




A step forward to gender equality: Breaking the political glass ceiling at local level

Bruna Filipa Gonçalves Ribeiro¹  | Miguel Ângelo Rodrigues¹  | Francisca Tejedo-Romero² 

¹Research Center in Political Science (CICP), School of Economics and Management, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal

²Universidad de Castilla-la Mancha, Ciudad Real, Spain

Correspondence

Miguel Ângelo Rodrigues.

Email: miguelangelo@eeg.uminho.pt

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Abstract

Gender quota policies have the ability to alleviate the scarcity of women in politics. However, opponents of quotas argue that such policies may constitute, in the long term, a “glass ceiling.” In Portugal, although there is still a long way to go in terms of gender equality, some municipalities have been successful in electing many women. Therefore, the aim of this article is to investigate, through the lenses of historical institutionalism and contagion theory, the factors that help women break out of the glass ceiling trap at local level. The study is based on a dataset from the last local elections and uses a panel data regression to calculate the probabilities of electing more women to municipal councils. The results underline that left-wing parties that have adopted voluntary quotas, municipal experience with women mayors, and competitive environments increase the likelihood of electing more women. Gender equality.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The last decade has seen significant improvements on gender issues. Nevertheless, many women still face gender discrimination in their personal lives and professional areas. According to Dolan and Hansen (2018) one such area is politics, especially with regard to elected office. In fact, the global average of 26.4% female Members of Parliament in December 2022 reveals that parliaments around the world continue to be dominated by men, while women are often underrepresented in decision-making bodies.¹

Although the gender gap in Parliaments is still significant, the 26.4% of female representation recorded at the end of 2022 was positive compared to the 14.5% recorded in 2002, 20 years earlier. The adoption of gender quotas worldwide has contributed to this positive evolution (Childs & Hughes, 2018). According to Rosen (2017) gender quotas are affirmative action laws designed to compensate for gender discrimination in the electoral process. By establishing a threshold, either in party lists or in elected bodies, quotas can circumvent various obstacles for women, boost equal representation, and rebalance the vertical distribution of power within parties and parliamentary structures (De Paola et al., 2014; Krook & Squires, 2006; Verge, 2010).

Notwithstanding their advantages, gender quotas are also subject to criticism. Opponents of gender quotas claim that one undesirable outcome of quota regulation is the possibility that quota provisions will come to constitute a glass ceiling, which will tend to prevent women from being nominated and elected beyond the quota requirement (see Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2010; Darhour & Dahlerup, 2013; Kerevel, 2019; Turnbull, 2019). In fact, after reaching the level of gender diversity required by law, it is highly likely that some parties, will no longer have incentives to go beyond the quota and include even more female candidates in party lists. Consequently, although in the short term a significant positive impact on the number of women elected can be observed (as a result of the initial inclusion of more women on the lists),² in the long term this number is likely to stabilize around the legal threshold (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2010). This situation is not desirable, since a successful quota must establish a foundation of representation on which women can build beyond the quota in a push for representational parity (Turnbull, 2019).

In Portugal, the gender quota regulation, the so-called Parity Law (organic law, No. 3/2006, of August 21), was adopted in 2006, mandating a minimum of 33% representation of each gender on candidate lists. In 2019, this requirement was increased to 40%, reflecting a stronger commitment to gender equality in Portuguese politics. Although it applies to party lists, its ultimate goal is to achieve effective parity by increasing the number of women elected. Since its implementation, however, this law has produced different results in different levels of government. While the European level reveals the most positive results for women, the local level is the one that has had the most difficulty in electing women, especially for executive bodies and presidencies (Santos et al., 2018). This situation led Rodrigues, (2023) to analyze data from municipal elections before and after the adoption of the Parity Law. The author found evidence that the quota regulation increased the number of women in office immediately after its implementation, but later contributed to the formation of a glass ceiling around the legal threshold in Portuguese municipalities.

Although the overall picture is not very positive, some municipalities have managed to elect many women to the municipal council. More precisely, around 27% of the 308 Portuguese municipalities, managed to elect women above the quota threshold. Based on these examples, the main goal of this paper is to further understand the factors that led to this situation, that is, the factors that can positively impact female representation in Portuguese municipal councils, contributing to “breaking” the glass ceiling. In this sense, the research question of the paper is as follows: What factors contribute to women breaking out of the glass ceiling trap? To answer this question, we drew on two important theoretical frameworks: historical institutionalism and contagion theory. In addition, we build a dataset from the latest local elections (2009, 2013, 2017, 2021) and using a panel data regression we computed the probabilities of electing more women to Portuguese municipal councils.

Firstly, we found evidence that prior paths of gender diversity increase the likelihood of electing more women. Specifically, we found that the higher the percentage of seats held by

those left-wing parties that had already promoted and adopted voluntary quotas before mandatory quotas were implemented, the greater the probability of electing women. By the same token, we found evidence that previous municipal experience with female mayors also increases the likelihood of electing more women to municipal council. Secondly, we found evidence that, through a contagion effect, competitive environments encourage political parties to diversify their lists in order to get more votes, which leads to the election of more women. Finally, we found evidence that previous successful female leadership positively influences parties' perceptions of female candidates' electability, making them more likely to be used as a competitive strategy in highly competitive environments.

