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The performance of politicians: The effect of gender quotas

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates whether the gender of elected politicians affects political outcomes at the municipal level. Relying on Italian administrative data from 1991 to 2009, we are able to instrument the gender of elected politicians using an institutional exogenous change: a gender quota in the candidacy list enforced only in a subsample of municipalities and for a short period of time. While the gender of politicians does not affect the general 'quality of life', proxied by the internal migration rate, it does increase significantly both the efficacy of policies targeting women and households, proxied by the fertility rate, and the efficiency of the municipal administration, proxied by the actual size of the administrative bodies. These results, which are robust to several specifications and checks, suggest that affirmative action enhancing gender equality in political representation may be beneficial not only in terms of social justice but also from a political outcome perspective.

1. Introduction

The last few decades have been characterised by a significant empowerment of women throughout the world. The reduction of the gender gap over time both in education and in the labour market has produced positive effects and externalities in many social dimensions which have translated into greater gender equality. Nevertheless, women are still under-represented in several contexts, such as corporate governance, academia, policy making, and especially in leadership positions. This under-representation is extremely evident in political institutions, where the share of women is significantly lower than that of men both at the central and local levels. Furthermore, this phenomenon is not only among political leaders or elected officials; women also constitute the minority of voters (United Nations, 2014).

Despite the introduction of universal suffrage in all developed countries in the first half of the twentieth century, the issue of fair representation has become central only in recent decades. A more equal representation in government is not only a question of ethics or social justice but also one of performance and governmental quality, since men and women tend to perform differently in various contexts, such as public spending (Rigon and Tanzi, 2011), redistribution (Geys and Revelli, 2011), economic development (Duflo, 2011; Hicks et al., 2016), and corruption (Alatas et al., 2009). According to Stevens (2007), equal participation in political decision making is necessary in order to legitimate the whole democratic body, since women represent half of the population. Therefore, the equal participation of women in politics, at all levels of government, is essential not only for building and sustaining democracy but also for enhancing equality in other social dimensions. Furthermore, since women's and men's needs are different, in general, more equal female representation can be used to target policy implementation and public spending in specific areas (Funk and Gathmann, 2013; Hicks et al., 2016; Rehavi, 2007).

In recent years, the number of studies exploring behavioural differences between the sexes in different economic contexts has

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been increasing, and these studies have provided evidence that individual attitudes and behaviours depend on both biology and social roles. If having a higher representation of women leads to the adoption of policies and practices which have a positive impact on the quality of institutions and organisations, then enhancing female political participation could benefit the well-being of society. Indeed, several authors have shown that some political outcomes, mainly at the local level, depend on the gender of the policy makers, and such evidence is available for both developed and developing countries. For instance, [Dollár et al. \(2001\)](#) and [Swamy et al. \(2001\)](#) document a lower level of corruption among female politicians in the United States as well as in other countries, both developed and developing.

The paper contributes to two main related strands of the literature: first, the gender gap and the under-representation of women in leadership positions; second, the performance of female politicians. The first field is well-developed and consolidated, both from a theoretical and an empirical point of view. According to economic theory, the under-representation of women in leadership positions and their lower level of career achievement can be rationalised either by their lower level of investment in education, both in terms of attainment and chosen major, or by gender differences in attitudes and behaviours in highly competitive environments ([Bertrand et al., 2010](#); [Lavy, 2008](#)). In both cases, gender-specific labour market vertical segregation arises owing to individuals' self-selection into occupations. Alternatively, vertical segregation can depend on discrimination, which creates a glass ceiling for women. This hypothesis is corroborated by empirical evidence suggesting that women are limited from entering the highest-paying jobs and leadership positions because of the so-called glass ceiling both in low and high income countries ([Bertrand et al., 2014](#); [Gayle et al., 2012](#); [Guvenen et al., 2014](#); [Pande and Ford, 2011](#)).

