

Female political representation at the local level: stereotypes, electoral rules, policy outcomes

Women's participation in politics is increasing, but rather slowly and unevenly. It is widely believed that access to power at the local level is easier and this is why we should observe a greater proportion of women in local government than at the other levels of government. However, data from various European countries often present the opposite pattern: In many countries, local politics is dominated by men to a greater extent than national or European politics. Yet another significant disproportion will appear when we take into account the type of positions taken by women: In local authorities, women are much less likely to perform executive functions. In 2021, in the EU countries, only 17.5% of mayors (or their equivalents) were women.

The project aims to trace these “political representation gaps” that exist between the local and national levels and between councils and executive bodies. In a cross-national comparative study, we will cover European democracies, mapping trends in female representation. We will seek to answer whether the direct election of mayors (in Poland introduced in 2002) reduces the presence of women among elected local authorities. In Poland, we will conduct surveys of voters and local elites (councilors and mayors). They will help to understand the mechanisms underlying the disparities in descriptive representation: do voters use stereotypes in selecting candidates? Do they judge female local politicians differently than male? Do women in local government authorities have different ambitions and expectations?

Over the past few decades, the participation of women in politics has increased significantly, also in local governments. It is an important symbol, but does it really matter for how politics looks like? Does it translate into real changes in local communities? Polish municipalities provide a very good opportunity to investigate this issue, as local decision makers have the opportunity to influence municipal budgets and shape some of the public policies. In the project, we will check whether the gender of local politicians influences the way public policies are designed and implemented. In particular, we will be interested in social policies (e.g., accessibility of kindergartens), infrastructure investments (e.g., road construction), local taxation, and budgets. Apart from tangible policy outcomes, we will also study differences in preferences of local politicians.

To achieve the goals of the project, we will collect and harmonize the scattered data. We will analyze it using advanced quantitative methods, including quasi-experiments that strengthen causal reasoning. We will conduct original surveys (of voters and councilors), including survey experiments. We will present the results of the research at conferences and in specialized academic journals. As the issues raised by the project are widely debated and policy-relevant, we will also present them in a series of more accessible reports to the wider public.