We believe that the outcomes of the paper are pertinent. First, we add an analysis of a level of government that has not been deeply explored in the case of Portugal. In fact, studies on gender representation in Portugal have mostly focused on national parliament and European elections (e.g., Lühiste & Kenny, 2016; Verge, 2013). It is also relevant to study gender representation on the local level, especially after the 2021 local elections, in which the quota regulation was applied for the first time since its update to 40%. Second, we add to the literature that explores how different pathways of gender diversity and political competition play a key role in increasing the likelihood of electing more women to municipal councils in proportional representation systems with closed lists. This is particularly meaningful. In fact, the observed increase in the number of women in office after the implementation of quotas, followed by the formation of a glass ceiling at the legal threshold aligns with trends documented in previous research. However, we advance the literature by identifying specific factors that can help women overcome the glass ceiling. Additionally, our analysis of how parties adjust their strategies based on electoral competitiveness and the history of female leadership offers valuable insights that could inform future research directions. In short, these findings can be valuable for policymakers, political parties, and researchers interested in enhancing female representation in politics.

The paper is organized as follows: after presenting a brief literature review on gender quotas and the political glass ceiling, we explore how different pathways of gender diversity and political competition play an important role in increasing the number of women elected. Then, we discuss the research context and the estimation strategies to fit the main goal of the study. Finally, we present the results and the most important findings and conclusions.

2 | GENDER QUOTAS AND THE POLITICAL GLASS CEILING

One of the most significant institutional developments in representative bureaucracy in the last 20 years is the global diffusion of gender quotas. This suggests that states have begun to identify quotas as a new state-led strategy to incorporate women into public life and, by extension, to promote feminist aims (Krook, 2008) and improve governance outputs (Mechkova et al., 2024). According to Rosen (2017) these quotas are positive action measures that intend to compensate those who face gender discrimination in politics—usually women. In this sense, they specify a threshold, typically a number or percentage of women, and/or men, that must be nominated or selected.

The rapid spread of gender quotas has triggered an explosion of research into their consequences and effectiveness (Krook, 2009). By design, quotas have the potential to remove structural barriers for women and lead to a sustainable gender transformation in politics (Lang et al., 2023). Nevertheless, in practice, quotas seem to generate mixed effects (Krook &

Zetterberg, 2017). Especially at national level, several studies argue that, in a first instance, quota policies are a fast track to boost gender diversity (Paxton & Hughes, 2015; Tripp & Kang, 2008). Clayton and Zetterberg (2018) analyzed 139 countries during the peak period of quota adoption and found that, on average, women's representation moved from 11% of parliamentary seats in the year prior to the quota's implementation to 21% the following year. By contrast, in the long term, while gender quotas may produce certain beneficial effects on the descriptive representation of women, it remains questionable whether they truly lead to a sustainable gender transformation of the political landscape (Erzeel et al., 2023), and specifically to a linear and steady growth in women's presence in politics (Devroe et al., 2021). In this regard, some studies argue that gender quotas carry the risk of breaking the incremental trajectory, contributing to the formation of a glass ceiling (see Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2010; Darhour & Dahlerup, 2013; Kerevel, 2019; Turnbull, 2019).

According to Folke and Rickne (2016), this metaphor has been used in politics as a blanket statement to describe the stagnation or decline in the proportion of women elected to the top of political hierarchies. The idea is that, despite a slight increase in female representation on party lists as a result of the implementation of legislative quotas, this uptick does not often translate into an increase in the actual number of women elected. Geys and Sørensen (2019) found empirical evidence of the glass ceiling effect in the lack of overlap between the implementation of quota regulation and the presence of women in the rest of the local government bodies. This discrepancy is probably due to the fact that after reaching the level of gender diversity required by law, some parties have no longer incentives to go beyond the quota and include even more female candidates in party lists. If parties do not go over the minimum threshold of the law, and still place female candidates in unwinnable positions, this means that they have not interiorized the spirit of the law (Verge & Espírito-Santo, 2016). On the contrary, political parties that are committed to gender equality do not feel tempted to just stick to the threshold. They therefore integrate more women into their lists, allowing women to be elected in greater numbers. In short, parties' commitment to achieving parity is crucial for the implementation of quotas and, consequently, for their success (Kittilson, 2006).

Although this paper follows the definition of political scope proposed by Folke and Rickne (2016), the term glass ceiling is over 40 years old³ and, in general, represents a specific pattern of career disadvantage that can explain the lack of women in the top of public and private organizational hierarchies (see, e.g., Baxter & Wright, 2000a, 2000b; Cotter et al., 2001; Martin, 1991; Mueller et al., 2024). In other words, it is used to describe the unseen, yet unbreachable barriers that prevent women from reaching leadership positions (Kalaitzi et al., 2017), regardless of their qualifications or achievements. Thus, invisible barriers are cultural rather than personal, that is, they do not relate to women's qualification or competence, but to socio-cultural factors associated with gender.

