The hegemonic gender order in politics

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Abstract

Purpose

Despite the ongoing increase of women in the top positions, they are still underrepresented in politics. The studies focused principally on women's underrepresentation in politics neglecting the role of gender as a category that structures and makes sense of social practices. The principal aim of this study is to investigate the mechanisms that regulate the contemporary gender order in politics through discourse analysis and the contribution of the critical feminist perspective.

Design/methodology/approach

The study is based on 30 biographical interviews with Italian politicians and focuses on the account of their political experiences and on the meanings attributed to these.

Findings

Results underline the tendency to either absolve or blame women for gender inequality in politics through different interpretative repertoires: "Women's disinterest toward politics", "Politics as masculine context", and "Politics-family unbalance". The analysis allowed to unravel the way in which the discursive practices create and reproduce the hegemonic gender order in politics.

Research limitations/implications

The research is limited to 30 qualitative interviews and so results cannot be generalised.

Practical implications

The findings highlight the importance of exploring issues relating to the gender gap in politics and stress the need to implement actions to promote gender equality in politics.

Originality/value

The paper contributes to an understanding of women's underrepresentation in politics and offers causes for reflection on a phenomenon that has profound implications for our society.

Keywords: gender, politics, discourse analysis, critical feminist perspective

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

Despite the ongoing increase of women in the top positions of hierarchy, they continue to be underrepresented in politics occupying 19.5 percent of seats worldwide, 22.8 percent in Europe, 22.6 percent in the Americas, and 42.0 percent in Nordic countries (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017a). In 2017 Italy ranks 44th out of 193 in the world classification compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, with a participation rate of Italian women to res public between 28% and 31% (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017b). Although the number of women elected in central institutions

is increased compared to the past, in Italy women are still low represented in politics (Massa, 2013), and the number of women politicians decreases in the hierarchy of power (Fornengo and Guadagnini, 1999; Bonomi et al., 2013). Every President of the Italian Republic has been a man and women who have served in the institutional role of President of the Chamber of the Italian Republic from 1948 to date are 3 out of 14 (Italian Parliament, 2017). This position of women in politics, characterised by both a numerical increase compared to the past, and a numerical decrease at the top of the power hierarchy, is well represented by current government. The XVII Legislature of government, which started in 2013 and close to conclusion, is the legislature with the largest number of women in Parliament, in fact the women account for 32% of deputies and 30% of senators, but only 16% of women cover the roles of leader, president of the commission and the office of the presidency. Analysing the composition of the Italian parliament, it is clear that the disparity between men and women in politics is recognizable when roles are more prestigious. This condition is also confirmed at the regional level: women are present in the joint sessions in 29% of the councils and hold key positions (departments and offices with greater decision-making power) in 18% of the councils, while only 10% is president of the region and only 2% are leaders of the municipalities in the capital city (Openpolis, 2015).

The Italian case is particularly interesting, as Italy is strongly characterised by conditions of gender inequality. In addition to the gender gap in political participation, as evidenced by the above data, in Italy the level of women's participation in the paid labour market is still very low (Istat, 2016): 54.4 per cent compared with an OECD average of 62.6 per cent (OECD, 2015). Although Italian women have a higher level of education than that of Italian men (Istat, 2016), gender segregation persists. Working women are concentrated in the tertiary sector and low-skilled professions (Istat, 2015b), with only 35 per cent holding a managerial position. In this regard, Italy is ranked 82nd out of 142 according to the World Economic Forum's (WEF) classification (WEF, 2014). In addition, in Italy the division of family work remains drastically imbalanced, to women's disadvantage (Eurostat, 2011; Istat, 2015a; Cnel, 2014). Research shows that the time Italian mothers dedicate to family work is much higher than that dedicated by fathers, even in dual- earner families (Eurostat, 2011; Istat, 2015a). This strict division of family roles is the main obstacle to women reaching decision-making positions in politics, because Italy also continues to invest inadequately in services to support families (Panzeri and Viale, 2016). In Italy, maternity continues to have a significant impact on unemployment rates and the early exit of women from the labour market (Cnel, 2014).

In Italy, therefore, the under-representation and low appreciation of women in society and politics together constitute a serious problem whose causes it is vital to investigate in order to intervene adequately (Pacilli et al., 2012).

Despite the substantial social and cultural transformations of men and women roles, women continue to be excluded or impeded in highly competitive and masculine hierarchical domains, such as politics (Lazar, 2005). Men continue to be the majority in power contexts that appear inaccessible and strewn with obstacles for women to grow in (Fox and Lawless, 2011; Paxton and Hughes, 2015). Although women have achieved full juridical parity and participate in the political life of the country, conditions of strong inequality still persist and limit their growth in contexts that are considered places of power (Davidson and Burke, 2016; Lazar 2017). Several studies have investigated women in leadership (e.g., Fitzsimmons et al., 2014; Mavin and Grandy, 2016), and explored persistent systems of discrimination and inequality (e.g., Kelan, 2008; Lewis et al., 2017).

The matter of women in politics continues to represent the context in which a gendered division of power has its highest expression and constitutes a macroscopic disadvantage in terms of 'presence' and in the acquisition of roles (Childs, 2006). Many pieces of evidence attest the existence of strong constraints to full and complete participation women's policy. Politics is one area where male domination over women and resistance to change are fully expressed (Bourdieu, 1998). Politics tends to reproduce male models and rules presenting itself as an unwelcoming domain for women. Women then, although they can rely on the same opportunity as men, are blocked by systems of exclusion rooted in the culture of many societies (Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Krook, 2010) and very often exclude themselves. Women's underrepresentation in politics reproduces the imbalanced and unequal gender relations (Lovenduski, 2001; Santos et al., 2013).

