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ARTICLE



Women in the local political system in Italy. A longitudinal perspective

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ABSTRACT

The gap between men and women in the formal enjoyment of political rights, and the low level of women's active participation in political life, even if it is common to several western democracies, is in Italy especially apparent, due to the high degree of gender inequality at various levels. The number of women in representative institutions tends to be inversely related to the centrality of the institutions, with numbers increasing with the move from the national to the local (regional, provincial and municipal) levels. This is the quantitative effect of 'bringing politics close to home' – through a process of decentralization of policies affecting women's rights and empowerment (in the labour market, education and health), particularly evident in Italy from the 1970 s and especially from 2000 – that brought increasing female representation in meso-level institutions. Starting from an essential link between quantity and quality, the article examines in depth the configuration of women's representation at local level through a longitudinal perspective based on data concerning elected women in local institutions from 1986 to 2019.

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Introduction

The focus of this article is the trend in women's political representation in municipal institutions in Italy. In fact, municipalities have more elected women than other political institutions. Here, we find a consolidated trend towards increasing female representation in recent years. Municipalities are an interesting level of analysis, allowing for observation of the relationship between the quantitative aspects of gender and political representation; the effects of measures introduced to rebalance the political system (i.e. gender quotas), and other socio-economic factors affecting women's political participation. In fact, in this article, we consider rules and gender-oriented measures to be necessary conditions for the achievement of equality as a significant value and goal. At the same time, these rules and measures are not sufficient, since cultural variables play an essential role in determining their effectiveness. Hence, as we shall see later, there are differences and disparities in gender equality across the different sub-national contexts making up the Italian polity.

It is also important to consider the paradoxical nature of female representation trends. Female political representation must be interpreted against the background of the growth in women's social participation generally, as this often entails forms of discrimination, sexism and even exclusion within the same democratic system. Thus, while female political participation has grown, gender inequalities have tended to persist in many forms, particularly in Italy and especially within its political system. Even though there have been many positive changes in recent years, the main risk for female political representation in Italy is still institutional segregation. In fact, the presence of women is significantly concentrated in peripheral institutions and lower positions in male-dominated hierarchies. Formal changes (i.e. numbers) have tended to be more significant than substantial ones. The relation between the two and the territorial distribution of female social participation will be the principal focus of our analysis.

Territorial diversity (economic, cultural, political), is one of the main characteristics of the Italian system, strongly affecting systems of gender relations as well. Therefore, through a longitudinal analysis of the presence of women in representative bodies, this study aims to investigate how differences in context can affect women's capacity for agency¹ (Sen 1985, 1999).

The article consists of two parts. In the first part, the theoretical debate and the sub-national contexts are discussed by comparing central and peripheral institutions, along with the gendered partition of political representation through institutional segregation. The second part presents the results of in-depth analysis of the trends in female participation in Italian municipalities over more than thirty years, relating it both to territorial differences and to the introduction (or lack) of tools to promote gender balance.

Presence and gender disparity

The current literature on female political participation tends to emphasize the constant divergence between the growing presence of women in political institutions and the absence of substantial change within those institutions. In fact, political institutions are unaware of gender issues and significantly characterized by disparity (Childs and Krook 2009; Towns 2003). As we have observed elsewhere (Carbone and Farina 2019), the number of elected women in Italy, particularly in recent years, has been highly concentrated in local rather than central institutions. However, following the last two general elections (in 2013 and 2018), the number of women legislators has increased: women now account for over one-third of the membership of the Italian parliament. This apparently contradictory circumstance can be partly explained as the knock-on effect of the measures in support of gender equality (Senato 2018) introduced to local institutions² since the beginning of the 1990 s. Another explanation for this odd circumstance could be that these gender-oriented measures, adopted over 30 years ago, have finally become intrinsic to political practice, reaching a point where gender balance is considered to be a fundamental requirement for good political practice.

In fact, the lack of gender balance has become an issue only recently, and women in political institutions tend generally to be considered as a 'novelty'.³ While their presence in politics (as well as other fields) is welcome, the risk of confining women to the role of eternal newcomers is real. They are mainly perceived as owing their positions to fate or

the assistance of some male politician, thus relieving the political system of its responsibilities for eliminating gender exclusion and marginalization.

It is on this issue that this article focuses, assuming the gender perspective to be a necessary key for interpreting directions of change and for going beyond the mere demographic composition of institutions to uncover the roots of the chauvinist exercise of power that explains much of the imbalance in political representation. Nonetheless, numbers remain the starting point for picturing and measuring the incidence of and trends in participation.