3 | MAKING THE WAY OUT OF THE GLASS CEILING TRAP

So far, we have presented a brief literature review on gender quotas and the political glass ceiling. Now, we will elaborate on the theoretical framework that can justify why some factors, namely different pathways of gender diversity and competitive environments, play an important role in increasing the likelihood of electing more women.

The first theoretical argument is rooted in historical institutionalism, which posits that history matters (North, 1990, p. 100) and that choices made during the formation of an

institution or policy can constrain future actions (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Peters, 2002). This dynamic, known as “path dependency,” suggests that institutions evolve in response to changing environmental conditions and political dynamics but are limited by past trajectories (Thelen, 1999). Therefore, deviating from established paths requires significant effort (Greener, 2005). This logic has been applied to gender research (see Clavero & Galligan, 2020; Kirlappos, 2024; Waylen, 2014), and, in this paper, we argue it may impact the effectiveness of gender quota regulations. In fact, when quota reforms are imposed, they either mesh well with pre-existing norms, or they cause conflict (Krook, 2009). In this regard, Verge and Espírito-Santo (2016) show that the legal adoption of quotas does not guarantee the effectiveness of their implementation. This is due to existing gender practices and norms, that is, informal institutions (Waylen, 2014) within parties that limit their effective compliance. If legislative quotas do not align with party practices, they become symbolic gestures with minimal impact on the number of elected women (Verge, 2013). Conversely, alignment between old and new institutions can lead to positive outcomes for women. As Meier (2004) notes, when voluntary quotas have been used by political parties, legislative quotas can stimulate the introduction of other measures and even encourage parties to exceed the minimum quota.

Among the ideological spectrum, it is important to acknowledge that not all political parties are equally likely to introduce voluntary gender quotas. Historically, parties on the left have been significantly more likely than right-wing parties to adopt quotas and pursue active strategies of gender equality, aiming to act as enablers for female candidates (Kittilson, 2006; Rolandsen Agustín et al., 2018). This is a general trend in the EU countries (Avdeyeva, 2010). Furthermore, these parties are characterized by a legacy of strong inner-party women’s networks, which put pressure on the party leadership to stick to quota regulations (Lang et al., 2023). However, not all left-wing parties can be considered promoters of gender equality. Historically, communist parties have rejected feminism on the grounds that it undermines the class struggle (Espírito-Santo & Weeks, 2022). In Portugal, for example, women’s representation in the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) stagnated for a long period, from 1995 until only recently (Espírito-Santo & Weeks, 2022). Additionally, the Communists voted against all bills aimed at implementing quotas, arguing that such quotas would be merely a pyrrhic solution (Baum & Espírito-Santo, 2012).

Based on this, we argue in favor of “path dependency” rather than party ideology. Specifically, we argue that only those left-wing parties that have adopted voluntary quotas see gender representation as a “law of the party.” Therefore legal quotas will encourage them to surpass their previous records. By including more women candidates on their lists, they increase the likelihood that more women will be elected. This can be translated into our first research hypothesis:

H1 Left-wing parties that have adopted voluntary quotas positively affect the election of women.

Also in accordance with the concept of “path dependency,” some studies have shown that political parties and voters are more likely to nominate and elect female candidates to positions already held by women.⁴ This is true even when women compete against men. Turnbull (2019), for example, showed that political parties in India continue to resist nominating female candidates, but are more likely to do so in wards previously represented by a woman. These findings support similar conclusions in the literature (e.g., Bhalotra et al., 2018; Bhavnani, 2009). Furthermore, Alberti et al. (2022) found evidence that women mayors reform local bureaucracies by increasing the proportion of women in the local governments, while Baskaran

and Hessami (2018) found that in Germany, female councilor candidates receive more preferential votes when a female mayor has been recently elected to office. According to the authors, one important reason for the electoral gains of female candidates may be that the exposure to a successful female mayor diminishes the anti-female biases of voters. As understood, women who manage to attain a key political position appear to have broader implications for the likelihood of other women achieving positions in the same or other branches of government.

Given this data, we argue in favor of spillover effects (Baskaran & Hessami, 2018). Specifically, that the election of a female mayor in the past positively impacts the election of other women to executive positions, whether as mayors or councilors. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2 Previous experience with female mayors positively affects the election of women.

