



Special Issue Article

# Gendered patterns in candidates' campaign fundraising: The case of Italy

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## Abstract

The lack of financial resources is an often-cited hurdle for women pursuing political careers. However, empirical analysis of the dynamics of the private funding of women candidates and its potential implications for their political careers is still scant, particularly for countries outside the anglophone regions. This paper contributes to the scholarly debate by focusing on the gendered patterns in campaign fundraising in Italy, where radical changes to the party funding regime and multiple reforms to the electoral laws may have changed the structure of opportunity for fundraising by women candidates. We analyse patterns of private funding for men and women candidates in four national elections between 1996 and 2018. Our analysis, triangulated with semi-structured interviews with women candidates, shows that differences exist in fundraising patterns between male and female candidates in Italy. It reveals differences in the quality of candidates' fundraising networks and confirms that political affiliation (to right-wing parties) and incumbency have an effect on the amount of donations received, thus granting women candidates greater access to private donations.

## Keywords

Gender gap, Italian politics, political fundraising, private donations, women candidacy

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## **Introduction**

The importance for women candidates of having funds to run in elections is undisputed. Research has shown that it is particularly difficult for women to raise funds, especially at the earliest stage of their campaigns, which often ends up preventing their inclusion at the core of political decision-making (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu, 2013). However, empirical analysis of the patterns of private funding for women candidates and the potential implications of this for their political careers is still scant, particularly for countries outside the anglophone regions, where private forms of political fundraising play a marginal role compared to state funds (but see Buckley and Mariani in this Special Issue).

In this article we contribute to this research agenda and widen the scope of existing research through a case study on the gendered patterns of private funding for national candidates in Italy. Italy is a case of particular interest because the country has recently experienced radical changes in its party funding regime, repealing all direct public subsidies to political actors, who now have to rely almost entirely on private funds. This reform has had a negative impact on the financial assets of Italian parties (Piccio, 2020) and may increase the importance of individual fundraising for male and female candidates. What differences can be observed in the fundraising patterns of men and women candidates in Italy? Which factors play a role in influencing candidates' fundraising?

To answer these questions, our enquiry moves from the key debates that we identified in the existing research on the gendered dynamics of private funding: the existence of a gender funding gap; the reliance on a different network of support for different groups of candidates; and the role of political affiliation and incumbency in influencing women candidates' fundraising capacities. We base our analysis on an original dataset including all private donations disclosed by individual candidates (male and female) who ran for four national parliamentary elections between 1996 and 2018. In addition, we triangulate the quantitative analysis with semi-structured interviews conducted with a pool of women 'top fundraisers', to gain a more thorough understanding of women candidates' fundraising strategies, their access to resources, and the opportunities and hurdles they experience when competing for office.

Our results partially confirm the existence of a gender funding gap and corroborate the existence of differences in the donors' network of male and female candidates. Moreover, as emphasized by previous research, incumbency favours women's fundraising capacity and party affiliation is a relevant factor: not only did right-wing and centre-right candidates raise more and larger donations, but left-wing and centre-left candidates also suffered from the budgetary constraints imposed by the 2014 reform. We conclude by emphasizing that the gender funding gap is also linked to the persistence of a gender imbalance in political recruitment, which inevitability points to the responsibility of political parties in their role as gatekeepers.

## **Political campaign fundraising from a gender perspective: the state of the art**

Money is crucial for being able to campaign successfully. As Burrell has argued, 'how well candidates perform on election day is a direct function of how much money they raise and spend' (2003: 73). This situation is commonly acknowledged to have important implications for diversity and inclusivity at the different stages of the election cycle. Indeed, groups that occupy more marginal positions in society and have fewer forms of capital usually find the costs of running for office prohibitive and, when they run, have a harder time getting elected (see Murray in this Special Issue). Women fall within these groups. A consequence of the persistence of the public/private gender divide that relegates women mainly to the private sphere (Ballington and Kahane, 2014;

Bjarnegård, 2013) is that women typically lack access to the networks that pour the greatest amounts of money into election campaigns. Raising money, therefore, has gendered implications and the lack of financial support has been considered a major impediment to women candidates' entry into the elected elite (Burrell, 1985). This section presents a literature review focusing on the key debates and findings that relate to the importance of money for women candidates: the gender funding gap; the candidates' fundraising networks; their partisan affiliation; and the role of incumbency. These four main themes will be empirically explored with reference to the Italian case in the fourth section.

The gender funding gap hypothesis, especially for those countries where candidates self-nominate for elections, posits that women's ability to raise sufficient funds and campaign effectively is hampered due to their more limited access to the public sphere and more limited connections to business sectors (Muriaas et al., 2020). Interestingly, the conventional wisdom pointing to women's disadvantage does not match with the empirical research that explores the gender penalty in fundraising. While acknowledging the existence of large disparities in candidate contributions (especially in privately funded regimes), scholars found that differences in the amounts of fundraising between candidates do not seem to follow gendered lines (Burrell, 1985, 2014; Thomsen and Swers, 2017; Tolley et al., 2020). Overall, little evidence is found that women have more trouble raising money than men do (Crespin and Deitz, 2010).

