

Representation Behind Closed Doors: The Effect of Electing Women Mayors on Domestic Violence *

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Abstract

Extensive research has shown that electing women can positively impact the delivery of various public goods, such as health and education. However, little is known about the influence of electing women mayors on private or household issues with significant social implications, such as domestic violence. Using administrative data from Chile, we analyze whether electing women mayors affects reports of domestic violence against women. Employing a difference-in-differences design, we find an increase in reports made by women in domestic violence situations approximately four years after the election of a woman mayor. Notably, we find no effect on domestic violence cases directly identified by the police (rather than reported by citizens), suggesting that the observed increase reflects a rise in reporting rather than in actual cases. We explore potential mechanisms and provide suggestive evidence related to substantive representation, such as women mayors implementing programs that facilitate the reporting of violence.

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1 Introduction

In recent decades, women’s representation in government has steadily increased, encouraging scholars to investigate the specific effects and outcomes of electing women leaders on political behavior and policy initiatives. According to the United Nations, women occupy 26.5% of seats in national parliaments globally, marking an 11% rise since 1997 ([United Nations, 2023](#)). With women holding a significant—albeit insufficient—share of political offices worldwide, multiple studies have found a positive effect of electing women representatives at the national and sub-national levels on various political outcomes ([Wängnerud, 2009](#)). This research agenda has focused primarily on effects related to publicly observed issues, such as allocated budgets for women’s and children’s healthcare, education, women’s political involvement, and violence targeting underrepresented groups ([Vega and Firestone, 1995](#); [Bratton and Ray, 2002](#); [Taylor-Robinson and Heath, 2003](#); [Funk and Philips, 2019](#); [Wen, 2021](#)).

However, women politicians may also influence women’s representation in private or household issues, where women are disproportionately affected, such as acts of domestic violence or inequitable divisions of labor. Many examples exist of policies or programs to prevent violence against women that were promoted by women politicians.¹ Moreover, studies highlight women activists and representatives prioritizing such programs ([Mackay, 2010](#); [Hearn et al., 2016](#)). Despite these efforts, there is a lack of evidence about the effects of such policies, leaving domestic violence understudied due to its private nature.

Domestic violence is private in the sense that it occurs in domestic settings, such as marriages or cohabitation, but it is a social problem with public consequences. Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological, meaning women are disadvantaged both

¹For example, Bulgarian MP Nadezhda Yordanova proposed changes to legislation on domestic violence protection following an extreme case of intimate partner violence ([Free Europe, 2023](#)). In the US, North Carolina State Senator Lisa Barnes sponsored a bill to extend the statute of limitations for misdemeanor domestic violence cases from two years to 10 years ([WUNC, 2023](#)).

publicly and privately. Survivors not only face difficulties behind closed doors—such as fear for their safety or limitations on daily functioning—but are also constrained in their public lives. For instance, a violent partner may restrict their victim’s public activities, such as voting, participating in community groups, or engaging in work, forcing survivors to submit to damaging demands to protect themselves or their dependents.

In this paper, we investigate the effect of electing women mayors on domestic violence at the municipal level. In many countries in the Global South, municipalities play a crucial role in connecting with people and providing essential public goods and services ([Escobar-Lemmon and Funk, 2017](#)). Thus, local governments prioritizing women’s issues can yield multiple positive outcomes for women living in these areas ([Meier and Nicholson-Crotty, 2006](#); [Bhalotra and Clots-Figueras, 2014](#); [Courtemanche and Green, 2017](#)). We argue that the relationship between electing women mayors and domestic violence operates through two main mechanisms. First, women’s descriptive representation (i.e., increased representation of women in government) can destigmatize reporting domestic violence, encouraging survivors to feel more comfortable reporting such incidents due to the presence of prominent women figures in local government. Second, women’s substantive representation (i.e., prioritization of women’s issues and policies) may lead to increased public security spending, improved public infrastructure, and additional youth programs initiated by women mayors, providing accessible resources for reporting.

Using administrative data from Chile, we analyze whether electing women mayors impacts domestic violence at the municipal level. However, uncovering the causal effects of this relationship presents challenges. First, since the election of women mayors is not randomized, unobserved characteristics of municipalities with male and female mayors may influence reports and rates of domestic violence. To draw causal inferences, we employ a dynamic difference-in-differences (DiD) design. This approach aggregates effects over the length of exposure (i.e., years under a woman mayor), facilitating the interpretation of results in contexts with multiple exposure periods ([Callaway and Sant’Anna, 2020](#)). Second, changes in reports of domestic violence can have two explanations: increased incidents of violence or increased reporting. To address this, we use de-

tailed administrative data to distinguish whether higher rates of domestic violence stem from more cases or more reports.

We find that reports of domestic violence against women increased by 0.22 standard deviations after electing a woman mayor. This increase is observed in citizen-initiated reports, with no corresponding effect on cases of domestic violence identified by police (e.g., during public patrols). As we explain and show later, police capacity is independent of the mayor. Therefore, these findings suggest that women are reporting more but that the actual incidence of domestic violence is not increasing. Furthermore, we explore potential mechanisms driving these effects using administrative and survey data. Our evidence supports the substantive representation mechanism but finds no evidence for descriptive representation.

This paper contributes to the growing gender politics literature by addressing private issues that disproportionately affect women, enabling future research to combat domestic violence, and encouraging a broader discussion of hidden yet significant challenges in women's lives. While substantial literature highlights the positive effects of women's representation on political behavior and policies addressing women's issues², we know much less about how women politicians can shape women's personal and family lives. Similarly, private issues disproportionately affecting women are underrepresented in the literature, often due to challenges in measurement and data availability. Using administrative data that captures these private issues highlights the importance of measuring such phenomena in a broader global context.

²For examples, see [Alberti, Diaz-Rioseco and Visconti \(2022\)](#); [Atkeson \(2003\)](#); [Atkeson and Carrillo \(2007\)](#); [Banducci, Donovan and Karp \(2004\)](#); [Barnes and Burchard \(2013\)](#); [Bobadilla and Lind \(2019\)](#); [Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer \(2019\)](#); [Gay \(2002\)](#); [Kao et al. \(2022\)](#); [Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer \(2012\)](#); [Reingold and Harrell \(2010\)](#); [Tripp \(2023\)](#); [Ulbig \(2007\)](#).

