

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

UNEQUAL DEMOCRACIES: WHO DOES (NOT) HAVE A SEAT IN PARLIAMENT?

The social composition of Parliaments
in five OSCE countries

A translation of the German original
»Wer sitzt (nicht) im Parlament?« by
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This study examines the social composition of contemporary national parliaments in five countries (France, United Kingdom, Poland, Spain and Turkey) according to gender, age, education and social class.



Women are numerically represented by less than 50 per cent, but the extent of underrepresentation varies greatly between countries. Younger people are also underrepresented.



The greatest homogeneity is to be found with regard to education and social class. The share of representatives with university education is over 85 per cent, while members of the working class and lower-grade service classes very rarely become members of parliament. Current research suggests that this underrepresentation can translate into neglected perspectives of possibilities and options in the political process.

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INTRODUCTION

Most parliaments of rich industrialised nations are now more female and less ‚white‘ than they were a few decades ago. Numerous organisations, social movements and internal political party groups have successfully worked to increase the representation of women and marginalised groups. These processes are far from complete and in many places there is still a glaring underrepresentation – but the tendency is toward greater political inclusion. At the same time, another trend pointing to increasing exclusion rather than inclusion in legislative bodies has become evident: for example, a »Diploma-democracy« in which university-educated political elites dominate parliaments, can be witnessed in recent decades (Best 2007; Bovens / Wille 2017); this has gone hand in hand with a general withdrawal of socially less privileged strata from the political process (Schäfer 2015). While more than 85 per cent of the members in the last German Bundestag had a university education, for example, only 9 out of 709 members had completed an apprenticeship in the crafts. Working-class people are scarcely to be found in parliaments anymore.

Social democratic and other left-wing parties have a special role to play in this development, as in the past it was mainly these parties that sent workers to serve as MPs in parliaments. In the UK in the early 1960s, 35 per cent of all Labour MPs had had a manual occupation before entering parliament, whereas in 2010 this figure had fallen to just under ten per cent (Heath 2018). Similar trends are observable in other countries (Best 2007). The professional backgrounds of MPs have also changed in other ways. For example, it has been shown for individual countries that more and more MPs have spent almost their entire professional lives in political professions before entering parliament. These »career politicians« thus hardly have any experience of their own with a professional working life above and beyond working in a party or as a political staffer and are at the same time highly dependent on a successful political career (O’Grady 2019).

But what are the effects on the democratic process when certain social groups are almost completely excluded from the political decision-making process, while others are greatly overrepresented? The question regarding the effects of (a lack of) descriptive representation has long been

a topic of discussion in political science theory.¹ Recently, the theoretical arguments for a stronger »politics of presence« (Phillips 1995) have been strengthened by findings from the field of empirical political science research. As recent studies show, a lack of descriptive representation among lower income and occupational groups is not void of consequences. On the contrary, various studies show that the substantive representation of their interests also suffers. For example, working-class MPs tend to be more left-wing on economic and social policy issues and more likely to support progressive economic and social policies than their party colleagues from other social strata – regardless of party affiliation (Borwein 2021; Carnes 2012; O’Grady 2019; Hemingway 2020). The underlying argument is that (occupational) socialisation strongly shapes one’s own political beliefs and perspectives on what is perceived to be a political problem (Kitschelt / Rehm 2014). Thus, these findings confirm what has long been more widely researched in relation to women and groups affected by racism: whoever is represented in parliaments also has an impact on what is decided.

Against this background, the following analysis seeks to examine the composition of selected parliaments in the OSCE area in more detail based on various social characteristics. While there is already a relatively ample amount of data on the composition of parliaments by gender or age, the socio-economic position of MPs is rarely documented in any systematic fashion. This report focuses on the countries of France, United Kingdom, Poland, Spain and Turkey and, in addition to age and gender, also maps the highest level of education attained and social class – this is operationalised using the occupation of MPs before entering parliament.² This makes it possible to obtain a comprehensive picture and to work out differences and similarities across countries that differ Regionally and institutionally. While the parliaments of the countries studied display considerable differences, especially with regard to the propor-

¹ Descriptive representation refers to when representatives share important (external) social characteristics and experiences with those whom they represent.

² Unfortunately, it was not possible to survey characteristics such as migration history or similar aspects in order to capture groups potentially affected by racism. This was largely due to the fact that the data collection was based on public sources such as parliamentary websites and MPs’ websites, and not on personal interviews.

tion of women represented, they are much more similar with regard to the socio-economic status of MPs. Thus, people who have attained middle and low levels of formal education are heavily underrepresented in all the countries, whereas university-educated people account for more than 85 per cent of MPs. Working class representatives – both from the production and service sectors – as well as people from the lower-grade service class are equally underrepresented. Looking at social classes allows for a more differentiated picture than simply looking at educational degrees. The composition of MPs from the upper class, namely MPs with a university education, differs in country comparison: while in Turkey, for example, a large share consists of business owners with employees and self-employed professionals, the share of socio-cultural professionals (higher education professions, e.g. in the fields of education and social services) is particularly high in Poland. Moreover, the working class is underrepresented not only in all parliaments, but also in all political parties. Overall, the findings suggest that the underrepresentation of people from less socially privileged classes is a cross-national phenomenon that should be devoted more attention in the future, both in research and in the public debate.

1

THE REPERCUSSIONS OF DESCRIPTIVE (MIS-)REPRESENTATION

According to the common understanding of political representation, the core task of political representatives is to take the concerns of the population into account in their decisions and thus to act responsively in their interest (Pitkin 1967: 209). According to this understanding, the quality of representation cannot be inferred from the numerical strength of different social groups alone. It is not *who* represents that is decisive, but *how* it is done. For voters, it is assumed that what counts is that their interests are represented, regardless of by whom (see the discussion in Griffiths / Wollheim 1960). However, recent normative-theoretical and empirical research has increasingly challenged this understanding of political representation. Under the caption of the »politics of presence« (Phillips 1995), it has been discussed whether and, if so, which groups should be guaranteed representation in parliament so that their concerns are sufficiently heard and the democratic claim to equality is satisfied. Although advocates of descriptive representation share some objections to a perfect mirror image of the population in parliament, they nevertheless insist that it is not inconsequential how a parliament is composed.

The starting point in their reflections is that certain social groups are poorly represented politically due to historically conditioned structural discrimination, which can be seen, among other things, in their numerical underrepresentation in legislative bodies down to the present day (Mansbridge 1999; Williams 1998). Because members of these groups share experiences (of discrimination) that privileged groups do not, their political perspectives and positions on relevant issues differ. For this reason, increased representation not only leads to »symbolic« representation, but also enables the inclusion of previously ignored perspectives (Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995). If there were more female MPs, for example, it is assumed that political decisions would be more responsive to women's concerns, even if the women represented in parliament were members of different parties. It is explicitly not assumed that gender eclipses all other differences, but merely that women adopt similar perspectives on some issues and/or put issues on the political agenda that would otherwise not be considered.

Research that empirically addresses the question of what effects the social composition of parliaments has on the decisions made there supports these arguments. In recent years, a particularly large number of studies have been published

on the effects of increased representation of women in parliament (for an overview, see Wängnerud 2009). These studies suggest that female MPs differ significantly from their male counterparts in certain subject areas, both in terms of their attitudes and in the priorities in their parliamentary work – for example, female MPs more often prioritise issues that affect women more than men, such as care work, (women's) health or violence against women. This is especially the case when no party positions have been articulated on these issues (Espírito-Santo et al. 2020; Heidar / Pedersen 2006; Wängnerud / Sundell 2012). In addition, systematic differences between parliaments with more or fewer female MPs can also be found at the level of adopted policy content (Elsässer / Schäfer 2018; Funk / Philips 2019; Wängnerud / Sundell 2012). Similar results have been produced by studies addressing the representation of minorities who experience racism in the respective society under investigation (cf. among others Owens 2005; Baker / Cook 2005; Broockman 2013).

