

Party Gate-Keeping and Women's Appointment to Parliamentary Committees: Evidence from the Italian Case

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In this article, we investigate whether and how political parties function as gate-keepers in determining gender differentiations in committee appointments by using the Italian parliamentary committee system from 1994 to 2013 as a case study. Committee membership provides individual MPs with direct influence in a specific policy area as well as with visibility and expertise, thus affecting MPs' political careers. Accordingly, to study women's appointments to committees' positions is eventually to say something about women's chances to have an actual effect in the political process. After presenting the theoretical framework, three hypotheses are proposed. Our findings show that women tend to be appointed to committees dealing with stereotypically 'feminine' and 'less prestigious' issues, and that left-wing parties reproduce this pattern less than right-wing parties, but not when it comes to the appointment to more prestigious and influential positions. Moreover, we found that no significant longitudinal trends towards more unbiased distributions can be detected. A discussion closes the article.

Keywords: Italian parliament, Parliamentary appointments, Parliamentary committees, Party gate-keeping, Women and Politics

1. Introduction

Despite the wide attention devoted by scholars to women's representation in national assemblies, the role of women within political institutions is still an understudied topic. Quite recently, we have witnessed the development of a fast-growing literature on women's cabinet appointments, also motivated by the numeric increase in female ministers worldwide. However, fewer studies have concentrated on the positions occupied by women within national parliaments. Just like ministerial posts, committee positions provide a degree of influence in policy-making.

Accordingly, to study women's appointments to committees' positions is eventually to say something about women's chances to have an actual effect on the decision-making process. Moreover, committee positions constitute a stepping-stone (O'Brien, 2012) for improving individual MPs' chances of political careers, by allowing them to gain visibility and expertise on a particular policy area. Membership of more influential or prestigious committees is thus a scarce resource in a parliament, and competition may arise among parties' representatives for the allocation of particular posts (Heath *et al.*, 2005, p. 421). Political parties are the gate-keepers (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995) for accessing political offices and play an exclusive role in determining committees' assignments. Accordingly, they can be considered as the actors responsible for promoting or hindering gender equality in the selection of committee members. In this article, we investigate whether and to what extent parties' assignments to parliamentary committees exhibit a model that reflects gender inequality. We focus our investigation on the Italian case. The Italian committee system shares many of the characteristics, in terms of structure, appointment procedures and powers, of the majority of Western European committee systems. In this sense, our study is particularly significant in virtue of the representativeness of the Italian committee system, but also in virtue of the paucity of literature on gender and politics in the Italian case.

Following the general trend in Western European democracies, in the last two decades, the number of women in the Italian Parliament has appreciably increased, moving from 15.8% in 1994 to 31.4% in 2013.¹ Far from reaching equality in representation of men and women in the parliament, however, Italy seems to have finally moved towards a more inclusive environment for women's representation. This result is even more compelling by virtue of the fact that Italy, unlike other European countries, lacks formal instruments for gender quotas at the national level, and that only one of the political parties which participated to the 2013 elections, the *Partito Democratico* (PD), introduced voluntary gender quotas.

In this article, we propose an analysis of women's appointments to Italian parliamentary permanent committees between 1994 and 2013 (XII–XVII legislative terms), and we investigate its evolution over time by focusing on the role played by political parties on women's committee assignment. After briefly reviewing the literature on the topic, we introduce the theoretical framework of our research

¹It is worth noting that the 1994 elections were held on the basis of a gender quota rule introduced by art. 1 of Law n. 277 (4th August 1993), which was later declared unconstitutional and abrogated by the Constitutional Court in 1995 (Guadagnini, 2005, p. 141; Palici di Suni, 2012, pp. 382–384). The electoral results for 1994 are thus affected by the presence of the quota rule, as is shown by the immediate decrease of female representatives in the successive elections, where the percentage of women elected fell to 11.1% in 1996 and to 9.8% in 2001 (see Section 5).

and we present our research question. Subsequently, we highlight the characteristics, in terms of structure and allocation mechanisms, that make the Italian committee system a relevant case study for our purposes. Lastly, we posit three original research hypotheses and we present the relevant findings, which are discussed in the last section of this article.

2. Women in parliamentary committees

Findings from the literature on women appointments to parliamentary committees indicate that women MPs tend to be generally under-represented in influential positions, and there is a tendency to assign committee posts along traditional gender lines (Thomas, 1994; Towns, 2003; Heath *et al.*, 2005; Wängnerud, 2009; Coffé and Schnelleke, 2013; Barnes, 2014). Accordingly, women seem to be more likely to be excluded from more prestigious committees whose policy area is seen as traditionally related to male interests and characteristics, and more likely to be assigned to committees whose policy area is more 'feminine', in the sense that reflects stereotypical ideas about women's role in the society. In general, women seem to be under-represented in committees such as Economics, Foreign Affairs and Finance, while they are over-represented in committees such as Education, Health, Welfare and Family (Heath *et al.*, 2005, p. 434).