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Understanding Gender-Based Violence

On average, nearly 20 people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner in the United States. Over the course of a year, this equates to more than 10 million women and men ([NCADV, 2023](#)). In Chile, one in four women who have been in a relationship report experiencing some form of partner violence in the past 12 months – whether psychological, physical, sexual, or economic ([Saavedra, Contreras Urbina and Inchauste, 2022](#)). More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically increased rates of domestic violence worldwide, as lockdown measures gave abusers greater freedom to act without being reported. For instance, domestic abuse rates increased by 5% in Australia, tripled in China, and rose by 20–30% in the United States ([Mittal and Singh, 2020](#)). In Chile, research has found that lockdown measures led to an increase in domestic violence helpline calls and shelter occupancy, even though police reports of domestic violence did not rise ([Bhalotra et al., 2024](#)).

Studies have shown that low-income, minority ethnic, and racialized women are among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable to interpersonal violence, as they are often subjected to violent social structures ([Hearn et al., 2016](#)). Increasingly, the intersections of gender with other forms of inequality—such as age, disability, and education—are crucial to consider when examining instances of gender-based violence. Additionally, external circumstances within communities can exacerbate gender-based violence, such as elections, armed conflict, and economic crises ([Agbal-ajobi, 2016](#); [Kishi, 2021](#); [Lindsey, 2022](#)). In the context of armed conflict, for example, domestic violence is often punished less severely than other forms of violence, such as rape ([Lindsey, 2022](#)). Moreover, survivors of such violent acts frequently face societal stigmatization and repercussions rather than receiving support ([Koos and Lindsey, 2022](#)). Women and their families may lose trust in the government and security forces, such as police officers. This stigmatization, combined with a lack of resources, significantly impacts women’s physical, emotional, financial, and even political

lives.

Resources to assist survivors in these contexts are vital. Such support can be facilitated through better representation in government (whether by electing women or candidates who prioritize these issues) or through targeted policy interventions. We theorize that the election of women mayors can influence domestic violence through two key mechanisms: (1) an increase in women's *descriptive representation*, which could enhance survivors' willingness to report domestic violence, and (2) an increase in women's *substantive representation*, whereby women mayors prioritize public security efforts related to women's issues, thereby creating additional avenues and resources for survivors. Descriptive representation refers to the similarities between representatives and the electorate, such as having more women in leadership positions. Substantive representation, by contrast, refers to legislators prioritizing the policy concerns of their constituents, such as women leaders addressing women's issues through public policy (Pitkin, 1972).

2.2 Descriptive Representation

Why would we expect an increase in the number of women mayors to influence domestic violence reports? Despite the complexity between women's share of seats in legislatures and their performance, a substantial body of literature uncovers the strong effects of women's representation on various political phenomena (Reingold and Harrell, 2010; Atkeson, 2003; Barnes and Burchard, 2013; O'Brien and Piscopo, 2019; Piscopo and Och, 2021). Regarding descriptive representation, we argue that an increase in women's representation in government can positively impact women survivors and their willingness to report domestic violence. When women hold political offices, their backgrounds are brought into the public sphere, reflecting shared experiences and showing visible manifestations of struggles similar to those faced by other women in the community (Young, 2002; Childs, 2006; Schwindt-Bayer and Reyes-Housholder, 2017). A good example comes from women's police stations, where local policies addressing violence against women have

increased trust and legitimacy in institutions (Córdova and Kras, 2020).³ A broad range of literature has explored the concept of shared experiences between representatives and voters. Findings consistently demonstrate that the descriptive representation of marginalized communities in government leads to increased political participation and trust in government institutions (Gay, 2002; Zingher and Farrer, 2016; Schwindt-Bayer and Reyes-Housholder, 2017; Sances and You, 2017; Funk, Silva and Escobar-Lemmon, 2019; Kao et al., 2022).

A similar desire for descriptive representation emerges when examining other minority groups, such as religious sects or marginalized ethnic communities. A history of dominance and subordination—such as between men and women—can lead to neglect and biased policies from the dominant group, as well as distrust from the subordinate group (Mansbridge, 1999). If a member of the subordinate group (in this case, a woman mayor) is elected to a position of power, individuals sharing similar experiences may engage in better communication and exhibit a higher willingness to report domestic violence. Representatives and their constituents can leverage this shared foundation of discrimination to foster stronger communication and build more robust bonds of trust (Mansbridge, 1999; Dovi, 2002; Córdova and Kras, 2020).

Based on previous literature on shared experiences and descriptive representation (Mansbridge, 1999; Gay, 2002; Young, 2002; Dovi, 2002; Childs, 2006; Kao et al., 2022), we expect that electing women mayors will increase survivors' willingness to report domestic violence by instilling greater trust in the government.

³ As another example, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong was the first woman to serve as Leader of the Government and later Leader of the Opposition in the Senate. She is also the first openly gay woman in government and has spoken candidly about her Chinese heritage. In a speech last year, she reflected on her family's experiences with British colonialism, stating, "such stories can sometimes feel uncomfortable—for those whose stories they are, and for those who hear them" (Australian Institute of Int'l Affairs, 2023).

2.3 Substantive Representation

A wide body of literature has examined the causes and effects of substantive representation. For example, studies have analyzed policies in the United States that disproportionately affect marginalized communities of voters (e.g., women, African Americans, Asian Americans, first-generation immigrants) and how electing individuals from these communities reduces biased policy outcomes (Sances and You, 2017; Zingher and Farrer, 2016; Gay, 2002; Kao et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is a consensus in the literature that when more women hold positions of power, women's issues are prioritized in legislatures, such as state abortion policies, children's issues, and maternal health (Bratton and Ray, 2002; Taylor-Robinson and Heath, 2003; Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006; Childs, 2006; Wängnerud, 2009; Piscopo, 2014; Funk and Philips, 2019; Jiang and Zhou, 2022).⁴

When an individual is affected by domestic violence, they may not have fully articulated their own needs due to the complex environment in which they live (e.g., prioritizing the safety of children in the household, facing financial barriers to leaving or adhering to religious beliefs against separation from a spouse). In such cases, elected public officials can play a vital role by providing resources that survivors may not realize they need to ensure their safety. This challenge is even more pronounced in the Global South, where women may hold public office but face significant disparities in rights and resources.