The second theoretical argument, in turn, is based on “contagion theory” (Matland & Studlar, 1996) and on the idea that competitive environments, characterized by the presence of many close competing parties, result in faster adoption of gender diversity strategies. According to Simón and Verge (2017), in the political market, parties constantly anticipate or react to the behavior of their competitors in order to attract or maintain electoral support. Consequently, some research states that when certain parties (typically left) begin to actively promote female candidates, giving them more winnable positions, other parties tend to follow their example if those actions are perceived as advantageous in attracting additional votes (Lépinard & Rubio-Marín, 2018; Meier, 2004; Reynolds, 1999; Weeks, 2018). This is particularly pronounced in proportional representation systems (Matland & Studlar, 1996). Research conducted by Caul (2001) corroborates this effect. In a study across multiple countries, Caul (2001) observed that the presence of political parties with gender quotas is one of the major factors explaining why other parties tend to adopt similar measures. This contagion effect also explains the parallel existence of both legal and party gender quotas in the same context (see Meier, 2004), highlighting how competitive pressures drive the widespread adoption of gender diversity strategies that may produce positive results for women. According to Franceschet et al. (2009), in competitive environments where several parties co-exist and larger parties respond to policy innovations initiated by smaller ones, quotas tend to improve women’s representation.

Based on the above, we argue that, through a contagion effect, competitive environments will promote gender diversity among all parties, consequently increasing the chances of electing more women. Therefore, our third theoretical hypothesis is:

H3 Competitive environments positively affect the election of women.

Finally, and based on everything discussed above, there is a possibility that when a municipality with a competitive electoral environment elects a female mayor, it signals to political parties that the electorate is receptive to electing women, especially if the female leadership has been successful. This perception influences the parties’ views on the electability of female candidates. Therefore, our aim is to assess whether, in subsequent elections, more women will be elected due to political parties placing more women in winnable positions as a competitive strategy, given that this has been well received by voters. We will empirically test the following hypothesis:

H4 In competitive environments, the previous presence of female mayors positively affects the election of women, as it signals to political parties that the electorate is receptive to female leadership.

By presenting these hypotheses, we aim to make significant contributions to the literature on gender and politics. Unlike prior research, which often examines path dependency and contagion theory in isolation, our approach integrates these frameworks to offer a comprehensive understanding of how historical trajectories and competitive dynamics could influence the effectiveness of gender quotas, thus potentially helping women to break out of the glass ceiling. By exploring the role of voluntary quotas in left-wing parties and the potential impact of previous female mayors on subsequent elections, we provide new insights into how institutional histories might shape gender representation. Additionally, our article aims to shed light on how competitive environments could accelerate the adoption of gender diversity strategies among political parties, suggesting that in competitive settings, parties may be more likely to adopt successful gender initiatives pioneered by others. Finally, our dual approach, analyzing both competitive environments and prior female leadership, proposes novel insights into how these factors might interact and influence political strategies adopted by parties. In summary, our focus on path dependency and contagion theory prepares the ground for a deeper understanding of the conditions under which gender diversity strategies could become more effective, with valuable implications for theoretical development, practical policymaking in gender equality, and party strategies aimed at enhancing women's representation in local politics.

4 | RESEARCH CONTEXT

Portugal uses a proportional representation system with closed lists for European, national, and local elections. This means that in Portuguese elections, voters vote for parties (i.e., candidate lists) instead of individual candidates. Plus, all political electoral seats are allocated through the application of the D'Hondt method. Consequently, if party leaders do not include women on the lists, women do not get elected, irrespective of voters' wishes. In order to prevent this situation, Portuguese government adopted in 2006 a gender quota legislation that applies to the parties' candidate lists. By this time, however, some parties had already adopted a gender-inclusive agenda by debating gender issues and implementing voluntary quotas. Therefore, we can divide Portuguese history regarding the adoption of gender quotas into three fundamental periods:

Before 1990: until the end of the 1980s, political representation of women in Portugal was very low. All political parties except the PCP had less than 10 percent female representation in the national parliament. In 1988, in order to show their commitment to gender issues, the Socialist Party (PS) passed a 25% internal quota. Still, its implementation was not immediately enforced (Martins & Teixeira, 2005). It was only in 1999 that the PS honored its own quota for the first time, encouraged by competition with the newly created Left Block (BE) party (Verge, 2013), which fielded about 40% women candidates (Baum & Espírito-Santo, 2012).

Between 1990–2006: the period in opposition (1985–95), along with growing social mobilization against women's political underrepresentation, incentivized the PS to increase gender equality (Monteiro, 2011). In this sense, the PS presented a draft law in 1998 which stipulated a requirement of 25% of female representation in party lists. Although the proposed bill did not find political support and was ultimately rejected, all parties felt pressured to improve gender

balance, which became apparent in subsequent elections. During this period, the PS (2000 and 2003) and BE (2001 and 2003) discussed other similar bills, but likewise did not succeed.⁵

From 2006: after obtaining the majority of seats in 2005 national elections, the PS finally met the conditions to approve a legislative quota in 2006—the Parity Law.⁶ Among the political parties, only the PS and BE, two left-wing parties, pushed for the Parity Law in Portugal. The three remaining parties with parliamentary representation—the PCP (the other left-wing Portuguese political party), the Social Democratic Party (PSD), and the right-wing conservative Christian Democrat Party (CDS-PP)—opposed quotas and have voted against all related bills (Teixeira et al., 2021). According to Parity law, all candidate lists presented for local, parliamentary, and European elections had to ensure a minimum representation of 33% of each gender, with no more than two candidates of the same gender placed consecutively in the final ordering of the lists. Furthermore, it established that non-compliant lists were subject to certain penalties, including a reduction in the public subsidies for campaigns. In 2019, the quota was updated to 40% and lists that do not comply with the law are now rejected (Organic Law 1/2019, 29 March).