Why then do women candidates perceive fundraising to be a major problem, more than men candidates do? Some scholars have answered this question by pointing to a selection bias in research on the subject, namely 'we do not know the extent to which women decide not to seek office because of a perception of inability to raise adequate funds' (Burrell, 1985: 268). By centring the analysis on candidates, in other words, we may be missing significant information on the informal barriers to women's political recruitment (Bjarnegård, 2013; Waylen, 2017). Other scholars have instead argued that a possible explanation for women's higher fundraising is the different path that women candidates undertake to achieve fundraising parity (Crespin and Deitz, 2010: 581). For example, female donors' networks, such as EMILY's List and the WISH lists, have provided an important economic boost for women candidates, in many cases even giving them a funding advantage over men (Burrell, 2003, 2014). But research has also pointed to the fact that women candidates devote greater effort to fundraising compared to their male counterparts and have to work harder in order to reach the condition of equal monetary resources (Burrell, 2003).

A second key debate in the literature on the subject deals with the qualitative differences between the fundraising networks of female and male candidates. The exclusion from formal and informal powerful networks is deemed as 'the single most important reason why fundraising is more difficult for women', according to women state representatives (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu, 2013: 116). Reflecting the societal gendered divide, men 'have well-heeled networks, consisting mostly of men who are accustomed to giving political money in sizable amounts' (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu, 2013: 117); women's networks are less moneyed compared to men's networks. Research based on a survey of major party state legislative candidates from nine US federal states has shown that women candidates not only appear more concerned about fundraising than men, but also that they consider a broader variety of sources (including the state party, the state legislative campaign committee, labour unions, interest groups and political action committees (PACs) as important for fundraising purposes and that they also use a broader variety of fundraising techniques compared to male candidates (Jenkins, 2007). Thus, in order to raise as much money as men, women must build their own donor base by seeking different sources and using a wider array of techniques and services. Women candidates, therefore, appear more likely to rely on support from individuals and on more differentiated sources than male candidates, who instead tend to rely on larger contributions from a few powerful donors. With the exception of the spouses, daughters and sisters

of well-known politicians who, by virtue of their relationships, have access to family capital and connections (Folke et al., 2021), most women candidates rely on smaller contributions from individual supporters. A recent study of the Canadian case confirmed this pattern, finding that women candidates are more likely to receive donations from women donors, who in general donate less and in smaller amounts than male donors (Tolley et al., 2020).

Fundraising networks, however, also differ according to the political affiliation of the candidates. The interest areas that different candidates represent are in fact mirrored in the configuration of their donors. The comparative literature has pointed to relevant differences between the economic support networks of left-wing, conservative and right-wing candidates. The latter two significantly attract more (large) donations from corporations and businesses compared to the former (Ensley, 2009; Ewing, 2006; Samuels, 2001). This also applies to the Italian case. Fiorelli (2021) has shown that private contributions from the business sector in Italy have been mostly directed towards political parties on the right of the political spectrum.

Another key issue that explains the amount of funding raised by candidates is incumbency (Krebs, 2001). Indeed, as we shall see, when fundraising disparities between men and women candidates exist, they are accounted for more by the candidate's status than by their gender (see Buckley and Mariani in this Special Issue). Contributors tend to support candidates who have held previous parliamentary or leadership positions because they feel they are more knowledgeable and competent, they have a more solid institutional network and they have the ability to actually shape those policy sectors they have been working in during their previous term (Burrell, 2014; Mueller, 2003). Large donations, therefore, are directed toward those candidates who are expected to develop effective policies, so that donors can count on the incumbents' expertise.

As for access to moneyed networks, however, incumbency is far from gender neutral. Not only are women more often challengers than incumbents (Burrell, 2003: 79), but they are more likely to be considered as 'outsiders' both by other constituency members and by some groups of voters. For members, women candidates are usually perceived as not complying with certain criteria – localness, well-connectedness or political style – deemed necessary to become 'acceptable' candidates in informally driven candidate selection procedures (Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2016). For voters, female challengers are still perceived as less competent than their male party fellows (cf. Brooks, 2013; Fox and Smith, 1998). In both cases, being an outsider is a condition that further hampers women's ability to become an incumbent in the long run. As a consequence, if 'money also flows to those in positions of power' and 'to candidates who look like winners' (Schlozman and Uhlaner, 1986: 32, 34), it is more likely that it will flow into male candidates' pockets.