In this regard, as already mentioned, the first relevant aspect is the concentration of female political representation at a local level, with representation having only recently grown in institutions at the national level. These facts are a necessary starting point for grasping the mechanisms of management and control of political power. Parties continue to play the role of ‘major distributors’ of masculinity (Lovenduski 2005), continuing in the role of undisturbed protagonists of the history of the ‘doing and undoing’ gender process (West and Zimmerman 1987) within political arenas (Bellé 2010).

Longitudinal analysis makes it possible to understand how gender boundaries have been variously built at the different levels and spaces of institutional policies, highlighting both the changes and the factors of resistance. In fact, the main instruments of political promotion adopted – such as quotas and gender norms – have had great importance in changing the formal rules with which the game of the numerical and demographic composition of political participation is played. Nonetheless, resistance to a rebalancing of political participation continues to support sexist visions and models. Paradoxically, this has enabled a numerical increase of women but not an increase in their actual political weight, considering the power acquired by women and the balanced diffusion of their representation, in terms of positions, roles, areas of competence and institutional levels.

In this regard, the Italian case is compelling. With a particularly unequal and structurally misogynistic political system (Farina and Carbone 2016) as compared to the systems of other European countries, it fully reflects the paradox represented by growing female political participation on the one hand and the fragility of the roots of gender equality in the wider cultural system on the other. The participation of Italian women in civil society is still unequal: in the workplace, as in politics, but also in the private sphere – the latter having been affected by direct attacks on health, family and reproductive rights.⁴ The structural disparity in terms of starting-points exposes Italy, more than other countries, to the risk of an emerging ‘transnational authoritarianism’ (Beinart 2019), the common denominator of which is, precisely, hostility towards women.

A virtually dialectical conflict, with unequal weapons, is underway; the ‘crusade’ is called by the heart of the institutions (Garbagnoli and Prearo 2017), the same institutions that have long adopted principles and practices of equal opportunities. These principles have been transversely assumed, reaching beyond even the party-ideological boundaries, in the secularization of those instances that were originally feminist. Still, they have not grazed the fundamentals of the persistent *gender-resistant* political and cultural agenda.

The current Italian situation, like that of other neo-liberal systems (Fraser 2013), is very complex, and male-oriented political participation must be factored in when analysing it: gender disparity is subsumed and functional to participation itself. Thus,

critical mass and critical action continue to diverge, supporting the disjunction between gender and politics above all.

In this regard, local authorities represent an excellent context for observing what has characterized female political participation in recent decades. Women have made their presence felt more strongly in local than in national political institutions. The effect of 'bringing politics close to home' indicates, in countries like Italy, a broader representation of women in intermediate institutional levels, but does not contribute equally to a feminist (Ortbals, Rinckery, and Montoyaz 2011) or more generally feminine activism. The occupation of public space is a democratic activity, which does not necessarily undermine inequality or even question it (Therborn 2013).⁵ Opportunities and impediments coexist, together revealing the limited impact of women in the political system, though the impediments are typically more significant than the opportunities.

The increased opportunities to become candidates and be elected continue to coexist along with the difficulties of reaching top positions (such as the presidency of a regional council) or those positions for which appointment is necessary, especially in the crucial and most prestigious sectors (such as finance and transport) (Perini 2019). As the electoral data show, the passage from candidacy to election and/or appointment reveals the presence of a gender bottleneck in which dominant co-opting mechanisms reflect the power and effectiveness of male co-optative *homosociality*. It is interesting that the so-called 'success rate', given by the ratio between the number of candidates and the number of candidates elected, tends to be lower among female candidates and that the gender gap in this regard gets larger as one moves from the peripheral to the central-level institutions.⁶

As far as municipalities are concerned, recently approved measures have brought about better success rates for women. At the regional level, the situation has been more varied. In fact, the implementation of Law 20/2016⁷ has been anything but uniform.⁸ This law requires regions to modify their statutes by introducing measures aimed at ensuring a greater presence of women among the members of their councils. Changing the rules is important, but it is also necessary for these rules to become means for achieving greater gender equality. Otherwise, they may serve a merely instrumental purpose for parties (De Feo and Piccio 2019), functioning as little more than 'useful complements' of other measures as a result of which women come to take on the role of raising the level of public support for the party concerned, without becoming protagonists of real empowerment within political structures and agencies. Therefore, politics *close to home* is not a virtuous setting *tout-court*, but rather a mirror of the contradictions and imbalances running through the political system as a whole: territorial differences, second only to gender, continue to be among the most significant elements of inequality.

