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Women in Politics: Why So Few and What to Do About It

Inequality in political empowerment between men and women is higher than the one observed in the economic sphere. According to the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2018), the world has closed only 23% of the gender gap in politics. In Europe, women represent 30% of politicians in legislative bodies and 29.5% in government cabinets (EIGE, 2018). In the European Parliament, women are in 2019 40%, the highest share ever, but still short of parity.

What is the source of this inequality? Why do we care about eliminating it? Are there effective policies to promote female political empowerment and reduce gender gaps in the political arena? In this contribution, I will give an overview of recent research addressing the above questions and the challenges ahead.

Why is There Gender Inequality in Political Representation?

Female under-representation in politics may result from different obstacles in a multi-step ladder process of political recruitment. First, women may not be willing to or may not be interested in competing for political seats, for instance due to time constraints associated with child care duties (e.g., Schlozman et al., 1994), lack of self-confidence or external encouragement (Fox and Lawless, 2004) or lower returns on the political market (Julio and Tavares, 2017). Second, parties, in their role of gatekeepers, may not choose women as candidates (e.g., Kunovich and Paxton, 2005). Third, voters may be biased against female candidates and not cast votes for them (e.g., Schwindt-Bayer et al., 2010; Black and Erickson, 2003).

Why Reduce Gender Inequality in Politics?

Irrespective of the relative importance of these explanations, it is important to discuss the reasons why achieving higher female political empowerment should rank high in the policy agenda. To start with, the promotion of female participation in politics is justified on the grounds of equity considerations (Stevens, 2007), since women represent 50% of the overall voting population. Moreover, female politicians appear less corrupt and show higher cooperation and team working skills (Epstein et al., 2005; Brollo and Troiano, 2016). Female participation in politics may also create role models for other women, who may decide to pursue a political career (Gilardi, 2015). In addition, a gender-balanced political body may impact public policy and the allocation of resources across different programs. Several recent studies have investigated the relationship between female political leadership and policy decisions. To appropriately test this relationship requires an institutional setting in which the gender balance of policy makers is exogenously determined, in order to avoid interpreting different policy choices or institutional environments as being caused by the gender of policy makers, when it is actually the other way around.

Exploiting random allocation of women-reserved seats, Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) find that female leaders in India allocate more resources to investments that are more relevant to their own gender, suggesting that descriptive representation involves also substantial representation. Again in India, Clots-Figueras (2011) finds that the gender of politicians impacts on policy decisions, with social position mediating the effect. Brollo and Troiano (2016) show that, in Brazil, cities run by female mayors have bet-

ter health indicators, receive more federal transfers and are less prone to corruption in public tenders. Baskaran and Hessami (2018) show that in Bavarian municipalities a higher share of female council members has a causal positive impact on the availability of childcare. Exploiting direct democracy in Switzerland, Funk and Gathmann (2015) show that in Swiss referenda women support the allocation of resources to health, environmental protection, defense and welfare. In a recent paper, Casarico et al. (2019) find that in Italian municipalities over the period 2000-2015, female mayors collect more revenues and spend more than male ones. When constrained to fiscal adjustments by the central government, female mayors reduce expenditures more than men.

In contrast to these contributions, which testify to the importance of gender in policy choices, Ferreira and Gyourko (2014) find that female mayors in US cities have no impact on municipal spending, employment and crime rates. Bagues and Campa (2017) find that the gender of Spanish municipal councilors does not bring about more expenditure on issues women care about the most. Gagliarducci and Paserman (2012) find that in Italian female-headed municipalities, the probability of early termination is higher with respect to male-headed ones. They do not find significant effects, though, on budget deficits, revenues and investments.

It is worth pointing out that in trying to assess the impact of the rising presence of female politicians, economists have generally focused directly on policy outcomes, as measured, for instance, by government spending levels or allocations. However, as pointed out by Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson (2014) change in policy outcomes is a particularly high bar for representation because “politics is about compromise, so that no group gets what it wants all the time” (page 5).

What Policies are Effective in Empowering Women?

If there are reasons to support stronger female political empowerment, what policy tools have proved effective in delivering this goal? Gender quotas are a widespread policy tool to strengthen female political representation. The way they are implemented differs across countries. Some countries legislated quotas in candidate lists; others have voluntary quotas at party level. When legislated quotas are present, they are often set at different levels, generally between a third and a half of the list.

Gender quotas are a much debated policy tool. The main objection to the use of this instrument is that it does not

obey to meritocracy, thus less qualified individuals who will perform poorly are elected and a loss of efficiency (Holzer and Neumark, 2000) can be expected. The effects of gender quotas on female empowerment are mixed. They have proved effective in raising female representation in local politics in Italy, for instance De Paola et al. (2010, 2014); they have been less successful in Spain (Bagues and Esteve-Volart, 2012; Bagues and Campa, 2017; Casas-Arce and Saiz, 2015). Besides the question on whether women gain more seats thanks to affirmative action policies, it is important to assess their impact on the quality of politicians. Running counter the expectation that quotas worsen the pool of elected politicians, Baltrunaite et al. (2014) show that the quality of elected politicians improved in Italian municipalities, which voted with gender quotas on candidate list. A similar result is shown in Besley et al. (2017) for Sweden.

While gender quotas act directly on party behaviour, the underrepresentation of women may result also from voters' choices. Baltrunaite et al. (2019) analyse a policy bundle introduced in Italy in 2012: gender quotas on candidate lists *and* double preference voting conditioned on gender, whereby voters can express two preferences rather than one, provided that votes are cast for candidates of different gender. The law targets all Italian municipalities with more than 5,000 residents, and we use this threshold to understand whether municipalities just below or above it behave differently in terms of share of women being elected to the municipal council. We first estimate that the policy leads to an 18 percentage point increase in the share of elected female politicians. To investigate the mechanisms behind the working of the policy, we hand-collect new data on candidate lists and preference votes, and find that the latter play an important role in promoting female political empowerment. We also analyse voters' behaviour in casting preference votes in higher level elections to study the potential presence of spill-over effects of the policy. We find some evidence of more preference votes cast for women in regional elections, where no affirmative action measures are in place. This suggests that even soft policy measures, such as double preference voting, may have effects beyond their direct target.

Conclusions

There is still ample room to reduce gender inequality in political participation. Reducing or closing the gap would deliver important economic and societal benefits and should be high in the policy agenda of all countries, especially those which are further away from gender equality. There are effective policies to favour female political em-

powerment and they do not come to the detriment of the quality of representatives. Involving voters in “delivering the change” can be a successful strategy.

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