

Does Gender Influence Migrant Reception? Evidence from Italy

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Abstract

This study examines whether the presence of women in local government influences attitudes toward migrant reception. Using data from the European Social Survey, I document that women view migration as more economically threatening than men, though they are more supportive of welcoming refugees. To identify causal effects, I exploit the exogenous variation in female representation created by Italy's 2012 gender quota law (Law 215/2012), which required municipal candidate lists to include at least one-third women in municipalities over 5,000 residents. Using a difference-in-difference and an instrumental variables approach, I show that a one standard deviation increase in women's council representation increases the probability of bidding for refugee centers by 77%. This suggests that despite women's greater concern about migration's economic impact, their preference for supporting vulnerable populations dominates in policy decisions.

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1 Introduction

As of September 2021, women constitutes only 21% of government ministries and 25% of national parliamentarians. At the local government level, 36% of elected members are women, with notable differences among countries (UN Women).

One of the main reasons of concern for this numbers, apart from desirability of parity in terms of equal representation, is that women tend to show more pro-social preferences and tend to favor policies that target the most fragile categories of the population (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Funk et al., 2015).

At the same time, in the past decade, Europe has seen the rise of populist movements, characterized by the promotion of conservative values and a stark anti-immigration sentiment. In around half a dozen of European countries, women are the head of anti-immigrant populist political parties (Italy, France, Germany, Norway, Denmark).

The aim of this study is to shed some light on these two opposite phenomena and investigate whether the presence of women in governing bodies induces a more favorable or a harsher attitude towards immigrants.

On the one hand, migrants, and especially refugees, are one of the most fragile categories in the population of a country, but on the other they could also represent a threat to national identity. If the first sentiment was to prevail, we could expect women to be more inclined to help immigrants with respect to men. In politics this would be reflected in a more welcoming disposition and the consequent promotion of policies aimed at improving immigrants living conditions and their integration in the society. However, using data from the European Social Survey, I will show that women tend to see migration as a threat more than men do, and the literature shows that women tend to be more inclined toward defense spending (Koch & Fulton, 2011). As a result, the impact of women in government on migrants reception is ambiguous.

I will investigate this issue in the context of allocation of refugee centers across municipalities

in Italy between 2002 and 2017. This setting offers multiple advantages: first, the allocation of migrants and refugees is generally decided at the central government level of every country, forcing researchers to rely on cross-country comparisons. In this case, municipalities can bid for the opening of a refugee center, which would bring a significant influx of public funds. Second, the electoral rules for municipal councils have been changed in 2012 in Italy, with the new law introducing the necessity of respecting gender quotas to present list of candidates to the municipal council, thus inducing an exogenous variation in the proportion of women in governing bodies. I provide more details in Section 2.

In this context, I find a positive effect of the share of women in the municipal council on the probability of bidding for the opening of a refugee center on the municipal territory.

This research aims at contributing to two different strands of literature.

First, the literature on the effect of gender quotas, and the impact of women in governing bodies on policy platforms pursued and public expenditure. Apart from Chattopadhyay & Duflo (2004), documenting that women in Indian Village Council provide public goods that are more close to the need of their own gender, the initial literature on this topic has found mixed evidence on whether women presence has an effect on public spending (Baltrunaite et al., 2019; Bagues & Campa, 2021; Ferreira & Gyourko, 2014). More recently, Hessami & Baskaran (2019) find evidence that women in local government lead to an expansion in the number of childcare spots available, and suggest that more than total of public spending or big macro-areas, the allocation of funds to specific initiatives could provide insight of the effectiveness of women as policy-makers. The allocation of refugee centers would represent an initiative specific enough to allow us to detect some effects. Moreover, refugee and migrant reception is a controversial policy, and our study could contribute to a recent branch of the literature exploring the behavior of women in period of crisis (Bruce et al., 2022).

Second, the paper wants to contribute to the big and fast-growing literature on the attitudes towards migrants and refugees and the impact on voting behavior (Tabellini, 2019; Dustmann et al., 2018), and the political response to the refugee crisis and the change in population

composition (Gamalerio, 2017). To the best of my knowledge, the aspect of gender is not explored in this literature, despite the fact that women might have in principle very different attitudes towards migrants and migration with respect to men. I start by documenting this evidence using data from the European Social Survey.

Attitudes towards migration in the ESS data: Table 1 explores the difference in means between female and male responses to the questions investigating attitudes towards migrants in the seventh round of the European Social Survey (2014). Even though more recent rounds are available, this one was focused on migration and asked a wide range of questions that are not available in the most recent rounds.¹

Interestingly, we can notice that the opinion of men and women significantly differs in a good number of outcomes.

