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Still “the Domain of Men?” Gender Quotas and Women’s Inclusion in Local Politics in Italy¹

Gender quota laws, which require political parties to include women among candidate lists, now exist at the subnational level in 15 European countries. Do they increase the inclusion of women in local legislative processes and facilitate the representation of women’s interests? To make progress on these questions, we leverage data from the “most similar” Italian region of Campania, which implemented a quota law in 2010, and Calabria, which had no quota law. Using a mixed-method approach, we pair quantitative analysis of all legislative bills proposed and passed in both regional councils from 2007 to 2017 with qualitative interviews with regional councillors. We find that Campania’s gender quota law increased women’s inclusion in the legislative process, but little evidence that this translated into substantive policy gains for women. Our qualitative evidence suggests that arcane legislative processes, male-dominated leadership roles, and a masculinist culture prevent women’s policy interests from being prioritized.

Women are underrepresented in politics at all levels of government. On average within the European Union, women make up 33% of national parliament members, 34% of regional council members, and 34% of local or municipal council members.² Women’s representation in subnational governments is important because many policy decisions that affect citizens’ everyday lives

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are made and implemented by local and regional governments. Just like national legislatures, local and regional councils have been subject to electoral reforms aimed at increasing gender diversity over recent years. Gender quota laws, which require all political parties to include a certain share of women among candidate lists, now exist at the subnational level in 15 EU countries.³ Our study aims to understand the impact of these subnational gender quota laws in Europe, beyond numbers of women elected. How do subnational quota laws affect the inclusion of women in the legislative process and the substantive representation of women's interests?

A large body of research focuses on the legislative and policy consequences of gender quotas in national parliaments (e.g., Clayton and Zetterberg 2018; Fernandes, Lopes da Fonseca, and Won 2021; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Franceschet et al., 2012; Kerevel and Atkeson 2013; Weeks 2022). However, as Clayton points out in a recent review of the policy impacts of quotas, “much less is known about subnational quotas” (2021, 237). Local politics tends to interest women more than national politics (Coffé 2013), and subnational legislatures can have important impacts on policies that shape women's day-to-day lives, like childcare (Bratton and Ray 2002). Compared to national legislatures, subnational legislatures might be especially likely to harbor masculinist norms, given these institutions are subject to less media attention and public interest compared to national legislatures. Relatedly, research demonstrates that corruption and bad governance are widespread among subnational institutions (Charron et al. 2015). In this context, can gender quota laws overcome the “shadowy arrangements” that benefit existing male-dominated networks (Sundström and Wängnerud 2016)?

So far we lack an understanding of how Europe's increasingly popular subnational gender quota laws affect women's inclusion in legislative activities like proposing bills, an important initial stage of the policy process, and attention to women's interests. We argue that quota laws have positive impacts on women's legislative inclusion, which we define as women's participation in the legislative process, and on the substantive representation of their interests. By women's interests, we mean those that are broadly fundamental to women's life chances given women's historical and structural marginalization from power (Beckwith 2014). Quotas increase the supply of women in the council, disrupt male-dominated networks, and increase the salience of gender equality—all mechanisms which can spur greater inclusion and attention to women's

concerns. While previous research has analyzed similar data on bill proposal and passage in Latin America, mostly studying national legislatures (e.g., Barnes 2016; Kerevel and Atkeson 2013; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Htun et al. 2013), to our knowledge we provide the first study in the European subnational context.

To test our argument, we employ a difference-in-differences approach, leveraging the “most similar” cases of Campania and Calabria in Southern Italy. In March of 2009, the regional council of Campania passed a gender quota law requiring that neither gender make up more than two-thirds of candidates on party lists and allowing voters to indicate two preference votes provided they are different genders. The quota was controversial, but it was successful at quickly increasing the share of women in office. In the 2010 election, when the law was first applied, the percentage of women in the council more than doubled to 23% from 10% in the previous election. The Campania law became a model that other regions in Italy followed, and in 2016 the national parliament in Italy also imitated the model to pass a law requiring regional councils to adopt quotas in their electoral laws. Calabria, a very similar “control” region in terms of geographic location, socioeconomic level, and cultural background, did not pass a quota law in line with national requirements until 2020 (implemented in 2021), after our period of analysis (2007–17).

We find that gender quotas increase women’s inclusion in local politics but no evidence that the quota facilitates substantive policy gains for women. The gender quota law in Campania leads to a 23-percentage-point increase in the share of bills sponsored and cosponsored by women, suggesting that after a quota law women’s voices are more included in the agenda-setting stage of policymaking. Yet bills related to women’s interests, like violence against women and work-family balance, are not more likely to be sponsored or pass after the quota law, all else equal. Our qualitative evidence suggests three reasons why quotas lead to women’s inclusion without significant policy changes: powerful leadership positions are still dominated by men, the legislative process is slow and arcane, and the council’s masculinist culture whereby politics is seen as “men’s domain” has not changed.

Gender Quotas and Women’s Inclusion in the Legislative Process

Gender quota laws often dramatically increase women’s descriptive representation in legislative bodies—but do they also

increase women's legislative inclusion? Legislative inclusion describes the extent to which women legislators are either involved in or marginalized from the legislature's main activities and functions. One fear associated with the use of gender quotas is that large new cohorts of women might be viewed as threatening to male politicians (Krook 2015). Some studies find evidence that women are sidelined after a quota law, perhaps as way for men to preserve their power. For example, Clayton, Josefsson, and Wang (2014) find that in Uganda women elected via a reserved seat quota are less recognized in debates (and thus afforded less respect and authority) compared to men and women elected via nonquota seats. Yet, other studies fail to find evidence of such dynamics, as Kerevel and Atkeson (2013) show using data on bill sponsorship and passage after a gender quota law in Mexico. Indeed, research on gender quotas in Portugal finds that the quota law significantly decreased the gender gap in legislative debates (Fernandes, Lopes da Fonseca, and Won 2021). The findings about the effects of quotas on women's legislative inclusion are thus mixed, but they give room for some optimism with regards to candidate list quotas (rather than reserved seats).

