A Gendered Chokepoint?
Italian Political Science and the *Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale*

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Abstract

This article examines the role of the *Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale* (ASN) in shaping the academic careers of Italian political scientists through a gender perspective. Drawing on an original dataset covering five ASN rounds (2012–2023), we find that while the procedure appears gender-neutral for associate professorships, significant disparities persist at the level of full professorships. Women are underrepresented among applicants, have lower success rates in obtaining the qualification, and are less likely than their male colleagues to be promoted once qualified. Institutional proximity between candidates and committee members significantly increase the likelihood of success and tends to benefit men more. To date, no study has examined the impact of the ASN within political science. This article offers the first systematic, gender-sensitive analysis of how the procedure affects career advancement in the field. The findings challenge the assumption of ASN's gender neutrality and highlight the persistence of structural barriers that continue to hinder women's progression to the highest academic ranks.

1. Introduction

Since 2012 career progression to associate and full professorships in Italy has been reshaped by the introduction of the *Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale* (ASN, National Scientific Qualification). A national-level evaluation based on academic credentials and publications, the ASN is (at least until 2025) a necessary prerequisite for participating in competitive selections for tenured positions at universities.[1]

Does gender affect the likelihood of obtaining qualification as an associate or full professor in Italian political science, and ultimately, of being promoted to a permanent academic position? We know it does. Data show that careers of male and female political scientists resemble the shape of a pair of scissors: women are well represented at early career stages but not in apical positions, whereas the presence of men increases with career progression (Bosco and Feo 2024). What remains unclear, however, is how gender dynamics have unfolded within the ASN procedure, and to what extent they have contributed to shaping the career progression of men and women in Italian political science.

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[1] At the time we are writing, a reform proposal is under discussion that would abolish the ASN in its current form and replace it with a system based on quantitative indicators and self-certification of eligibility. However, the outcome of this proposal still remains uncertain.

In other terms, we do not yet know whether, and how, career progression has changed since 2012 from a gender perspective.

Most of the (scarce) literature on the ASN assumes that the procedure is gender neutral (Pautasso 2015), and that women discrimination is instead located at the subsequent stage, when those qualified compete for actual positions at individual universities. For example, Marini and Meschitti (2018, p. 989), analyzing ASN outcomes in the period 2013-2016, found that, at parity of scientific production, men were about 24% more likely than women to be promoted, with women facing significant barriers, particularly in promotions to full professorship. Similar conclusions are presented by De Paola, Ponzo and Scoppa (2018a), who examined the results of ASN and university promotions between 2013 and 2015. They found no gender differences in the probability of obtaining qualification, but a meaningful gender gap in subsequent promotion outcomes. Furthermore - to our interest - the gender gap resulted especially large in the area of social sciences (as well as natural sciences and engineering) and particularly evident in advancements to full professorship.

However, the gender-neutrality hypothesis of the ASN has not been tested in individual scientific sectors such as political science. Our aim, in this article, is to understand how the ASN procedure has contributed to shaping specific patterns of career progression in Italian political science and what role it has played for male and female scholars. To address these questions, we built an original dataset covering all the Italian political scientists who took part in the ASN in the period 2012-2025 (February). We examine five rounds of ASN (starting in 2012, 2013, 2016, 2018 and 2021). Although the fifth round concluded in 2023, we tracked local level hiring processes through February 2025.
The article is organized as follows. The first section provides an overview of the ASN procedure. The next one presents data and methodology. The subsequent three parts investigate, respectively, the main actors involved in the ASN process: the candidates (those seeking career progression) and the qualified (those who obtained the ASN certification); the commissioners (those who evaluated the candidates); and the promoted (ASN-qualified individuals who were later recruited as associate or full professors). The last section discusses the main findings. For each actor (candidates, qualified, commissioners and promoted) we draw on the existing literature, present data from our dataset and adopt a gender perspective to assess the presence of a gender gap and its implications.

2. The *Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale*: an outline

In this section we summarize the main features of the ASN within the context of the university reforms that have reshaped the Italian higher education system since the first decade of the new millennium. For this reason, we do not delve into the regulatory details and the countless controversies that have surrounded the ASN since its inception (see Manzo 2017; Marini e Meschitti 2018; Marzolla 2015). Instead, we provide a general overview of the qualification procedure within the career advancement framework of Italian universities.

In the first decade of the 2000s the center-right governments led by Silvio Berlusconi (2001- 2006 and 2008-2011) radically changed the system of academic recruitment and career progression. Law no. 230/2005 initially set the abolition of the

tenured assistant professor position (ricercatore), which had existed since 1980, to take effect in 2013. Later on, law no. 240/2010, also known as the Gelmini reform - by the name of the then Minister of Education, University and Research (MIUR) - anticipated the abrogation of the figure to 2011. Tenured assistant professors were thus replaced with two fixed-term positions: the RTD-A, a non-tenured role with a contract of three to five years; and the RTD-B, a tenure-track position with a three-year contract.

The Gelmini reform also introduced a national evaluation process for the first time. Since 2012 the ASN has become a prerequisite for career progression to associate or full professorship. This means that all Italian academics - except full professors - must obtain the ASN qualification before applying for a tenured position in a specific university. The result has been a two-tiered promotion system, in which national evaluation through the ASN precedes the local competitive recruitment process.

In the Italian university system, the disciplinary affiliation of academic staff, i.e. the scientific classification under which each faculty member operates, is structured through a set of disciplinary groups established by Law 240/2010 (art. 15). This classification unfolds across three levels: 86 Macro-Competition Sectors (*Macro Settori Concorsuali* - MSC), 190 Competition Sectors (*Settori Concorsuali* - SC), and 383 Scientific-Disciplinary Sectors (*Settori Scientifico-Disciplinari* - SSD). Each faculty member is formally affiliated with a single SSD, which defines their scientific domain for the purposes of teaching, research, and academic recruitment. The SSDs are the most micro units and are grouped into SCs and MSCs, which in turn fall under one of the 14 national disciplinary areas. For example, Area 14 (Political and Social Sciences) includes SSDs such as SPS/04 (Political Science), SPS/07 (General Sociology), and SPS/11 (Political Sociology).

To implement the ASN, the Ministry appointed an examination committee for each MSC. The committees were initially composed by four Italian full professors and one from a foreign university. The Italian commissioners were randomly selected from among full professors who had applied for the role and belonged to the same SSDs as the candidates. Each committee was responsible for assessing candidates to both associate and full professorship qualifications. Evaluation was based on candidates' publications and academic credentials (e.g., leadership of financed research projects, editorial roles in scientific journals etc.). For candidates in so-called 'bibliometric' Areas, citation metrics had also to be considered. In contrast, Area 14 –classified as non 'bibliometric'– was assessed only on the number and type of publications, excluding citation data.

