

# Italy and Spain at a crossroads: the politics of active social policies in southern Europe under a gender perspective

Italy and Spain  
at a crossroads

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The article explores to what extent party politics has influenced the different trajectories in Spain and Italy in terms of gendered active social policies (ASPs) (i.e. ALMPs and WLBP). Second, it investigates how social and political modernization in the two countries has facilitated or hindered party competition on gendered ASPs.

**Design/methodology/approach** – To investigate to what extent parties support gendered ASPs, the article relies on an original content analysis of party manifestos issued during the 2010s national elections. A total of 1387 quasi-sentences have been coded. The results were then quantified to graphically show how positions differentiate across parties and countries.

**Findings** – The content analysis of party manifestos displays that party politics matters: gendered ASPs are backed in a very different way by the Spanish and Italian parties. While in Spain all political parties have strongly championed ALMPs and WLBP, this is not the case for the Italian parties. The research has also stressed that the specific path of social and political modernization is an important intervening variable that alters positively or negatively parties' support for gendered ASPs.

**Originality/value** – The article contributes to widen theoretically and empirically the literature on ASPs in the Southern European countries. Theoretically, it questions the supposed homogeneity of the Southern social model and investigated the alleged bifurcation between Italy and Spain, focusing on those policies – ASPs – that constitute the foundations of the Southern model: familialism and dualization. Furthermore, this bifurcation was analyzed adopting a gender perspective, and exploring adherence to or departure from the Southern model. Third, the article focuses on the politics of ASPs demonstrating that inspecting the political arena can contribute to explain policy change.

**Keywords** Gender equality, Active labor market policy, Active social policies, Southern regime, Work–life balance policy

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

There is an established tradition of grouping Southern European countries (Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal) within a specific social and labor market policy regime (Ferrera, 1996, 2005; Trigilia, 2022).

Among the core features, *familialism* is undoubtedly one of the most crucial aspects (Naldini, 2003) and is commonly described as the byproduct of the Catholic Church's influence in the consolidation of the Southern countries' welfare institutions—in particular, family policy (Pfau-Effinger, 1998; Van Kersbergen and Manow, 2009; León and Pavolini, 2014; Pavolini *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, Catholicism has always fostered traditional social norms, thus



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contributing to the development of a very conservative social environment with a strict separation of gender roles inside and outside the household (e.g. Lynch, 2009). Such a traditionalist environment has reinforced the male breadwinner family model, characterized by stable working careers for men and women being relegated to home and caring for children and frail relatives. Accordingly, Southern Europe has historically disregarded the development of work–life balance policies (WLBP), which aimed at *de-familializing* care—that is, expanding childcare services outside the family (Lewis, 1992; Leitner, 2003), promoting female employment, and, consequently, fostering the shift towards a dual-earner family model. Furthermore, in opposition to continental European countries—where the male-breadwinner model was similarly widespread, at least until the late 1990s—cash transfers and family allowances were relatively scant and fragmented. Family policy thus has had a residual feature in the Southern welfare states (León, 2002). More than *explicit familism*, we can talk about *implicit familism*, where no or selective financial support is given to help families in their caring functions (Leitner, 2003; Saraceno and Keck, 2010).

Alongside familism, the Southern European countries display a dualized labor market policy regime (e.g. Rueda, 2007; Mulè and Rizza, 2023), with strong divides in terms of job protection and social rights between insiders and outsiders. While dualization has also been a key feature of the European continental countries, the insiders/outside cleavage appears to be stronger in Southern Europe (Gherardini, 2022; Giuliani, 2023a). Here, labor market policies have mostly followed a “compensatory” logic, guaranteeing income support to the (male) core workers, strengthening short-time work schemes and early retirement while overlooking activation measures for the outsiders, especially women (Beramendi *et al.*, 2015).

From a gender perspective, familism and dualization are mutually reinforcing: over time, women in Southern European countries have displayed lower employment rates, more fragmented careers, low wages and insecure jobs (Schwander and Häusermann, 2013). These countries thus seem to have resisted *modernization* in terms of gender equality, and their policy institutions are said to be “immovable objects” (e.g. Pierson, 2001). More specifically, they have been depicted as an unlikely environment for the expansion of active social policies (ASPs): work–life balance and active labor market policies (ALMP) (Bonoli, 2013; Kazepov and Ranci, 2017; Da Roit and Sabatinelli, 2013).

However, since the early 2000s, the homogeneity of the Southern social model, especially in promoting gender equality, has weakened. Concerning the two archetypes, Italy and Spain, literature has increasingly pointed out the emergence of a bifurcation (Bürgisser, 2022; León *et al.*, 2019; Moreno and Mari-Klose, 2014). Both WLBP and ALMP have, in fact, developed differently in the two countries. While Spain has started to move away from a familistic and consumption-based welfare state (León and Pavolini, 2014; León *et al.*, 2019), Italy has not followed an alternative path. Although some defrosting mechanisms have occurred in the last few years (Saraceno, 2022), Italy is still a *frozen landscape* regarding gender equality inside and outside the labor market (De Roit and Sabatinelli, 2013; Saraceno, 2020).

While there is a very informative comparative literature investigating ASP reforms implemented in the two countries (e.g. León *et al.*, 2019; Pavolini and Sorrenti, 2022; Giuliani and Raspanti, 2022), an empirical analysis of the politics of ASPs from a gender perspective is lacking. How can we explain such bifurcation when considering the gendered politics variable? If politics matters and is assumed to affect policy, partisanship may help to understand why Spain has promoted ASPs to a greater extent than Italy, thus enhancing gender equality.

This article aims to explore the following research questions:

First, *to what extent has party politics influenced the different trajectories in Spain and Italy regarding gendered ASPs?*

Second, *has social and political modernization in the two countries facilitated or hindered party competition on gendered ASPs?*

In other terms, we aim to explore the step that precedes policy implementation, focusing on what happens during the electoral phase, when alternative ASPs reforms promoted by parties enter the public debate to gain consensus.

The article has two goals. First, building on the literature concerning policy change in the family and the labor market realms (e.g. [Morgan, 2013](#); [Blome, 2017](#)), it empirically investigates to what extent Spain and Italy diverge in terms of (a) constituencies' policy and value preferences; (b) gendered party competition; and (c) female political representation. The combination of these variables generates what we call *paths of social and political modernization*. Second, through a content analysis of Italian and Spanish party manifestos in the last decade, the research thoroughly analyzes parties' positions on gendered ASPs.

