

Gender Quotas and the Path to Power

Evidence from Italy

Extended Abstract

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Abstract

Gender quotas have been adopted around the world in an effort to expand the political representation of women. Though a large amount of research has focused on the design, implementation, and descriptive outcomes of quotas, too little is known about whether they also increase the number of women in political leadership positions, and if so, via which mechanisms and under which conditions. I exploit a quasi-natural experiment on the regional level in Italy, where constitutional reforms and court decisions in 2001 and 2003 opened the door for regions to individually adopt electoral gender quotas. Utilizing a new and unique data set, I employ a difference-in-differences design to investigate whether gender quotas increase women's political leadership, or whether women continue to be heavily under-represented in political leadership positions on the regional level in Italy. This paper has important implications for the study of gender quotas, in particular their broader ramifications beyond descriptive representation in legislatures and the question of whether they can help bring women into positions of political power.

Keywords: Gender quotas, female leadership, Italy, regional politics

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Introduction

The implementation of gender quotas over the past 25 years has been one of the most important developments in transforming the diversity of the political landscape. Over 130 countries now have some form of gender quota (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo, 2012; O'Brien and Rickne, 2016) and the topic of gender diversity in politics has increasingly come into focus around the world. The rapid spread of quotas has instigated scholarly interest, particularly in their design and adoption (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo, 2012), the descriptive outcomes of such measures (Wängnerud, 2009), and their implications for substantive representation (Anzia and Berry, 2011; Wängnerud, 2009).

As countries continue to implement gender quotas, it is important to consider the full range of their potential effects. Research has yet to fully investigate the “secondary effects” of quotas; namely, the ramifications of bringing women into legislatures via gender quotas. This can include effects on substantive representation and the policy-making process, the types of women elected to public office, and the behavior of female legislators, both individually and as a group. Gender quotas are, after all, “...a simple answer to a very complex problem” (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo, 2012) and their longer-term effects are only now becoming apparent. It is important to look beyond the standard definition of descriptive representation, which is the most apparent and clearly identifiable metric of success for quotas, to examine potential subsidiary effects of gender quotas.

One of these “secondary effects” purported to stem from the implementation of gender quotas is a rise in the number of women holding political leadership positions. Scholars have increasingly examined the existence of an executive glass ceiling for women in politics (Davis, 1997; Reynolds, 1999), the conditions under which women are able to attain leadership positions in the executive branch (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson, 2016; Goddard, 2019; Krook and O'Brien, 2012; Reynolds, 1999), and the changing nature of the leadership positions that women hold (Barnes and O'Brien, 2018; Krook and O'Brien, 2012). Studying the presence of women in political leader-

ship positions is key, since female political leaders can be both of symbolic and substantive importance in advancing the interests of women (Krook and O'Brien, 2012).

Despite this scholarly focus on women at the elite levels of political leadership, one key question has not been completely explored in the research: do political gender quotas also increase the number of women in leadership positions? It stands to reason that, as the number of women in a legislature increases over time, so do their chances of attaining leadership positions in both the legislative and executive branches, in particular in parliamentary systems, where candidates for leadership positions are primarily drawn from sitting parliamentarians. Research has suggested that gender quotas can help women gain access to leadership positions (Dahlerup, 2006; Kittilson, 2006; O'Brien and Rickne, 2016), however it has not fully analyzed the range of situations and explanations for why legislative quotas should specifically have an impact on leadership positions and under which conditions this should occur. On the other hand, some scholars have found evidence of a "backlash" against women in the wake of quota adoption that might prevent them from advancing their careers to the leadership level (Barnes, 2016). The few studies that have explicitly examined the connection between quotas and women in leadership have found effects on the Swedish municipal level (O'Brien and Rickne, 2016) and on legislative leadership positions in Mexico, although not on executive leadership positions (Kerevel, 2019). We know very little, however, about the robustness of this connection between quotas and leadership positions, whether it holds across time and countries, and when and under which conditions women are or are not able to parlay gains in the legislature via quotas into advances in holding leadership positions.