Only recently have similar studies emerged on the question of whether MPs from socially and economically less privileged backgrounds are more committed to the concerns of lower income and occupational groups. These studies are strongly motivated by the findings that in many countries an increasing political marginalisation of lower social strata is to be observed, which can be seen on the one hand in decreasing political participation, but also in a systematic skewing of political decisions to the detriment of their concerns and political preferences (Gilens / Page 2014; Elsässer et al. 2021; Schakel 2021). Against this background, various researchers have investigated in the USA and individual European and Latin American countries whether MPs from working-class occupations systematically display different attitudes and priorities or a different (voting) behaviour in parliamentary work. For the US, Carnes (2013) shows that working-class members of Congress differ from those of better-off groups in terms of their political preferences, for example with regard to economic, labour market or social policy. They advocate different policies and sometimes vote differently – however, due to their small number in Congress, these representatives do not manage to influence political decisions significantly (Carnes 2013: 83). An analysis of Latin American countries and an in-depth case study on Argentina has confirmed this pattern of working-class parliamentarians advocating different goals, even if voting behav-

ious in parliamentary systems ends up being determined more by party affiliation than social origin (Carnes 2015; Barnes / Saxton 2019).

In a cross-national European study, Hemingway (2020) shows that working-class MPs are more concerned about economic inequality and more likely to report having contact with workers' organisations such as trade unions in their parliamentary work. For Germany, Hayo and Neumeier (2012) illustrate that spending priorities differ systematically across the German *Länder* when *Länder* premiers come from different social classes. Finally, O'Grady (2019) uses an analysis of parliamentary speeches to show that MPs in the British House of Commons adopt different positions on welfare state reforms depending on their social background. The precipitous decline in the descriptive representation of workers since the 1980s and their displacement by »career politicians« has facilitated the restructuring of the British welfare state. Although there are only a handful of studies to date that examine the effects of unequal descriptive representation of social classes, the findings available indicate that in this respect as well, the »who« is not without consequences for political decisions.

Against the backdrop of these findings we have endeavoured to examine the composition of parliaments in the five selected countries with regard to age, gender, education and social class.

2

DATA BASIS AND METHODS

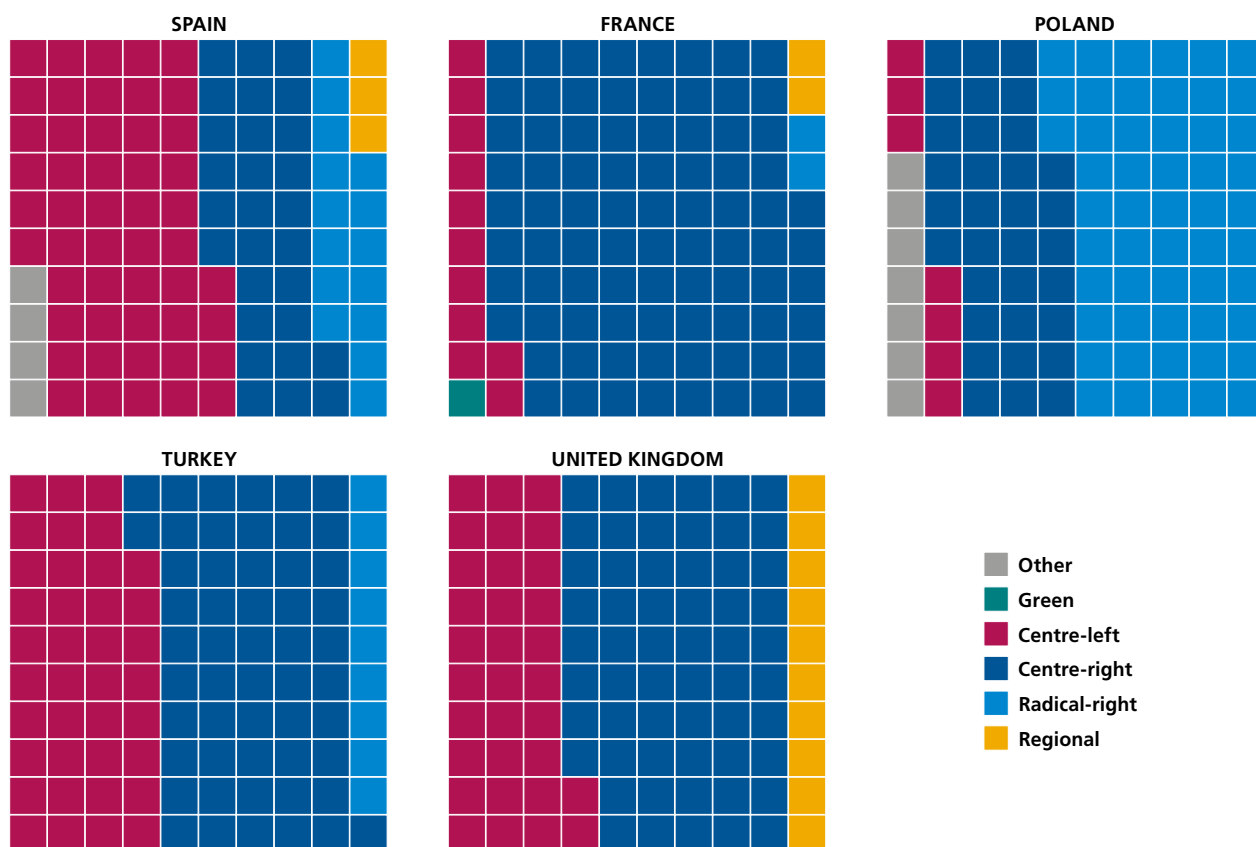
CASE SELECTION

Our study covers the countries of France, United Kingdom, Poland, Spain and Turkey. For each of these countries, the social backgrounds of members of the national parliament for the current legislative period were determined. The countries were selected with the aim of covering OSCE states from different regions and with different institutional arrangements – especially with regard to electoral systems. Thanks to existing research on descriptive representation of women, for example, we know that the type of electoral law has an influence on the number of female MPs. Women tend to be better represented in systems with proportional representation and closed list-vot-

ing, as the nomination of candidates via lists makes it easier to implement (in-)formal rules on proportional representation (Fortin-Rittberger et al. 2017; Kroeber et al. 2019).

Against this background, we include countries with different electoral systems in the study in order to be able to identify similarities and differences. With France and the United Kingdom, the study includes two countries with (absolute and relative) majority voting and three countries with electoral systems of proportional representation (Spain, Poland and Turkey). In addition, the partisan composition of parliaments also plays a role, as the ideological orientation of parties can also influence the social compo-

Figure 1
Political party composition of parliaments (simplified)



sition of party membership – and thus that of the candidates as well (Matthews / Kerevel 2021). In this respect, too, the selected countries display tremendous diversity: As can be seen in Figure 1, centre-right parties dominate the legislative landscape in France, the UK and Turkey, whereas in Spain the social democratic PSOE and in Poland the right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS) party are the strongest party groups. If there were different recruitment patterns displayed by MPs in different party families, one could also expect there to be differences in the composition of the parliaments we studied.