Gender disparities in elections, have to do not only with the absence of measures aimed at achieving greater equality, but are significantly linked to other variables, such as levels of participation locally, especially in the work environment.

According to Formengo and Guadagnini (1999), in contexts where the division of labour is less heavily influenced by gender, the participation of women in politics tends to rise. Conversely, in contexts with a rigid gender division of labour, female political participation is more limited (Drew 2000; Stevens 2007). Renate Siebert (1991) argues that in contexts where processes of social modernization have succeeded in undercutting the traditional division of labour between men and women, there are greater

opportunities for female participation in the public sphere. However, where thanks to cultural and economic constraints social modernization has not yet undermined the traditional attribution of sex roles to any significant degree, women tend mainly to remain confined to the private sphere. According to this perspective, in southern Italian regions, where a peasant cultural tradition coexists with poor industrial development, the distinction between the ‘public sphere, symbolically and materially of the male domain’, and the ‘private sphere (kingdom and prison at the same time), attributed to the female sex’, has undergone only marginal change (Siebert 2007, 161). Conversely, some contexts, unlike others, would be endowed with those cultural, political and economic conditions capable of triggering the *virtuous economic participatory circle* in which ‘women’s economic and social development is fuelling women’s ambition to improve their own political status’ (Stevens 2007, 39).

In addition, the opportunities for access and permanence in political power management groups, for women as for men, are regulated through various forms of recruitment within the political class, historically and locally consolidated. Thus, due to the structural territorial disparity characteristic of Italy, especially in the Central-Northern regions, political participation is rather ideological, and the access to an institutional office becomes even more dependent on the so-called ‘vote of belonging’ (Parisi and Pasquino 1977; Cerruto 2008). The social stratification of the political system is deeply connected to social-sexual division, which also means that most of the work-life balancing activity relies on women’s efforts, thus becoming the main obstacle in the way of reconciling participation in political activities with family life and possibly working activities as well. Reconciliation often represents one of the main obstacles to female participation in the public sphere.

In southern regions, though, participation is traditionally based on an individual’s ‘ability’ to mobilize support, by representing the various interests in her/his territory of reference (Costabile 2007). This is, therefore, a rather instrumentally oriented type of political participation, where the ‘vote trade system’ regulates access to office and to the different resources in the territory. The prestige of the southern political class, in fact, derives from the fact that it consists of *notables*, which results in greater social closure both in terms of class and gender.

For all these reasons, the analysis of female political participation in Italy requires taking into account the macroeconomic, political and cultural gaps in the various geographical areas and, above all, the gender differences that overlap across these gaps.

Behind the numbers: territorial differences in women’s representation

The main goal when analysing the distribution of women elected to Italian municipalities is to point out the characteristics of territorial differences in relation to female political participation. As mentioned before, municipalities are the institutions with the most well-established female presence. As of 31 December 2017, there were 40,058 women holding a local elected office, that is, 31.7% of the total, according to the data of the Registry of Local and Regional Administrators of the Ministry of the Interior.

Municipalities are, therefore, a privileged observation point for considering female political participation. This is so for several reasons, related to the higher incidence of elected women and the higher concentration of political activism, but also because of the

closer relationship between the population and the electorate, as widely shown in the literature (Fulton et al. 2006; Fox and Lawless 2011). Formal political representation and its differences in distribution across geographical areas of the country are the main objects of this analysis.

Following a diachronic approach, the attempt is to understand if and to what extent the differences between the various areas of the country have changed over time, and also if political events and/or regulatory changes that have occurred in recent history have left a trace, or played a significant role, in the trend in women's political representation.

From the data available from the Registry Office of elected representatives,⁹ it is possible to identify four distinct phases. A first phase runs from the second half of the 1980 s to the early 1990 s, corresponding therefore to the political crisis of the First Republic. In this period, the gender composition of local representatives is substantially stable, the percentage of women among municipal councillors being significantly low, between 6.7% in 1986 and 8.5% in 1992 (see Figure 1).

The next phase, between 1993 and the end of the 1990 s, is characterized by a significant increase in the proportion of women in local political offices. In this phase, the percentage of female administrators went from 10.2% in 1993 to 17.1% in 1999, reaching its highest value in 1995 at 17.5%. This numerical upturn must be interpreted in the light of a significant change in the political but above all in the regulatory context.

