

The Impact of Gender Quotas on Votes for Women Candidates: Evidence from Italy



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Gender quotas to increase women's political representation are now used in more than half the countries in the world. There are three main quota systems: a) the reserved seats system, in which a share of seats is by law reserved for a gender, regardless of voter choices; b) the legal candidate quotas system, in which a share of candidacies is reserved for a gender, but voters can choose among all candidates; and c) the voluntary, political-party quotas system, in which a share of candidacies is reserved for a gender by parties aiming for balanced gender representation. Reserved seats systems, used in India and Rwanda, are quite effective in increasing women's share of political offices. Legal candidate quotas systems, like those used in Italy, are less effective. Although legal quotas increase the votes received by women, they do not automatically ensure a corresponding increase in the number of seats held by women.

More votes for women candidates, inconsistent gains in seats.

Authors Genny Bonomi, Giorgio Brosio, and Maria Laura Di Tommaso show that an example of this outcome may occur in open-list proportional electoral systems such as Italy's, where lists of candidates selected by a party are presented to voters. This is what occurred in Italy: in 1995 and 2000, the introduction of quotas in four regional elections led to an appreciable increase in votes for women candidates, although it was not as large as the increase in women candidates and was unable to ensure a consistent increase in the number of elected women. This paper empirically studies how gender quotas worked in these regional elections and how their effectiveness reflected a demand bias and a supply bias. Demand bias refers to voters' choices: when the opportunity to vote for men exists, voters typically prefer to do so; supply bias refers to a bias that comes from parties preferring to field male candidates.

Methodology. The authors use a conditional multinomial logit model to estimate the probability that a voter will choose a woman candidate and simulate how this probability is influenced by changes in a number of variables, such as the introduction of gender quotas, length of the candidate list, and the position of the party in terms of liberal values. The results show that a greater share of women in party lists leads to an increase in the probability

that voters will choose a woman candidate.

Italian voters and gender bias. The probability of voting for a male candidate is always higher than the probability that a vote will be cast for a female candidate, even with 50 percent quotas. In particular, an increase in the number of women candidates on the list to 50 percent (the equivalent of a 50 percent gender quota) increases the probability that voters will choose a woman from 12 to 36 percent. However, the fact that a 50 percent gender quota leads to only a 36 percent chance of voting for women shows that Italian voters retain some gender bias, at least in the period under consideration. Over time, quotas may affect voters' response that could become less gender biased. The more liberal the party's values regarding these issues, the higher the probability that a woman will receive a vote. Voters' behavior is also influenced by the length of the party list and the position of women and men on it (a very long list appears to discourage voters from selecting any candidate) and the extent to which a party espouses liberal values, defined here in terms of abortion, homosexuality, and euthanasia.

Increasing Italian women's agency. What are the policy implications of these findings? To reach gender equality in representative bodies in Italy, the authors suggest that quotas in an open-list electoral system are a necessary affirmative action, as quotas remove some of the obstacles to women's political participation. In the current Italian electoral system for National Parliament, there are no gender quotas. At the same time, the authors stress the need to address the many different aspects of gender inequality in Italy. Women's traditionally weak bargaining power within the household in Italy likely also weakens their participation in the political arena. Increasing bargaining power through labor force participation and other means, such as stronger measures against domestic violence and violence against women, will enhance women's political prospects as well. Empowerment of Italian women is a difficult path, where each dimension is linked to another. Only by working in parallel, in all dimensions, will Italian women increase their agency in the political arena.

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