Women seem to indeed favor poorer migrants and refugees, which are more likely to be in a fragile condition. Moreover, women tend to give less importance to some characteristics of migrants like being white, having the work skills needed in the country or good educational qualifications. However, surprisingly and partially in contrast with this, women are strongly more likely to believe that immigration is bad for the country's economy. Finally, women tend to be against allowing Muslims in the country.

In what follows I focus on refugees, due to data availability. Consistent with women favoring refugees, I find an increase of 77% in the probability of opening a refugee reception center due to an increase in one standard deviation in the presence of women in the municipal council. In the future, I hope to find information regarding reception structure or inclusive policies targeted at economic migrants in order to verify whether the positive effect persists

¹The countries participating in this round are: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom. Notice that the project is focused on Italy which is not in this list, I used the questions available in the other rounds in which Italy took part to partially replicate this table. The results are presented in Table A1. Since the number of observation for Italy is limited in every round, I used data from all the rounds in which the questions were asked and controlled for round fixed effect.

Table 1: Attitudes towards migrants - European countries

Variable	(1) Males	(2) Females	(3) Diff.
Allow many/few immigrants of same race/ethnic group as majority	2.897 (0.854)	2.892 (0.854)	0.010 (0.009)
Allow many/few immigrants of different race/ethnic group from majority	2.571 (0.884)	2.554 (0.891)	0.008 (0.009)
Allow many/few immigrants from poorer countries outside Europe	2.376 (0.924)	2.375 (0.933)	0.038*** (0.010)
Allow many/few immigrants from poorer countries in Europe	2.549 (0.900)	2.535 (0.903)	0.016* (0.010)
Allow many or few Jewish people to come and live in country	2.814 (0.921)	2.791 (0.935)	-0.001 (0.010)
Allow many or few Muslims to come and live in country	2.336 (0.981)	2.266 (0.982)	-0.031*** (0.010)
Allow many or few Gypsies to come and live in country	2.134 (0.989)	2.085 (0.980)	-0.010 (0.010)
Immigration bad or good for country's economy	5.085 (2.481)	4.809 (2.367)	-0.247*** (0.027)
Country's cultural life undermined or enriched by immigrants	5.592 (2.513)	5.631 (2.462)	0.083*** (0.027)
Immigrants make country worse or better place to live	5.076 (2.279)	5.006 (2.254)	-0.040 (0.025)
Immigrants take jobs away in country or create new jobs	4.861 (2.345)	4.763 (2.307)	-0.073*** (0.025)
Qualification for immigration: good educational qualifications	6.348 (2.597)	6.214 (2.683)	-0.191*** (0.030)
Qualification for immigration: speak country's official language	6.574 (2.884)	6.613 (2.965)	-0.057* (0.031)
Qualification for immigration: Christian background	3.405 (3.245)	3.553 (3.277)	0.009 (0.032)
Qualification for immigration: be white	2.335 (2.934)	2.335 (2.959)	-0.155*** (0.029)
Qualification for immigration: work skills needed in country	6.711 (2.691)	6.516 (2.786)	-0.320*** (0.030)
Qualification for immigration: committed to way of life in country	7.363 (2.493)	7.358 (2.490)	-0.043 (0.027)
Government should be generous judging applications for refugee status	3.103 (1.119)	3.161 (1.103)	0.067*** (0.012)
Observations	18,893	21,292	40,185

Note: The table reports the difference in mean between the average answer of men and women to the question reported in the Variable column. All regressions control for country fixed effect, age, years of education, whether the respondent was foreign-born, income decile, and their positioning on the left-right political scale. All questions are categorized so that a higher number means more favorable towards migration. In particular, the first 7 questions are categorized on a scale from 1 (Allow none) to 4 (Allow many), question 8 - 10 are on a scale from 1 (bad) to 10 (good), the qualification for immigration (11 - 16) questions are categorized on a scale from 0 (unimportant) to 10 (important). The question on refugee status goes from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Standard errors in parenthesis. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

even when we consider a type of migration that women seem to be less favorable towards than men.

2 Italian Context

At the beginning of 2012 Italy counted 8,092 municipalities. Each municipality administration decides over the allocation and level of expenditures devoted to the provision of some local public goods, like education, administration, usually environment and social services. Municipalities are headed by a mayor, who is assisted by a legislative body - the municipal council (Consiglio Comunale), and an executive body - the executive committee (Giunta Comunale).

