the Appendix.

4. Results

The results of the multilevel logistic regressions are presented in Table 2. All models include the individual-level variables described above and control for GDP. Gender is a highly influential factor with a significant and negative coefficient in all models. Hence, a gender gap in support with lower approval rates among the non-target group of men exists in all countries of the sample after controlling for differences in the sample composition. In the following, we will examine, first, in what way country-level characteristics influence the general support for affirmative action policies (direct context effects) and, second, how country-level characteristics moderate the effect of gender and influence the size of the gender gap in support (cross-level interaction effects).

4.1 Contextual effects on the level of support

In Models 1–7 we estimate the main and cross-level interaction effects of the country-level indicators step by step (Table 2). In the following, we will discuss the main effects representing the determinants of the general support for affirmative action policies. Model 1 includes the results for the binary indicator on legal gender quotas. Both the main and the interaction effects with gender are not significant. One reason for this might be that most of the countries that have already established a legal gender quota in 2011 implemented this directive in 2010, just shortly before the survey was conducted. Therefore, the results of this law might not be visible to the broad public in these countries. Models 2 and 3 include the results for the indicators on political parties' orientation and the historical development of women's political rights. Whereas both variables on parties' orientation are insignificant, the year of the introduction of women's suffrage has a significant positive main effect. Accordingly, the later women's voting right was established, the higher the general support for affirmative action policies. To sum up, the results on the political and institutional dimensions show that neither recently implemented policies aiming to redress gender inequality nor parties' orientations seem to be relevant to explain the level and the gender gap in support for affirmative action policies. The historical establishment of women's rights has a significant effect that underpins the contradiction argument formulated in Hypothesis 1b, as support levels are higher and more similar among men and women in countries that are latecomers in terms of women's voting rights.

Table 2: Multilevel Logistic Regression Analysis of Support for Affirmative Action Policies (dependent variable: approval to a legal quota for gender balance on company boards), macro variables and cross-level interaction effects

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Gender: Male	-0.744***	-0.675***	-0.673***	-0.682***	-0.697***	-0.695***	-0.708***
	(0.112)	(0.110)	(0.105)	(0.103)	(0.103)	(0.103)	(0.103)
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)
Legal gender quota for companies	-0.208						
	(0.231)						
Male * Legal gender quota	0.183						
	(0.112)						
Libertarian/traditional orientation		0.122					
		(0.160)					
Male * Libertarian/traditional		-0.115					
		(0.099)					
Laissez-faire/interventionist orientation		0.256					
		(0.192)					
Male * Laissez-faire/interventionist		0.002					
		(0.116)					
Women's suffrage (introduct. year)			0.017**				
			(0.006)				
Male * Women's suffrage			-0.006+				
			(0.004)				
Female employment rate 2010				-0.042***		-0.024+	
				(0.012)		(0.013)	
Male * Female employment rate 2010				0.017*		0.003	
				(0.007)		(0.009)	
Sectoral gender segregation 2010					-0.070***	-0.054**	
					(0.017)	(0.018)	
Male * Sectoral gender segregation 2010					0.029***	0.027*	
					(0.009)	(0.011)	
Share of female MPs							-0.026**
							(0.010)

Table 2: Multilevel Logistic Regression Analysis of Support for Affirmative Action Policies (dependent variable: approval to a legal quota for gender balance on company boards), macro variables and cross-level interaction effects (continued)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Male * Share of female MPs							0.013**
							(0.005)
Share of female CEOs							-0.029*
							(0.014)
Male * Share of female CEOs							0.002
							(0.008)
Constant	2.491***	2.316***	0.202***	2.400***	2.385***	2.375***	2.437***
	(0.160)	(0.141)	(0.060)	(0.133)	(0.133)	(0.130)	(0.129)
Variance Components							
Male	0.030***	0.037***	0.029***	0.022***	0.020***	0.020***	0.016***
	(0.020)	(0.025)	(0.021)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.020)	(0.018)
Constant	0.253***	0.187**	0.202***	0.179**	0.184***	0.158**	0.146***
	(0.074)	(0.059)	(0.060)	(0.055)	(0.055)	(0.048)	(0.044)
N	19742	18817	19742	19742	19742	19742	19742
Wald chi sq.	377.168	342.972	386.968	416.875	451.553	457.479	461.991
Log likelihood	-8949.992	-8565.309	-8947.128	-8945.450	-8939.804	-8938.136	-8940.338

Notes: All models include the individual-level control variables as in Table A2 in the Appendix.