While national resources like the US National Domestic Violence Hotline or South Africa's "Stop Gender Violence Hotline" exist, many countries lack overarching resources for reporting, and local communities often have limited access to such services. Local-level officials can fill this

⁴An illustrative example comes from the German government, where Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and Development Minister Svenja Schulze co-authored a feminist foreign policy. This policy allocates 12 billion euros (12.8 billion) in German development funds to projects addressing gender inequality, including the appointment of an ambassador for feminist foreign policy (Deutsche Welle, 2023).

gap by creating accessible resources for survivors, such as hotlines and safe houses, implementing educational programs for youth, and promoting bystander intervention practices within the community. Research has shown that community-wide educational programs, such as radio broadcasts or video demonstrations, can effectively reduce violence against women and increase support for gender equality (Arias, 2019; Green, Wilke and Cooper, 2020). For instance, women politicians in Mexico have been shown to significantly reduce homicide rates among women, with evidence suggesting this effect is due to their prioritization of budgetary plans aimed at combating violence against women (Alcocer, Skillmana and Torres-Beltran, 2022). Moreover, studies indicate that such programs lead to increased willingness to report incidents to authorities and a reduction in the number of women experiencing violence in the months following their implementation (Green, Wilke and Cooper, 2020).

Based on this evidence, we expect that electing women mayors will influence reports of domestic violence by empowering survivors to articulate their best interests and by providing avenues for reporting and supportive policy efforts. In conjunction with this theoretical framework for understanding domestic violence, we propose the following hypothesis: *The election of women mayors will increase reports (but not cases) of domestic violence against women.* As a reminder, cases found by the police can serve as a benchmark. Consequently, an increase in reports may indicate that women are more willing to contact the police, rather than an actual increase in violence against women when a woman mayor is elected.

Regarding mechanisms, fluctuations in domestic violence reports can be driven by both descriptive and substantive representation of women in local offices. Descriptive representation (i.e., electing more women mayors) is expected to foster trust in government through shared experiences, thereby increasing survivors' willingness to report. Substantive representation (i.e., enacting policies addressing women's issues), on the other hand, is expected to expand the avenues through which domestic violence can be reported safely.

3 The Case of Chile

In the year 2006, Chile elected a woman as president for the first time. This follows a change in electoral rules for municipal elections in 2002, which has been found to have gendered effects ([Hinojosa and Franceschet, 2012a](#)). Since then, the country has experienced various improvements in terms of women's representation ([Reyes-Housholder and Roque, 2019](#)). The best example was the 2020 election for the Constitutional Assembly, which implemented a gender quota law to ensure an equal distribution between women and men members ([Suarez-Cao, 2021](#); [Piscopo et al., 2023](#)). Even though Chile has exhibited this clear improvement in terms of women's representation in national politics, this has been less clear at the local level, such as in mayoral posts ([Holman, 2017](#); [Alberti, Diaz-Rioseco and Visconti, 2022](#)). This problem is not unique to this country; women are usually underrepresented in local executives across the entire Latin American region ([Escobar-Lemmon and Funk, 2018](#)). The main factor explaining women's under-representation at the local level relies on the processes of candidate nominations, which are usually controlled by men, and they are usually less attentive to narrowing the gender gap ([Hinojosa and Franceschet, 2012b](#)).

Despite the lack of representation of women at the local level, women who hold political offices have been vocal in combating gender-based violence in Chile ([Franceschet, 2010](#)). In terms of descriptive representation, Mayor Emilia Ríos of Ñuñoa has spoken publicly against acts of domestic violence carried out by a well-known sociologist in the community. She assured that "gender violence is unacceptable no matter who perpetrates it" ([La Tercera, 2023](#)). In terms of substantive representation, Mayor Claudia Pizarro of La Pintana has led a campaign against domestic violence. Part of this campaign includes the "Woman Alert" program, which delivers GPS devices with a panic button to the users. If threatened, the person can press the button, allowing responders to find the person's location and direct them to the La Pintana Community Protection Network, Carabineros de Chile, and the South Metropolitan Prosecutor's Office ([Con Todos La Pintana, 2023](#)). Similarly, Mayor Carolina Leitaó of Peñalolén has worked closely with the implementation and overview of "SOS Women Program" which collects locations from a panic

button that recovers the user’s location and connects them with an operator for support in real-time (Acuña, 2021).

Even with these recorded instances of descriptive and substantive representation of women leaders related to domestic violence, a lack of data to observe the effects of such programs leaves domestic violence understudied.

4 Research Design

To uncover the effect of electing a woman mayor on domestic violence, we must address two main methodological challenges. Firstly, women mayors are not randomly assigned. Municipalities that elect women as heads of local government may differ from those that do not in numerous ways. A common approach is to adjust for observed characteristics, which can mitigate some of the associated biases. However, unobserved variables may still influence the results after adjustments, potentially biasing any conclusions. To address this issue, we employ a difference-in-differences (DiD) strategy, which allows us to draw causal inferences under the key identification assumption of parallel trends. This assumption posits that both the treatment and control groups would follow a similar trajectory in the absence of the treatment. As a robustness check, we also use a regression discontinuity design (RDD) in closely contested electoral races to estimate the effect of electing a woman mayor.⁵

Given the presence of multiple treatment periods (i.e., municipalities electing women mayors at different times), we use a dynamic or event-study DiD approach (Callaway and Sant’Anna, 2020). This design aggregates effects over the length of treatment exposure, facilitating the interpretation of results. To identify treated and control municipalities, we collected electoral data from Chile, covering results from four local elections from 2005 to 2020. Candidates’ self-reported gender enables us to determine whether a mayor is a woman. Importantly, a dynamic DiD approach requires staggered treatment, meaning that once a unit is treated, it remains treated. In

⁵See Appendix D for this analysis.

cases where municipalities elected a male mayor after previously electing a woman, we remove those municipality-years from the analysis to maintain the staggered design (though the entire municipality is not excluded). Additionally, municipalities that have continuously had a woman mayor since 2004 are excluded from the analysis because they lack pretreatment information.

