

# Agricultural Practices, Organized Workers and Female Political Empowerment: Evidence from Italian *Mondine*\*

Luca Bagnato<sup>1</sup>, Yu Pan<sup>2</sup>, and Miriam Venturini<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>UCLA Anderson School of Management

<sup>2</sup>University of Zurich

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*Abstract:* We study whether work practices adopted in recent history in agriculture influence the political empowerment of women in a European country. Focusing on Italy, we study the case of female rice weeders and their successful history of unionization and mobilization for better working conditions. Relying on an instrumental variable strategy to predict quasi-exogenous variation in rice production, we test whether the historical presence of female rice weeders predicts differences in measures of political empowerment during the second half of the XX century. We find that towns where rice production was historically relevant had higher support for divorce in the 1974 referendum, have more women in politics, and are more likely to have a nursery school. Our results suggest the importance of collective action of working women to achieve persistent female political empowerment.

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# 1 Introduction

Despite the radical changes that affected the role of women in society during the XX century (Fernández, 2007), in many countries, we still observe gender gaps in participation in the labor force, earnings, and representation in leadership positions, even in OECD countries (Fortin, 2005; Gagliarducci and Paserman, 2012; Baltrunaite et al., 2019). There also exist substantial differences across societies in the tasks that men and women usually perform, the participation of women in politics, and the beliefs about the appropriate role of women in society (Alesina et al., 2013). In Italy, recent evidence shows that almost a third of the respondents in a representative survey believed men were responsible for providing for the needs of the household, while women were more suitable for housework; such stereotypes are widespread in Southern Italy, while they are substantially less common in the North (ISTAT, 2018).

Many studies investigated the determinants of these differences (see, e.g., Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2010; Doepke et al., 2012); in particular, a strand of literature focused on the cultural determinants of differences across societies in the role of women (Fortin, 2005; Fernández, 2007), and in line with research emphasizing the long-term persistence of cultural traits in societies (Guiso et al., 2016) many scholars analyzed how traditional (and often disappeared) work practices (together with historical economics shocks) influenced gender roles and gender norms (Qian, 2008; Alesina et al., 2013; Carranza, 2014; Federico and Martinelli, 2015; Xue, 2016).

In this paper, we study how Italy's traditional agricultural practices at the beginning of the XX century affect historical and contemporary female empowerment. In particular, we examine whether political views about women's rights, female political participation, and female-friendly policies are affected by the (past) presence of women working in teams able to mobilize for their rights and to organize in unions.

We focus on the case of Italian *Mondine*, seasonal female rice weeders working between the end of the XIX century and the 1960s in the Italian rice belt, i.e., the center of Northwestern Italy.<sup>1</sup>

Weeding in the rice fields soon became, during the XIX century, an activity almost exclusively performed by teams of women, who performed arduous tasks for long working shifts and in bad health conditions. The collaborative nature of their work, the unsatisfactory working arrangements, and the interest of unions led to high unionization of female rice weeders in Italy and to high capacity to mobilize and protest to obtain improvements in their condition. Such mobilization was eventually successful, achieving the eight-hour working day in 1906, with weeders' salaries surpassing those of men working in the rice fields. We argue that the empowerment of female rice weeders by means of protests for workers' rights (and their success in obtaining them) had consequences also outside of the working field, affecting the political empowerment of women who participated in or were exposed to the agricultural practice of rice weeding.

We test for the effects of female rice weeders in a town on measures of female political em-

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<sup>1</sup>Rice production in Italy is and was historically concentrated in the current provinces of Vercelli, Novara, Pavia, and Milan.

powerment, in terms of voting behavior for divorce laws and share of elected female politicians, and provision of nursery schools, a public good especially relevant for women. We proxy for the past presence of rice weeders using data on the production of rice in a town in the 1923-1929 period. We complement such dataset with information on the share of votes in a town in support of divorce, elected politicians in city councils between 1986 and 2021, and the presence of nursery schools in 1991 and 2011.