Since the 1990s, some scholars, mostly women from Anglo-Saxon and Northern European countries (Childs and Krook, 2006; Krook, 2010), have begun to investigate the relationship between women and politics, focusing especially on the numerical presence of women in the government and in the Councils, on the trends and mechanisms of recruitment and selection of women by the parties (Kenny, 2007; Celis et al., 2015; Kenny and Verge, 2015). These studies found that women continue to be underrepresented in politics and despite there being a much greater number of women in elected positions compared to the past, this it is not a substantive representation and cannot be called substantive equality (Childs and Krook, 2006). The literature on this topic has addressed the potential factors that may explain this underrepresentation, and has highlighted the influence of patriarchal culture, the division of family roles, the lack of childcare, the resisting attitude of the parties and the fragmentation of women's movement (Lovenduski and Guadagnini, 2010; Bonomi et al., 2013). Others have analysed the relationship between discourse,

gender and political representation, focusing on political discourse and the construct of gender identity (Shaw, 2000; Walsh, 2001) and gender citizenship in politics (Poggio, 2004; Bellè, 2012). This study is positioned in the field that investigates the relationship between women and politics using a discursive perspective. The research was conducted within a theoretical framework referred to as discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), and to contribution from the critical feminist perspective (Lazar, 2007, 2017; Holmes and Marra, 2010), and proposes to understand the mechanisms that regulate the contemporary gender order in politics through the analysis of the discourses of a group of Italian politicians. The focus on discourses of politicians allows us to analyse the processes by which dominant symbolic gender order is reconstructed in politics and to show how the distribution of power between gender is acted out through practices of hegemonic masculinity which excludes women from the real seats of power.

This study offers a reflection on gender inequalities in political participation, starting with a review of the literature and the results of research conducted on Italian politicians. The contribution of this paper is to shed light on continuing discourses concerning politics as a predominantly male context. We conclude by highlighting the study's theoretical and practical implications for enhancing equality in politics and further developing research in this area.

Gender, power and discourse in politics

The studies on women and politics continue to focus on women' numbers in politics and on sex differences, and with difficulty, they are able to embrace the concept of gender (Kenny, 2007) as a category that structures and makes sense of particular social practices. However, feminist studies have developed complex theories of gender, including both patriarchal and discursive conceptions of power. The power inequality between gender relies on the concept of patriarchy, a system of social structures and practices of domination founded in the subordination of women by men (Walby, 1990). Gender relations are power relations involving formal public structures as politics and private structures as the family. The distribution of power between gender, based on hegemonic patriarchal culture, which associates naturally the female to the house and the male to the labour and political activities, has determined an asymmetry in which the historical forced absence of women from prestigious positions, such as politics, would involve a vicious circle whereby the greater female participation in domestic work has become cause and consequence of their exclusion (Walby, 1990). Through the internalization of gendered norms produced routinely in discourses of everyday life, this gap of power between men and women has become invisible, misrecognized and recognized as legitimate and natural (Bourdieu, 1991), contributing to the consolidation of 'hegemonic masculinity' that preserves, legitimizes and naturalizes men power and, consequently,

women subordination (Connell, 1987; 2016; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Discourse, therefore, plays a significant role in the reproduction of dominance, which is considered as an exercise of social power by elites, institutions or groups that have the effect of increasing social, political, class and gender inequality (van Dijk, 1993; 2011). Social power is enacted, reproduced or legitimised by the discourse of dominant groups or institutions (van Dijk, 1996).

Relations of power and dominance (Bourdieu, 1991) can discursively challenge the interests at stake. Therefore, hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, perpetuated, negotiated, and challenged. To share or refuse these contents means to contribute to the reproduction and maintenance of the social order and also to resist and transform that order (Lazar, 2005; 2017).

Gender is socially constructed through discourses (Wodak, 1997), and the power relations associated to, and reproduced by, such discourses (Wodak, 1997). Gender expresses the relationships of power that constitute society: women and men, through their performances, can reify or on the contrary challenge the system of relations and gender privileges (Holmes and Marra 2010). Feminist critical discourse perspective offers important contribution to theorize and analyse 'the particularly insidious and oppressive nature of gender as an omni-relevant category in most social practices' (Lazar, 2007, p. 3). In particular, feminist critical discourse analysis aims to demystify the interrelationships of gender and power, in discourse and critiques the discourses that sustain a patriarchal social order, that systematically privilege men and disadvantage women (Holmes and Marra, 2010). The disclosing of the discursive strategies through which power structures and supports oppressive social relations is a form of "analytical resistance" that help to support the struggles of protest and social change (van Dijk, 1991). Feminist critical discourse contributes to social transformation through the focus on repressive norms and restrictive stereotypes reified and reinforced by routine discourses of people (Holmes and Marra, 2010).

Methodology

This study is based on 30 biographical interviews conducted with local Italian politicians, 15 of whom were men, 15 women. We chose to involve local politicians because figures on the number of women in local Italian institutions are lower than those at national level (Istat, 2017).

The average age of the politicians interviewed was 43 years (DS=12,5; Range=24-64). The research was carried out in Italy and recruitment took place through the involvement of political parties. The face-to-face interviews were conducted by one of the authors, lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and focused on two central topics: their experiences in politics and meaningful episodes in their political life; the barriers that may hinder women's political participation. Respondents were asked to illustrate their political career starting from the reasons that led them to choose politics and to

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discuss the relationship between politics and gender, taking into consideration their own experiences and reflecting on the meanings attributed to the experiences.