In fact, the early 1990 s was a period of profound transition for the Italian political party system, which, following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, underwent an 'identity crisis' triggered by a general delegitimisation of the Italian political class, as a result of the Tangentopoli scandal.¹⁰ What became definitively evident through this investigation was the closure of the Italian political system, corrupted and unreadable in its social reproduction. The legitimacy of the main political parties was seriously undermined, bringing them dramatic losses of support. The Italian electorate demanded important signs of renewal. As highlighted by Siebert (2001), it is at this time that Italian women began to occupy new spaces, offering an important opportunity for renewal to the political system by playing the role of newcomers, with no continuity with the recent past.

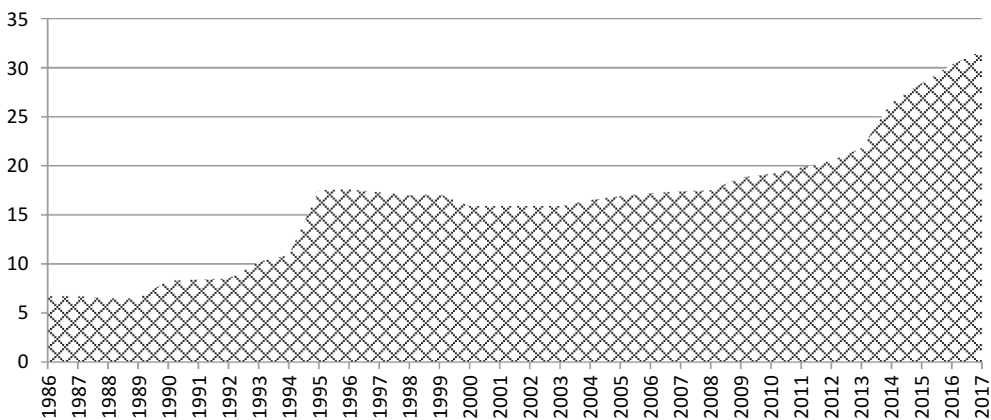


Figure 1. Women as a proportion of municipal councillors in Italy 1986–2017.

Source: our calculations based on data from the Ministry of the Interior.

Historical contingencies are important, but changes in the regulatory framework are just as relevant. From this point of view, the turning point is represented by two new laws promoting equal opportunities between men and women. The first is law no.125 of 10 April 1991, which establishes that the statutes of municipalities and provinces must ensure equal opportunities by regulating and promoting the presence of both genders in the councils and collegiate bodies of municipal and provincial institutions. The second is law no. 81 of 25 March 1993, which introduces regulations to improve gender balance in the lists fielded by parties and party coalitions in municipal elections.¹¹

Moreover, law 81/1993 providing for the direct election of mayors, established new mechanisms for selecting and presenting candidates in municipalities, thus highlighting the importance of a direct relationship with the electorate of reference for success in winning votes. Thanks to this law, parties had to surrender part of their self-referentiality in choosing their candidates, in favour of personal reliability. In this context of transformation, women were presented with new and greater chances to run as candidates and be elected (Del Re 2004).

The significant effect of Law n.81/1993 must be assessed in light of its partial abolition in 1995 by the decision of the Constitutional Court.¹² This brought a halt to the increase in the number of women in representative municipal bodies in the years that followed. In fact, in the third phase, between 2000 and 2008, the percentage of women in local administrations remained rather stable – ranging from 17.0% in 2000 and 17.5% in 2008.

Finally, in recent years a fourth phase has started, one characterized by a new increase in the presence of women in local political bodies. The percentage of women rose from 18.9% in 2009 to 26.5% in 2014 and 31.7% in 2017.¹³ Once again, this new increase was propelled by new regulations related to the introduction of gender quotas: Law 215/2012¹⁴ and Law 56/2014.¹⁵

It is important to emphasize that the introduction of new gender regulations was not just a fortuitous occurrence. Rather, it represented an important answer to the need to overcome the *impasse* due to loss of legitimacy, aggravated by the social and economic effects of the recent and still acute socio-economic crisis, as well as by the results of harsh *austerity* policies.

Therefore, the regulatory and situational context, together with the ‘political climate’, have had a significant influence on political representation in recent history, especially at the level of local authorities. The rewriting of the rules aimed at gender rebalancing and the search for new bases of support would seem to have produced a clear representative redistribution.

