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Political polarization and activism of female political activists

Polarizzazione Politica e attivismo delle donne militanti

Abstract

In Europe we have assisted in the last years to a growing political polarization. Intolerance and rigidity characterize both sides of the political spectrum. Encouraging a dialogue among individuals of different ideologies is essential for a well-functioning democracy. *Aims* in this preliminary study we wanted to explore the differences in far-left and far-right wing female political activism, the motivations that drive political participation and how political activism today differs from the past. *Methods*: forty young female activists in extremist left and right-wing movements participated to the research, data were collected by using in-depth interviews. *Results* our research shows that both far-left wing and far-right wing activists seem to be motivated more by idealistic values and not by gaining more power or beginning a political career. Far-right activists give more importance to the wellbeing of the local community, while far-left activists to worldwide issues.

Keywords: political participation, political activism, extremism, women

Abstract

In Europa abbiamo assistito negli ultimi anni ad una crescita della polarizzazione politica. L'intolleranza e la rigidità caratterizzano entrambi i lati dello spettro politico. Incoraggiare un dialogo tra individui di diverse ideologie è essenziale per una democrazia ben funzionante. *Obiettivi*: in questo studio preliminare abbiamo voluto esplorare le differenze nell'attivismo politico femminile dell'estrema sinistra e dell'estrema destra, le motivazioni che guidano la partecipazione politica e il modo in

cui l'attivismo politico oggi differisce dal passato. *Metodi*: quaranta giovani donne attiviste di movimenti estremisti di sinistra e di destra hanno partecipato alla ricerca, i dati sono stati raccolti utilizzando interviste in profondità. *Risultati*: dalla nostra ricerca emerge che sia le attiviste di estrema sinistra che quelle di estrema destra sembrano essere motivate maggiormente da valori idealistici che dalla prospettiva di avere maggiore potere o iniziare una carriera politica. Le attiviste di estrema destra danno più importanza al benessere della comunità locale, mentre le attiviste di estrema sinistra sono più interessate ai problemi globali.

Parole Chiave: partecipazione politica, l'attivismo politico, estremismo, donne

Introduction

A significant issue facing our society is political polarization and increasing political extremism. Americans in 2018, after Donald Trump's election in 2016, are more politically divided than ever. Also in Europe we have assisted in the last years to a growing political polarization. Growing poverty, less stable employment conditions and economic stagnation fuels Europe extremism (Spannus, 2017). West Austria almost saw the Austrian Freedom Party gain the Presidency, the National Front is making great political strides in France. Additionally, the Golden Dawn has been a strong force in Greece and in the last German election the radical right wing AFD has entered parliament as the third-largest party. Authoritarian Populism Index, that studies the phenomenon of populism, recently analysed the results of all European elections from 1980 to today. There was an impressive growth of the vote of rightist nationalists in the last decade, but there is also a certain return of the radical left that had lost many of his votes between 2008 and 2012 (European Policy Information Center, 2017).

The radical left in 1980 was 10%, then declined to 3.7% in 2010. However, in the last seven years, the trend is on the rise: it is now 6.3%. Greece, Cyprus and Spain are the strongest states, three countries heavily affected by the economic crisis. The extreme right trend was totally different: in 1982 was 1% at European level and today it is over 12%. (European Policy Information Center, 2017). Extremist parties appeal to those

most likely to see the world in black and white. The recent rise of power of far-right and far-left political groups is dangerous, since they are less willing to compromise and have gained more influence in central parties (Funke, Schularick & Trebesk, 2015). This increases the risk that several countries will become more difficult to govern.

During the last three decades there has been an increasing in extremism. Despite this extremism continues to be perceived as predominantly a “male problem”. This is highly problematic, as it hinders an accurate perspective on the influence and activities of far-right wing and far-left wing women activists and therefore impedes the development of effective counter-strategies to deal with the increase of political polarization. There is a clear need for a gender-sensitive approach in all strategies and actions to prevent extremism and decrease polarization.