Factors that are generally described as responsible for a gendered distribution of political offices include cultural factors, like the diffusion of the value of gender equality in a society (Reynolds, 1999; Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Paxton and Kunovich, 2003; Krook and O'Brien, 2012; Jacob *et al.*, 2014); institutional factors, like the selection procedure (O'Brien, 2012); party-level factors, like party ideology (Heath *et al.*, 2005) and the presence of women in leadership positions within the party organisations (Krook and O'Brien, 2012); and individual level factors, like previous experience in the parliament (Heath *et al.*, 2005).

Placing our findings in the context of this literature, our research aims at investigating whether and in which way Italian political parties have worked to promote gender equality in positions of power, or, in contrast, whether they have worked to marginalise female representatives to less influential positions. Our analysis is led by a theoretical framework based on the neo-institutional *partisan approach*. According to the partisan approach, committees are both vehicles of specialisation and arenas of partisan co-ordination (cf. Strøm, 1998, p. 27). Following this perspective, committees can be seen as instruments that political parties employ to reach their various goals (Cox and McCubbins, 1993). Committee members are the agents of their own party, which have the final say in the composition of the parliamentary sub-arenas. Party leaders, through the party organisation, by deciding on appointments have the chance to limit parliamentarians' drifts and to reduce the likelihood of an agency loss in the principal

(party)–agent (MP) relationship.² More generally, parties are the ultimate gate-keepers for the promotion of their members, and, hence, of women as a group to positions where power can be exerted, specific decisions taken and connections to constituencies and interest groups nourished. The extent to which a given committee system is ‘gendered’, accordingly, says something about how much political parties foster or inhibit gender equality in politics.

3. A text-book case study: structural and procedural features of the Italian parliamentary committee system

The crucial role that parliamentary committees play for the functioning of democratic legislatures is well summarised by Woodrow Wilson’s famous statement: ‘Congress in session is Congress on public exhibition, whilst Congress in its committee-rooms is Congress at work’ ([1885], 2002, p. 79). While Wilson refers specifically to the American Congress, the validity of the statement extends to many assemblies (Mattson and Strøm, 1995) and unquestionably includes the Italian parliament.

Two aspects are relevant in making the Italian case particularly appropriate for this study: the strength of the Italian committee systems in terms of its impact on the decision-making process and the primary role played by political parties in committee appointments.

The literature has indeed stressed the impact that Italian parliamentary committees have on the legislative process (Della Sala, 1993; Capano and Giuliani, 2001), so confirming the conventional claim that among Western countries Italy is a representative case of a strong committee system (e.g. Shaw, 1979, 1998).

The *strength* of a given committee system depends on some of its structural features, such as the committee type, the number, the size and the jurisdiction (Martin and Vanberg, 2011).³ In Italy, three *types* of committees are present: permanent committees, *ad hoc* committees and investigative committees.⁴ While permanent committees have a fixed membership, specific jurisdiction and last for the entire

²We assume that politicians are career politicians interested in keeping or improving their position and that parties are the most efficient tools to achieve that.

³Needless to say, this is not the whole story, but only what we are interested in for the paper’s purposes. Committees can be more or less strong depending on their formal powers in the legislative process (Strøm, 1998, pp. 47–55) as well as on the institutional environment they operate in (Martin, 2014). In particular, Döring (1995) contends that the wider the government’s agenda-setting power, the weaker the committees are. As empirical analyses show, Italian governments have been traditionally bestowed with only a limited agenda-setting power, save some steps towards a strengthening of such power subsequent to the appearance of government alternation over the last 20 years (Zucchini, 2011).

⁴A further type of committees are bicameral committees, which are joint committees gathering MPs from both Houses.

legislative term, *ad hoc* committees are created for a special task and dissolve once it has been fulfilled; lastly, investigative committees are special committees with a limited life span devoted to conducting an inquiry into a particular issue. Permanent committees are the most relevant for the legislative process (Pasquino and Pelizzo, 2006, p. 51) and are those we focus on.

The Italian legislature is characterised by a symmetrical bicameralism, that is, by two chambers with identical functions and powers, directly elected, and with the same legislative term of five years. This substantial equilibrium between the two branches allows us to deal with only one of two branches without any big danger of bias selection. We thus focus on the committees in the Lower House of the assembly, the Chamber of Deputies. In the period of this study, the Chamber of Deputies had 14 permanent committees (13 up to 1996). Although this *number* is not the highest among Western legislatures, it is still quite considerable (Mattson and Strøm, 1995, pp. 261–263). Smith (1980, p. 167) has posited an inverse relationship between the number of parliamentary sub-groups and their power in the political process: ‘the greater the number of small groups, the less amenable to government control they are than a single, large one’ (quoted in Strøm, 1998, p. 30).

A small committee *size* allows for more internal specialisation and endows the members with informational advantages and possibilities of gate-keeping expertise (Mattson and Strøm, 1995, p. 268). If restrictions on multiple membership exist, then a higher number of committees implies a smaller *size*. In Italy, the Chamber of Deputies is made up of 630 MPs and each committee comprises about 50 individuals (Di Ciolo and Ciaurro, 2013, p. 337). The members, who must be selected from the range of parliamentarians, can only be included in one committee, except when they substitute for other members who have been appointed as ministers or junior ministers. Moreover, since each committee membership should reproduce the proportions of party seats in the whole Chamber, double appointment is allowed when a parliamentary group’s size is smaller than the number of committees.

