Gender Gaps in Political Careers: Evidence from Competitive Elections

Davide Cipullo ◇ Job market Paper
Department of Economics ◇ Uppsala University
www.davidecipullo.com ◇ davide.cipullo@nek.uu.se

1. Research design

- This paper exploits two-stage elections to estimate the impact of voters on the representation of women in the political profession, holding (self- or party-appointed) selection of candidates constant. I provide evidence based on two different settings: primary and general elections for the US House of Representatives and runoff elections of mayors in Italy. The research design exploits the fact that in both systems, politicians who barely make it to the final round and those who just miss the qualification threshold are arguably comparable in observed and unobserved characteristics.

- I estimate

\[ Y_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 F_i \times \text{Qualified}_{i,t} + \beta_2 \text{Qualified}_{i,t} + \beta_3 F_i + f(F_i; h_{i,t}) + \delta_t + \epsilon_{i,t} \]

where the running variable \( f(F_i; h_{i,t}) \) is a flexible function of the qualification margin \( h_{i,t} \) and allowed to vary across genders and on either side of the qualification threshold and \( \delta_t \) is a set of election-year dummies. The coefficient of interest is \( \beta_1 \), which measures the differential effect of qualification for female candidates in comparison with the effect for their male colleagues.

2. Gender differences in the probability of winning the election

Female candidates who barely qualify to the general election for the US House of Representatives are 7 p.p. (20 percent) less likely elected than male who barely qualify. Similarly, female candidates who barely qualify to the second round of a runoff election in Italy are 9 p.p. (40 percent) less likely elected than male candidates who barely qualify.

3. Future political careers

Qualification to the general election increases the probability of winning a seat in the US House in the future more for men than for women. The effect widens up a career gender gap for up to the third downstream election. Similar results estimated in Italian municipalities.

4. Mechanisms and implications

- Marginal qualification of a female candidate also reduces turnout by 1 percentage point compared to qualification of a male candidate.
- Barely qualified female candidates receive 25 percent lower media coverage than barely qualified male candidates.
- Gender differences in the probability of being elected cannot be explained by differences in observable characteristics (Party, experience, incumbency, age, education, occupation).
- Barely qualified candidates of different gender comparable in the amount of resources collected and spent during the campaign and equally likely to receive endorsements of excluded candidates.
- Gender gaps in the probability of being elected driven by inexperienced candidates and stronger in areas of the country in which women are less represented in politics and less integrated in the local labour market.
- Consistent with the sticky floor hypothesis, the results of this paper suggest that women are less likely than men to reach the top because they face early challenges in their careers.