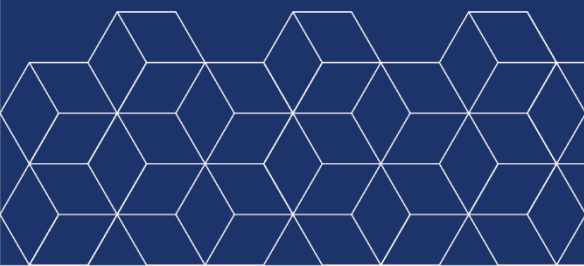# WORKING PAPER

The effects of Law no. 56/2014 on gender composition in Italian Municipal Councils

Valentina Ferri
Alina Grieco

INAPP
ISTITUTO NAZIONALE PER L'ANALISI
DELLE POLITICHE PUBBLICHE

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Valentina Ferri
Istituto nazionale per l'analisi delle politiche pubbliche (INAPP), Roma
v.ferri@inapp.org

Alina Grieco
Istituto Italiano di Valutazione, Milano
alina.grieco@valutare.org

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CONTENTS: 1. Introduction. – 2. Gender quotas: a brief literature review. – 3. Data and evaluation design. – 4. Empirical analysis. – 5. Conclusions. – References

ABSTRACT

The effects of Law no. 56/2014
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This paper aims to analyze the impact of Law no. 56/2014 on the presence of women in Municipal Giuntas. Law no. 56/2014 was introduced in Italy in order to enhance female political representation in Municipal Councils and it applies to all Municipalities with more than 3,000 inhabitants. We basically questioned whether the increase in the number of women in the political arena is an effect attributable to the gender balance constraint imposed by the new law. The analysis is based on data available from the Ministry of the Interior and refers to 2014-2015 administrative elections.
Results show that the gender balance constraint introduced by Law no. 56/2014 led to an increase in female presence within Municipal Giuntas. At national level it is estimated an average increase varying from 13.5 to 15.7 depending on the approach adopted (OLS regression and Regression Discontinuity Design). The effect driven by the enforcing of the law is positive and significant in two out of the three macro-areas investigated.

1.   Introduction

Law no. 56/2014 was introduced in Italy in order to enhance female political representation in Municipal Councils. It applies to all Municipalities with more than 3,000 inhabitants and defines a minimum gender balance within the Municipal Giunta, which is the local City Council composed by the Major and the Town Councillors appointed by the Major. Since law no. 56 entered into force, women (or men, as well) must count for not less than 40% of the total number of Councillors in the Municipal Giunta, including the Major.

Law no. 56/2014 was enacted with the purpose take another step further along the path toward gender equality, after the step marked by Law no. 215/2015, which had stated – for all Municipalities with more than 5,000 inhabitants – that each sex must be represented for at least 1/3 of the total number of candidates on the electoral list[1].

Passed in 2014, Law no. 56/2014 – the so-called Del Rio Law after the name of the proponent Ministry of the Government in charge – was applied for the first time during the elections held in 2014 and 2015.

This work aims to investigate the impact of Law no. 56/2014 on the presence of women in Municipal Giuntas. We basically questioned whether the increase in the number of women in the political arena is an effect attributable to the gender balance constraint imposed by the new law. The analysis is based on data available from the Ministry of the Interior and refers to 2014-2015 administrative elections.

Since the law only applies to Municipalities with a resident population over 3,000 inhabitants, it introduced a cut-off in the institutional framework depending on the demographic size of Italian Municipalities. Therefore, we could identify the treatment as the implementation of the law. We then exploited the discontinuity at the threshold of 3,000 inhabitants and applied a Regression Discontinuity Design to compare the electoral outcomes (i.e. the quota of women elected in Municipal Councils) between the Municipalities placed just above and those placed just below the threshold (i.e. exposed and not exposed to treatment).

The paper is structured as follows: the first paragraph is the introductory part, section 2 reviews the literature on gender quotas' effects; section 3 describes the evaluation design; section 4 shows some descriptive statistics and the results of the analysis; section 5 comes to conclusion.

The results show that the female presence within Municipal Giuntas increased on average by 15.7 percentage points due to the application of the law (OLS regression); non-parametric estimations vary from 13.5 to 15.7 depending on the polynomial order. The effect is significant among Municipalities in Central and Northern Italy, respectively quantified at 20.7 and 17.1 percentage points with OLS regression estimation; non-parametric estimation reveals a higher impact within Central Municipalities (ranging from 14.4 to 26.1 percentage points) and a weaker impact in the North (from 12.8 to 14.7 percentage points). No significant effect is found within the Southern Municipalities.