Municipal elections take place every five years and municipal governments cannot affect their schedule. Electoral rules in Italy change according to the size of the municipality, following the previous literature (Baltrunaite et al., 2019; Andreoli et al., 2022) here I focus on municipalities with less than 15,000 residents in order to have a sample of municipalities subject to homogeneous rules in terms of electoral process and composition of the municipal council.² In these municipalities, the mayor is elected according to a single-ballot system, each candidate is supported by one list only and the list supporting the winner gets 2/3 of the municipal council seats, while the rest is attributed according to a proportionality rule. Law 215/2012 was introduced in 2012 to address the problem of scarce representation of women in municipal councils. It was applied starting from elections held in 2013 to all those municipalities with more than 5,000 residents and it introduced two main novelties in the electoral rules: first, neither gender can represent more than 2/3 of the candidates of a list presented for the local council; second, if voters want to express a preference for candidates to the local council within the list they vote for, either they express only one preference or

²For the same reason, I remove from the sample, 5 autonomous regions that are granted additional flexibility in establishing their electoral rules (Valle d'Aosta, Province Autonome di Trento e Bolzano, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Sicilia, Sardegna)

if they want to express two, they must choose two candidates of different gender. The introduction of this policy caused an exogenous increase in the number of women in municipal councils (Baltrunaite et al., 2019). The members of the executive committee in municipalities below 15,000 residents are appointed among the councilors.

The allocation of migrants is usually controlled by the central government and the municipal councils have no say in the matter. However, this is not the case for the allocation of SPRAR centers, which represent the second level of reception for refugees. Namely, SPRAR centers are structures that host refugees and asylum seekers, providing services aimed at their integration like help in learning Italian and finding a job.

When the Italian Ministry of Interior wants to allocate refugees through SPRARs, it issues a tender. Municipalities can decide whether to participate and in the tender and submit a proposal to open a SPRAR center. The Ministry of Interior evaluates the bids and creates a ranking, winning municipalities can open the center and are granted funds for it, according to the details of their bid. These grants are of a significant amount for the municipality: the average per capita SPRAR grant is equal to 26% of the total per capita grants. Also, the average per capita SPRAR grant is equal to 8% of the total per capita budget available to municipalities (Gamalerio, 2017).

3 Data

Municipal Council Composition: From the website of the Ministry of Interior, I collected information on the composition of municipal council for every municipality between 2002 and 2016. The dataset contains yearly information on the name of councilors, their role (mayor, councilor, member of the executive council), their gender, education level and previous job, together with information regarding the list they were presented in, and their election date (which is going to be the same for the whole council). In addition, from the same dataset I include the municipal census population.

SPRAR: The data on the bidding for SPRAR centers are from Gamalerio (2017), The dataset contains information on the municipalities that bid for opening a SPRAR, those that won the bid, and the amount of SPRAR grants received, between 2002 and 2016.

As a result, I obtain a dataset of 6,047 municipalities. For every year in which a tender was available I know whether the municipality bid for the opening of a refugee center, the composition of the municipal council and its election year.

4 Empirical Strategy

The aim of this study is to identify the effects of the presence of women in municipal councils on the opening of reception structures for refugees. To do so, we need to exploit a source of exogenous variation in the number of women sitting in municipal councils. Indeed, municipalities who have a strong presence of women in their councils might differ in many ways from those who don't, for examples, the constituency of such municipalities could be particularly supportive of pro-social policies which would lead to a higher probability of electing women as well as a strong support for the opening of a SPRAR center irrespective of the gender of the elected politicians.

To isolate the effect of women in municipal councils, I exploit the introduction of Law 215/2012. As I mentioned above, the law forced list of candidates for municipal councils to be composed of women for at least $1/3$, for all the elections starting in 2013, for municipalities above 5,000 residents. Thus, inducing an exogenous variation in the number of women in municipal councils, with respect to the elections held before 2012. Using a regression discontinuity strategy, Baltrunaite et al. (2019) show that the introduction of this law lead to an 18% increase in the share of elected female politicians. At the same time, Andreoli et al. (2022), using a difference-in-difference strategy find an increase in the share of female councilors of 13.9 percentage points.

Following Andreoli et al. (2022), I will estimate the effect of the policy on the share of seat in

municipal councils allocated to women, and then use this estimate as an instrument for the presence of women in municipal councils, in order to proceed to the effect of the municipal composition on the bidding for the opening of SPRAR centers.