The article contributes to widening theoretically and empirically the literature on ASPs in Southern European countries. Theoretically, it questions the supposed homogeneity of the Southern social model. We do this by investigating the alleged bifurcation between Italy and Spain, focusing on those policies—ASPs—that constitute the foundations of the Southern model: familialism and dualization. Furthermore, we scrutinize this bifurcation by adopting a *gender perspective* and exploring adherence to or departure from the Southern model. Third, we focus on the *politics* of ASPs, demonstrating that inspecting the political arena can contribute to explaining policy change. Empirically, we provide informative data regarding party positions on ASPs, thus concretely assessing how changes at the social and political levels affect party competition.

The article's argument develops as follows: First, we briefly illustrate the development of ASPs in Italy and Spain, focusing on similarities and divergences. Second, we thoroughly analyze the different paths of social and political modernization undertaken by the two countries since the early 2000s, and we formulate our hypotheses. Then, the results of the content analysis of the party manifestos are discussed. The final part is dedicated to our conclusions.

## 2. Gendered ASPs and the Southern Model

The social investment literature has highlighted that postindustrial welfare regimes have initiated a recalibration process to update their policies to the new social risks, including those dealing with gender inequalities. In this regard, comparative research has focused on the development of ASPs ([Hemerijck, 2012](#); [Bonoli, 2013](#); [Beramendi et al., 2015](#); [Garritzmann et al., 2022](#)), defined as those sets of interventions that prioritize human capital investment and the removal of obstacles to labor market participation. ASPs include WLBP and ALMPs.

Concerning WLBP, the literature agrees that childcare services positively impact the female employment rate ([Lewis, 1992](#); [Saraceno and Keck, 2010](#); [Morel et al., 2012](#)). The activation effect of leave is less straightforward. Research has pointed out that long periods of leave, accompanied by a low replacement rate and no specific quota for fathers, discourage mothers from returning to work ([Boeckmann et al., 2015](#)). On the contrary, relatively short periods of leave followed by a high replacement rate and a non-transferable daddy quota not only encourage women to return to work but also foster an equal redistribution of caring tasks within the household.

Shifting our attention to ALMPs, the literature suggests that they may have a less disadvantaged effect on women than passive labor market policies (PLMPs) ([Estévez-Abe, 2006](#)). Since women are more likely than men to have fragmented careers, they have fewer chances to be eligible for insurance-based benefits, while they are expected to be entitled to less generous needs-based benefits. It follows that the degree to which labor market policies reduce occupational inequalities between genders is related to the phenomenon of

recommodification. From this perspective, ALMPs may play a positive role since their main goal is to promote individuals' entry to, and permanence in, the labor market. In this regard, upskilling (first of all, training) appears to be very beneficial to women.

Therefore, ASPs can be investigated from a gender perspective, that is, as tools for achieving more balanced gender relationships inside the household and the labor market. WLBP are more explicit gendered measures. On the contrary, ALMPs may be considered an implicitly gendered tool since they are primarily promoted in a gender-neutral way even though they may positively affect the female employment rate. In some circumstances, ALMPs can directly target women—for instance, specific training programs for mothers overloaded with caring tasks. We label these policies as Gendered ALMPs.

When considering Italy and Spain, the comparative literature has always depicted these countries as adverse cases for ASPs (e.g. [Kazepov and Ranci, 2017](#)). This is primarily due to the specific distorted configurations of their social and labor market policies.

As previously argued, Spain and Italy have been traditionally classified as belonging to the Southern European/Mediterranean welfare regime ([Ferrera, 1996](#)). From an institutional point of view, this equates to pensions and labor market policies organized following a Bismarckian model of social insurance and limited State intervention in social care and family policies.

Concerning this latter aspect, [Saraceno and Keck \(2010\)](#) classify Italy and Spain as familistic countries. Childcare policies have traditionally been lower than in all other welfare state regimes, with women being strongly penalized in terms of their low level of employment and their high level of inactivity, especially in Italy ([Guillén and León, 2011](#)). The underdevelopment of WLBP—especially during the so-called Golden Age—may be explained by considering the influence of Catholicism in shaping the welfare institutions, as mentioned in the Introduction. For a long time, the idea of direct state involvement in the family sphere has clashed with the concept of a strict separation of the public and private spheres ([Morgan, 2006](#)). The strenuous defense of the subsidiarity principle fostered the growth of no-profit, Church-related organizations, which started to be critical actors in welfare provisions and were seen as a protective layer between the State and the family ([Van Kersbergen, 1995](#); [Pavolini et al., 2017](#)).

Regarding labor market regulation, Italy and Spain display high levels of dualization ([Gherardini, 2022](#); [Rizza et al., 2022](#)). This trend started in the 1990s in parallel with the liberalization of temporary and part-time jobs, resulting in more women being hired on atypical contracts. Furthermore, ALMPs do not provide for job placement schemes, and this shortcoming penalizes women more than men, as a relatively small percentage of women are at work, especially in Italy.

The historical lack of ASPs in Italy and Spain can be assessed on the basis of the structure of national social expenditure. As shown in [Table 1](#), in the 1990s, the spending on family services was very low by a comparative standard: 0.18% of the GDP in Spain and 0.14% in Italy. The values displayed by the two Mediterranean countries were substantially lower not only compared with those of Sweden and Denmark—the forerunners in promoting defamilialization—but with other continental European countries such as Germany—the archetype of the male-breadwinner family model—and France.

A similar picture is visible when considering expenditure on ALMPs. In the late 1990s, Spain and Italy lagged behind Scandinavian and Continental countries. Given the scarce development of ASPs, the extremely low level of female employment rate in the 1990s (well under 40%) in the two Southern countries is thus not surprising.

However, over the last 20 years, there has been a growing divergence in the approach to ASPs in Italy and Spain.

	Italy			Spain			France			Germany						
	1990s	2000s	2010s	Change 1990–2010s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Change 1990–2010s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Change 1990–2010s				
Expenditure on WLBP <sup>1</sup>	0.14	0.19	0.2	+0.06	0.18	0.67	0.78	+0.6	0.51	0.7	0.95	+0.44	0.69	0.76	1.16	+0.47
Expenditure on ALMP <sup>2</sup>	0.49	0.50	0.32	-0.17	0.58	0.60	0.54	-0.04	1.01	0.77	0.64	-0.36	1.04	0.82	0.32	-0.72
Female Employment Rate <sup>3</sup>	36.4	44.3	47.7	+11.3	33.7	50.2	54.3	+20.6	53.3	58.0	60.5	+7.2	55.4	60.7	69.8	+14.4
Gender Equality Index <sup>4</sup>	-	-	63.8	-	-	-	73.7	-	-	-	73.5	-	-	-	68.6	-
							(14th)				(3rd)				(10th)	
	Denmark			Sweden			Denmark			Sweden						
	1990s	2000s	2010s	Change 1990–2010s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Change 1990–2010s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Change 1990–2010s				
Expenditure on WLBP	2.03	2.3	2.27	+0.24	1.67	1.31	1.57	-0.1	1.67	1.31	1.57	-0.1				
Expenditure on ALMP	1.75	1.35	1.38	-0.37	1.94	0.93	0.92	-1.03	1.94	0.93	0.92	-1.03				
Female Employment rate	69.3	72.0	69.6	+0.3	72.9	72.1	73.4	+0.5	72.9	72.1	73.4	+0.5				
Gender Equality Index	-	-	77.8 (2nd)	-	-	-	83.9 (1st)	-	-	-	83.9 (1st)	-				