Rice cultivation in a town could be correlated with other factors able, in turn, to predict differences in the political empowerment of women. For example, if areas where gender norms were ex-ante more equitable decided to invest more (or less) in the production of rice, we would estimate a positive (negative) correlation between rice and female empowerment, even if rice cultivation (and hence the presence of rice weeders) did not have a causal effect on the outcomes under analysis. To isolate the causal effect of historical rice production and female weeders' presence on our outcomes of interest, we instrument rice cultivation in a town with the potential yield for rain-fed rice, for which we observe large variation across the Italian territory. In this way, we isolate the effect of rice production on outcomes that is only due to quasi-exogenous differences in the climatic and soil conditions of a town, which are unlikely to affect female empowerment through channels other than actual rice cultivation.

Results show that towns where rice production was larger in 1923-1929 had significantly more votes for divorce in 1974, a result suggesting more equitable gender norms and a more favorable attitude towards female enfranchisement. Additionally, we find that in the thirty-five years between 1986 and 2021 (that is, almost two decades after rice weeders exited the labor market in the rice belt) towns where rice production was more relevant had larger shares of women elected in city councils and that in census years between 1991 and 2011 such towns were more likely to host a (town government's funded) nursery school. We show that our results remain positive after controlling for geographical characteristics of towns that may influence our outcomes of female empowerment, and we discuss why the effects we estimate can reasonably be attributed to the historical presence of female rice weeders.

The salient presence of empowered women in the recent history of a town can thus predict long-lasting differences in the gender norms of its population, even after such women become less relevant in their bargaining power as workers and, arguably, when they start to disappear from the voters' pool. The evidence we provide studying Italian female rice weeders stresses the importance of the ability to engage in collective action and bargaining for the political empowerment of women in settings where, ex-ante, agricultural practices and historical shocks did not lead *per se* to relatively higher female income.

The rest of this paper is organised as follows: section 2 discusses the contribution to the existing literature; section 3 discusses the history and characteristics of Italian female rice weeders; section 4 describes the data used in this paper; section 5 describes the identification strategy; section 6 presents our main results; section 7 discusses the motives behind the unionisation of weeders and

alternative explanations, and section 8 concludes.

## 2 Related literature

This paper relates to several strands of literature. First, it contributes to a strand of literature that has studied the impact of agricultural practices on cultural norms and, more specifically, on gender norms. Previous studies provided evidence that gender roles (and arguably also female empowerment) between societies can be traced back to traditional agricultural practices (Hansen et al., 2015), like the use of the plough (Alesina et al., 2013; Carranza, 2014), or by the presence of crops whose production entails gender-specific comparative advantages (Qian, 2008; Federico and Martinelli, 2015); other studies provided evidence that other traditional activities for which gender advantages exist (like cattle-raising or cotton-weaving) are predictive of long-run differences in gender norms (Voigtländer and Voth, 2013), also in terms of beliefs about women and presence of women in powerful positions (Xue, 2016). This paper’s contribution to this strand of literature is to look at a setting where unionization and mobilization of women played a central role and to study the effects of agricultural arrangements on political outcomes, not only in terms of elected politicians but also of female-friendly policies and voting behavior with respect to topics particularly relevant for women’s lives. More broadly, this paper contributes to the large and growing literature on the determinants and effects of gender norms (see e.g. Fernández et al., 2004; Chong and Ferrara, 2009; Fernández and Fogli, 2009; Jensen and Oster, 2009; La Ferrara et al., 2012; Fernández, 2013; Alesina et al., 2016; Field et al., 2016; Bernhardt et al., 2018; McKelway, 2019; Bursztyn et al., 2020) by studying the effects of (relatively recent) agricultural practices on female empowerment in a European context.

Second, this paper relates to the literature on the persistent effects of past institutions (both formal and informal) on citizens’ attitudes in the Italian setting (Guiso et al., 2016; Buonanno et al., 2019; Bagnato, 2021) by looking at the effect of work arrangements on female empowerment.

Finally, this paper contributes to the large body of historical and sociological research that studied rice production in Italy and the case of *Mondine*, focusing on the history of their unionization process, the assessment of their achievements, their relevance in the Italian popular culture, and the links between their case, the socialist movement and the fight against malaria (Zappi Gentili, 1991; Snowden, 2003; Imbergamo, 2014; Faccini, 1976; Preti, 1955; Soave, 1979; Lorenzoni, 1904; Golgi, 1907; Castelli et al., 2005; Luraghi, 1974). This paper adds to this literature by providing quantitative evidence on the long-lasting effects of the presence of rice weeders on female empowerment out of the work setting, even decades after their disappearance from the Italian fields.

