

When identity trumps class: Women and workers in Italian municipal politics

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Abstract

This research note analyzes extensive archival data on Italian policymakers, to closer examine the intersection between gender and occupational class among Italian politicians ($N > 615,000$). It studies how the gender and class composition of Italian municipal assemblies have changed after the imposition of gender quotas, to test claims concerning replacement vs. spillover effects among the socio-politically disadvantaged. Leveraging a natural experiment in which some municipalities temporarily introduced quotas on party lists in the mid-1990s, it finds that quotas have positive effects on the descriptive representation of not only middle and working class women—but also on working class men. Results thus highlight how gender parity rules may have positive spillover effects on the political representation of traditionally marginalized groups in society.

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I Introduction

Recent years have seen a surge in scholarly work centering on the statistical representation of women in politics¹—and for good reason. In nearly all democracies in this world, women represent more than fifty percent of the voting age population. Despite this, women are systematically under-represented in legislatures in the vast majority of these country states, as well as in all levels of government within them (Paxton et al., 2020; UN Women, 2021).

The academic debate about women legislators hardly stems from a vacuum in public discourse. In Italy, the focus of this paper, gender parity in politics has become a major topic of debate. Numerous popular initiatives, such as *Il Giusto Mezzo* and *Donne per la Salvezza*, are now actively campaigning to improve the sex ratio among Italian lawmakers (Blasi, 2021). And left-of-center political parties have started adapting their party programs to make the increased legislative participation of women a distinct policy objective (Italia Viva, 2019; Partito Democratico, 2020). As part of this trend, there has been renewed interest in adopting a policy designed specifically to improve direct female inclusion in the legislative process: gender quotas.

Far from everyone in Italy supports the adoption of gender quotas. Right-leaning lawmakers and political pundits have suggested that more women in politics will come at a cost, and that this cost will be a decline in legislator quality. Empirical evidence fails to back up this claim. When in force, Italian gender quotas have mainly served to bolster the human capital of policymakers, as highly educated women start to replace less educated men (Baltrunaite et al., 2014; Weeks and Baldez, 2015). Problematic with these studies of human capital, however, is that they examine variables that better proxy class than legislator competence (Carnes and Lupu, 2016; Cramer and Toff, 2017; Hakhverdian, 2015). If gender quotas function to bolster human capital, this thus suggests that upper class women may be replacing another politically disenfranchised group: working class men. This framing—of gender quotas as an elite driven policy that serves to oppress working class men—is a rhetoric that is commonly used by the populist right. But does it have merit?

This research note tests this by examining how the statistical representation of women affects the political opportunity of men, when specifically accounting for social class. Drawing on extensive data on Italian municipal policymakers, it leverages

¹See e.g. Barnes and Holman (2020); Casas-Arce and Saiz (2015); Clayton et al. (2020); Clayton and Zetterberg (2018); Folke et al. (2015, 2021); Hughes et al. (2017); O’Brien and Rickne (2016); Paxton et al. (2020); Profeta and Woodhouse (2018); Teele et al. (2018); Thomsen and Swers (2017).

a temporary introduction of gender quotas on party lists to examine how quotas affects the political opportunity of both women and men across the upper, middle and working classes. Two findings stand out. First, results suggest that gender quotas have a persistent and positive effect on the rate of mainly *middle and working class women* that manage to attain political office. This runs contrary to accounts that suggest that it is mainly upper class women that benefit from quotas being adopted. More surprisingly, results additionally show that quotas effectively increase the likelihood that *working class men* succeed in attaining political office. This suggests that policy-driven efforts to improve the sex ratio of legislatures may well engender positive spillovers in statistical representation. In brief: workers—a traditionally socio-politically marginalized group—seem to benefit directly from inclusion of more women in politics.