Figure 1 summarizes the treatment across units and time. Each row represents a municipality; red spaces indicate a woman mayor, while blue spaces indicate a man mayor. Importantly, we exclude (i) municipality-years where a man was elected after a woman (i.e., not a staggered treatment) and (ii) municipalities that elected a woman mayor in the first year of the dataset (i.e., always treated). This figure shows the final structure of the staggered treatment used to implement the dynamic difference-in-differences approach, where 304 municipality-years have a woman serving as mayor and 4,425 municipality-years have a man serving as mayor.

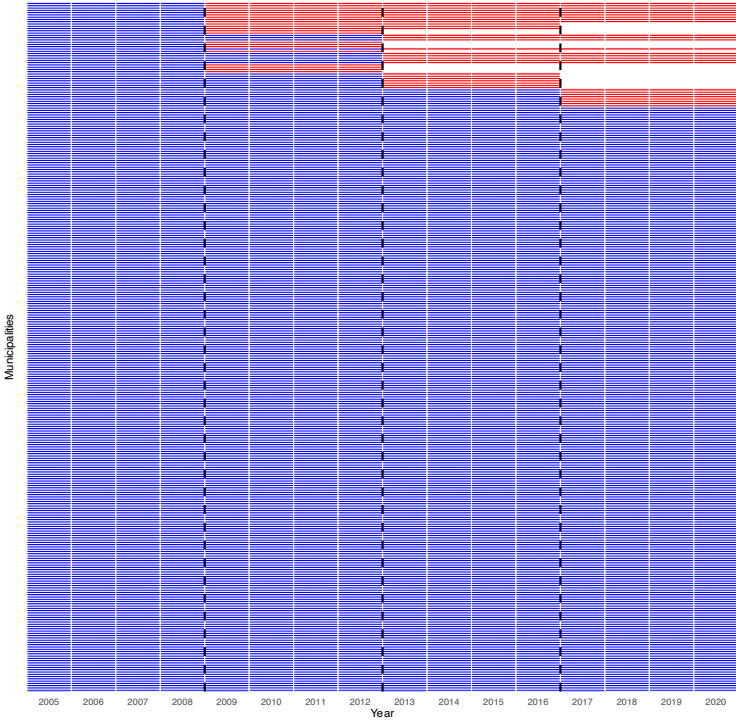


Figure 1: Women mayors across municipalities and years. Red indicates municipalities with women mayors, blue indicates municipalities with men mayors, and white indicates cases where a man was elected after a woman.

Figure 2 provides a map of Chile, highlighting municipalities that have had a woman mayor in red and those that have never had a woman mayor in blue,⁶ illustrating that women mayors are distributed across the entire country.

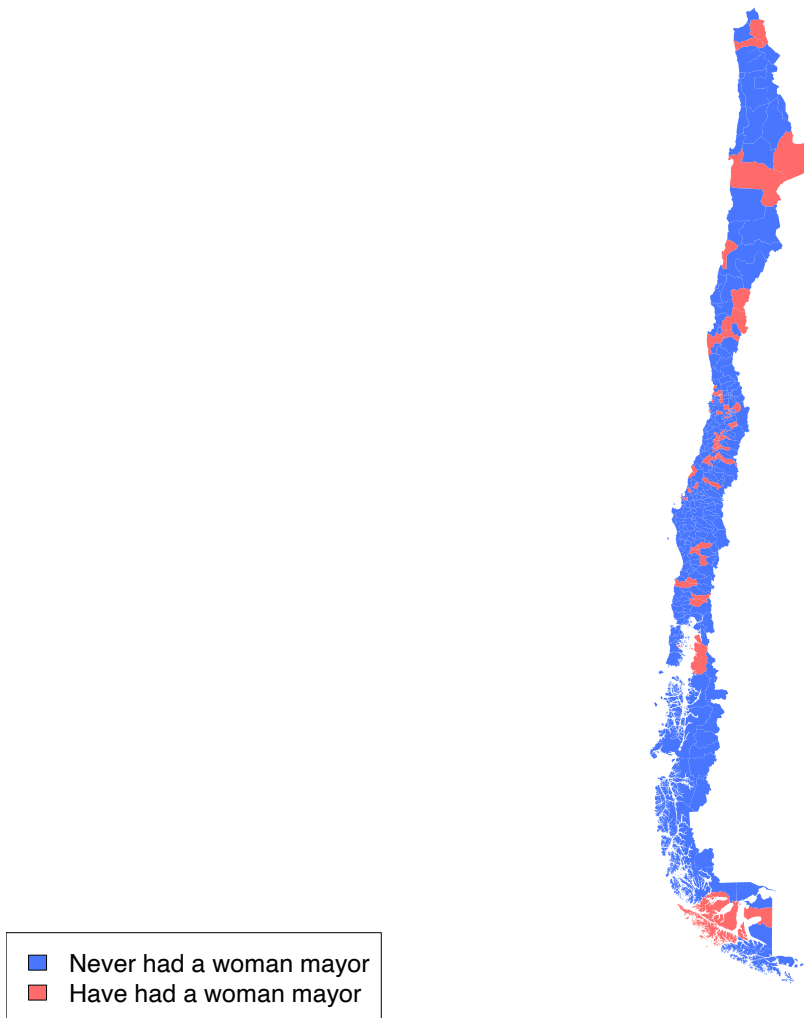


Figure 2: Map of Chile depicting municipalities. In red: municipalities that had a woman mayor at any time between 2005 and 2020; in blue: municipalities that never had a woman mayor from 2005 to 2020.