GALTAN Coding: 0 (most libertarian) to 10 (most traditional); Laissez-faire/interventionist orientation Coding: 0 (pro interventionism) to 10 (pro laissez-faire). Standard error in parentheses; ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, + p < 0.1; Controlling for individual-level variables.

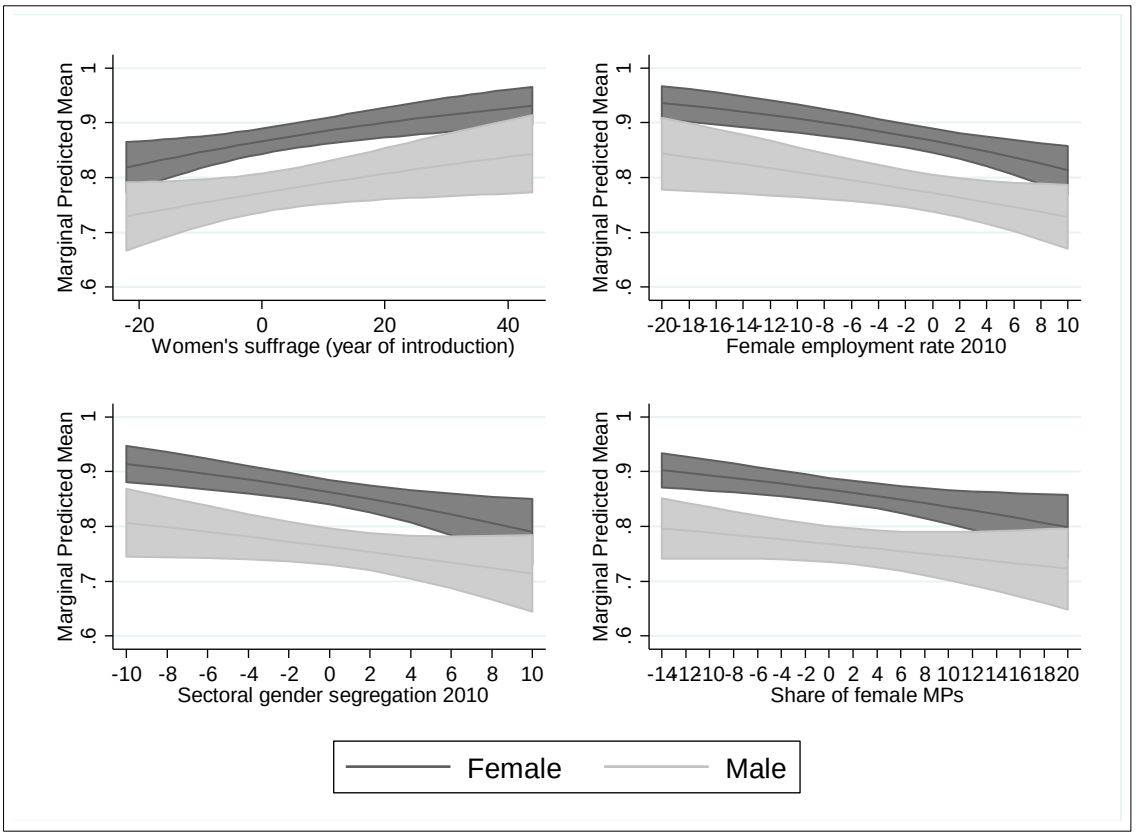
Source: Own calculations using Eurobarometer 2011 (76.1.)