The study was carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants were informed of the aims, methods and other ethical aspects relevant to the study. After they had given informed consent, all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity have been protected through the use of pseudonyms.

For the first step of the analysis, the authors independently examined the transcripts to identify the emerging main themes and recurrent repertoires. Subsequently, the researchers worked together on the discourse analysis (Billig, 1987; Potter and Wetherell, 1987), in order to come to an agreement on the identified interpretative repertoires and chosen illustrative key quotes drawn from the different interviews.

Particular attention is given to discourse, as social action through which men and women can reify or challenge the system of power relations, gender imbalances and privileged places in which these mechanisms can be observed and unmasked (Holmes and Marra, 2010). Data analysis focused on the *interpretative repertoires* and *ideological dilemmas*. The repertoires are "clusters of terms organized around a central metaphor, often used with grammatical regularity" (Wiggins and Potter, 2008, p.74) not defined by specific words or phrases, but by a textual constellation that refers to a specific theme (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). The ideological dilemmas (Billig *et al.*, 1988) indicate the intrinsic contradictory nature of common sense and highlight the rhetorical origin of attitudes toward gender as they emerge in contexts where there is an argument. "[...] when contradictory positions overlap they provide a basis for awareness and reflexivity, just as they lead to problematization and change" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 82).

Who is to blame for the gender gap in politics?

Data analysis show how the dominant gender order is performed and reinforced through the discursive practices of the politicians interviewed. The participants tell their experience as politicians and produce discourses that clarify the norms that regulate the political field. These discourses are part of a wider social context in which choices, roles and careers are gendered.

The politicians interviewed offer several arguments about women' low participation in politics, referring to different degrees of responsibility or states of helplessness. Results show the participants' tendency to either absolve or blame women for gender inequality in politics through different interpretive repertoires, which can be, in some cases, dilemmatics (Billig et al., 1988).

In particular, the interpretative repertoire "*Women's disinterest toward politics*" tends to blame women for their low participation in politics, whilst the interpretative repertoire "*Politics as*

masculine context" tends to absolve women and to attribute the responsibility of the gender gap in politics to the hegemonic social context and to the attitude of the parties. A third repertoire "*Politics-family unbalance*" identifies in the unequal distribution of family work the principal responsibility of gender inequalities in politics. The arguments referred to the latter repertoire concern the debate between nature or culture, fluctuating between the essentialist positions, on the one hand, and progressive positions, on the other hand.

Women's disinterest toward politics

Though among the politicians interviewed the idea that men and women can perform the same roles in politics is common, they explain the women low representation in politics referring to the lack of interest of women toward politics, the women voluntary abstention and their minor will to be involved (De Simone et al. 2017). The issue of women's lack of interest is built on beliefs that recall individual factors (Fornengo and Guadagnini, 1999) as "a choice for women" dictated by lack of desire to engage. This choice would lead women to voluntarily keep away from the places of *res public*:

> Marco (39 years): "Women can play the same role in politics, whatever role males can play; there is no difference. It is a choice for women who do not participate in politics. They are not interested. [...] because there is no woman that enforce herself!"

Marco does not display explicit conflicts that were unfavourable to full equality between men and women in politics, however affirming the claim of women's disinterest in politics, supports the counterarguments that identify in women the cause of the impossibility to put such equality into practice.

The argumentation relying on women's responsibility for the gender gap in politics becomes even stronger when greater capacity and greater potential is attributed to women themselves:

> Giovanni (41 years): "women voluntarily choose not to do politics [...] when they are brought into play, they have produced good results just as good or better than others. I think that women have all the possibilities and conditions for doing politics, and even in the best way."

The notion of choice is another key element to the understanding of the gender gap in politics. The reference to women's disinterest in politics being a reflection of their own voluntary choice, implies a lack of recognition of the social inequalities affecting women's access to politics. Reference to women having free choice moves attention away from the responsibility of the system to the

responsibilities of the individual woman, indicating that women's choices are embedded within cultural, social and economic conditions that structure gender dynamics (Lewis et al., 2017).

The quotations above show as the power, deeply ingrained, acts automatically and unconsciously, since is foregone and 'buried' under consolidated ideologies (Lukes, 2005). Marco and Giovanni's words show how the gender order is preserved through the third dimension of power that prevents some issues from being expressed. Gender conflict is latent because the subjects holding positions of power, in this case two men politicians, do not explicitly express their interests. The ideologies influence people's wishes and thoughts, the 'ideological power', the 'real power', acts indirectly and unconsciously, influencing the social actors and ensures, in this way, their acquiescence, even when it goes against their self-interest (Lukes, 2005). Indeed *Valeria, (25 years)*, says:

> *"Women themselves are afraid of not being up. It depends very much on the lack of interest or fear to get involved because, in my opinion, we are the cause of the prejudice! I speak often of meritocracy, I hate rose quotas! There is no need for rose quotas."*

Valeria affirms that women have not the need for rose quotas. The rose quotas refer to those legal instruments aimed to protect gender equality within the representative bodies through different calculation mechanisms and allocation of seats. Valeria, with her statements, contributes to maintaining the status quo, by underplaying and silencing structural inequalities. Once again, it is not the politics to reiterate a gender order that does not allow women's participation, but women themselves are responsible for their own exclusion. For many respondents, including women, and as it is clear from Valeria's discourse, affirmative action promoted in favour of gender equity in political participation is perceived as offensive and not qualifying (Santos et al., 2016). Valeria denies gender inequalities, thereby oppositions are avoided, whereas asymmetric power relations between gender persist.