Although the gender quota law in Portugal applies to the parties' candidate lists, its ultimate goal is to achieve effective parity by increasing the number of women elected. In this regard, however, the Parity Law has produced different results in different levels of government. In the Republic Assembly, women's representation rose from 21.3% in 2005 to 38.7% in 2019. Also in the European Parliament elections, the impact of the law was evident, with women's representation rising from 25% in 2004 to 42.8% in 2019. In local governments, by contrast, this growth trend was not so pronounced.⁷ In fact, Portuguese local governments display the lowest percentage of women elected compared to the other political bodies, both before and after the quota regulation (Rodrigues, 2023). Moreover, the global pattern remains: low proportion of elected women and lower relative presence of women in executive bodies and presidencies (Santos et al., 2018). This is the reason that led us to focus our study on the executive body (municipal council) of Portuguese municipalities.

In the Portuguese context, election at the municipal level, implies the election of the executive (municipal council) and legislative (municipal assembly) branches. In either cases, all parties have their votes converted into seats. In the executive, the mayor is the head of the list most voted for the municipal council, even if he/she has not received an absolute majority to govern. In turn, the council seats are distributed to the councilors, according to the percentage of votes obtained by those who went to the elections, including those from other party lists or independent movements. This means that in the municipal council, there is a coexistence between winner and losers.

Through a more detailed analysis of the proportion of women elected to the 308 Portuguese municipal councils, as mayors and councilors, in the municipal elections that took place after the implementation of the Parity Law, it is possible to divide the local governments into two groups:

1. First group: in which the number of women elected to the municipal council went from zero to the threshold set by the quota regulation.
2. Second group: in which the number of women elected to the municipal council is above the threshold established by the quota regulation.

These two groups compare the number of women actually elected with the threshold that applies to candidate lists. At first glance, this may raise concerns about comparability. However,

this comparison is feasible. As already mentioned, the ultimate goal of the Parity Law is to increase the number of women actually elected and not just to increase the feminization of the lists. In other words, not only the “letter of the law” (compliance with the Parity Law on the lists), but also the “spirit of the law” (the internalization that effective parity is the ultimate goal) must be considered, and, to assess this, we must look at the levels of elected women, as argued by Verge and Espirito-Santo (2016).

Therefore, Table 1 shows that, after the introduction of the law, the number of cases recording a proportion of women in office above the legal threshold (group 2) had been increasing at a steady pace until 2017. However in the last local elections, which took place in 2021, it saw a setback of approximately three percentage points, probably supporting the argument that at some point gender quota regulation may produce a glass ceiling of elected women. Consequently, the present study is relevant since it adds to the literature that explores how specific factors play an important role in increasing the likelihood of electing more women to municipal councils.

5 | DATA AND METHODS

As reported by the literature, there is a possibility that gender quota regulation could produce a glass ceiling effect. However, this situation is not desirable since a successful quota should establish a foundation of representation that allows women to continue to push for representational parity beyond the quota (Turnbull, 2019). For this reason, it is important to understand the factors that can increase the likelihood of electing more women to the 308 Portuguese municipal councils. This is our main goal. In particular, we want to assess the effect of gender diversity pathways and competition.

The first argument establishes that the election of women is positively affected by those left-wing parties that advocated the introduction of quotas, as well as by previous municipal experience with female mayors. The second argument establishes a positive relationship between competitive environments and the election of women.

To test these theoretical arguments, we have collected a database for the 308 municipalities in Portugal, for a 13-year period (2009–2021), considering the four electoral moments (2009; 2013; 2017; 2021). Since we have collected data from the same subjects over time, we opted of a panel data approach. We use fixed effects to control of the unobserved heterogeneity within municipalities, constant across time.

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \beta X_{it} + u_{it}, \quad (1)$$

Assuming:

TABLE 1 Distribution of municipal councils by groups.

	2009	2013	2017	2021
Group 1	248 (80.52%)	237 (76.95%)	216 (70.13%)	226 (73.38%)
Group 2	60 (19.48%)	71 (23.05%)	92 (29.87%)	82 (26.62%)
Total	308 (100%)	308 (100%)	308 (100%)	308 (100%)

$$\text{cov}(\mu X) \neq 0$$

The dependent variable is an index on the data of women elected to municipal council. The objective of the index is to evaluate the distance of each municipality to the legal threshold (33% until 2017, and 40% in the 2021 local elections). The matrix of independent variables (βX_{it}), in turn, includes two categories: one related to gender diversity pathways and other related to political competition.

