

Promoting Gender Equality through Party Funding: Symbolic Policies at Work in Italy

Francesca Feo 

Scuola Normale Superiore, Italy

Daniela R. Piccio

University of Turin, Italy

Given the growing importance of state subsidies as a source of party income, several countries have introduced policies that link the provision of party funding to the promotion of gender equality in political representation. Variations in the assignment of public funding — that is, financial incentives and cuts — are increasingly employed to promote equal gender participation in intraparty politics and in public office. However, we know little about why and how these equality promotion policies have been adopted in different countries, how they work in practice, and, most importantly, what effects they have on women's representation. To contribute to this debate, after embedding gender-targeted public funding regulations in the broader set of political representation policies and presenting a comparative overview of existing rules in the European Union, the article concentrates on the Italian case. We examine the evolution of Italian regulation of gender electoral financing and the extent to which the Italian parties have complied with the rules over time. The results show that this set of policy instruments, when poorly designed, is nothing more than symbolic policy. The lack of appropriate mechanisms for sanctions and rewards, which can induce parties to change their behavior, has hampered the effectiveness of these policy measures.

Keywords: Gender equality, political representation, party politics, public funding

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Given the proliferation of public funding schemes and the growing importance of state subsidies as a source of income for political parties, policy makers have an important instrument at their disposal to influence the behavior of the recipients of these subsidies. Indeed, an increasing number of countries have introduced specific conditions that parties must respect if they wish to receive funding from the state budget, linking the provision of public subsidies to the establishment of intraparty democracy rules (for the cases of many post-authoritarian countries, see Piccio 2012) or to the parties' commitment to the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (for the case of Belgium, see Weekers, Maddens, and Noppe 2009). More recently, a smaller group of European countries have introduced policies that link the provision of public funding to gender equality.

These policies, which we call gender-targeted public funding (GTPF) measures, acknowledge the pivotal role that political parties hold as gatekeepers to public institutions, being directly — and almost exclusively — in charge of the political recruitment process. At the same time, they also recognize that political parties act as “institutionally sexist organizations” in performing this function (Lovenduski 2005a, 48), reflecting patriarchal social practices that see women as less qualified, less equipped, and less willing to participate in politics. Hence, variations in the assignment of public funding — in the form of rewards (additional budget) or penalties (budget cuts) — are employed as a lever to modify the “demand” side of the political recruitment process (Lovenduski and Norris 1993), encouraging parties to promote women's participation in party and parliamentary activities.

Notwithstanding their increasingly diffuse and potential impact, this form of political representation policy (Mazur 2001) has received very little attention thus far, especially by academics (but see Childs 2013; Kayuni and Muriaas 2014; Ohman 2018; van Biezen and Rashkova 2013). We know little about why and how these measures have been adopted in different countries, how they work in practice, and, most importantly, what effects they have on party behavior and political representation more generally. In this article, we aim to fill this gap and contribute, both theoretically and empirically, to the literature at the crossroads of gender representation and political finance regulation.

Even though all the questions raised here deserve due attention, we focus particularly on the effects of this set of measures in the case of Italy, one of the European countries with the longest history of GTPF

measures, as well as the country that has introduced the widest array of instruments linking public funding to women's equality promotion. In particular, we focus on the evolution of the legal framework of GTPF and empirically assess party compliance with these rules over time. We argue that public funding to political parties can contribute to providing a response to the underrepresentation of women in political life only when these instruments are designed in such a way that the benefits of compliance as well as the penalties for noncompliance are sufficiently high so as to be perceived as an incentive or a deterrent for party organizations. When this is not the case, as with the Italian GTPF legislation, these are nothing more than symbolic policies, namely, policies put forward by policy makers more interested in "image-making than problem-solving," resulting in "policy statements with no teeth" (Mazur 1995, 2).

The article begins by embedding GTPF measures within the broader framework of political representation policies. Then we provide a comparative overview of existing GTPF rules in the European Union (EU) and details on case selection and data collection. Next, we present the Italian experience with GTPF, examine the evolution of the Italian legal framework around it, and empirically assess the extent to which Italian parties have complied with the rules over time. In the conclusion, we provide a critical assessment of GTPF policies in Italy and discuss the broader implications of our research findings.

THEORIZING POLITICAL REPRESENTATION POLICIES AND GTPF

Different policy instruments have been introduced to counterbalance the unequal starting positions of men and women in society and to increase women's political representation. Scholars have typically focused on reserved seats and electoral quotas.¹ The adoption of these policies has stimulated important discussions among scholars about their effects in terms of women's descriptive and substantive representation (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012; Krook 2009; Meier 2004; Verge 2015). However, scholars agree that the establishment of quotas alone will not solve the problem of women's underrepresentation in politics, which is evidently connected to the persistence of traditional gender roles nested in what feminist theorists call the "public/private divide." In

1. As we focus on policy solutions, voluntary party quotas are not considered in the present analysis.

a nutshell, the public sphere, to which politics and the economy belong, is men's responsibility, and women should not be involved (Elshtain 1981). Of course, the passing of time has changed the pervasiveness and the legitimacy of this divide, but the stereotype that politics is not a place for women remains a very concrete obstacle for women's willingness to participate in politics.

In order for citizens, gatekeepers, and women themselves to overcome this stereotype and finally reach the goal of gender equality in political life, a variety of complementary and mutually reinforcing policy strategies are needed at different stages of political recruitment (Howlett and Rayner 2013; Krook and Norris 2014). Without aiming to be exhaustive, among the "wide inventory of tactics available for promoting women in politics beyond quotas" (Krook and Norris 2014, 3), we could name awareness-raising campaigns, symbolic actions within political institutions, the adoption of laws to punish violence against women in politics, capacity development programs, the creation of women's policy agencies, party quotas, party funding regulations, and campaign support opportunities (Mazur 2001; Verge and de la Fuente 2014).