2 Gender quotas and class representation

How do gender quotas affect the socioeconomic composition of democratically elected legislatures? A surprising strand of literature, which examines the drivers of political selection, has examined this question *indirectly*, by exploring how quotas affect policymaker competence.² The theoretical underpinning of this work is simple: by facilitating the entry of women into the political marketplace, quotas are predicted to increase competition between political candidates. All else constant, legislatures should thereby become more strongly characterized by the prevalence of competent policymakers (Besley et al., 2017; Júlio and Tavares, 2017). To test this competition mechanism, this work has often been forced to rely on crude proxies to attain estimates of policymaker competency. These include pre-political income, occupational background and educational attainment: indicators that may equally function to measure social class (Carnes and Lupu, 2016; Cramer and Toff, 2017; Hakhverdian, 2015).

The findings of this work are mixed. Analyzing the 2001 introduction of gender quotas in France, Lassébie (2020) finds that quotas have no effect on the occupational diversity of municipal councils. Contrariwise, Besley et al. (2017) examine the effect of quotas on the pre-political career incomes of Swedish municipal councillors, adjusted for locality-occupation specific average income. They uncover that quotas effectively raise the income backgrounds of primarily male policymakers that attain office. This result is echoed the findings of Baltrunaite et al. (2014), who find that gender quotas

²E.g. Baltrunaite et al. (2014); Besley et al. (2017); Bird (2003); Lassébie (2020); Weeks and Baldez (2015).

raise the share of highly educated policymakers from managerial occupational backgrounds in Italian municipal councils. Similar to in Sweden, these effects stem mainly from lower rates of low educated men attaining office.

Variation in findings highlight that gender quotas have differential effects depending on the specifics of their designs, as well as the pre-existing gender norms of the locality that adopts them.³ But in sum, the literature on political selection suggests that gender quotas either have no effect on policymaker class diversity, or work actively to harm the political opportunity of socio-economically disprivileged men.

Alternative to competitive models of political selection, another set of theory highlights that gender quotas may in fact work to improve legislator diversity by means of altering social norms. Theoretically, this has been postulated by gender scholars, who argue that as the share of women in political office grows, the societal understanding of what constitutes a competent policymaker is also broadened to include other socio-politically marginalized groups (Alexander, 2012; Beauregard, 2017). Empirically, however, there is little work to support this claim. Folke et al. (2015) analyze whether the introduction of gender quotas on social democratic party lists in Sweden, work to bolster the rate of people with immigrant backgrounds that manage to attain office. They find that quotas have no effect on the election probability of immigrants. More recent work focusing on legislator diversity in Latin America, finds tentative evidence to suggest that gender quotas increase the professional and educational diversity of sub-national legislatures: both among male, as well as among female policymakers (Barnes and Holman, 2020). Due to problems of data scarcity this study fails, however, to provide substantively interpretable estimates of how quotas affect different occupational or educational classes of legislators. Nor does it provide any evidence to suggest that findings are generalizable to any case outside that of Argentina.

3 Research design

To test the theoretical claims posited above, I analyze how changes in gender representation affect the class composition of Italian municipal assemblies between 1988 to 2009. The single-country design of my study comes with a number of advantages. First, the pure of number of municipalities in Italy allows for the effective use of large

³See Davidson-Schmich (2006), Hughes et al. (2017) and Paxton et al. (2020) for extensive reviews on this matter.

N statistical methods: in 2020, there were 7915 of them.

Second, and more importantly, Italy temporarily enforced mandatory gender quotas on party lists in municipal elections during the early 1990s. The quotas were introduced as part of the country's electoral system reform of 1993 and mandated that a maximum of two thirds of any party list be assigned to any gender. Quotas were in force until 1995, when the Italian supreme court ruled them to be unconstitutional (Palici di Suni, 2012). As such, only municipal elections that were held between April 1993 and September 1995 were subject to quota rules. In Italy, because of historically frequent municipal government breakdowns and the subsequent calling of snap elections, not all municipalities hold elections simultaneously. This, the exogenous timing of elections, allows to me to leverage an identification strategy in which I compare municipalities that held elections when gender quotas were mandatory, with other all municipalities. The strategy has been employed previously by De Paola et al. (2010) and Baltrunaite et al. (2014). Neither of the studies find any evidence of strategic election timing, by which municipalities would have intentionally set election dates to be subject to and/or avoid quota rules. Moreover, both papers find that quotas positively effect the number of female policymakers that get elected into mayoral offices, as well as municipal councils.