Italian committees are characterised by a high degree of specialisation. Each committee has exclusive competency over its own policy *jurisdiction* and is accordingly endowed with the power to affect decisions falling within its respective field. The substantial correspondence between permanent committees’ jurisdictions and ministerial sectors (Pasquino and Pelizzo, 2006, p. 54) is a component of their power (see, for example, Martin, 2011, p. 358). Indeed, ‘such an arrangement facilitates oversight and law-making as well as the formation of issue networks involving legislative, administrative and interest group specialists’ (Shaw, 1998, p. 230).

However, as mentioned above, the structure of the Italian committees is not the only dimension that makes them an interesting case study for our purposes. Explored in light of the aforementioned partisan approach, Italy matches the ideal-type of a case *under party control*: decisions on committee appointments are the monopoly of political parties.

Different procedures are at place for the selection of committee chairs and of single members. The position of committee chair has an inherent significance due to its formal pre-eminence and symbolic function and it grants some procedural prerogatives (De Micheli and Verzichelli, 2004, p. 173). Moreover, a committee chair often plays the functional equivalent of watchdog over junior ministers (Thies, 2001) in coalition governments (Kim and Loewenberg, 2005). In Italy, committee chairs belong to one of the parties in government,⁵ and, whilst formally elected by the House, parties are the major actors in the selection process, making party bonds the decisive factor for the choice, rather than seniority or other factors (Hazan, 2001, p. 38).

However, the selection process where the party control is more easily detectable concerns the role of simple *members*. In Italy, committee assignments are made on the basis of a proportional representation among party groups and thus reflect the relative strength of the parties in the parliament.⁶ Political parties decide on the distribution of posts and, as pointed out by Hazan (2001, p. 37): '[n]omination to committees is [...] solidly under party control, and each party works according to its own style'. Curini and Zucchini (2014, p. 529) have further suggested that 'it is reasonable to presume that party leaderships have always attempted to satisfy the preferences of MPs as far as possible, as it is also in the interest of the party as a whole to do so'.

The structural and procedural features reviewed so far converge in picturing the Italian committee system as particularly suitable for the inquiry we aim at.

4. Research hypotheses

Italy is generally depicted as a society still marked by strong gender inequalities. Gender inequalities manifest themselves in the labour market, where women employment rates remain low, especially in the Southern regions, and where, despite the number of women with university education exceeds the number of men, men tend to earn higher salaries and gain more significant positions (Barbieri *et al.*, 2007; World Economic Forum, 2014). Despite the introduction of some relevant normative changes, like the Golfo-Mosca Law No. 120/2011 on gender quotas in the boards of companies listed in the Stock Exchange, gender inequalities in the

⁵Unless the government party composition changes over the legislative term and no reshuffle occurs. With regard to this, art. 20 of the Regulations of the Chamber of Deputies states that committees' membership is renewed (and members can be confirmed) every two years after the first formation.

⁶Moreover, art. 19 of the Regulations of the Chamber of Deputies states that '[t]he President of the Chamber, according to parliamentary groups' proposals, allocates [...] among the Committees [...] the deputies who have not been assigned [...] after the first allocation] as well as those who belong to Groups whose size is lower than the number of Committees'.

economic sector are still one of the most striking aspects of Italian society. Relevant for the interpretation of these inequalities is the cultural background in which they are embedded. Italy remains a patriarchal and familistic (Ruspini, 2009) society, where women stereotypes are reproduced and favoured both at the private and the public level. The traditional vision of the family also reinforced by the strong influence of the Catholic Church (cf. Rule, 1987, pp. 481–484; Lilliefeldt, 2012, p. 196; Valiente, 2008, p. 127) tends to favour the relegation of women to sub-alternate positions and specific areas of the job market.

In light of this cultural and socio-economic background, it is easy to assume that societal values play a major role in determining women's chances of access to political power. Social attitudes towards women affect both the supply and the demand side of women's political participation: on the supply side, they may affect women's decisions to run for offices or positions of power; on the demand side, they may have an effect on voters' support for female politicians, thus influencing parties' support for female candidates (Paxton and Kunovich, 2003; see also Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). In a society where traditional expectations about the 'appropriate' role of women are still in place, and where women's socio-economic status is still low, it is possible to expect that gender differentiations will reproduce themselves in the political sphere and that political parties will not act to promote female candidates.

4.1 *The gendered division of labour*

Traditional values imply a gendered differentiation of roles in a society, where the difference between women's and men's 'appropriate' spheres of action is often described in light of the private/public divide. In the economic sphere, this results in the common acceptance of the traditional norm according to which men tend to specialise in paid work in the market, while women tend to specialise in unpaid work within the home environment. Within the job market, traditional gender differentiations result in considering women as more apt for jobs which fit the stereotypical idea of women as 'caring' and 'nurturing'. The so-called 'gender segregation' (Bloksgaard, 2011) in the labour market, however, goes along two different dimensions. Horizontal segregation refers to the distribution of men and women in different professional sectors and job functions, in line with the idea that certain jobs are more related to men's ascriptive characteristics while others to women's (Bloksgaard, 2011, p. 6). Vertical segregation refers to a hierarchical distribution of roles between men and women within a same professional sector and implies 'the fact that women will typically rank lower in the hierarchy concerning pay, opportunities for promotion, mobility and chances to enhance qualifications in their jobs than men' (Bloksgaard, 2011, p. 6).

