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How Italian Female Local and National Politicians Perceive and Cope with Obstacles in a Gatekeeping Political Culture

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Abstract

In spite of decades of women's political battles, there is a persistent underrepresentation of women in legislative bodies, with only 23.8% in 2018. In this chapter, we discuss theories and empirical studies that have explored what kind of obstacles female politicians are more likely to meet and how they cope with them, when they face more hurdles, and why we need more women elected to political office. Furthermore, we report the results of several studies, which have involved 233 Italian national politicians (46% females), 425 local politicians (56% females), 626 political activists (44% females), and 3249 ordinary citizens (49% females). Results of these studies show that female politicians face mainly external obstacles as the gatekeeping theory maintains. Women find obstacles all along their political career supporting labyrinth hypotheses. Females at all levels of political involvement scored higher in self-transcendence values that emphasize concern for the welfare of others, partially confirming the politics of presence theory. Female politicians were also more open to change and less conservation oriented than their male colleagues. Our findings in general support ethical struggles for a more balanced gender representation.

Keywords: female politicians, gatekeeping, gender differences, personal values, obstacles facing women in politics

1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is primarily twofold. First, we seek to identify which obstacles among those postulated by different theories are hardest to cope with for female local and national politicians, and when in their career paths they face most difficulties. Elected women tend in fact to leave politics more often than men (revolving door syndrome); thus, knowing which obstacles they face more frequently will permit us to focus on political battles more precisely. The second aim of this chapter is to document why in this individualistic world, burdened with huge economic inequalities and environmental problems, we need to have more women in local and national political positions. We present empirical data that show that female and male voters differ in core political values and in their basic values, women score higher in self-transcendence values which emphasize concern for the welfare of others, and for the environment, while men have higher

self-enhancement (power and achievement) values. Then, we present scientific evidence in favor of theorists of the politics of presence hypothesis that these gender differences among voters persist even when women are elected to political positions and have to operate in male-dominated contexts. Finally, we argue that it is crucial to have a large number of women in powerful political positions since they may support different policy priorities that will allow us to better handle the main social and political challenges we face today.

Women are underrepresented in politics in most countries (on average in the world, 23.8% of women are in national parliaments) [1]. Different theories try to explain this persistent political gender gap in legislative bodies. Some theories have explored what kind of obstacles female politicians are more likely to encounter and how they cope with them. Researchers in this area have varied academic backgrounds, ranging from sociology, political science, and political psychology to gender studies. They have thus emphasized obstacles hypothesized by one or two specific theories focusing either on societal structure, institutional aspects which hindered women's access to political career, or explored the theories which examined hurdles women encounter after being elected (e.g., gatekeeping, gender stereotypes, work-family balance, and attitudes of mass media) [2]. Other theories have focused on when women encounter most obstacles. The "glass ceiling" theoretical approach maintains that women find more obstacles primarily on approaching high leadership roles. "Labyrinth" theory supporters instead argue that women encounter more obstacles than men all along their careers paths [2, 3]. Theorists of the politics of presence [4] have focused on why we need more women elected to political office hypothesizing that they have personality traits and hold values different from their male colleagues.

In this chapter, we discuss these theoretical approaches and the results of several studies, which have involved 233 Italian national politicians (46% females), 425 local politicians (56% females), 626 political activists (44% females), and 3249 ordinary citizens (49% females).

The first part of our research with female politicians aimed to build two reliable instruments: (WO) Women's Perceived Obstacles and (WOC) Women's Coping Efficacy in Politics, to explore which kind of hurdles postulated by different theories such as gatekeeping, gender role, mass media, and work and family balance were more present for women elected to local and national offices and how women coped with different kinds of obstacles they encountered. We also tried to ascertain whether women find hurdles all along their political career as labyrinth theorists hypothesize or primarily when competing for top political positions as glass ceiling supporters maintain. Furthermore, we examined how personality traits and personal values account for political career self-efficacy beliefs and career progression, among women legislators, since no published studies have tried to examine how dispositional variables and self-efficacy beliefs operate in concert to account for women's political career progression, in samples of women elected to top positions such as members of parliament.