In the first case, and in order to test research hypothesis number one, we used a numerical variable (*Party Winner_i*) that identifies the political party that won the local government. This is a dummy variable that takes the value of one when the winning party is the PS or BE, and zero otherwise. We also used a second variable (*%SeatsPS_BE_i*) that represents the percentage of seats in the council won by the two parties that defended the introduction of quotas (PS and BE). As discussed throughout this paper, PS and BE, are the two Portuguese left-wing parties that have historically demonstrated the greatest commitment to gender issues by claiming for more women in politics and introducing voluntary quotas for candidate lists (PS) and for party organs (BE).⁸ Because of this, we expected to see more women elected under PS and BE governments, as well as to find a positive relationship between the percentage of seats won by these parties and the number of women elected.

To test our second research hypothesis, we included a variable that measures the effect of previous experience with female mayors (*WPresident_i*). This is a dummy variable that takes the value of one if the municipality has already had a women acting as mayor, and zero otherwise. As mentioned above, we expect to find a positive effect of female mayors on the election of more women to Portuguese municipal councils.

In the second case, and in order to test our third hypothesis, we used a variable (*Victory Gap_i*) that represents the difference between the number of votes obtained by the winning party and by the runner-up. Additionally, we used a second variable (*Diversity_i*) that represents the number of different parties with seats in the municipal council. The argument for choosing these variables is that competitive environments encourage political parties to develop new strategies to defeat their competitors, which can positively affect the number of women elected. Naturally, a political environment is more competitive the smaller the difference in votes between the first and second place, and the greater the number of parties with seats in municipal council.

In order to test the last hypothesis and obtain an overview that simultaneously considers the pathways of gender diversity and political competition, we included an interaction (*WPresident_i*Victory Gap_i*) variable. Specifically, we used this interaction to test if, in a situation of both high competition and previous experience with female mayors, opposing political parties will place female candidates in top positions on their lists as a competitive strategy, thereby increasing the number of women elected.

Finally, and since it is possible that the election of women is affected by variables other than those presented above, we also included a set of control variables. First, we controlled for the size of the local government (*Electors(log)_i*). This is a numeric variable that represents the number of electors in the municipality. This is particularly important because the dimension determines the number of seats in the municipal council. We also controlled for the effect of municipal development (*Development Index_i*). It is expected that more developed municipalities are more likely to elect women (Jones & Navia, 1999). Finally, we control for education level (*Education_i*). This variable represents the percentage of high school students who passed at the

end of the school year. The reason to include this variable is that local governments with more qualified citizens may be more open to electing women.

6 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results presented in Table 2 refer to the estimation of the models by fixed effects. Models 1, 2 and 3 are presented as robustness checks for the results of model 4, which integrates all independent and control variables. In turn, model 5 is the same as model 4, but adds the interaction variable. Overall, the results indicate that both gender diversity pathways and

TABLE 2 Estimation results by fixed effects.

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<i>%SeatsPS_BE_i</i>	8.029* (4.180)	-	-	7.678* (4.230)	7.485* (4.227)
<i>Party Winner_i</i>	-2.264 (1.720)	-	-	-2.120 (1.727)	-2.041 (1.726)
<i>WPresident_i</i>	-	5.366*** (1.597)	-	5.451*** (1.599)	7.593*** (2.043)
<i>Victory Gap_i</i>	-	-	-0.000275* (0.000144)	-0.000276* (0.000143)	-0.000232 (0.000145)
<i>Diversity_i</i>	-	-	-1.433 (0.995)	-1.389 (1.008)	-1.328 (1.007)
<i>WPresident × Victory Gap_i</i>	-	-	-	-	-0.000534* (0.000317)
<i>Electors (log)_i</i>	6.061*** (0.708)	5.789*** (0.707)	6.826*** (0.797)	6.652*** (0.795)	6.814*** (0.800)
<i>Development Index_i</i>	-0.231** (0.0939)	-0.234** (0.0934)	-0.133 (0.106)	-0.125 (0.106)	-0.133 (0.106)
<i>Education_i</i>	-0.0938 (0.112)	-0.0896 (0.112)	-0.100 (0.112)	-0.0670 (0.112)	-0.0786 (0.112)
<i>Constant</i>	-63.70*** (12.23)	-59.57*** (11.94)	-64.00*** (12.44)	-68.54*** (12.67)	-69.36*** (12.67)
Observations	1024	1024	1024	1024	1024
F	18.95	25.76	19.21	14.04	12.82
Test > F	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
R-squared	0.085	0.092	0.086	0.100	0.102
Number of year	4	4	4	4	4

Note: Robust standard-errors are in parenthesis. Significance levels: 1%, ***, 5%, **, 10%, *.

competitive environments increase the likelihood of electing more women to Portuguese municipal councils.