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[1] Law no. 215/2012 also introduced the so-called "double gender preference" which allows voters to express their preferences for two candidates to City Councils, on condition that they are of different sex.

2.   Gender quotas: a brief literature review

One of the most popular tools for promoting women's political participation is the system of quota, specifically gender quota, which sets incentives to increase the representation of a specific group, specifically women (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005; Legnante *et al.* 2013). Quota are in force in more than 100 countries all over the world to regulate the balance in the national, regional or local political forums, by defining a minimum threshold for the proportion between male and female candidates or elected representatives (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2008)[2].

The mechanism of gender quota is a controversial topic. In favor of the use of quota stand those who point out that women have right to be politically and equally represented with respect to men. The idea is that quota can balance the barriers that women encounter in accessing political arena and therefore contribute to get an equal gender representation (Pande 2003; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Chen 2009). On the other hand, quota give a comparative advantage to a group – specifically, women – compared to the others. In this way quota play as a kind of incentive that, as such, 'drugs' the market, which is, in this case, the political market (i.e. the political arena at each level: national, regional or local). From this perspective, the introduction of quota shifts the optimal equilibrium of the market and allows a distorting effect which could reduce the quality of politicians by favoring (female) candidates with less political experience then other (male) candidates (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Duflo 2005); on the other hand, the presence of women can be associated, on average, with a higher level of education within the political class (Baltrunaite *et al.* 2012).

Positive effects of quota on political participation (which is related to number of female candidates running for elections) are found in Peru by Jones (1998), in Argentina by Schmidt and Saunders (2004), in the Eastern European countries by Tripp and Kang (2008), in Italy by De Paola *et al.* (2010, 2014) and in Spain by Campa (2011). According to these studies it seems that quota can represent an effective fast-track tool to enhance political participation of women in the short term[3].

The evidence about the effectiveness of quota on political representation (which is the effective presence of women among Parliamentary or Council seats) is still scarce and controversial. Positive evidence is found, for example, in the analysis by Campa (2011) and Casas-Arce and Saiz (2011) on the Spanish municipal elections in 2007 and in the aforementioned studies on municipal elections in Peru (Jones 1998) and on provincial elections in Argentina (Schmidt and Saunders 2004).

Referring to the Italian context, De Paola *et al.* (2014) focus on the first Italian experience in the implementation of gender quota in the 1990s. The analysis takes into consideration the Municipalities

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[2] See: Gender Quotas Database, available at: <https://bit.ly/3v60laL> (last accessed 1/4/2020).

[3] In literature, a distinction is made between the so-called "slow or incremental track approach" and the "fast track approach". The first, as explained by Legnante *et al.* (2013), derives from the experience of Scandinavian countries. It is characterized by a long-term perspective: the achievement of equal opportunities could be pursued through the adoption of policies aimed at promoting full integration of women in various spheres of society, from family roles to economic and political participation. In this perspective, it is considered more useful and incisive to allocate resources to strategic sectors such as education or welfare, rather than to define fixed quota which discriminate in favor of female political representatives (Legnante *et al.* 2013, 3). The second approach, on the other hand, addresses the gap between women and men in access to political representation through transitory measures such as the adoption of gender quota in order to break down some structural barriers that hinder equal opportunities in a medium / short term perspective (Legnante *et al*. 2013, 3-4).

involved in elections between 1993, when gender quota entered into force for the first time, and 1995, when they were repealed as the Constitutional Court sentenced they were unconstitutional. The study shows that the female component in the Italian City Councils increased considerably in the Municipalities involved in elections when gender quota were in force compared to the Municipalities in which elections called before 1993 without any gender balance restriction. Interestingly, even after 1995, when gender quota were not in force anymore, electoral results keep showing an increase in the percentage of women elected to City Councils, as well as a higher electoral turnout, meaning that gender quota continued to produce their effects despite the mandatory mechanism had been withdrawn.

Not only De Paola *et al.* (2014), but also Baltrunaite *et al.* (2012) examine the Italian gender quota. They find an increase both in the percentage of female candidates and in the percentage of elected women. Moreover, the number of voters' preferences expressed in favor of a female candidate increase as a consequence of the gender balance incentives.

After the 1990s experience of gender quota, in 2012 Law no. 215 set a regulatory constraint in order to promote the political representation of women in Italy. Baltrunaite *et al.* (2017) analyzed the effects of the new law, but they did not found any significant impact neither on the number of female candidates or on the order of candidates on the electoral lists. Instead, significant effects happened to be triggered on the preferences expressed by voters: the total number of expressed preferences increased by 75%, while preferences for female candidates raised by 14%[4].