First stage: I am exploiting a difference-in-differences design, in which the observations receiving the treatment are all the municipalities that have more than 5,000 (and less than 15,000) residents in 2012. I estimate the following equation:

$$W_{ite} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 T_i + \alpha_2 P_e + \alpha_3 T_i \times P_e + \varepsilon_{ite} \quad (1)$$

Where, W_{ite} is either the proportion of women in municipal council or in municipal executive committee i , year t , elected in year e . T_i takes value one when the municipality i is above 5,000 residents, and thus affected by the policy. P_e is a dummy variable taking value one when the election year e is after 2012. The coefficient of interest is going to be α_3 which corresponds to the interaction between the two terms. Subsequent specifications include municipality (θ_i) and year (θ_t) fixed effects, and election year fixed effect (θ_e).

This strategy is based on the parallel trends assumption: in the absence of the law, the number of women in municipal councils of cities below and above 5,000 residents would have followed the same trend.

Second Stage: From equation (1) above, I predict the exogenous share of women in councils and in executive committees, I then use this predicted value in the following equation:

$$Y_{ite} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \hat{W}_{ite} + \theta_i + \theta_t + \varepsilon_{ite} \quad (2)$$

Y_{ite} is our outcome of interest, taking value one if the municipality i , bid for the opening of a SPRAR in year t , after election year e . In a second specification, I am also adding θ_e , electoral year fixed effects.

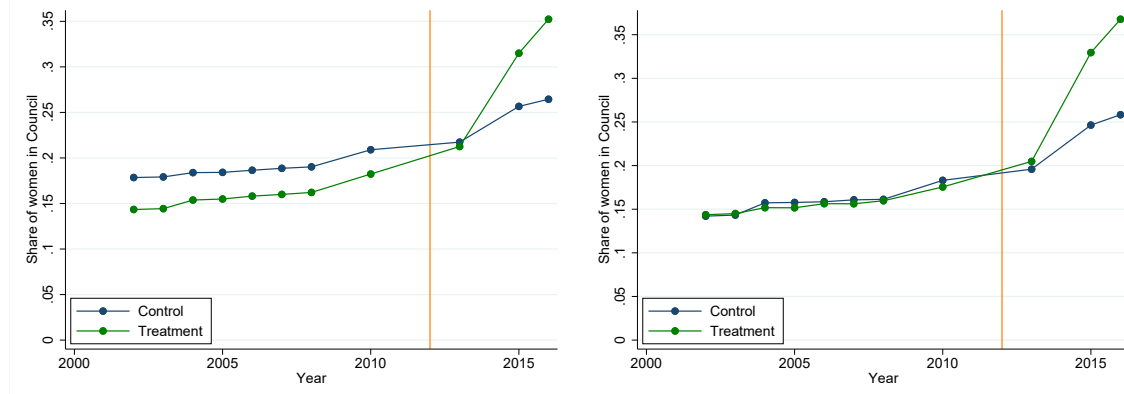
The assumptions for the instrumental variable strategy require that the introduction of the law is exogenous with respect to the SPRAR bidding decisions, which seems extremely plausible given that the introduction of the law, the election years, as well as the timing of tender openings for the SPRAR bids are not decided by the municipal councils which have no influence on those. Moreover, in order to interpret β_1 as the effect of an increase in the number of women in the municipal council (executive committee) we have to be sure that the introduction of the law is not influencing the municipal council composition in ways other than inducing a higher percentage of women. A potential threat to the exclusion restriction would be the finding in Baltrunaite et al. (2019), indicating that women elected in municipal councils tend to be more educated than the men that were elected in the past. For this reason, my next step is to replicate the analysis in (2) controlling for the level of education of the municipal council (executive committee) members.

5 Preliminary Results

I start with the discussion of the first stage. According to Table 2 (column (2)), the introduction of Law 215/2012 increases the share of women in municipal council by 13.2 percentage points. This corresponds to an increase of 65% with respect to the average number of women in municipal council. Similar effects can be found on the executive board of the council (note that in our sample, with some limited exceptions, executive members are selected among members of the municipal council), with an increase of the share of women of 12.8 percentage points (70%). The magnitude of the effects are in line with previous literature on the reform (Andreoli et al., 2022).

In Figure 1, I plot the average share of women in council (1a) and in the executive committee (1b) for the treatment and control group. The orange line is for 2012, the introduction of the law. First, we have evidence of parallel trends for the years preceding the policy. Second, we can notice that, despite a reduction in the difference in the share of female councilors already

Figure 1: Time Trends



(a) Share of women in municipal council (b) Share of women in executive committee

visible in 2013, the big jump happens in 2015 (2014 is excluded from the dataset, because of absence of information on tenders for SPRAR); the reason is that elections happen every 5 years, therefore since the law passed in 2012 and was applied from 2013 on, only those municipalities due for elections in 2013 will have a council formed under the new law in 2013 (436), while in 2015 we are observing councils elected under the new reform for those municipalities that held elections in 2013, 2014 and 2015 for a total of 4,461.