The issue of voluntary women's abstention from politics justifies persistent power inequalities as the result of women's individual choices and underlies the non-recognition of gender social inequalities (Lewis, 2014). Marco, Giovanni, and Valeria's extracts emphasize the individual responsibilities with the effect of concealing structural discrimination mechanisms, and the inequality of power between men and women. Through those discourses seem to emerge a lack of awareness of the mechanisms of male dominance that push women, without their awareness, to adapt their hopes and their aspirations to opportunities, and consequently not to undertake actions that are not expected of them (Bourdieu, 1998). The order of things, in fact, is not a natural order, but a building of the world with which man pleases his thirst for domination, a vision so exclusive that the same women who are the victims have integrated in their own way of thinking by accepting their unconscious

inferiority (Bourdieu, 1998). Valeria, as a woman, can be considered victims and author of gender relations of power acting in social practices upholding hegemonic culture. The hegemonic masculinity, as a pattern of practices that permit men's dominance over women (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), inspires discourses that aim to represent a reality of gender equality. Marco, Giovanni, and Valeria's discourses lack an acknowledgement of this systematic imbalance referred to the rhetoric of sameness between gender and denial of inequalities. The hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) inspires the discourses of equality that deny gender inequalities slowing social change (De Simone and Scano, 2017).

Politics as masculine context

Interviewed politicians' discourses identify the cause of the women low representation in politics in the sexism that characterizes the parties and politics in general, using the interpretive repertoire "Politics as masculine context". Women's access to some areas continues to be difficult and to represent a source of inequality especially in the "real" places of power (Lazar, 2005), as politics. Several interviewees emphasize the persistence of the gender gap in politics highlighting that despite the number of women in politics has increased compared to the past, high positions continue to be held predominantly by men reiterating a gender order that relegates women to subordinate positions (Connell, 1987, 2016).

> *Cristina (53 years): "Certain roads were blocked to women. There is a social structure that does not allow access to women in politics. Since it is been a long time, and now it seems that everything is established a norm. Women, despite the battles, block themselves because this is the social structure which they know and consequently everything remains unchanged."*

Cristina's words recount as the politics represents a system of power relations aimed at gaining control of resources and opportunities of majority group over the minority group (van Dijk, 2001). According to respondents also the attitude of the parties that have opposed resistance and have offered few opportunities for women helps to explain the low representation of women in politics (Guadagnini, 2005; Yirmibeşoğlu, 2008; Lovenduski and Guadagnini, 2010; Bellè, 2012; De Simone et al., 2017). About this Sara, 60 years, says:

> *"I have encountered many difficulties in my political career. The political parties are governed by men, who support other men. Women do not vote for women because there are no women on the list and if they are there, they are already put in the last places, and they will never be elected. The parties are a male lobby."*

Sara and other respondents attribute the barriers encountered by women in politics to the

discriminatory practices carried out by the parties (Lovenduski and Guadagnini, 2010). Sara describes the difficulties encountered in the party and the sense of exclusion generated by belonging to a minority. Sara's words perfectly convey the idea of the dynamics that develop in power institutions, always male dominance, helping to define the segregating phenomena of women. The lower representation of women in political institutions is explained by reference to the selection and recruitment methods in force in the various political systems and implemented by the various parties (Fornengo and Guadagnini 1999; Bellè, 2012; De Simone et al., 2017). The construction of male-dominated lists is fostered by party logics that build blocked lists where women are at the end of the list, without any chance of affirmation, according to the political gatekeeping phenomenon (Bain and Cummings 2000). In this way, politics tends to exclude women by proposing predominantly male patterns and discriminatory practices (Annesley and Gains, 2010).

Carlo, 45 years, explains the mechanisms of political parties that discourage women participation (Fox and Lawless, 2011) and contribute to the consolidation of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005):

> *"In political parties, women are called by the secretaries, who are mostly men, in the election period. But after the election, when women did not take votes, they are no longer considered and they feel cheated. So, they say: do not go back there again."*

The existence of the *glass ceiling* (Morrison et al., 1992) in politics represents an invisible barrier that prevents women participation in politics and, on the contrary, privileges men. The prevalence of votes of men candidates becomes an obvious, logical, natural phenomenon, as told also by Giacomo, 38 years:

> *"There is a greater tendency by most people to vote for men, the system is structured in a sexist way. First, since women are less, there are ten women and ninety men; clearly, it is easier for a man to achieve, than for a woman. Second, a man wants to support himself, so he wants to keep that power and a woman who arrives so high would compromise the rules."*

Giacomo exemplifies as the vote reifies the dominant gender order according to specific logic of power. His discourse operates for the naturalization of a gender order socially accepted and shared, which mystifies the diversity in the distribution of power and inequality between women and men (Lazar, 2005, 2017).

Politics-family unbalance

The underrepresentation of women in politics is linked to family-work life balance as women's responsibility (Lovenduski and Guadagnini, 2010; De Simone et al., 2017). Some interviewees

assert that women would not be interested in doing politics because they organize their lives around the family. For example, Giovanni, 38 years, say:

> *"I also understand that for a woman who decides to have a family and children it is more complicated because family work falls more on the woman than on the man. Women are interested in organising their lives around the family. Women should not be pretentious and have unrealistic demands toward politics, they must organize themselves with family and adapt to the rules of politics."*

Giovanni's extract describes a rigid division of gender roles and a strong unbalance in the distribution of family work as a disadvantage for women because of the limitation of time and resources for professional and political affirmation (Lazar, 2005; Lasio *et al.*, 2017) and as a cause of the gender gap in politics (Guadagnini, 2005). This imbalance reflects the unequal distribution of power in gender relations (Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Lazar, 2017) that finds expression also in politics.