Furthermore, in 2018 the National Research Council (CNR-IRPPS 2018) provides an evaluation of the impact of Italian Law no. 215/2012. The analysis is carried out by adopting two methods: *i)* a comparison between the Municipalities in which elections were called just before or just after the introduction of gender quota (according to this approach, the introduction of the quota is comparable to a natural experiment) and *ii)* a comparison between the Municipalities beyond the threshold set at 5,000 inhabitants – those exposed to the gender balance constraint – and the Municipalities located below the threshold – those un-exposed to any gender balance restriction (in this case, the so-called RDD approach was adopted and the sample was limited to the Municipalities strictly close to the threshold, i.e. between 4,500-5,550 inhabitants). With both methods the estimated impact of the law – measured by the difference in the percentage of female candidates to Councils between the two group of Municipalities – is slightly less than 6 percentage points. The same analysis was held within three geographical macro-areas (North, Centre, South and islands): the effects were found higher in the South (+11.3 percentage points) and weaker in the North (+3.5 percentage points), while in the Central area no significant impact was found. As for the effect on the quota of elected women, it is quantified in about 12 percentage points at national level; the highest impact is confirmed in the South with an increase of almost 20 percentage points, compared to +6 percentage points in the North-East, +8.6 in the North-West and +14.8 in the Centre. A further attempt to investigate the impact of Law no. 215/2012 is proposed by Ferri and Grieco (2019). Applying the RRD approach, this study comes to a higher estimation of the effects, since the quota of women elected to City Councils seem to increase

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[4] As previously mentioned, voters are permitted express their preferences for two candidates, on condition that they are of different sex.

by 16 percentage points. As already found by CNR-IRPPS (2018) the effect is mainly driven by Municipalities in Southern Italy (+24 percentage points) in comparison to those in Central Italy (+19.3 percentage points) and Northern Italy (+9.8).

Therefore, previous studies had apparently led to different evaluation of the effects of gender quota. This paper aims to shed some light on this issue and investigates more about its effectiveness in addressing gender gaps in political participation. For this purpose, we focus on the latest Italian law with gender balance provisions, which is Law no. 56/2014. We adopt an evaluation design based on RDD and carry out our analysis both at national and macro-regional level within three distinct areas, as we illustrate in the following sections.

3.   Data and evaluation design

The aim of this study is to estimate the effect of the gender balance introduced by Law no. 56/2014 on female political presence at municipal level[5].

Firstly, it has to be underlined that the estimation of the causal effect is complicated by the so-called distortion problem (Martini and Sisti 2009). Municipalities affected by the law and Municipalities which are not subject to the law may differ in some characteristics which are possibly related to a series of variables eventually capable of affecting the outcomes of interest themselves, i.e. outcomes measuring the presence of women in the political arena. As a matter of facts, gender quota are generally introduced in countries and societies which already developed some gender-sensitivity in the first place, which could in turn affect the number of female candidates and Councillors (Campa 2011).

Following Campa (2011) we find the solution by adopting the Regression Discontinuity Design. Since the new law applies only to Municipalities with a resident population over 3,000 inhabitants, an exogenous, non-manipulable variation arose in the institutional framework depending on the population size of local Municipalities.

There are reasons to believe that the group of Municipalities placed slightly below the threshold is on average very similar, in terms of initial characteristics, to the group of Municipalities just above the threshold of 3,000 inhabitants. The analysis is then carried out on a sample which only includes the Municipalities located close to the threshold[6]. This choice allows isolating the potential confounding factors that could create distortion (voter preferences, gender stereotypes, attitude towards women,

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[5] Italy counts approximately 8,100 Municipalities. Each Municipal administration is headed by a Mayor, who chairs the executive body (the so-called Municipal Giunta) and is supported by a legislative body (the Municipal Council). Municipal elections are held every five years, under different electoral rules depending on the population size. In Municipalities with a resident population up to 15,000 inhabitants (such as those in the sample of this analysis), the Mayor is elected with a single-shift system, so the winning candidate is the first candidate on the list that obtains the relative majority. The winning list gets 2/3 of the seats in the City Council, while the remaining seats are proportionally assigned to the other lists. The candidates on the electoral lists must not exceed the number of seats existing in the Council (which is between 6 and 16 depending on the number of inhabitants) and in any case must not be less than 3/4 of the total number of seats.

[6] Sicily and Sardinia are excluded from the sample since they are entitled to apply special electoral rules, different from those in force in the rest of the country.

attitude of women towards politics etc.) and therefore enables us to identify the causal effect. More precisely, the causal effect of the treatment is quantified in the difference between the average outcomes measured within the two groups of Municipalities placed just above and just beyond the threshold.