The regression equation approximating the Callaway and Sant’Anna (2021) method for a dy-

⁶ Using data from 2005 to 2020.

dynamic DiD model with group-time-specific treatment effects is the following:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \sum_{k=-11}^{11} \beta_k \cdot 1(k = t - g) + X_{it} \theta + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Where Y_{it} is the outcome of interest (e.g., violence against women in standard deviation units) for unit i at time t . α_i represents unit fixed effects (to control for time-invariant differences between units). γ_t represents time-fixed effects (to account for common shocks across units in each time period). k is the time to or since a municipality was first treated with a woman mayor, and g is the first year of having a woman mayor. β_k represents the treatment effect at event time k , allowing for dynamic treatment effects. X_{it} is an index of local development measured before 2004 when we began collecting outcome data. ε_{it} is the error term.

A key methodological issue to address involves the measurement of domestic violence. An increase in domestic violence can have two distinct interpretations. On the one hand, the number of offenses may have increased, indicating that more acts of domestic violence are occurring in a given municipality-year. On the other hand, the number of reports may have increased without a corresponding rise in offenses; in this case, there may actually be fewer acts of domestic violence, but survivors are more willing to report the crime. As a result, it is challenging to determine whether an increase reflects higher reporting rates or a genuine rise in the frequency of domestic violence.

To address this issue, we leverage detailed administrative data from Chile, where domestic violence offenses are classified into two categories: (1) those reported to the police by the survivor or a witness, and (2) those directly identified by the police. An example of a citizen-reported case is a woman calling the police and asking for food (used as a code for domestic violence) ([La Cuarta, 2022](#)). An example of a police-identified case is a national police round resulting in 14 detentions for domestic violence ([Cooperativa, 2023](#)). These two indicators enable us to determine whether an increase in domestic violence stems from changes in the willingness or opportunity to report or an actual rise in the number of offenses.

Importantly, police data serve as a particularly useful benchmark or placebo test since Chile's

police force is autonomous from both central and local governments, and there are no local or state police (Alberti, Díaz-Rioseco and Visconti, 2023). Consequently, mayors do not have the capacity to instruct police to focus more attention on specific types of crime, such as domestic violence. To further ensure that women mayors are not indirectly improving policing capacity in their municipalities, we demonstrate in Appendix B that they do not increase the number of security cameras or security booths when compared with their men counterparts.

To summarize, the structure of our dataset is as follows: the unit of analysis is the municipality-year. For each observation, we identify its treatment status (woman mayor or not) and the length of the treatment (number of years with a woman mayor). The outcomes are domestic violence against women reported by citizens and domestic violence against women identified by the police (both standardized in standard deviation units).⁷ We also include a list of relevant pre-treatment characteristics.

5 Results: Difference-in-Differences

As a reminder, a dynamic difference-in-differences approach aggregates the effects based on the length of exposure and provides the average treatment effects for having a woman mayor during the first, second, and third, up to the eleventh year consecutively. Some municipalities are never exposed to the treatment (i.e., they never elected a woman mayor), allowing us to construct a control group to compare with those municipalities that elected women at different times.

Figure 3 presents the main results of electing a woman mayor on domestic violence rates against women: (i) cases reported by citizens and (ii) cases directly identified by the police. The grey markers represent the pre-exposure analysis—that is, a comparison between *never treated*⁸ and *eventually treated*⁹ municipalities. The absence of significant effects during this period sup-

⁷The original outcomes are expressed as the number of domestic violence cases against women per 100,000 people. These variables were standardized for easier interpretation.

⁸Municipalities that did not have a woman mayor between 2005 and 2020.

⁹Municipalities that will have a woman mayor, using data from before that event.

ports the parallel trends assumption. The black markers indicate the post-exposure analysis, reflecting the effects of electing a woman mayor based on the length of exposure.

The results for both outcomes are not significant before first exposure (pre-treatment trends), providing further evidence for the parallel trends assumption (i.e., both groups followed the same trajectory during the pre-treatment period).

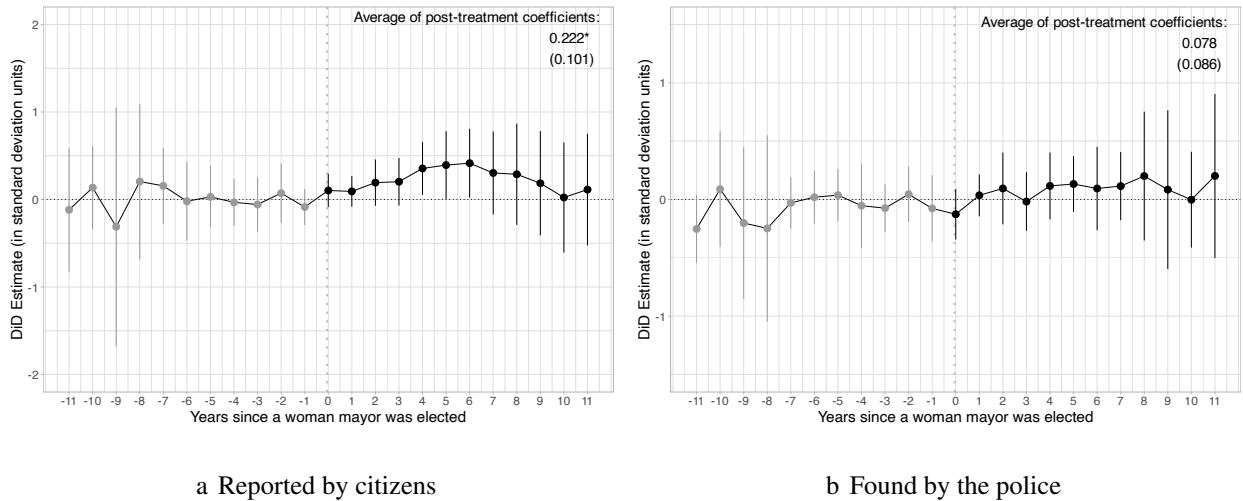


Figure 3: Average effect of having a woman mayor on violence against women by length of exposure. A length of exposure of -1 refers to the period before the first exposure, 0 to the first exposure, and 1 to the second exposure. The overall treatment effect is reported with coefficients, bootstrapped standard errors in parentheses, and (*) denoting p-values lower than 0.1. N = 4,729 (municipality-year observations).