Aims and Methods

Using a qualitative approach (in-depth interviews) this study aims to enhance the understanding of what brings women to begin and continue to actively participate in far-left and far-right political movements; how they perceive the activists of opposite political movements; if they have perceived gender differences in their political activism and if political activism today differs from the past. Forty female activists participated in the research (mean age 39), (33% from 18 to 30, 17% from 31 to 40, 37% from 41 to 50, 50+ 13%). Of the female activists 50% were part of far-right political movements: (40% Post Fascist Italian Social Movement, 13% Far-Right Political Party Forza Nuova, 13% Neo Fascist Party Tricolor Flame, 27% Italian Movement Casa Pound, 7% Skinhead Movement). Also the far-left activists participated to several movements (47% Communist Rifondation Movements, 20% Critical Left, 13% Left European Party, 20% far-left political maverick. After the first contacts had been established snowball sampling was used to recruit the other participants.

Data analysis was guided by content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After a set of in-depth interviews, interviewers read through their written notes. Transcript texts were prepared and coded for recurring themes independently by two analysts. Coding themes were conducted by drawing upon the domains from the interview guidelines and emergent information from the empirical data. Discrepancies in results between two

analysts were discussed and resolved by the research team, who met frequently during the whole data collection and analysis process.

Results

With respect to our first area of research on motivation for becoming an activist of the far- right wing, 40% of activists interviewed declared that they began because they wanted to be anti-conformist and 20% for Passion.

During my adolescence, the clash between left and right was very strong. I felt drawn to what was less fashionable, the one that was described as the worst, so the curiosity to find out why it was the worst actually made me fall in love with it.

The choice: during my years of University everybody was on the left side and I chose to be on the right and I was happy to be on that side.

Regarding the motivation for becoming an activist of the left wing 40% of activists interviewed mentioned participating to active student groups and 33% mentioned motives such pursuing justice, and collective well-being.

My path started with a high school militancy at Mamiani. The occupation lasted for a month and a half, it ended with a violent police intervention to which 90 complaints were followed.

I have always conceived the world as unfair. In Junior High School when I watched the news from the tv I thought it was not right. I cannot do nothing if I see injustices and that people are starving.

On their motivation for continuing to be a political activists 33% of the far-right wing interviewees said it was for their sense of community and 20% because they believed in a mission

It's a life style when you begin, you cannot change.

Seeing the community of Casa Pound more rooted in the territory, seeing the community grow and slowly acquire more credibility in the eyes of people

The fact of believing in a battle, I do not know what all we do is actually going to change the world. Even if the world does not change, I hope the world does not change us

Of left far-wing activists that participated to the research, 60% declared that their motivation to continue be a political activist is fighting injustices.

My aim is to free society from the oppressions, from forms of exploitation such as capitalism or patriarchy. I am a political activist because I feel the need to live in a better society than this one

Leaving now the left, which in so much trouble, would be acting like a coward

I always want to hope to do something good in life and especially for others, as much as I can

On main difficulties in their life as an activist 26% of far-right wing respondents perceived a loophole between real problems and party ideology and 13% of them lamented they had to do sacrifices for balancing work life family life and activism.

It's hard when you feel betrayed by the choices of the leaders of the party

When you enter the parties you become aware of the discrepancy between the leaders and simple activists

Of the far-left wing activists interviewed 33% said that the main difficulties were balancing work and family life and 13% underline the fights with other members of their groups.

It's very hard to be a political activist: you wake up at 6am, you accompany the children to school, you go to work and then around 6pm at the Party. I have mostly paid babysitters to do politics

When I fought with other activists of my party I suffered a lot and thought of leaving the party. In our political movement political differences, become personal differences. I suffered a lot, when I realized that political conflicts among us, influenced our personal relations

With respect to differences between female and male activists, 40% of far-right activists that participated to the research maintain that is much harder for female activists, 13% underline that female and male activists have a different role in the party.

...Is always been different for women activists. A woman must always demonstrate in any occasion to be up to the job, all her actions are passed to the microscope.