**Note(s):** 1: The expenditure on WLBP is based on the expenditure for family services (in-kind benefits) as % of GDP (average values for each decade). Source: Eurostat

2: The expenditure on ALMP is calculated as a % of GDP (average values for each decade, for the 1990s we refer only to the late years). Source: Eurostat

3: Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat

4: Source: Authors' elaboration based on <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/>The data for 2021 Index is mostly from 2019

**Table 1.**  
Background Statistic:  
Expenditure on ASPs,  
Female Employment  
Rate and Gender  
Equality Index (1990–  
2010s), selected  
countries

The most remarkable differences are related to WLBP, with the Italian government failing to introduce any de-familiaizing measures capable of modifying the general nature of the family policy. Consequently, a shift from the male-breadwinner family model to a dual-earner one has not yet been completed (Saraceno, 2020).

On the contrary, Spain has increasingly invested in measures facilitating the rebalancing of the unpaid care workload between men and women (Moreno and Mari-Klose, 2014).

The diverging paths taken by Italy and Spain since the 2000s are quite evident when considering some data (see Table 1). Concerning WLBP, the Spanish expenditure on in-kind benefits increased, shifting from 0.18% to 0.78% of the GDP between the 1990s and the 2010s. On the contrary, Italy continues to lag behind, with only 0.2% of the GDP devoted to childcare and other family services. Even when considering ALMP, some changes can be observed. While Spain maintained a quite constant expenditure in this field in the last two decades, Italy reduced the financing (−0.17 pp).

This new policy path taken by Spain has clear effects in terms of gender equality. The female employment rate in Spain has dramatically improved (60% in 2020), while in Italy, it remains around 50%, with the level in the southern regions well below this value. Furthermore, if we consider the gender equality index, Spain records the highest values (73.7 out of 100 points in 2021), placing 6th in the ranking, while Italy is relegated at the bottom (14th, with a score of 63.8 points).

We are not arguing that Spain has gone Scandinavian. Differences with Nordic countries are still striking, and women still lag behind men in other key labor market indicators, such as the likelihood of being in temporary work and having an involuntary part-time job. The resources allocated in WLBP and ALMP are still lower than in Denmark or even in Germany. However, the Spanish positive trend toward prioritizing ASP, focusing on rebalancing gender inequalities, is straightforward. Spain has placed greater emphasis on the process of de-familialisation by investing in public childcare services, thus supporting female employment and encouraging fathers to share responsibilities toward small children (Guillén *et al.*, 2022). Italy, on the other hand, remains an adverse case for ASP.

### 3. Paths of social and political modernization

#### 3.1 Theoretical considerations

The comparative welfare state literature and party politics postulate that *politics affects policy* (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Huber and Stephens, 2001; Vlandas, 2013). Social policy can therefore be analyzed by scrutinizing party competition: political parties endorse specific policy agendas—especially during electoral campaigns—to gain consensus and expand their constituency. Once in office, eventually, they will try to implement their agenda.

An electoral return is, therefore, necessary for convincing political actors to promote ASP. If parties think that promoting ASP and gender equality may increase their consensus, they will be motivated to support these issues. On the contrary, these policies are unlikely to enter political agendas if parties think the gain is marginal—or even absent.

As studies show, contextual variables may impact party strategies to promote a specific policy agenda by raising or diminishing the potential electoral returns (e.g. Bonoli, 2013; Morgan, 2013; Blome, 2017). More specifically, when considering gendered ASP, a country's social and political modernization can incentivize or hinder parties to prioritize these policies openly. In other words, social and political modernization paths are expected to affect politics and, thus, indirectly, policy outcomes.

We conceive these paths as the diverse combination of three contextual factors: (1) the gender equality shift toward gender roles; (2) the reconfiguration of electors' policy preferences concerning ASP; (3) the change within the female electorate; and (4) gender representation.

Concerning the first variable, public opinion polls show that citizens' norms and values concerning family and gender roles have changed (e.g. León and Pavolini, 2014; Giuliani, 2022). Women have increasingly been portrayed as workers and not only as mothers. The process of social individualization and secularization witnessed since the 1970s in most Western countries has thus led to a reconfiguration of electors' social norms and values, more inclined to support gender equality (Inglehart, 1997). However, this shift has not occurred in the same way, and in some countries, a conservative vision of gender roles is still widespread.

A gender-equality shift concerning gender roles is expected to be followed by a reconfiguration of electors' preferences toward policies that *enable* such strategies to prevail. As shown by recent comparative analyses (Busemeyer, 2017), ASPs have been, in recent times, more largely supported by citizens, especially by women. Nevertheless, the support for ASPs is likely to vary according to the extent to which gender equality values have been endorsed.

Third, women's entry into the labor market has altered women's political mobilization. While in the Fordist era, housewives outnumbered working women, the situation was the opposite in the post-Fordist era. In most advanced economies, working women now represent the majority of the female party constituency, not only concerning the left-wing parties. Also, the right-wing increasingly supports measures that help reconcile paid work and care and policy interventions that enhance female employment (Inglehart and Norris, 2000; Giuliani, 2022). Hence, promoting gendered ASPs can be a way to attract women's consensus, expanding parties' electoral base. Clearly, working women's interests will be less relevant in countries with a lower female employment rate.

Finally, the presence of women in government is said to positively impact issues that may be *of interest* to women, including work–life balance and active labor market policies (e.g. Lovenduski and Norris, 2003). It follows that where politics has undergone a process of *feminization*, ASPs have more chances to enter the party agendas. On the contrary, the limited presence of women among policymakers and a traditionally *masculine* form of politics will discourage parties from prioritizing these issues.