When examining domestic violence reported by citizens (Figure 3a), the average of the post-treatment coefficients indicates that a woman mayor has a positive effect on reports. On average, women mayors increase the number of domestic violence reports by 0.222 standard deviation units (95% confidence interval: [0.012, 0.443]). When disaggregating the results by length of exposure, Figure 3a shows a statistically significant effect four years after the first exposure (95% confidence interval: [0.052, 0.658]). This impact diminishes over time, vanishing after ten years when the point estimate approaches zero (95% confidence interval: [-0.605, 0.652]).

For domestic violence cases found by the police (Figure 3b), the average of the post-treatment

coefficients provides no evidence that women mayors influence the number of cases directly identified by the police. The results show a non-significant increase of 0.061 standard deviation units in the number of found crimes. When disaggregating the results by length of exposure, Figure 3b indicates no instance in which the election of women mayors affects this particular outcome.

In summary, our findings suggest that women mayors influence citizens' willingness to report domestic violence but not the actual number of crimes identified by the police. We interpret this as an effect on the willingness to report rather than on the occurrence of crimes. However, these effects disappear after a decade, a finding we explore further in the discussion.

6 Causal Mechanisms

6.1 Survey Evidence

To better examine the two causal mechanisms through which electing women mayors can affect domestic violence, we use four LAPOP surveys conducted in Chile in 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014. We focus on two questions: the first addresses descriptive representation by asking, "To what extent do you trust your municipal government?" The second targets substantive representation by asking respondents to "Evaluate the quality of the services provided by the municipality." Using these outcomes, we implement a dynamic DiD approach with the same treatment structure as before. Since the unit of analysis is municipality-year, we aggregate the survey outcomes at the municipality-year level by calculating the average response for each survey.¹⁰ Additionally, we focus only on responses from women, as we aim to measure perceptions within this subgroup. The outcomes are expressed in standard deviation units to facilitate interpretation.

Figure 4 illustrates the results of electing a woman mayor on trust in local government (Figure

¹⁰ Obtaining the average outcome at the municipality level is known as disaggregation (e.g., Erikson, Wright and McIver (1993)). See Severino and Visconti (2023) for an example of this approach to construct the outcome variable in a dynamic difference-in-differences setting.

4a) and the quality of services provided by the municipality, as perceived by women respondents (Figure 4b). These results suggest that the quality of services provided by the municipality increases approximately three years after first electing a woman mayor, with an effect size of 0.533 standard deviation units (95% confidence interval: [0.054, 1.012]).

This finding suggests that women mayors are more likely to prioritize policies addressing women’s issues, thereby increasing the availability of safe avenues for reporting domestic violence. However, the effects of electing a woman mayor on trust in government are not statistically significant. This suggests that electing a woman mayor does not enhance women’s willingness to report domestic violence through the mechanism of descriptive representation.

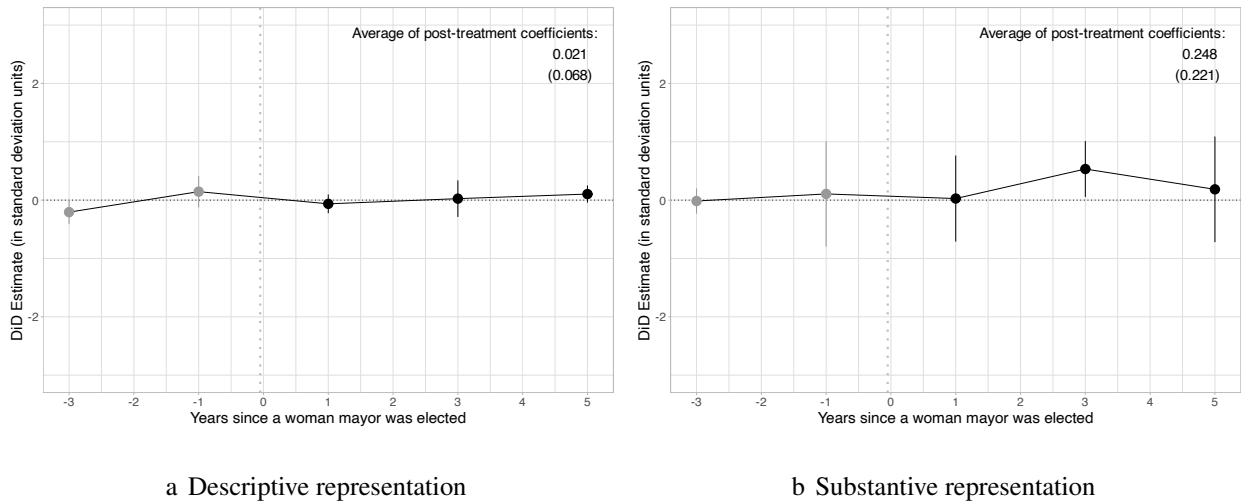


Figure 4: Average effect of having a woman mayor on LAPOP Survey Questions. A length of exposure of -1 refers to the period before the first exposure, 0 to the first exposure, and 1 to the second exposure. The overall treatment effect is reported with coefficients, bootstrapped standard errors in parentheses, and (*) denoting p-values lower than 0.1. N = 278 (municipality-year observations).

Interestingly, when examining substantive representation, a similar diminishing effect over time is observed, as seen in Figure 3a. This provides further evidence that the increase in reports of domestic violence against women can be attributed to substantive representation.

Regarding the limitations of this analysis, future research could explore alternative measures of descriptive representation (e.g., feelings of representation) and substantive representation (e.g.,

evaluation of policy initiatives). Nonetheless, our findings provide suggestive evidence supporting the causal mechanism of substantive representation. When women mayors are elected, they improve the quality of government services—potentially including domestic violence resources—which enables more women to report cases.