The role of woman is not equal but complementary. Women cannot assume roles that are equal to men

Considering differences between and male and female 47% of far-left activists respondents underline that there is still discrimination against women among political activists and 13% maintain that women activists pay more attention to relations than men.

The discrimination with respect to women is still present, you can see it even in small things, like the companion who assumes that the office of the party has to be cleaned by women

For years I have been in meetings where I was the only woman I used only to listen for years, it was very hard for me to begin to talk during the meetings

They teased me because during the evening meeting I called the babysitter to see how kids were doing... they instead had their wives to take care of their family

Women activists build more trusting relationships, they build stronger personal relations

When questioned on how they see female activists of opposite political area 26% of far-right wing respondents believe far-left activists are less feminine and 26% maintain they don't accept that women naturally have different roles.

The difference is, first of all, a difference in femininity in the sense that we have always been anti-feminist and I have never been ashamed of being a woman, 100% a woman! In the left there has always been emphasis on the levelling of roles

Left wing women have a serious problem in accepting to be a woman and they do anything to show they are like a man

They don't accept their role of women, they have to arrive every time to same level of men

On how they perceive female activists of opposite parties 33% of far-left wing interviewees said that as activist they are all the same, 20% that they did not know and 13% that they may encounter a more hostile environment in their party than far-left wing activists.

I knew only few, far-right ones, one in Puglia, that could have been even left-wing oriented, she was full of passion for politics

There are no differences between left and right militant women. They give more importance to their appearance, but in volunteering we are all equal

I think, but maybe I'm wrong, that it is more easy to be a far-left women activist because right wing movements are usually dominated by male chauvinists

The aims are different naturally, but the activities are the same: participate to manifestations, attaching posters, and distributing leaflets

We also investigated if they perceived a difference between past and present activism. Sixty per cent of the far-left activists respondents and 40% of the far right activist interviewed maintain that in the past activism was better, more passionate. There was a stronger belief of wanting to change the world. Example from far-left wing:

Young people are no longer willing to devote their whole life to political activism, the generations of the 1960s and 70s thought they would change the world. Young activist today are disillusioned, they volunteer but they mostly try to live well their lives.

Example from far-right wing:

Yesterday they believed more, they had faith, their beliefs were their life.

With respect to what could a party do to increase participation 26% of far-right wing activists that participated to the research believe the Party has to listen more to activists.

They have to listen more to the opinions of activists that know the issues of the community and don't just use them for leaflets and parade!

On the same issue 26% of far-left wing respondents propose experimenting new forms of participation, 13% understanding more common basic problems and 13% helping people believing in a better future.

I think that we need to experience new forms of democracy to be together among organizations and within organizations. Internet can be a new way to foster political activism.

The party should start speaking in another way, being less demagogical and trying to understand the issues peoples live.

The party should entice young people to believe in a better future.

Conclusions

Our research confirms that it's harder for women of both far-right wing and far-left wing to participate actively in politics and reach powerful positions in a party (Carli & Eagly, 2001) due to persisting gender discrimination (Folke & Rickne, 2016).

From the analysis of our interviews it emerges that both left wing and right wing activists seem to be motivated more by idealistic values and not by gaining more power or beginning a political career. These data confirm in part previous research that have emphasized that women participate to politics more for passion (Francescato, Mebane & Vecchione, 2015; Mebane, Sorace & Vecchione, 2006). However while far-left activists motivations to participate are more related to solve worldwide issues (changing the world, fighting against forms of exploitation everywhere in the world, struggling against pollution, opposing wars) confirming previous studies (Caprara, Vecchione, Schwartz et al. 2017) that show the left wing voters have higher universalism values (universalism values call for promoting the welfare of others, they express concern for the weak, those most likely to suffer from market driven policies). Our results highlight that female far-right activists, instead tend to value more a sense of belonging to a community and they focus more on promoting the growth of their local communities (e.g. understanding the issues and solving the problems of their territorial neighbourhoods). A limitation of this study is that the numbers of activist were relatively small, future research should further develop and confirm these initial findings. Further research should investigate if extreme male activists also actively participate to politics mostly for idealistic values.

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TEMA

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