This study aims to examine these questions in the context of the Italian sub-national level. The influence of quotas on women's attainment of political leadership positions is difficult to causally ascertain, given that the majority of gender quotas were implemented at the same time on various governmental levels within the same country and that cross-country comparisons of the causal effects of gender quotas are complicated due to varying national cultures, contexts, and political systems. I therefore

exploit a quasi-natural experiment on the regional level in Italy to examine the effects of gender quotas on the number of women in political leadership positions. Constitutional changes and court decisions in 2001 and 2003, respectively, opened the door for regions to implement measures (i.e., quotas) that would improve gender diversity in politics. What followed was a patchwork adoption of gender quotas, including different kinds and combinations of quotas. I leverage this temporal and geographic distribution as well as the varying treatment intensity within one country in a causal research design to determine whether the quotas had an effect on women in political leadership positions. This study is thus a contribution to the literature identifying the causal effects of quotas, and to the scarce existing evidence specifically linking quotas to leadership positions.

In this paper I explore whether a quota has ramifications beyond descriptive representation, namely on women's attainment of political leadership positions. This question is important both to ascertain the effects of gender quotas and to assess whether further measures might be needed in order to ensure diversity in political leadership positions. Positive subsidiary effects of quotas provide an argument for the continuation and expansion of gender quotas. On the other hand, if gender quotas have no appreciable effect on women in leadership positions, this raises the question of whether more targeted measures are necessary to break down the barriers specifically preventing women from attaining leadership positions.

Research Design

Background

Italy had a short-lived experiment with gender quotas in the 1990s. Quotas were used for the national Chamber of Deputies in the 1994 election, as well as for the 1995 regional elections, municipal elections between 1993 and 1995, and the 1999 European Parliament elections ([Openpolis, 2018](#); [Palici di Suni, 2012](#)). The quotas were declared unconstitutional and repealed on all levels in 1995.

Gender quotas didn't reappear in Italy until the early 2000s, when a court decision and constitutional amendment opened the door for Italy's regions to implement rules to "promote" the participation of more women in politics. Four regions brought in list quotas for the 2005 regional elections, but the issue grabbed attention when Campania implemented the first double preference law in 2009 (first used in the 2010 election). Campania was sued by the federal government but won in court, which paved the way for further regions to implement similar rules. In 2012, the federal government issued a non-binding "recommendation" that the regions bring in some sort of gender quota and provided three acceptable forms (list quotas, double preference, and alternating lists). A national law was eventually passed in 2016 mandating that the regions implement at least one of the quotas, but three regions still have no quota (in some cases, a regional quota law was defeated by the regional parliament or there was political conflict over the form and details of a quota). Other regions are debating increasing their quota rules or adding additional forms of gender quotas.

Although there was clearly policy diffusion between the regions as they implemented various quotas and copied one another, there is no discernible north/south divide in terms of implementing quotas (the impact of the quotas, on the other hand, varies both within and between regions over time). Two of the three regions without any form of quota are in northern Italy (Piedmont and Liguria), while one is in southern Italy (Calabria).

Quota Types and Implementation

On the regional level three different types of measures are in effect (Table 1). These are list quotas (the loosest form, specifies that a certain percentage of the list must be made up of women but often does not include specific placement rules), double preference (voters can express two candidate preferences instead of just one if the two candidates are of different genders), and alternating lists (specifies that electoral lists must alternate men and women). The Italian regions use a mixture of these three different measures: some use only one, such as the list quota, while others use them in

combination with one another.

Type of Quota	Description
List percentage quota	On candidate lists, the number of candidates (in percent) of a specific gender cannot be less than a given quota
Double preference	Voters can express a double preference as long as the second preference is a different gender from the first preference
Alternating lists	Electoral lists must be completed by alternating men and women on the list

Table 1: Types of Diversity Measures Used in Italian Regions

Italian regions use an open-list proportional representation system, which has important consequences for gender quotas. Given the open list system, the list quotas are generally considered to be the most ineffective of the three quota types since the political parties in most regions tend to bury the required women at the bottom of the list. The double preference and alternating list options have proven more successful, although in comparison to a closed list proportional representation system the quotas are certainly less effective, since the voters still ultimately choose who is elected to the regional parliaments.