The objective of our last study, that involved both men and women elected to political office, was to test the theory of presence that hypothesizes that women and men hold diverse interests and values and that women elected would still have similar values to women and therefore represent them more adequately than their male colleagues.

2. What kind of obstacles are women more likely to encounter in their political career and how they cope with them

Several studies from various theoretical viewpoints have tried to understand which factors promote or undermine women's political career [2, 5]. Structural

approach supporters maintain that women's underrepresentation in politics might be related to their past lower social status, lower levels of education, lower control of financial capitals, and fewer work occasions [5]. The institutional approach focuses on the role of: party rules and electoral laws, and access to funds for campaigning, in hindering or favoring women's political participation [2, 5].¹ The gatekeeping approach suggests that men systematically control all the most relevant political positions and literally keep the gates shut to women, by excluding them on purpose at the entry level and opposing their career progress [4, 6]. Alternatively, family and work balancing theories [7] claim that it is harder for women to be elected and remain in high political offices since their family responsibilities limit their career opportunities [3, 5].

Gender differences theories maintain that many cultural and personal factors, such as political empowerment, influence women's political experiences [5, 8]. Theorists who employ the term gender differences emphasize that these differences develop from acquired social expectations of what masculine and feminine means and that political underrepresentation of women is related to the characteristics conventionally associated to men and women [2, 9]. Theorists of mass media and political personalization highlight the importance of successfully campaigning to be elected in politic office. As politics has become more personalized, individual characteristics of politicians (e.g., their values, their personality traits, and their appearance) have a greater impact than in the past and the role of mass media has become more fundamental in drawing attention to the personal characteristics of politicians [10]. According to the *mass-media* hypothesis, women in politics have more difficulties to access media than men and are represented differently [11].

A close review of the literature reveals that few studies have involved top and middle level women politicians to investigate if they perceive the obstacles they encounter in their political career as deriving from situational, gatekeeping, gender differences, or mass media variables, and most of all, how they cope with them. Empirical studies in this field, involving women politicians, are scarce and reveal contrasting findings.

For instance, some studies indicated that women politicians have problems remaining in politics because of family issues [12]. Others [13], instead, have shown that most female members of parliament were aided by partners, children, and parents.

¹ The last Italian Electoral law (2017), has a mixed voting system: 37% of seats are gained using a first past the post electoral system and 61% using a proportional system (one round of voting). Also this new electoral law (also known also as Rosato) enables the same candidate to run for more offices simultaneously. In the past the multiple candidacy has allowed, party leaders to control the rank-and-file by promoting the election of those candidates who were most loyal to the leader. With the Rosato election law, however, this is no longer possible since when the candidate is elected in more than one multi-member constituency, they are given the seat in the constituency where their party has the lowest percentage of votes. Moreover, a candidate elected both in a single-member district and in one or more multi-member districts wins the seat of single-member district. Concerning gender equality the Rosato law requires that party lists must be filled using the 'zipper' system. Furthermore, none of the candidates from the same party can be present in single-member districts or at the top of the list more than 60% of the time. Although the Rosato law tried to promote the equal representation of women, in the last election (2018) in Italy, though women comprised 44% of the total population of candidates for the Chamber, the percentage of women among elected deputies was just 36%. The multiple candidacy system was partially responsible for this result, since, according to the zipper system the seats left vacant by elected women were assigned to male candidates from the same party. In our interviews many women complained that the committees who decided placement on electoral lists had primarily male components and put women in locations where the party had fewer chances to fare well. (Data available at: <https://constitution-unit.com/2018/05/08/how-italy-experienced-yet-another-electoral-system-and-why-it-may-soon-change-it-again/>).