The dimension of women's integration in the labour market is examined by means of the indicators for the female employment rate and the sectoral gender segregation. For the female employment rate, the main and the cross-level interaction effects are significant (Model 4); however, after controlling for sectoral gender segregation in Model 6, only the main effect remains significant at a ten-percent level. Accordingly, the level of general support for affirmative action policies decreases with increasing female employment rates. Similarly to the effects of the variable on the year of the introduction of women's suffrage, we find more support for the contradiction (Hypothesis 1b) than for the consonance argument (Hypothesis 1a). The results for sectoral gender segregation included in Models 5 and 6 are in line with Hypothesis 2 on the exposure argument: the higher the segregation on the labour market, the lower the general support level in a country. This result remains stable even after controlling for the female employment rate in Model 6; accordingly, the sectoral segregation on the labour market is a stronger predictor of citizens' support for affirmative action policies than women's general involvement in the labour market as measured by the female employment rate. In Model 7, we included the two indicators on women's visibility in leadership positions. The share of female MPs and the share of female CEOs are significant and negatively related to the general support for affirmative action policies. The more women have already achieved leading positions in the economic field, the lower the approval of a binding gender quota for company boards among citizens. The same applies to the share of women in national parliaments: a high female representation in the political field goes along with a lower support of affirmative action measures. Therefore, we again find Hypothesis 1b to be confirmed: the support for affirmative action policies is in fact lower in countries with a high visibility of women in leading positions. To sum up, the results for the direct impact of contextual factors reveal a consistent pattern of a contradictory relationship between public opinion and public policy: citizens' support for affirmative action policies is negatively associated with a country's actual structural gender equality and institutionalization of equality norms. Furthermore, the result for gender segregation on the labour market supports the exposure argument: citizens' support level of affirmative action policies toward women are higher in countries where the division of women and men among industry sectors is less pronounced, i.e. where target and non-target groups have a higher probability of interaction in everyday working life.

4.2 Context effects on the gap in support

So far, we have focused on the general impact of political institutions and social structure on the support for affirmative action policies among citizens. However, according to the interest-based explanations outlined above, we expect target and non-target group members not only to show divergent overall levels of support, but also to be differently affected by contextual factors. Therefore, we test the interaction effects of the contextual factors with gender (coded as male, with female being the reference category) in the second step of our analysis (see Table 2). We find significant interaction effects at a ten-percent level for the sectoral gender segregation and the share of female MPs as well as for the introduction of women's suffrage. Furthermore, the interaction effect for the female employment rate is significant before controlling for sectoral segregation. First of all, the relationship is less steep for all of these factors, i.e. the effect of these contextual factors is less strong for men compared to women. This general result supports Hypotheses 3a on the greater sensitivity of women as the target group of affirmative action policies to contextual factors. To examine these moderating effects of the country-level characteristics in detail, we plot the predicted marginal effects of support for men and women for different values of the macro indicators (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Marginal Effects with 95% Confidence Intervals of contextual variables (mean-centered) by gender



Note: Estimation of marginal effects based on models 3, 4, 6, and 7 as depicted in Table 2.

Source: Own calculations using Eurobarometer 2011 (76.1.)

The negative interaction effect between gender and the year of women's access to the ballot indicates that the gender gap becomes smaller, i.e. the later women's suffrage was established, the more men and women are similar in their support for affirmative action policies. The significant positive interaction effect of gender and sectoral segregation indicates that the gap in support is smaller in countries with higher gender segregation on the labour market. The graph at the bottom left in Figure 2 illustrates this relationship and shows that not only support levels are low among both genders, but also the gender gap is no longer significant in countries with high gender segregation. Indeed, the decline in support among females is greater in countries with a high level of gender segregation on the labour market. Similar relationships can be found for the female employment rate and the number of female representatives in national parliaments: higher levels of both indicators go along with lower support for affirmative action policies among both genders, and also the gender gap is decreasing along with higher levels of women's involvement in business and politics. For both indicators, the converging support levels of men and women towards the ends of the range are again resulting from a stronger decline in women's support.

Taken together, these results provide some support for Hypotheses 3b: the worse their positon in society, the stronger women support affirmative action policies. By contrast, in countries with a high female employment rate and a high share of female MPs, support among female citizens is low and more similar to men. However, the result for sectoral gender segregation points in another direction and is not in line with

H3b: with increasing gender segregation in a country, the support for affirmative action policies is shrinking especially among women—and this relationship remains stable even after controlling for the female employment rate. This result again provides support for the exposure argument.