As part of the reform's implementation, scientific journals were divided into two different categories: regular journals, recognized as standard scholarly publications, and so-called 'class A journals', which were identified as particularly relevant to specific SSDs. Finally, the *abilitazione* was to last four years, a period of time initially deemed sufficient for the qualified candidates to be recruited as associate or full professors by local universities. However, when it became clear that the academic system was unable to absorb the large number of qualified scholars, the validity of the ASN title was extended first to 6 years (in 2016), then to 9 (in 2019), and later to 12 (in 2024).

A major reform of the procedure took place in 2016. Originally, the ASN was supposed to occur annually, but various issues emerged during 2012-2013, convincing the MIUR to reform it. As a consequence there were changes in the evaluation parameters,

the duration of the title (as seen above), the composition of the commissions (now entirely composed by Italian full professors) and the timing of application windows, which were opened three times a year to avoid the massive number of candidates that had characterized the starting of the process (Manzo 2017; Marzolla 2015).

Between 2012 and 2023 five different rounds of ASN took place (in 2012; 2013; 2016-2018; 2018-2021 and 2021-2023). A sixth round (2023-2025) is ongoing at the time of writing (Summer 2025). During the five rounds just four committees were appointed since in 2012 and 2013 (before the reform) the Commissioners remained the same.

3. Data and methodology

To investigate the gendered dynamics of academic career advancement in Italian political science following the introduction of the national qualification (ASN), we constructed an original dataset by integrating multiple data sources. The aim of this empirical strategy is twofold: first, to provide a longitudinal, gender-disaggregated overview of participation, qualification, and promotion in the political science sector; second, to assess whether and how the ASN has functioned as a mechanism of reproduction or disruption of existing and well-known gender hierarchies in academic careers.

The dataset combines and expands upon previous data collections carried out by the Italian Society of Political Science (SISP), enriched by systematic data extraction from institutional sources. We collected individual-level data on all applicants in the sector 14/A2 (Political Science) for the five completed ASN rounds (2012, 2013, 2016-2018, 2018-2020, and 2021-2023), using information published on the official ASN portal. Given that the composition of the 2012 and 2013 ASN committees remained unchanged, featuring the same appointed members, we treated these two rounds as analytically aggregated. As a result, the five ASN rounds conducted between 2012 and 2023 correspond to four distinct committee compositions: 2012-2013, 2016-2018, 2018-2021, and
2021-2023.

For each candidate, we collected: name; gender (inferred from first name and validated manually); ASN academic rank applied for (associate or full professor); institutional affiliation (where applicable) at the time of the application; professional background (i.e. tenured faculty member; non-tenured post-doc, including also unaffiliated with academic institutions, or based abroad); outcome of the ASN evaluation; and date and institution of a subsequent promotion to associate or full professorship. Using and triangulating data collected by the SISP dataset on the political science community in Italy (Bosco et al 2024)[2], we were able to document whether and when each candidate secured a permanent position within the Italian university system. The final dataset contains 772 observations, as individuals who applied multiple times are counted separately for each application.

In addition to ASN candidates and ASN qualified, we systematically collected data on the ASN commissioners. We extracted the composition of the evaluation committees (five members per round, including their gender, institutional affiliation, and role as president or member) for each round of the ASN. We also included contextual indicators

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[2] See also Marino, 2017 for an early analysis of Italian political science community based on a different dataset.

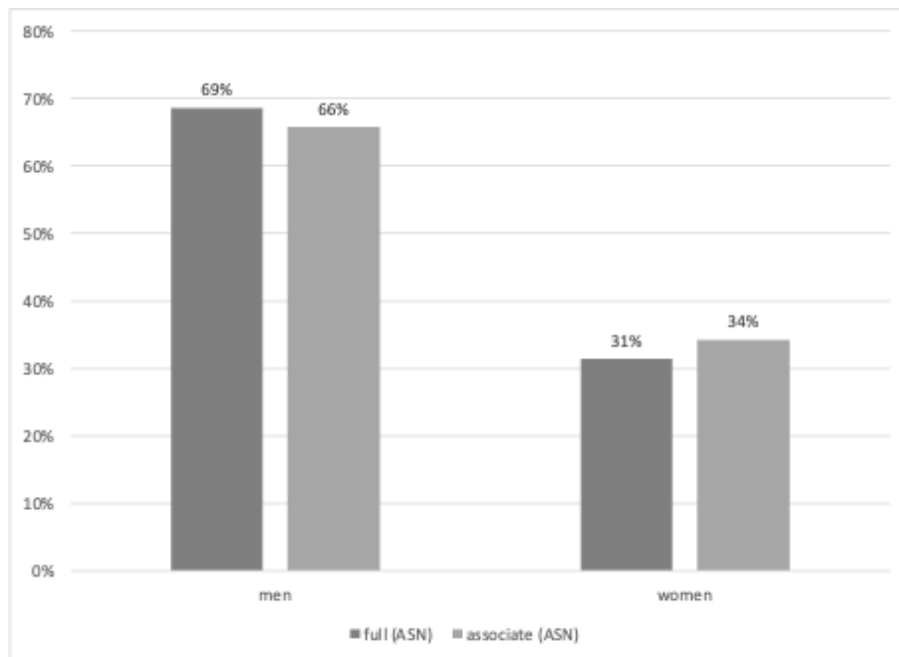such as geographic provenance of commissioners and institutional overlap with candidates.

Our approach is primarily descriptive. While we do not employ statistical techniques, we focus on identifying patterns in participation, success rates, and transitions to permanent positions, disaggregated by gender and academic rank. This choice reflects our theoretical focus on institutional mechanisms of (re)production of gendered academic inequalities (Gaiaschi 2025) and our intention to contribute to the literature with fine-grained empirical evidence from a specific disciplinary sector. We limited the scope of our dataset to the sector 14/A2 for research purposes.

4. ASN candidates and ASN qualified

Have women participated in the ASN qualification process as much as men? The literature consistently indicates that women have applied to the procedure less frequently than their male colleagues. In the first two rounds (2012 and 2013), for example, women accounted for less than 37% of all applicants (Manzo, 2017, p. 183). Higher levels of risk aversion and lower self-confidence have been identified as factors contributing to this lower application rate among women (De Paola, Ponzo, and Scoppa, 2015; De Paola, Ponzo, and Scoppa, 2017).

In political science, an even more pronounced process of self-selection appears to have characterized female candidates: on average, they accounted for only 33% of ASN candidates between 2012 and 2023. As shown in Fig. 1, women made up only 31% of applicants for full professorship and 34% for associate professorship in the discipline.