This article sheds light on one of these alternatives to gender quotas that has received limited attention so far: gender-targeted public funding.² GTPF specifically refers to rules that link the use and distribution of state funding to political parties to gender equality measures. As we shall see, even if virtually all European countries provide state funding to political parties (van Biezen and Kopecký 2017) only a few of them link public funding provisions to the promotion of gender equality. Yet public funding schemes can be regarded as powerful leverage to stimulate political parties — the key gatekeepers for accessing political institutions — to undertake reforms that promote women's equality.

This is especially the case in light of a dual and possibly mutually reinforcing development that has characterized the organizational environment of political parties in the last decades (cf. Katz and Mair 1995, 2009). First, a growing sense of disengagement from party politics, which has resulted in a strong and consistent downward trend in party membership figures across all European democracies (cf. Delwitt 2011; van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012), has led to a decline in membership subscriptions and other types of voluntary contributions that

2. Legislation may refer either to "women" or to "the underrepresented gender." In line with the terminology used by scholars and the international community of practitioners, we use the term "gender" instead of "women" throughout this article.

constituted the economic “core” of the traditional party organizations. Second, the increasing amounts of state subsidies that have characterized all European democracies have made parties increasingly dependent on resources from the public purse, with aggregate national figures of state dependency exceeding in a number of cases 70% of the total party income (Piccio 2014). In such a context, in which “the state has become the driving force behind the increased resource endowment of contemporary European political parties” (Piccio and van Biezen 2018, 73), we believe that parties can be expected to be particularly sensitive and compliant when it comes to rules that regulate their access to public money.

Following Lovenduski’s distinction among equality rhetoric, equality promotion, and equality guarantee strategies (Lovenduski 2005a; see also Krook and Norris 2014), in Figure 1 we place GTPF measures along a spectrum of the strength of state intervention in women’s equality policies. Let us briefly recall Lovenduski’s threefold classification. Equality rhetoric strategies involve the acceptance of women’s claims as part of the language of formal politics. These policies, which Mazur (2001) and Edelman (1985) define as “symbolic policies,” may be beneficial for women, as they have the potential to frame political thinking and impact broader attitudes and beliefs, but they do not imply the adoption of policy instruments for changing the status quo. In their words, symbolic policies do not “actively pursue sex balance in top positions” (Mazur 2001, 64), nor do they entail efforts for their implementation on the part of the government (Edelman 1985, 29). Equality promotion strategies entail active attempts to bring more women into politics by effectively facilitating their ability to compete for office. This includes offering training or financial assistance to women candidates, but also the establishment of quotas within party structures or for electoral lists. Finally, equality guarantee strategies secure places for women representatives. They imply the adoption of “more interventionist” policies (Buckley 2013, 342), such as reserved lists or quotas for the percentage of women elected to national parliaments.³ As shown in Figure 1, GTPF instruments are placed under the headings of both promotion and equality guarantee strategies; their exact positioning depends on the specific “settings” of the policy instruments adopted.

3. The distinction between the introduction of legislated quotas for the number of women elected to parliament or for the number of women candidates is important. Only the former constitute an example of equality guarantee strategies (Campbell, Childs, and Lovenduski 2006; Lovenduski 2005b).

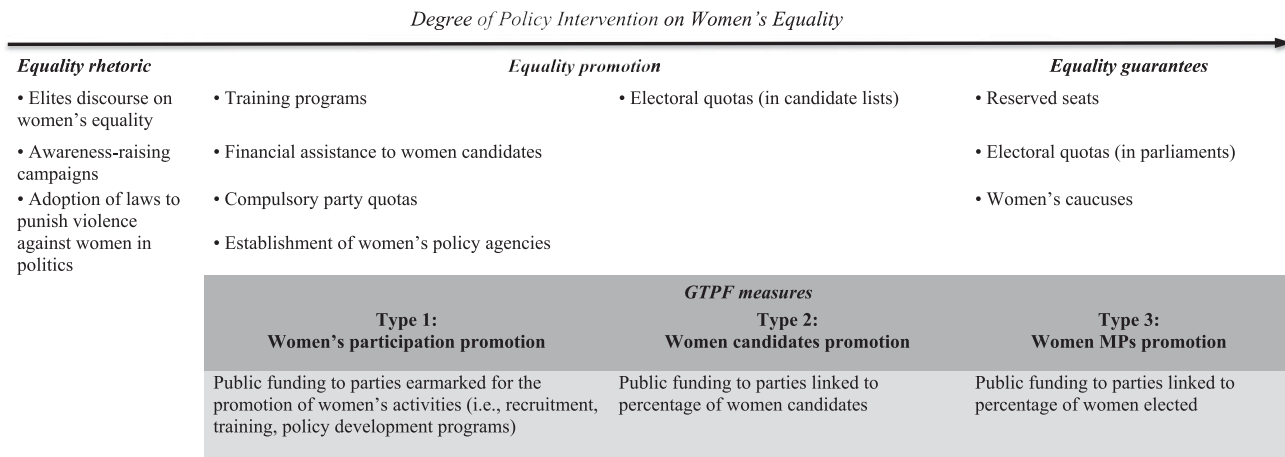


FIGURE 1. Strategies for the promotion of women in politics.

We distinguish three types of GTPF measures. The first type, which we label *women's participation promotion*, allocates a given percentage of the public funding that political parties receive to specific initiatives and activities favoring women's participation in politics. We envision a broad array of activities falling within this category, including political training for aspirants, policy-themed workshops, and recruitment activities. The second type of measure links the provision of public funding to the percentage of female candidates that parties nominate on their electoral lists. Such policies may either provide bonuses to parties in the form of additional funding, if they nominate a given percentage of female candidates on their lists, or they may prescribe economic sanctions, reducing the amount of public funding available to parties if they fail to do so. We label this second type of GTPF instrument *women candidates promotion*. A third type of measure, which we label *women MPs (members of parliament) promotion*, ties public funding to the election of women in parliaments. Here, too, the measures adopted may consist of either bonuses or sanctions, in the form of additional money or budget cuts. The amount of public funding at the political actors' disposal can be increased or decreased depending on the number of women elected to public office.