International literature on women in politics has highlighted a similar trend in the appointment to political offices (Bækgaard and Kjær, 2012; Coffé and Schnelleke, 2013). Single-case and comparative studies have shown that the distribution of ministerial posts and committee seats are in line with a gendered—both horizontal and vertical—division of labour. In Italy, where socio-economic gender inequalities are even more striking than in other Western countries,⁷ we expect that political parties operate the selection of committee members in a way that reproduces traditional gender differences. On the basis of this, our first hypothesis is:

H1: *The division of labour hypothesis.* Women are over-represented in committees dealing with 'feminine' issues and in less prestigious committees and are under-represented in 'masculine' and more prestigious committees.

4.2 Party ideology

Left-wing parties are generally considered as more concerned with issues like equality and minority rights than conservative parties, which, on the other hand, seem to preserve a more traditional view of women's role (Rule, 1987). Both leftist parties' ideology and their traditional electoral body are more inclined to support the ideal of gender equality and the elimination of gender stereotypes. This results, as shown in a number of studies (Caul, 1999; Christmans-Best and Kjær, 2007; Wängnerud, 2009), in left-wing parties promoting more women candidates for parliamentary seats. The introduction of voluntary quotas in the PD in 2013 would testify to such trends also in the Italian case. However, a party's commitment to gender equality is expected not only to turn into a larger rate of female MPs, but also into the assignment to women of positions of power. This leads to our second hypothesis:

H2: *The ideology hypothesis.* Leftist parties are more inclined to assign to women seats in traditionally masculine or high prestige committees than rightist parties.

4.3 The gender-equality contagion

In the last few decades, the promotion of gender equality has achieved a prominent role in the international debate about social justice and has been included in the official proposals of a number of supra-national decision-making bodies. International attention to gender issues has grown considerably after the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA)

⁷The Global Gender Gap Report 2014 of the World Economic Forum lists Italy only at the 69th place in the world in terms of gender-equality, followed only by Greece, Malta, Hungary, Czech Republic and Romania among EU countries (World Economic Forum, 2014).

in 1995, where gender equality was placed at the centre of the global policy-making agenda.

The promotion of gender equality at the political level is testified by the progressive introduction of gender-quotas worldwide and by the increase in the percentage of female MPs in national parliaments and cabinets. [Jacob *et al.* \(2014, p. 323\)](#) show that the international recognition of a 'gender-balanced decision-making norm' has increasingly affected women's appointment in formal positions, although this seems to be more evident in the appointment to (low prestige) cabinet positions than in an increase in parliament representation. The growing consideration for women interests and empowerment at the international level and the widespread emergence of women politicians in Europe and worldwide may have led political parties of culturally more traditional countries to see the promotion of women to positions of power as at least an electoral resource (e.g. [Jalalzai and Krook, 2010](#); cf. [Campbell *et al.*, 2006](#)). Although left-wing parties may be more likely to incorporate this trend, it is possible to suggest that the influence of international opinion may have an impact on all parties in the political spectrum in light of the *contagion effect* ([Matland and Studlar, 1996](#)), according to which: 'one party in a multiparty system stimulates other parties to adopt their policies or strategies' ([Matland and Studlar, 1996, p. 708](#)). On the basis of this, in recent years we may expect a less 'gendered' distribution of committee positions between different parties:

H3: *The gender-equality contagion hypothesis.* From 1994 to 2013, equality in the distribution of committee seats in terms of gender and prestige increased along the entire political spectrum.

5. Findings

As anticipated, we looked at the composition of all permanent committees in the Italian Chamber of Deputies in the period 1994–2013 (XII–XVII legislative terms), that is, during the long transition subsequent to the breakdown of the so-called First Republic ([Almagisti *et al.*, 2014](#)). For our purposes, this time span is quite interesting: overall and compared with the former republican period, it witnessed a substantive increase in the rate of women in the parliament, that in 2013 reached the thresholds usually indicated as needed for a critical mass ([Studlar and McAllister, 2002](#)), as well as the larger increase in the number of women ministers, which moved from one in 1994 to seven in 2013.

To test our hypotheses, we distinguish Italian permanent committees between masculine-neutral-feminine committees and between high-medium-low prestige committees according to their field of competence. Information regards all the posts' allocations up to the final committees' formation excluding subsequent

changes occurred during the legislative term.⁸ Previous literature on women's committees assignment does not distinguish between a committee gender and prestige type, implicitly assuming that 'masculine' committees are the most prestigious, and vice versa (see Heath *et al.*, 2005; Coffé and Schnelleke, 2013; Barnes, 2014). However, if the prestige of a committee is defined on the basis of its visibility and access to resources, gender and prestige type classifications do not completely overlap: differences in terms of prestige may be found among both 'masculine' and 'feminine' committees. To solve this analytical blur, we follow Krook and O'Brien's (2012) classification of cabinet ministers by policy area in classifying Italian committees by both gender and prestige types. This choice is supported by the fact that Italian committees are, to an extent, mirrors of ministerial areas. When a committee deals with more than one policy area, we classify it according to the prevalent type. Krook and O'Brien's classification has the merit of being built upon established literature on societal gender divides and portfolios rankings as well as of being suitable for comparative research. Whereas the 'gender' of a committee is defined, in line with feminist literature, on the basis of the traditional and symbolic association of its field of competence to one gender or the other, the 'prestige' of a committee is defined on the basis of its access to financial resources and visibility (see Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson, 2005, p. 833; Krook and O'Brien, 2012, pp. 844–845).