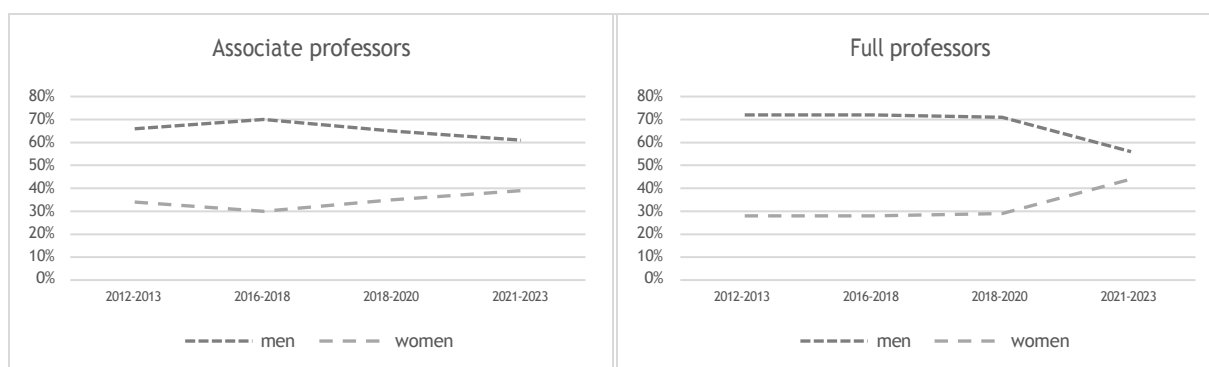**Figure 1.** Candidates to the ASN qualification, by gender and academic rank applied for (2012-2023)

Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

Such a large gap in application rates cannot be attributed to gender differences in candidates' academic background. Approximately 50% of applicants –50% of men and 49% of women– already held a position within a university. Another 34% of them –33% of men and 36% of women– were still in non-tenured role (post-doc or temporary position). The remaining 16% of applicants (15% in the case of women) were based at institutions abroad. Similarities also characterized the academic rank candidates applied for: 72% of women (compared to 69% of men) sought qualification for associate professorship, while the remaining 28% (versus 31% of men) applied for full professorship.
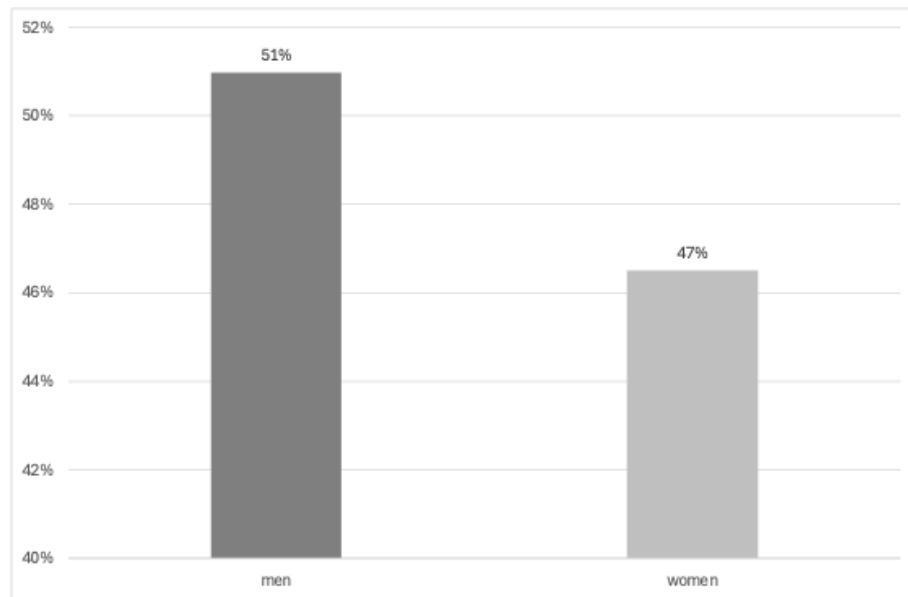
Shifting attention to the ASN rounds we observe a gradual reduction of the gender gap over time. For associate professorships, the number of female applicants began to rise steadily after 2018. In contrast, the increase in female candidates for full professorships occurred later, becoming evident only after the fourth round in 2020 (Fig.2). However, the narrowing of the gender gap was driven more by a decline in the number of male applicants than by a significant expansion in the group of female candidates.

Figure 2. Candidates to ASN by gender, rank applied for and round (2012–2023)

Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

Turning now to the winners of the procedure –the qualified– how successful were women? Did they obtain the ASN qualification at the same rate as the male candidates? Raw data from the Italian National University Council (CUN) on the 2012-2020 rounds of the ASN provide valuable insights. First, the overall qualification rate –for both associate and full professorships across all scientific areas– increased from 44% in 2012 to 56% in 2018. Second, and more importantly, the proportion of female candidates who obtained the ASN qualification increased over time, from 43% in 2012 to 56% in 2018 - compared, respectively, to 45% and 56% for men (CUN, 2023). Furthermore, after controlling for candidates' scientific productivity, De Paola, Ponzo, and Scoppa (2018), found no significant gender differences in the likelihood of obtaining the *abilitazione*. Other studies similarly report no evidence of a gender gap in qualification outcomes (Filandri & Pasqua 2021; Marini & Meschitti 2018; Pautasso 2015). Finally, our aggregated data suggest a tendency toward gender neutrality in the ASN outcomes for political science, though the evidence remains only partial. As shown in Fig. 3, 47% of female candidates achieved the qualification compared to 51% of male applicants.
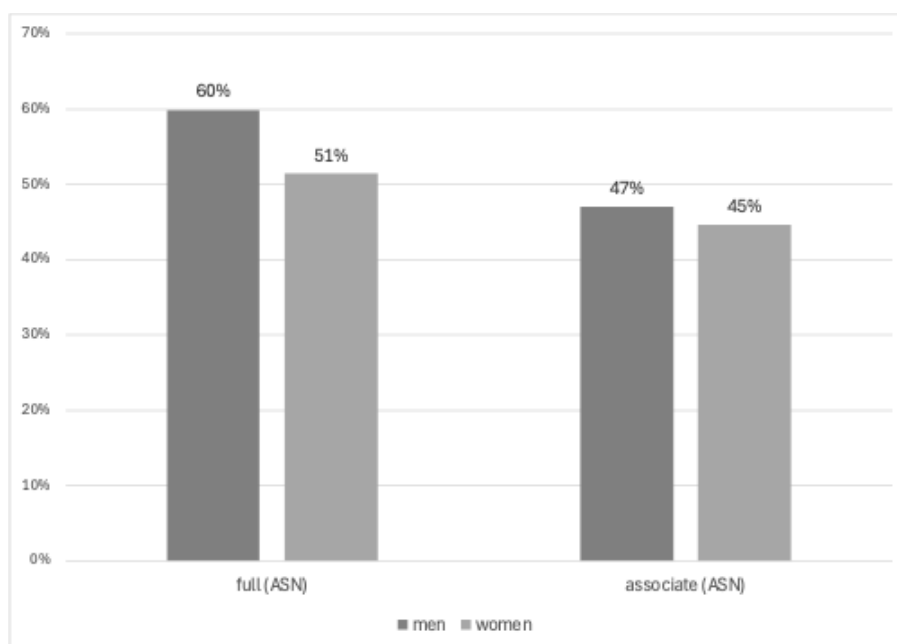
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Figure 3. Qualified political scientists, by gender (% of candidates 2012-2023)

Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

Does this suggest that the ASN procedure has operated in a gender-neutral manner? The point to be stressed is that general findings conceal disparities both among and within disciplinary areas. During the 2012 and 2013 rounds, for instance, Manzo (2017) observed significant variations within Area 14. Notably, political science, recorded the lowest percentage of women qualified for full professorship—only 11.8% compared to an average of 42.2% across the other sectors within Area 14.