Overall, the candidates' fundraising networks as well as incumbency can be explained under the same 'rich-get-richer' process theorized by Vonnahme (2014), who claimed that 'donors will bandwagon with candidates that have many existing attachments' (4), thus reproducing and reinforcing societal disparities in the political realm.

## **The Italian context: an interplay of different institutional reforms**

Not surprisingly, much of the scholarship analysing the themes just described focuses on the United States context, characterized by an extremely candidate-centric system and the prevalence of private forms of political financing whereby the political success of self-nominating women candidates is tied to their fundraising capacities and efforts. Very scant research has been done on countries with different political systems and institutions (but see Tolley et al., 2020), particularly European countries (Smulders et al., 2019). In most parliamentary systems in Western Europe, the centrality of political parties as gatekeepers for political recruitment and the availability of public money for campaigning do not create fertile ground to explore gendered patterns of private

funding.<sup>1</sup> As shown in previous studies, donating to parties and candidates is a marginal phenomenon in Europe (Fiorelli, 2017; Ponce and Scarrow, 2011).

Italy, however, constitutes an appropriate case study to explore the ‘micro dynamics of private funding’ (Ewing and Issacharoff, 2006) from a gender perspective, because of the changes that have occurred in its institutional arrangements in the last 20 years. As mentioned, the country shifted dramatically from a mainly state-funded political finance regime to a predominantly private one in 2014, making Italy an outlier in Europe, where aggregate national figures of state dependency exceed 70% of the total party income in a number of countries (Van Biezen and Kopecký, 2017).

Previous studies have shown how prior political finance reforms took place in Italy as a reaction to episodes of corruption. In 1993, all forms of direct public funding were replaced by a system of electoral reimbursement, following the results of a popular referendum that condemned the systemic corruption ingrained in national politics.<sup>2</sup> However, the 1993 law on electoral reimbursements did not decrease party dependency on the public purse, and de facto substituted public funding (see Pizzimenti, 2018 for an overview).

Fast-forward to the 2010s, and the political finance law was reformed again in the aftermath of another scandal concerning the financial malpractices of party treasurers. The rising Five Star Movement (FSM) – a populist party that put the moralization of politics at the core of its political message – capitalized on it. After entering parliament in the 2013 national elections with 162 Members of Parliament (MPs), the FSM brought cuts to public funding onto the parliamentary agenda. Thus, the centre-left government led by Enrico Letta found itself adopting a drastic reform that, starting from 2014, progressively repealed all forms of direct public funding, including the reimbursement of electoral expenses. With this new law, parties and candidates in Italy have to rely almost entirely on private sources of income. As parties’ financial means have become more limited, candidates have for the first time been under pressure to search for financial support and engage in fundraising activities. As discussed above, this may prove especially challenging for women candidates.

Two other strings of reforms changed the opportunity structure for women in politics. First, the electoral law has effectively been reformed three times since 1993, each time with different implications for the patterns of funding for women candidates. Here is important to stress the evolution of proportional and majoritarian elements in the Italian electoral systems. The first electoral system adopted in 1993 was a mixed system with a strong majoritarian tendency<sup>3</sup> (Bartolini and D’Alimonte, 1995). In 2005, a (dis)proportional system with a majority premium was adopted. In this case, all the seats were assigned with a proportional representation (PR) formula and closed candidate lists, but the party or the coalition with a plurality of votes at the national level (Chamber of Deputies) or at the regional level (Senate) would get a majority prize. In 2017, a new electoral law again enforced a mixed formula with roughly one-third of the seats allocated in single-member districts (SMDs) with plurality rule and two-thirds contested in multi-member constituencies with a proportional formula. PR systems, or a mixed system with a proportional tendency, are believed to provide a more open opportunity structure for women than plurality systems or systems with majoritarian tendencies. But this was unlikely to affect private fundraising by women candidates, as long as selection was party-centred and public funding in place.

Second, the 2017 electoral law introduced for the first time at the national level a quota mechanism applying to both single-seat and multi-member constituency nominations. For SMDs, the quota established that neither gender could exceed 60% of the candidates fielded by a party or coalition. In multi-member constituencies, the law enforced the alternation of candidates by gender on each list (zippered list). In addition, the top-list candidates of each gender cannot be more than 60% (Sampugnaro and Montemagno, 2020). Again, the effects of quotas in electoral institutions on

**Table 1.** The structure of opportunity for women fundraising in Italy.

Election years	Party funding regime	Electoral formula	Electoral quotas
1994 1996 2001	Predominantly public	Mixed system (75% majority; 25% PR)	No
2006 2008	Predominantly public	PR, closed lists and majority bonus	No
2013	Predominantly public	PR, closed lists and majority bonus	No
2018	Predominantly private	Mixed system (37% majority; 61% PR; 2% reserved for Italians abroad)	Yes

PR: proportional representation.

funding for women candidates is not straightforward. Buckley and Mariani (in this Special Issue) find that following the implementation of a quota, women candidates raise less campaign funding than men. Conversely, quotas can also increase women's fundraising capacities, given that they make women candidates more competitive (Smulders et al., 2019).