5.1 *The division of labour hypothesis*

To test the presence of a gender bias, we show the presence of a pattern in the distribution of specific committees seats. In Table 1, we analyse women's representation in committees distinct by gender type.

We put in bold the values above the percentages referring to the whole Chamber. A pattern emerges: certain committees are constantly characterised by a degree of female representation that is higher than the general value of the Chamber, whereas others are always or almost always below the threshold. Two out of the three committees with a greater proportion of women in all the legislative terms fall in the so-called feminine domain. On the other hand, only three committees have always shown a percentage below the Chamber's value, and they belong to the masculine type. Moreover, if we take all the legislative terms and consider all the committees over the years, we see that only 22.2% of the masculine committees exceed the Chamber's value (12 times

⁸This means that we counted all the appointments, irrespective of the fact that some MPs left the post after being appointed to government posts. More specifically, for each legislative term we took into consideration the allocations up to: XII, 25 May 1994; XIII, 4 June 1996; XIV, 21 June 2001; XV, 6 June 2006; XVI, 22 May 2008; XVII, 7 May 2013. Henceforth, this applies to all the data presented.

Table 1 Percentage of women by committee gender type and by legislature, 1994–2013

	Legislative term					
	XII	XIII	XIV	XV	XVI	XVII
Chamber of Deputies	15.1	11.1	9.8	17.3	21.3	31.4
Committee type						
Masculine						
Constitutional, Presidency of the Council of Ministers and Interior Affairs	12.5	10	9.8	22.4	26.5	29.8
Foreign and European Community Affairs	13.2	9.2	11.5	10.6	14.6	32.6
Defence	12	12.3	6.1	12.2	10.9	20.9
Budget, Treasury and Planning	5.7	5.9	10.6	14	8	16.3
Finance	12.2	10	6.1	12.5	8.2	15.5
Transport, Post and Telecommunications	4	3.8	2.1	2	10.6	24.4
Economic Activities, Trade and Tourism	11.5	8	2.1	14.9	19.6	19.6
Public and Private Sector Employment	18.4	18	10.4	31.1	34.7	50
Agriculture	9.8	2	0	14.9	17.8	28.6
Neutral						
Justice	16.7	10	12.5	20.4	26.7	32.5
Environment, Territory and Public Works	18.4	8.5	17	13	19.1	26.1
European Union Policies		13	10.2	16.7	12	36.4
Feminine						
Culture, Science and Education	37	24.5	28.3	29.8	46.8	51.1
Social Affairs	17.3	22.4	34.8	35.5	46.9	46.7

Sources: Own calculation with data from IPU (2015) and the websites of the Chamber of Deputies camera.it and www.camera.it. Note: Entries in bold refer to percentages above the Chamber's value.

out of 54);⁹ in contrast, the numbers raise up to 58.8% in the case of neutral committees and eventually to 100% for feminine committees.

Table 2 describes the distribution of female MPs distinguishing the committees according to their prestige. Data show that women are under-represented in high prestige committees and over-represented in low prestige settings. Only 20% of times when a high prestige committee is formed, was the rate of women above the Chamber's value, whereas it occurred 81.8% of times with regard to low prestige committees. Medium prestige sub-groups are placed in the middle with a value of 45.2%. Even looking only at those committees where women are over-represented, feminine and low prestige committees have the lion's share of female representation.

Data about women's appointments to Italian parliamentary committees thus confirm our *division of labour hypothesis*: in the period under scrutiny, women have been assigned to feminine committees sensibly more than to masculine committees, and to low prestige committees more than to high prestige committees. Women are 'better' represented in neutral and, especially, feminine committees,

⁹The percentage falls to 12.5% if the exceptional case of the Labour committee is excluded.

Table 2 Percentage of women by committee prestige type and by legislature, 1994–2013

Committee	Legislative term					
	XII	XIII	XIV	XV	XVI	XVII
Chamber of deputies	15.1	11.1	9.8	17.3	21.3	31.4
Committee type						
High prestige						
Constitutional, presidency of the council of ministers and interior affairs	12.5	10	9.8	22.4	26.5	29.8
Foreign and European community affairs	13.2	9.2	11.5	10.6	14.6	32.6
Defence	12	12.3	6.1	12.2	10.9	20.9
Budget, treasury and planning	5.7	5.9	10.6	14	8	16.3
Finance	12.2	10	6.1	12.5	8.2	15.5
Medium prestige						
Justice	16.7	10	12.5	20.4	26.7	32.5
Environment, territory and public works	18.4	8.5	17	13	19.1	26.1
Transport, post and telecommunications	4	3.8	2.1	2	10.6	24.4
Economic activities, trade and tourism	11.5	8	2.1	14.9	19.6	19.6
Public and private sector employment	18.4	18	10.4	31.1	34.7	50
Social affairs	17.3	22.4	34.8	35.5	46.9	46.7
Agriculture	9.8	2	0	14.9	17.8	28.6
Low prestige						
Culture, science and education	37	24.5	28.3	29.8	46.8	51.1
European Union policies		13	10.2	16.7	12	36.4

Note: See Table 1.

with the significant exception of the Public and Private Sector Employment (Labour) committee (Tables 1 and 2). Women's appointments to Italian parliamentary committees reproduce the pattern of both a horizontal and a vertical division of labour highlighted by international studies.

