



The impact of gender quotas on electoral participation: Evidence from Italian municipalities

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ABSTRACT

We analyze the effect of gender quotas on electoral participation by using a dataset regarding Italian municipal elections. Gender quotas were in force in Italy from 1993 to 1995. Given the short period covered by the reform, some municipalities never voted using a gender quota. We identify a treatment and a control group and estimate the effects of gender quotas by using a Difference-in-Differences estimation strategy. Electoral turnout shows a decreasing trend, but turnout decreased significantly less in municipalities affected by the reform, suggesting that gender quotas produced an increase in electoral participation. The effect on electoral turnout is driven by an increase in valid ballots. The effect is smaller in the southern part of the country, which typically manifests more traditional gender roles. We also find that female electors react more than males.

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1. Introduction

The use of electoral gender quotas to increase the number of women in political bodies is common to many countries. Nevertheless quotas remain controversial. Various arguments have been proposed in favor of and against the introduction of quotas as a tool to increase women's political empowerment. Those supporting the quota system argue that it represents a powerful method for achieving a gender balance in political institutions as it compensates for some of the various barriers that prevent women from participating effectively in the political arena. In addition, female legislators may have different political preferences and give particular attention to women's interests with the result of correcting a number of imbalances in different social and economic spheres (Pande, 2003; Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Chen, 2009). On the other hand, those opposing quotas argue that this instrument is against the principle of equal opportunity since women are given an advantage over men. Moreover, quotas may lead to negative effects on the quality of politicians as women are typically less experienced than men. Others argue that, by restricting the pool of candidates, quotas may undermine democracy as voters have less opportunity to choose their representatives freely. By changing the pool of candidates, gender quotas may also change the size and composition of the voting population.

The existing literature on the effects of gender quotas has mainly investigated their effects on political choices and on gender stereotypes. By exploiting the random assignment of head positions for women across village councils in West Bengal, Beaman et al.

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(2008) show that prior exposure to a female leader weakens stereotypes about gender roles and attenuates the negative bias in how female leaders' effectiveness is perceived by male villagers, although it does not alter the villagers' preferences for male leaders.

In terms of the participation of female candidates, by using a natural experiment strategy and data for India, *Bhavnani (2009)* shows that in non-reserved areas the level of female participation as candidates is extremely low. When only female leaders are allowed in a district as a consequence of gender quotas, the participation of women as candidates increases substantially. Relying on the temporary adoption of gender quotas in Italy, *De Paola et al. (2010)* find that the introduction of gender quotas increased female representation and that these effects have continued since the reform was abolished. This supports the idea that affirmative actions may play an important role in overcoming negative stereotypes. Also with regard to the Italian experience, *Baltrunaite et al. (2012)* show that the increase in female representation is not associated with a negative effect on the quality of politicians, indeed they find an increase in the average educational level of elected politicians. A positive effect of gender quotas on the percentage of female candidates and councilors has also been found by *Campa (2011)* for Spain, by *Schmidt and Saunders (2004)* for municipal elections in Peru and by *Jones (1998)* for provincial legislatures in Argentina.

Other works investigate the effects of gender quotas in terms of the policies adopted by elected representatives, and obtain mixed results. While a number of papers considering the Indian experience show that female legislators encourage policies supporting female needs (*Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Clots-Figueras, 2011; Rehavi, 2007; Funk and Gathmann, 2008*), other works focusing on European countries do not find any statistically significant effect (*Campa, 2011; Rigon and Tanzi, 2011*).¹

In contrast, little is known about how gender quotas affect turnout and voter behavior. Even though the main aim of gender quotas is not to affect electoral participation, their introduction may result in unintended consequences and induce some groups in the population to increase or to reduce participation, so helping in the election of certain candidates rather than others.

Understanding whether gender quotas affect electoral turnout is relevant since turnout is often considered a crucial indicator of democracy (*Sartori, 1987; Przeworski et al., 2000; Clark et al., 2009; Blais and Young, 1999*). As argued by *Vanhanen (1997)*, if only a small part of the population takes part in elections, the electoral competition is restricted and the bulk of the population finds itself outside representative politics. Voter turnout could also be a measure of the "quality" of institutions given that, as elections involve the selection of people who will make decisions that are relevant for the whole community, a high level of political participation will effectively allow ideologically and socially different groups to compete for political power. In addition, as different groups of the population may react differently, we could also find some consequences regarding the political choices of elected politicians (*Fumagalli and Narciso, 2012; Kovenock and Roberson, 2011*). As shown by a number of works, an increase in the participation of disadvantaged groups leads to an increase in the provision of welfare and public good (*Husted and Kenny, 1997; Lizzeri and Persico, 2004*). Similarly, an increase in female turnout may lead to more female orientated public policies.

From a theoretical point of view, gender quotas might affect turnout through a number of channels which would lead to different consequences. Gender quotas could affect the expected utility of voters for both instrumental and expressive reasons. As regards instrumental voting, the benefits that electors expect to receive from the election of a candidate may change because female policy-makers might give particular attention to women's interests and female and male electors may respond differently to this type of expectation. In addition, voters may consider a candidate's gender as a proxy for information on her quality or policy preferences. Female politicians may be perceived as less experienced (*Kolinsky, 1991; Murray, 2008; Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008*) or as less corrupt than males (*Swamy et al., 2001*) with contrasting effects on turnout. As far as expressive motivations are concerned, it could be that voters obtain utility from voting for candidates of their own gender (*Childs, 2004; Kudva, 2003*) and a higher number of female candidates may increase the number of female electors who decide to cast their vote. Furthermore, citizens might be more motivated to cast their vote as gender quotas are likely to improve the degree of representation.

The empirical literature investigating the effects of gender quotas on electoral participation is rather scant. Using a Regression Discontinuity Design which exploits the Spanish electoral rules, *Casas-Arce and Saiz (2011)* do not find that female candidates had any statistically significant effect on either turnout or blank and invalid ballots. On the other hand, contrasting effects are shown by a few empirical investigations which consider the effects of reservations for other disadvantaged groups. *Kurosaki and Mori (2011)* show a positive correlation between the probability of citizens from minority groups voting and being in a constituency where a quota of places is reserved for minorities, but they cannot directly identify the causal impact of reservations on voting. On the other hand, *Natraj (2011)* finds a causal negative effect regarding the Indian context: turnout falls by 9% as a consequence of the reservation of a number of candidate places for minorities.

In this paper we try to shed some more light on the effects of gender quotas on electoral participation by exploiting the temporary adoption of gender quotas in candidate lists in Italy. Gender quotas, reserving a percentage of the candidacies in the party lists for Municipal Council elections for female candidates, were introduced in Italy in 1993 and repealed in 1995 by the Constitutional Court. Given the short time that this law was in force, and the staggered scheduling of local electoral races, not all Italian municipalities voted under the gender quota system. In fact, only municipalities that had an election in the period between April 1993 and September 1995 were affected by the reform. As a consequence, thanks to random factors that led municipalities to vote or not in the reform period, we are able to identify a "treatment" group and a "control" group and to apply a Difference-in-Differences estimation technique to identify the effects of gender quotas on electoral participation. We compare the changes in turnout rates (measured as the number of effective voters on the number of electors) across the two groups of municipalities before and after the reform was enforced.

¹ As shown by *Rigon and Tanzi (2011)* the presence of a female mayor in Italy does not produce effects on the type of policies implemented at municipal level.

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