Starting from this general framework, in order to analyse in detail the territorial differences in women’s political representation at the local level, it was considered appropriate to compare five geographical areas of the country. This choice was made taking into account the geographical proximity of the regions on the one hand, and on the other, some relevant aspects of local socio-economic differentiation. The criterion utilized was, above all, the chances of female participation in the labour market. As shown above, in fact, the existence of a high correlation between female employment and women’s participation in political representation activity can be confirmed. Given this, regions were divided into one of five areas, based on trends in the rate of female employment (see Figure 2). A first area groups the regions of the North West (Valle d’Aosta, Piedmont, Liguria and Lombardy), with a very high female employment rate of

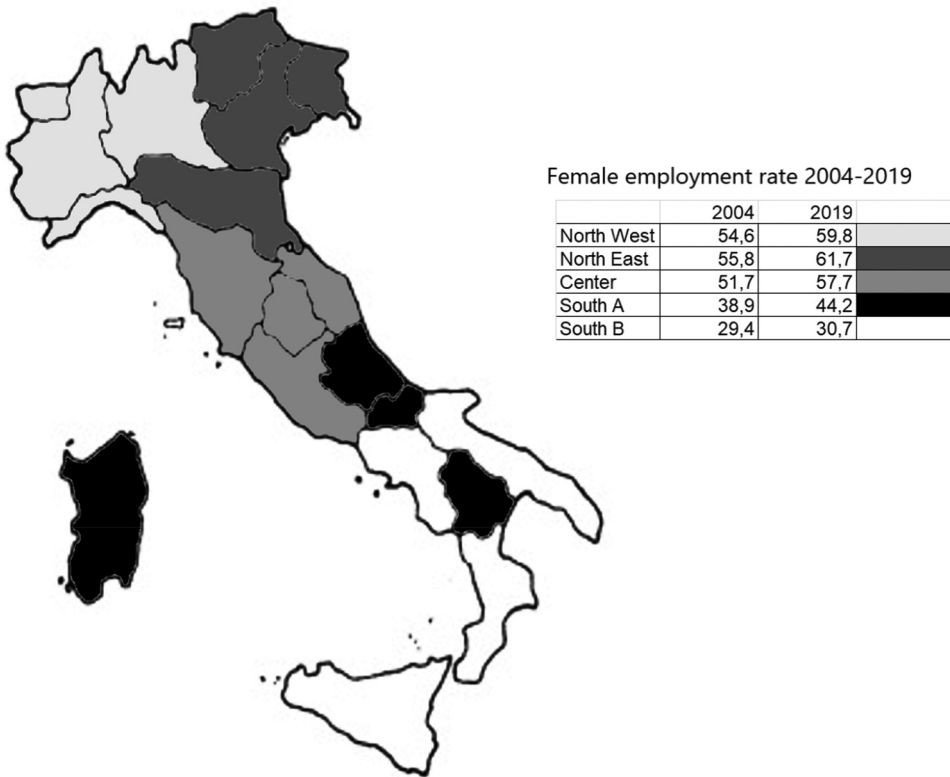


Figure 2. Trends in the female employment rate (2004–2019) by geographical area.
Source: our calculations based on data from Istat

between 54.6% and 59.8% in the last fifteen years. A second area brings together the regions of the North East (Veneto, Trentino, Emilia Romagna, Friuli). These register the highest female employment rate: between 55.8% in 2004 and 61.7% in 2019. A third area consists of the Central regions (Tuscany, Marche, Umbria, Lazio), with a female employment rate at a medium level, between 51.7% and 57.7%. Finally, Southern Italy was further divided into two sub-areas. The first includes regions with an employment rate between 38.9% in 2004 and 44.2% in 2019: Abruzzo, Molise, Basilicata and Sardinia. This group was labelled South A. The second group includes the regions with the lowest female employment rate (Campania, Puglia, Calabria and Sicily), labelled South B.

Looking at the different geographical areas of the country, grouped as mentioned above, significant differences in female political representation become evident. Considering the trend over the last thirty years (Figure 3), it can be observed, first of all, that in the Central-Northern regions the increase in the presence of women between the first and second phase took place earlier than in the rest of the country. Precisely in these areas, in fact, the percentage of women councillors began to grow as early as at the end of the 1980 s, while in the regions of the South this increment only occurred after the introduction of gender quotas, starting from 1992–1993.