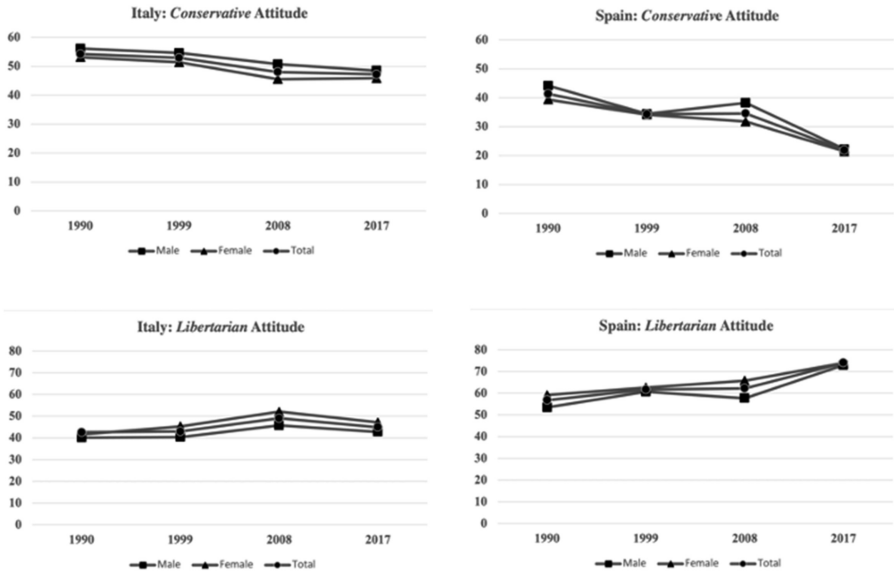
To summarize, the more a country has taken a modernized path, the more likely it will be for political parties to promote ASPs and especially gendered ASPs. On the contrary, a low level of modernization will hinder such possibility.

### 3.2 Different paths in Italy and Spain

As previously discussed, the Mediterranean countries resisted social and political modernization because of their traditionalist context. However, since the 2000s, social and political modernization paths in Spain and Italy have diverged. Spain has undertaken a clear, modernized path, while Italy has maintained a traditionalist approach.

Data from the European Values Survey (1990–2017) concerning gender roles in the labor market and the household clearly show that Spaniards have developed a much more egalitarian attitude than Italians over time (see Figure 1).

In Spain, the share of citizens holding conservative attitudes substantially decreased between the Early 1990s and the Late 2010s (–19.5% points, pp.), both for women (–18 pp.) and—even to a greater extent—for men (–22 pp.). In parallel, libertarian positions substantially scaled up (+17 pp.), with the gender gap being reduced in 2017 (+1 pp, compared to +5.7 pp in 1990). In other words, the social modernization path has proceeded fast in Spain. More importantly, it has involved both women and men, which has become much more supportive of gender equality in the labor market and at home. As the literature pointed out, Spaniards' realignment toward gender equality went in parallel with an acceleration of the process of secularization and a resulting weaker role of the Catholic Church in affecting citizens' values and influencing welfare policies (and politics) (León and Pavolini, 2014; Moreno and Mari-Klose, 2014).



**Figure 1.** Conservative and libertarian attitudes in Italy and Spain, early 1990s-Late 2010s

**Note(s):** The values in the figures indicate the share of Italians and Spaniards that display a conservative and libertarian attitude concerning gender role in the labor market and the household

**Source(s):** Authors' elaboration based on EVS

On the contrary, in Italy, the modernization process has proceeded at a significantly lower pace and still needs to be completed. Conservative positions declined over time to a minimal extent (-7 pp), and still, in the Late 2010s, almost half of the Italians displayed a traditionalist vision concerning gender roles. Consistently, libertarian attitudes increased only marginally in the last 3 decades, and the gap with Spain is striking: only 45% of Italians show a gender-equality position. Interestingly, the gender gap in Italy is much higher than in Spain, with women being more libertarian and less traditionalist than men. However, these values do not have to be overestimated. Compared to Spanish women, conservative attitudes are still quite widespread, even among Italian women (46 vs. 21.5%). Second, the gender gap points out that Italian men continue to lag in the social modernization process: at the end of the 2010s, still 48% of them display a conservative attitude, while only 42% can be defined libertarians.

The European Value Survey data are consistent with INVEDUC data (*Investing in Education in Europe: Attitudes, Politics and Policies*) regarding Italians and Spaniards' attitudes toward work-family balance measures (and more specifically, childcare) and ALMPs [1] (in this case, labor market and public employment programs) in the mid-2010s (Table 2).

First, while these policies are supported in both countries, they are sustained to a greater degree in Spain. Second, Spanish women tend to be more in favor than men of childcare services and ALMPs. More concretely, in Spain, a widespread libertarian attitude is associated with greater support for policies promoting female labor market participation. On the other hand, in Italy, a more widespread conservative attitude is correlated to a lower level of support for work-family balance and active labor market measures. Interestingly, women's support for ALMPs in both countries is greater than men's, suggesting that ALMPs can be an issue of specific interest to women.

The composition of the female electorate has taken a different path as well.

As Tables 3 and 4 show, in the mid-1990s, housewives outnumbered working women in both countries. In Spain, the share of working women in the female electorate at the national level was meager (22%). However, this picture has dramatically changed in the following decades. At the end of the 2010s, in Italy and Spain, working women represented the relative majority of the female electorate; however, in Spain, the level of change was significantly higher: the share of working women has increased by 25 pp, while in Italy, only by 7.8 pp. Furthermore, in Spain, the PSOE and PP have witnessed an impressive rise of working women within their constituency in parallel with the shrinking role of housewives.

Conversely, in Italy, the main—though declining—center-right party, Go Italy (FI), has increasingly lost working women’s support (–24.2), and its female constituency is largely represented by housewives and retired women. Coming to the main Italian center-left party, the Democratic Party (PD), even though the working women share in its female constituency has increased, it has been impressively lower than that displayed by the Spanish Left. Furthermore, working women are still outnumbered by retired women.

To summarize, in Spain, all political parties are now incentivized to promote gendered ASPs since the structure of the female electorate has profoundly changed, with working women being the most important electorate group. In Italy, this incentive is lower, especially for the Right but also for the Left, since the composition of the female electorate has undertaken a less radical change, and women not in the labor market still represent a powerful group.

Finally, the differences between Italy and Spain regarding ASPs and, more specifically, work-family reconciliation policies and gendered ALMPs can also be accounted for by considering women’s presence in politics.

Table 5 shows that historically, the share of women in Parliament has always been higher in Spain than in Italy.

A growing trend is visible for both countries, especially in the two more recent national elections. However, Italy continues to lag substantially behind Spain and to be some way off the top of the ranking of the countries with the highest percentage of the female members of parliament.

On the basis of this evidence, our main hypotheses revolve around two main points:

- H1. In Spain, the social and political modernization path positively impacts on the politics of gendered ASPs, thus incentivizing political parties to promote gendered ASPs—in parallel with gender equality—since the electoral returns are expected to be positive.
- H2. In Italy, social and political modernization is only a marginal phenomenon, and this negatively affects the politics of gendered ASPs. Parties have low incentives to promote gendered ASPs—in parallel with gender equality—since the electoral returns are expected to be meager.