Contradictory results emerge also with respect to gatekeeping. Most studies show ample evidence of discriminatory behaviors. Powerful men do not place female colleagues in strategic political positions [12], do not put many women on electoral lists [14], or insert them in the most unelectable places [15]. Male politicians marginalize women colleagues by not communicating vital information [13] or verbally assaulting them and interrupting them even when they are head of a meeting [16]. Moreover, male politicians tend to make negative remarks on the femininity of assertive female colleagues [17] and to assign women politicians mostly to health, education, equal opportunities, and welfare committees [18]. Furthermore, they devalue the success of women politicians by giving to “luck” the credit for their achievements [18]. These negative behaviors by colleagues have been found to push women to leave the offices more often than their male colleagues (the “revolving door syndrome”) [13]. Other studies reveal that men also tend to resent successful women in politics, especially if they are married and have children [19]. Some research studies, however, found that powerful women also act as gatekeepers toward their younger female colleagues and do not team up to support their colleagues [13]. A few studies show also that women candidates receive as much support as their male colleagues [20].

With respect to individual characteristics of politicians, contrasting results emerge regarding political ambition [21]. Moreover, women politicians face today a cultural double bind since typical male behaviors are considered inappropriate for a woman and typical female behaviors are inappropriate for a politician [22]. Various authors [23] argue that a “feminized” conception of politics has emerged, in which the concept of leadership is related to the ability to help groups to work together to solve problems. This contrasts with the traditional view of politics as a fight to obtain power for one’s party and defeat the others [23]. Other researches confirm this trend [24] revealing that leadership styles of politicians show significant gender differences: female politicians tend to use a leadership style that pursues consensus, while male politicians, a style that pursues personal power and control.

Moreover, as Stevens points out we still do not know which personal qualities women politicians need to persist in their political career and to gain leading political positions, maintaining their beliefs and values [2]. She hypothesizes that for women politicians to achieve these goals, personal empowerment and a blend of feminine and masculine characteristics might be very important [2].

Research on media and politics indicates that there is often a misrepresentation of women (e.g., more comments on their appearance and family, and less on their policies) and that women politicians appear less frequently in the media (e.g., they are less present in talk shows) [11].

A review of most empirical studies and theoretical approaches highlights that the obstacles encountered by women politicians can be divided into two broad categories: (a) the first “inner obstacles” are supported mostly by the gender and difference theory and work and family balance theory (e.g., such ambivalence toward total commitment to politics (long hours, high stress levels, highly competitive environment, etc.)) and (b) “external obstacles” are supported mostly by mass media and gatekeeping theories (e.g., masculine cultures; restricting entry into politics or to higher political positions or institutional party practices that hinder women; difficulties to gain access to media) [25].

Which of these challenges are more difficult to overcome by women politicians, and with which types of obstacles they cope better? Reviewing the existing literature, we had difficulties answering these questions, since to our knowledge there is lack of studies that included specific instruments measuring internal and external obstacles that women politicians encounter and how they cope with them.

Our initial research [25] aimed therefore to build and validate specific instruments. We developed a Women Obstacles scale (WO), which included perceived obstacles derived from the four main theories. Furthermore, we built a scale called Women Coping Efficacy in Politics (WOC), which explored how well women politicians can cope with these obstacles.

A sample of 349 Italian women politicians either elected to the national parliament ($N = 109$, 68.8%) or to local councils ($N = 240$, 10%) participated in this study. Participants' age varied from 18 to 78 years (mean age = 47.18; $SD = 10.6$), and they were all administered the WO, WOC scales, the Big Five Questionnaire (BFQ), and the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ). About 70 women were also interviewed in depth, and all could answer open-ended questions in a section of the survey. Our findings with respect to the WO scale show a two-dimensional scale: women in politics perceived both external and internal obstacles. Male gatekeeping behaviors and also lack of women mentors and discriminatory acts put in practice by other powerful political women were external hurdles most often perceived by female politicians. Also, difficulties with media were often mentioned. Internal obstacles included primarily feeling ambivalent to compete for positions of high power in politics because women disliked the highly competitive and conflictual work environment and feeling unable to balance family and work [25].

The WOC scale resulted in a clear-cut four-factor structure of personal capabilities resembling the above-mentioned theoretical approaches: efficacy (1) in gaining access to mass media (e.g., "I can always gain visibility through television"), (2) in balancing work and family burden (e.g., "I can always manage my political task without sacrificing my private life"), (3) in self-empowering (e.g., "I can always pursue ambitious goals more effectively than my male colleagues"), and (4) in contrasting male gatekeeping (e.g., "I can always hold my own view when dealing with very powerful men") [25].