In the first case, the result from the variable $\%SeatsPS_BE_i$ shows that an increase of one percentage point in the percentage of PS and BE seats in municipal council has an impact of 7.678 units on the index, thus confirming our first research hypothesis. This result aligns with the concept of “path dependency” of the historical institutionalism, which posits that past events influence the present situation. Indeed, left-wing parties with a historical commitment to the representation of women and the promotion of female candidates prove to be significant agents that positively impact the election of women. To test the first hypothesis, we also expected to rely on the *Party Winner_i* variable, however this is not statistically significant.

The result of the variable $WPresident_i$, in turn, is positive and statistically significant at 1%, revealing that previous experience with female mayors strongly influences the election of more women. Specifically, a municipality that has previously elected female mayors in comparison to a municipality that has never been governed by a woman, shows a positive impact of 5.451 units on the index. This finding supports our second research hypothesis.

In the second case, regarding competitive environments, the *Victory Gap_i* variable is statistically significant and shows that there is a reduction in the number of women elected as political competition decreases (the contrary is also true). Specifically, a decrease in the index is observed when the difference between the winning party and the runner-up increases by one vote. The coefficient of this variable, presented in Table 2, is obviously modest since one vote cannot have such a big impact on the dependent variable. Unfortunately, the *Diversity_i* variable does not appear to be statistically significant. Still, we have confirmed our third hypothesis, at least partially. In this way, competitive environments are important contagion-driving mechanisms for gender diversity.

Finally, and as mentioned in the previous section, we also included an interaction variable ($WPresident_i * Victory\ Gap_i$). According to the negative coefficient of this variable, we can conclude that the increase in the victory gap (which implies less competition) negatively influences the election of women in a situation of previous experience with female mayors. In symmetrical terms, this means that competitive municipalities foster the election of women when they have experience with female mayors. This situation is illustrated in the graph below (Figure 1) and, in fact, as the difference in votes between the first and second runner-up decreases, the marginal effect of the $WPresident_i$ on the index increases.

This finding is quite interesting. A competitive municipality that has elected a female mayor signals to political parties that the electorate is receptive to electing women, especially if the female leadership has been successful. Consequently, political parties include more women in winnable positions on their lists, as a competitive strategy, which seems to have a slight positive effect on the number of women elected.

Regarding control variables, we found significant evidence that larger local governments ($Electors(log)_i$), with more seats available in the municipal council, favor the election of more women as expected. This result is in line with the literature that has found that larger district magnitudes favor women's representation (see, e.g. Matland, 1993; Matland & Brown, 1992). However, not all control variables met our initial expectations. While the *Education_i* variable is not statistically significant, the *Development Index_i* appears statistically significant in models 1 and 2, but not significant in models 4 and 5.⁹ In this sense, we decided not to analyze its coefficient.

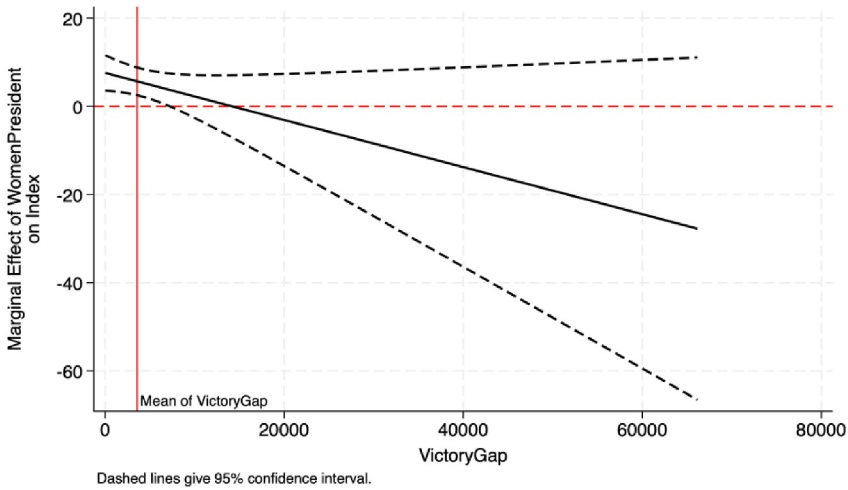


FIGURE 1 Interaction between $WPresident_i$ and $Victory\ Gap_i$.

7 | CONCLUSION

The local government level is an important training ground for women in their ascendant political careers. Nevertheless, women have been deeply underrepresented at the local level. This a general trend in democratic societies (Verge, 2010), which includes Portugal. To address this situation, and increase the representation of women in political office, Portuguese authorities implemented a legislative quota in 2006—the Parity Law—which mandated 33% gender diversity on party lists for local, national, and European elections. Although this law has led to an increasing trend in women's representation at all levels of government, the local government level continues to present some difficulties in electing women, especially above the quota established by law. In other words, there is a glass ceiling effect at the local level (Rodrigues, 2023). Therefore, the main objective of this article is to assess the factors that can increase the likelihood of electing more women to the 308 Portuguese municipal councils, thus helping women to break out of the glass ceiling trap.