> *Kayla (63 years): "So, there is a problem when a woman with family decides to go into politics. Because we are good at giving ourselves the responsibility of all that is not all right. We feel guilty at work because we are not at home, and we feel guilty at home because we are not at work."*

It is evident by Kayla's discourse, the logic of the hegemonic power is internalized and shared by women themselves (Bourdieu, 1991), involved in that relationship of dominance-submissiveness dictated by patriarchal power, which places men and women in specific roles, public and private. The dichotomy between private-domestic sphere, traditionally considered feminine, and political-public sphere, historically a men prerogative, is proposed again in the interviewees' discourses.

The family-political life balance as women's responsibility is explained by the respondents referring both to "natural " both to "cultural " factors:

> *Elisa (47 years): "Many women do not present themselves as candidates because they would not be able to balance family and politics, unlike men, clearly, probably by nature, by the trend. It is normal to be like this, but there is the difference. There is a different way of approaching the family, but that is DNA."*

> *Carlo (45 years): "Women have a natural limitation because they can become mothers. Being a mother influences life. A woman has different needs than a man; she is more careful toward the family and, therefore, feels more strongly the need to go back home - she wants to prepare the soup for the baby. She is*

worried, but these worries are a limitation in the practice of an administrator.
Because you have to be free and distractions are not allowed. All this penalizes
the woman."

The focus is on the alleged inability of women to reduce in their favour domestic and family responsibilities. Although there is an awareness of family burdens on women, that affects their opportunities for growth, the organization of the system seems to be conceived as an essential and unchangeable rule. Respondents that adhere to this interpretation tend to minimize and naturalize (Lazar, 2005) inequalities and women disadvantage resulting from strong adherence to a dominant gender order, which places women and men, respectively, inside and outside the home, mystifying diversity in the distribution of power.

However, as clearly expressed by Valeria, the explanation for family-political life balance as women's responsibility not only comes in terms of "natural" factors, but an important role is also played by "cultural" factors that reiterate the status quo, and are accepted and considerate as appropriate by women as well.

Valeria (25 years): "There is still the mentality of the woman that stays at home,
cleans, takes care of the children and cannot do it late at night. The low
participation of women in politics may also be caused by this. This depends on
culture; for a man is different, it is inevitable! A man goes to a working dinner,
but I know that my children are at home, and my 'mother's heart' makes me
come back home."

The social, political, cultural context offers a dominant gender order (Connell, 1987, 2016), proposing a "natural" division between gender and roles played by men and women.

Women's domestic overload is cause and consequence of the exclusion of women from prestigious activities like politics, a vicious circle whereby the hegemonic patriarchal culture, associating the women to the home and the men to the work, lays the foundation to determine an asymmetry between gender (Walby, 1990).

The characteristics of the cultural context are another factor that plays a key role in explaining the gender gap in politics (Fornengo and Guadagnini, 1999). In particular, Giacomo's reflection underlines a dichotomous division of roles (production- men and reproductive-women), as result of a hegemonic patriarchal culture. The politics and its "times" are described not as a natural and obvious dimension, but as subject to renegotiations and changes. Giacomo, 38 years, supports the role of "cultural " factors:

"Now it is happening that since the woman has to stay home and take care of the
kids, the man goes to do politics, because the timing in politics is done for men.

> *Our society has this idea about politics. We must change it… we must change the*
> *culture. We must educate children. We must create a new political establishment*
> *and the conditions so that things will be different in the future, otherwise, it is*
> *normal that in politics you will repeat what is the everyday life."*

This quotation identifies the social and cultural dimensions that influence common sense featured in an essentialist nuance, and refer to the patriarchal culture that categorizes men and women according to hierarchical relationships of dominance and submission. This distribution of roles as told by Giacomo is the product of practices and power relations in a social context that conveys social expectations that reproduce existing power unbalances between the gender. Giacomo expresses the need to change the patriarchal hegemonic culture that influences a gender order also in the political life.

Some respondents think that adequate reconciliation services would help to solve the problem of underrepresentation of women in Italian politics (Lovenduski and Guadagnini, 2010).

> *Ambra (61 years): "Here are no services, or at least not enough. A good plan of*
> *services that allow women to enter the labour market, just a systematic project that*
> *needs to go in the direction of eliminating disparities."*

The balancing of family life and political career is a woman prerogative because even currently women more than men are engaged both in the public and private spheres. According to our respondents, the lack of adequate support from government policies and inequities in the distribution of family work are among the causes of women's choice to not devote to institutional policy.

The political and family systems are still structured for the men advantage and for the oppressive presence of a gender order (Connell, 1987, 2016) that still put the exercise of social power in the hands of elite groups or specific men institutions (Lazar, 2005, 2007, 2017).

Conclusions

This paper explores the topic of the gender gap in politics through a discourse analysis of a group of Italian politicians and shows the patterns whereby a dominant gender order is constructed and reproduced. Discourse analysis discloses some interpretive repertoires used by men and women to confirm and reinforce the hegemonic gender order.