Data

I collected data from a variety of sources for the empirical analysis. The primary source was the administrative records of regional and local politicians from the Italian Interior Ministry. This registry, also known by its Italian acronym AALR, provides data going back to the mid-1980s on all individuals elected to regional parliaments and municipal councils.¹ The data are collated and published on December 31st each year. The data include standard demographic details for each individual, such as name, gender, place and date of birth, education level (degree/title), previous profession, their elected role, and leadership roles such as the president of the parliament. General

¹Data going back to 1946 exist but has not been digitized

information about the regions and municipalities is also listed, such as identification codes and the sizes of the regional parliament and cabinet. I hand-checked all of the AALR data against other national and regional sources in order to ensure its accuracy. I supplemented the AALR data with data from the Italian national statistics office (ISTAT), which includes population totals for regions and municipalities, geographical information, as well as employment statistics.

From these data I created a panel data set for the 15 “regular” regions from 2000 to 2020. As previously mentioned, my data begin in 2000 since all regions held an election in that year, and it was the first election without a gender quota following the 1995 regional elections (which were held with a quota for the first time). Extending the data to before 1995 would present problems given the political upheaval of the early 1990s in Italy and would not be comparable to the post-1994 political period in Italy. The first post-2000 gender quotas on the regional level were brought in for the 2005 elections, however these were all of the less-effective list percentage requirement variety. I also focus only on the 15 “ordinary statute” regions since the other five “special statute” regions (Aosta Valley, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Trentino-South Tyrol, Sardinia, and Sicily) have a different constitutional status and administrative relationship with the federal government. The increased autonomy and competencies the “special statute” regions have render them incomparable to the “regular statute” regions.

I gathered all quota data from a variety of official sources on the national and regional levels. All information was checked against the relevant official national or regional laws. I also collected data on the composition of regional governing coalitions, whether a woman is the regional president, president of the regional council, or regional party leader (i.e., in a position to select/appoint individuals to other leadership positions), and survey data on gender equality attitudes in each region, among others.

My dependent variable is the presence of women in executive leadership positions, which in this case refers to the executive cabinet (*giunta regionale*). The regional cabinets include the president of the region and a mix of individuals who were either

elected to the regional parliament or brought in “externally” (i.e., they do not have to be elected to the parliament but are usually still politically connected or have specific expertise in their portfolio area). Some regions, for example, only allow elected parliamentarians to be appointed to the cabinet but have different rules about whether they can retain their seat in the parliament or not, and others also allow external experts to be appointed to the cabinet.

Empirical Methodology and Preliminary Results

Women’s political representation in Italian regions has improved significantly in the past 20 years. Figure 1 shows the aggregate number of women in Italy’s regional parliaments and regional cabinets from 2000 to 2018. The effect on the percentage of women in cabinets is particularly clear in years when several regions held elections (2005, 2010, and 2015) and dramatically climbs starting in 2010, when the first of the more effective quota measures (double preference and alternating lists) came into effect.

