

[Baltrunaite, A., Casarico, A., Profeta, P., Savio, G. \(2019\). Let the voters choose women, *Journal of Public Economics*, Elsevier, vol. 180\(C\).](#)

The long-standing question of the under-representation of women in politics and in particular on equal access between women and men in the electoral race in the Italian context has received renewed regulatory attention in recent legislatures. Since the early 2000s, the issue of equality in access to elective offices at different levels of government has been the subject of a reasoned process of gender equalization in electoral mechanisms aimed at promoting an equal representation of the two genders in the electoral system.

The first innovation that gave impetus to this series of interventions was the modification of article 51 of the Italian Constitution in 2003 in which the principle of gender equality was strengthened. This was followed by a series of subsequent measures with the aim of making this principle enforceable, in particular centered on the introduction of the quota system, but also other positive measures such as electoral rules that regulate the composition of the lists in terms of candidates' positions or gender alternation up to double preferences conditioned on gender. In particular, the latter instrument implies that two preferences can be expressed, one of which is reserved for a candidate of a different gender. Otherwise, the preferences subsequent to the first are canceled. Gender double preference was introduced for the first time by law 215/2012, combined with gender quotas, in municipal elections for municipalities with more than 5,000 residents with the aim of promoting gender rebalancing in local councils.

The effectiveness of the double preference voting in promoting an increase in female representation among the candidates elected in municipal Councils has been studied by a team of economists, Baltrunaite, Casarico, Profeta, and Savio, in a recent article published in the *Journal of Public Economics*. Using a regression discontinuity design, the authors analyze the effects in terms of gender of law 215/2012 in the municipal elections subject to this reform by comparing voting results in municipalities above and below the threshold of 5000 residents. They conclude that the double preference voting system led to a significant increase in female representation in municipal Councils in those municipalities above the cut-off of 5000 residents, subject to the reform, of 18 percentage points with respect to the rest of municipalities. They also delve into the mechanism involved and conclude that positive actions of this kind that allow voters to choose female candidates actually lead to a more egalitarian gender representation, even more effectively than the gender quotas that instead act on the gender composition of the candidates' lists carried out by political parties. According to the study, in fact, the increase in the number of female city councilors is mainly due to the increase in preference votes received by women, where the impact of the reform on the number of candidates is less decisive.

Finally, the authors suggest that positive measures of this kind may have positive and far-reaching implications at higher levels of government, such as at the regional level, beyond their direct target.