Using the estimates in column 2 and 4 of Table 2, we predict the change in the share of women elected in the council as a result of the introduction of the reform, so as to isolate the exogenous variation in the number of women. We then use it as an instrument in equation 2 to look at the effect of the female share in council on the probability of bidding for a SPRAR. Going from a council with 0 women to 100% women increases the probability of bidding for a SPRAR by 16 percentage points, corresponding to a 57% increase. In other words, increasing the proportion of women by one standard deviation induces an increase of 0.12 standard deviations, or 77% in the probability of bidding. Similarly, a one standard deviation increase in the share of women in the executive committee increases the probability of participating in the bid for a refugee center by 0.18 standard deviations.

Table 2: First Stage

	Share of women in council			Share of women in executive		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treat $\times$ Post	0.130*** (0.004)	0.132*** (0.004)	0.132*** (0.004)	0.124*** (0.006)	0.128*** (0.006)	0.129*** (0.006)
N	64,878	64,878	64,878	64,867	64,867	64,867
R ²	0.128	0.607	0.609	0.076	0.510	0.512
Year FE	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Municipality FE	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Election FE	N	N	Y	N	N	Y
Mean Dep.	0.202	0.202	0.202	0.182	0.182	0.182
SD Dep.	0.121	0.121	0.121	0.182	0.182	0.182

Note: Standard errors in parenthesis. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table 3: Second Stage

	Dependent variable: SPRAR Bid					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Share _C (Pred.)	0.616*** (0.036)	0.160*** (0.048)	0.147** (0.058)			
Share _E (Pred.)				0.573*** (0.031)	0.154*** (0.045)	0.151** (0.060)
N	64,878	64,878	64,878	64,878	64,878	64,878
R ²	0.017	0.281	0.282	0.020	0.281	0.282
Year FE	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Municipality FE	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Election FE	N	N	Y	N	N	Y
Mean Dep.	0.025	0.025	0.025	0.025	0.025	0.025
SD Dep.	0.155	0.155	0.155	0.155	0.155	0.155

6 Conclusion and Next Steps

We can conclude that a stronger presence of women in the municipal governing bodies improve attitudes towards migrant receptions. Unfortunately, we cannot be sure that women favoring refugees rather than economic migrants is the only characteristic driving this result. In order to explore this further I would like to repeat my analysis with a different outcome which is related to economic migrant, in this way I could distinguish whether women are simply more likely to have better attitudes toward migration or exploit the economic opportunity offered by the tender, rather than putting forward their preference towards refugees over economic migrants.

Moreover, to make sure that the isolated effect is the result of the gender composition of the council, rather than the education level or the political composition, I need to check whether the results are robust to the inclusion of these variable.

As a preliminary analysis, I showed that the presence of women influence attitudes towards refugees, for future research I hope to be able to explore more how this interact with the rising of populism and the always more prominent role that women seem to play in parties funding their political platform in anti-immigration sentiment.

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A Additional Tables and Figures

Table A1: Attitudes towards migrants - European countries

Variable	(1) Men	(2) Women	(3) Coeff.
Allow many/few immigrants of same race/ethnic group as majority	2.774 (1.034)	2.749 (1.044)	-0.008 (0.026)
Allow many/few immigrants of different race/ethnic group from majority	2.555 (1.045)	2.544 (1.067)	0.024 (0.027)
Allow many/few immigrants from poorer countries outside Europe	2.536 (0.945)	2.509 (0.907)	-0.008 (0.025)
Immigration bad or good for country's economy	4.768 (2.755)	4.588 (2.546)	-0.142** (0.071)
Country's cultural life undermined or enriched by immigrants	4.792 (2.774)	4.848 (2.688)	0.096 (0.073)
Immigrants make country worse or better place to live	4.006 (2.449)	3.997 (2.383)	0.069 (0.065)
Observations	4,346	4,721	9,067

Note: The table reports the difference in mean between the average answer of men and women to the question reported in the Variable column. All regressions control for round fixed effect, age, years of education, whether the respondent was foreign-born, income decile, and their positioning on the left-right political scale. All questions are categorized so that a higher number means more favorable towards migration. In particular, the first 3 questions are categorized on a scale from 1 (Allow none) to 4 (Allow many), question 4 - 6 are on a scale from 1 (bad) to 10 (good). Standard errors in parenthesis. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.