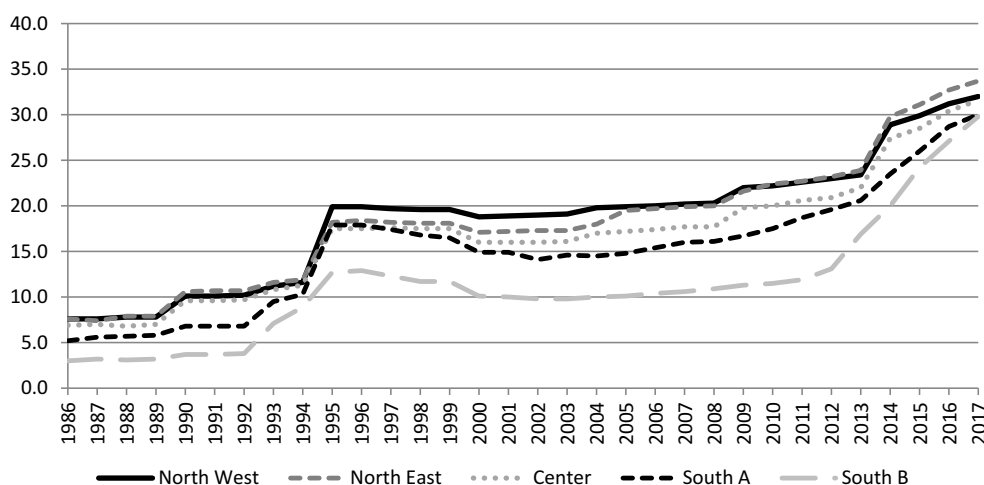


Figure 3. Percentage of female councillors at the municipal level, by year and geographical area. Source: our calculations based on data from the Ministry of the Interior.

It is also important to notice that the regulatory framework of the early 1990 s had the effect of reducing these territorial differences, as might be expected. In fact, as shown, between 1993 and 1995, when Law 81/1993 entered into force, the differences between the various areas of the country clearly reduced. With the abolition of this law, the gap between the geographical areas of the country started to increase again. This is probably because, while in the Northern regions the share of women present in local administrations remains substantially stable until the turning point in 2008, in other regions, especially those in South A, a decade starts in which the trend in female presence decreases. Between 1995 and 2007 the percentage of women administrators went from 19.9% to 20.2% in the North-West regions, and from 13.0% to 10.4% in the regions of South B.

From the mid-1990 s onwards, there is a clear distinction between the regions of South A and those of South B, which lasts for the rest of the period of time considered here. Around this time, in South A women's political representation remains stable, with values very close to those of the central regions and, consequently, clearly distant from the other southern regions.

As mentioned, the most recent phase characterized by a new increase in women elected in local administrations shows a trend similar to the previous phase of growth of female presence in the first half of the 1990 s. Even in recent years, the increase in the number of women elected in the Northern regions preceded by a few years the turn-around that took place after 2012 – which only happened after the introduction of more recent laws, especially in the regions of South B.

Hence, a trend seems to emerge: regulatory rebalancing and greater spaces for female participation, linked to times of crisis, induce effects, albeit partial, in terms of territorial differences. During the two historical moments in which the female presence increases, gaps between geographical areas tend to decrease. However, this scenario highlights that regions such as Sicily, Puglia, Calabria and Campania (area South B) still maintain significantly lower levels of female political representation,

compared not only to the regions of Northern-Central Italy but also to the rest of the South. This evidence seems to support the idea that female political participation, without the constraints imposed by any gender quota assigned by law, is strongly affected by the overall level of involvement of women in public activities, including any job-related activity.

When shifting the focus from the simple numerical presence to the different ways of accessing the most important political positions, the picture just described reveals more precise and defined contours. Considering the trend of the quota of women appointed to the most important position at the local level (i.e. mayor), the data show a clear and increasing territorial divergence during the period analysed (Figure 4).

In 1986, the percentage of women out of the total number of mayors was 3.6% in the North-West, 2.5% in the North-East, 2.4% in the Centre, 1.7% in South A and 0.6% in South B. In 2017, the percentage of female mayors was 16.8%, 17.3%, 13.6%, 13.0% and 6.4%, respectively. The scenario that has emerged since the mid-1990 s, when the legislation providing for the direct election of mayors came into effect, seems to describe a three-speed trend. Firstly, the Northern regions show a steadier and stronger increase in the number of women holding the most important political role at the municipal level, compared to other regions. In the Central and South A regions, after a phase of stagnation between the mid-1990 s and the early 2000 s, the number of female mayors is increasing once again and has settled on very similar values in recent years. As for the remaining Southern regions, however, the quota of female mayors remained almost stable until the end of the first decade of the 2000 s, and has undergone only a limited increase in recent years.