Based on the estimation results of the models, we found evidence that the higher the percentage of PS and BE seats on the municipal council, the higher the number of women elected as mayor and councilors. This evidence is relevant because it allows us to conclude that the history of political parties influences the present situation, as contended by “path dependency.” Specifically, the left-wing parties that, prior to the legal adoption of quotas, were already treading toward a path of gender diversity (whether by adopting voluntary quotas or promoting initiatives to pass pro-equality bills), are the most likely to elect women.

Also confirming the importance of “path dependency,” we found evidence that local governments with previous experience with female mayors are more likely to elect women in the future. This probably happens because the exposure to female mayors reduces the prejudice of voters against women. An alternative reason may be that female mayors can achieve better local governance results compared to men in the same position, leading voters to recognize their effectiveness and elect them again. This question of whether the performance of politicians differs by gender is an interesting topic to explore in the future.

Regarding the political environment, we found that competitive environments, characterized by a small difference in votes between the first ranked party and the second one, contribute, through a process of contagion, to the election of more women. As Franceschet et al. (2009) point out, in competitive environments, larger parties tend to follow innovative actions adopted by smaller parties (such as including more women in winnable positions) if those actions are perceived as advantageous. This finding is important as elections for local governments in Portugal have recently registered an increasing number of candidacies from new independent movements and small parties.

Finally, we found evidence that in a situation of high competition and previous experience with female mayors, opposing political parties will place female candidates in top positions on their lists as a competitive strategy, thereby increasing the number of women elected. Therefore, the study introduces new insights on the relationship between competition, previous experience with female mayors, and the strategic positioning of female candidates.

In conclusion: the implementation of gender quota regulation is not a magic solution. Although it constitutes a fast track to boost gender diversity in the political sphere, it does not seem to be as effective at achieving true parity in elected office, since the quota constitutes both a floor and a ceiling of elected women in most municipalities. This leads to an average of only 26.6% municipal councils exceeding the threshold of 40% women after the 2021 local elections. As discussed throughout this paper, a successful quota should establish a foundation of representation on which women can build beyond the quota in a push for representational parity. Therefore, we believe that our results are relevant and innovative. In fact, we do not merely document the increase in female representation after the implementation of quotas, followed by a glass ceiling at the legal threshold, as is already well documented by other studies. We advance the literature by identifying specific factors - previous experience with quotas, municipal experience with female mayors, and competitive environments - that may help women overcome the glass ceiling at the local level. For the Portuguese context, these findings are doubly significant: Firstly, because the local level is the level of government with the greatest difficulties in electing women, and secondly, because it has received the least attention from scholars.

In a general context, our findings may be useful for policymakers, political parties, and researchers interested in enhancing female representation in politics. Additionally, these findings may be relevant for countries with gender quota regulations and historical experiences similar to Portugal.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest associated with this work.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

ORCID

Bruna Filipa Gonçalves Ribeiro  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7128-3536>

Miguel Ángel Rodrigues  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2254-2607>

Francisca Tejedó-Romero  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2600-9826>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Data retrieved from Inter-Parliamentary Union: https://data.ipu.org/women-averages?month=12&year=2022&op=Show+averages&form_build_id=form-wGVmrNWvJD9CQr1fREMBOWSX8LfGamOSUn5extc2WlY&form_id=ipu_women_averages_filter_form (Accessed September 9, 2023).
- ² This depends on the country and on the party. Usually, countries and parties that used to elect a high percentage of women before the quota law was adopted, do not suffer almost any impact from its adoption.
- ³ The term “glass ceiling” was first used by the management consultant Marilyn Loden on May 24, 1978. With this term, she sought to account for the invisible barriers that, in the context of companies/organizations, prevented women from accessing top positions.
- ⁴ This is in line with the mechanism presented by O'Brien in several of her papers on the impact of party leadership gender and prime-ministerial gender on the likelihood of nominating women for higher positions at the party level and at the ministerial level (see, for example, Krook & O'Brien, 2012).
- ⁵ All bills can be found online through this website: <https://www.parlamento.pt/ActividadeParlamentar/Paginas/IniciativasLegislativas.aspx>
- ⁶ For having proposed this law, the PS received a distinction from the Council of Europe in 2009—the Gender Equality Prize (Monteiro, 2011).
- ⁷ This is not exclusive to the Portuguese case. Many studies suggest a tendency for the proportion of women represented in elected bodies to be lower at the local level (see Eder et al., 2016).
- ⁸ It should be noted that the PCP, the other left-wing/extreme left-wing party in Portugal, was not considered in the creation of the variables $PartyWinner_i$ and $\%SeatsPS_BE_i$. As already explained, this party does not have a path of actions or measures promoting gender equality, such as the adoption of voluntary quotas. In fact, the PCP has consistently opposed such measures, voting against the bill presented by the PS in the national parliament in 1998, as well as against the Parity Law in 2006 (Teixeira et al., 2021).
- ⁹ Realizing that this variable is not significant, we thought of replacing it with a variable concerning whether the municipalities are rural or urban. However, this variable did not prove to be significant either, so we decided to leave it out of the model.

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