Our findings confirm the existence of a significant gender gap in qualifications for full professorship, but not for associate professorship. As shown in Fig. 4, the success rates of male and female candidates in the ASN procedure differ markedly across the two academic ranks. Over the 2012-2023 period, in fact, only 51% of women got the qualification as full professor, compared to 60% of men. Women resulted also slightly less qualified as associate professor, but in this case the gap is narrower: 45% of women versus 47% of men. The gender disparity is thus more pronounced at the full professorship level.
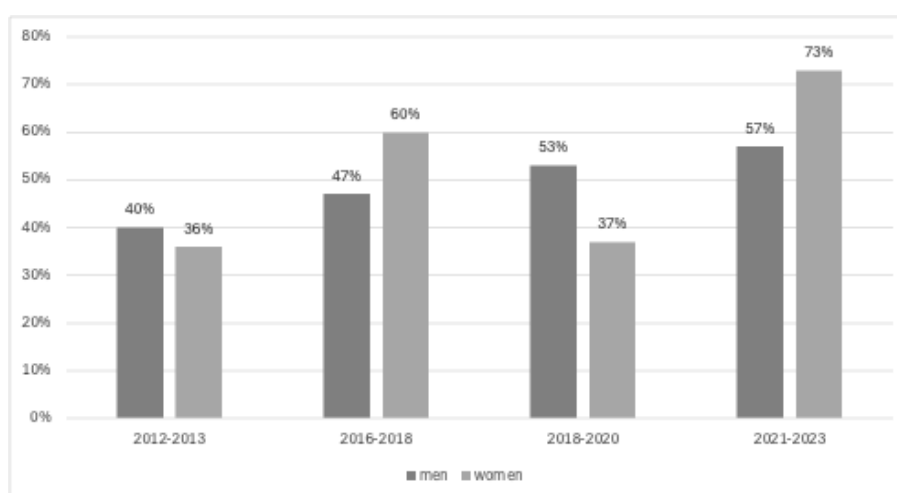
Figure 4. Qualified political scientists by gender and academic rank applied for (% of candidates, 2012-2023)
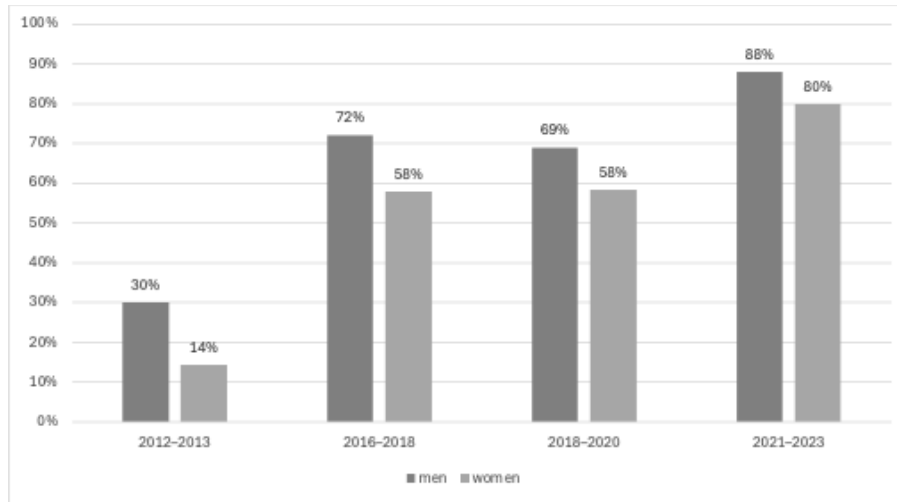

Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

More differences emerge by looking at the evolution of the ASN qualified in the different rounds of the procedure. Actually, only twice, in the 2016-2018 and 2021-2023 rounds for associate professorship, was the percentage of qualified women higher than that of men, while in all the other rounds, for both associate and full professorships, men always resulted more successful than women (Fig. 5 and 6).

Figure 5. Success rates obtained by qualified political scientists for associate professorship, by gender and ASN round

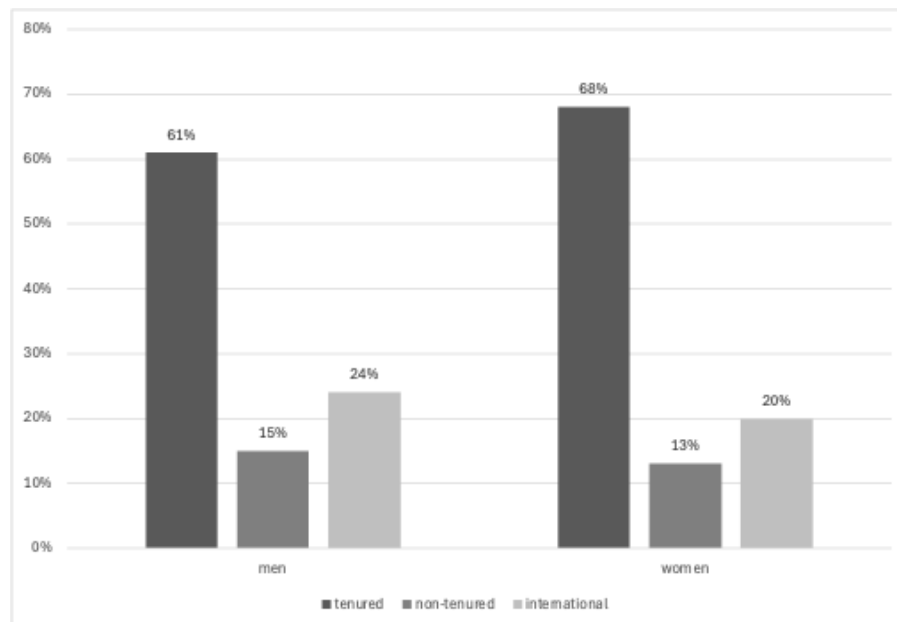Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

Figure 6. Success rates obtained by qualified political scientists for full professorship, by gender and ASN round

Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

The data presented in Fig. 6, in particular, show how the gender gap in the qualification to full professorship seriously narrowed only in the fifth round of the procedure (fourth commission, 2021- 2023). In contrast, the preceding rounds, and especially those of 2012 and 2013, limited women's career advancement producing the well-known 'crystal ceiling' phenomenon (Gaiaschi 2022; Naldini and Poggio 2023).