5.2 The ideology hypothesis

We now observe variations across party families. We classified parliamentary groups (1994–2013) into two broad ideological categories: left and right parties. Since the used left-right scale goes from 1 (extreme left) to 20 (extreme right), we put those parties with a (mean) scale value ranging 1 to 10.5 in the first category and those higher than 10.5 in the second.¹⁰

¹⁰We refer to Benoit and Laver (2006); Giannetti and De Giorgi (2006); Curini and Iacus (2008); Di Virgilio *et al.* (2015) for party placement. The groups are composed as follows, from left to right: *left*—PRC, SEL, PDCI, Verdi, Progressive/DS, Ulivo/PD, RNP, M5S, PPI/Margherita, RI, IDV; *right*—UDEUR, NPSI, SC, CCD/UDC, FI, PDL, AN, FDI, LN. Only groups formed at the start of each legislative term are taken into account. Mixed groups, namely, those groups made up of MPs who have not entered any party parliamentary group in the legislature at issue are excluded.

First, we looked at committees' chairs. From 1994 to 2013, only 9 out of 83 (10.8%) chairs were women, with no particular variations across legislative terms.¹¹ Six women belonged to the left (*Ulivo*/DS; PD and PPI), and three to the right (FI and PDL). The only committee that has been chaired by a woman in more than one case is Justice (three cases); all the others (Constitutional, Presidency of the Council and Interior Affairs; Defence; Culture; Environment, Territory and Public Works; Social Affairs; European Union Policies) have been chaired by a woman only once. Furthermore, the only two women chairing a masculine and high prestige committee belonged to leftist parties (*Ulivo* and PPI).

Second, we analysed the overall distribution of women in committees. In this respect, we observed the distribution, *within left and right*, of women appointed by committee type for the whole period under analysis. We compared the resulting percentages with the percentage of women who should be in each type *if* they were appointed without any (positive or negative) gender bias ('unbiased distribution').¹² In both cases, the percentages refer to the rate of women appointed to a committee type over the total of female MPs. The results are pictured in Figures 1 and 2.

The findings are not straightforward, but they allow us to infer some (cautious) conclusions. Left-wing parties have somehow acted in contrast to the general trend of women representation in parliamentary committees as far as feminine and low prestige committees are concerned, which goes against the expectation regarding in

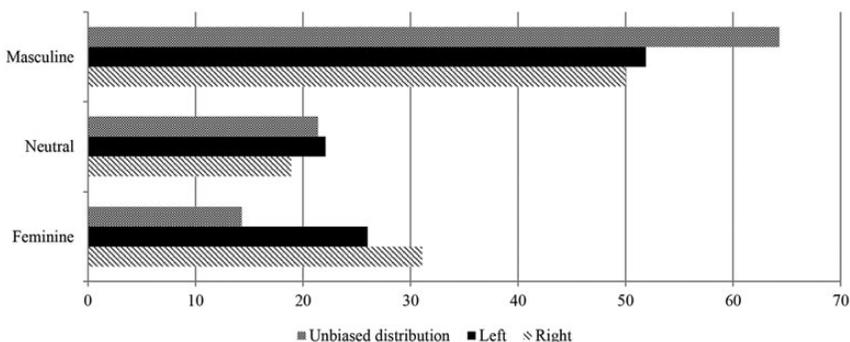


Figure 1. Percentage distribution of women by gender committee type and ideological group. Sources: Own calculation with data from storia.camera.it and www.camera.it

¹¹The highest number is three in the XIII and the lowest 0 in the XIV.

¹²The unbiased distribution hypothetically assumes that female MPs are distributed to committees in a way proportional to the size of each committee type. We then calculate the percentage of committees (over the total of committees in the Chamber) for each type. For the sake of simplicity, in Figures 1 and 2 we counted 14 committees also for the XII legislative term and irrespective of the number of members of each committee in each legislature, assuming they are exactly the same.

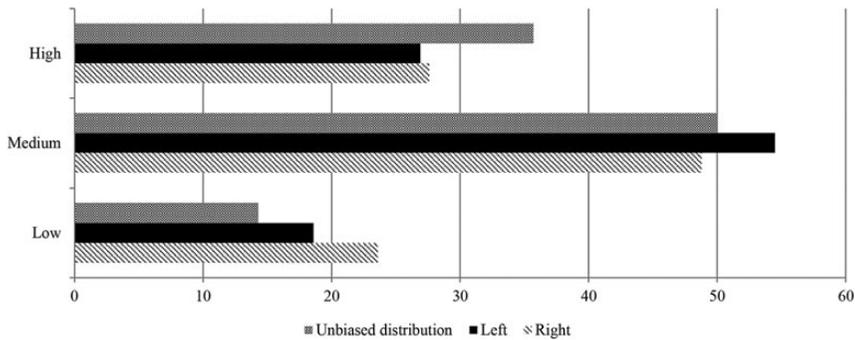


Figure 2. Percentage distribution of women by prestige committee type and ideological group. Sources: See Figure 1

particular high prestige committees. In this case, right-wing parties seem to promote their female MPs slightly more than left-wing parties. It is also worth noting that differences between ideological groups sensibly shrink with respect to masculine committees. Finally, when it comes to appoint to 'mid' committees (neutral and medium prestige), the two groups approximate the hypothetical unbiased representation with regard to both types, with some significant exceeding's on the part of the left in medium prestige committees.