Having validated the WO and WOC scales we then began to explore the rather controversial question of when female politicians encounter most hurdles.

3. When do female politicians encounter most obstacles?

In this research, we used the WO and WOC scales to ascertain if women find hurdles all along their political career as labyrinth theorists hypothesize or primarily when competing for top political positions as glass ceiling theorists maintain. The second aim was to explore which kind of hurdles among those postulated by gatekeeping, gender role, mass media, and work and family balance theorists were more present for women elected to local and national office and how well they coped with these obstacles.

Supporters of "glass ceiling" theory think that women encounter obstacles primarily when they approach high leadership roles [26]. Eagly and Carli [3] have argued that the glass ceiling interpretation is misleading because it erroneously implies that women have equal access to entry or middle level positions, facing obstacles only at the top. They underline that, compared to men, female politicians have to go through a "labyrinth" beset with obstacles all along their career paths. Given the widespread underrepresentation of women in elected political positions in most countries, it would be crucial to ascertain which theory best explains the difficulties women encounter in a traditionally male field such as politics. Yet, the available empirical studies of female politicians do not permit us to favor either the glass ceiling or the labyrinth hypothesis. Reviewing the literature, we found that most studies had involved only women elected to local office, and few have

involved national and local politicians at the same time; so we do not know which obstacles are perceived by women politicians at any level, as labyrinth theory would predict, and which prevail primarily at higher levels of political achievement, as glass ceiling theory would predict. Even less was known about how elected women politicians cope with and overcome the obstacles they were likely to find, and which they found more difficult to cope with. So we did a pilot study [13], based primarily on interviews with male and female local politicians but with a small sample of national male and female representatives. We found that the national congresswomen, being on average over 55, were less likely than local representatives to report problems balancing family-work obligations. Half of the national congresswomen had no children, while the other half had grown children. Compared to women of the political left, women of the right felt better able to balance work-family requirements, reporting receiving much support from husbands, children, and their own parents or relatives. They also felt more ready to occupy high positions in spite of their male colleagues' opposition. They could envision themselves as party leaders in the future more often than women of the left. The women of the left were more likely to state that they had problems showing their ambition too openly, did not feel qualified enough for top positions, and did not want to face the extreme competition and conflict that reaching a top position usually entails. Right-wing local and national politicians also had significantly higher scores on an empowerment scale than their left-wing peers, especially in the subscale measuring leadership propensity and capacity to reach goals.

Then, we did another study [27] in which we confronted two competing theories (glass ceiling or labyrinth) on why women still represent a small minority of elected politicians. We hypothesized that the labyrinth hypothesis would be sustained, and both local (lower level) and national (higher level) women politicians would report similar obstacles in pursuing their political careers. We also wanted to investigate how women elected coped with these obstacles, taking into account our previous study [13], we hypothesized that right-wing politicians would have greater self-reported ability to cope with the obstacles presented by mass media, work-family balance, and gatekeeping. We used the same sample of 349 local and national politicians involved in the study on perceived obstacles, analyzing in more depth the differences in answers to both WO and WOC between local and national politicians.

Our results on the WO overall seem to give more support to the labyrinth theory: both local and national politicians perceived more external obstacles, deriving primarily from hostile attitudes of their male colleagues, as gatekeeping theory (e.g., see [4, 6]) would predict. Internal obstacles included having trouble conciliating political engagements and family commitments, as other studies have shown [12], and also feeling ill at ease with some aspect of political life. For instance, top political positions were perceived as too stressful and demanding, so some women chose not to compete for them because they did not want to live "mutilated" lives, a choice that supports gender stereotype theories [23].

In general, results on the WOC showed a similar pattern for both local and national politicians, giving further indirect support to the labyrinth hypothesis. Both groups found it hardest to cope with the difficulties of accessing media, particularly national television, and easiest to confront male colleagues who exhibited gatekeeping attitudes and behaviors. Both groups had an intermediate level of difficulty in keeping their sense of empowerment high.