Figure 7. Success rate of qualified political scientists, by gender and academic background (2012-2023)

Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

Finally, another gendered pattern emerges in figure 7. Our findings indicate that women are more likely to obtain the qualification when they already hold a tenured position (68%) and are therefore better known within the academic community. Previous reputation, in other terms, appears to play a more critical role for women than for men.

5. The evaluators

Has the ASN evaluation procedure reflected gender bias on the part of commissioners? This question cannot be answered directly. However, we can investigate certain characteristics of the evaluation committees –such as their gender composition and institutional affiliation– to assess whether these factors may have influenced candidates' chances of success.

Regarding gender composition, in the first five ASN rounds, women accounted for only 22.9% of all commissioners (ANVUR 2023, p. 31). This figure is lower than the proportion of female full professors in Italian universities, which stood at 27.9% in 2023 (https://cercauniversita.mur.gov.it/).

According to some strands of the existing literature, the absence of women on evaluation committees tends to disadvantage female candidates, as mixed-gender committees are more likely to appoint women to professorships (Van den Brink, Benschop, and Jansen 2010; De Paola and Scoppa 2015). However, contrasting evidence is provided by Bagues, Sylos-Labini and Zinovyeva (2017), who find that the presence of women on committees does not necessarily lead to more favorable outcomes for female candidates.

There is, nonetheless, one area where the literature appears to converge: the importance of connections between candidates and evaluators. Abramo, D'Angelo and Rosati (2015) show that male committee presidents are more likely to favor candidates affiliated with their own institution, whereas female presidents are more inclined to support candidates with whom they have co- authored publications. Since no ASN committee in political science has been chaired by a female full professor, the latter hypothesis cannot be tested in this case.

The relevance of personal and institutional ties is further supported by findings from De Paola, Ponzo and Scoppa (2018), who report that a candidate's probability of success increases by 11% when a university colleague sits on the ASN committee. Similarly, Abramo and D'Angelo (2015) identify the duration of a candidate's academic career within the same university as a committee member as a significant predictor of success in academic competitions. Notably, this factor appears to benefit male candidates than on female ones. Moreover, this pattern holds across academic selection procedures conducted both before and after the introduction of the ASN.

Among the four ASN committees considered in our research, only two women served alongside eighteen men. As shown in Table 1, women were present in the first commission, which evaluated candidates in the two rounds of 2012 and 2013, and again in the 2018-2020 commission. This imbalance reflects the broader underrepresentation of women among full professors, the academic rank required to serve on ASN evaluation committees.

A second factor is related to the rules for forming the commissions: candidate commissioners are drawn by lot, with no regard to gender. As a result, although female

professors applied in every round, only two were selected. As shown in Table 2, random drawing systematically favors the larger gender group, while the *candidature rate by gender* (the share of full professors of each gender applying to become ASN commissioners) makes little difference. In 2016, for example, 33% of female full professors applied, yet all the positions went to men, whose candidature rate was much lower (14.6%).

The near absence of female evaluators is therefore a critical weakness of the system, which could be addressed by revising the rules. In any case, given the strong gender asymmetry, it was not possible to conduct a robust analysis of the potential effects of committee gender composition on qualification outcomes.

Table 1. Gender composition of the ASN commissions

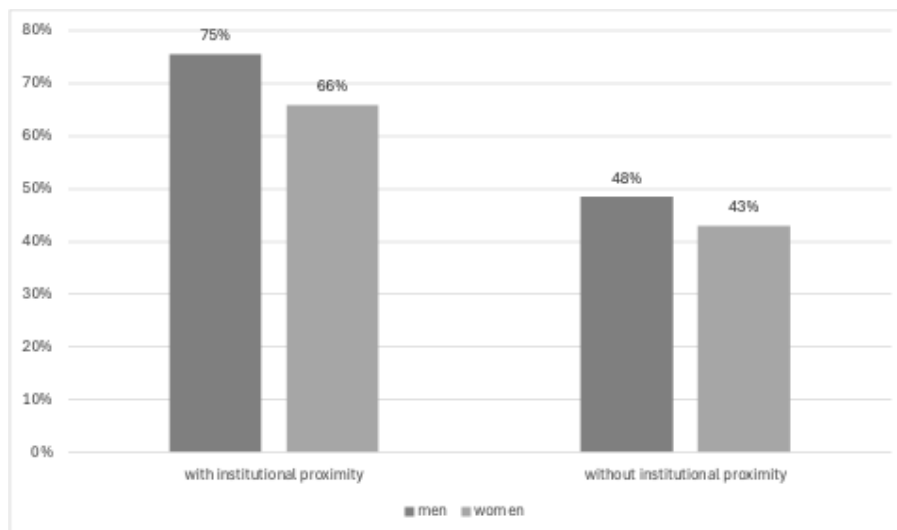|	Men FPs	Women FPs
2012-2013	4	1
2016-2018	5	0
2018-2020	4	1
2021-2023	5	0

Table 2. Gender gap in candidature and selection to commissions

	Men FP candidates (%)	Men commissioners (%)	Women FP candidates (%)	Women commissioners (%)
2012-2013	40.9	80	22.2	20
2016-2018	14.6	100	33.3	0
2018-2020	20.9	80	20	20
2021-2023	12.3	100	6.3	0

Note: Men/Women FP candidates: percentage of political science full professors in service who applied in each round of the ASN. Men/Women commissioners: percentage of members of the committees.