All in all, the fast pace of the simultaneous reforms at different institutional levels does not allow for unidirectional hypotheses of linear change over time, as institutional settings interacted in complex and partly contradictory ways at each moment (see Table 1). In particular, significant changes in the nature of party organizations took place, affecting the patterns of candidate fundraising. While Italy has long been regarded as a party-dominated political system in which parties control every step of the representation process (Cotta and Best, 2007), the progressive weakening of (mainstream) party organizations coupled with the emergence of new forms of organizing that explicitly refuse to adopt traditional party structures – a striking example being the FSM – and an overall increased personalization (Musella, 2020) may have created leeway for candidates' autonomy. In fact, recent studies on the personalization of electoral campaigns have shown that partisan control over candidates is more heterogenous than it may seem (Pinto, 2016).

In a context of privately funded politics, in which parties have become less capable of ensuring candidates' political careers and direct competition is favoured by the electoral system, we expect women candidates to have a harder time raising funds and accessing political power, despite the potential positive effect played by legislative gender quotas recently introduced. This is particularly the case in a country where the disparity between men and women is still significant for a combination of socio-cultural, institutional and individual norms that still support traditional ideas about the role and the position of women in society (Belluati et al., 2020). Policy initiatives aimed at reverting inequality in political representation, such as gender-targeted electoral financing and legislative gender quotas, have, respectively, resulted in a flawed implementation (Feo and Piccio, 2020) and only partially met their expected goals (Legnante and Regalia, 2020).

## Data and methods

Our analysis relies on two different primary sources. The first source consists of the annual financial reports that candidates must file after parliamentary elections in compliance with Italian political finance rules. Based on these reports, we constructed a database including a total of 995 private donations distributed between 81 women and 520 men candidates running for the major parties competing in national parliamentary elections.<sup>4</sup> The database includes the following variables: number and amounts of donations; recipients' gender, incumbency status and partisan



affiliation; donors' identity (recoded according to whether they are individuals, corporations or political actors, see Table A1 in Appendix A).<sup>5</sup> Donation disclosure requirements by candidates have changed several times since 1993. The threshold was first set at 5b lire (approximately €2500) and was then raised to €5000 to adjust for inflation in 1993. In 2006, it was raised significantly (to €50,000) until it was finally lowered to €5000 in 2012. In order to increase the number of our observations and be able to compare across election years, we selected those years where the lowest disclosure requirements were in force: 1996, 2001, 2013 and 2018 (see Table A2 in Appendix A).

Thus, our sample consists of medium-to-high donations to candidates (whom we will therefore name 'top fundraisers'). These are clearly a minority among the broader population of candidates running in the Italian parliamentary elections, the overall share of candidates reporting private donations of a medium-high amount being only 5.4% of the total number of candidates in 1996, 8.7% in 2001, 1.4% in 2013 and 1.8% in 2018.<sup>6</sup> However, these are the only publicly disclosed data. Additionally, medium-to-high-value donations are usually related to interested donors that adopt a pragmatic – or rational – strategy of influence and support (McMenamin, 2013).

The second source of analysis for this study consists of five semi-structured interviews. We purposefully selected potential interviewees from our dataset, choosing among women candidates who reported donations during the two most recent election campaigns (2013 and 2018) and differentiating for party affiliation, aiming to include at least one candidate for each political party. Interviews allowed us to explore in more detail questions concerning the political socialization of women candidates, their funding strategies and access to resources, and the role played by the party in their funding activities, as well as their personal experiences and opinions of the opportunities and hurdles to women's political representation in Italy.<sup>7</sup>