5.3 *The gender-equality contagion hypothesis*

In order to observe variations in committee appointments in Italy over the last 20 years, we disaggregated the data of Figures 1 and 2 for each legislative term and we aggregated the data of the two ideological groups. Once again, we calculated the hypothetical 'unbiased distribution' for each legislative term.¹³ The more the percentage rate of women appointed to a type over the total of female MPs approximates to the relevant 'unbiased distribution' line (see above), the less the allocation is gender biased.

Quite interestingly, the graphs show a certain trend towards a gender-neutral allocation in the current legislature as far as gender type is concerned (Figure 3). Indeed, an increase in the percentage of women appointed in traditionally masculine domains goes together with a decrease in the number of posts allocated to feminine committees. However, values do not follow the same trajectory with regard to prestige types, and low prestige committees in particular (Figure 4); however, the percentage of women in low prestige committees had not been distant from the

¹³Since the total number of committees and the committees distribution into types are fixed for the whole period, with the exception of the XII legislative term, the 'unbiased distribution' lines are almost entirely flat over time.

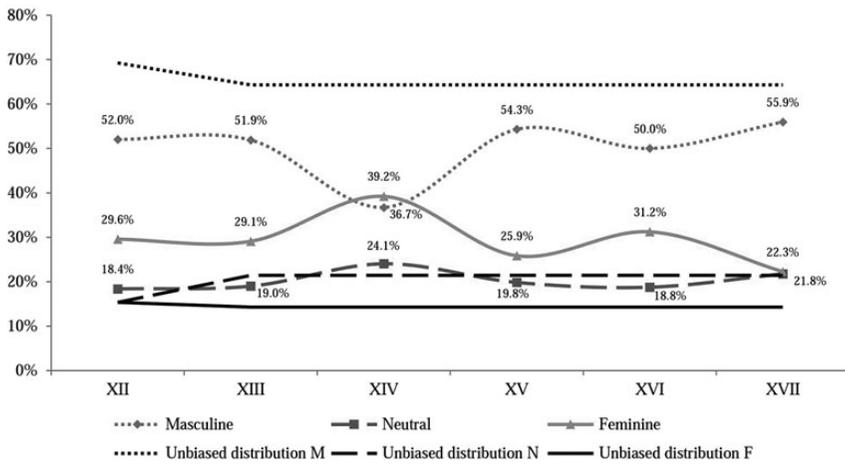


Figure 3. Percentage distribution of women by gender committee type and legislature, 1994–2013. Sources: See Figure 1

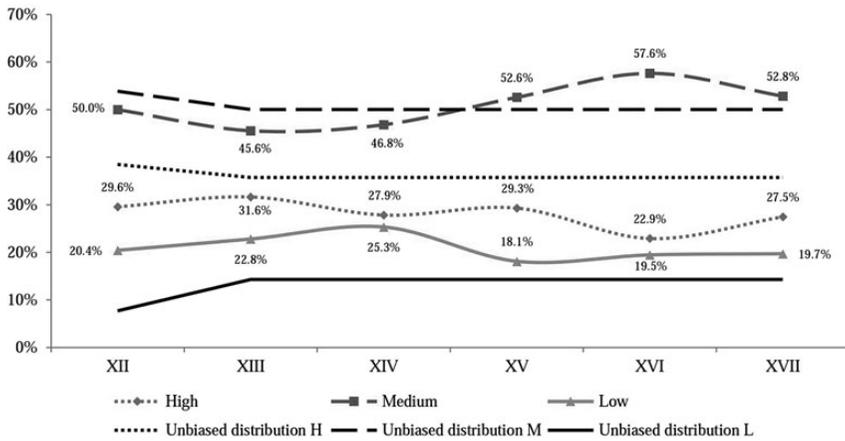


Figure 4. Percentage distribution of women by prestige committee type and legislature, 1994–2013. Sources: See Figure 1

respective ‘unbiased distribution’ since the XV legislative term. Moreover, if one looks at the fluctuations over time between committee gender types, it is possible to point out that the two legislatures in which the disproportion in terms of female representation between feminine and masculine committees have been the greatest are those characterised by a centre-right majority and a centre-right government (Conti and Marangoni, 2015): accordingly, the egalitarian trend could be only temporary and could depend on the parliament’s party composition (see ideology hypothesis with regard to gender types) and not on some general

'ungendering' process. Overall, the trends are not straightforward and the contagion hypothesis cannot be unquestionably confirmed.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of the Italian case confirms the presence of a gender-biased selection of parliamentary committee members. Italian female MPs tend to be appointed to committees dealing with stereotypical 'feminine' and 'gender-neutral' policy areas in higher proportion than their male counterparts—with the significant exception of the Public and Private Sector Employment Committee, in which female presence remains high along all the six legislatures under scrutiny—as well as to be over-represented in low and especially medium prestige committees. The vertical and horizontal 'division of labour' that characterises the Italian socio-economic structure is thus reflected in politics, where committee assignments made by parties are led by stereotypical attitudes towards women.