DATASET

In the analysis, a new dataset was created containing both socio-demographic characteristics as well as information on the political biography of all members of the five national parliaments. The official websites of the national parliaments and the personal websites of MPs were the main sources of information used to collect the data. All persons assigned with the collection of data speak the national language of the respective country fluently and are familiar with the respective political system, thus ensuring that the required information is collected in as precise a manner as possible.³

With regard to political biography, the year in which the MPs were elected to the national parliament for the first time was recorded. In addition, the party (or electoral list) through which the person entered parliament was coded. To be able to analyse party affiliation on a country-by-country basis, individual parties were assigned to party families characterising the ideological orientation of the parties. The parties were coded according to the categorisation used by Armingeon et al. (2021) and assigned to the following party families: *left-wing parties*, which include both social democratic and socialist/communist parties; *green or ecological parties*; *centre-right parties*, to which independent, conservative and conservative-religious parties were assigned; *radical right-wing parties*, which include right-wing populist and extreme right-wing parties; and *regional parties*, which see the representation of a specific region or ethnic group within a country as their core task.

In order to capture the socio-demographic background of MPs, age, gender, education and social class – operationalised according to occupational groups – were surveyed. Based on their highest educational attainment, MPs were divided into three educational groups: Persons with *low-level formal education* without a secondary school degree, persons with *middle-level formal education* with a secondary school degree (comparable to the German *Abitur* or a completed vocational training degree) and persons with *high-level formal education* who have received a (technical) university degree or a doctorate.

The social class of the representatives was coded with the aid of Oesch's (2006) class scheme, which defines class status based on occupational position in the labour market. The last occupation of the MPs before entering parliament was used to classify their respective position in the class scheme. In order to capture changing occupational structures in post-industrial societies – especially the expansion of the service sector as well as the increasing gainful employment of women – this scheme differentiates occupations along two dimensions: As can be seen in Figure 2, occupations are firstly classified along a vertical axis according to qualification requirements. In this way, a distinction can be made between university-educated, semi-professional and apprenticeship and semi-skilled occupations. On the horizontal axis, the occupations are also differentiated according to their underlying work logic. It is assumed here that, in addition to education, the type of work experience and work role also influences the perspectives of employees. Thus, a distinction is made between administrative occupations with an organizational work logic, occupations with a technical work logic, occupations with an interpersonal work logic, and self-employment (Oesch 2006). This twofold distinction helps to identify differences between occupational groups with similar formal qualifications.⁴

The original class scheme according to Oesch distinguishes between 16 occupational classes, which are shown in Figure 2. Next to each class are examples of specific occupations that fall into the respective occupational class.⁵ A greatly simplified version of the class scheme groups the 16 occupational classes into four categories, which are colour-coded in the figure. According to this simplified scheme, all university-education occupations are grouped within the upper service class (red), which includes not only employees but also business owners with employees and self-employed professionals. In addition, all employees in semi-professions are assigned to the middle class or lower-grade service class (green) and all apprenticeship and semi-skilled jobs are assigned to the working class (yellow). Small business owners (orange) form the fourth class. In the evaluations, both the four-class scheme and the more differentiated 16-class scheme are used.

In addition to the occupational categories according to Oesch, a further occupational category was established to record the proportion of MPs from occupations *relating to politics*. These occupations include all activities in ministries, for political parties and political foundations or political offices held by the MPs themselves (e.g. in local city parliaments) before entering the national parliament. There

³ We would like to take this opportunity to thank Emad Al Hayek, Hanna-Maria Paul, Susanna Seperant, Steffen Verheyen and Mustafa Yildiz for their excellent work.

⁴ Employing this two-dimensional class scheme, party preferences, for example, can be better explained than with a scheme that only considers formal qualifications (cf. Oesch 2006: 277).

⁵ In the coding, specific occupations were assigned to occupational classes using ISCO codes (*International Standard Classification of Occupations* of the International Labour Organisation) to ensure comparability between countries.

Figure 2

Class scheme with 16 occupational classes according to Oesch

	EMPLOYEES			SELF-EMPLOYED	
	Administrative work logic	Interpersonal work logic	Technical work logic	Independent work logic	
Upper service class	Higher-grade managers accountants, senior ministry officials, advertising professionals	Sociocultural experts secondary school teachers, physicians, university teachers	Technical experts engineers, IT experts	Independent professions lawyers, practicing physicians, independent consultants	Large employers managers, business owners, farmers
Lower-grade service class	Lower-grade managers skilled administrative staff, skilled commercial professions	Sociocultural professions social workers, elementary school teachers	Technical semi-professions skilled workers in engineering professions, medical technicians	Small business owners with employees	
Working class	Skilled clerks skilled secretaries, warehouse clerks	Skilled service providers salespersons, preschool teachers, practical nurses	Skilled crafts workers electricians, building electricians	Small business owners without employees	
	Routine office clerks call-centre agents	Routine service providers bartenders, cleaning professions, security professions	Routine skilled workers machinery operators, freight professions		

are good reasons to assume that the share accounted for by these »career politicians« has grown in many places and that this also shapes the content and style of the political debate (O’Grady 2019).