### 3 Historical background

The cultivation of rice in Italy traces back at least to the XV century when there is evidence of rice production in the Duchy of Milan (Gavinelli, 2018); the history of its introduction is uncertain, as it can be traced back to the Arabian domination in Southern Italy, to the Aragonese one, or to the commercial activities of Venetian merchants (Cai et al., 2013). The production of rice grew with time and characterized several areas of Northern Italy, but it did not involve the presence of workers specifically devoted to weeding until the XVIII century, when the price of rice grew to the point of making it a profitable crop and hence encouraged an increase in productivity (Imbergamo, 2014). Starting in the XIX century, thanks to substantial investment in irrigation infrastructure,<sup>2</sup> the Italian production of rice greatly increased (Ferrero and Vidotto, 2010), making Italy by far the major producer of rice in Europe (Snowden, 2003). Before World War I, rice was Italy's most profitable farming activity and the most capital-intensive one (Camp, 1992).

The organization of work that started to be common in the Italian rice fields in the XIX century envisaged the division of labor in several phases, each one allocated to different types of (and differently skilled) workers. While seeding and flooding of the fields were performed by high-skilled men, weeding soon became an activity overwhelmingly performed by women.<sup>3</sup> In terms of the number of workers involved in it, weeding was the most relevant part of the rice production process: at the beginning of the XX century, around 130,000 weeders worked in the Italian rice fields (Imbergamo, 2014). This division of tasks between genders was motivated by several reasons. First, weeding does not require particular muscular strength, while body flexibility and short stature are advantageous for the job (Snowden, 2003). Second, most of the male labor force was involved in harvesting, which occurred simultaneously with weeding. Third, in the first years after the introduction of the role of specialized weeder, owners and contractors aimed to reduce costs by hiring workers with lower wages (i.e., women and migrants), especially considering the labor-intensive nature of the weeding task (Imbergamo, 2014).<sup>4</sup>

Despite not requiring muscular strength, weeding was a meticulous and strenuous activity involving repeated bending, working in stagnant water, and a high degree of attention to distinguish weeds from rice plants. At the beginning of the XX century, women often worked for ten or more hours for around forty-fifty days per year, between May and July. Working in stagnant water exposed weeders to a high risk of malaria. While contractors preferred migrant weeders (as

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<sup>2</sup>The effort to improve the production of rice in Northwestern Italy was led by Cavour, the last prime minister of the Sardinia Kingdom around the XIX century, that also supported the construction of the Cavour Canal, which greatly enhanced the production potential of rice fields in the areas of Vercelli, Novara, and Lomellina.

<sup>3</sup>The share of women in rice weeding in Italy was 73% in 1904 and kept increasing during the XX century (Imbergamo, 2014). The prevalence of women (and children) in weeding was not a peculiarity of Italian rice fields but has also been observed in the Philippines, India, and Pakistan (Foster and Rosenzweig, 1996).

<sup>4</sup>As a result of the mobilization of rice weeders, by the beginning of the XX century, the salaries of male and female workers in the rice fields were almost equal (Faccini, 1976), and female rice weeders eventually ended up earning more than men (performing other tasks).

they ignored the rules and conditions of the local labor market, relied on contractors for meals and accommodation, and therefore were less likely to protest against the hard working conditions), two-thirds of total weeders were natives. Native workers kept living in their houses, while migrants lived together in farmsteads provided by contractors in poor sanitation conditions and often worked more hours than native weeders. Weeders worked in teams, usually divided between natives and migrants.

The wearing and unhealthy nature of weeding and the exploitative nature of the work arrangements favored the mobilization of weeders for better working conditions between the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century. Several factors favored the particularly high degree of unionization of weeders. First, teamwork favored the emergence of horizontal bonds between workers. Second, the out-migration of Italian citizens to American countries heavily impacted the Italian labor market, making women more difficult to replace and increasing their bargaining power. Third, the large number of weeders among agricultural workers made them extremely relevant for the rising agricultural (mostly socialist) union movement, whose activities would have been hindered if such a large group of workers had not supported its activities (Imbergamo, 2014). Finally, and crucially (as explained in detail in section 7), the Italian anti-malaria campaign implemented around 1900 served as a catalyst for the unionization of rice weeders (Snowden, 2003).