As previously mentioned, the direct election of mayors from the 1990 s represented a crucial turning point in the development and reproduction of the political class at the local level. This provision has strongly contributed to the so-called *personalization* of politics, in which access to governmental positions, at a local level but not exclusively, is increasingly linked to one's personal ability to mobilize

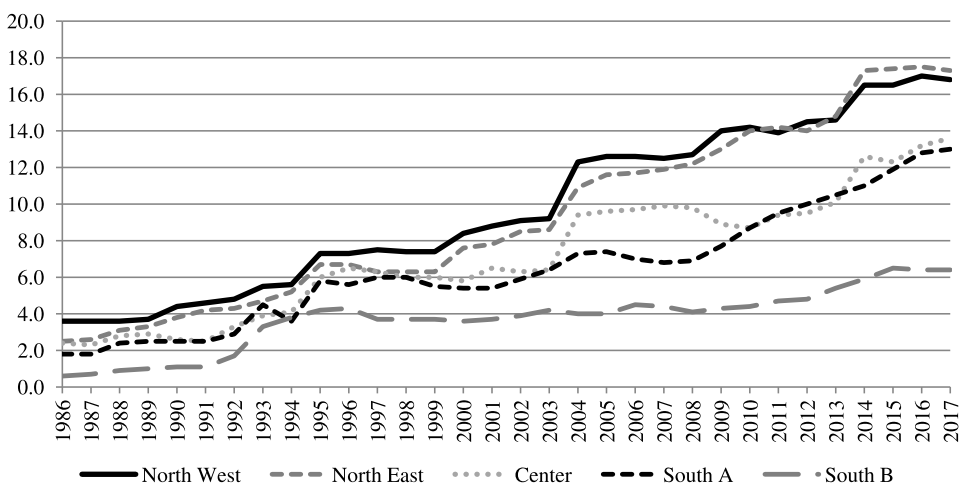


Figure 4. Percentage of female mayors in Italian municipalities, by year and geographical area. Source: our calculations based on data from the Ministry of the Interior.

support. Obviously, this presumes the possibility of gaining access to a public role capable of promoting social visibility and the expression of individual skills. Such change seems to have penalized, once again, the women of the southern regions, who have to face double constraints in this process. These are, on the one hand, the lower chances of accessing jobs, especially those of greater prestige and social recognition; on the other hand, the specific requirements for mobilizing political support in these regions, which is tightly linked to ‘parental, patronage, mafia’ affinity (Fantozzi and De Luca 2010) and therefore pertains more typically to male power management roles.

Conclusion

In light of the analysis of the historical trend of women’s political representation at the local level, the evolution of the female presence in Italian municipalities shows a tendency towards territorial differentiation. On the one hand, there has been a general increase in the number of women in legislative councils, affecting the whole of the country, especially in recent years. On the other hand, this increase has taken place at different rates, depending on the geographical area. Most importantly, though, this upward trend has only corresponded to a significant increase in the chances of accessing the position of mayor in the Northern regions. Therefore, the overall scenario that seems to emerge is that of female representation differentiated into three main areas. The first area includes the North-West and North-East regions, where the formal presence in both the municipal and government councils shows a clear growth compared to the past. Today, in these regions, about one in three municipal council members is a woman and about one in six municipal councils are led by a woman. The second area includes the Central regions and those of South A, where the presence of women in municipal councils is just slightly lower than that of the Northern areas, although only one in ten municipalities is headed by a female mayor. Finally, the South B area shows a clear gap from the rest of the country. In these regions, the recent regulatory reforms relating to gender quotas have had, as in the past, the sole effect of partially rebalancing the female presence in municipal councils. In fact, with regard to the role of mayor, the gap between South B and the rest of the country is still evident, along with the persistent obstacles preventing women from becoming an integral part of the local political class. As a matter of fact, in these regions, only one in about twenty municipalities is headed by a woman mayor.

Therefore, it is clear that the political representation of women has inevitably been conditioned by the events that have accompanied the political history of Italy over the last thirty years. Those events, marked by important legislative reforms, have also significantly affected the numerical presence of women in elective assemblies at all levels.

Women’s political representation, in the observed period of time, has mainly been supported by changes in the regulatory framework. These changes occurred in coincidence with the aforementioned period passages, through the implementation of European and international provisions (Vincenti 2005), truly necessary but not quite sufficient. In fact, despite supporting changes and an actual increase in the participation of women, these

provisions ended up showing the limitations intrinsic to these changes. As the results show, the conventional territorial discontinuity based on the distinction between the North and the South of the country is not quite adequate to explain the gender disparity in political representation. Within the South, important differences emerge, but the inequalities that directly affect female social participation are distinctly evident. In fact, the analysis highlights a notably profound and direct connection between how the public role is played, and female political participation (Drew 2000; Stevens 2007), which in the Italian case tends to be quantitatively and qualitatively more significant in those regions where the employment rate is higher. Therefore, female political representation must be considered as related to gender roles in all spheres of social life. Looking at participation itself, it is also possible to observe the differences by gender and area. The intersection between gender and region gives a better account of the meaning of agency.