Local women were more able than national women to remain empowered and maintain high self-esteem even in the face of difficulties. This might depend on their younger age. However, further analysis showed that age affected only the perceived ability to conciliate public and private life. More specifically, women over 50 reported more perceived efficacy in coping with conciliation.

3.1 Interaction effects between political orientation and level of political engagement

We had hypothesized, on the basis of the earlier pilot study [13], that right-wing women politicians would portray themselves as better able to cope with obstacles. Our hypothesis has been confirmed in all four typologies of problems: balance issues, access to media, maintaining high levels of empowerment, and gatekeeping. National women politicians of the left also perceived more internal and external obstacles (WO) than the other groups, confirming the trend found in the pilot study [13]. The national women of the left also described themselves as less able to cope than the other groups in accessing the media, in feeling empowered, and in confronting gatekeeping behaviors. The glass ceiling theory thus derives some support from this particular group of politicians. What might explain this peculiarity?

We can hypothesize that women of the left have been in parliament for a longer time in Italy (while most women politicians of the right have increased their presence only in the last two decades). They thus may be more aware both from historical and personal experiences of the difficulties women politicians still face in a highly masculine culture. It is also conceivable that right-wing ideologies favor some forms of personal empowerment: right-wing ideals have always emphasized the rightfulness of hierarchies, perhaps making it easier for a national woman politician on the right to feel ambitious and empowered, while leftist ideologies have tended to promote egalitarianism, making it perhaps harder to legitimize aspiring to top positions. Right-wing women politicians may also be drawn from a pool of well-born local notables, who feel empowered from their family background. They may have personality traits, which propel them to more optimistic views and greater self-confidence in their ability to overcome obstacles.

4. Exploring traits and values as determinant of political orientation and perceived career efficacy

Personality has a critical role in political orientation [10]; however, while most studies have relied on direct methods when assessing personality of voters, most of the research on personality of politicians relied on indirect measures [28]. In this study [29], we compared 106 women members of parliament and 864 voters using the Big Five questionnaire and Schwartz's basic values questionnaire. Schwartz focuses on 10 motivationally distinct basic values: self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, and universalism. These can be grouped into four broader dimensions: self-enhancement (power and achievement), which includes pursuit of self-interest; self-transcendence (universalism and benevolence), which underlines concern for the welfare of others; openness to change (self-direction and stimulation), which emphasizes independence of thought and action and readiness for new experience; and conservation (security, conformity and tradition), which includes self-restriction, order, and resistance to change. Hedonism is not clearly located in one of the four dimensions, as it shares elements of both openness and self-enhancement. All of these values are measured through a Portrait Values Questionnaire, which has been tested and evaluated in more than 50 countries [30]. In this research [29], with female members of the parliament we examined the extent to which differences in traits and values contribute to ideological orientation of politicians and voters of rival coalitions. We found that traits and values contributed more to partisanship of politicians than of voters, and that there were higher significant differences in traits and values of left-wing and right-wing female politicians than of right-wing and left-wing voters. Since no males were included in this study, we could not examine gender differences.

In another research [31], we examined the potential explanatory role of personality traits and values as determinants of perceived political career efficacy and career progression in women elected to the national parliaments.

Our findings show that political women with higher levels of extraversion are more likely to attain higher scores in perceived self-efficacy in contrasting male gatekeeping, in balancing work and family duties, in gaining access to mass media, as well as in being able to set and pursue ambitious political goals. Our results are consistent with similar studies in organizational psychology, which maintain that extraversion is advantageous in job settings due to its positive relation to career decidedness, goal stability, and cognitive clarity [32]. Among personal values, self-transcendence had a greater impact since it was positively associated with two forms of efficacy: in dealing with gatekeeping and empowerment obstacles. These results confirm in part previous studies that have shown the importance of holding universalistic values for political efficacy and participation [33]. Moreover, a tied comparison of traits and values revealed that personality traits “trumped” personal values in the prediction of career efficacy beliefs.