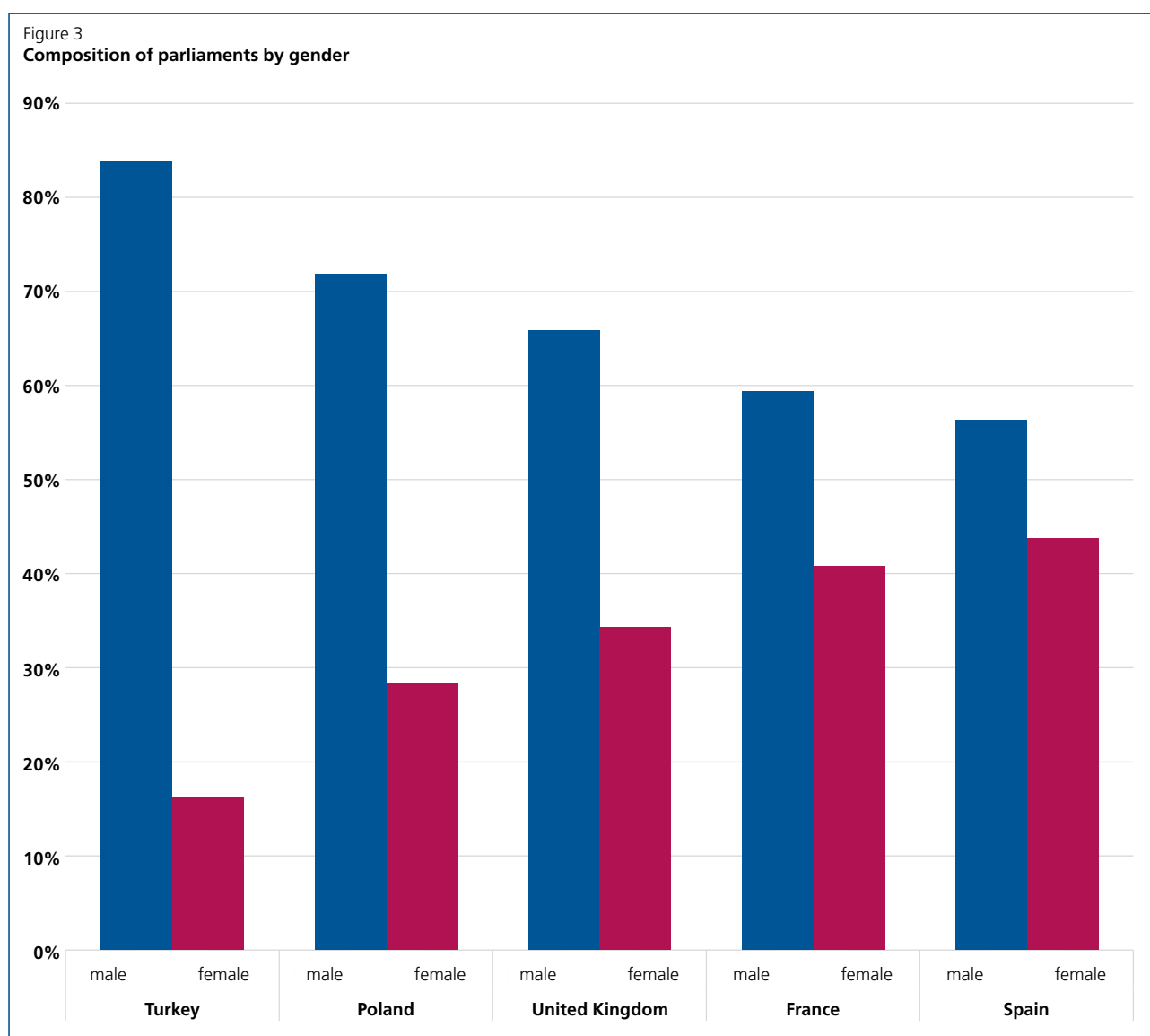
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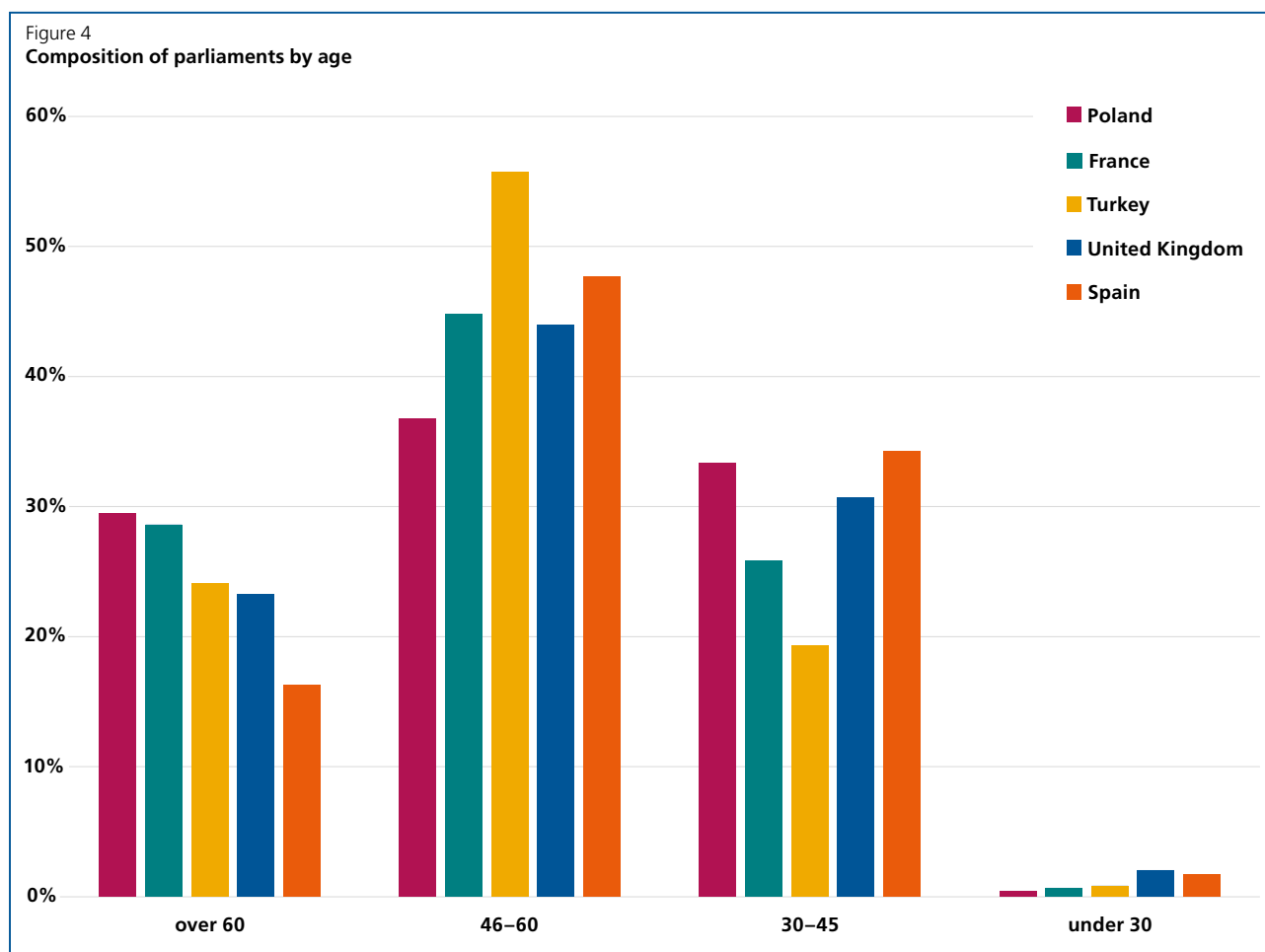
EVALUATION

In the first step, we look at the composition of the five parliaments in terms of gender and age. As can be seen in Figure 3, the proportion of female MPs varies greatly between the countries studied. While the proportion is highest in Spain and France (44 and 41 per cent, respectively), it is only 16 per cent in Turkey. Poland (28 per cent) and the United Kingdom (34 per cent) are in the middle of the field – here the proportion of women roughly corresponds to the

average proportion of female MPs in European parliaments, which is 31 per cent.⁶ To examine the reasons for these differences in more detail would go beyond the scope of this study, however.

⁶ Current data on the proportion of women in the parliaments can be found at *Inter-Parliamentary Union*: <https://www.ipu.org/women-in-politics-2021>.





There is less heterogeneity in the age groups represented in parliaments, although there are notable differences here as well (see Figure 4). One thing all the countries studied have in common is that people under 30 years of age are hardly represented in parliaments, while the over-60s age group account for between 20 and 30 per cent of MPs in almost all countries. One exception is Spain, where the proportion of over-60s is only 16 per cent. Furthermore, the group of MPs between 46 and 60 years of age is the most prevalent category in all the countries studied.

Regarding age and gender, it is furthermore interesting to enquire whether the proportion of female MPs is systematically higher among younger MPs than in older age groups. If this were the case, one could expect the share of female MPs to trend upwards in the future. To explore this question, Figure 5 shows the absolute number of female and male MPs by age group for each country. Yet, there is no clear pattern of rising numbers – instead, women seem to tend to be underrepresented in all age groups. To explore this in more detail, figure 6 shows the percentage share of female and male MPs in each age group. This figure also confirms that no consistent pattern can be discerned in the country comparison: only in Turkey does the proportion of female MPs increase steadily in the younger age groups. In the French Parliament, the proportion of women in the 30–45 age group is also higher than in the older age groups, although these differences are less pronounced. In Poland, Spain and the UK, on

the other hand, the proportion of women is almost identical in all age groups over 30. The picture is least uniform in the under-30 group, but this may also be due to the very small total number of MPs in this group. While here the proportion of women is even greater than 50 per cent in Spain and the UK, there is not a single woman under 30 in the Polish parliament. All in all, these findings show that the underrepresentation of women will not necessarily disappear with succeeding younger generations.

While there are clear differences between the parliaments of the countries studied in terms of age and, above all, gender, there is a very high degree of conformity in terms of educational qualifications of the MPs (see Figure 7). In all the countries studied, at least 85 per cent of all MPs have a tertiary education. People with a lower-level formal education are – with the exception of the UK – virtually unrepresented in parliaments. In the Polish parliament, not a single person has a low-level formal education, and in Spain only one MP. The proportion of MPs with intermediate-level formal education ranges from three per cent (Poland) to nine per cent (France). This strong dominance of university-educated representatives is remarkable because it is so similar in all the countries studied, despite strong institutional differences.