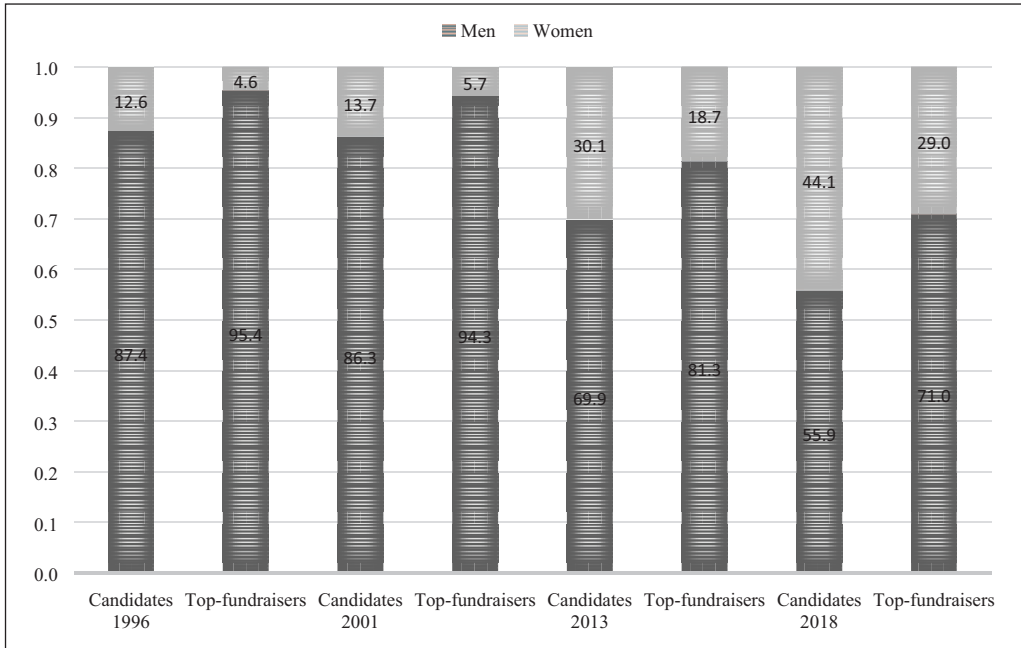
## Empirical analysis

We start our empirical analysis by exploring the presence of a gender funding gap in the Italian case. Are women candidates less successful in fundraising compared to men? We answer this question by observing: (a) the number of male and female candidates reporting medium-high donations; and (b) the actual number and amount of donations received. In Figure 1 we answer the first question. In order to better assess whether a gender funding gap exists, we compare the gender ratio of top-fundraiser candidates to the gender ratio of total candidates in each election round. In the absence of a gender funding gap, the proportion of candidates declaring donations should mirror the actual gender ratio of candidates running for elections. Our data show that this is not the case, as men candidates reporting donations are consistently more numerous than women in all selected years ('top fundraisers bar'). The difference is striking in 1996 and 2001, where only 4.6% and 5.7% of the top fundraisers were women, respectively. The situation improved in 2013, but even in 2018 only approximately one-third of the 'top fundraisers' were women. As we compare across the two bars in each electoral year ('top-fundraisers' and 'candidates' bars), however, we get a more nuanced picture: in 1996 and 2001, roughly one-third of women candidates disclosed private donations; in 2013 and 2018, instead, this number increases to almost half of the pool of women candidates.

The second way in which we measure the gender funding gap focuses on the number of donations and amount of funding that candidates received. If we focus on the first row of Table 2, we see how men candidates report a much higher number of donations compared to women candidates (in total, men reported 857 donations and women 138) in all the electoral years.

However, when looking at the average number of donations by top-fundraisers and at the actual values of the donations collected by candidates (rows 2 and 3), a more balanced picture emerges.

**Figure 1.** Candidates running for national office and candidates disclosing private donations ('top fundraisers'), by gender.



Source: candidates' reports (available at the Chamber of Deputies). Own elaboration (see Appendix A3).

**Table 2.** Number and amount of private donations reported by candidates, by gender (n, %).

	1996		2001		2013		2018	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
n donations reported	135 (96.4)	5 (3.6)	387 (94.9)	21 (5.1)	215 (81.7)	48 (18.3)	120 (65.2)	64 (34.8)
Average number of donations for each top-fundraiser	1.3	1	1.8	1.6	1.9	1.9	1.2	1.7
Average donation amount*	€11,254	€11,803	€12,641	€10,981	€13,662	€11,702	€10,109	€11,658

Source: candidates' reports (available at the Chamber of Deputies). Own elaboration (see Appendix A3).

\*Values indexed at GDP deflator 2015.

The average number of donations declared by men and women candidates is fairly equal in all election years, showing a similar capacity to attract the attention of private donors. Similarly, we find an overall balance in the amounts of the contributions received and limited differences between the two groups (with a maximum average difference of approximately €2000). These results suggest that among those candidates who are able to attract medium-to-high donations there is no clear gender funding difference, neither in terms of the number of donations nor in terms of the monetary amount funded.



**Table 3.** Private donations to candidates from individuals, corporations and parties (*n*, %).

	1996		2001		2013		2018	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Individuals	48 (35.6)	1 (20)	134 (34.6)	10 (47.6)	55 (25.6)	20 (41.7)	26 (21.7)	22 (34.4)
Corporations	55 (40.7)	2 (40)	198 (51.2)	10 (47.6)	157 (73)	28 (58.3)	87 (72.5)	38 (59.4)
Political parties	33 (24.4)	2 (40)	55 (14.2)	1 (4.8)	3	0	7 (5.8)	4 (6.3)
Total donations	135	5	387	21	215	48	120	64

Source: candidates' reports (available at the Chamber of Deputies). Own elaboration (see Appendix A3).