The mobilization for better working conditions, which in early forms started in the 1890s without the organization from unions, became a widespread and effective phenomenon starting in 1901 when two *Camere del Lavoro* (centralized labor unions) were founded in Vercelli and Mortara, two of the most prominent centers in the rice district (Zappi Gentili, 1991). During the first years of mobilization, weeders' requested higher salaries and their homogenization across towns of the rice district; starting in 1903, however, requests included also workers' protection (e.g., against replacement with migrant weeders following a protest), improvements to working conditions and abidance to the existing regulations on work in the rice fields, which were mostly not enforced while still being mild (Imbergamo, 2014). From 1904, mobilizations' main objective became the cap to eight working hours per day. Following a wave of strikes and protests, in 1906, weeders finally obtained the reduction of working time to eight hours per day without salary reductions, eleven years before it was recognized to steelworkers, another heavily unionized (but male-dominated) group of workers (Bertrand, 1982).<sup>5</sup> Across the years, weeders obtained several improvements to their working and living conditions, which nonetheless remained particularly hard: a ban on night working shifts; two hours break; protection for pregnant women; sanitation of and anti-mosquitoes measures in the farmsteads where weeders lived, the right to participate in mediation committees for working disputes, and salary raises (Imbergamo, 2014; Snowden, 2003).

While improvements to working conditions continued after the Fascism regime and World War

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<sup>5</sup>While the agreement on the eight-hours day in 1906 was short-lasting (being raised to nine hours in 1907), the cap to eight hours became permanent in 1910 (Imbergamo, 2014).

II, starting at the end of the 1950s, the burgeoning processes of industrialization and urbanization that took place in Italy (including, and even more so, in the areas where rice weeders typically originated from) greatly reduced the influx of weeders (who could easily find better working arrangements in manufacturing), despite the influx of new workers from Southern Italy. Such labor shortages coupled with (and, arguably, also encouraged) the modernization and mechanization of agricultural tasks, including the use of herbicides: the use of such substances became widespread from 1963, and, by the end of the 1960s, they made the work of weeders obsolete (Imbergamo, 2014).

## 4 Data

### 4.1 Data sources

**Rice production.** We obtain data on rice production in Italy in the 1923-1929 period from ISTAT (1936). While in these years the production of rice had reduced compared to the beginning of the century, the Cadastre is the most accurate source providing data on rice production at the town level, while earlier data are considered less reliable by scholars (Zappi Gentili, 1991). Specifically, for each town, we obtain information on the total production of rice in tones and the total number of hectares devoted to rice production. We use the total production of rice and the share of a town's area devoted to rice as our measures of rice production. For robustness, we also use the average production of rice per hectare and an indicator of the presence of rice fields in the town.

**Land suitability.** To measure the land suitability of Italian towns for rice, we obtain data on potential yields for rainfed rice with medium-level of inputs from FAO-GAEZ (FAO, 2015); we also use information for potential yields with medium-level of inputs for other common crops in Italy: wheat, tomato, olive, potato, maize, oat, rye, and barley.<sup>6</sup>

**Votes in referenda.** We obtain town-level data on the 1974 referendum to repeal the Divorce Law (Law n.898/1970) from the Italian Ministry of Interior.<sup>7</sup> As outcome of interest, we use the share of "No" votes against the repeal of the law out of the total votes expressed in a town. Additionally, we collect town-level data on the 1981 referenda on abortion and use the share of "No" against the repeal of the abortion law (L.194/1978) as outcome of interest.

**Female politicians in local councils.** To measure female empowerment in politics, we use data from the Ministry of Interior<sup>8</sup> on the universe of Italian elected politicians in city councils in the 1986-2021 period. For each election cycle, we compute the share of female councilors out of the

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<sup>6</sup>We focus on potential yields for rainfed rice to identify the areas where rice production was historically common in Italy before it became a capital-intensive crop during the XIX century. Potential yields for irrigated rice with medium-level inputs are high for basically every flat area in Italy.