With respect to prediction of career progression—operatively defined as the difference between the age at which each participant started her political activity and the age at which she was elected for the first time (the smaller the difference is, the quicker the career)—we were able to show not only that both traits (particularly extraversion) and values were correlated with this objective career outcome but also that personality is likely to have a distal effect on career outcomes that is mediated by career efficacy beliefs (particularly empowerment).

5. Why is it important to have more female politicians elected: gender differences in personal values of national and local Italian politicians, activists, and voters

The last decades have witnessed a strong debate over women’s underrepresentation in politics. Politics of presence supporters [4] maintain that it does matter who is a representative, and that is very important for women to be involved in setting the agenda, since women and men hold different interests and values. According to this theoretical approach, female politicians’ behaviors, attitudes, and values should mirror those of women voters [34]. Politics of presence can be studied analyzing political choices and activities of female politicians, but Lovenduski and Norris [35] maintain that behavioral measures (e.g., legislative voting) are influenced by backbench activities and offer therefore a limited view of the impact of women in politics and that an alternative systematic and reliable method to attest the hypotheses of the politics of presence theory is analyzing attitudes and values of females and male representatives. Indeed, if women and male politicians do hold similar values, then it will be rather questionable that women in public office can really make a difference (e.g., supporting “women’s issues”). Values are envisioned and assessed in different ways by political scientists and by social and personality psychologists. The former include mostly in their research “core political values” such as social equality, civil right, liberty of expression, etc. (e.g., see [36]), while personality psychologists focus in their studies on “basic personal values.” Basic personal values theory [30] defines values as desirable, trans-situational goals that serve as guiding principles in people’s lives. Different studies [37] maintain that focusing on personal values is relevant since it allows us to predict how people elected in public office might conduct themselves in unpredicted circumstances. In addition, basic value priorities tend to be more permanent and less affected by recent events than political attitudes.

5.1 Empirical evidence of gender differences in politics and basic personal values among voters and politicians

An analysis [36] of the political science literature on gender differences on political issues of the last three decades shows that there is a broad political gender gap in attitudes and behaviors, (e.g., women tend to favor more programs on health care, education, promoting employment and stricter gun control; they are less likely than men to support death penalty and the use of military force to resolve international conflicts). This difference is due principally to the different socialization experiences of men and women, who end up supporting distinctive values. Feminine values are: collaboration, empathy, equality, a belief we are all entitled to human rights, a preference for pacific solutions to fights, and a sense of community and the feeling of being part of something bigger than our selves. Men are socialized to endorse masculine values such as antagonism, hostility, and individualism. Therefore, they tend to make decisions mostly based on what suits them better and is best for them and they tend to favor more the use of force when necessary to manage foreign conflicts. Research on voters has shown a strong association between political behaviors and values [38]. Empirical studies on political values give support to the politics of presence theory.

Instead, contradictory results characterize the studies on gender gap values among politicians. Some research studies provide evidence that women elected in public office hold feminine values. Norris and Lovenduski's research [39] showed that women of British Parliament had more feminist and leftist radical values than their male colleagues; however, political orientation had a stronger impact on values and policies. In line with these findings, other studies [12] based in the United States, which included male and female politicians at the state levels, also highlighted different priorities. Among the priorities of women politicians were issues of women, children, and families. Other research, instead, showed that male and female politicians were more alike, holding similar values. A Swedish research that involved members of the parliament [40] showed only a small difference between men and women's attitudes on most of the issues investigated, since they both valued social goals. Also, another qualitative research on British politics (based on interviews) highlighted more similarities between female and male politicians [41]. Instead, in a qualitative study [11], the Italian female representatives interviewed perceived their male colleagues as more power oriented. Moreover, these female politicians noted that their personal values of caring for the commonwealth and for women's issues helped them face hurdles [11].