Analytically, the evaluation method relies on the following regression:

$$y_i = \alpha + D_\tau + X\,\beta + \varepsilon \tag{1}$$

where:

y_i is the outcome, namely the quota of elected women to Municipal Councils;

X is the population size of sampled Municipalities;

D is a binary variable that identifies the treatment and assumes value 1 for treated units (i.e. Municipalities above 3.000 inhabitants as they are affected by the introduction of the law) and value 0 for untreated units (i.e. Municipalities with 3.000 inhabitants or less).

The analysis is carried upon Ministerial data from the Department for Internal and Territorial Affairs; specifically, data regarding all 3,152 Municipalities with a population up to 5,000 inhabitants which run administrative elections in 2014 or 2015. The dataset includes variables relating to population size and gender political representation (men and female candidates elected to City Councils).

As previously mentioned, the analysis compares only Municipalities close to the discontinuity threshold, thus reducing the number of observations in the sample. This choice allows reducing the risk of heterogeneity due to a wide demographic variability. The authors are aware that this method lead to a strong internal validity of the estimated effects, at the expense of a limited external validity.

4.   Empirical analysis

As shown in table 1, within the group of Municipalities with 3,000 inhabitants or less 24% of Town Councillors (i.e. members of the Municipal Giunta) are women; this quota increases up to 39% among Municipalities whose population size ranges between 3,000 and 5,000 inhabitants.

Table 1.   Quota of elected women in Municipal Councils above and below the threshold of 3,000 inhabitants

	Full sample Women quota 2013-2014	North Women quota 2013-2014	Centre Women quota 2013-2014	South Women quota 2013-2014
T=0 Pop < 3.000 inhabitants	0.24	0.25	0.22	0.18
T=1 Pop 3.000 > inhabitants < 5.000	0.38	0.39	0.38	0.35

Source: Authors' elaboration on data from the Ministry of Interior (2014-2015)

In order to carry out the analysis on macro-regional sub-samples, we defined three macro-areas: Northern Italy, Central Italy and Southern Italy (comprising Southern Regions and the Islands)[7]. In Northern Italy women represent 25% of the total number of Town Councillors in Municipalities with less than 3,000 residents and 39% in the most populous ones; in Central Italy, the quota of female Councillors is 22% within the Municipalities below the threshold and 39% within those set above the threshold; finally, in the South the comparison is between a quota of 18% calculated within the Municipalities with less than 3,000 inhabitants and a quota of 35% within the larger ones.

The next step of the analysis is to investigate whether the difference in the percentage of women within Municipal Giuntas may depend on the introduction of Law no. 56/2014.

First of all, we show graphically the impact of the law. Figure 1-4 plot the discontinuity in the quota of women in Municipal Giuntas between Municipalities up to 3,000 residents and Municipalities with a population over 3,000 residents. As depicted in the graphs, a discontinuity appears across the 3,000 inhabitants threshold. Since the grey areas (which set the 95% confidence interval) never overlap across the left and right sides of the plot, we can say there is a significant discontinuity between the two groups of Municipalities.

Figure 1.   Women quota in Municipal Councils in Italian Municipalities. Regression discontinuity plot. Italian Municipalities
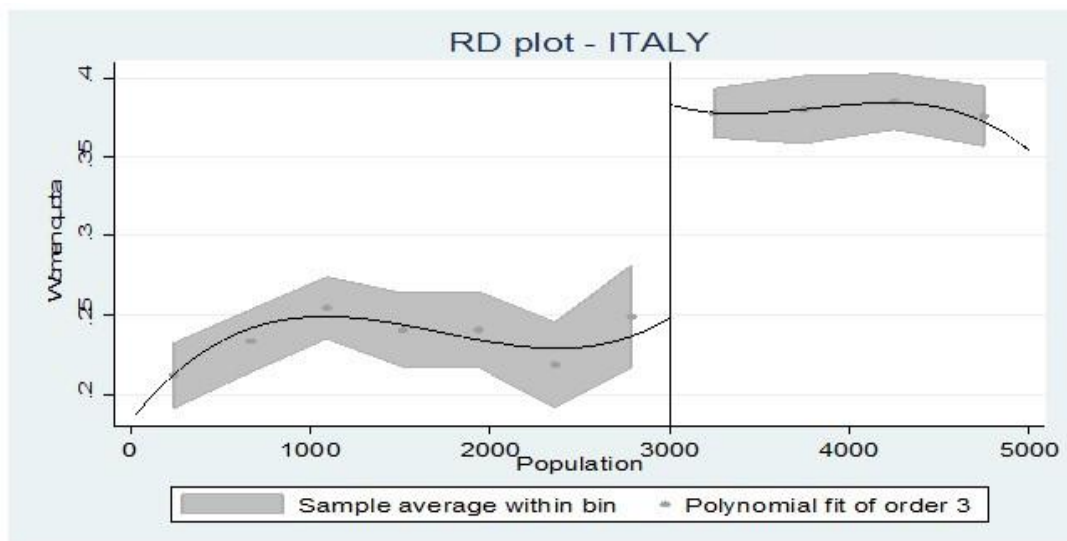
Note: observations from Valle d'Aosta, Friuli Venezia Giulia e Trentino Alto Adige excluded from the sample as they apply other electoral rules.
Source: Authors' elaboration on data from the Ministry of Interior (2014-2015)