Instead, we directed our attention on the role of institutional proximity, that is, instances in which candidates and commissioners were affiliated with the same university at the time of application. Could institutional proximity increase the likelihood of obtaining the ASN qualification? To investigate this issue, we systematically coded shared affiliations and identified a non-negligible number of cases in which such overlap occurred.
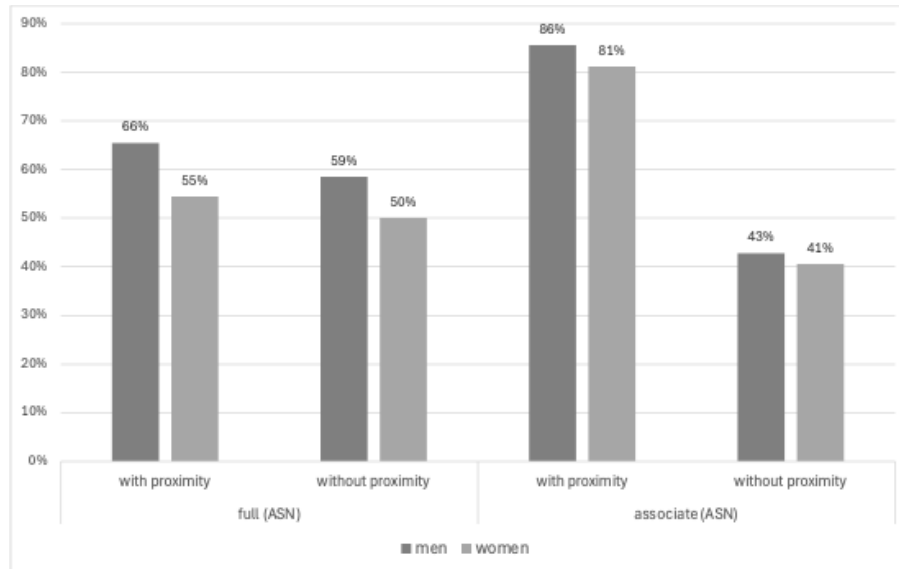
Figure 8. Success rates of qualified political scientists, by institutional proximity and gender (2013-2023)

Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

Fig. 8 shows that candidates who shared an institutional affiliation with at least one committee member at the time of application were significantly more likely to obtain the *abilitazione*. The difference is substantial: 75% of men and 66% of female candidates with institutional proximity succeeded, compared to only 48% of men and 43% of women without such a connection. While this is a descriptive observation, it underscores the enduring influence of institutional proximity in shaping academic careers. These findings seem to confirm the persistence of what has often been described as an "old men's club", particularly in the access to the rank of full professor, where male-dominated informal networks and institutional loyalty may play a decisive role in structuring academic opportunities and outcomes (Stapleton & Michelson, 2021).

Figure 9. Success rates of qualified political scientists, by academic rank applied for, gender and institutional proximity (2012-2023)

Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

As further illustrated in Fig. 9, institutional proximity is associated with higher success rates at both career levels. For full professorships, the success rate was 66% for men and 55% for women with institutional proximity, compared to 59% and 50%, respectively, among those without it. The difference is even more striking for associate professorships: 86% of men and 81% of women with proximity succeeded, versus only 43% and 41% among those without. Institutional proximity thus has a stronger impact for associate professorship - where it nearly doubles the success rate.

These patterns suggest that proximity functions as a key mechanism in shaping access to academic positions, exerting a stronger influence than gender alone. However, it is important to stress that the findings can also be interpreted through the lens of short-range networks—that is, territorially embedded strong ties—which are especially relevant for younger candidates. With shorter professional careers, these candidates may not yet have developed broader academic visibility or independence, making local connections more consequential for their success. In this context, institutional proximity can provide a crucial advantage. For senior candidates, however, longer trajectories tend to diminish—but not eliminate—the importance of local ties. As professional reputations and collaborative networks expand beyond institutional boundaries, weak ties and long-range networks become increasingly significant (Granovetter 1973).
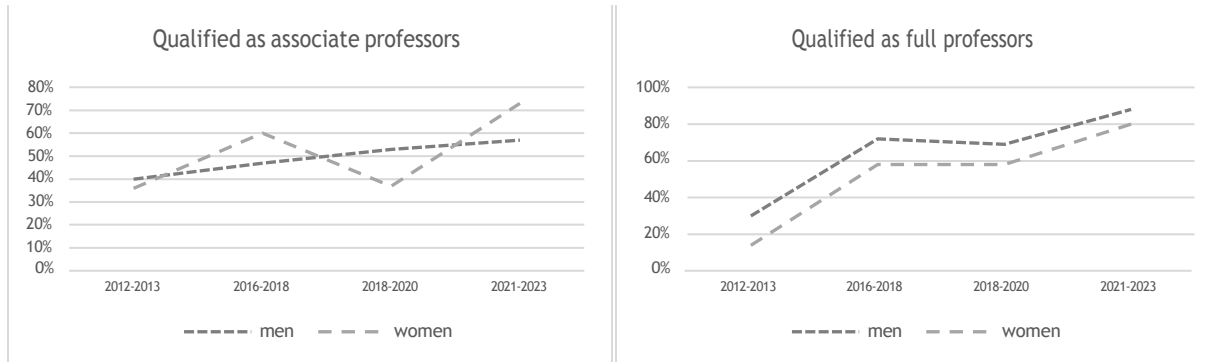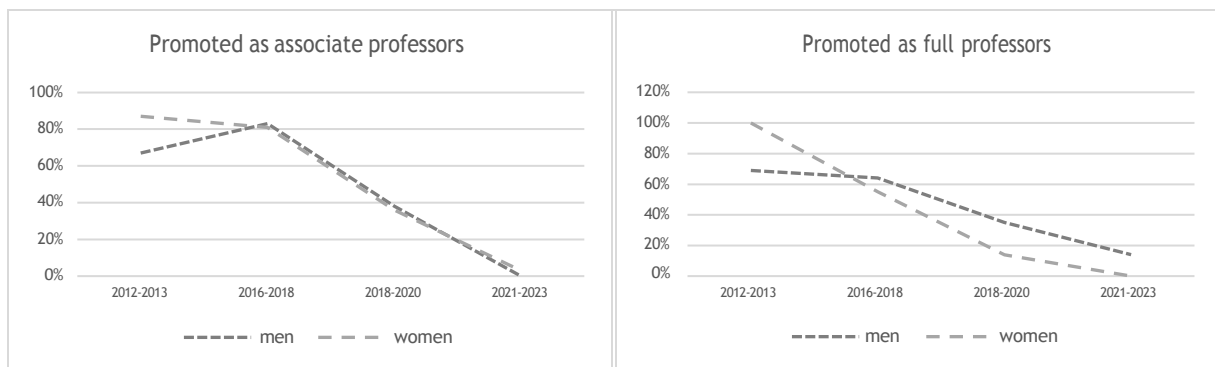
More generally, the success rate differential between candidates with and without institutional proximity is larger than the gender differential. In this sense, institutional proximity may operate as a form of "gender gap compensation": women with proximity display higher success rates than men without it. This pattern emerges clearly in the aggregate (Fig. 8) and is particularly evident among candidates for associate professorships.
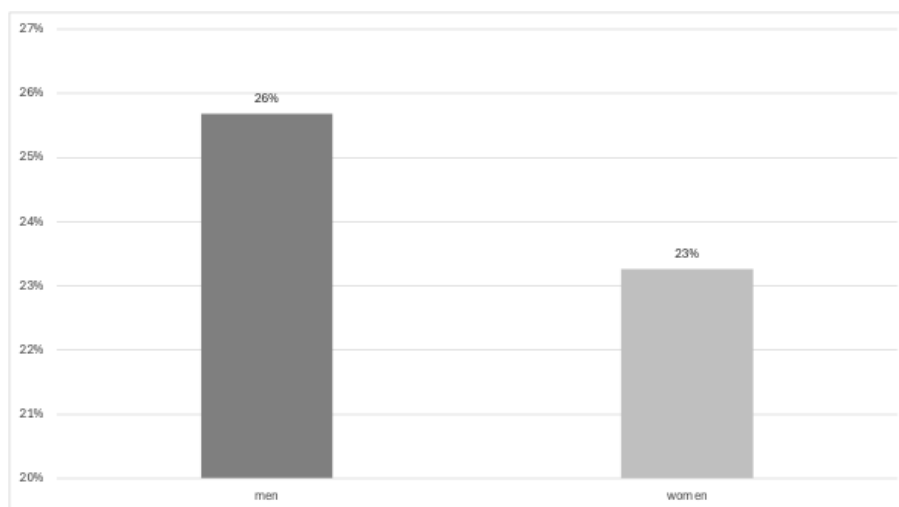
6. The promoted