A similar picture emerges when we look at the occupational background of MPs instead of their highest level of educational attainment. As described above, the occupation

Figure 5

Composition of parliaments by age and gender

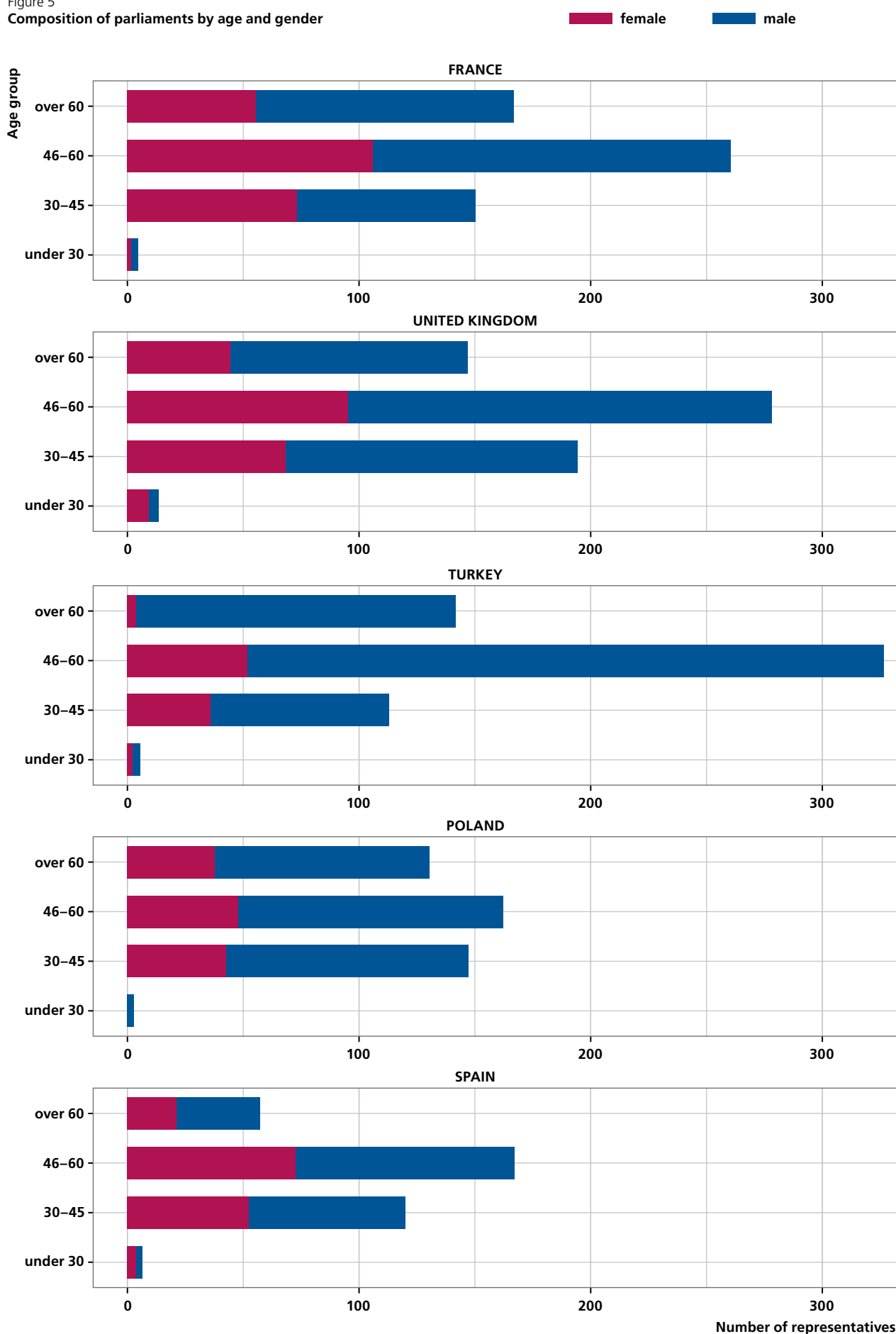
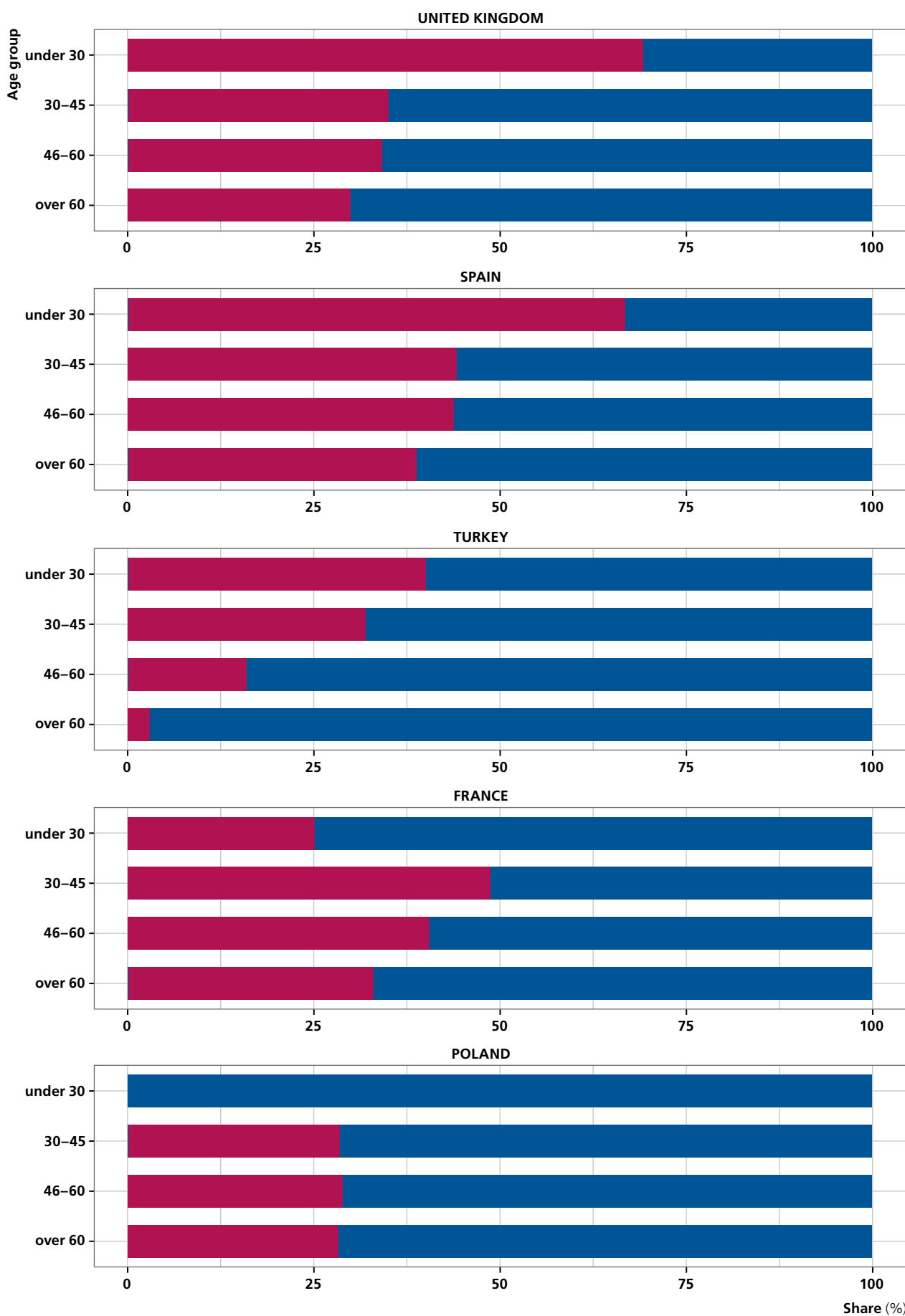