3.1 Municipal government and elections in Italy

There are roughly 8000 municipalities in Italy, which jointly control approximately 15% of state spending. They are responsible for a wide array of public policies, including land zoning, water and waste management, local transportation, cultural policy, social housing policy and pre-primary and primary education. Municipal governments consists of two main bodies: The mayor (*sindaco*), who appoints and leads an executive committee—and a municipal council (*consiglio comunale*), which retains legislative authority.

Mayoral and municipal council elections are closely linked in Italian politics. Voters may formally split their vote to select different parties for the mayoral office and the council. Yet, electoral rules noticeably reduce incentives of voters to do so. In municipalities consisting of 15'000 inhabitants or less, two thirds of council seats get automatically allocated to the party list of the candidate that wins the mayoral office.⁴

⁴Mayoral candidates must be formally endorsed by at least one party list. Party lists or list coalitions must in turn contain a number of candidate councilpersons, which may not exceed the number of actual council posts.

Remaining council seats get proportionally allocated to the other parties, according to party vote share and by means of the D'Hondt formula. In metropolitan municipalities with more than 15'000 inhabitants the rule is similar, but the mayoral party list gets 60 percent of seats.

The inter-connected nature of mayoral and council elections allows me to discriminate between some theoretical mechanisms by design. Mayors are granted substantial power in Italian politics, as electoral rules automatically hold them accountable to a council that is controlled by his or her own party list. Council elections are thus low salience, as they stand in the shadow of mayoral elections that take place simultaneously. This raises the likelihood that changes in the socio-demographic composition of councils are supply-side driven, as opposed to stemming from the attitudinal biases of voters. In absence of media coverage, voters will find it hard to assess other traits of council candidates than their gender. Unlike in other European countries, such as Sweden, only candidate names are provided on voting ballots. Second, the fact that at least 60% of council seats get allocated to the mayoral party raises the probability of gender quotas operating via a direct change in the sex ratio *within* party lists, as opposed to a change across them. As party lists are closed, a majority of lawmakers that win office will automatically have appeared on the list of a party that wins mayoral office.

3.2 Data

In my study, I draw on policymaker data compiled by the Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs annually between 1988 and 2009. These contain information on the gender, age, birthplace and party affiliation of all Italian municipal politicians, as well as their educational attainment and occupational background. I delimit the time period examined, as the effect having a singular election with gender quotas should arguably decline over time. As elections were held every four years after 1993, municipalities conduct on four or five elections after the quota reform.

Information on the gender of politicians is fully complete. Data on their occupational background has a higher, yet still low NA rate at 6%.⁵ As a result, my analysis covers data on 616'195 unique council posts, in +37'500 council elections. Council size varies between 1 to 80, where the number of council seats is determined by pop-

⁵For now I treat this missingness as MCAR, as has been done by De Paola et al. (2010) and Baltrunaite et al. (2014).

ulation size. Only fifty of all unique municipal elections I analyze have generated a council with fewer than five members (<0.09%).

To capture the class of legislators, I code a series of dummy variables based on gender and occupational information provided by the ministry. I first code occupational descriptions into four social classes, based on a coding scheme developed by Oesch (2006). Oesch's scheme distinguishes between five occupation-based social classes: the higher grade service class, the lower grade service class, small business owners, skilled workers and unskilled workers. While my original coding is similar to Oesch's original, it has been partially modified as the raw occupational data provided by the ministry does not allow for differentiation between business-owners and employees.⁶ I opt to look mainly, however, at four distinct groups: the upper, middle and working classes as well as those inactive in labor markets. Table 1 displays how I adapt Oesch's coding scheme into my own four-category coding.