In Table 3, our analysis turns to the donors' characteristics. As we discussed in the theoretical section, scholars have shown how male and female candidates tend to rely on different networks of financial support: corporations and big donors in the case of male candidates, individuals in the case of women. Table 3 reports the distribution of private donations according to candidate gender, type of donors (whether individuals, corporations or political associations) and electoral year.

The overall trend indicates that the lion's share of private donations declared by candidates comes from corporations and businesses. Given the fact that public disclosure of such information is only available for donations of a medium-to-high value (>€5000), the bias toward corporations is easily explained. Most importantly, interesting differences emerge as we take a closer look at the differences in candidates' networks. For each election year (except for 1996), male candidates report a lower percentage of donations from individuals as compared to women candidates. The importance of individual networks for women candidates also emerged in our interviews. In particular, one of the candidates reported receiving a large number of small donations from individual supporters, as a consequence – she argued – of her 'on the ground' campaign and of her previous political experience at the local level. Having a local presence allowed her to be 'recognized' in the constituency in which she ran for office and receive financial support for her campaign (Interview 2). Another respondent reported receiving a lot of in-kind (i.e. non-monetary) support from followers (non-party members), who actively sustained the actual rollout of her campaign (Interview 4).

If parties were a relevant source of financial support to their own candidates in 1996, accounting for 25% of the reported donations, this figure had fallen to only 6% in 2018. Most likely, this is the consequence of the repeal of public party funding, which downsized financial resources devoted to campaign activities. Candidates, therefore, had to become active in fundraising. The interviews conducted with the candidates campaigning in the 2013 and 2018 elections confirm the limited support they received from parties, with significant differences between party groups. Centre-left candidates confirmed that their parties, which used to help them financially, suffered the effects of budgetary restrictions in 2018 elections.

In particular, one candidate running for one of the Overseas Constituencies lamented the funding cuts imposed by the party, which made her campaigning activities in such a large constituency less effective, and led her to seek different campaigning strategies, which relied less on traditional means such as postal campaigning (Interview 1). Meanwhile, centre and centre-right candidates maintained that fundraising has always fallen on their shoulders (Interviews 3, 5). Across party affiliations, but more for the centre-right and centre candidates, personal networks built before entering politics and connected to the candidates' previous professional activity were perceived as crucial for attracting private donations (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 5). What also emerged is that candidates'

**Table 4.** Distribution of private donations to male and female candidates, by incumbency status (n, %).

Election year	Women		Men	
	New	Incumbent	New	Incumbent
1996	2 (40.0%)	3 (60.0%)	59 (43.7%)	76 (56.3%)
2001	7 (33.3%)	14 (66.7%)	219 (56.6%)	168 (43.4%)
2013	13 (27.1%)	35 (72.9%)	77 (35.8%)	138 (64.2%)
2018	16 (25.0%)	48 (75.0%)	54 (45.0%)	66 (55.0%)
Total	38 (27.5%)	100 (72.5%)	409 (47.7%)	448 (52.3%)

Source: candidates' reports (available at the Chamber of Deputies). Own elaboration (see Appendix A3).

funding efforts drained directly from personal individual wealth and household resources (Interviews 4, 5). One interviewee explained this as follows:

[For financing the 2018 electoral campaign] I relied on a tiny part of the funding from the party, funds from private donations . . . and family funding, which was actually not at all irrelevant!! [laughs]. I mean . . . my personal savings, a lot, and those of my husband who made me a donation. (Interview 4)

In other words, candidates have also funded the campaign from their own pockets, sometimes through the involvement of their partner and/or family members.

We now turn to the examination of incumbency. As argued above, scholars have underlined how incumbency influences campaign contributions as it provides candidates with a privileged access to the policy process and correlated networks.

Overall, we find no significant differences between incumbents' and newcomers' ability to attract donations. Of the total of 995 donations constituting our sample, 55.1% were for incumbents and 44.9% for newcomers. However, as we separate women and men candidates, we find that donors evaluate the incumbency status of men and women differently (Table 4). Overall, being an incumbent favours female candidates more than it favours male candidates. For all the years, women incumbents receive over 60% of all donations to women, whereas the distribution is more even when it comes to men. In fact, in 2001 the donations received by male newcomers outnumbered those received by incumbents.