We consider three different types of legislative inclusion: bill sponsorship, bill passage, and leadership. Our first hypothesis relates to the effects of quotas on bill sponsorship and cosponsorship. Sponsorship is an important first stage of the policy process, where the issues deemed worthy of political discussion in a society are defined. This activity does not require party leaders to act as gatekeepers in order for women to participate. Instead, the number of bills that a legislator sponsors relies on their own initiative, as well as their relationships with peers. As mentioned previously, as the supply of women in the council increases, it is reasonable to expect that the share of bills sponsored by women also rises. However, quota laws might have an additional impact beyond this mechanical one.

More gender-balanced environments could have an empowering effect for women—perhaps especially if women reach a “critical mass” of legislators (e.g., Childs and Krook 2009; Dahlerup 1988). Mendelberg, Karpowitz, and Goedert (2013) find that as the share of women in a group increases, so does their authority. In this context, women could become more comfortable participating actively in agenda setting, and men more likely to include them. Women might be especially likely to focus on bill sponsorship if their access to power in other contexts remains constrained after a quota law. For example, Barnes' (2012, 2016) research on legislators' cosponsorship patterns after quota laws were passed at the provincial level

in Argentina shows that women collaborate more than men, as a product of women working together to promote shared interests in the context of ongoing marginalization from leadership roles. Thus, we expect a positive impact of the quota law.

Hypothesis 1a (bill sponsorship) After the quota law, the percentage of bills sponsored and cosponsored by women increases.

Hypothesis 1b (empowerment) After the quota law, elected women councillors sponsor and cosponsor more bills.

While bill sponsorship shapes political agendas, the impact of a legislator’s agenda is of course much greater if the bills pass. Unlike sponsorship, the question of whether bills proposed by women actually become law relies on the support of other legislators and “policy gatekeepers” (Alemán 2006), like committee chairs who can prevent the bill from ever reaching the floor. There is more room for women’s legislative activity to be marginalized in this context. Yet previous research from the similar contexts of Portugal and Spain suggests no negative impact of a gender quota on women’s legislative inclusion, in terms of their promotion to party leadership or their access to floor debates (Bagues and Campa 2021; Fernandes, Lopes da Fonseca, and Won 2021). Indeed, added numbers of women might give them more negotiating power to push their parties and the council towards their preferences. Thus, the quota law might enable women to better align the council’s decisions to their priorities. We thus expect:

Hypothesis 2 (bill passage) After the quota law, women councillors are more successful at getting their bills passed in the council.

Finally, a third way to measure women’s inclusion in regional government is their appointment to important leadership roles and committees. After a quota law, we expect women’s inclusion in leadership positions to increase for two reasons. First, the share of women in national parliaments and leadership roles (ministerial portfolios) are highly correlated (Krook and O’Brien 2012). If the quota law increases numbers of women in

office, the pool of women candidates for leadership positions also increases, particularly if experience is not a prerequisite for leadership appointments.

Second, the quota law itself might increase the salience of gender equality in the council, setting in motion important policy feedback effects. In this case, we might expect the law to lead to what Pierson (1993) calls either “learning” or “interpretive” effects. The quota law, and debates about its adoption, could cause predominantly male gatekeepers to either learn about gender equality, which might not previously have been on their radar, or change how they view its importance. This could make gatekeepers more likely to include women in leadership roles. We thus expect:

Hypothesis 3 (leadership) After the quota law, the percentage of women in leadership roles increases.

Gender Quotas and the Substantive Representation of Women’s Interests

Can subnational gender quotas increase the substantive representation of women’s policy interests? A large literature investigates whether and how gender quotas affect policy outcomes, although mostly at the national level of politics (for a review, see Clayton 2021). For example, Clayton and Zetterberg (2018) find that gender quotas that lead to major increases in the number of women in office increase public spending on health. In India, women leaders after a quota law were more likely to adopt laws and invest in resources that women favor like safe drinking water (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004). Additionally, Brulé (2020) finds that women leaders in India have facilitated women’s access to property rights, but they can also lead to backlash. Looking at high-income OECD democracies, Weeks (2022) finds that gender quota laws lead to shifts in the composition of work-family policies towards more gender-equal configurations.

While many studies thus find positive effects of quotas in the direction of women’s interests, these results are not universal. Studies of the impacts of gender quota laws at the subnational level in Spain and Italy provide little evidence that quotas have significantly affected local government expenditures (Bagues and

Campa 2021; Rigon and Tanzi 2012). In their analysis of Italian municipal expenditures, Rigon and Tanzi (2012) find that gender quotas increased the share of women in city councils, but they did not increase expenditures in policy areas associated with women’s preferences, like social assistance (including child and elderly care). Looking at municipal spending in Spain, Bagues and Campa (2021) report that a gender quota law increased the share of women in municipal councils but does not affect the overall size or composition of spending.

In contrast to these previous studies, we investigate whether quotas increase the share of bills proposed and passed related to women’s interests. Many interests of concern to women do not necessarily have large spending implications. For example, policies related to violence against women often involve legal reforms rather than spending (Weldon 2002). Additionally, broad spending categories like social assistance make it hard to pinpoint whether quotas increase attention to specific women’s interests.

Women’s interests arise from women’s life chances, which are shaped by shared experiences of discrimination on the basis of socially constructed gender (Beckwith 2014). Women do not share a single, static set of political beliefs, but in most political contexts (including Italy) women still face significant differences in their life circumstances compared to men. In her elaboration of the difference between broad women’s *interests*, specific policy *issues*, and women’s *preferences* over such issues, Beckwith (2014) suggests that recognizing women’s interests should not imply that women have the same set of political preferences over policy issues. Focusing on broader interests thus allows us to recognize the diversity that exists among women, while still considering how gender quota laws impact substantive representation.

For the sake of this article, we focus on three broad interests related to gendered power structures: (1) gender equality; (2) violence against women; and (3) combining work and family. Each interest is reflected in the United Nations’ Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) treaty, which Baldez (2011) recommends using as a dynamic measure of women’s interests. Women share a common agenda in not being discriminated against; this is the basis of CEDAW. Similarly, women across all walks of life

share an interest in being free from violence, a central element of CEDAW's approach since 1992. Finally, one of the major issues facing women in postindustrial economies is how to reconcile increased employment with continuing to provide the bulk of care work in the family (Orloff 1993). For this reason, CEDAW advocates ending discrimination related to women's role as mothers and reaffirms the right to combine family responsibilities with participation in public life, highlighting issues like maternity protection and child care.