5. Conclusion

A fine-grained understanding of citizens' attitudes toward group-based policies that aim at redressing inequality is essential for the assessment of the challenges behind the implementation of such policies. The academic debate has hitherto been dominated by U.S. studies focusing on White Americans' attitudes toward ethnic minority groups and has thus neglected contextual determinants and target group members' opinion. However, as this study shows, not only citizens' levels of support for affirmative action policies differ largely across countries, but also the gap in support between target and non-target group members shows a substantial cross-national variation. Assessing the role of contextual factors can help understanding the sources of these cross-national differences in the overall attitudes toward affirmative action policies as well as in the gap between target and non-target group members' support levels. Why is it interesting to understand this source? First of all, exploring variation between countries allows us to test the universality of theoretical mechanisms assumed at the individual-level. It helps us to understand whether and how citizens' opposition to or approval of affirmative action measures is dependent not only on their personal interest but also on the position of their group in society and on the structural and normative framework in which they live. Besides, a deeper insight into the contextual mechanisms will lead to a greater understanding of factors promoting an acceptance of affirmative action policies among citizens.

Our results give some support to the interest-based explanation at the individual level but also yield the significant role of contextual factors related to the actual level of gender equality and position of women in society as well as to a country's tradition of equal rights. Generally, the extent to which individuals are likely to—or expect to—benefit from a policy is strongly related to their levels of support for this policy: in all countries, target group members are significantly more supportive of affirmative action policies than non-target group members. However, levels of support as well as the gap in support between target and non-target group members vary largely between countries. Both target and non-target group members adjust their opinion to the actual conditions in their countries. Hence, the relevance of self-interest in the support for affirmative action policies is dependent upon context—and this is even more the case for target-group members because they appear to show a larger sensitivity to contextual factors. Yet, the results also provide evidence for exposure-based explanations, showing that affirmative action policies gain less support if inequalities are not visible in society, that is, if the gender segregation on the labour market is high.

Generally, contextual factors related to the actual social structure regarding the position of women in a country play a pivotal role for citizens' support for affirmative action policies, whereas political institutions are less significant for both target and non-target group members. Accordingly, the interaction of target and non-target group members on the labour market as well as the visibility of target-group members in positions of political leadership shape citizens' support for affirmative action policies. Moreover, also the tradition of equal political rights for women in a country appears to have this effect. Other characteristics of political institutions such as parties' orientations and the institutionalization of equality norms in legislation, in contrast, do not have a significant impact. The effects of the relevant contextual characteristics support the contradiction in contrast to the consonance argument: we mostly find a negative relationship between the level of support for affirmative action policies and the tradition and level of gender equality in a country. The support for affirmative action policies thus seems to be a response to adverse conditions in a country: approval to a binding gender quota among both the target and the non-target groups is high where women's involvement in business and politics is low and where women's suffrage was established relatively

late. By contrast, affirmative action measures are less supported in countries where inequality is already at a relatively low level: a large share of women in national parliaments is related to a generally lower support for affirmative action policies, and an early implementation of women's voting right is also associated with lower support levels. However, the results for the sectoral gender segregation are partly conflicting and provide evidence for exposure-based rather than interest-based explanations. Women as target-group members are less likely to support affirmative action policies in countries with high gender segregation on the labour market. It can be argued that this result may be not only due to a lower visibility of inequalities in every-day (working) life but also to a lower perceived necessity for affirmative action, as in highly female-dominated industries also leading positions are predominantly hold by women. Our results lead to the overall conclusion that affirmative action policies are more accepted by citizens in countries where equality levels are low, whereas additional measures to enhance equality even further are likely to create reluctance among citizens in countries with high levels of equality. Finally, although we do not directly test this, our paper provides support for a negative feedback loop of gender equality. Support for affirmative action policies turns out to be especially low in countries with high levels of gender equality. Citizens in these countries do not seem to perceive it as a necessity to implement further equality enhancing policies. In other words, we find that, if feminism is successful, it may undermine itself in the long run. Furthermore, also the intersectionality of gender and class plays a role here: gender quotas for company boards address a specific privileged group of women to whom the majority of women may feel rather disparate than close.