In total, donations to women incumbents cover 72% of the total donations reported by this group. The interviewees equally stressed the importance of incumbency, which they connected with them 'being competent' and 'well recognized' within the party structures, as well as 'acknowledged' by their constituencies. Their expertise, which is based on both their professional experience but also on the years spent in 'working their way up' – for example, in local government (Interviews 2, 5) – is considered a crucial element for being selected by their respective parties. Another element emerging is the very central role that parties still play. One of the respondents connected incumbency with the issue of 'power within the party'. In her understanding, the fact of being a powerful, resourceful woman is still not widely accepted within the organization, being perceived by male colleagues as a threat (Interview 2). Expertise and incumbency are also connected with the possibility of attracting donations from specific types of donors, or corporate interests. When asked about her connections with corporate donors, one of the incumbent interviewees explained that these linkages were mainly due to her parliamentary activity, which involved contacts with different stakeholders in the development of a policy proposal, and were to be understood as support for her to continue her work in that field (Interview 2). Overall, the incumbency status allows women to fill the gap that separates them from their male counterparts.

**Table 5.** Average donations to female and male candidates, by political affiliation and incumbency.

	Average donation (€)	SD	F
<b>Male candidates</b>			
Partisan affiliation			
Right	11,568	7858.5	3.859
Centre	13,775	10324.6	
Left	12,465	8488.1	
Incumbency			
Yes	13,204	8982.8	10.575***
No	11,361	7499.46	
Election year			
1996	11,254	4647.7	5.698
2001	12,641	7856.46	
2013	13,662	10905.17	
2018	10,109	7161.19	
<b>Women candidates</b>			
Partisan affiliation			
Right	15,133	10648.79	10.635***
Centre	6457	2816.37	
Left	9025	5713.57	
Incumbency			
Yes	11,212	6533.97	0.623
No	12,532	12981.35	
Election year			
1996	11,803	773.68	0.038
2001	10,981	4569.71	
2013	11,702	10820.21	
2018	11,658	8524.53	

Source: candidates' reports (available at the Chamber of Deputies). Own elaboration (see Appendix A3). All values are indexed at gross domestic product (GDP) deflator 2015.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

To put it differently, the progressive socialization of women in the sphere of political power makes them more competitive and visible, both within and outside the party organization.

In Table 5, we move to the analysis of the actual amounts of donations collected by the candidates and we test for their association to party affiliation and incumbency. Incumbency seems to play a significant role for male candidates in explaining the difference between the average amount of financial donations received. For women, political affiliation seems to be the only significant factor accounting for the average amounts of donations received. Notably, there is a substantive difference in the average donation reported by right-wing candidates compared to others. The right-wing women declared on average €15,000 for a single donation, while left-wing ones around €9000.

As argued, political finance does not operate in a vacuum and interacts with other factors in the shaping of political competition. Indeed, all interviewees who were involved in more than one campaign confirmed that the dynamics of political competitions changed dramatically in 2018 as a consequence of the new electoral system. As one interviewee admitted, 'if the 2013 campaign had been a lovely stroll, the 2018 campaign felt like a hurdles race' (Interview 4). This is the

consequence of running in highly competitive SMDs, which made candidates invest more personal resources into their political campaign. Our interviewee added:

In 2013 we were operating in the context of Porcellum [the electoral law, which employed a proportional formula with closed candidate lists] and we, with the other fellow party candidates, we pushed the party forward, and not the people. We needed to move around the [party] label. In 2018, it was more about. . . putting my face directly on it, my sensibilities, the things I have done . . . in a much more complex competition. (Interview 4)

## **Conclusions**

This article analyses patterns of private funding for candidates in Italy from a gender perspective, providing empirical evidence on a mostly neglected political behaviour. Similar to other European countries in which political campaigning is mainly party-centred and public funding is available, candidates' private fundraising has not often been explored in scholarly debates. The many institutional changes Italy has undergone in recent years – in particular the repeal in 2014 of all forms of direct public funding for political parties – have potentially increased the incentives for both parties and candidates to find and raise private donations. From a gender perspective, the shift to private financing can reflect, or even expand, the structure of inequalities engrained in political competition, making it harder for women to run and effectively compete for office.

We observed the evolution of patterns of private funding for women and men candidates in Italy over a period of 25 years, focusing on 4 national election rounds, to explore whether a gender funding gap exists, whether women and men candidates rely on different networks of support and whether political affiliation and incumbency play a role in influencing women candidates' fundraising capacities. A gender funding gap was found when observing the actual pool of candidates reporting private donations, men outnumbering women in all the election years observed. However, as we turned to the analysis of the average number of private donations that men and women candidates received and of the average amounts of donations, differences levelled out. This is in line with previous research that challenged the common belief that men candidates would receive more and more generous donations than women. Successful women' – that is, those who compete and succeed in national politics – are as able as men to attract large donations.