<sup>7</sup>Available online at <https://elezioni.interno.gov.it/>.

<sup>8</sup>Available online at <https://dait.interno.gov.it/elezioni/anagrafe-amministratori>.



total number of councilors. We also build an indicator variable for the presence of a female mayor in the town.

**Nursery schools and other town-level variables.** We use information from ISTAT on the presence of children enrolled in nursery schools by town in 1991, 2001 and 2011.<sup>9</sup> We build an indicator variable for the presence of a nursery school in a town if at least one child from that town is counted as enrolled in a nursery school.<sup>10</sup>

**Other control variables.** Finally, we use data from USGS (2005) to compute a town's average elevation and slope; we further compute the distance of towns from Rome and from the coast. We also add an indicator for whether they were the province capital in 1951.<sup>11</sup>

## 4.2 Summary statistics

In Table 1 we present summary statistics for the variables we use in the empirical strategy. Cultivation of rice, on average, pertained a small fraction of towns' area in 1923-1929. However, there exists meaningful variation in such a measure (as well as in total production of rice), with towns in the rice belt having the vast majority of their area allocated to rice fields. This pattern is also clear when looking at Figures 1, 2 and 3, which show how rice production, the share of land devoted to rice, and potential yield for rice are extremely high for towns in the center of Northwestern Italy.

The share of "No" votes against the repeal of the Divorce Law in the 1974 referendum is around 49% for the mean town of our sample<sup>12</sup>; as Figure 4 shows, the share of "No" votes was substantially higher in the Centre and Northwestern Italy (the areas that include towns producing rice).

The share of female councilors in Italian city councils is, on average, quite low (19%); additionally, in no town or year we observe the share of women reaches 50%; Figure 5 shows that high shares of female councilors can be observed in every region, while being more common in Centre Italy, similarly to other indicators of female empowerment.

Most Italian towns hosted a nursery school both in 1991 and 2011. Nonetheless, variation in the presence of nursery schools in Northwestern Italy is substantial, as can be noticed in Figure 6.

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<sup>9</sup>In the analyses split by single years, we focus on information for 1991 and 2011, as data on nursery schools in 2001 is missing for more than 38% of the sample.

<sup>10</sup>In the main analysis we focus on the presence of a nursery school (instead of the number of enrolled children) to abstract from a measure that may be influenced by differences in population, age structure, and fertility rates. In the appendix, we also provide evidence of the effects by looking at the number of enrolled children.

<sup>11</sup>We also use data from ISTAT to obtain information on towns' area and population in 1951. 1951 is the first census year for which ISTAT provides full digitized data on towns' population. Data from ISTAT available at: <https://ottomilacensus.istat.it/>

<sup>12</sup>While the referendum was eventually not approved (and the law not repealed), the result was significantly driven by voters in large Italian cities, while small towns (the majority in the sample) were more likely to vote to repeal the Divorce Law.



## 5 Identification strategy

In this section, we elaborate on the identification strategy that allows us to evaluate the consequences of the historical presence of rice weeders in Italy on several indicators of female empowerment. Unfortunately, no geographically disaggregated data on the presence of rice weeders are available. For this reason, we will use different measures of rice production to proxy for the presence of weeders. However, rice production in a town is probably determined by cultural and institutional factors that may directly impact women's empowerment, political participation, and policy making. As a consequence, OLS analyses on the effects of rice production on female empowerment would deliver a biased estimation of the effect of rice production on these outcomes. For this reason, our identification strategy relies on an instrumental variable estimation. We use the potential yield for rice in a town as an instrumental variable to predict rice production. Potential yield is an index computed by FAO-GAEZ (FAO, 2015) using time-invariant geographical and soil characteristics to measure whether and how much agricultural land in a particular territory is suitable for a specific crop. This measure is frequently used in the literature as an exogenous determinant of the cultivation of a specific crop in an area (e.g., Alesina et al., 2013). Hence, we use the potential yield for rice in town  $i$  ( $Rice\ Potential\ Yield_i$ ) to predict rice production in the following first stage regression:

$$Rice_i = \pi + \theta Rice\ Potential\ Yield_i + \sum_{c \in C} \mu_c Potential\ Yield_{ic} + (\Gamma_i \sigma) + \xi_i \quad (5.1)$$

where  $Rice_i$  is either the total annual production of rice in town  $i$  or the share of town's  $i$  area cultivated with rice. To take into account the fact that a town with high potential yield for rice may also have high (or even higher) potential yield for other crops ( $c \in C$ ), in our main specification, we control for the potential yield of a number of other crops: tomato, olive, potato, summer wheat, maize, oat, summer rye, and barley. The intuition behind this strategy is that rice cultivation in a town is likely to be determined by the comparative advantage of rice with respect to other crops. In some specifications, we additionally control for a vector of geographical (or town-level) controls ( $\Gamma_i$ ): the area of the town (only when the explanatory variable is total production), whether the town is a province capital, distance from the coast, distance from Rome, slope, log elevation, population in 1951. The predicted rice production and the same set of control variables are then used as independent variables in the second stage regression:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta \widehat{Rice}_i + \sum_{c \in C} \gamma_c Potential\ Yield_{ic} + (\Gamma_i \delta) + \varepsilon_i \quad (5.2)$$

where  $Y_i$  is either the share of votes against the repeal of divorce law in the 1974 referendum, the share of women elected in a town's council (elections between 1986 and 2021), or whether town  $i$  has a nursery school (in 1991 and 2011). When considering outcomes that we can observe

in multiple years (the share of female council members and the nursery schools' data) we pool together data for different years and add electoral cycle or year fixed effects. In addition, as a robustness check we add region fixed effects.<sup>13</sup>

Two sets of concerns may arise regarding our strategy to measure the impact of women rice weeders on women's political participation and policy outcomes. First, two main identification assumptions are needed for our instrument to be valid: relevance and exclusion restriction. We show that our instrument is relevant in section 5.1 when discussing the results from the first stage regression in equation 5.1. Regarding the exclusion restriction, it is reasonable to assume that potential yield for rice (a geographical index summarizing how much an area is suitable for rice cultivation) does impact our outcomes of interest only through actual rice cultivation and production.

Second, we use rice cultivation as a proxy for women weeders' presence. In fact, rice cultivation, even if as good as random, may have an effect on our outcomes of interest independently of the presence of female rice weeders through two main channels: income and socialist presence. We discuss the relevance of these potential threats in section 7.

## 5.1 First stage: Rice potential yield and rice production

In Table 2 we test for the relevance condition for the validity of our instrument by regressing our two indicators for rice production on our measure of potential yield for rice.<sup>14</sup> The results show that higher potential yield for rainfed rice in a town significantly predicts both larger production of rice and larger share of the town's area devoted to rice cultivation in 1923-1929. Such evidence confirms the spatial patterns observed in Figures 2 and 3, where it is evident that rice production in Italy is concentrated only in the areas where the potential yield for rice is higher.

As already discussed, the potential yield for rice could predict larger production of rice simply because they capture generalized suitability for agriculture<sup>15</sup>; however, we find that our instrument is significant both in bivariate regressions and controlling for the potential yield of other crops, therefore attenuating this concern.

In all results tables in section 6, we report  $F$ -statistics on excluded instrument for every regression of our main results; in the vast majority of cases, the first stage  $F$ -statistics suggest we do not face a weak instrument problem.

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<sup>13</sup>We also run reduced form regressions of the form:  $Y_i = \alpha + \beta \text{Rice Potential Yield}_i + \sum_{c \in C} \gamma_c \text{Potential Yield}_{ic} + (\mathbf{T}_i \delta) + \varepsilon_i$

<sup>14</sup>In the first stage and reduced form results, we standardize our measure of potential yield for rice to facilitate interpretation of the coefficients.

<sup>15</sup>A similar case has been faced by Lowes and Montero (2021); when studying potential yields for cassava in Cameroon and former French Equatorial Africa.

## 6 Results

In this section, we present the results of our instrumental variable analysis, where we test for the effects of the historical presence of rice weeders in Italy (as proxied by the production of rice) on several indicators of female empowerment.