We expect the quota law to lead to increased attention to these women's interests. We offer two main mechanisms through which the quota increases substantive representation: the increased share of women in the council and the salience of gender equality concerns. First, politicians rely at least partially on their own lived experiences to decide what issues to support, experiences which are informed by their gendered identities. In addition, women might be more attuned to the preferences of women constituents than are men and thus better able to capitalize on untapped demand for certain policies. A wealth of research supports the link between descriptive and substantive representation, finding that women are more likely to prioritize women's policy concerns than men (see Wängnerud 2009 for a review). Second, as discussed in the context of leadership roles, gender quota laws can send signals to male-dominated legislatures that women's experiences are politically salient. Thus, men could interpret growing support for women in politics as a cue to better represent women's interests in order to claim credit with women constituents (Mayhew 1974). Our final hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 4 The quota law increases legislative attention to policies related to women's interests.

The Cases: Regional Councils of Campania and Calabria

We focus our analysis on the regional councils of Campania and Calabria in Italy. There are 20 regional councils (*consigli regionali*) in Italy, with an average of 45 elected members per council. The Italian regions have had legislative powers since 1970, including over health care, welfare services, housing, transport, and vocational training, and these were extended

by a 2011 constitutional reform (Amato 2015). Local government expenditure in Italy typically amounts to about 30% of total government expenditure, most of which is accounted for by the regions.⁴ Regional councils pass laws and issue regulations and have the right to collect certain revenues and taxes. Examples of regional powers include responsibility for organizing and delivering health care and child care through the regionalized National Health Service (*Servizio Sanitario Nazionale*), daycares (*asili nidi*), and preschools (*scuola materna*). Regional councils also pass laws and formulate regional plans related to violence against women, including women’s shelters (Toffanin et al. 2020). Regional government thus has considerable power to legislate over important policies that affect women’s everyday lives in Italy.

We select Campania because it was the first region in Italy to adopt a quota law. In March of 2009, Campania introduced a quota known as “double preference” into the electoral law; voters can indicate two preference votes, one woman and one man. In addition to the double preference, the law requires that neither gender can make up more than two-thirds of the candidates on a party list, or the list will be rejected.⁵ The new law was first applied in the 2010 regional elections. The quota more than doubled the share of women councillors elected in 2010 (from 10% to 23%), even if the threshold of 33% was not met.⁶

The law was put forward by the executive of the council (*Giunta*), headed by the center-left Democratic Party (Pd), and was promoted by the regional women’s conference of the Pd. According to Senator Valeria Valente, who was then a councillor for the city of Naples and a member of the Pd women’s conference, a network of women councillors (from municipalities, cities, and the region) worked together to advance the representation of women. She said, “there were many very good women at the lower levels who did not succeed in rising... on the other hand there were many men who were not that good that did make it to higher levels in the party. I wanted to fight against this.”⁷

Italian constitutional law prevented the use of gender quotas before a 2001 reform of Article 51 which specified that the state could intervene to encourage women’s participation in politics. According to Valente, after this decision the region of Campania was able to change the electoral law. It eventually passed after a

long debate in which opponents argued that quotas would unjustly advantage women, and that women did not need special protection. News coverage at the time cites several women from the Pd as key advocates, including councillors Valeria Valente and Angela Cortese and senators Teresa Armato, Annamaria Carloni, Franca Chiaromonte, Maria Fortuna Incidente, and quotes a letter from the women of the Pd's regional conference: "The law is a result of the battle we conducted within and outside of the party."⁸

We select Calabria as a nonquota "control" case to compare to Campania because of its similarity on important potential confounders, including the representation of women and party power. Both regions are in the South, carrying similar histories of socioeconomic hardship and organized crime, traditional views on women's role in society, and low levels of women's employment (Alesina and Giuliano 2014 ; Bianco et al. 2013). They are among the regions with the lowest historical participation of women in local politics, and the lowest perceived levels of good governance (Carbone and Farina 2020; Charron et al. 2015). Both regions were governed by center-left coalitions in the years prior to quota adoption in Campania. Trends in women's representation in both regions were similar prior to quota adoption in Campania.⁹ Additionally, given the high turnover rate from term to term in the regional council, the legislators in office after the quota law was implemented in Campania were not the same legislators responsible for passing the law. Thus, while the quota law in Campania was not exogenously imposed on the council, we have little reason to believe that these observable factors which might have influenced adoption also influenced women's inclusion and substantive representation after the quota.

Data and Methods

Empirical Strategy

Our argument poses a relationship between the quota law and the inclusion of women and women's interests in subnational legislatures. However, such quota laws are not randomly imposed, and the concern for causal inference is that regions which adopt a quota law may be self-selecting. For example, regions that adopt a quota law might be characterized by different culture or attitudes

towards equality, and these underlying attitudes might also influence the inclusion of women in the work of the council. We cannot fully resolve this problem, but we take several steps to alleviate endogeneity concerns.

First, our analysis focuses on two regions, a “treated” region (Campania, which adopted a quota) and a “control” region (where no quota law was adopted at the time) which can be compared to measure the effects of the quota law via a difference-in-differences approach. The two “most similar” cases provide a counterfactual framework for thinking about what would have happened, all else equal, if a quota had not been adopted (Tarrow, 2010). We estimate models that include region and year fixed effects. The two-way fixed-effects design is a generalization of the difference-in-differences approach. The specification compares average outcomes postquota minus outcomes prequota in the “treated” region (Campania) to the change in outcomes in the control region (Calabria) over the same time period. The difference-in-differences approach helps address endogeneity concerns given that the parallel trends assumption holds—that is, that trends in legislative inclusion and substantive representation would have been the same across regions in the absence of a quota law. We provide figures showing trends before and after the quota law in both regions for visual inspection that this assumption holds.

Second, our mixed methods approach also relies on qualitative data to confirm the plausibility of our quantitative findings and shed further light on potential mechanisms. Our interviews with women councillors in Campania provide key insights into how women experience working in the council after the quota, the extent to which they feel included, and their views on the representation of women’s interests after the quota.