	Question b) Expanding access to early childhood education and improving its quality			Question b) Expanding labor market and public employment programs (by scaling up taxes)		
	In favor (% agree)	Against (% disagree)	Gender gap “In favor”	In favor (% spending more)	Against (% spending less)	Gender gap “In favor”
Italy	78.9	15.5	–1.2	56.0	17.8	+1.19
Spain	92.6	4.7	+1.5	63.9	10.3	+3.6

Source(s): Authors’ elaboration based on INVEDUC, round 1, 2014

**Table 2.**  
Attitudes concerning  
Childcare and ALMPs  
(% In favor vs Against  
and gender gap [1]),  
mid 2010s

**Table 3.**  
Structure of the Female  
Electorate, Italy. Mid  
1990s, Late 2010s and  
change

	Mid 1990s			Late 2010s			Change (pp)		
	Working Women	Housewives	Retired	Working women	Housewives	Retired	Working women	Housewives	Retired
National Female Electorate	34.5%	36.9%	15%	42.2%	14.8%	27%	+7.7	-22,1	+12
Mainstream Right (FI)	36.6%	43.9%	10.6%	12.4%	28.4%	44.9%	-24.2	-15.5	+34.3
Mainstream Left (PDS/ PD) <sup>1</sup>	31.1%	34%	13.8%	36.5%	9.0%	42.9%	+5.4	-25	+29.1

**Source(s):** Authors' elaboration based on EES and ISSP. For the mid 1990s we relied on ISSP 1996 "Role of the Government". For the late 2010s, we used ESS8  
1: In the 1990s the Italian mainstream left party was the Party of the Left Democrats (PDS), which, at the end of the 2000s, merged with another, Catholic-oriented center-left party and established the Democratic Party (PD)

	Mid 1990s			Late 2010s			Change (pp)				
	Working women	Housewives	Retired	Other	Working women	Housewives	Retired	Other	Working women	Housewives	Retired
National Female Electorate	22.7%	41.3%	18.9%	17.0%	47.7%	16.3%	14.2%	20.7%	+25	-25	-4.7
Mainstream Right (PP)	21.2%	43.6%	21.6%	13.6%	37.1%	26.7%	20.0%	14.0%	+15.9	-16.9	-1.6
Mainstream Left (PSOE) <sup>1</sup>	16.6%	45.5%	22.8%	15.2%	45.3%	19.4%	16.2%	18.7%	+28.7	-26.1	-6.6

**Source(s):** Authors' elaboration based on ISSP. For the mid 1990s we relied on ISSP 1996 "Role of the Government". For the late 2010s, we used ISSP 2017 "Social Networks".

**Table 4.**  
Structure of the Female Electorate, Spain. Mid 1990s, Late 2010s and change

**Table 5.**  
Women elected to  
national Parliaments  
(%) 1990–2010s

	Parliament majority	Ranking	Lower or single house	Upper house or senate
<i>a) Italy</i>				
1996	center-left	43	11.1%	8%
2001	center-right	65	9.8%	7.7%
2006	center-left	60	17.3%	13.7%
2008	center-right	52	21.1%	18.0%
2013	center-left	34	28.4%	27.0%
2018	Mixed	29	35.7%	35.3%
<i>b) Spain</i>				
1996	center-right	14	24.6%	13.3%
2000	center-right	12	28.3%	22.8%
2004	center-left	7	36%	23.2%
2008	center-left	9	36.3%	28.3%
2011	center-right	18	36.0%	33.5%
2015	Mixed	14	40.0%	39.2%
2016	center-right	18	39.1%	38.0%
2019 (Nov.)	center-left	13	44%	39%

**Source(s):** Authors' elaboration based on Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), no available data before 1996

#### 4. Method [2]

To investigate the *politics* of gendered ASPs, we rely on a content analysis of party manifestos. The decision to focus on party programs—which have a long-standing tradition in the comparative party politics literature (i.e. [Budge and Farlie, 1983](#))—rather than on concrete government reforms is twofold. First, our research considers the phase that precedes policy implementation and aims at understanding what happens during the electoral campaign when competing policy agendas are debated. Analyzing party manifestos appears to be the best strategy to detect to what extent gendered ASPs have been politicized. Second, investigating party programs allows us to consider all main political parties, not only those in office.

From a theoretical perspective, the content analysis is embedded in the *issue-saliency* theory. According to this theory, parties emphasize different issues in their campaign: the more a party emphasizes an issue, the more likely it is to gain electoral support from those who consider that issue crucial. Therefore, we would expect parties to focus on ASPs in their manifestos to different degrees. Following the literature ([Busemeyer, 2017](#)), we consider ASPs and gender equality in general as valence issues, that is, issues considered positive by the whole electorate. Explicit opposition to ASPs in party manifestos is very unlikely. Therefore, the *sentiment* of the parties' position is always intended as positive. We can also conceive saliency as a proxy to detect *policy support*, ranging from *no support* to *high support*.

The content analysis strategy resembles that of [Enggist and Pinggera \(2022\)](#) and [Giuliani \(2023b\)](#). To identify the extent to which parties debate gendered ASPs, we recorded data as quasi-sentences from the Comparative Manifesto Project Database, CMP ([Lehmann et al., 2023](#)). The quasi-sentences were assigned to two Domains: *Domain A: Gender Equality*; *Domain B: ASPs*. Domain A includes general references to gender equality. Domain B is split into three subdomains: *Domain B1: ALMPs*; *Domain B2: Gendered ALMPs*; and *Domain B3: WLBP*s. To properly differentiate political and national differences in parties' endorsement of ASPs, each subdomain was furtherly divided into subcategories according to the main policy programs commonly identified by the literature.

The third step quantifies the empirical results to graphically show how positions differ across parties and countries. We assigned 5 scores: 0 for no support, 1 for Low Support, 2 for

Medium Support; 3 for Medium/High Support; 4 for High/very High Support. We also constructed a “National Party System Score” for each Domain and Sub-Domain, calculated as the average support of the national parties.

Regarding the party selection, we have focused on the mainstream political actors—both on the center-right and the center-left—and those generally considered the leading *new challengers*. The party selection for Spain includes the People’s Party (PP), the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE), Citizens (Cs), and We Can. While for Italy: Go Italy (FI), the Democratic Party (PD), the League, and Five Stars (M5S).