Confirming previous studies, moreover, differences emerge in the composition of candidates' networks of support. Corporations constitute the majority of the donor portfolios reported for both groups. However, while men attract more donations from corporate bodies and businesses, women seem to rely on a more balanced network of support. Our analysis, enriched with the insights from our interviews, revealed that the networks of women candidates are just as likely to be composed of individuals as of corporations, the former being connected to the candidate by family bonds or professional relationships. Moreover, our interviewees confirmed that previous political engagement at the local level helps them in obtaining financial support, confirming the value of prior political experience for running in a national competition (for a similar result, see Buckley and Mariani in this Special Issue). The support of political parties, still relevant in the mid-1990s, tends to drastically decrease over time, highlighting the financial crisis of political organizations due to the progressive reduction of public funding, which led to limited financial contributions to the candidates' electoral campaigns. The lack of financial support from the party organization was particularly felt by candidates for centre-left parties, who had relied more heavily on this source of income.

Both incumbency and political affiliation emerge as important factors. Incumbent women tend to receive more donations than women challengers, and the difference between them is bigger than that of their male counterparts. The interviews provided a more fine-grained understanding of the role of incumbency for women candidates. When asked about their fundraising capacity, all interviewees referred to their previous political experience as a determinant factor for demonstrating their competence in the eyes of potential donors. If we read this result together with the persistence of the gender funding gap, we see how being a woman newcomer greatly hampers candidates' capacity to attract private donations, with some impact on their political path. Political affiliation is instead the factor that accounts for the amount of donations received. Not surprisingly, right-wing and centre-right women candidates manage to catalyse donors' attention. This result is not new: right-wing parties are natural interlocutors for a majority of corporate interests. Left-wing and centre-left women candidates receive smaller donations, but can count on more institutionalized support from their party organization.

In conclusion, our study expands on many of the findings of the existing literature on gender and political financing. Most importantly, it confirms that inequality in funding patterns, an important factor that can hinder fair competition, exists, and that it disproportionately affects women trying to access politics. When women are already socialized in politics, their fundraising capacity is comparable to that of male candidates. Yet inequalities in the access to politics remain virulent, as fewer women can even get to compete with men in the political arena in the first place. To understand why this is the case, we believe that future research should tackle the following aspects. First, it should focus more on the intersection between gender and class (see Murray in this Special Issue). Candidates enjoying a relative position of wealth and privilege are usually overrepresented in political competition. To understand the real impact of money in politics we should also focus on groups that are underrepresented, or simply absent in political competition, and understand the extent to which money (or the absence of it) really plays a role in determining access to politics. To achieve this complete picture, full transparency on the financial practices of candidates is a necessary step to better understanding flows and networks of private funding, together with a deeper knowledge of candidates' social backgrounds. Second, alongside studying the financial networks and resources of candidates and their gendered and classed dimension, our findings and the insights from the interviews highlight how studying 'why parties do not choose women' (Piscopo, 2020: 215) remains a relevant research agenda for countries like Italy, where informal rules of party patronage constrain access to all levels of political decision-making.

Finally, some consideration must be given to the complex institutional interplay characterizing the Italian context. We could have expected a more pronounced impact of the abolishing of direct public funding on the pattern of private funding for Italian candidates. From the interviews, we can affirm that the new funding regime, as well as the subsequent change in the electoral law, made political campaigning in 2018 more competitive even if it did not result in a mad rush of fundraising by individual candidates. The increasing competitiveness between candidates, somewhat autonomously from their parties, creates the conditions for studying how different institutional factors – funding regimes, electoral laws, quota systems – systematically interact to hamper or foster women's access to the political arena. Further research should focus on these interactions, preferably in a comparative fashion.

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## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. As suggested by Piscopo (2020), beyond the US a more fitting question for understanding why women do not run for office is not whether women can get enough money to run a campaign, but why parties do not select them as candidates.
2. We refer to the corruption scandals known as ‘Bribe Ville’, which caused a crisis in the post-war Italian party system in the 1990s.
3. It was based on a combination of 75% plurality rule in single-member districts (SMDs) and 25% proportional (PR) seats for both the Chamber of Deputies and Senate.
4. The candidates we selected ran for the following political parties: Partito Democratico della Sinistra (1996 election); Democratici di Sinistra (2001 election); Partito Democratico (2013 and 2018 elections); Liberi e Uguali (2018 election); Movimento 5 Stelle (2013 and 2018 elections); +Europa (2018 election); Nuovo Centro Destra (2013 election); Scelta Civica (2013 election); Forza Italia (all elections); Lega Nord (all elections); Alleanza Nazionale (1996 election); and Fratelli d’Italia (2018 election).
5. See Table 1, Appendix A for database description. Party positions are recoded under the ‘left’, ‘centre’ and ‘right’ labels according to the left–right scale from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al., 2020). See Appendix B.
6. See Table 3, Appendix A.
7. Despite our efforts, we were not able to interview representatives for all political groups. In the case of FSM and Fratelli d’Italia (FdI), we could not replace the sampled candidate with others running for the same party, as only one woman candidate reported private donations for each party. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded and transcribed. We agreed with the interviewees to respect their anonymity and the confidentiality of the information shared with us. See Appendix C for further details on the interviews.

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