Data

We compile an original dataset of bills proposed and passed in the regions of Campania and Calabria from 2007 to 2017. The data were collected from the regional council websites and archival information obtained from the council, in the case of Campania from 2007 to 2009. Our regional dataset includes 2366 observations over 11 years (before and after a quota law was implemented in Campania but not Calabria) in the two regions. We coded all bills sponsored in

this time period, including the name of the bill (from which we derive the issue area), whether the bill was sponsored or cosponsored by a woman, and whether the bill passed into law. We gathered additional data from Campania 2005–20 to investigate women's leadership roles in permanent and special committees, the speaker's office (the part of the council that handles the legislative agenda), and as members of the prestigious 5th committee (which deals with health and social services), before and after the quota law.¹⁰

We supplement the quantitative data with interviews of women councillors in Campania. We contacted the entire population of women councillors in office in both regions at the time of the study (April–May 2019). Of the 12 women in office at the time (11 in Campania and one in Calabria), we obtained interviews with five, all councillors in Campania, for a response rate of 45%. Two councillors belonged to the majority coalition (Councillors Maria Ricchiuti and Carmela Fiola) and three the opposition (Councillors Valeria Ciarambino, Maria Grazia Di Scala, and Maria Muscarà). The interviews were semistructured and focused on the councillors' work, experiences, and priorities in the council and their views on the quota law. All interviews were conducted in Italian and took place over the phone or video call. See Appendix B in the online supporting information for details about interview methods.

Dependent variables

To test our four hypotheses, we define the following dependent variables. The percentage of *Bills Sponsored by Women* is coded as the sum of all bills sponsored or cosponsored by at least one woman, divided by the sum of all bills sponsored by councillors.¹¹ To investigate the *Success of Bills Sponsored by Women* (H2), we use bill-level data, coding a binary dependent variable equaling 1 if the bill passed, and 0 if not. The percentage of *Women in Leadership Roles* (H3) is coded as the sum of women appointed to a leadership role divided by the sum of all legislators in the role (we consider several types of leadership positions as dependent variables). Our dependent variable to test Hypothesis 4 is coded as the percentage of bills proposed related to *Women's Interests*, including gender equality, work-family balance, and violence against women (sum of bills proposed related to these interests divided by the sum of all bills proposed).

Independent variable

The main independent variable is *Quota Law*, which is a binary variable coded as 1 in the region of Campania including and after the first year that the quota was implemented, 2010, and 0 before. *Quota Law* always equals 0 for the region of Calabria. We would control for party ideology, but our cases are nearly exactly matched on this. Both Campania and Calabria councils were governed by center-left coalitions from 2007 to 2010, center-right from 2010 to 2014, and center-left again from 2015 to 2017. The only exception occurs in 2014 when Calabria had an early election due to the council president being forced to resign; Calabria thus moved from a center-left to center-right government six months earlier than Campania did.

The baseline model with region and year fixed effects can be written as:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_1 \text{Quota Law}_{it} + \alpha_i + \eta_t + \mu_{it} \quad (1)$$

where Y_{it} is the outcome of interest and measures women’s legislative inclusion or the representation of women’s interests in region i in the year t ; *Quota Law* is a binary variable indicating whether a quota law was implemented or not, and β_1 is the coefficient for this main independent variable; α_i and η_t are region and year fixed effects, respectively; and μ_{it} is the error term.

Results

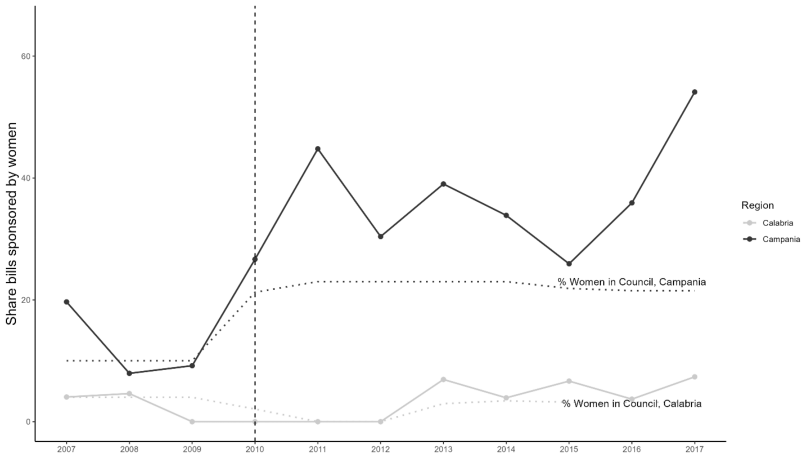
Our first hypothesis relates to the inclusion of women in agenda setting: bill sponsorship. In the regions of Campania and Calabria, bills can be proposed by the executive government (*Giunta*), by regional councillors, and by popular initiative. In our data, the majority of bills in both regions are proposed by councillors (71% in Calabria and 72% in Campania). Of those that pass into law, 57% are proposed by councillors in Calabria and 44% in Campania. This suggests that regional councillors have significant legislative power.

As [Figure 1](#) shows, the quota law in Campania is associated with a significant increase in the share of bills sponsored or cosponsored by women. Before the quota law, in 2009, women sponsored or cosponsored 9% of bills, similar to their share of

FIGURE 1

Share of Bills Sponsored by Women

Note: The solid lines show the share of bills sponsored by women, and the dotted lines indicate the share of women in the regional council. The dashed vertical line indicates quota law implementation in Campania.



the council, 10%. One year after the quota law was implemented, in 2011, this increased to 45% (outstripping women's share in the council, which was 23%), and in 2017, the figure reached 54%. In Calabria, women sponsor and cosponsor between 4% and 7% of bills, with no increasing trend over time. In both regions, prequota trends show that women's sponsorship was declining before the quota, with a big jump in sponsorship coming only after the law was implemented in Campania.