Data analysis confirms that the Italian context is strongly characterised by a dominant gender order that assumes that most men are involved in the public sphere and in paid employment, while women are more likely to operate in the private sphere and family work. This gender order defines the boundaries of symbolic practices and materials of masculinity and femininity, positioning

women and men in different positions of power. While the presence of women in politics breaks the dominant gender order (Connell, 1987, 2016), the other gender practices in politics tend to rebuild that order, repositioning women in subordinate roles.

The participants tend to either absolve or blame women for gender inequality in politics through different interpretive repertoires: ascribe to women the responsibility of their low representation in politics relying on women's disinterest toward politics; absolve women attributing the responsibility of the gender gap in politics to the reproduction by politics of masculine rules, rhythms and symbols that do not correspond to the characteristics and needs of women. The participants' discourses also highlight how work-family imbalanced distribution influences women's participation in politics attributing this both to natural factors and cultural factors. These discourses highlight an ideological dilemma (Billig et al., 1988) with respect to the causes that would lead to the clear separation between private and public spheres and, consequently, the different roles assumed between women and men.

Findings allow us to understand the processes by which dominant symbolic gender orders are re-constructed, and to show how power relations are permeated by practices of hegemonic masculinity which reinforce this order. Discourses on low representation of women in politics contributes to the consolidation of hegemonic masculinity that conserves and legitimizes men power and women subordination (Connell, 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic patriarchal culture continues to act undisturbed and, through everyday discourses about natural gender binarism, legitimises and becomes the direct expression of the power relationship between men and women (Walby, 1990). Behind the rhetoric of the growing democratization of modern organizations, gender inequalities have become more powerful because they act through subtle discursive mechanisms, much more difficult to unmask (Fairclough, 1992). Rhetoric of equality, framed into a broader context of male hegemony, guides their sense-making into denying gender inequalities in politics. Those discourses represent a subtle, pervasive, insidious, and seemingly innocuous form of power in modern societies (Lazar, 2005). In fact, processes of naturalization of gender inequality (Lazar, 2005) are proposed also in those discursive, apparently egalitarian, contexts that absolve women. Women in dilemma are the main witnesses (unaware) that gender differences are built in discourses and acted out in daily practices (Lazar, 2017). For many women interviewed, it was very difficult to recognize their position of inequality because it is produced by a latent ideological and hegemonic power (Lukes, 2005). This has the effect of driving choices and waivers and systematically and unknowingly supports men as a privileged social subject in the exercise of political and social power.

This study has some limitations that may be overcome with further research. First, the small sample size and voluntary participation of politicians means that our results are not generalisable. Thus, this research project should be replicated using an expanded sample and comparing local and national politicians. A second limitation is the exclusive reliance on qualitative data, which in future should be supplemented with quantitative data. Despite these limitations, the findings highlight the importance of exploring issues relating to the gender gap in politics and offer some suggestions for implementing actions to promote gender equality in this area.

The rebalancing of gender could be promoted by quotas guaranteeing women a percentage of posts in the political system. Pink quotas, along with actions to promote awareness of gender discrimination, could be a response to women's disinterest in politics. The presence of women as candidates or in political office also assumes a symbolic function and conveys the unequivocal message that politics "is not for men only". Previous studies have shown that the presence of women in institutional political roles increases other women's interest in politics (Burns et al., 2001). The virtuous effect of quotas in countries that have adopted them is widely documented in the literature (Dahlerup and Freidenvall, 2010). Also, work-life balance policies (such as monetary transfers, and children and care services) aimed at alleviating the burden of women's familial responsibilities could increase women's participation in politics by promoting gender equality inside and outside the family (Gornick and Meyers, 2003; Lewis, 2009). Indeed, some studies have shown a relationship between different welfare regimes and the way in which men and women build their life paths (Gornick and Meyers, 2003; Geist, 2005).

To promote social change and challenge the dominant gender order it is necessary not only to take into account psychosocial and cultural factors, but also to leverage institutional factors.

The research allows disclosure of the social practices based on gender and the patriarchal ideology that contributes to the construction and preservation of women political disadvantage (Holmes and Marra, 2010). The feminist critique of political practices and social relations based on gender aims ultimately at inspiring a social change. The status quo is challenged in favour of a feminist humanist vision of a just society in which gender does not predetermine or mediate relations with others or our sense of who we are and what we can become. Discourse analysis, which reveals how power works to support oppressive social structures and relations, is in itself a form of "analytical resistance" (van Dijk, 1991) and contributes to conducting power struggles and social change (Lazar, 2007).

The study shows how discourses can represent an instrument of resistance to change and reinforcement of hegemonic gender order and offers some suggestions for future research. Future studies could use discourse analysis and the contribution of the critical feminist perspective as

instruments to raise awareness, to understand the mechanisms underlying gender inequalities and the gender gap also in other domains of power in which women are still excluded.

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Reviewer: 1

Recommendation: Minor Revision

Comments:
(There are no comments.)

Thank you very much for your generous feedback and useful suggestions. Please see below how we have addressed your specific comments.

Additional Questions:
1. Originality: Does the paper contain new and significant information adequate to justify publication?: The originality of this paper remains in the context studied: The italian politic field.
2. Relationship to Literature: Does the paper demonstrate an adequate understanding of the relevant literature in the field and cite an appropriate range of literature sources? Is any significant work ignored?: The review of the literature is accurate. However, the recent literature is only italian, and the old literature is the basic when gender is analysed. In this sense, I miss the relevant -and recent- international literature, since in some moments, the paper seems to be biased by so many italian writers (Indeed, in many times it is the same author quoted in up to 6 references).