6.2 Security Plans

To analyze substantive representation, we collected 115 security plans from Chilean municipalities spanning 2011 to 2024.¹¹ Security plans are documents provided by municipalities summarizing their main goals and strategies regarding public security. We explain in Appendix A how security plans were processed.

In both stages, we extracted the number of times the following keywords appeared in each document: *woman/women (mujer/es)*, *gender (género)*, *domestic violence (violencia intrafamiliar)*, *violencia doméstica*, *gender violence (violencia de género)*, *femicide/s (femicidios)*.¹² The final data frame includes each municipality’s name, the year of the security plan, the number of pages, and a count of occurrences for each keyword in the document. We also included the gender of the mayor for the corresponding municipality and year.

The primary outcome of this analysis is the total number of keywords mentioned in each security document. As a robustness check, we divided the total number of mentions by the number of pages in the security plan document, creating a weighted version of the outcome. To evaluate whether having a woman mayor correlates with the frequency of these keyword mentions, we used a linear probability model with region-fixed effects, specified as follows:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{WomenMayor}_i + \mathbf{X}'_i \beta_2 + \gamma_r + \varepsilon_i$$

¹¹See Appendix A.1 for the list of municipalities and years of security plans.

¹² We also use variations of these keywords. See Appendix A.1 for the counts of each keyword across all documents.

Where Y_i is the outcome variable for unit i , WomenMayor_i is the binary indicator for whether the mayor is a woman (1 if woman, 0 otherwise), \mathbf{X}_i is a matrix of relevant pre-treatment characteristics (i.e., local development indicators, population, and vote share), γ_r represents region fixed effects, and ε_i is the error term. The coefficient of interest is β_1 .

	Mentions	Mentions per page
Mayor Gender	29.06**	0.64**
	14.25	0.30
Controls	Yes	Yes
Region Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes

Table 1: Regression Results. Note: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

These results show that women mayors use 29 more keywords related to violence against women and gender issues than male mayors or 0.6 more keywords per page. These findings support our previous results, indicating that electing women mayors leads to an improvement in substantive representation. When women mayors are elected, they prioritize and commit to more policy initiatives addressing gender issues and violence against women than their male counterparts.

6.3 Community and Health Outcomes

To further evaluate the substantive representation of women mayors in Chile, we analyze the effect of electing a woman mayor on spending directed toward community organizations and health coverage. Community organizations are those that may provide additional resources for women to report instances of domestic violence and are funded by the government. For instance, women mayors might prioritize funding for community groups for mothers, which can serve as alternative reporting mechanisms for women in domestic violence situations, outside of traditional police channels.

Health coverage spending may indicate that women mayors prioritize women’s health more broadly, offering another avenue for reporting domestic violence (e.g., during confidential doctor visits). However, the challenge with health spending lies in the inability to specifically identify the

direct benefits of the funding, as it is often reported as a lump sum in budget legislation. While it is plausible that an increase in health coverage spending under a woman mayor is directly benefiting women, this assumption is strong and may not always hold true.

We present evidence to examine these two potential mechanisms in Figures 5 and 6. First, for community organizations, we use spending on community organizations and the number of community organizations as outcome variables. Our findings show a positive and significant effect of electing women mayors on both, with a trajectory similar to the trends reported in the main findings.

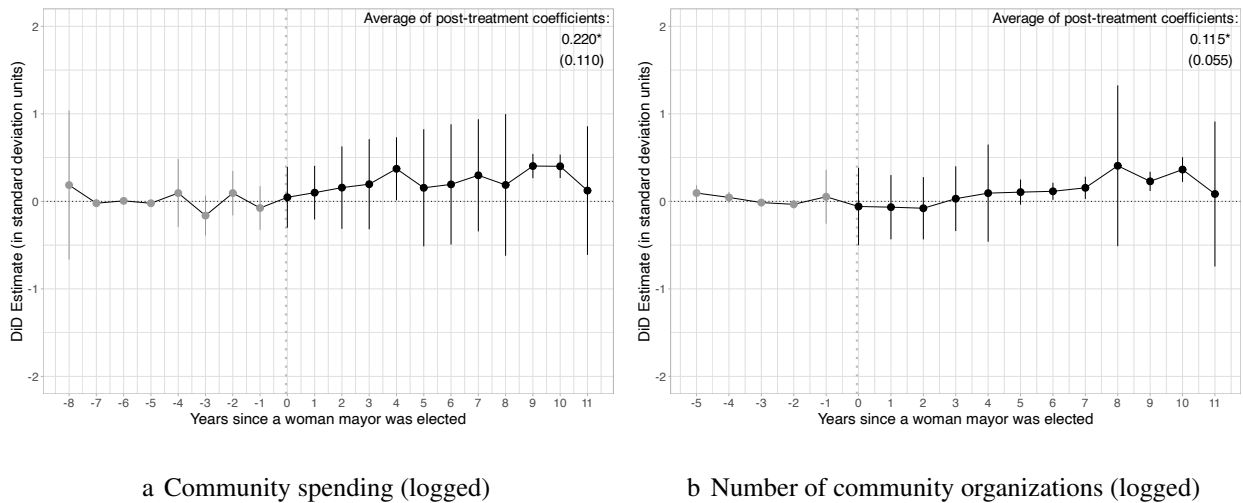


Figure 5: Average effect of having a woman mayor on reports of alternative offenses. A length of exposure of -1 refers to the period before the first exposure, 0 to the first exposure, and 1 to the second exposure. The overall treatment effect is reported with coefficients, bootstrapped standard errors in parentheses, and (*) denoting p-values lower than 0.1. N = 4,729 (municipality-year observations).

Second, with respect to health improvements, we use health spending and health coverage as outcome variables. The results provide no evidence that women mayors increase health spending or health coverage, suggesting a lack of clear support for health-based mechanisms.