In terms of time frame, we adopted a *long-range* perspective, thus investigating the elections of the last decade. We, therefore, scrutinized three electoral rounds for Italy (2008, 2013 and 2018) and four for Spain (2008, 2011, 2015 and 2019). Party positions have been calculated as an average of their scores in the different national elections. The decision to consider the mean position in the last ten years is motivated by the fact that modernization paths are social phenomena that take time to settle and thus influence politics. In this sense, it would not be useful to adopt a *short-range* strategy of analysis, that is, assessing parties’-shifts between temporally close electoral rounds. By using average scores in the last decade, we can obtain a good approximation of party positions without them being overly affected by contingent (e.g. economic crisis) but not lasting changes. Such a *long-range* perspective is widely used in the literature (e.g. [Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2015](#)).

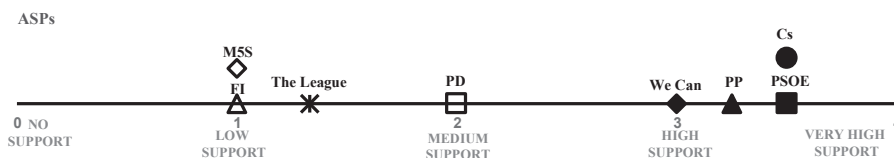
## 5. Empirical analysis

The figures presented below show the content analysis results of party manifestos in Italy and Spain between the late 2000s and the late 2010s. The empirical analysis reveals a clear difference between the two countries concerning the parties’ support of ASPs, especially in terms of gendered ASPs.

[Figure 2](#) shows that ASPs are baked to a high/very high degree by all Spanish political parties belonging to the Left or the Right. On the contrary, in Italy, the support is very low. Only the main Italian center-left party—the PD—displays higher support than the other parties. However, the level of support is only medium. Furthermore, the PD endorsed ASPs to a higher degree only recently—in the 2018 elections—while previously, its support was minimal. The distance between the PD and its Spanish counterpart, the PSOE, is remarkable.

Let’s now analyze more into details the parties’ positions in all three main subdimensions—that is, ALMPs, Gendered ALMPs and WLBP— and in some selected subcategories [\[3\]](#).

As regards ALMPs ([Figure 3](#)), the difference between Italy and Spain is striking. In Spain, only We Can—a new challenger from the Radical Left—shows moderate support for ALMPs, while the other Spanish parties strongly uphold them, including the PP and the new challenger located at the center-right, Cs. The support remains meager in Italy, even if we consider the PD. Furthermore, in Spain, all parties—except for We Can—support upskilling measures, first of all, training—while this is not the case when considering Italy ([Figure 4](#)). In



**Note(s):** ASPs = ALMPs + Gendered ALMPs + WLBP

**Source(s):** Authors’ own creation

**Figure 2.**  
Party support to ASPs,  
late 2000s-late 2010s

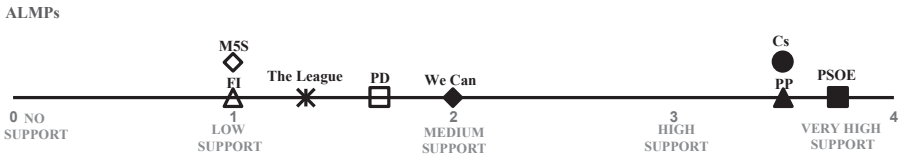
other words, in Spain, ALMPs were mainly endorsed in the parties' electoral programs as a social investment strategy aimed at improving workers' skills and, consequently, increasing their employability.

At least at the partisan level, this *upskilling shift* marks a significant break with the past patterns of labor market policy, characterized by cash transfers and job protection measures for the insiders. In Italy, this shift did not happen: upskilling remains mostly overlooked.

As gendered ALMPs are concerned, they are not much debated in the parties' agenda in Spain and Italy. In other words, the percentage of quasi-sentences related to gendered ALMPs is the lowest—on average, 4% in Italy and 6.3% in Spain. Nevertheless, in Spain, the partisan support for gendered ALMPs remains, overall, medium-high—except for We Can—especially during the elections held at the onset of the economic crisis (Figure 5).

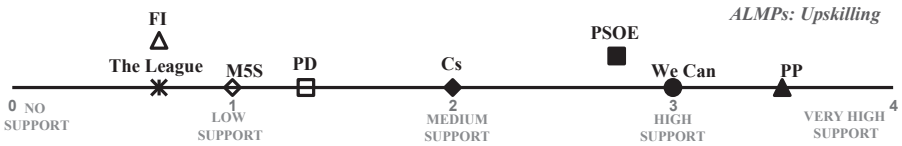
In particular, the PSOE endorsed activation measures dedicated explicitly to women. In Italy, the PD is the only political actor that included gendered ALMPs in its agenda, especially as a strategy for incentivizing the female employment rate in the South. On the contrary, FI (Go Italy), the M5S (Five Stars), and the League show no support. Nevertheless, the PD refers to gendered ALMPs mostly in general terms, not specifying the kind of activation programs to be implemented. On the contrary, the Spanish PP shows (medium) support for human capital investment for working women (upskilling) and tax rebates for hiring women (job subsidies). The PSOE, on the contrary, records (medium/low) support for employment assistance.

**Figure 3.**  
Party support to  
ALMPs, late 2000s-  
late 2010s



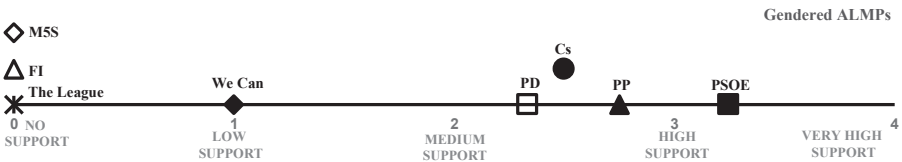
Source(s): Authors' own creation

**Figure 4.**  
Party support to  
ALMPs: Upskilling,  
late 2000s-late 2010s



Source(s): Authors' own creation

**Figure 5.**  
Party support to  
gendered ALMPs, late  
2000s-late 2010s

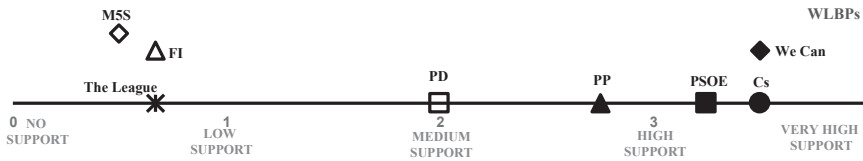


Source(s): Authors' own creation

Finally, even when considering WLBP, the differences between Italy and Spain are remarkable (Figure 6). Spanish parties strongly or very strongly support conciliation policies, especially childcare (see Figure 7)—particularly the PSOE and Cs—and paternity leave/daddy quota—especially We Can and Cs. Even the PP, though to a lower degree, seems to have endorsed entirely the WLBP consensus that emerged in Spain, at least at the electoral campaign level. This is not the case for Italy. Support for WLBP is meager, except for the PD, which, in the last elections, exhibited higher support for childcare measures, but a scarce interest in paternity leave/shared parental leave. However, the distance between the PD and the PSOE is remarkable. Conciliation measures are not a priority in the PD’s agenda. Women are primarily portrayed as mothers and then as workers, and the government’s goal is to help women find a better work–family balance. Caring is thus implicitly considered an exclusive task of women.