As you suggested, we have improved our engagement with the literature by revisiting the references. Specifically, we have added some recent and relevant references from the international literature (for example, Davidson and Burke, 2016; Lazar 2017; Fitzsimmons et al., 2014; Mavin and Grandy, 2016; Kelan, 2008; Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al., 2017), deleted some old and Italian references (for example, Gherardi, 1995; Bellè, 2010; Lasio et al. 2012; Davidson and Cooper, 1993; Gough, 1998) and removed, in parts of the manuscript, the same author quoted in many references (e.g. Guadagnigni and Guadagnini and colleagues).

3. Methodology: Is the paper's argument built on an appropriate base of theory, concepts, or other ideas? Has the research or equivalent intellectual work on which the paper is based been well designed? Are the methods employed appropriate?: The methodology is appropiate, and the authors tried to use a "wide" range of participants,   however   it   has   its   limitations,   which   are   clearly   stated. I miss a statement pointing that the confidentiality of the participant was protected and the names were changed.

In the Methodology Section, we have specified that participants' confidentiality and anonymity were protected through the use of pseudonyms.

4. Results: Are results presented clearly and analysed appropriately? Do the conclusions adequately tie together the other elements of the paper?: The conclusions are clearly linked with the results and are relevant for both, the study and the knowledge in the area.

5. Implications for research, practice and/or society: Does the paper identify clearly any implications for research, practice and/or society? Does the paper bridge the gap between theory and practice? How can the research be used in practice (economic and commercial impact), in teaching, to influence public policy, in research (contributing to the body of knowledge)? What is the impact upon society (influencing public attitudes, affecting quality of life)? Are these implications consistent with the findings and conclusions of the paper?: It is not clarly stated how the research can be used on the basis of an economic and commerical impact, and teaching. The public policy and society ideas should be more developed, since the conclusions are linked to these areas.

We have concluded by highlighting the theoretical and practical implications of the study for improving gender equality in politics and further developing research on this theme. In the Conclusion section, we have remarked on the importance of exploring issues relating to the gender gap in politics, stressing the need to implement actions to promote gender equality in this area. We have proposed the pink quota system, along with actions to promote awareness of gender discrimination and work-life balance policies in response to the interpretative repertoire "women's disinterest towards politics". We agree that to promote social change and challenge the dominant gender order it is necessary not only to take into account psychosocial and cultural factors but also to leverage institutional factors.

6. Quality of Communication: Does the paper clearly express its case, measured against the technical language of the field and the expected knowledge of the journal's readership? Has attention been paid to the clarity of expression and readability, such as sentence structure, jargon use, acronyms, etc.: The paper is written

Reviewer: 2

Recommendation: Reject & Resubmit

Comments:
I was very intrigued with your topic and interested in reading your paper. I think generally the reasons why, in my opinion, it falls below the level of being publishable at this stage, are two-fold. First of all, the significant justification for conducting the study in Italy is not made clear enough. Secondly, you seem to want to make practical policy recommendations to encourage equal participation in politics, but your research method may not be suited to this sort of finding, nor do you seem to actually make those recommendations clearly in the end. I sincerely hope that my comments have been helpful and that you are able to somewhat significantly revise your paper's structure and focus as advised previous, for attempted publication at EDI if a clear connection between theory and practice can be achieved or elsewhere, perhaps in a more theoretical only journal.

Thank you very much for your generous feedback and useful suggestions. As you suggested, we have significantly reworked the paper. The new version has substantial changes, especially in the Introduction where we justify our decision to conduct the study in Italy, and in the Conclusion where we revisit our recommendations to encourage equal participation in politics. In this new version of the manuscript we have also revised the theoretical and practical implications of the study, anchoring them more to the data analysis. Please see below how we have addressed your specific comments.

Additional Questions:
1. Originality: Does the paper contain new and significant information adequate to justify publication?: This paper seeks to move beyond what the author sees as a typical focus on statistical representation in gender and politics analysis, mainly focused on Anglo-Saxon and Northern European countries, generally finding that substantive analysis remains elusive in those countries. Part of the original contribution is the focus instead on a southern European country, Italy, as well as what is clearly stated: "to shed light on discourses still carried out today to consider politics as a predominantly male context in order to identify the key factors from which to plan interventions aimed at promoting an equal participation of women and men to the political life of [Italy]" A bit disappointingly, however, while this aim is repeated in the paper's conclusion, what these key factors are precisely do not seem to be elucidated. As such, this paper, while an interesting insight into the working lives of some male and female Italian politicians, does not seem to rise to level of a concise, unique contribution worthy of publication at this time.

We thank you for this valuable suggestion. As you rightly point out, this study is not able to identify the key factors on which to plan interventions aimed at promoting the equal participation of women and men in political life. We have deleted this statement in the Introduction and Conclusion, more accurately defined the contribution of the study and reworked the practical implications of the research by anchoring them more to our findings.

2. Relationship to Literature: Does the paper demonstrate an adequate understanding of the relevant literature in the field and cite an appropriate range of literature sources? Is any significant work ignored?: An impressive range of sources are cited within this paper. However, it would have been helpful to have provided some further literature justifying the selection of Italy or clarifying what conducting this research in Italy adds to previous relative discursive analysis. At present, you provide some background understanding of statistical representation in Italy, but it would be helpful to provide a better link to either literature or perhaps substantive current events/policy that makes placing this study within Italy at this time of interest.