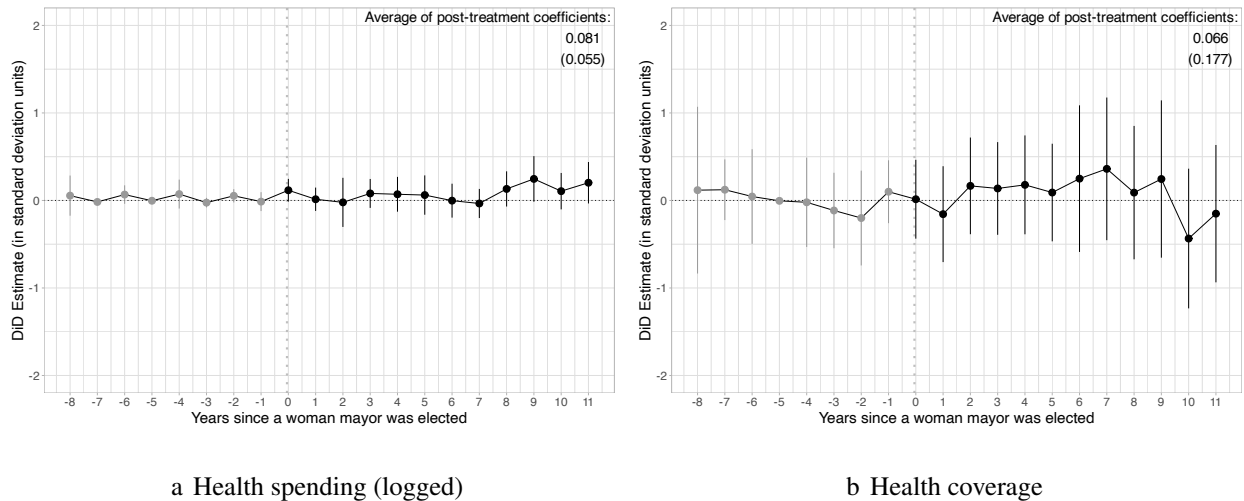


Figure 6: Average effect of having a woman mayor on reports of alternative offenses. A length of exposure of -1 refers to the period before the first exposure, 0 to the first exposure, and 1 to the second exposure. The overall treatment effect is reported with coefficients, bootstrapped standard errors in parentheses, and (*) denoting p-values lower than 0.1. $N = 4,729$ (municipality-year observations).

In summary, we conduct these additional analyses to support our theorized causal mechanisms, where electing a woman mayor influences domestic violence through substantive and descriptive representation. Each analysis provides suggestive evidence to support the substantive representation mechanism, showing that women mayors prioritize more policy initiatives targeting gender issues and violence against women. Using survey data from Chile in Section 6.1, we find that women mayors improve the quality of municipal services following their election. In Section 6.2, we analyze security reports from Chilean municipalities and find that women mayors prioritize gender and anti-violence policy initiatives. Finally, in Section 6.3, we show that women mayors increase both spending on community organizations and the number of community organizations. These additional analyses provide suggestive evidence supporting the conclusion that electing women mayors impacts reports of domestic violence by assisting survivors and creating avenues for reporting through beneficial policy efforts. We believe this is suggestive in the sense that indirectly captures different dimensions of substantive representation, as a result, further studies are needed to shed more light on the mechanisms at play.

We complement these findings with further results in the supplementary appendix. In Appendix B, we evaluate alternative explanations, such as the possibility that women mayors are simply more effective leaders, which could lead to improved reporting mechanisms and encourage complaints across a broader range of offenses affecting quality of life. We also examine whether women mayors improve the security performance of their municipality, thereby indirectly influencing our benchmark outcome (cases found by the police). We find no evidence to support either of these alternative explanations.

In Appendix C, we also explore why the main effects diminish over time and provide suggestive evidence that policies facilitating reporting may not fundamentally alter the structural dynamics of violence against women. However, we acknowledge that further research is needed to fully understand this trend. Finally, in Appendix D, we use a regression discontinuity design (RDD) in close electoral races as a robustness check, finding similar results, and further strengthening our conclusions.

7 Conclusion

Previous research has provided convincing evidence that women in office behave differently from men, particularly at the national level. However, outcomes at the local level remain understudied. The administrative data from Chile utilized in this study allows us to closely examine whether electing women mayors impacts reports of domestic violence against women. While most studies investigate overall rates of violence against women, they often fail to focus on specific instances of crime (e.g., domestic violence) or the actual reports made by civilians. Consequently, the effect of electing women mayors on domestic violence reports has been largely overlooked. Using a dynamic difference-in-differences design, we find that women mayors positively influence domestic violence reporting. Specifically, there is a sharp and significant increase in reports around the fourth and fifth years of having a woman mayor. Furthermore, we find no evidence that electing a woman mayor affects acts of domestic violence against women identified by the

police. This aligns with existing research showing that police arrests based on domestic violence calls can reduce repeat offenses in certain cases (Amaral et al., 2023). These findings suggest that reports from survivors increase, but the actual crime rates remain unchanged. This observed pattern may be explained by theoretical frameworks addressing the effects of women's descriptive and substantive representation on their constituents.

Electing a woman mayor may influence domestic violence reports through two key mechanisms. First, via descriptive representation, women mayors alleviate mistrust in government among survivors while projecting their shared feminine experiences publicly. This form of representation can increase a survivor's willingness to report domestic violence. Second, through substantive representation, women leaders often prioritize public policies addressing women's issues. These policies can include public security measures such as domestic violence hotlines, safehouses, and educational programming (e.g., media campaigns or community-wide initiatives). In the context of domestic violence, women mayors articulate survivors' interests on their behalf, creating accessible resources and avenues for reporting. Our additional analyses provide evidence supporting the influence of substantive representation, measured through improvements in the quality of services provided by the government.

The findings of this study have implications beyond Chile, suggesting that the gender of elected officials can significantly affect citizens' well-being in other contexts as well. Future research could explore whether descriptive or substantive representation more strongly drives the observed increase in domestic violence reports. Similarly, scholars could investigate why this effect appears to diminish after a certain period post-treatment. Incorporating the effects of women mayors on violence against women in the Global South will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the causes and consequences of increasing women's representation in government.

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