In [Figure 1](#), the women's participation promotion and women candidates promotion measures are positioned under the equality promotion strategies. In fact, they promote women's equality by introducing incentive mechanisms that encourage parties to foster women's participation in politics and apply a more equal gender balance in the selection of candidates, but they do not secure parliamentary places. When the distribution of public funding is conditional on the percentage of women elected to national parliaments, as women MPs promotion measures do, then GTPF instruments reflect the equality guarantee strategy. It follows that the different types of GTPF measures may reach broader scopes with regard to women's representation compared with other policies that target more specific objectives. GTPF measures address women's participation at different levels: voters, party members, candidates, and MPs. By doing so, they may address issues of substantive representation, by suggesting that political parties focus on policy development and engage in discussions about equality (Childs 2013).

Hence, if GTPF tools are only a specific subset among the number of policy measures that can address the power imbalance between men and women in the politics of representation, they can impact women's representation in many ways, as different GTPF instruments can provide multiple venues for policy makers to influence parties' internal gendered

behavior and homosocial norms, which are indeed very persistent across different contexts (Chiva 2018; Kenny 2013; Verge 2015). This is not to say that political parties are willing to include and recruit women only when they can “gain” from it. Some parties, especially left-wing and green parties, have traditionally included feminist claims in their policy agendas and supported women’s descriptive representation through the adoption, for example, of voluntary party quotas. Other parties have included representative claims that, without being feminist, have nonetheless targeted a women’s perspective, as in the case of conservative parties (Celis and Childs 2014) and, more recently, far-right parties (Kötting, Bitzan, and Petö 2017). Also, political parties may strategically promote gender representation to attract women voters, privileging a vote-seeking strategy (Müller and Strøm 1999). Without undermining the relevance of other factors, we argue, following the rationale behind their formulation, that GTPF can act as an additional incentive for parties to change their internal practices with regard to women’s participation in politics. The extent to which this effect is achieved is the empirical question we seek to answer in the following sections.

SELECTING AND ANALYZING THE ITALIAN CASE

As mentioned before, EU countries have largely overlooked the possibility of linking the public funding of political parties to gender equality. Indeed, GTPF measures are present only in Croatia, France, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, and Romania. Table 1 provides an overview of the EU countries where GTPF measures have been established, the date they were introduced, and which type of the three GTPF measures discussed earlier was adopted.

Given the small number of cases available, their recent introduction, and the relatively small number of electoral cycles that can be observed since their adoption it seems too early to tell whether GTPF measures have been successful.⁴ Most importantly, measuring the effects of these policies based only on the simple recognition of the number of women MPs is methodologically inappropriate, as no assessment of their efficacy can be made without referring to other possible political representation policies in force, such as electoral quotas.

4. For both a positive and a more cautious evaluation, see Casal Bértoa and Rodríguez-Teruel (2017) and Cigane and Ohman (2014), respectively.

Table 1. GTPF measures in EU member states

<i>Countries</i>	<i>Type 1: Women's participation promotion</i>	<i>Type 2: Women candidates promotion</i>	<i>Type 3: Women MPs promotion</i>
Croatia			♀ (2001, 2016)
France		♀ (1999, 2000, 2009)	
Ireland		♀ (2012)	
Italy	♀ (1999, 2012, 2014)	♀ (2012, 2014)	♀ (2014)
Portugal		♀ (2006)	
Romania			♀ (2006)

Note: Years of adoption and following amendments in parentheses.

Source: International IDEA (2018) and authors.

In the following section, we discuss the evolution of GTPF policies and the extent to which they have contributed to changing the incentive structure of political parties, focusing on the specific case of Italy. Not only is Italy — as shown in [Table 1](#) and discussed in more detail in the following section — the only EU member state where all three types of measures are present; it is also one of the countries in Europe where political parties have been mostly dependent on state funding (see [Piccio 2014](#)), thus creating the potential for a strong structure of incentives for political parties to break gendered behaviors. Moreover, it is the country (along with France) with the longest history of GTPF measures in Europe, which allows us to observe and evaluate the results of this policy over a long time frame. This is particularly relevant in the case of culturally embedded policy fields such as that of gender representation, whose impact on politics and society may require more time to have an effect (see [Murray 2012](#)).

We explore how Italian parties have coped with the GTPF instruments previously described since 1999, the year they were introduced. The analysis combines document analysis with elite interview data. Regarding the former, we relied on parties' "official story," namely parties' official financial reports, the explanatory memorandum produced by party treasurers, and other official documents, the reliability of which has improved since the introduction of transparency requirements for party finance laws ([Smulders and Wolfs 2017](#)). We also included documents issued by the so-called Transparency Commission,⁵ to verify whether sanctions (funding reduction) and incentives (additional funding) have

5. The Guarantee Commission for Party Statutes, Transparency and Oversight over Parties' Financial Reports, as introduced by Law 13/2014, <http://www.parlamento.it/1055>.

been effectively applied. We then triangulated the document data with the elite interview data to get a more fine-grained understanding about how parties have dealt with GTPF instruments in practice. Interviews were conducted between January and June 2018 with political party treasurers and national MPs who were involved in the process of policy design.⁶

We focused on the major political parties that competed in Italian elections throughout the time frame observed, covering the entire left-right political spectrum. It should be noted that the Italian party system still has not recovered from the dramatic changes that took place in the early 1990s, when post-World War II parties were almost completely replaced after the “clean hands” judicial investigation revealed widespread corrupt practices among all parties in the system. In the context of the long-term deinstitutionalization of the Italian party system (Chiaromonte and Emanuele 2015), many of the parties that were considered relevant actors by the late 1990s had experienced mergers, splits, and processes of internal restructuring, while genuinely new actors — the most prominent being Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement — emerged. This continuous reshuffling of individual parties makes tracing the way in which single party organizations have dealt with GTPF instruments over time quite complex.