[7] More precisely, the Northern macro-region include Municipalities in the following Italian Regions: Lombardy, Piedmont, Veneto, Liguria and Emilia-Romagna; the Central macro-region include Municipalities in the following Italian Regions: Tuscany, Marche, Umbria, Lazio and Abruzzo; the Southern macro-region include Municipalities in the following Italian Regions: Campania, Molise, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria and Sardinia. The five autonomous Regions (Aosta Valley, Trentino Alto Adige, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Sicily and Sardinia) are excluded from the sample since they are entitled to apply special electoral rules, different from those in force in the rest of the country.

Figure 2.   Women quota in Municipal Councils in Northern Municipalities. Regression discontinuity plot.
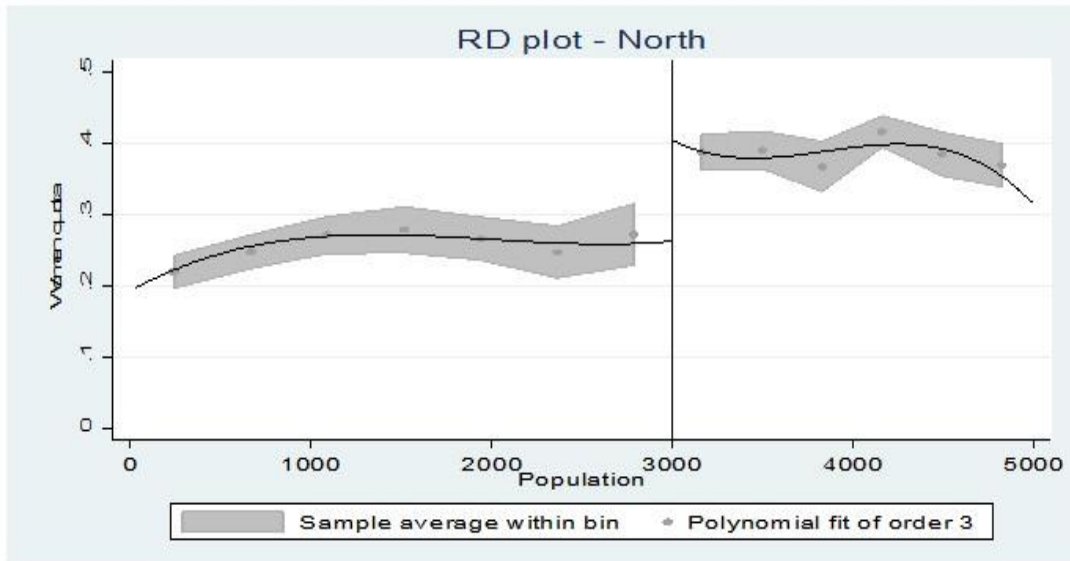

Note: observations from Valle d'Aosta, Friuli Venezia Giulia e Trentino Alto Adige excluded from the sample as they apply other electoral rules.
Source: Authors' elaboration on data from the Ministry of Interior (2014-2015)