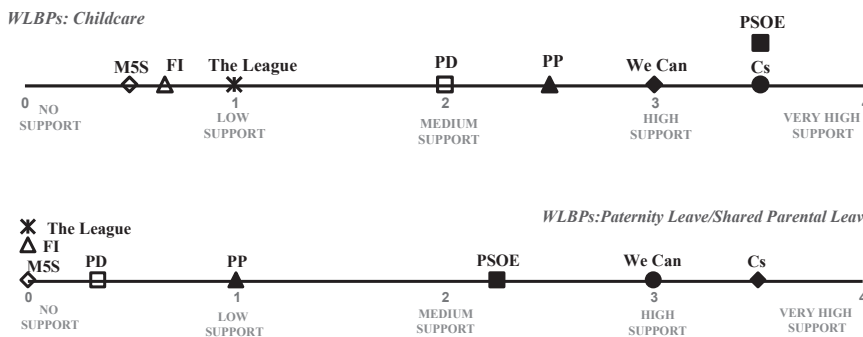
On the contrary, in the PSOE’s electoral manifestos and those of the other parties, conciliation is an issue involving the whole family, that is, both fathers and mothers. Women are not portrayed just as mothers but also as workers, like men, with a job career that needs to be developed and sustained. In this sense, conciliation measures turn out to be policies for sharing family responsibilities between men and women.

The national differences in the politics of gendered ASPs can be further observed when considering Figure 8, where we plotted party support for ASPs on one axis and gender equality on the other. Spanish parties are all located in the upper-right quadrant, showing strong support for ASPs and gender equality. On the contrary, the main Italian parties are placed in the lower-left quadrant, showing weak support for both policies. The PD is located in a more in-between position but still very far from the Spanish parties. This figure suggests that ASP promotion is associated with an endorsement of gender equality. When the “female” issue is considered extremely important, parties tend to support policies that scale down inequalities also in the labor market and the household.



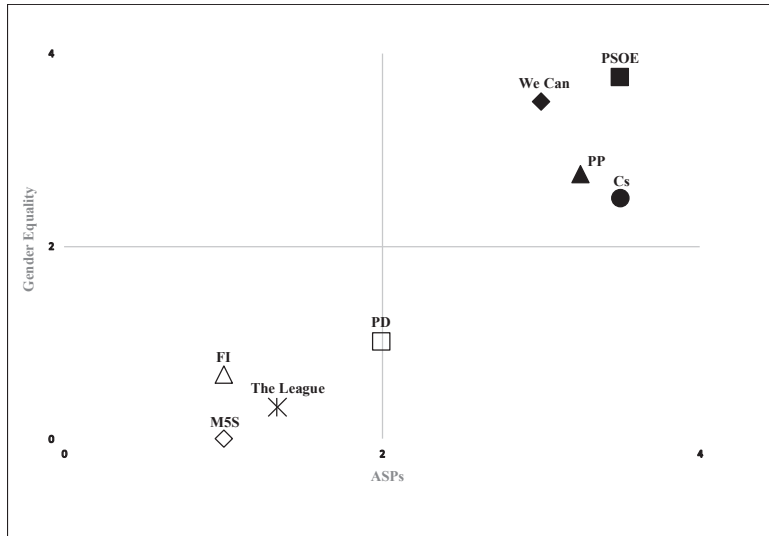
**Figure 6.** Party support to WLBP, late 2000s-late 2010s

Source(s): Authors’ own creation



**Figure 7.** Party support to WLBP: Childcare and paternity leave/shared parental leave, late 2000s-late 2010s

Source(s): Authors’ own creation



**Figure 8.** Party support for ASPs and gender equality, late 2000s-late 2010s

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Finally, [Figure 9](#) summarizes the results of the empirical analyses. The Spanish party system overall has loosened its ties with the Mediterranean legacy, by endorsing gender-oriented policies in the direction of both conciliation and active labor market measures. In Italy, on the contrary, there has not been any real change: ASPs—especially from a gender perspective—continue to be relegated to the bottom of the political agenda and are entirely neglected in some cases.

The empirical analysis confirms our hypothesis. In Spain, social and political modernization has positively impacted the politics of gendered ASP. Parties are incentivized to promote gendered ASPs—in parallel with strong support for gender equality—since the electoral returns are positive as a result of the radical changes in the values of the population and the transformations of the female parties' constituency ([Moreno and Marí-Klose, 2014](#)). On the contrary, in Italy, since social and political modernization, especially in terms of gender equality, is far from being a sharing issue, parties have low incentives to promote gendered ASPs and gender equality. Electoral returns are indeed not considered sufficient by the Italian parties to make a U-turn in their agendas.

The analysis also suggests that *politics matters*. The different path undertaken by Spain and Italy in terms of gendered ASPs seems to be affected by a divergent dynamic. In this regard, the analysis triggers a reflection concerning the partisan politics of ASPs. There are evident differences between the two countries at the opposing ends of the political divide.



**Figure 9.** Spanish and Italian party system support to ASPs

Source(s): Authors' own creation

The leading left-wing party in Spain, the PSOE, has prioritized ASPs as part of a broader *gendered strategy*. For the PSOE, significantly since the leadership of Zapatero, the search for working women's votes has helped offset the erosion of a shrinking male working-class without alienating it. Indeed, the strong endorsement for ASPs has helped to unify the "labor" issue (historically a preserve of the left) and "gender equality," a more recent postmaterialist issue for the Libertarian Left. In other words, during the electoral campaign, the PSOE endorsed a recommodification strategy strongly framed from a gender perspective. This strategy was influenced by the Third Way approach (Giddens, 2000) and had a threefold goal: first, to maintain the labor issue at the heart of their program; secondly, to adopt financially sustainable measures strongly fostered by the European Union; and third, to appeal to the growing outsider constituency, primarily women (see also, Morel *et al.*, 2012).