With the enactment of Law 240/2010, obtaining the ASN qualification represents only the first step in the career progression toward associate or full professorship. Actual promotions occur subsequently at the local level, when university departments issue open calls for these positions. Only candidates who have obtained the ASN qualification are eligible to apply, compete and, potentially, be appointed. While ASN thus provides a national-level certification of eligibility, recruitment remains managed at the local level, with individual universities exercising autonomy in launching competitions and appointing selection committees.

The limited number of studies that have examined the final outcomes of the ASN process suggest that, as in earlier stages, women tend to be at a disadvantage compared to men. According to De Paola, Ponzo, and Scoppa (2018), in contexts where positions are scarce – such as at the departmental level – "females have a significantly lower probability of promotion." This finding is corroborated by Marini and Meschitti (2018). Data covering the period from 2012 to 2018 (the first three ASN rounds) show that - by 2021 - while approximately 50% of all candidates obtained the qualification, only 31% of those qualified had secured a permanent position through a local competition by 2021 (CUN 2023). Moreover, the share of qualified candidates who were eventually promoted declined markedly over time, from 53% in 2012 to just 4% in 2018, reflecting the limited capacity of the Italian university system to convert qualifications into actual job positions. Among those who were promoted, the presence of women increased only marginally: from 37% in 2012– 2013, to 39% in 2016, to 40% in 2018. In short, women consistently remained a minority among those who successfully progressed in their academic careers (CUN 2023).

Regarding political science, Figures 10 and 11 provide a longitudinal, gender-disaggregated overview of the ASN process, illustrating trends in qualification rates and subsequent appointments to permanent positions. While gender disparities in qualification rates are evident in the early rounds, the gap narrows in more recent cycles, as previously discussed. However, this apparent progress is not mirrored in actual promotions (see Fig. 11). For both ranks, the proportion of qualified candidates who were ultimately promoted declines sharply over time, and this downward trend affects both men and women. Notably, in the most recent round, the percentage of promotions falls to very low levels for both genders, but particularly so for women aspiring to full professorships. This pattern confirms the existence of a structural bottleneck in academic career advancement and suggests that, even when women succeeded in overcoming the qualification hurdle, their prospects for promotion remain constrained, likely due to a combination of systemic limitations and gendered bias.
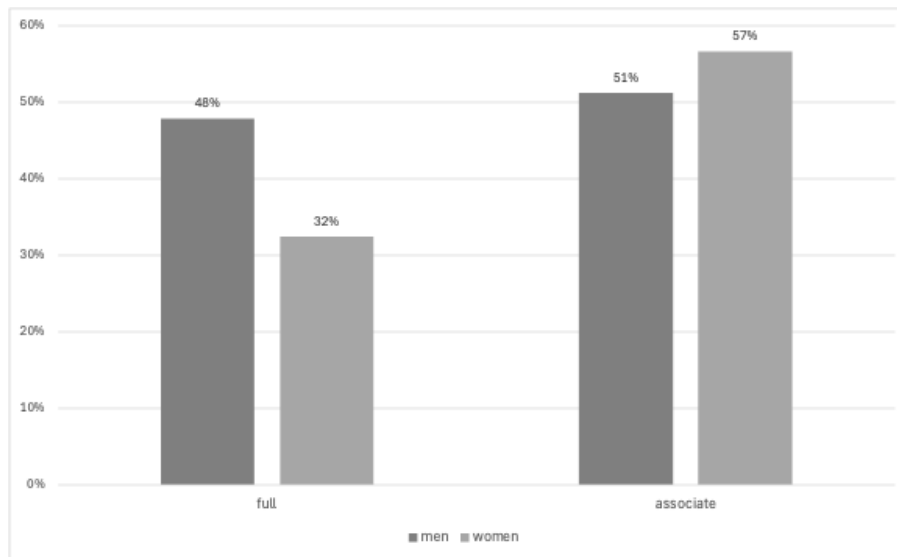
Figure 10. Trends in qualified political scientists by gender, rank applied for and commission (2012–2023)

Figure 11. Trends in promoted political scientists by gender, rank applied for and commission (2012–2023)

More recently, Brunetti, Fabretti, and Zoli (2024) conducted a fine-grained analysis by focusing on the recruitment of ASN-qualified candidates already employed within university departments. Their study, which spans the 2012–2021 period, found that women were more likely to be promoted to full professorships only when they were well represented on the committees responsible for recruitment decisions. In other terms, the presence of female full professors in decision-making bodies appears to be a crucial factor in promoting gender equality at the highest academic level. Considering the low number of women full professors in Italian political science - they were just 21 at the end of 2023 (Feo and Bosco, 2024) - it's easy to understand their limited influence when it comes to recruitment decisions.