Figure 3.   Women quota in Municipal Councils in Central Municipalities. Regression discontinuity plot.
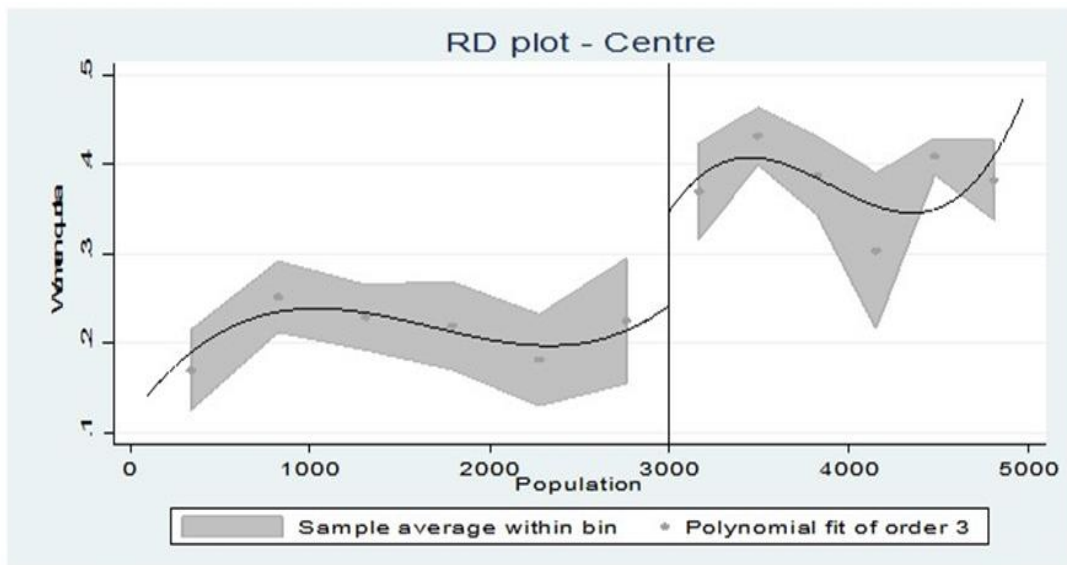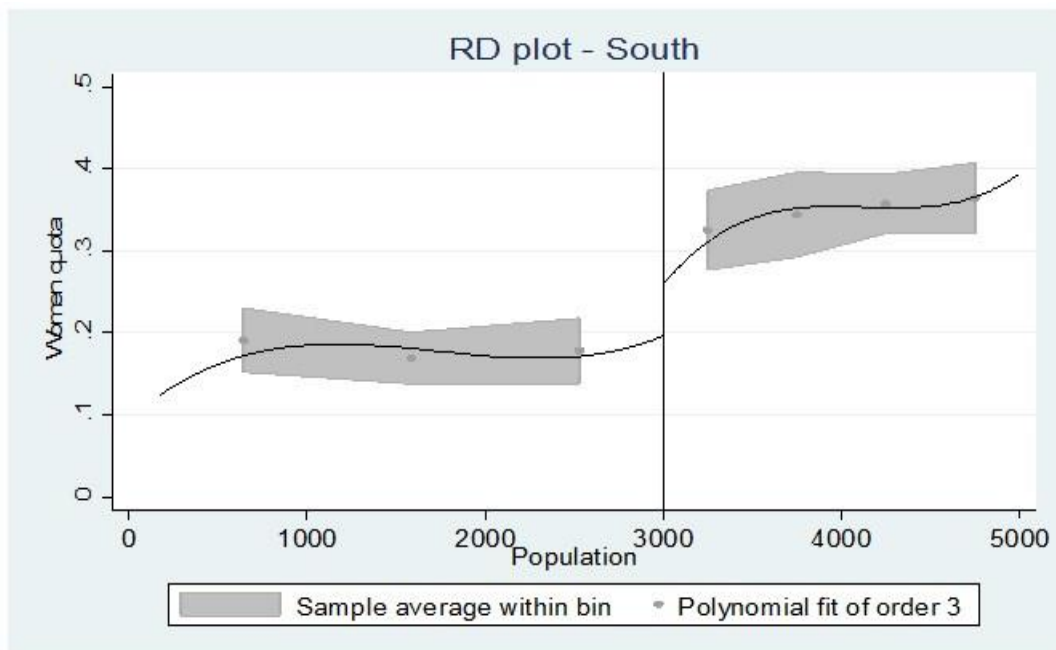

Source: Authors' elaboration on data from the Ministry of Interior (2014-2015)

Figure 4.   Women quota in Municipal Councils in Southern Municipalities. Regression discontinuity plot

Note: Sicily is excluded from the sample as it is subject to different electoral rules.
Source: Authors' elaboration on data from the Ministry of Interior (2014-2015)

In order to measure the effect of the law, we run a regression which includes the quota of female Councillors within Municipal Giuntas as dependent variable and a binary variable which identifies the treatment as explanatory variable. The treatment variable assumes value 1 for all Municipalities exposed to treatment (i.e. those with a population larger than 3,000 inhabitants) and value 0 for all Municipalities not exposed to treatment (i.e. those with 3,000 inhabitants or less).

table 2 shows the results calculated both within the entire sample and the three above mentioned macro-regional sub-samples. At national level, taking into account 3,152 Municipalities who called election in 2014-2015, the percentage of female Councillors increased by 15.7 percentage points after the introduction of Law no. 56/2014. The impact is slightly higher in the North (+17.1 percentage points), taking into account 2,082 Municipalities. In Central Italy the effect is quantified at +20.7 percentage points, over a sub-sample consisting of 645 Municipalities. The treatment is not statistically significant within the 425 Municipalities sampled in the Southern Regions and the Islands.