Political values have received more attention on the debate on representation with respect to personal values; however, in order to address politics of presence, we need additional studies to focus on personal values. Recent evidence [37], in fact, found that basic personal values underlie political ideologies and attitudes, and core political values (e.g., people who give greatest importance to security and power will tend to support policies that favor patriotism). The authors [37] highlight that the pattern of correlations between basic values and core political values reveal their shared motivational structure. They claim that the coherent structure of motivations that organizes basic values also structures core political values. For instance, the political values of equality, civil liberties, and—on the other side—free enterprise reveal the motivational opposition of universalism and benevolence versus power and achievement values. Therefore, the primary motivational conflict concerning these political values is self-interest versus interest for others.

In order to study the theory of presence, personal values seem particularly suited to explore whether women politicians, of different levels, have values similar to most female voters. The few systematic studies on gender differences in personal

values among voters found small but significant differences. Males scored higher on self-enhancement values (power and achievement) and females higher on self-transcendence values (universalism and benevolence) [42, 43]. Furthermore, previous studies have revealed that basic personal values predicted political orientation, across cultural contexts and political systems (e.g., see [10]) and our recent study involving women politicians confirmed this trend [29].

An analysis of the literature, taking into consideration different approaches, revealed that in order to legitimize the claims of politics of presence, investigating if women politicians have personal values more similar to female voters and different from male politicians, we needed to control also for political orientation and different levels of political experience. Some authors, in fact, have maintained that becoming involved in politics may modify values, so that simply being a female politician does not ensure that they will hold feminine values. To fill the literature gap we investigated if women, at all levels of political engagement, still held values of transcendence that correspond to those of female voters, as theory of presence maintains or personal values would vary at different levels of political involvement (e.g., activists, politicians elected to local and national political office).

To our knowledge, no previous studies have examined these issues involving male and female voters, activists, and politicians. Moreover, Wängnerud [44] in her research pointed out that there was a need for empirical studies of the politics of presence theory, particularly in countries where the political gender gap is higher than in Northern European ones. Italy ranks low in the Global Gender Gap Index, 50th among 144 countries [45]. Furthermore, Italy has a strongly masculine culture [9, 46].

Our most recent research [47] therefore aimed to investigate if gender differences in personal values were still present among activists, and local and national politicians. We also tried to determine if, in line with previous studies on voters, self-transcendence values were more strongly held by women and self-enhancement by men at all levels of political activities even after controlling for political orientation. Furthermore, since we are not aware of previous research that has examined gender differences in conservation and openness to change in people actively involved in politics, we explored whether gender-specific values for conservation and openness to change are similar at all levels of political participation.

A total 4533 participants were recruited for the study: 233 Italian national politicians (46% females), 425 local politicians (56% females), 626 political activists (44% females), and 3249 ordinary citizens (49% females). Participants were given a shortened version of the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ, Schwartz, 2003).

Our findings give additional support for the politics of presence theory since females, at all levels of political involvement, showed higher levels of self-transcendence values (that express concern for the welfare of others).

Our results lend support to previous studies [42, 43], self-transcendence values were more important for women; moreover, this specific gender difference was present at all levels of political activities, among activists, and local and national politicians, even after controlling for political orientation. However, our results did not show significant gender differences in self-enhancement values, in contrast to earlier studies [42, 43]. Self-enhancement values were somewhat higher for male voters, activists, and local politicians; however, unlike previous results reported in literature, female national politicians had slightly higher scores than their male colleagues. Furthermore, our findings show that female politicians were also more open to change and less conservation oriented than their male colleagues. These results significantly differ from previous research among voters, where females were less open to change and more conservation oriented than males [42, 43].

6. Conclusions

Women are underrepresented in politics in most countries (on average in the world, 23.8% of women are in the parliament [1]. This gender gap has stimulated theoretical and empirical studies to discover which obstacles most hinder female politicians, when these hurdles are more present, and why we need more women in our legislative bodies.

To answer some of these questions, we constructed and validated two scales (WO women obstacles, and WOC Women coping efficacy in politics) that included items derived from each of four main theories (gatekeeping, mass media, life balance, and gender role). Results showed that female politicians faced primarily external obstacles (gatekeeping behaviors by male colleagues and difficult access to main stream media). Internal obstacles were cited less frequently and provided some support for work-life balance and gender role theories.