To trace the organizational continuity of the individual political parties, we adopted the largest successor/predecessor method (Mainwaring, Gervasoni and España-Najera 2017). According to this method, we considered the party resulting from a merger to be the continuation of the largest of the predecessor parties. Conversely, in the case of a split, we considered the largest successor to be the continuation of the previously existing party. Indeed, it is often the case that parties resulting from mergers and splits inherit their organizational assets from the parties that preceded them, thus making it possible to trace organizational continuity between formally different organizations (Bartolini and Mair 1990; Bolleyer 2013).

We included the following parties: the Party of Communist Refoundation (RC); Left, Ecology and Liberty (SEL), the only party to the left of social democracy that elected representatives in the 2013 elections; the Democratic Party (PD) and its predecessor, the Democrats of the Left (DS) (1998–2007); the Union of the Christians of the

6. In agreement with the interviewees, we anonymized the interviews by disclosing only the position and role they held within their party organization. Further details are provided in the online appendix and are available from the authors.

Center (UDC) and its predecessor, the Christian Democrats Center (CCD) (1994–2002); Go, Italy! (FI)⁷; the League (LN, formerly the Northern League); and the National Alliance (AN) and its successor (from December 2013), the Brothers of Italy (Fdi). Finally, we included the most prominent newcomer to the Italian party system, the Five Star Movement (5SM), a party that refuses all forms of direct state funding and hence is not required to comply with the GTPF rules.

THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE WITH GTPF

The set of policies aimed at reducing the disparity between the genders in public office has a relatively short history in Italy, which has remained for decades one of the countries in Europe with the lowest representation of women in the national parliament. Although the Constitutional Court declared the early 1990s parity laws for local and national elections unconstitutional, as they violated the principle of formal equality stipulated in Article 51 of the Italian Constitution (D'Amico 2011), gender equality policies again gained momentum after the amendment of the Italian constitution in 2003. Following this reform of the country's fundamental law, equal opportunities for men and women could actively be promoted. In the following years, electoral quotas were introduced for the first time for elections to the European Parliament, regional councils, and national parliament.⁸

Yet measures linking the provision of public funding for political parties to women's political participation promotion had already been introduced in 1999. Under Article 3 of Law 157/1999, parties that are eligible to receive electoral reimbursement should spend at least 5% of the total amount received on the implementation of "initiatives to promote women's active participation in politics." This instrument can be categorized as a women's participation promotion measure (Type 1), as it promotes gender equality by calling for the more active intervention of parties to overcome the barriers to women's political participation, and it raises awareness of the central role that parties can play in overcoming them. The policy also includes a (very) mild oversight mechanism, as

7. Silvio Berlusconi's party, Go, Italy! (FI), merged with the far-right National Alliance in 2009, forming the People of Liberty party. However, the merger was short-lived, and by 2011 the two parties had split again. FI was refounded in 2013. For the analysis of GTPF Type 1, we consider financial reports until 2009.

8. For the European Parliament elections, Law 90/2009, amended by Law 65/2014; for the regional councils, Law 215/2012; for the national parliament, Law 165/2017.

parties were obliged to introduce a specific budget item in their annual financial reports in order to track the expenditures incurred for the promotion of women's participation in politics. However, penalties and sanctions in cases of noncompliance were not established.

In 2012, Law 96/2012 simultaneously strengthened the 1999 rule and expanded the scope of GTPF legislation to include a new type of measure. With regard to the former, the law introduced sanctions for parties that did not comply with the 5% spending obligation: noncompliant parties had to return one-twentieth of the public funding they received. With reference to the latter, the latest intervention linked for the first time the provision of public funding to the promotion of women candidates (Type 2), setting a 5% reduction of public funding to those parties whose electoral lists contained less than 30% women candidates.

The third type of GTPF measure was introduced in 2014 with the most recent amendment to the Italian party funding regime (Law 13/2014). The 2012 reform both strengthened the coerciveness of the two GTPF measures previously in force and introduced a new one, aimed at increasing the number of elected women. Indeed, following from the promotion of women's participation in party activities introduced in 1999 (Type 1), both the threshold of earmarked spending as well as the sanctions for noncompliant parties were raised to 10%. As for the promotion of women candidates (Type 2), the minimum percentage of women to be fielded as candidates on the parties' electoral lists was raised from 30% to 40%. Finally, the new GTPF measure that was introduced provides additional public funding for those parties that manage to elect more than 40% of women from their electoral lists (Type 3).

As shown in [Figure 2](#), GTPF measures in Italy seem to follow an incremental logic of policy change, where new norms strengthen previously existing ones and at the same time expand the scope of policy intervention regarding women's equality one step further (Howlett and Rayner 2013). Indeed, not only has the level of coercion gradually increased, but the very policy goals have become more specifically oriented toward the representation of women in parliament over time (original regulations are reported in the online Appendix).

Yet this growing focus on the promotion of women's equality and the acknowledgment that public funding can provide viable instruments for pursuing it stand in sharp contrast to the concomitant evolution of the Italian public funding regime, of which GTPF tools form a part. Indeed, following a number of reforms that lowered the level of public funding