Abbildung 6

Composition of parliaments by age and gender (shares per age group)

female male



held by all MPs before entering parliament was surveyed and assigned to a social class according to the Oesch class scheme. The proportion of MPs according to the simplified four-class scheme is shown in Figure 8. Two aspects are particularly noteworthy here: Firstly, the proportion of lower-grade service classes is very low, although together they make up a broad majority of the population. For example, the proportion of workers alone – according to the Oesch scheme, people who work in apprenticeships or semi-skilled jobs in administrative/organisational, interpersonal or technical fields – is between 40 and 50 per cent of the population in the countries we studied.⁷ Secondly, the proportion of MPs from the upper service class is similar to the proportion of MPs with tertiary education. This is not surprising given that the upper-class groups comprise all university education occupations with different work logics. Unlike the rough classification according to educational qualifications, the more differentiated 16-class scheme allows a further distinction to be made at this point. Thus,

MPs in the upper service class can be further subdivided according to the work logic underlying their respective occupation.

As can be seen in figure 9, there are interesting differences in the composition of the MPs between the countries. Firstly, in Turkey in particular, at over 30 per cent the proportion of business owners and self-employed professionals (e.g. practising lawyers or physicians) is much higher than in the other countries studied. This could indicate that personal financial resources are particularly important for a successful candidacy in Turkey. In addition, the second largest group of MPs in all countries, with the exception of the UK, is that of so-called socio-cultural professionals, whereas only a few MPs from technical university-education professions can be found in parliaments. Teachers, professors or physicians with employee status are thus much more strongly represented than, for example, engineers or IT specialists. Thirdly, by far the largest share of MPs were working in professions that can be classified as »higher-grade management« before entering parliament; in Spain, France and the UK, this share is even around 70 per cent of MPs. This includes all university-educated employees who work in professions with an administrative work logic (accountants, financial experts, salaried lawyers, etc.). This group also in-

⁷ These figures are based on survey data from the *European Social Survey* (ESS, wave 2018) and include not only the working population but also pensioners and the unemployed, whereby in these cases the last occupation is taken. For Turkey, the ESS does not provide reliable data on employment classes.