Table 1 reports the regression results of our fixed-effects models and further confirms that the quota significantly increased the share of bills sponsored by women in Campania by 23 percentage points, in line with Hypothesis 1a.¹² To determine whether this effect is a mechanical reflection of the increased supply of women in the council or reflects an increase in the rate of bill proposals from women (H1b, *empowerment*), we calculate the mean number of bills proposed by women in Campania before and after the quota law. Before the quota law, women proposed an average of 2.1 bills per year. After the quota law, the average is 4.1 bills per year (significant at 0.1 level in a Welch

TABLE 1
Effect of Quota Law on Women’s Bill Sponsorship

	Dependent Variable
	% Bills Proposed by Women
Quota Law	23.387*** (5.752)
Constant	7.174 (4.906)
Observations	22
R ²	0.945
Adjusted R ²	0.872
Region FE	Y
Year FE	Y

Note: Dependent variable is the share of bills sponsored or cosponsored by women councillors; bills sponsored by the *Giunta* or popular mandate are excluded from this analysis. Model estimated using ordinary least squares regression with fixed effects. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

two-sample t -test, one-sided). The average number of bills that men sponsored or cosponsored also increases after the quota law, although not as much as it does for women (increase of 1.5 bills for men compared to two bills for women). The difference between the mean number of bills sponsored for men and women is not significant before the quota law, or in the first postquota term, but it rises to statistical significance in the second postquota term. In this term, men sponsored four bills per year on average while women sponsored 5.7 (significant at 0.05 level in a Welch two-sample t -test, one-sided). Our initial analysis thus suggests that the increase observed is not only due to the greater supply of women but also women’s higher rate of participation after a quota law, which rises over time.

The increased legislative inclusion observed is not driven by women incumbents; reelection rates are low for both men and women in our council data, and none of the women first elected in 2010 to Campania’s council were reelected in 2015.¹³ Our results are also not driven by a few women who propose most of the bills after a quota law is implemented, as we demonstrate through visual inspection of the distribution of women’s bill proposals (see Figure A2 in the online supporting information). We also test whether quota *adoption* increases the share of bills women propose (changing the quota threshold from 2010 when the quota was

implemented to 2009 when it was adopted). We find that our results persist, but with reduced effect size and less statistical significance (See Table A3). Combined with the visual evidence presented in Figure 1, which shows no significant increase in women's sponsorship before the quota law, we conclude that quota implementation rather than adoption drives women's sponsorship to increase.

If our argument that quotas empower women is correct, we ought to observe women's sponsorship increasing *especially* among opposition parties, since men and women in ruling parties might exert more power through the executive. Table 2 reports the results of bivariate regressions, which examine whether the share of women sponsoring bills in Campania is significantly different from pre- to postquota law among bills sponsored by ruling parties, the opposition, or a combination (bipartisan bills). Table 2 shows an increase in women's sponsorship activities among all groups after the quota law, but especially among those bills sponsored by the opposition and across governing and opposition parties (bipartisan). While the quota law is associated with an 11-percentage-point increase in the share of bills sponsored by women among ruling

TABLE 2
Women's Bill Sponsorship by Governing Party Status in
Campania

	<i>Dependent Variable</i>		
	% Bills Proposed by Women		
	Governing Party Bills	Opposition Party Bills	Bipartisan Bills
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Quota Law	10.670* (5.757)	36.840*** (9.898)	53.204** (20.106)
Constant	17.361*** (4.910)	3.846 (8.441)	9.091 (17.146)
Observations	11	11	11
R ²	0.276	0.606	0.438
Adjusted R ²	0.196	0.562	0.375

Note: Dependent variable is the yearly share of bills sponsored or cosponsored by women councillors in Campania among those bills sponsored by governing parties ($N = 465$), the opposition ($N = 305$), and jointly sponsored by members of the governing and opposition parties ($N = 100$). Bills sponsored by the *Giunta* or popular mandate are excluded from this analysis. Models estimated using ordinary least squares regression. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

party bills (significant at the 0.1 level), it is associated with a 37-percentage-point increase in women’s sponsorship among opposition party bills, and a 53-percentage-point increase when considering bipartisan bills (both significant at conventional levels).

Hypothesis 2 suggests that the quota law and increased numbers of women make women councillors more effective at driving their bills through the legislative system. We find little evidence of this in our analysis of bill-level data. Table 3 presents the odds ratios from a logistic regression model on legislative effectiveness, where the binary dependent variable equals 1 if the bill passed and 0 if not. The interaction of *Quota Law* and *Woman Sponsor* is positive but not statistically significant. After a quota law, we find no evidence that women are more likely to see their bills pass into law compared to before the quota.¹⁴ In a more positive interpretation, this also means that women are not *less* likely to see their bills pass after a quota law, which might be expected if women are seen as “tokens” or if others resent women’s increased presence being mandated in the council.

Our third hypothesis suggests that women’s inclusion in important leadership positions ought to increase after a quota law, due to the greater supply of women eligible for such positions or to male leaders’ changed perceptions about the importance of women in such roles after a quota law. We examine women’s inclusion as presidents of permanent and special committees, in the Office of the Speaker, and as members of the 5th committee

TABLE 3
Effect of Quota Law on Women’s Effectiveness in Council (Bill Passage)

	<i>Dependent Variable</i>
	Bill Passed (Odds Ratio)
Quota Law	2.504** (1.257, 5.201)
Woman Sponsor	1.169 (0.558, 2.349)
Quota Law * Woman Sponsor	1.600 (0.705, 3.743)
Constant	0.324*** (0.191, 0.526)
Observations	1685
Log Likelihood	-836.986
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1703.972
Region FE	Y
Year FE	Y

Note: Dependent variable is bill passage (0,1). Bills sponsored by the *Giunta* or popular mandate are excluded from analysis. Model estimated using logit regression. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

(health and social services), which commands a large share of the budget. In Campania, political groups within the council assign councillors to the commissions, based on proportionality of their representation within the council. The entire council, then, votes via a secret vote for the president, vice-president, and secretary of each of the permanent commissions.

Table 4 reports the mean share of women in leadership roles before and after the quota law was implemented in Campania, with p -value for associated χ^2 tests. It shows that as women's representation in Campania's regional council increased, so did their appointment to most positions of power. While the share of women in leadership roles increased after the quota law, most differences are not statistically significant. The exception is that after the quota law, women make up a larger share of the 5th committee (significant at the 0.1 level). We note that women continued to make up a relatively small share of presidents of permanent committees. Our results are thus in line with previous research finding no evidence that gender quotas promote women's political leadership at the local level in Italy, beyond the level required by the law (Spaziani 2022).

Our final hypothesis suggests that the quota law will increase the share of bills sponsored which are related to women's interests. **Figure 2** shows the share of all bills sponsored that are related to women's interests (including gender equality, violence against women, and work-family balance) in both regions over time. Prequota trends show a decrease in attention to women's interests before the quota law in both regions. The figure suggests no sustained increase in attention to women's interests after the quota law in Campania, although a bump in women's interest bills can be seen in 2011.