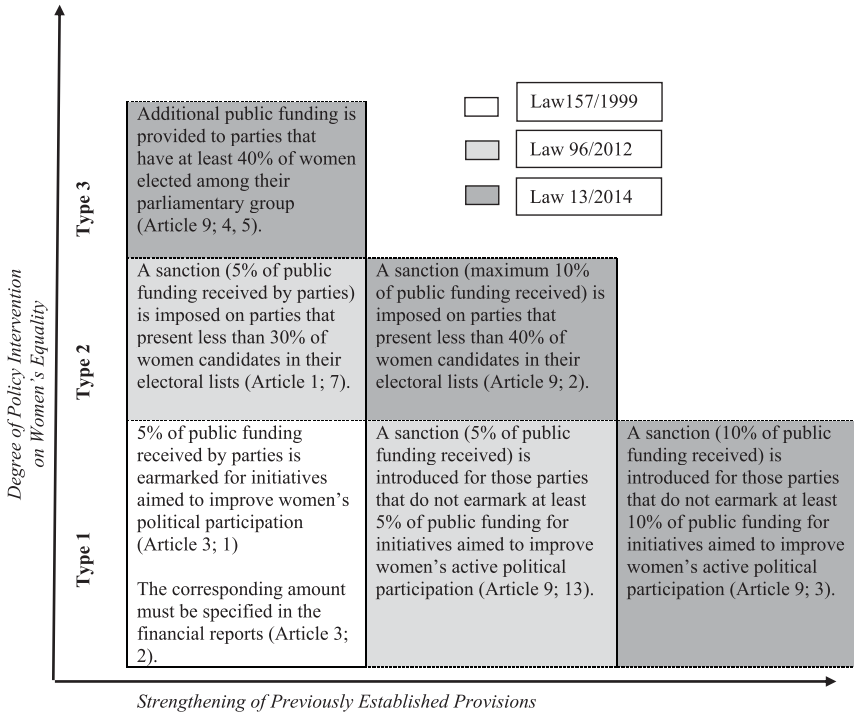


FIGURE 2. The Italian legal framework for gender-targeted public funding.

to political parties from 2008 onward, the latest amendment to the Italian funding regulations in 2014 repealed all forms of direct public funding to political parties.⁹ What has remained for parties in terms of state benefits are funds provided to parliamentary groups, tax breaks for private donations, free airtime on public broadcasting services, and a system that allows taxpayers to earmark 0.2% of their taxable income as a contribution to one eligible political party. Following the 2014 reform, the last has become the primary source for pursuing GTPF measures. Hence, whereas Italy used to rank third (behind Spain and Belgium) among the European countries in the dependency of political parties on state subsidies (see Piccio 2014, 11), thus constituting an ideal setting for linking the provision of state funding to the promotion of women's

9. Several reasons for this repeal of direct public funding to political parties can be mentioned: the economic crisis that began in 2008; the reemergence of incidents of corruption and bribery; the polarization of the political debate on the issue; and the pressing requests to abolish party funding by a newly emerged and highly successful political competitor, the Five Star Movement. For a more detailed discussion of the evolution of the party funding regime in Italy, see Pizzimenti (2018).

equality, it has now become a setting in which the existence of such norms has possibly become irrelevant. Given the significant decrease in the amount of state funding at the parties' disposal, it is plausible to expect that both sanctions and benefits provided by GTPF measures have become irrelevant for changing the incentive structure of political parties.

Promoting Women's Participation in Party Activities (Type I Measures)

It should be recalled that according to the GTPF rule introduced in 1999, parties should spend at least 5% (10% as of 2014) of the public funds they receive to promote women's initiatives and report this spending item in their annual financial reports. Yet, as we specified earlier, no sanctions were attached to this measure until 2012. Indeed, as shown in [Table 2](#) (first column), of the six financial reports that we were able to examine for 1999 (SEL formed in 2009), only four reported the amount spent for women's participation promotion (DS, CCD, FI, and AN). Instead, it took two years after the measure entered into force for the LN and three years for the RC to report the women's expenditures item.

Additionally, we found that reporting the spending item in their financial budgets does not imply that the parties acted in agreement with the GTPF rules. On the contrary, as shown in the second column of [Table 2](#), whether parties respected the spending requirement of 5% varied greatly from one party to the other, with compliance percentages ranging from full compliance to 23%. In this respect, it is worth remarking that left and center-left parties have complied with the norm to a greater extent as compared with their right and center-right competitors, except for the LN and CCD-UDC. This is in line with previous research on the different party families' commitment to gender equality, which has shown that leftist parties are usually more sensitive to gender issues and minority rights (Kenny 2013; Kittilson 2006; Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Verge and de la Fuente 2014).¹⁰ Indeed, it would be erroneous to explain the two center-right parties' relatively high compliance (the LN and CCD-UDC respected the norm in 70% and 86% of the cases, respectively) as a way to advance women's political representation, given their opposition to quota measures in the early 1990s (Guadagnini 2005), as well as to the new affirmative action

10. For a discussion of the predictive power of party ideology on women's representation, see Santana and Aguilar (2018). Also, on the right-leaning parties' efforts to advance women's representation, see Celis and Childs (2014).

Table 2. Public funding and women's participation promotion (Type 1), 1999–2013

<i>Parties</i>	<i>First year reporting women's spending item^a</i>	<i>Overall compliance with spending requirement (percent)^b</i>	<i>Average party spending for women's participation activities, euros (percent)^c</i>
RC	2002	73	533,912 (7%)
SEL ^d	2010	100	96,189 (12%)
DS-PD	1999	93	2,611,625 (6%)
CCD-UDC	1999	86	426,189 (5%)
FI ^e	1999	20	642,142 (2%)
LN	2001	73	511,971 (4%)
AN-FdI	1999	23	258,293 (2%)

^a The obligation to report party spending for women's participation promotion was introduced in 1999.

^b Compliance percentages were computed by dividing the number of times the spending threshold was respected by the number of times parties should have reported the spending item in their annual financial reports.

^c Averages include all the years in which the parties had to report spending for women's activities. When parties did not account for any spending in their financial report, we considered it zero. All currencies are expressed in euro real values (2016). The average percentage of spending for women's activities by individual parties is reported in parentheses.

^d SEL was formed in 2009.