No general coping efficacy helped politicians face all these different hurdles. Each type of hurdle required a set of different personal capabilities, developed through experience with hostile, powerful men (for gatekeeping problems), or obtaining help and support from family members (for life-balance hurdles). Local politicians developed strategies to gain access to local media while national politicians had more problems accessing big national networks and used social media (Twitter, Facebook, blogs, etc.). Finally, those who felt empowered were better able to pursue ambitious goals related to the values that brought them to political activism in the first place. In some interviews, women stated clearly how important it was for them to uphold their feminine values and their femininity to contrast the prevalent warrior, masculine culture.

We also investigated the role of personality traits in coping with obstacles. Our findings indicated that being talkative, assertive, energetic, and dominant helps women overcome many different obstacles. Our results therefore supported authors who maintain that dispositional variables of politicians are important in the attainment of political success [10, 48], and that personality traits should be considered when selecting candidates. Moreover, to try to diminish women's underrepresentation in parliaments, we should also promote empowerment-training programs that increase female politicians' capacity to have high aspirations, to preserve their self-confidence in achieving ambitious goals even in hostile settings, and to strengthen extrovert attitudes and behavior.

We then tried to ascertain when women find hurdles, if all along their political career as labyrinth theorists hypothesize or primarily when competing for top political positions as glass ceiling supporters maintain. We hypothesized that the labyrinth hypothesis would be sustained, and both local (lower level) and national (higher level) women politicians would report similar obstacles in pursuing their political careers. We also hypothesized that right-wing politicians would have greater self-reported ability to cope with the obstacles presented by mass media, work-family balance, and gatekeeping. Results supported both of our hypotheses. Further studies should explore if differences between right-wing and left-wing female politicians found in Italy are also present in other countries.

Our last research is the first study that we are aware, to directly measure personal values of female and male members of the parliament, local politicians, and activists through the PVQ [30] and to test the theory of politics of presence's hypothesis that women elected to political office would represent women better than male politicians, because they would still hold values similar to those of female voters.

Our results confirmed that the self-transcendence gender differences in voters can be found among politicians. This supports politics of presence claims that it could matter whether there are men or women in elected political positions. Female

politicians higher in transcendence values (benevolence and universalism) may favor policies that promote equality, civil liberties, and social welfare; they may be more willing to increase funds for medical care, education, and fighting violence against women. They will support more laws for gun control and against capital punishment and the use of force to resolve conflicts [36, 37]. To have documented significant self-transcendence gender differences among women and men at all levels for political involvement in a country with low level of gender equality such as Italy is an important finding, given that many countries present low levels of gender equality worldwide.

We also want to underline another interesting finding, local and national female politicians were more open to change and less conservative than their male colleagues, while among voters, normally, men were more open to change and less conservative. This finding does not support the politics of presence' theory, since women politicians differ in those two values from women voters. However, these results would please those activists who claim that a higher number of women may revitalize politics which is now held in low opinions by many voters [49]. Our results also may give some support to activists in women's movements who argue that female representatives are more likely than men to challenge the status quo [50]. Women who become politicians, thus accessing a career in a prevalently male field, are probably women who are willing to break the traditional gender schemata, and therefore more open to change in other domains also. Our female politicians moreover scored lower in conservation values than both their male colleagues and women voters. They therefore would be more likely to oppose policies related to traditional moralism, law and order, and blind patriotism, which are the core political values that are held [37] by people with conservative personal values. Further studies should examine if our results related to conservation and openness to change are confirmed in other countries with different indexes of gender equality.

We also found that women politicians who survive and thrive in hostile male-dominated political institutions have high level of personal empowerment and a blend of feminine and masculine characteristics as some feminist authors have hypothesized [2]. Taken together, then, the results of our different studies bring more scientific evidence in support for more gender balance in political representation. We are aware that our research has several limits. While we have a broadly representative sample of female members of parliament (70%), we have less representative samples of males in parliament, and of local politicians and activists. Moreover, future research should measure personal values, political decisions, and other behaviors of male and female politicians.

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