Table 5 presents our fixed effects regression results. This model also includes a control variable for the regional level of women's unemployment, which could be related to the need for policies related to work-family balance and gender equality at work (data collected from the Italian National Institute of Statistics). As **Table 5** shows, we find no evidence that the gender quota law significantly increases women's interests bills.¹⁵

Even if more women's interests bills are not proposed after a quota law, it could be that women's added presence or the salience of gender equality makes such bills more likely to be passed into law. Due to the small number of bills passed related to these issues,

TABLE 4
Women in Leadership Roles in Campania Before and After Quota Law

	Mean Women, Prequota	Mean Women, Postquota	<i>p</i> -Value
President of Permanent Committee	0.12 (0.33)	0.16 (0.37)	0.92
President of Special Committee	0.13 (0.35)	0.32 (0.47)	0.13
5th Committee Member	0.05 (0.22)	0.29 (0.46)	0.06
Office of the Speaker	0.14 (0.38)	0.21 (0.42)	1

Notes: Standard deviation in parentheses; *p*-values are for a Pearson χ^2 goodness of fit test (with Yates’ continuity correction), which tests the hypothesis that proportions are the same before versus after the quota law was implemented. In the case of Office of the Speaker ($N = 23$), the *p*-value comes from a Fisher’s exact test. The prequota period includes the legislative term commencing 2005, while the postquota period includes the three subsequent legislative terms (commencing 2010, 2015, and 2020).

FIGURE 2
Share of bills proposed related to women's interests
Note: The dashed vertical line indicates quota law implementation in Campania.

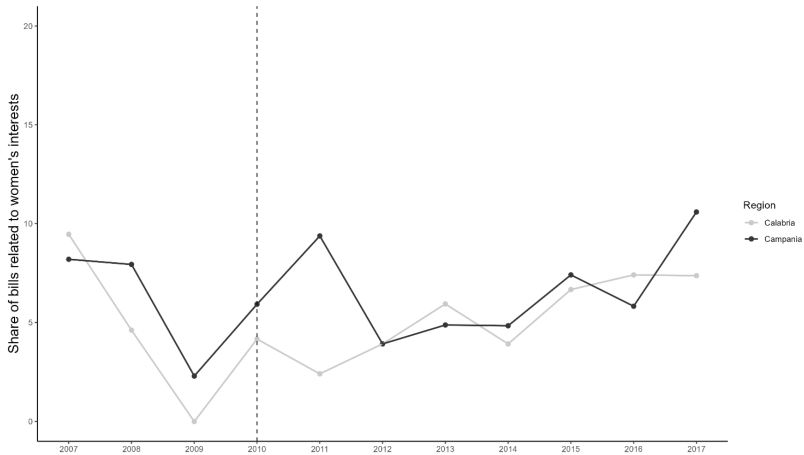


TABLE 5
Effect of Quota Law on Substantive Representation of Women's Interests

<i>Dependent Variable</i>	
Share Bills Proposed Related to Women's Interests	
Quota Law	0.362 (1.261)
% Women Unemployed	0.840** (0.257)
Constant	-3.545 (3.742)
Observations	22
R ²	0.903
Adjusted R ²	0.746
Region FE	Yes
Year FE	Yes

Note: Dependent variable is the share of bills proposed each council-year devoted to women's interests (including equality, violence against women, and work-family balance). Models estimated using ordinary least squares regression with fixed effects. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

we cannot provide a statistical test to explore this question, but we present descriptive evidence in [Table 6](#).¹⁶ Twelve of the 100 bills related to women’s interests proposed between 2007 and 2017 in the two regions passed into law and are shown in [Table 6](#). Most of these passed in the period after the quota law: six out of seven in Campania, and four out of five in Calabria occur after 2009.

Approximately half of the laws are related to violence against women, and all that pass in Campania are sponsored or cosponsored by women. The increase in bills passed suggests that the quota law might have had a positive effect; however, the similar trend observed in Calabria without a quota law makes it hard to discern whether this is an effect of the quota or related to other changes affecting both regions over time. The passage rate in Campania before the quota was 8% (1/13) compared to 13% after (6/47). In Calabria the passage rate increased slightly less over time from 10% before the quota (1/10) to 13% after (4/30). While our analysis is limited given the small sample size here, the data suggest little evidence that the quota law significantly increased laws adopted related to women’s interests.

In summary, we find that the regional quota law in Campania facilitated women’s legislative inclusion in the council. Men no longer dominate bill sponsorship, women sponsor more bills on average after the law particularly within the opposition and bipartisan bills, and women are more likely to serve on the prestigious 5th committee. Women are also not less successful at getting the bills they sponsor passed into law after a quota law. However, the quota law did not lead to more attention to women’s interests in the council or more laws passed related to women’s interests. While the quota increased women’s legislative inclusion, this did not necessarily translate into substantive policy gains for women.

Experiences of Women in Campania: A Council in “the Domain of Men”

We supplement the quantitative analysis with qualitative evidence from interviews with women in Campania’s regional council to shed further light on women councillors’ experiences and legislative priorities after a quota law. Do women councillors feel included in the main activities of the legislature? Are they interested in representing women as a group, and do they feel the council affords them the ability to do so?

TABLE 6
Bills Passed Related to Women's Interests, 2007–17

Region	Year Proposed	Title	Sponsored by a Woman?
Campania	2009	Electoral Law (includes gender quota)	Y
Campania	2011	Measures to prevent and combat gender-based violence (11/2011)	Y
Campania	2011	Rules to ensure efficiency, savings and equal opportunities	Y
Campania	2012	Change to Article 23 of the regional law January 30, 2008, N.1, re. international adoptions	Y
Campania	2012	Rules for the integration of the network of territorial services for reception and assistance to victims of gender violence	Y
Campania	2015	Rules for the recognition and support of the family caregiver	Y
Campania	2017	Interventions to promote the personal, social and economic autonomy of women victims of gender violence and their children and recovery actions aimed at men perpetrators of violence	Y
Calabria	2007	Provisions for the promotion and support of anti-violence centers and shelters for women in difficulty	Y
Calabria	2013	Rules on educational services for early childhood	N (sponsored by executive of the council)
Calabria	2016	Establishment of the Regional Observatory on Gender Violence	Y
Calabria	2016	Law 194/1978. Rules for the correct application on the regional territory	N
Calabria	2017	Establishment of the Regional Observatory for minors	N (sponsored by executive of the council)

On the topic of substantive representation, there was a broad agreement among the interviewees across government and opposition parties that women represent women’s interests. For example, majority coalition councillor Carmela Fiola claimed that “As a woman, I do everything starting from one point of view, that of being a mother. I feel highly related to the sphere of social policies, health, and policies relating to women and young people.” Fiola was careful to emphasize other interests as well, including transport and the environment.¹⁷ Along the same lines, opposition coalition councillor Valeria Ciarambino expressed how, “as a woman, I know the problems that women living in my region face: the absence of services... the net of support for women victims of violence is patchy... I fight for women because I directly live their problems.”¹⁸ Majority coalition councillor Maria Ricchiuti discussed the positive value of women’s increased presence in the council, explaining that women “obviously bring their own personal life experiences.”