Figure 12. Promoted political scientists, by gender (2012-2025)

Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

As shown in Figure 12, on average, only 25% of the Italian political scientists who obtained the ASN title between 2012 and 2023 were able to progress in their careers by securing a tenured position by 2025. As the literature suggests, women were less likely to be promoted than men (23% vs. 26%). While this overall difference may appear modest, more substantial disparities emerge when disaggregating by academic rank. Only 32% of women who obtained the qualification for full professorship in political science were ultimately appointed, compared to 48% of their male counterparts (Fig. 13). Furthermore, the time span between qualification and promotion was longer for women (an average of 3.3 years) than for men (2.8 years). These gaps are not observed in the case of associate professorships. By 2025, 57% of qualified women had secured tenure, compared to 51% of men. Moreover, the average time to promotion was identical for both genders (2.8), a convergence likely due to the standardizing effect of the RTD-B contract introduced by the Gelmini law.
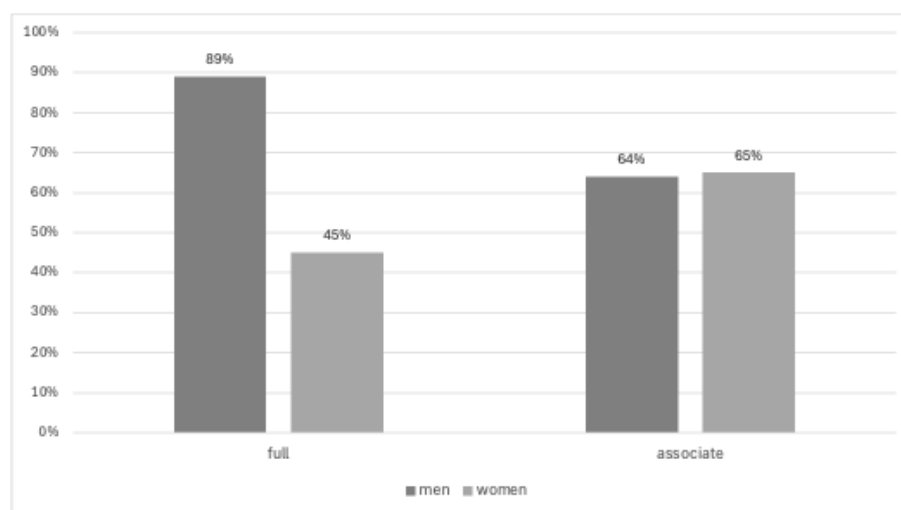
Figure 13. Promoted political scientists, by gender and position applied for (2012-2025)

Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

Finally, beyond gender disparities, a broader structural pattern has been observed: most competitions for associate and full professorships are won by internal candidates –those already employed at the university issuing the call. In our dataset, 131 out of 188 promoted political scientists (70%) obtained their position at the same institution where they were affiliated at the time of the ASN. As one of the leading scholars of the Italian university system, and himself a former president of an ASN committee, Giliberto Capano observed, "the system did not change the prevalence of localistic interests or the asymmetric chances of being promoted" (Capano 2022, p. 29). According to our data, these enduring asymmetries also contribute to the persistence of gender gaps in academic career advancement.

When we disaggregate the data by gender and academic rank (Fig. 14) a further dimension of inequality emerges, one that distinguishes between associate and full professorships. gender gap dividing full professors from associate ones emerges. For associate professors, the proportion of candidates who obtain a position at the same institution where they were previously employed is identical for men and women. By contrast, a striking gender gap emerges at the level of full professorships: 90% of male qualified political scientists take up the position at the same university in which they were affiliated during the ASN process, compared to only 45% of their female counterparts. In other words, female full professors experience significantly greater, and likely more burdensome, territorial mobility, as they are less frequently recruited by the universities in which they were previously employed.

Figure 14. ASN Promoted political scientists recruited in the same institution they were previously employed, by gender and rank (2012-2025)

7. Conclusions

Other The goal of this study was to examine the role played by the *Abilitazione scientifica nazionale* (ASN) in the career progression of political scientists, adopting a gender perspective. Previous research has already documented the underrepresentation of women in Italian political science. At the end of 2023, for instance, when the fifth ASN round concluded, women accounted for only 33.6% of political scientists, against 41.7% in the broader Area 14 (Bosco and Feo 2024).

What had not yet been explored is the role of the ASN in the career advancement of female political scientists. The existing literature, which is based exclusively on aggregate data, offers two key claims. First, the qualification procedure is considered to be "gender neutral" or even gender blind: since it relies on objective indicators of productivity, it is assumed not to introduce gender bias in the evaluation of candidates' scholarly work. Second, unequal outcomes are said to emerge at a later stage, when qualified women apply for promotions at local universities, particularly for full professorships.

But do these claims hold in the specific case of political science? We argue that investigating the ASN's role from a gender perspective is crucial for understanding the future of the discipline. At the end of 2023, only 25 women had been promoted to full professorships in political science since the early 1980s (Bosco and Feo 2024). What has been the impact of the ASN on these extraordinarily small numbers? The original dataset we have built allowed us to identify six gendered patterns through which the ASN has contributed to producing gender disparities.

First, women have been underrepresented among political scientists applying for the ASN. This is especially significant for full professorship applications. In contrast, the time limits (three years) connected to the tenure-track contracts (RTD-B) may have pressured candidates to face the ASN, limiting procrastination and strategic choices.

Second, success rates in the ASN vary by rank and by gender. While qualification rates for associate professorships are similar for men and women (47% vs. 45%), the picture is quite different for full professorships. Here, 60% of male candidates obtained the qualification, compared to just 51% of women: furthermore, women's success rates were consistently lower than men's in every round and particularly so in the 2012–2013 period.

Third, our data revealed another important dimension, institutional proximity – i.e., sharing affiliation with at least one committee member. Across all applications—for both associate and full professorships—candidates who shared an affiliation with at least one commissioner were more likely to succeed than those without such ties. This effect is particularly pronounced for associate professorships, where the success rate of candidates with institutional proximity—both men and women—is more than twice that of candidates without any territorial connection to committee members. For full professorships, by contrast, the influence of institutional proximity is weaker, but is associated to a stronger gender dimension as men continue to have a success rate higher than women (66% vs. 55%).

Turning now to the final stage of the career progression—the actual promotion to tenured positions within universities—our findings align with the broader literature, which shows that men are more likely to be promoted than women. In political science, as elsewhere, the rank for which one applies makes a difference. For associate professorships, women have higher success rates than men (57% vs. 51%). For full professorships, however, the familiar gender gap re-emerges: 48% of men who qualified were promoted, compared to only 32% of women. The gap is not only quantitative, but also qualitative in terms of the conditions of promotion. Around two-thirds of both men and women promoted to associate professor secured the position at the same university where they were employed at the time of their ASN application. In contrast, promotions to full professorship appear to entail greater "costs" for women. While 89% of men were promoted within their home institution, only 45% of women achieved the same. In other words, women are more frequently required to change institutions in order to advance, paying a price in terms of territorial mobility that their male colleagues are less likely to face. Future research could further deepen the analysis by extending the comparison to other academic competition areas and disciplinary fields beyond political science. It would also be valuable to explore additional dimensions of inequality, such as territorial disparities, to better understand how institutional and geographic factors interact in shaping academic careers.

Yet, our findings suggest that, for political scientists, the ASN cannot be considered gender neutral in its effects. While the procedure appears to operate in a relatively gender-neutral manner for associate professorships, this is not the case for full professorships, where significant disparities persist. The data thus point to the continued existence of a structural bottleneck that hampers women's advancement to the highest academic ranks.

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