On the contrary, in Italy, the PD continues to be more reluctant to consider these policies—and, more in general, *gender*—as an issue of primary importance. The slightly gender-friendly environment has not encouraged the PD to prioritize strategies for attracting working women. Furthermore, the Italian Left comprises at least two different factions, one more secularized, the other strongly linked to the Catholic Church and its traditions. This means that the PD must balance libertarian and conservative positions, with the latter very often prevailing. The changes witnessed during the 2018 general election, emphasizing work–family conciliation measures, represented only a partial reconfiguration of the party's core ideology. Special attention was paid to transfer-oriented measures, less to public services, and de-familialization interventions in this specific policy field. Furthermore, priority was given to labor market deregulation and the extension of unemployment benefits, while ALMPs were not considered an important topic, especially in terms of pursuing a greater gender balance.

Such differences are also visible when the center-right of the political spectrum is considered. In Spain, the PP has embraced ASPs and gender equality, at least in theory. The new libertarian environment and the PSOE's electoral success in the 2000s have influenced its partisan strategy. Like other center-right parties in Western Europe, the PP has shifted to less conservative positions in this policy area and has started to compete for working women's votes. Furthermore, the party has exploited the electoral ductility of ALMPs. Indeed, while these policies benefit the outsiders, their recommodification objectives are also supported by business interests, which are a key constituency for the PP. It does not mean that differences with the PSOE have disappeared. Once in office, the PP implemented some retrenchment measures, cutting, for example, childcare expenditure (León and Pavolini, 2014). However, a paradigmatic shift—a return to familialism—did not happen.

In Italy, the declining right-wing party Forza Italia (Go Italy) maintains a very conservative position and has no real incentive to embrace egalitarian ideas. A conservative environment and a hesitant center-left reinforced the traditional positions of the center-right on female employment and, more in general, on gender roles.

Finally, if we consider the new challengers, it is interesting to note that the M5S (Five Stars) in Italy and We Can in Spain—two parties that, to a certain extent, share a similar populist background—have adopted different stances. While they place very little support on ALMPs, We Can strongly champion gender equality and WLBP, while the M5S totally neglects such issues. Similarly, even Cs—a liberal party that challenged the PP's hegemony on the Right pole—has embraced ASPs. On the contrary, the Italian Northern League—the most important Radical Right Party in the 2010s—overlooked these issues. Ultimately, in Spain, the appearance of the new challengers has further reinforced the shift toward pro-ASP positions. In Italy, on the other hand, the Lega and the M5S's orientation regarding gender issues and ASPs do not contribute to a renewal of the policy landscape.

## 6. Conclusions

This article has investigated the divergent patterns in Spain and Italy regarding gendered ASPs, the consequent differentiation of the Southern countries, and the weakening of a homogeneous social and labor market policy regime. By analyzing the politics of gendered ASPs, we have tried to demonstrate how party politics dynamics—influenced by the different routes of social and political modernization—have evolved in different ways in the two countries, affecting policy outcomes.

This article has shown that gendered ASPs are supported very differently by the Spanish and Italian parties. While in Spain, all political parties have strongly supported (gendered) ALMPs and WLBP, this is not the case for the Italian parties, which mostly overlooked these policies and displayed only medium/low support. Broadly speaking, while gender equality is a widely shared goal for the Spanish parties, this is not a priority for the Italian ones. The analysis, therefore, suggests that *politics matters*: the different relevance assumed by ASPs in Spain and Italy is a consequence of the divergent party politics dynamics. A sort of gendered ASPs consensus has emerged in Spain—at least at the electoral campaign level—and has incentivized parties, once in office, to promote these policies—though setbacks are possible, as the case of the PP demonstrates. The opposite situation can be seen in Italy, and all parties have not prioritized these policies when in government.

The research has also displayed that the specific path of social and political modernization is an important variable that alters party support for gendered ASPs. Social and political modernization has sped up in Spain in the last two decades. Parties have been encouraged to foster gendered ASPs since the positive electoral returns have been considered positive. On the contrary, Italy continues to lag behind in social and political modernization. Parties are thus less motivated to uphold gendered ASPs. Electoral returns are insufficient to convince parties to make a *U-turn* in their policy agendas.

Our findings trigger two final research implications in both practice and society regarding the changes within the Southern European social and labor market policy regime.

First, the stability of the Southern regime is associated with the persistence of *familialism* and gender *dualization* in the labor market. It follows that the more a government promotes de-familialization, the more a country moves away from the traditional Southern regime. At the same time, de-familialization has substantial *gendered* implications: by unburdening women from caring tasks, it boosts gender equality in more conservative-oriented societies. Furthermore, *familialism* is related to *dualization* since women in Southern European countries are mostly labor market outsiders. If de-familialization reduces the burden of caregiving tasks on women, their opportunities to participate in the labor market increase actively.

Furthermore, active labor market policies may offer fundamental tools for enhancing their employability, especially concerning women with low levels of education. In other words, how a country promotes gender equality via ASPs can be considered a key dimension to assess a *regime change* within the Mediterranean cluster. From both a theoretical and empirical perspective, adopting a gender perspective in analyzing social and labor market policies of the Southern countries seems to be essential to detect more or less paradigmatic shifts.

Second, from a party politics perspective, the Southern Model questions, to a certain extent, the Power Resources Theory, which identifies the Left parties as the leading promoters of the growth of the welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The Spanish case suggests a slightly different perspective. In the post-Fordist era, while it is true that Left parties have an important role as *initiators*, their role is no longer sufficient for a fundamental policy change to occur. The emergence of a new policy consensus shared by the main political parties belonging to the right and left spectrum is needed. In Spain, it was the PSOE to initiate the strengthening of a new gendered ASPs consensus, but although the PP, once in office, has

promoted some retrenchment measures, it did not uphold a real step back in terms of gender equality and ASPs. In other terms, the Spanish Right did not reverse the path started by the Left since it was not electorally convenient. At the same time, the new challengers, We Can and Cs reinforced this new policy legacy. In other terms, the *initiator function* of the Left is necessary but not sufficient to trigger a *regime change*, while the *enabling or consenting* role of the other parties—especially those from the center-right pole—is crucial. In practical terms, the presence of a less traditionalist center-right increasingly appears to be a necessary condition for the development of ASPs—and in particular, for WLBP. In this sense, Italy remains an *adverse* case: nor the PD has acted so far as an initiator, much less the other parties have included these policies in their agendas. Put differently, the political conditions for a regime change are not present in Italy.

Future works could expand the comparative analysis by integrating other Southern countries and evaluating the relationship between party politics and policy change, considering gender issues as a decisive aspect of regime transformation. New classifications and more significant differentiations among southern European countries may emerge.

### Notes

1. Contrary to social attitudes, no diachronic data concerning policy preferences are available for Italy and Spain.
2. For more specific info, see the Online [Appendix](#).
3. For the party positions concerning all the main sub-categories and for illustrative examples of party statements in their party manifestos, see the Online [Appendix](#).

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**Appendix**

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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