Table 2. Effects on the quota of elected women to Municipal Councils - OLS regression on full sample and macro-regional sub-samples

VARIABLES	Women quota ITALY	Women quota NORTH	Women quota CENTRE	Women quota SOUTH
Treatment	0.154***	0.171***	0.207***	0.0149
	(0.0320)	(0.0396)	(0.0660)	(0.0840)
Population	6.12e-06	1.72e-05**	3.80e-06	-2.19e-06
	(5.59e-06)	(6.92e-06)	(1.28e-05)	(1.45e-05)
T x Population	-6.62e-06	-2.19e-05*	-1.26e-05	4.01e-05*
	(9.50e-06)	(1.19e-05)	(2.03e-05)	(2.40e-05)
Constant	0.227***	0.233***	0.211***	0.181***
	(0.00846)	(0.00998)	(0.0196)	(0.0254)
Observations	3,152	2,082	645	425
R-squared	0.074	0.065	0.095	0.131

Note: robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.
Source: Authors' elaboration on data from the Ministry of Interior (2014-2015)

We now repeat the analysis by adopting a non-parametric approach instead of OLS regression (table 3). This approach allows us to investigate the effect of the law, taking into account only the Municipalities strictly close to the cut-off, i.e. 653 Municipalities below 3,000 inhabitants and 303 Municipalities with more than 3,000 residents. The effect of the law on the quota of female Councillors is confirmed to be positive and highly significant. It is quantified at 13.5 percentage points when a 1st polynomial order regression is adopted, while it increases respectively up to 13.9 and 15.7 percentage points in case of a 2nd or a 3rd polynomial order regression.

Table 3. Effects on the quota of women in Municipal Councils - Regression with non parametric approach. Full sample

VARIABLES	(1) Women quota ITALY Spline (1)	(2) Women quota ITALY Spline (2)	(3) Women quota ITALY Spline (3)
Conventional	0.135***	0.139***	0.157***
	(0.0258)	(0.0350)	(0.0487)
Bias-corrected	0.131***	0.138***	0.166***
	(0.0258)	(0.0350)	(0.0487)
Robust	0.131***	0.138***	0.166***
	(0.0311)	(0.0400)	(0.0546)
Observations	3,152	3,152	3,152
Number of obs (left)	2519	2519	2519
Number of obs (right)	633	633	633
Eff Number of obs (left)	653	1019	894
Eff Number of obs (right)	303	275	282

Note: robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Columns (1), (2) and (3) fit a 1st, 2nd and 3rd order polynomial in gender quota on both sides of the threshold.
Source: Authors' elaboration on data from the Ministry of Interior (2014-2015)

Exploring the differences among the three macro-regions (table 4), we observe that the law affects positively and significantly women political participation in the North and in the Centre of Italy. Taking into account 408 Northern Municipalities on the left of the cut-off and 192 on the right and running a 1st polynomial order regression, we quantify an increase in the quota of female Town Councillors by 13 percentage points, attributable to the introduction of Law no. 56/2014. Adopting a 2nd and 3rd order polynomial regression, the estimated treatment effect is respectively 12,8 and 14.7 percentage points. Moving the view to Central Municipalities (119 below and 40 above the 3,000 inhabitants threshold), we observe that the quota of female Councillors increases by 14.4, 18.3 or 26.1 percentage points, depending on the polynomial order of the regression.

Table 4.   Effects on the quota of elected women in Municipal Councils - Regression with non parametric approach. Macro-regional samples

	Spline (1)	Spline (2)	Spline (3)
	NORTH	**NORTH**	**NORTH**
Conventional	0.130***	0.128***	0.147**
	(0.0328)	(0.0428)	(0.0625)
Bias-corrected	0.130***	0.121***	0.153**
	(0.0328)	(0.0428)	(0.0625)
Robust	0.130***	0.121**	0.153**
	(0.0398)	(0.0493)	(0.0711)
Observations	2,082	2,082	2,082
Number of obs (left)	1656	1656	1656
Number of obs (right)	426	426	426
Eff Number of obs (left)	408	593	569
Eff Number of obs (right)	192	237	195
	CENTRE	**CENTRE**	**CENTRE**
Conventional	0.144**	0.183***	0.261***
	(0.0570)	(0.0682)	(0.0869)
Bias-corrected	0.143**	0.197***	0.282***
	(0.0570)	(0.0682)	(0.0869)
Robust	0.143**	0.197**	0.282***
	(0.0662)	(0.0788)	(0.0952)
Observations	645	645	645
Number of obs (left)	526	526	526
Number of obs (right)	119	119	119
Eff Number of obs (left)	119	166	177
Eff Number of obs (right)	40	33	53
	SOUTH	**SOUTH**	**SOUTH**
Conventional	0.0437	-0.0290	-0.0599
	(0.0845)	(0.116)	(0.120)
Bias-corrected	0.0126	-0.0569	-0.0908
	(0.0845)	(0.116)	(0.120)
Robust	0.0126	-0.0569	-0.0908
	(0.0992)	(0.131)	(0.132)
Observations	425	425	425
Number of obs (left)	337	337	337
Number of obs (right)	88	88	88
Eff Number of obs (left)	82	86	184
Eff Number of obs (right)	30	32	49