In the second field, relating to female political performance, the results are mixed. On one hand, the available evidence indicates that significant gender differences exist with regard to preferences for policies ([Carroll, 2001](#)). In particular, women are more likely to implement policies and invest in public interventions linked to traditionally female concerns, such as childcare, water provision, health, and environment ([Clots-Figueras, 2011](#); [Funk and Gathmann, 2008](#); [Rehavi, 2007](#)). Furthermore, gender differences emerge in the behaviours of legislators, since women are often more liberal than men and tend to support women's issues ([Swers, 1998](#); [Thomas and Welch, 1991](#); [Washington, 2008](#); [Welch, 1985](#)). On the other hand, women have no effect on efficiency. According to [Ferreira and Gyourko \(2014\)](#), a mayor's gender is uncorrelated with both local government size and the composition of municipal spending. Indeed, local administrations run by women tend to be less stable ([Gagliarducci and Paserman, 2012](#)). Yet, in their indirect evaluation of the quality of elected politicians via educational attainment, [Baltrunaite et al. \(2014\)](#) find that, on average, introducing gender quotas increases the quality of elected politicians.

In line with these results, we provide new evidence on whether women in public office affect policy outcomes. Specifically, we investigate the effect of the gender of politicians on the efficacy and efficiency of policies at the municipal level in Italy. The institutional setting in question is unique owing to a legislative change that increased the required share of female candidates between 1993 and 1995, affecting only those municipalities where elections took place in this period. This reform exogenously creates variability both over time and between geographical areas. The same discontinuity has already been exploited by other scholars to address issues directly related to political management, such as the effect of women in office on women's representation ([De Paola et al., 2010](#)), on public spending ([Rigon and Tanzi, 2011](#)), on government stability ([Gagliarducci and Paserman, 2012](#)), on electoral turnout ([De Paola et al., 2014](#)), and on the quality of politicians ([Baltrunaite et al., 2014](#)). However, in contrast to these scholars, we provide evidence on the causal effect of the gender of politicians on general social outcomes. Voters are generally interested in the quality of elected politicians in terms of good governance and performance. However, it is worth noting that there is no consensus on what determines governmental quality and how to measure it.

It is widely accepted that good policy-making arises from avoiding rent-seeking, enhancing electoral accountability, and increasing the competence and integrity of the political class to ensure that its members perform in accordance with voters' preferences. Although the quality of political activity is difficult to evaluate and quantify, in this paper, differently from the previous literature, we aim to evaluate the performance of politicians by focusing on outcomes which are directly related to implemented policies. In particular, we consider three alternative outcomes: the quality of life in the communities, the efficacy of the implemented policies, and the efficiency of the public administration. Since no direct measures of these outcomes are available, we identify three proxies, described in more detail in the subsequent sections. The local quality of life in a broad sense is proxied by the (internal) migration rate; the efficacy of policies targeting women and families is proxied by the municipal fertility rate; and the efficiency of the public administration is proxied by the size of the Municipal Executive. The results show that elected women are more effective than men in implementing policies aimed at enhancing fertility and are more efficient in municipal administration. These results are reinforced when considering specifically the share of women in municipal office and the effect of the mayor's gender on the interactions between them. However, there are no differences in the overall desirability of the municipality as a magnet for internal migrants. Our results are robust to several alternative specifications.

The conducted analysis supports the idea that introducing affirmative action, including gender quotas, can produce positive results from a social perspective. However, it is worth noting that there are also theoretical arguments against such measures. Indeed, equalising outcomes can be considered as a 'second best' in comparison to equalising opportunities: whenever women endogenously self-select outside public administration (because of, for example, different preferences, less specific competencies, or weaker motivations), equalising the representation might be detrimental in terms of outcome efficiency, as long as 'more efficient' men are superseded by 'less efficient' women. Even if the empirical strategy used in the paper cannot disentangle this effect, the positive findings also account for this potential detrimental effect, strengthening the advisability of such efforts at affirmative action.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. [Section 2](#) describes the institutional framework of reference; [Section 3](#) is devoted to the empirical analysis, presenting the data and the empirical strategy. The main results and a set of robustness checks are presented in [Sections 4 and 5](#), respectively, while [Section 6](#) concludes the paper.

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