Table 1: Class coding based on occupational classes

| Occupations (<i>examples from raw data</i>) | Oesch coding | Three cat. coding |
|--|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Company directors, Senior civil servants, Lawyers, Engineers, Financial analysts, University professors, Journalists | Higher grade service class | Upper class |
| Hospitality managers, Police inspectors, Technicians, Sales agents, Designers, Librarians and curators | Lower grade service class | Middle class |
| Bank-tellers, Travel consultants, Legal secretaries, Customer service reps, Fire fighters, Craftsmen | Skilled workers | Working class |
| Drivers, Machine operators, Assemblymen, Farm workers, Waiters, Hairdressers, Cleaners | Unskilled workers | Working class |
| Homemakers, students, retirees | — | Inactive in labor market |

Having attained a categorical indicator of class background, I thereafter combine it with a binary indicator of gender to attain eight distinct class-gender groups. Table 2 displays the class-gender distribution of councilpersons included in the dataset. It highlights how incredibly few women and workers were active in Italian municipal politics throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Overall, less than 15% of councilpersons were women and less than 18% belonged to the working class.

⁶For a more elaborate discussion of the implications of this see appendix A.1.

Table 2: Class-gender distribution of Italian municipal councilpersons, 1988-2009

| Class | Male | Female | Total |
|--------------------------|-------|--------|-------|
| Upper class | 24.5% | 3.6% | 28.1% |
| Middle class | 29.8% | 5.8% | 35.6% |
| Working class | 16.8% | 1.0% | 17.8% |
| Inactive in labor market | 14.0% | 4.4% | 18.3% |
| <i>Total</i> | 85.2% | 14.8% | 100% |

My outcome variables of interest concern the probability of individuals from each distinct class-gender subgroup to attain a seat on a municipal council. To measure this, I collapse the data to generate a series of variables that measure the share of each subgroup that were elected into council, at a given municipality during an election year. For now, I focus my analysis on the subgroups where class belonging is clearly distinguishable. Data on persons that were inactive in labor markets is thus accounted for when generating my outcome variables, but I refrain from examining their council shares separately as an outcome.⁷

3.3 Model choices

To test my theoretical claims, I run series of regressions following an empirical strategy originally proposed by De Paola et al. (2010) and additionally used by Baltrunaite et al. (2014). The model specification can be formalized as:

$$R_{it} = \beta_1(QuotaMunicipality_j) + \beta_2(PostQuota_k) + \beta_3(QuotaMunicipality_j * PostQuota_k) + \beta_4 X_{it} + \mu_p + \epsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

where R_{it} is a continuous variable indicating the percentage of a given class-gender category i in a municipal assembly, during an election year t . $QuotaMunicipality_j$ is a dummy variable, which denotes if a municipality j held an election when gender quotas were mandatory. $PostQuota_k$ is a dummy indicating if a given election, k , took place after gender quotas were in place (i.e. after March 1993). $QuotaMunicipality_k * PostQuota_k$ is an interaction term, where the coefficient β_3 captures my main estimate of interest: namely, the effect of gender quotas on over-time differences in

⁷Ideas on how to best deal with this category of legislators is welcome.

class representation between municipalities that held vs. did not hold elections with mandatory gender quotas. X_{it} indicates municipal population size and municipal population squared at time t , based on data from the census closest in time.⁸ μ_p is a vector of province-level dummies and ϵ_{it} is an error term.⁹

To ensure that effects are not entirely driven by councils that were installed when quotas were in place, I run models on a) the full data set, as well as b) a delimited sample, which excludes data on councils that were elected into office between April 1993 and September 1995. In all specifications, I cluster standard errors at the municipality level.

4 Results

How have class-specific patterns of statistical representation been affected by the introduction of gender quotas? Figure 1 presents results from my regression estimations, where outcomes center on the representation of women. To better understand differences between quota and non-quota municipalities prior to the introduction of quotas, we can examine *QuotaMunicipality* coefficients. They suggest that there were small yet statistically significant differences between the two groups of municipalities, in how frequently they elected upper and middle class women into office, before April 1993. In quota municipalities, women from upper and middle classes were 0.4 and 0.7 percentage points more likely to win an office, respectively. In contrast, pre-quota differences in the share of female working class lawmakers are statistically insignificant at conventional CI thresholds.

PostQuota coefficients provide estimates on how likelihood it was for women from different classes to attain political office after the introduction of quotas, but in non-quota municipalities. Overall, they show that the average share of women from both upper and middle classes increases by between 2 and 1.5 percentage points post-1995. Working class women, however, experience no improvement in statistical representation in absence of gender quotas during the same period.