Note: standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.
Source: Authors' elaboration on data from the Ministry of Interior (2014-2015)

With regard to the South of Italy, the parametric approach allows confirming that no significant effect is attributable to the law, despite the descriptive analysis (table 1) had shown that the average quota of female Councillors is higher (+17 percentage points) within the Municipalities ranging from 3,000 to 5,000 inhabitants in comparison to the smaller ones which count 3,000 inhabitants at most. Apparently, the increase in female presence among Southern Councillors is not attributable to the new law.

5.   Conclusions

In recent decades, electoral incentives such as gender quota have been widely used in many countries around the world, in an attempt to enhance the presence of women in local, regional or national political arenas. Several studies have estimated the effects of gender quota on voters' turnout, expressed preferences, female candidates on electoral lists or elected women in legislative and government bodies.

This work focuses on the effects of Italian Law no. 56 which entered into force in 2014 and applied to Municipal administrations with a resident population of more than 3,000 inhabitants. The analysis is based on a Regression Discontinuity Design, whose identification strategy allows distinguishing between Municipalities with a population of 3,000 inhabitants or less and Municipalities with a larger population, from 3,000 to 5,000 inhabitants. The evaluation design consists in a comparison between Municipalities placed around the discontinuity threshold (3,000 inhabitants) in order to identify a causal effect. The idea is the following: assuming that we are able to check for any possible confounding factors, we can quantify the effect triggered by the law in the difference between the outcome of interest measured within the Municipalities exposed to treatment – i.e. those located just above the threshold – and the outcome resulting within the untreated Municipalities – i.e. those located just below the threshold.

Results show that the gender balance constraint introduced by Law no. 56/2014 led to an increase in female presence within Municipal Giuntas. At national level it is estimated an average increase varying from 13.5 to 15.7 depending on the statistic approach adopted (OLS regression, i.e. linear approach, or 1st, 2nd or 3rd polynomial order regression, i.e. non-parametric approach).

The effect driven by the enforcing of the law is positive and significant in two out of the three macro-areas investigated. OLS regression results measure similar effects in Central and Northern Italy (20.7 vs. 17.1 percentage points). When it comes to non-parametric approach, the effect seems to be mainly driven by Municipalities in Central Italy, where the quota of female Councillors increased by at most 26,1 percentage points (3rd polynomial order regression estimation), in comparison to 14,7 percentage points quantified among the Northern Municipalities. Both with OLS and non-parametric approached, no significant impact is estimated in the South, which is the area with the weakest female representation's rate in the first place (before the approval of the law).

On the whole, Law no. 56/2014 seems to be effective in promoting female presence within the Municipal Councils. Nevertheless is should be pointed out that the norm has enhanced gender balance in Northern and Central Italy, where sensitivity to gender issue was higher in the first place. Further studies should deepen the analysis with regard to Southern Municipalities, which – starting from the worst performance in gender electoral balance – experienced the highest discontinuity rate across the

3,000-inabitants threshold, tough this gap seems not to be attributable to Law no. 56/2014. We suggest to further explore this issue and consider the impact of previous Law no. 215/2012, which developed its effects particularly in the Southern area (Ferri and Grieco 2019). Therefore, it could have presumably driven some cultural changes with more effectiveness than in the other areas of the country, thus reducing the potential effect of Law no. 56 among Southern Municipalities.

Overall, this study aimed at giving a contribution to the debate on the effectiveness of legislative and regulatory tools to promote women's representation. Since these tools lead to positive outcomes in term of electoral participation, presumably similar tools could be helpful in order to enhance women' participation in other fields (economic participation, social participation, primary, secondary and University education, STEM education, etc.). We definitely hope this study could serve as an invitation – for researcher, sectoral experts and policy makers – to further examine this issue and evaluate the opportunity for other incentives, tools or reforms to be adopted with the common goal of tackling gender barriers and providing concrete support for equal opportunities.

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