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. As pioneering study, it also suffers from several limitations, which will hopefully be tackled in future research. For instance, 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 that aim at redressing inequality, political parties' ideological orientations, and the extent to which underrepresented groups manage to hold visible leading positions in various societal arenas. The structure of the data we used for this study did not allow us to assess these feedback loops in more detail: we were able to investigate only one side of this two-way interaction. Moreover, the paper focuses on support for affirmative action policies for a specific underrepresented group (women) in a specific societal arena (the economy). Future research including a larger set of attitudinal measurements could shed light on the generalizability of our findings to other underrepresented groups and societal arenas. Despite these limitations, we hope that this study has shown a new avenue for social scientists interested in public opinion toward affirmative action policies and the acceptance of policies supporting women in leading positions. Future research is needed to better understand the complexity of the relationship between structural and institutional factors as well as the multidimensional support for group-based equality and policies.

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Appendix

Table A1: Descriptive statistics for the individual level variables

	% / Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Dependent variable (support)	0.80	0.40	0	1
Gender: Male	0.47	0.50	0	1
Age finished full-time education				
No education or below 15 years	0.17	0.38	0	1
At 16-19 years	0.43	0.49	0	1
At 20 years or above	0.37	0.48	0	1
Still Studying	0.03	0.17	0	1
Age (mean-standardized)	0.28	17.76	-34	49
Employed (RC: not employed)	0.50	0.50	0	1
Left-right self-placement	5.29	2.16	1	10
Difficulties paying bills	0.39	0.49	0	1
Family status				
(Re)Married	0.53	0.50	0	1
Cohabiting	0.11	0.31	0	1
Single	0.17	0.38	0	1
Divorced, separated or widowed	0.18	0.38	0	1
Children below age 15 in household	0.26	0.44	0	1
Place of residence				
Rural area or village	0.34	0.47	0	1
Small or mid-size town	0.36	0.48	0	1
Large town	0.29	0.46	0	1

Notes: Difficulties paying bills Coding 1: most of the time / from time to time, 0: Never.

Source: Own calculations using Eurobarometer 2011 (76.1.)

Table A2: Multilevel Logistic Regression Analysis of Support for Affirmative Action Policies, individual-level variables

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	ICC: 10.34		
Gender: Male		-0.661***	-0.681***
		(0.097)	(0.105)
Employed (RC: not employed)		-0.081	-0.082
		(0.065)	(0.065)
Male * Employed		-0.128	-0.118
		(0.080)	(0.081)
Left-right self-placement		-0.061***	-0.061***
		(0.009)	(0.009)
Place of residence (RC: Rural area or village)		ref.	ref.
Small or middle sized town		-0.020	-0.020
		(0.046)	(0.046)
Large town		-0.047	-0.047
		(0.049)	(0.049)
Age finished full-time education (RC: Below 15 years or no education)			
At 16-19 years		-0.018	-0.024
		(0.088)	(0.088)
At 20+ years		-0.160+	-0.145
		(0.091)	(0.093)
Still Studying (and age<20)		0.041	0.039
		(0.234)	(0.235)
Male * At 16-19 years		0.072	0.084
		(0.115)	(0.116)
Male * At 20+ years		-0.105	-0.129
		(0.115)	(0.118)
Male * Still Studying		-0.069	-0.064
		(0.272)	(0.273)
Age		-0.007***	-0.006***
		(0.002)	(0.002)
Age sq.		-0.000	-0.000
		(0.000)	(0.000)
Difficulties paying bills		0.173***	0.173***
		(0.046)	(0.046)
Marital Status (RC: (Re-)Married)		ref.	ref.
Cohabiting		-0.052	-0.053
		(0.066)	(0.066)
Single		0.070	0.073
		(0.061)	(0.061)
Divorced, separated or widowed		-0.036	-0.037
		(0.056)	(0.056)
Children aged<15 in household		0.018	0.019
		(0.051)	(0.051)
Constant	1.625***	2.410***	2.420***
	(0.121)	(0.152)	(0.155)
Variance Components			
Male			0.030***
			(0.021)
Constant	0.379***	0.329***	0.352***
	(0.106)	(0.093)	(0.102)
N	19742	19742	19742
Wald chi sq.		547.733	363.274
Log likelihood	-9241.051	-8957.860	-8955.613

Notes: Difficulties paying bills Coding 1: most of the time / from time to time, 0: Never.

Standard error in parentheses; ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, + p < 0.1.

Source: Own calculations using Eurobarometer 2011 (76.1.)