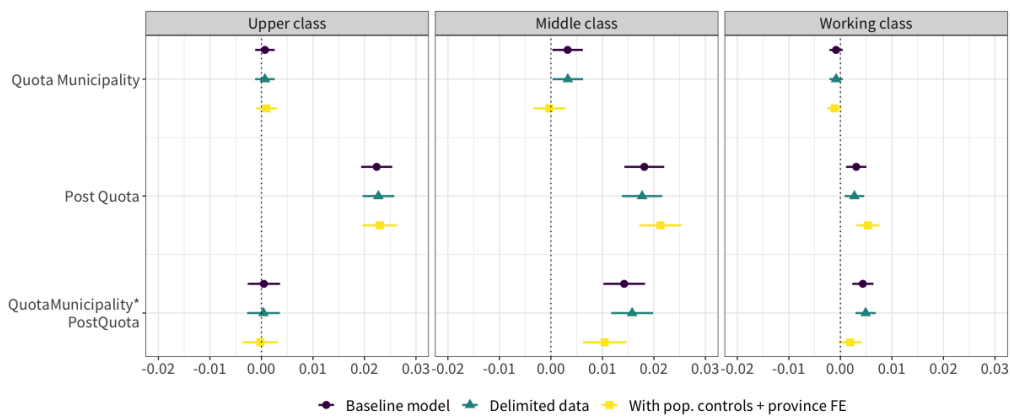
What about the effect of quotas in themselves? *QuotaMunicipality*PostQuota*

⁸Like the Italian Ministry of Interior, I use 1991 census data for all elections that take place before January 1998 and data from the 2001 census for the elections that follow.

⁹In later iterations of this analysis, I will add a number of municipality level control variables, drawing on additional census data. These are a) educational attainment, measured as the the average years of education among the among inhabitants aged 18 or above, as well as b) the fraction of inhabitants aged above 15 that were employed.

coefficients show that—in spite of representational improvements being experienced most strongly by upper class women after 1992—gender quotas work mainly to positively effect the rate of middle and working class women that attain office. At 0.6 percentage points, quota effects stronger for middle class women, but the female working class also experiences a smaller, yet statistically significant increase of 0.3 percentage points.

Figure 1: Diff-in-diff estimates of the effect of the gender quota on women’s representation in municipal assemblies, by class



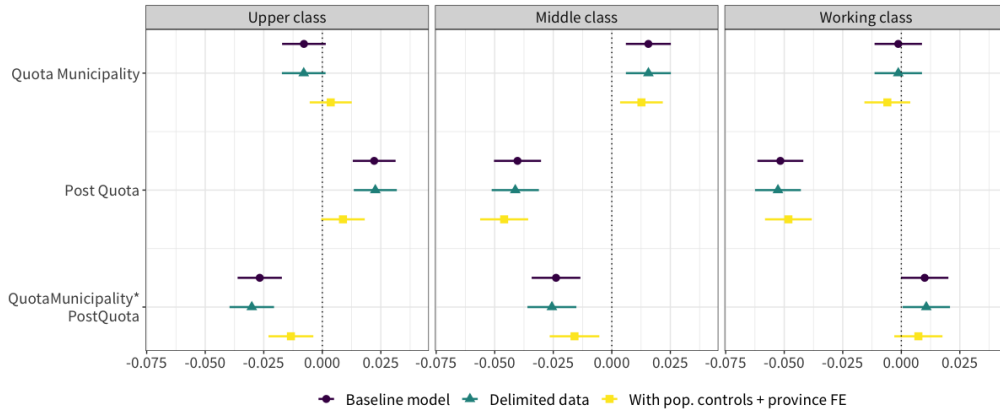
Note: Model specifications include a) the full sample without controls; b) a subsetting sample without controls (no observations where quotas from when quotas were in force) and c) the full sample with municipal-level population controls and province level fixed effects. In all specifications, standard errors are clustered on a municipality level. Bandwidths indicate 90% confidence intervals.