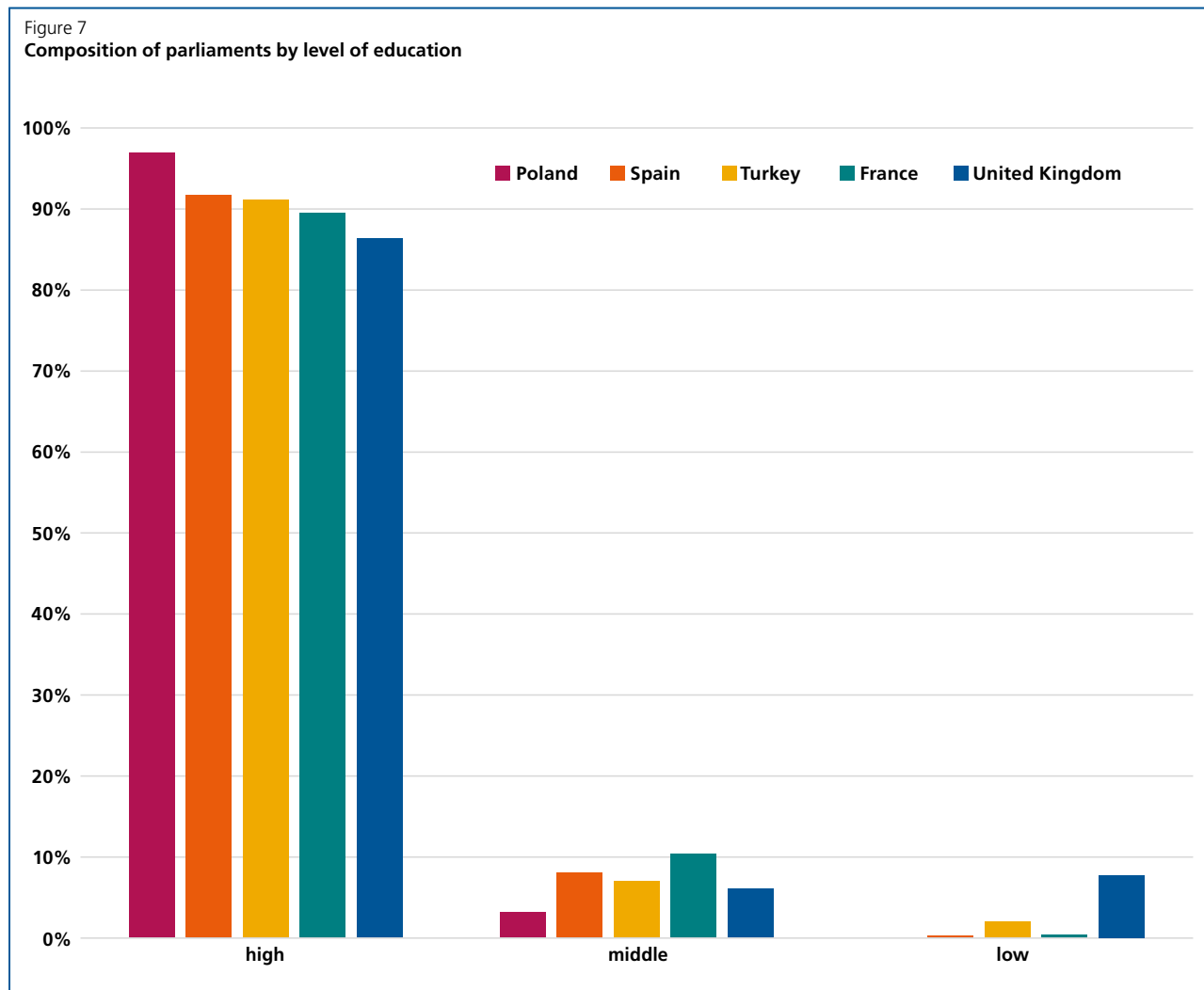


Figure 8

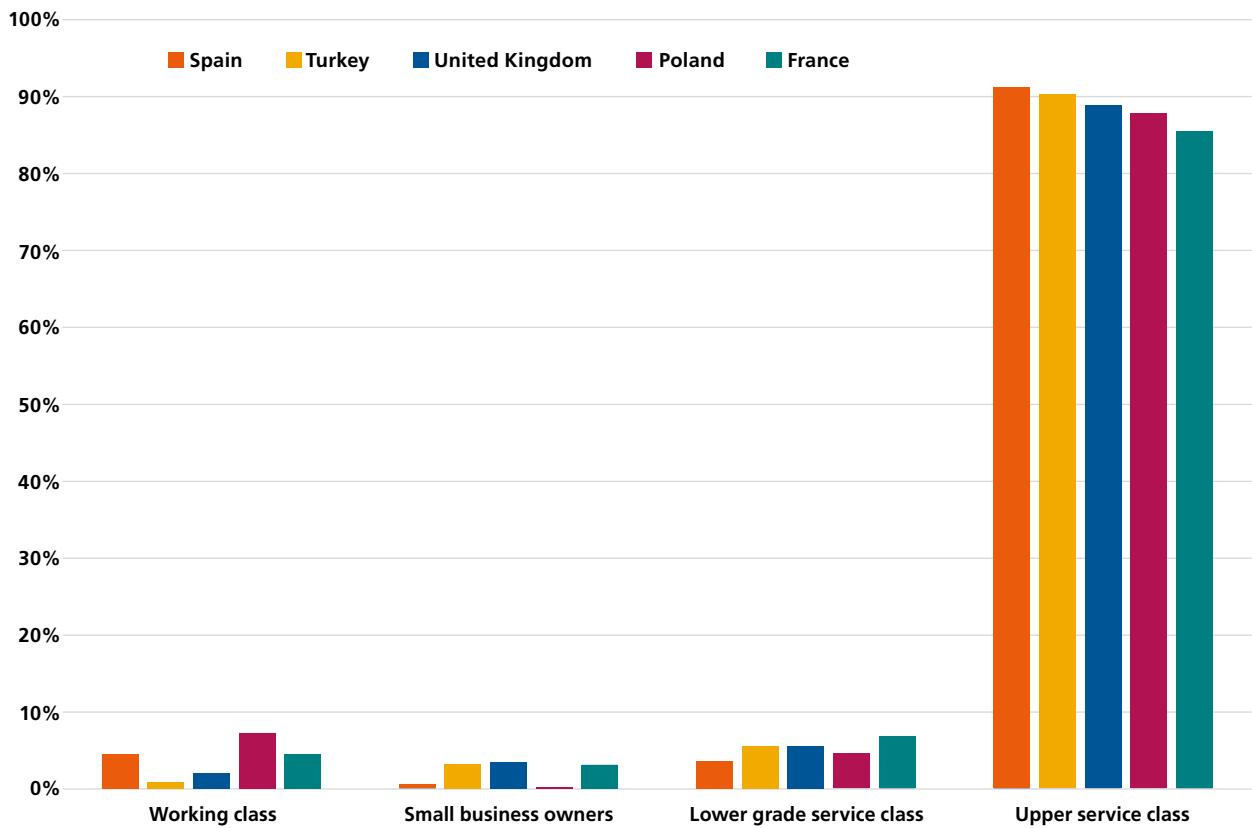
Composition of parliaments by social class

Figure 9

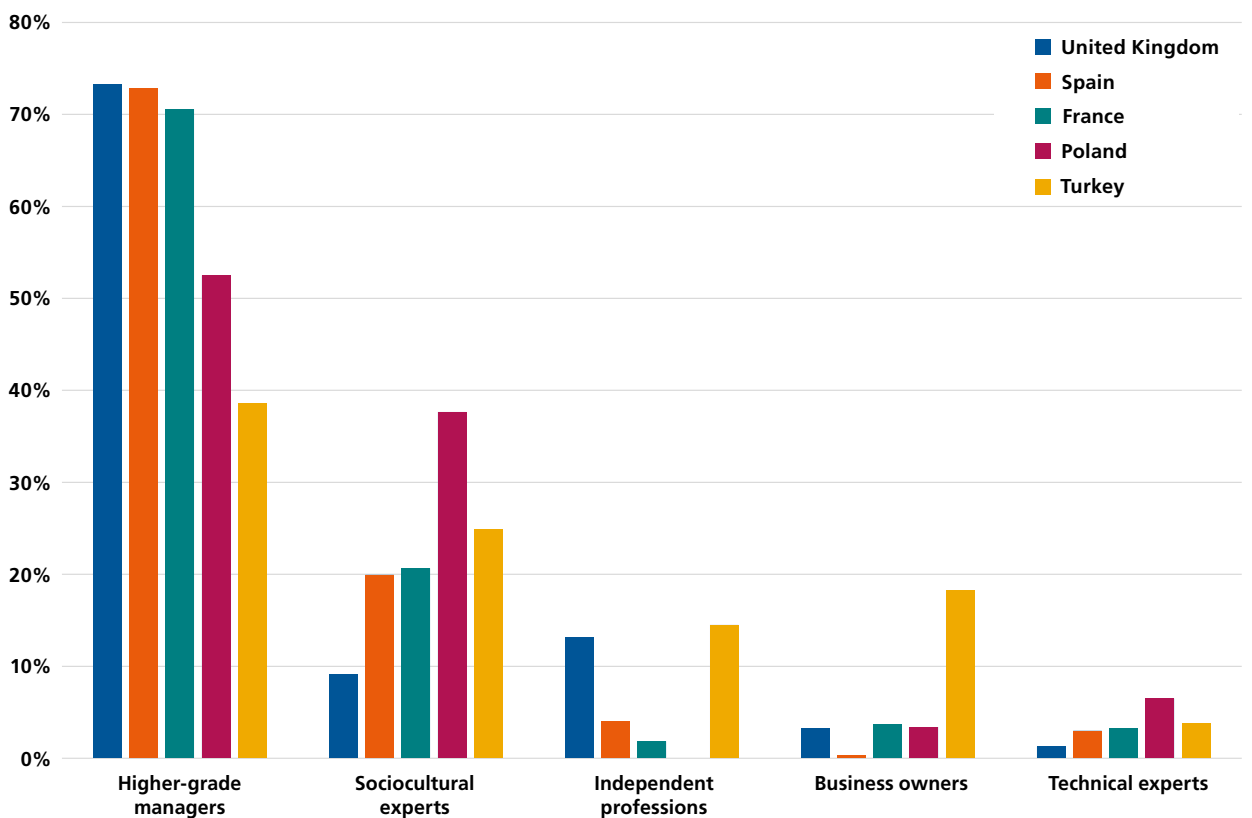
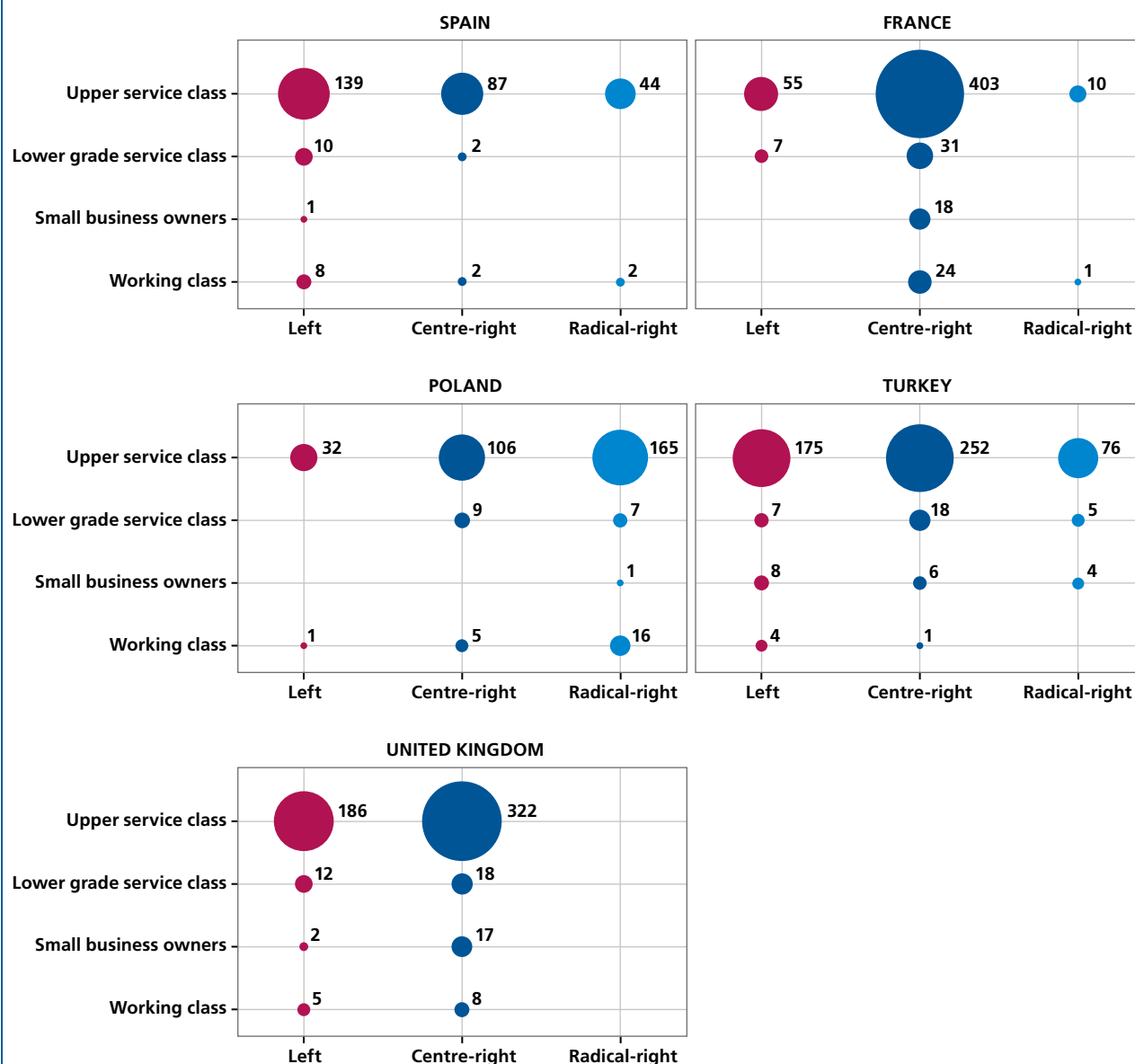
Composition of the upper service class in parliaments