In contrast to our expectations, party ideology does not show a clear effect on the extent to which horizontal and vertical marginalisation are limited or reproduced. Leftist ideology and the explicit party commitment to social equality play a role in the distribution of women in committee seats in terms of committees' gender type: leftist parties appointed women to masculine committees in a slightly higher degree than rightist parties, and, more prominently, assigned women to feminine committees in a significantly lower degree than rightist parties. However, quite surprisingly, rightist parties score slightly better than leftist parties in promoting women to high prestige committees, although showing also a higher degree of women appointments to low prestige committees.

Longitudinal analysis shows that no significant change has occurred in the course of the six legislatures under scrutiny, and that differences in the assignment of committee seats continue to be reproduced along traditional gender lines. Accordingly, political parties' decisions on committee assignment seem not to be generally affected by a form of international 'contagion' about the promotion of women equality in politics. Rather, variations in the allocations of women to committees posts seem to be affected by the party composition of the government: in the presence of centre-right majorities (XIV and XVI legislative terms in particular), inequality clearly increases in relation to gender type, thus indirectly confirming our ideology hypothesis. Less straightforward results, however, are present when comparing right-wing and left-wing legislatures for women's appointments to committees by prestige type.

In sum, the analysis of the evolution over time of gender differentiations in the assignments of committee positions does not allow us to identify a clear variation in favour of a more unbiased selection. Although in 2013 women's representation in 'masculine' and 'feminine' committees reaches, respectively, its highest and its

lowest points, a similar trend does not occur with regard to prestige type. This result may be explained, following Jacob *et al.*, (2014), by assuming that the effects of the societal diffusion of the value of gender equality is reproduced in politics only for what concerns more *symbolic* aspects, like in the appointment of women to (low prestige) ministerial posts, and, in our case, in the attenuation of the horizontal 'division of labour' in committees appointments. In contrast, gender inequalities are maintained for what concerns less visible, although influential, political appointments. This assumption may be supported by the increase in the percentage of women ministers in the two Italian governments (Letta, 2013; Renzi, 2014) that have followed the 2013 elections (Marangoni and Verzichelli, 2014), to which no significant change in the pattern of allocation of high prestige committee seats corresponds.

Another possible explanation of the absence of a trend in favour of an unbiased selection in committees appointments can be drawn from Heath *et al.*'s theory of 'newcomers marginalisation', according to which 'as representation to women in a chamber increases, they become a growing threat to male domination' of scarce political resources (2005, p. 423; see also Barnes, 2014). As supported by Heath *et al.*'s results, an increase in women's presence in the parliament may lead to further segregation to low prestige committees posts. Accordingly, newcomers marginalisation theory may suggest that the increase of female representatives in the Italian parliament may also result in further marginalisation, thus mitigating the effects of the international gender-equality contagion with particular reference to high prestige committee membership. Moreover, newcomers marginalisation theory may explain also differences at the party level. Parties with higher numbers of female MPs may experience a sort of 'newcomers effect' in higher degree than parties where the representation of women remains low, thus containing the effects of the gender equality contagion. In the Italian case, a higher percentage of women MPs is traditionally located within left-wing parties, while right-wing parties generally exhibit percentages of women below—and, in certain cases, considerably below—the Chamber's value. Accordingly, right-wing parties may experience the newcomers effect in a less intense degree than left-wing parties, and thus be less inclined to consider women as a group as a possible threat to access to positions of power. This interpretation may explain to an extent the only partial confirmation of our ideology hypothesis, based on the higher degree of women's representation in high prestige committees for right-wing parties in comparison to left-wing parties.

Our study has shown that gender bias in the selection of committee members is currently an enduring characteristic of Italian politics. It is worth noting, however, that only in the last elections women in the national parliament have surpassed 30% and have reached the proportion generally considered necessary for the presence of a critical mass. Future data will show whether the increase in women's

representation will confirm Heath *et al.*'s (2005) hypothesis, showing a further marginalisation of women in committee assignment; or whether the persistence of a high rate of women in the legislature may induce permanent changes in favour of less biased party selection of committee members. To put it in Barnes' (2014, p. 136) terms, it will show whether 'women's access to legislative committee appointments changes as women learn to navigate the legislative arena.' Future studies, moreover, may focus on an assessment of the differences between male and female MPs' committee appointments in light of their area of competence, investigated on the basis of their previous political career and professional background, following, for example, in the steps of Zucchini's (2001) study on Italian parliamentarians and of studies on female ministers' careers such as Taylor-Robinson and Escobar-Lemmon (2014). Lastly, studies aiming at investigating female MPs' preferences prior to committee appointments (Bækgaard and Kjær, 2012) may offer further assessment of parties' style in membership selection.

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Conflict of interest

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