As you suggested, we have also tried to more clearly explain why it is important to conduct research on the relationship between female participation and politics in Italy. Specifically, in the Introduction we have included recent sources to justify the selection of Italy. We have described how Italy is strongly characterised by conditions of gender inequality in both political participation and the labour market. In fact, in Italy the level of participation of women in the paid labour market is still very low (Istat, 2016): 54.4 per cent compared with an OECD average of 62.6 per cent (OECD, 2015). We have specified that although Italian women have a higher level of education than men (Istat, 2016), gender segregation persists and working women are concentrated in the tertiary sector and in low-skilled professions (ISTAT, 2015b), with only 35 per cent holding a managerial position. We have also stated that in this regard Italy is ranked 82nd out of 142

according to the WEF classification (WEF, 2014). We have also highlighted that in Italy the division of family labour is dramatically imbalanced, to the disadvantage of women (Eurostat, 2011; Istat, 2012a, 2012b, 2015a; Cnel, 2014) and that the time Italian mothers dedicate to household labour is much higher than that dedicated by fathers, even in two-career families (Eurostat, 2011; Istat, 2015a). In addition, we have said that Italy continues to invest inadequately in support services for families (Panzeri and Viale, 2016) and that maternity continues to have a significant impact on unemployment rates and the early exit of women from the labour market (Cnel, 2014). Based on these pieces of evidence, we believe that Italy is an interesting context in which to study the phenomenon of the gender gap and the under-representation of women in politics.

3. Methodology: Is the paper's argument built on an appropriate base of theory, concepts, or other ideas? Has the research or equivalent intellectual work on which the paper is based been well designed? Are the methods employed appropriate?: This paper's argument is built on an appropriate base of theory, particularly discursive analysis and the feminist critical perspective. However, given your emphasis on previous findings in the literature about the persistence of vertical segregation within elected positions (ie: men tend to continue to dominate higher echelons of elected political power), it would have been quite instructive to explain to what level the politicians you spoke with were elected (ie: national, local, etc). If all the same, why? If not, why not? Can you compare and contrast perspectives from different levels? (Probably difficult given your small numbers).

As you suggested, in the Methodology section we have specified that the research involved 30 local politicians. In particular, we chose to involve 30 local politicians because the number of women in local institutions is lower than that at national level (Istat, 2017).

4. Results: Are results presented clearly and analysed appropriately? Do the conclusions adequately tie together the other elements of the paper?: The results are organised to reflect what appear to be the three key themes emerging from the interview transcripts. They are reasonably linked to the content they contain, which effectively references back particularly to the concept of hegemonic masculinity discussed in the literature review. However, it is not clear how these results tie together with concluding promise to "identify key factors from which to plan interventions aimed at promoting an equal participation of men and women in politics." One wonders if it may be the case that a paper which is not focused on a practical understanding of the machinations of becoming an elected official, working as an elected official, etc, struggles to connect itself to what seem intended to be practical policy recommendations, although these recommendations are not present in the paper.

As you suggested, we have revisited the link between the results of the research and practical implications. We have revised the promise to 'identify the key factors on which to plan interventions aimed at promoting the equal participation of men and women in politics', and focused our attention on the need to implement actions to promote gender equality in politics, beginning with our findings.

5. Implications for research, practice and/or society: Does the paper identify clearly any implications for research, practice and/or society? Does the paper bridge the gap between theory and practice? How can the research be used in practice (economic and commercial impact), in teaching, to influence public policy, in research (contributing to the body of knowledge)? What is the impact upon society (influencing public attitudes, affecting quality of life)? Are these implications consistent with the findings and conclusions of the paper?: This paper states a desire to bridge the gap between theory and practice, but as stated previously, it does not seem to do so. Had specific factors to promote equal participation in politics been stated, I'm not sure they would have been able to clearly follow from the research findings presented.

We have clarified the contribution this paper makes by emphasizing that this study presents a reflection on gender inequalities in political participation, beginning with a review of the literature and the results of a study conducted on a sample of Italian politicians. We have made it clear that the contribution of the manuscript is to shed light on discourses still going on today around politics as a predominantly male context. We have concluded by highlighting the theoretical and practical implications of the study for improving equality in politics and further developing research in this area.

In the Conclusion, we explain the principal limitations of our research. First, the small sample size and the voluntary participation of politicians limit the generalisability of our results. This research project should be replicated, expanding the sample and comparing local and national politicians. A

second limitation is its exclusive reliance on qualitative data, which should be supplemented with quantitative data. Despite these limitations, we remark on the importance of exploring issues relating to the gender gap in politics, stressing the need to implement actions to promote gender equality in politics. We propose the use of pink quotas, along with the actions to promote awareness of gender discrimination and work-life balance policies in response to the women's disinterest in politics. We agree that to promote social change and challenge the dominant gender order it is necessary not only to take into account psychosocial and cultural factors but also to leverage institutional factors.

6. Quality of Communication: Does the paper clearly express its case, measured against the technical language of the field and the expected knowledge of the journal's readership? Has attention been paid to the clarity of expression and readability, such as sentence structure, jargon use, acronyms, etc.: The language level is generally very good. There are some technical issues to be improved. Specifically, the last full sentence on page 1 – just use a parenthetical citation for the IPU reference – it's in your reference list – no need to make it expansive as you have done. You do something similar more than once – no need for the extra words. Just put a normal parenthetical citation. There are also enough small writing errors I would suggest having a second person read this before re-submission (ie: on page 5, methodology section, the word "elective" is used where you clearly mean "elected").

We have followed up your suggestions and corrected the errors indicated as you suggest. Finally, the paper has been proofread by a professional service (PRS.com).