This consensus contrasts with our quantitative findings that bills proposed or adopted related to women’s interests did not significantly increase after a quota law. While each councillor confirmed the notion that women are more likely to represent women’s interests compared to men, they also pointed to serious barriers to achieving this in the council. One such obstacle might be the quota law itself, which was seen to tokenize women. Perhaps surprisingly, every councillor we interviewed was opposed to the principle of gender quotas. Councillor Ricchiuti explained that in her view the quota could not reify deeply embedded cultural norms of gender inequality. For this reason, she described the law as one, “on paper only.”¹⁹

Several of the interviewees caveated their comments about working for women’s interests with references to institutional barriers. They depict the council as a slow, arcane body where women’s interests can be deprioritied or dismissed. Opposition coalition councillor Maria Grazia Di Scala, for instance, explained that after the quota law:

Representation has improved, though there’s only so much a woman can do in this environment [...]. Women know what women need, and it reflects on the bills they propose. Take my ‘Tagesmutter’ bill [A proposal related to child care]: I don’t think a man would have proposed it. There are needs a woman can

*understand immediately, a man gets there a bit later. Sometimes a lot later.*²⁰

Among our interviewees, women from the opposition were more likely to express dissatisfaction with the council, the legislative process, and the position of women within the council than members of the majority. For example, majority councillor Ricchiuti reported, “constant support from female and male colleagues, even across party lines.”²¹ The more common view, though, was concern at the high level of bureaucracy and lengthy legislative process. For example, majority coalition councillor Fiola cited laws that took three years to be examined by committees. Opposition coalition councillor Ciarambino gives another example: “My proposal on tackling violence against women is lying in the drawers of the 6th Committee [Education and Culture, Research, and Social Policy]. I have tried in the last session to push for its reading, and every member of the majority voted against it.”²²

Our interview subjects raised three main explanations for the lack of policy change on issues related to women. First, women are less likely to be appointed leaders of powerful permanent committees compared to men. Women councillors brought up the prestigious 5th committee (health and social services), noting that the majority of the council’s budget goes to these services yet senior positions within the committee are all occupied by men.²³ As we show in the previous section, while the quota law increased the share of women in the council, it did not increase women’s leadership in permanent committees. This leaves a power deficit in the legislature that a quota for candidate lists alone cannot remedy.

Second, many councillors expressed frustration and disappointment with the democratic functioning of the council in general; this sentiment was more common among women from the opposition coalition. For example, Maria Muscará, an opposition member, said that “This council is hostile to requests to do more work, and it’s accommodating to a worldview of ‘let’s pretend to be doing something and then we get to go home’.”²⁴ Her opposition colleague, Valeria Ciarambino, reinforced this by saying “I am deluded by how politics works within the institutions because you’re not working for the common good, but often to consolidate your own power, and that is a power to distribute power within the regional public administration.”²⁵

Third, despite the quota law having been in place for almost 10 years in Campania at the time of the interviews, women legislators perceived the council to be a heavily masculinist environment: Opposition councillor Ciarambino described the council as an institution that “has been the domain of men for decades, where the man is the one who wants, manages, and delegates power.”²⁶ Councillor Di Scala, a member of the opposition, claimed that women’s legislative activity is strongly limited because, “those who govern and decide are so masculinist, it’s depressing, [women’s] activities are never a priority, they are always kind of dismissed.”²⁷ Majority coalition member Ricchiuti adds that, “the masculine position is a fact,” and due to this, women have to work harder than men to demonstrate their ability.²⁸ Some councillors went on to describe how they negotiate working in this masculinist environment by mirroring the practices of men, a phenomenon described in other gender and politics research such as Childs’ (2004) study of the UK parliament. Opposition councillor Muscarà stated that “for some [men], there will be a preconception that a man would be more authoritative, but I don’t really notice it. I pose myself as a man would, so they have to get over it.”²⁹

In summary, our qualitative evidence suggests that women councillors identify strongly with women’s interests, but they are often frustrated by their ability to represent these issues in the council. They brought up roadblocks in committees led by men, the overall difficulty of trying to push bills through a slow and arcane legislative system, and a masculinist culture that does not prioritize women’s policy interests. Thus, while our quantitative results show that women’s legislative inclusion in terms of bill sponsorship and membership in important committees increased after a quota law, the qualitative evidence suggests that the quota has not impacted these three other factors of committee leadership, council bureaucracy, and masculinist culture. Women’s disenchantment with this institutional context may be a reason that women are less likely to be reelected compared to men: in our sample in Campania, 23% of male councillors were reelected, compared to 17% of women councillors. Future research analyzing candidate lists might investigate whether this is because women are less likely to run for reelection compared to men.

Conclusion

The rapid growth of gender quota laws across all levels of government has increased women legislators worldwide and has important implications for the extent to which women are included in the democratic process more broadly. Contributing to a growing field of study about the impacts of quotas beyond descriptive representation, our study provides evidence about the impacts of subnational quotas on women's legislative inclusion and the representation of women's interests. We find that after a quota law in Campania women are more included in the legislative process. The share of women's bill sponsorship increases by 23 percentage points, and they are more likely to be included in some important roles. The increase in women's bill sponsorship does not come at a cost to effectiveness: bills sponsored by women are not more or less likely to be adopted after the quota law. Yet, the quota law does not increase attention to women's interests. Our interviews with women councillors in Campania suggest that women across government and opposition coalitions relate to women's interests strongly—they bring up violence against women and work-family balance especially—but institutional constraints prevent such interests from progressing in the council. Specifically, the council's slow legislative process, paired with a masculinist culture and women's dearth of permanent committee leadership appointments were all cited as roadblocks.