^e Data for FI are considered until 2009 and from 2013 on. Between 2009 and 2011, FI and AN merged to form the People of Liberty party (PDL). The union lasted only few years, since former members of AN left the party in 2011. FI was refounded in 2013, after running in 2013 parliamentary elections as PDL. We do not consider these transition years in our analysis.

policies in 2005.¹¹ Much more likely, they simply duly filled in their financial report according to the regulations in force. SEL is the only party that has always respected the 5% spending threshold, followed by the center-left PD, which respected the spending threshold in 93% of cases. If we consider that SEL was a relatively new party, founded in 2010, we can argue that the center-left PD, along with its predecessor, has been more prone to pay attention to gender equality promotion compared to other leftist parties such as the RC, which respected the spending threshold in 73% of cases. As one of the interviewees, an elected representative of the PD and former member of the RC and SEL, explained to us,

To be honest, this issue of gender parity is much more grounded within the Democratic Party rather than other leftist parties I engaged with in the

11. At that time, parliament voted against the amendment Law 21/2005 on the introduction of gender quotas, advanced by the minister of equal opportunity (Stefania Prestigiacomo), who was a member of the center-right FI party. During the parliamentary debate on the introduction of affirmative action policies, CCD deputy Pippo Gianni began his speech by saying "Women have to f***k off" (Battaglia 2015).

past . . . I mean . . . as far as I can see, in words [the commitment] is higher in these [leftist parties], but only in words! In deeds however . . . the PD is better, also because it has more relevant numbers that mean that women have a different [political] “weight.” (Interview 1)

The pivotal role of the PD is also confirmed if we move from compliance percentages to the average amounts of spending for the promotion of women’s participation under the 1999 GTPF Type 1 requirement (third column of Table 2). In fact, the data reveal that the most generous party with regard to these activities is the PD and its predecessor DS with an average expenditure exceeding 2 million euros, followed by FI, RC, LN, CCD-UDC, FdI-AN, and SEL. This ranking does not reflect a division on the left-right axis because the amount of public funding received by the parties, which, in turn, is employed for women’s activities, also depends on their strength and party size. However, as shown by the average percentages of spending by the individual parties reported in the same column, the different sensibility to the issue for left and right parties still holds true. On average, the RC, SEL, and PD have reserved 7%, 12%, and 6% respectively, of their annual budgets for the promotion of women’s political participation, whereas right and center-right parties did not get over the 5% threshold. In particular, the AN and FI scored very low over the time span, spending on average 2%.

Table 3 shows the funds earmarked for women’s activities from 1999 to 2013. Overall, we cannot trace a clear trend shared by all parties, with the exception of a growing convergence over time toward spending 5% of state subsidies on these activities. In fact, from 2009, all parties spent at least 5% of the state subsidies earmarked for the financial year on the promotion of women’s participation. Some parties present a fairly stable trend over time, such as the LN and CCD-UDC, often respecting the 5% threshold and seldom exceeding it. The AN instead, for more than 10 financial years, systematically failed to reach the required threshold. Only in 2009 did the party start respecting the 5% rule. On the left of the political spectrum, percentages of spending by the RC increased beginning in 2008, after the party failed to enter parliament. Thus, a higher percentage can also mirror the party’s willingness to maintain the same level of spending for promoting women’s activities, notwithstanding the financial restrictions that the party incurred after its electoral defeat.¹² SEL is the party that has earmarked the highest percentage for such

12. The treasurer of the RC confirmed that the budgetary crisis that hit the party from 2008 onward was a consequence of the reduction of electoral reimbursements (Interview 2).

Table 3. Percentage of public funding earmarked for women's activities by party, 1999–2013

Party	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
RC	No	No	No	9	6	8	6	5	7	15	13	7	0	5	17
SEL	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	5	18	18	8
DS-PD	5	7	10	5	6	6	6	10	8	5	5	5	5	5	5
CCD-UDC	5	n/a	5	5	5	5	2	0	5	5	5	8	5	5	5
FI	6	6	2	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
LN	No	No	5	2	3	7	7	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	6
AN-FdI	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	0	0	0	5	5	n/a	n/a	6

Notes: No = no spending item present in the financial reports; n/a = not applicable: either the party did not exist in that year or it was a in transition as a result of a merger or split.

Source: Authors' elaboration from the parties' financial reports (available at <http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it>).

expenditures: in 2011 and 2012, the party reserved almost one-fifth of the subsidies it received for activities promoting women. The trend for the PD tends to stabilize over time around the 5% threshold. In 2001 and 2006, the percentage reached 10%, coinciding in both years with national elections.

As a second focus of analysis, it is worth investigating which types of activities have been considered women's political participation promotion. In 1999, policy makers did not provide further information as to what this might entail. Unsurprisingly, parties have given a broad meaning to the regulation. It should first be underlined that both financial reports and additional annexes often provided only vague information on how state subsidies have been spent for women's participation promotion,¹³ and it would be impossible to draw a full inventory of how parties have actually used these funds. Some examples of women's activities reported in these documents are the organization of open meetings for International Women's Day; political campaigns, events, and demonstrations; meetings of parties' women's wings; and the participation of party delegates at a European Convention of Women. However, according to our interviewees, earmarked funds have mainly been used to cover costs for political campaigning activities or even as travel reimbursements for the parties' women delegates whenever they had to attend party meetings. This scattershot list confirms the lack of goal specificity provided by the Italian GTPF Type 1 regulation. More critically, one of our interviewees told us that "political parties did not use earmarked funds at all for activities that may attract women into politics" (Interview 3). According to another interviewee, clearer and more binding rules are needed to clarify the way in which earmarked funding for women's participation should be spent (Interview 4). The reinforcement introduced in 2012 seems to have tackled this issue by establishing the Transparency Commission, an oversight body in charge of monitoring party finances. Indeed, the RC received some criticism from the commission, which considered the activities reported by the party as expenditures as inappropriate. As the treasurer explained to us,

We received some criticism from the Commission in 2016, saying that certain activities cannot be part of this spending item. There should be some concrete activities. We cannot say anymore, as we did in the past that ... say ... the National Committee has 20 women, therefore we

13. Following a reform introduced in 1997, more complete explanations and evidence of different financial activities (including spending items) must be discussed and clarified in additional compulsory reports that are attached to the parties' financial statements.

count their reimbursements as activities for women's promotion, as we more-or-less did in the past. [. . .] Now that we have received this criticism, we have adapted to it (Interview 2).