Hence, female agency must be considered as supported by a plurality of factors, which together explain the concrete and accessible opportunities. As the analysis shows, the set of opportunities for political participation are strictly linked to the local context. Rules and norms are fundamental for allowing access to the political system, but ultimately equal participation depends on political will. Altogether, the norms introduced brought about a formal change in the distribution of political representation, without actually undermining the substantive power and structure.

The implementation of policies of equal opportunities resulted in the establishment of pre-accomplished and pre-assumed equality, although stiffened in what seems to be a 'State feminism' (Donà 2007). This, in turn, ended up promoting a formally equal institutional action, within a cultural context in which gender is a mere additional factor, in cases where it cannot be culturally removed or fought. The recent appearance in the public debate of an anti-gender motion, sometimes called 'ideology', other times 'gender theory' (Garbagnoli 2014), measures the extent of a rampant, albeit democratic, Italian sexism (Campani 2010; Simone 2012), which does not compromise the space of gender discrimination in the first place, but rather quite the opposite.

The issue of numerical equality as the main focus of the rebalancing systems, through gender quotas, has revealed just how these systems could foster more composite participation from a gender point of view, but not necessarily oriented to or inspired by it. The gender issue is complex, and it involves a plurality of factors, which all support a culture of equality in the first place. Norms are tools, which must be animated and given substance to. This is indeed the main difference observed among local realities: the 'ability' to provide substance to those norms, to incorporate them into practice. The relevance and limitation of these norms are evident since they both promote gender equality and prevent its concrete realization.

While norms are in place to support the rebalancing of gender political representation, a culture convinced that women are less willing to take part in the public sphere is much harder to affect. Such culture is even deeply rooted in administrative procedures aimed at safeguarding the respect of prescriptions. The unavailability of women, as long as it is effectively proven – although there is no clear indication on the evidence to be shown for this – represents a strong motivation for evading regulatory precepts. Establishing rules is necessary, but they need fertile and receptive soil in which to flourish and grow strong roots.

The ambivalence of the measures and provisions is the reason for the weak establishment of female representation, and for all the persistent obstacles not only to reaching the critical mass but also to transforming it into a gender-oriented critical action.

Notes

1. We consider formal political representation to be an indicator of female agency. Though a significant part of the concept of agency, formal political representation does not of course cover all of it.
2. The 2018 general election was the first in Italy to be held on the basis of an electoral law providing for gender quotas.
3. Again in 2018, a woman held the post of president of the Senate for the first time.
4. The penultimate government proposed measures involving direct attacks on acquired rights in the fields of reproduction, family roles, etc. See, for instance, <http://www.ingenere.it/articoli/la-famiglia-secondo-il-nuovo-governo>.
5. As Therborn (2013) states, perfect equality is not a necessary condition for the existence of democracy.
6. See the 2018 IRPSS report, in particular the analyses related to success rates at regional elections between 2000 and 2015, and at municipal elections between 2009 and 2016.
7. Regarding provisions aimed at ensuring balance in the representation between women and men in regional councils, see GU n. 46 of 25/2/2016.
8. In fact, some regions (Basilicata, Calabria, Liguria, Molise and Piedmont) have not yet introduced any measures aimed at ensuring gender balance, while others have introduced a range of measures. The success rate of female candidates is higher where voters can cast at least two preference votes (IRPPS 2018).
9. The database can be viewed at the following address: <http://amministratori.interno.it/AmmIndex6.htm>.
10. This arose from the Mani Pulite ('Clean Hands') judicial investigations beginning in 1992 that uncovered a deep-seated and widespread system of corruption involving all the main parties of government.
11. Neither gender can be represented by more than three quarters of the candidates making up lists fielded for elections in municipalities of up to 15,000 inhabitants. In municipalities of more than 15,000, neither gender may be represented by more than two thirds of the candidates.
12. Ruling 422/1995 <https://www.cortecostituzionale.it/actionSchedaPronuncia.do?anno=1995&numero=422>. The ruling of unconstitutionality concerned only the provisions for gender balance, not those providing for the direct election of mayors.
13. This could be considered as running counter to the trend of underrepresentation of women in the political system as a whole. The point is the gap between the numbers of the female representatives and their uneven distribution among the regions, due to the unequal implementation of the regulations and the differences in the social, cultural and working conditions in the local contexts.
14. The law promotes the rebalancing of gender representation in municipal and regional councils.
15. Known as the Del Rio Law after the name of its principal sponsor. This law establishes that in municipalities of over 3,000 inhabitants, neither gender can be represented by less than 40% of the councillors.

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