A positive interpretation of our results is that quotas do *not increase* marginalization of women in subnational government. Like others (Fernandes, da Fonseca, and Won 2021; Kerevel and Atkeson 2013), we find no evidence that a quota law decreases women's participation or effectiveness in the legislature. Yet, the quota law also did not lead to significant gains in attention to women's interests or the most powerful leadership roles—and therefore, the council remains a “male domain.” Our findings about women's legislative inclusion echo Barnes' (2016) study in Argentina, which suggests that because women lack powerful leadership roles they use increased bill sponsorship to attain policy power. In terms of policy implications, our study suggests that if the goal is to increase women's political power and substantive representation, quota designs should include provisions that require women's presence in executive or leadership

roles. This is especially true for those subnational governments where bad governance and corruption pose additional barriers for women newcomers.

To continue making progress on understanding the impact of gender quotas in subnational government, future research can build on the approach we take, evaluating women’s legislative inclusion throughout the policy process in other local and regional councils. We expect our Italian results to hold in similar institutional contexts where male dominance could be exacerbated by high levels of corruption, including for example local councils in Greece, Poland, or parts of Spain (all of which have implemented gender quotas at the local level). The initial findings from our qualitative evidence suggest strong informal and gendered norms in the council. Future qualitative studies describing the experiences of men and women elected to subnational legislatures would provide valuable evidence about gendered institutional contexts (both challenges and opportunities) which can be hard to measure quantitatively (Kenney 1996).

Our analysis showed that bills associated with women’s interests are not more likely to be prioritized after a quota law. This raises the question, under what conditions *are* they passed? Tracing the process from bill sponsorship to passage, and considering the role of additional factors like gender of the executive, electoral context, and voter demographics could bring valuable new evidence to bear on this question. In our study period, no women were elected to head Campania or Calabria’s executive government. Because previous studies find that women in executive roles shift policy outcomes in the direction of women’s preferences under certain conditions (e.g., Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Reyes-Housholder 2017), a fruitful line of future research could evaluate the impact of subnational women leaders on policies.

Finally, we focus on two key stages of the policy process here (agenda setting and adoption). Subsequent policy stages remain understudied, even though the implementation of, for example, violence against women laws at the local level has critical implications for women’s life chances (Araújo and Gatto 2022). Future contributions should also explore the impact of subnational gender quotas on policy implementation and outputs.

Data Availability Statement. The data that support the findings of this study will be made openly available on Harvard Dataverse.

NOTES

1. We thank all of the councillors who agreed to interviews and shared their views and experiences with us, Licia Papavero, Hilde Coffè, participants at the SISP 2021 conference, and three anonymous reviewers for helpful feedback on previous versions of the article. We thank Dr. Rosaria Conforti from the Campanian Regional Council for her generous assistance in data collection.

2. Data from EIGE Gender Statistics Database, last updated September 6, 2021.

3. Data from IDEA Gender Quotas Database. The countries are Albania, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Greece, Italy, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, and Ukraine.

4. “Overview of Fiscal Decentralization: Italy: Fiscal Powers.” European Committee of the Regions. <https://portal.cor.europa.eu/divisionpowers/Pages/Italy-Fiscal-Powers.aspx>

5. Regional Law N. 4, March 27, 2009. <https://www.cr.campania.it/leggi-progetti/leggi-regolamenti/dettaglio-documento?id=1831>

6. We find that the quota law in Campania is associated with a 14-percentage-point increase in the share of women, statistically significant at the 0.01 level (see Table A1, Figure A1, in the online supporting information).

7. Valeria Valente, personal interview, April 9, 2014, Rome, Italy.

8. “Regione Campania La Rivoluzione del Voto,” InterNapoli.it, March 12, 2009. <https://internapoli.it/14732-regione-campania-la-rivoluzione-del-voto/>

9. In Calabria, the previous two elections saw 2% (2000) and 5% (2005) women elected to the regional council. In Campania, the corresponding figures are 4% (2000) and 7% (2005) women elected.

10. Data and replication files are available on the LSQ Harvard Dataverse (Weeks and Masala 2022).

11. In the bill sponsorship analysis, we leave out bills that were sponsored by the executive of the council (Giunta) or by popular proposal because it is not possible for women or men councillors to sponsor or cosponsor these bills.

12. The results are robust to dropping years 2016 and 2017 when women’s bill sponsorship peaks; see Table A2 in the online supporting information.

13. One woman councillor, Rosa D’Amelio, was elected in both 2010 and 2015, but she first entered the council in 2005, before the quota law.

14. This result does not change when we analyze bills by the governing party status of proposing councillors (results available from authors).

15. Our results do not change when excluding the control variable of women’s unemployment. We also test whether quota adoption increases the share of bills proposed to women’s interests (changing the quota threshold from 2010 to 2009 when it was adopted), and the results do not change.

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16. In particular, there are many region-years when no bills related to women’s interests were passed. Statistical models can fail to produce reliable estimates when there is not sufficient variation in the data.

17. Fiola, personal interview, May 2, 2019.
18. Ciarambino, personal interview, April 26, 2019.
19. Ricchiuti, personal interview, April 11, 2019.
20. Di Scala, personal interview, April 26, 2019.
21. Ricchiuti, personal interview, April 11, 2019.
22. Ciarambino, personal interview, April 4, 2019.
23. Ciarambino, personal interview, April 26, 2019.
24. Muscará, personal interview, April 18, 2019.
25. Ciarambino, personal interview, April 26, 2019.
26. Ciarambino, personal interview, April 26, 2019.
27. Di Scala, personal interview, April 26, 2019.
28. Ricchiuti, personal interview, April 11, 2019.
29. Muscará, personal interview, April 18, 2019.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Appendix A: Additional descriptive data and statistical tests

Figure A1: Share of Women in the Regional Councils of Campania and Calabria

Table A1: Effect of Quota Law on Women's Descriptive Representation

Table A2: Effect of Quota Law on Women's Bill Sponsorship, Dropping 2016 and 2017

Table A3: Effect of Quota Adoption on Women's Bill Sponsorship

Figure A2: Distribution of Women's Bill Sponsorship Before and After a Quota Law

Appendix B: Interview Methods

Table B1: Interview Sample