The interviews also shed light on the peculiar oversight mechanism applied by the Transparency Commission. Once parties are notified by the commission of their noncompliance with the spending item regulation, they are given the opportunity to revise their financial report *ex post*, changing the amount reported so that it fulfills the threshold requirement. In other words, political parties are given a second chance to revise their financial reports so that it is keeping with women's political promotion regulations and to make ends meet without incurring sanctions.

Moreover, the Transparency Commission's controls have been unsystematic. One of the main problems preventing the commission from effectively performing its oversight function is the lack of personnel, as lamented by the president of the commission during a hearing in the Italian Senate (Senato 2017a). Moreover, new institutions always need some time to develop institutional practices and expertise. As one of the interviewees put it,

The Commission has modified its composition . . . it needed some time to start operating and identify what to address and how to make its interventions more specific. This is [political finance in general] kind of a complicated matter. For what this specific measure is concerned with (GTPF), I think it will make things harder for us [political parties], but it is also fair. If the aim of the measure is to improve women's participation, there should be more targeted activities. (Interview 2)

Overall, these findings suggest that the ever-present formal commitment to gender equality in the parties' statutes and discourses translates into actual deeds only to a very limited extent. The analysis showed that many of the parties we observed failed to comply with the regulation especially in the immediate years following its introduction. Moreover, and throughout the whole period, it showed that most parties have been reluctant to spend more than what is strictly required by the policy measure, thus transforming the minimum thresholds suggested by the decision makers into a maximum ceiling.

Promoting Women in Public Office: Women Candidates and MPs

The two other types of GTPF policy — reduction of public funding for parties with less than 30% (40% as of 2014) of women candidates and

additional funding for parties whose elected representatives include at least 40% women — were introduced in 2012 and 2014, respectively. In order to observe party compliance with these rules, we focused on the two most recent national parliamentary elections that took place in 2013 and 2018. [Table 4](#) shows the data for both.

Starting with the 2013 elections, the analysis reveals an overall high degree of compliance by Italian parties. Six of the eight political parties we observed complied with the 30% women candidates rule: the left and center-left (RC, SEL, and PD), which generously overcame the 30% threshold,¹⁴ and the center (UDC) and right-wing parties (LN and FdI). The only two parties that had less than 30% of women candidates on their electoral lists were FI and the newcomer Five Star Movement. Both parties were sanctioned. FI's electoral reimbursements for 2014, 2015, and 2016 were reduced by 5%, with an overall reduction of 280,118 euros.¹⁵ In the case of the Five Star Movement, the sanction amounted to 330,788 euros. These were perhaps insignificant sanctions for both parties: FI could rely on significant amounts of private assets provided by its founder and president Silvio Berlusconi, while the Five Star Movement in any case refuses direct state funding. However, meeting the 30% women candidates quota did not automatically improve their descriptive representation. This can be seen clearly as we move to the second column of [Table 3](#), which presents the percentage of women elected from the parties in 2013. Only 1.3% and 1.4% of women were elected from the lists of the UDC and FdI, respectively, the percentage perhaps being affected by the limited number of parliamentary seats these parties won. The case of the LN is even more striking, as no women were elected in 2013, meaning that all women candidates were relegated to the bottom of closed electoral lists (proportional representation [PR] system).

The 2018 elections took place in a completely different environment. No longer were GTPF measures the only policies promoting women's equality. In late 2017, a new electoral law was introduced, which replaced the proportional representation system with a mixed (closed-list) system and reintroduced single-member districts (SMD) for the election of one-third of the MPs. This very same law, moreover, introduced for the first time a 40% gender quota as well as the provision of “zippered”

14. It should be noted that the left-wing parties had already introduced voluntary quotas for women candidates in previous elections, confirming the greater commitment to gender parity among the left-wing parties.

15. *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, Serie Generale, Anno 156°, No. 176, July 31, 2015.

Table 4. Percentage of women candidates and women MPs in the 2013 and 2018 national elections

Parties	2013		2018		
	Women candidates	Women MPs	Women candidates (PR)	Women candidates (SMD)	Women MPs
RC ^a	37.8	n/a	50	44.2	n/a
SEL ^b	42.9	21.6	50	42.9	28
PD	43.5	37	50	39.8	33
UDC	32	1.3	50	40	0
FI ^c	27.7	32.7	50	40.3	36
LN	37.6	0	50	40.3	29
FdI	33.4	1.4	50	40.3	31
5SM	15.3	33	50	42.0	43

Notes: Data include the Chamber of Deputies only. Given the high degree of party switching recorded in the Italian parliament, we consider data from the beginning of each legislature.

^a Figures refer to the percentages of women candidates presented by the electoral lists supported by the Party of Communist Refoundation (Civic Revolution) in 2013 and Power to the People in 2018. In neither case did the list pass the electoral threshold for parliamentary representation.

^b For the 2018 elections, we considered the newly founded electoral cartel Free and Equal, with which SEL merged.

^c For the 2013 elections, the People of Liberty party.

Source: Italian Ministry of Interior, <http://www.interno.gov.it>.

candidates' lists.¹⁶ The combination of these two measures led de facto to the establishment of gender parity for candidates' lists in multinomial districts. At the same time, the 40% gender quota is to be respected in single-member districts, too. Indeed, despite the fact that the electoral law does not foresee sanctions in cases of noncompliance (Senato 2017b, 17), all parties respected the measure, and consequently the GTPF regulation. To be sure, the introduction of compulsory electoral quotas played a major and fundamental role in achieving this high compliance rate, more than what the GTPF measure would have done on its own. The two tools are complementary and have created an additive effect.