If gender quotas serve to bolster the inclusion of women in office, which men are most affected by this shift? To examine this, figure 2 presents regression estimates where outcomes capture the rate of male legislators in municipal councils, by class. Here *Quota Municipality* coefficients suggest that the only difference between quota and non-quota municipalities prior to 1993, was that middle class men, on average, were 0.5 percentage points better represented in municipal councils that would later adopt quotas.

PostQuota coefficients suggest a noticeable and significant increase of 2 percentage points in the rate of upper class men that attained office after 1992. Conversely, the representation of male middle and working classes significantly deteriorated by between four and five percentage points in the same period—importantly, however, in absence of the introduction of any quotas.

Finally, $QuotaMunicipality * PostQuota$ points to something particularly interesting concerning the effects of gender quotas on male class representation. While the share of upper class men in local legislatures increases the most of all class categories post-1992, this is also the class category that is most negatively affected by gender quotas: at -3 percentage points, this effect is highly statistically significant. Middle class men are also negatively affected by the installment of quotas, as their share on local councils decline by 2 percentage points. And most surprisingly—in spite of experiencing the largest deterioration in political representation in the decade following 1995—working class men actually benefit from the installment of gender quotas. While the effect size is small at one percentage point, it is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) comparable in size to the positive representations effects that middle class women attain from the very same policy.

Figure 2: Diff-in-diff estimates of the effect of the gender quota on men's representation in municipal assemblies, by class



Note: Model specifications include a) the full sample without controls; b) a subsetting sample without controls (no observations where quotas from when quotas were in force) and c) the full sample with municipal-level population controls and province level fixed effects. In all specifications, standard errors are clustered on a municipality level. Bandwidths indicate 90% confidence intervals.

5 Discussion

Overall, the findings of this paper show that gender quotas have a positive effect on the statistical representation of especially middle and working class women, as well as working class men. The latter finding is particularly noteworthy, as it suggests that legally mandated efforts to improve gender parity in legislatures also positively affects

socio-politically disenfranchised men. The magnitude of effect are small at 0.5 to 2 percentage points. But they need be seen in light of how incredibly under-represented these subgroups were in the period that preceded the adoption of quotas.

While results remain preliminary, they give rise to number of new research questions. Most centrally, the analysis can as of yet not elucidate on the underlying mechanisms that engender treatment effects. A first step to attaining a better understanding of these, would be to closer inspect potential moderators of uncovered effects. This can be done via a number of means. I elaborate on two of them below.

Party attachment of Italian legislators is very weak as politicians frequently change party affiliations. Moreover, numerous Italian political parties have in the past thirty years collapsed, broken down and been reborn under new names. It is thus difficult to directly assess whether changes in the statistical representation of different gender-class groups stem from increased intra- or inter-party competition between political candidates. Particularly so as information on neither the gender nor the occupations of political candidates, as opposed to legislators, are collected by Italian authorities. That said—at minimum—the results call for a closer examination of whether spillovers are generated as the result of changes to left- vs. right-leaning legislatures. This can be analyzed with some efforts to hand-code to the ideological leanings of the +400 party lists to which legislators in the sample are affiliated.

Another set of potential moderation tests, would involve scrutinizing the extent to which quotas affect municipalities with varying labor organization and family patterns. Italy is a relatively young, unitary state formed across a large amount of micro-states. As such, the country is highly heterogeneous in terms of union organization and family structures. In later stages of my work, I may leverage this better, to test how quota reforms work differently across localities with (potentially exogenous) variation in class and gender norms.

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A Appendix

A.1 Data on policymaker occupational background

Ministry data on policymaker backgrounds allow me to account for fine-grained sectoral employment, as well as individual-level managerial competency. It does not, however, allow me to directly differentiate between business-owners, the self-employed and employees. That means that e.g. an individual coded to belong to a managerial class may either be employed in a management position by a larger enterprise, or simply act as a manager in a family-owned firm. Equally, individuals in some high-skill service professions - such as architects or accountants - are automatically coded as belonging to the upper grade service class, as opposed to being owners of small firms. Furthermore, I add an additional category to account for individuals that were not in conventional employment conditions prior to attaining office. This residual category includes homemakers, students, retirees, the sick and disabled and the unemployed.