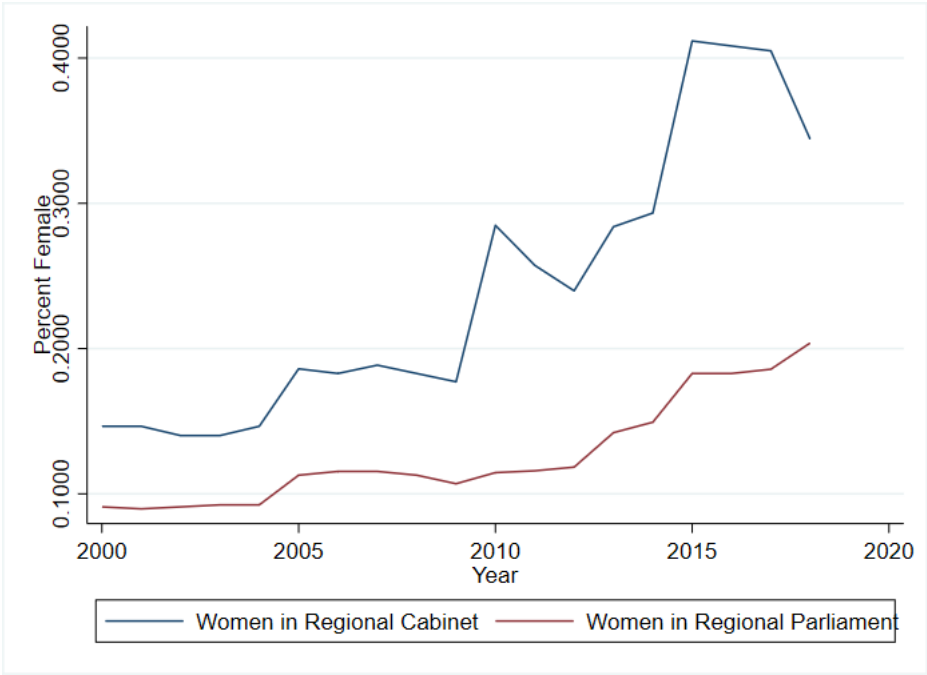


Figure 1: Women in Italian Regional Cabinets and Parliaments, 2000-2018 (Aggregate)

I estimate a series of staggered difference-in-differences models to analyze the

causal effects of quota implementation and strength on women’s representation in regional cabinets (*giunta regionale*). The models were estimated with fixed effects and standard errors clustered at the regional level. The preliminary results, summarized in the coefficient plots in Figures 2 and 3, show that quotas started having a significant effect on women’s presence in regional cabinets starting around 2013 and 2014, but the effect is most clear from 2015 onward, when several regions started using a combination of more effective quotas.

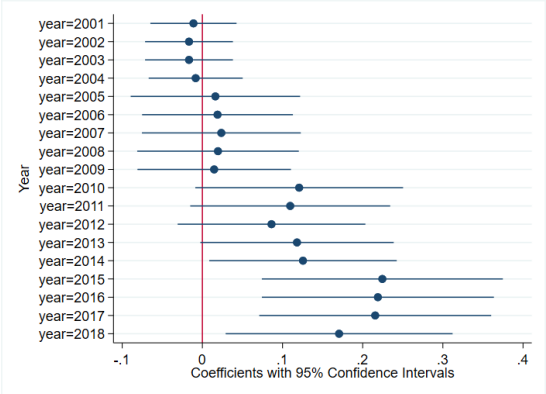


Figure 2: Percent Women in Cabinet, Selected Quotas

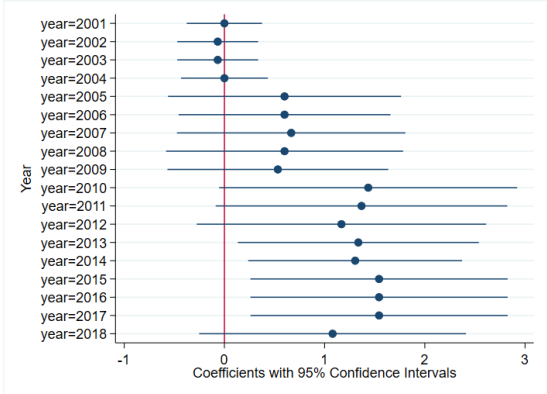


Figure 3: Number Women in Cabinet, Selected Quotas

Conclusion

Gender quotas have undoubtedly reshaped the political landscape over the past 25 years. Beyond their impact on descriptive representation, however, it is also important to look at their effect on other factors, such as individual- and group-level behavior, the types of women elected to public office, substantive representation and the policymaking process, and the number of women in leadership positions. The last point, in particular, warrants further attention. The literature generally holds that quotas should lead to a subsequent increase in the number of women in leadership positions, however heterogeneity in the number of female leaders in countries with quotas demonstrates that this effect is not guaranteed. We do not yet know whether this supposed link holds across countries and time. My research thus focuses on the question of whether there is a link between quotas and women in leadership positions,

and if so, under what conditions do we see an effect and what are the mechanisms at work?

In order to answer this question, I exploit a quasi-natural experiment on the regional level in Italy and utilize a difference-in-difference design to examine whether, under which conditions, and via which mechanisms gender quotas lead to more women attaining political leadership positions. My preliminary results indicate that gender quotas in Italian regions have had at least a small effect on the number of women appointed to the regional cabinets, but these effects came two election cycles after the first quotas were introduced and are likely driven by the more effective quotas that primarily came into effect during the election cycle with the largest gains (2013-2015).

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