Even though women's descriptive representation significantly improved following the 2018 elections, as the current parliament has the highest-ever number of women representatives, the striking gender parity achieved in the electoral lists is not mirrored in the number of women MPs. This is due to the fact that the same candidate could run in more than one constituency, up to a maximum of five (the so-called multiple-nomination mechanism;

16. The new electoral law introduced so-called antidiscrimination measures, based on which neither gender may represent more than 60% of the total number of candidates.

see Senato 2017b). Used to guarantee election or reelection for some candidates (as it multiplies their paths to office), this mechanism also helped parties reach the gender quotas required for their electoral lists.

Most importantly for the purposes of this article, the fact that except for the Five Star Movement (which in any case rejects these forms of state funding) none of the parliamentary parties elected more than 40% of women clearly shows that the additional public funding provided to parties (GTPF type 3) did not work as an incentive. As stressed by our interviewees, the instrument itself seems to lack any appeal. All interviewees considered rewarding parties according to their percentage of women MPs to be a positive idea, but they also all agreed that the potential benefits appear too fuzzy. Indeed, the law does not establish a fixed amount that virtuous parties may receive. Rather, the sum to be distributed depends on the amount of public funding withdrawn from those parties that do not comply with electoral gender quotas (GTPF type 2). Thus, according to the law, the prize for virtuous parties relies on the non-virtuous behavior of those parties that failed to fulfill the 40% electoral quota. Paradoxically, as electoral quotas are now in force and all parties comply with the rule (see table 4, for 2018 national election), the amount available for such a provision is unavoidably scarce, if not null. It is too early to tell whether this measure will ever be applied and to note the actual amounts that will be disbursed to parties. However, if the GTPF measure for the promotion of women MPs does not allow parties to know in advance the reward they will get by complying with the rule, it seems unlikely that they would feel an incentive to change, even in a context of scarce economic resources.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we focused on gender-targeted public funding for political parties, namely, those measures that link the use and the distribution of state funding for political parties to the objective of gender equality. We argued that GTPF is an underresearched yet promising policy instrument that has the potential to create new incentives for political parties, the key gatekeepers for political recruitment, to increase the presence of women into politics.

In the first part of the article, we introduced GTPF measures within the broader debate on women's equality promotion policies and proposed a new typology that brings together GTPF with other policy instruments aimed at increasing gender equality. In this context, we identified three

GTPF measures, characterized by a different degree of state intervention and policy scope.

In the second part of the article, we focused on the case of Italy. At first sight, the evolution of GTPF instruments seems to follow an incremental logic and builds a coherent policy mix. However, our analysis highlighted many loopholes that hampered the effectiveness of GTPF policies. First, the regulation seemed more of a recommendation than a rule as no sanctions were foreseen until 2012. Moreover, even when sanctions were introduced, the Transparency Commission, which conducted compliance review of the parties' financial accounts, had a very limited oversight capacity because of the lack of personnel and a significant work overload. Second, the minimum threshold requirement of 5% (later 10%) of the total funding received for women's activities became for many parties a maximum ceiling. Finally, the law does not provide a specific definition of women's participation promotion activities, which resulted in parties misusing these funds. On the contrary, linking public funding (introducing subsidy cuts) to the promotion of women candidates proved to be a more successful measure.

In particular, most Italian parties respected the 30% quota for women candidates in 2013, when no further gender quotas were in force. The introduction of sanctions, then, seems to improve the effectiveness of the instrument. In fact, if political parties were to risk losing a large proportion of the funds they would otherwise have received, then they would have a significant incentive to run female candidates. Not coincidentally, perhaps, the two parties that did not comply with the 30% quotas are those that – for very different reasons – are the least dependent on public subsidies. In the last election that was held in 2018, GTPF measures overlapped with electoral quotas. In this case, compliance with women candidates promotion measures was very high, suggesting that when different policy instruments are complementary with each other and share the same policy goals, their effect is maximized. For GTPF measures promoting women MPs, it appears too early to grasp any effect. To be sure, no party reached this quota following the 2018 national elections, once again with the exception of the Five Star Movement, which rejects public funding. It seems that the incentive mechanism would be improved significantly if parties knew the actual amount of public funding that they might obtain, especially now that large amounts of public funding are no longer provided.

Overall, GTPF is by no means a standalone policy instrument that can solve gender inequality. However, we believe that these measures can

complement other policies, such as electoral gender quotas, in reducing gender inequality. Alternatively, they could be used as a softer, and for many more acceptable, alternative to electoral gender quotas for enhancing women's participation, as long as they are backed up with strong sanctions and benefits. While acknowledging the potential of this subset of measures, we argue that their effectiveness is linked to carefully drafted policies that create strong incentives from which parties can clearly benefit. Our analysis reveals that this has clearly not been the case for the Italian GTPF measures, which seem instead to constitute a perfect example of symbolic "image making" (Mazur 1995, 2) reform policies. Notwithstanding the symbolic commitment to gender equality expressed through the introduction of this policy, our analysis shows the very little impact it has had on political parties and on the Italian debate around gender equality throughout the entire timespan from their introduction in 1999 until now.

This stands in sharp contrast with the appraisal of the French parity law, which initially appeared as symbolic but later triggered far-reaching societal change (Murray 2012). Possibly as the consequence of the absence in Italy of a broad social debate on women's equality, the Italian political parties have done *less than the minimum possible* both when establishing these policies and later when complying with them. Further research should focus on the relationship between gender electoral financing and women's representation. The in-depth analysis of further cases may provide relevant information for policy makers on how best to employ these instruments. Equally important, it is essential to focus on the conditions under which these policies have been introduced. By understanding why these policies have been adopted with such a weak policy design, researchers will be able to reassess how male dominance is reproduced through state institutions.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

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Francesca Feo is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political and Social Sciences, Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence, Italy. In her thesis, she focuses on the behavior of populist parties in national parliaments in

southern Europe. Her research interests include populism, political representation, party organizations, politics and gender, and political finance regulation: francesca.feo@sns.it; Daniela R. Piccio is Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Turin, Italy. Her research interests include party organizations, political representation, and political finance regulation and practices: danielaromee.piccio@unito.it

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