Figure 10
Employees in parties



cludes all professions involved with politics – for example, staffers for members of parliament or in ministries, positions in party-affiliated foundations or political offices at other levels (e.g. members of a state parliament or mayors).⁸ This group of political professions is particularly large in Spain, France and the UK, but somewhat smaller in Poland and Turkey.

In the final step, we venture a look at whether the parties differ in terms of how many working-class representatives they send to parliament. Due to the small number of cases, we concentrate on left, centre-right and radical right par-

ties. The first thing that strikes one in Figure 10 is how small the number of skilled workers and low-skilled workers is in all parties and countries. Nowhere do more than ten per cent of MPs come from these social classes. The highest proportion is in Poland, where 16 out of 189 MPs of the radical right parties can be assigned to the working class. This pattern is not confirmed in the other countries, however. In Spain, it is the parties on the left that provide the most working-class MPs, both in relative and absolute terms – but even here the number is very small (8 out of 158). Overall, the results suggest that no party family at present (any longer) acts as a representative of the working class.

⁸ Whether these are always »career politicians« who have not previously had a profession outside of politics cannot be conclusively answered on the basis of our data because we were not able to record every aspect of curricula vitae. The category therefore only serves as an approximation.

4

CONCLUSION

At no time have parliaments been a mirror image of the population, and not every incongruity between representatives and those they represent is politically relevant. However, the greater the differences in current circumstances, opportunities for advancement and experiences of discrimination between social groups, the more important it is that the socially disadvantaged also be represented in legislative bodies. Descriptive representation not only signals that these groups are able to assume political leadership roles, but also influences the issues addressed in parliaments and the decisions made there. Especially in situations where new challenges need to be dealt with, it is important to be able to draw on diverse perspectives. In addition to the underrepresentation of groups with fewer resources, the increasing homogeneity of MPs' CVs also leads to a narrowing of perspectives available in parliament. While it is widely acknowledged in the public debate that a parliament dominated by white males is not representative, the almost complete absence of people without university degrees is less often perceived as a problem. For some years, however, political science research has been showing that the socio-economic composition of parliaments also has an impact on political decisions.

In this study, we have documented patterns of unequal representation for five countries. Five points can be summarised:

1. Women are represented at less than 50 per cent in all countries, although the extent of underrepresentation varies significantly. In France and Spain, the proportion of female MPs is higher than in Poland or Turkey, for example.
2. Younger people tend to be underrepresented, while older people are represented or even overrepresented compared to their share of the population.
3. People without a university degree are very much underrepresented everywhere. In all five countries one can speak of »diploma democracy« (Bovens / Wille 2017).
4. Parliaments in no way reflect the occupational structure of the population in the countries studied. A very

high proportion of MPs belong to the upper service class. Members of the working class only very rarely make it into parliaments.

5. In many parliaments, »career politicians« are a noteworthy group. These MPs have spent a large part of their professional lives working in political or party-related fields.

The above points raise the question of what explains the numerical underrepresentation of people from non-university-educated professions. Although the working class have never been represented in parliaments according to their share of the population, existing research points to a trend of increasing social closure. Research on the causes of this development is still in its infancy, however. Individual studies indicate that there are structural barriers at various points in selection and nomination processes that pose major challenges to people from less privileged social classes (Carnes 2018; Hemingway 2020b; Norris / Lovenduski 1995; Sojourner 2013).

One frequently mentioned disadvantage is the lack of financial and time resources needed for a successful election campaign. Hemingway (2020b) shows, for example, based on candidate surveys in ten European countries, that candidates from working class occupations report having less money for personal campaign financing and can only enter the campaign »full-time« at a later stage. Apart from purely financial constraints, time resources are also often lacking due to frequently less flexible working conditions – and less supportive employers (Norris / Lovenduski 1995: 110–113). Beyond the question of individual resources, some studies also find that trade unions (can) positively contribute to promoting people from non-university-education professions and mobilising them for a political career (Sojourner 2013; Carnes 2018).

Overall, the question of the factors and mechanisms that lead to more or less professional diversity in parliaments is only now beginning to increasingly come into the focus of social science research – existing work has so far often been limited to individual countries or factors. As this study shows, this question is not only of importance to future research, but also when it comes to the quality of democratic representation.

Insofar as public debate and legislative process are not only determined by which political parties are represented in parliaments, but also by who the concrete representatives are, a socially skewed composition can also lead to skewed decisions. Unequal representation and unequal responsiveness are thus incompatible with the democratic pledge and claim of political equality.

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UNEQUAL DEMOCRACIES: WHO DOES (NOT) HAVE A SEAT IN PARLIAMENT?

The social composition of Parliaments in five OSCE countries



Most parliaments in rich industrialised nations are more female and less »white« today than they were a few decades ago. In many places, there is still a glaring underrepresentation, but the trend points towards increasing political inclusion. At the same time, however, another trend toward increasing exclusion rather than inclusion in legislative bodies has become evident. Recent decades have witnessed the rise of a »diploma-democracy« in which university graduates dominate parliaments, and this has gone hand in hand with a general withdrawal of socially less privileged strata from the political process. At the same time, current research indicates that the social composition of parliaments is not without consequences for the political decisions made there.



Against this background, this study examines the social composition of current parliaments in five OSCE countries according to the attributes of gender, age, education and social class. At the same time, the countries studied, France, the UK, Poland, Spain and Turkey, have been selected with the aim of covering a wide variance in institutional terms as well as in terms of the current political party composition of parliaments. Our results show that women have less than 50 representation in all countries, although the extent of this underrepresentation varies widely between countries. Younger people are also underrepresented across all countries.



The greatest homogeneity can be seen in level of educational attainment and social class, which we have mapped by using occupational groups. In all five countries, university graduates or those from the higher-grade service classes account for over 85 per cent of parliamentarians, while workers and people from the lower-grade service classes only very rarely make it into parliament. Against the background of current research, these findings suggest this almost complete dearth of representatives without a university degree in parliaments may also lead to a neglect of their perspectives and policy demands in the political process.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
democracy.fes.de