We summarise our main results in Table 3. We present instrumental variable regressions of our three main outcomes of interest (the share of votes in favor of divorce in the 1974 referendum, the share of female politicians in city councils, and the presence of nursery schools in a town) on our two proxies of the presence of rice weeders in a town, i.e., the share of a town's area devoted to rice cultivation and the annual production of rice in the 1923-1929 period (measured in 100 tons); each column is based on our preferred specification, which includes controls for potential yields of relevant crops other than rice.

For every combination of outcome of interest and proxy of the presence of rice weeders, the results show that the production of rice in a town has a significant effect on female empowerment: towns where rice production was larger had higher shares of votes in favor of divorce in 1974, more female politicians in their city councils in the 1986-2021 period, and were more likely to host a nursery school between 1991 and 2011.

In the following sections, we discuss our results in greater detail, separately for each outcome of interest.

### 6.1 Cultivation of rice and votes against the repeal of the Divorce Law

The introduction of divorce in Italy in 1970 and the 1974 referendum to repeal it was accompanied by fierce political fights, with Catholic groups (and politicians) intensely campaigning to repeal the law and feminist groups supporting its retention (Petricola, 2006). The introduction of divorce arguably improved the possibility of emancipation of women in Italy. Indeed, in other contexts, the introduction of divorce (especially the unilateral one) improves the situation of women by decreasing domestic violence, women's suicides, and the likelihood that one spouse received financial support from the other (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2006; Stevenson, 2007). In light of this evidence, we look at support for divorce in a town (or, better, opposition to the repeal of the Divorce Law) as a measure of gender attitudes and, in particular, as a measure of support for women's emancipation.

In Table 4 we reproduce (in columns (2) and (6)) the results on votes for Divorce Law already presented in Table 3 and test for their robustness to the inclusion of several sets of controls. The results show that, both in the bivariate case and including town-level controls, towns with larger production of rice had significantly higher shares of votes against repealing the Divorce Law, i.e., in favor of divorce. The coefficients report the effect of unitary increases in our two independent variables; that is, a shift from null to total coverage of rice of a town's area and a 100 tones increase in rice production for our second regressor. To understand the magnitude of our effects, it is helpful

to interpret them in terms of standard deviations changes of the regressors (0.06 for the ratio of land cultivating rice and 6.49 for total rice production). Focusing on our preferred specification, results are quantitatively meaningful: a 1 SD increase in the share of land devoted to rice (as predicted by differences in potential yield for rice) is associated with a 10.7 p.p. higher share of votes in favor of divorce in a town, while a 1 SD increase in the amount of rice produced in a town in the 1923-1929 period (again, as predicted by differences in potential yield for rice) is associated with a 9.5 p.p. increase in the share of votes for divorce.

It is important to notice that the share of votes in favor of divorce, while being an arguably valid proxy for the gender attitudes of citizens in a town, is an outcome that pertains to both male and female voters' behavior. Under the assumption that rice production affects votes for divorce through the historical presence of (unionized) rice weeders, this result is consistent with two (not mutually exclusive) interpretations: women in the rice belt were more conscious of their condition, felt more entitled to civil rights (after having obtained important rights as workers), and voted to obtain them; men in the rice belt, on the other side, may have learned to recognize legitimacy to women's requests, and were more prone to accept new rights that would have arguably benefited women more.

## 6.2 Cultivation of rice and female politicians

The presence of women in powerful positions, such as in politics ([Alesina et al., 2013](#)) and in managerial positions ([Xue, 2016](#)), has been commonly used as a measure of female empowerment, signaling the participation of women in activities performed outside the house. Following this line of research, we test for the effect of the presence of rice weeders on the participation of women to local politics, as measured by the share of (elected) female politicians in city councils.

Table 5 reports results from such a test, replicating results from Table 3 in columns (2) and (6) and adding specifications with different sets of controls. As we observe several electoral cycles for each town (and, consequently, several elected city councils for each town), each regression includes electoral cycle fixed effects.<sup>16</sup> Results show that towns with larger production of rice have significantly more women in politics; a 1 SD increase in the share of land cultivating rice (as predicted by differences in potential yield for rice) is associated with an 8 p.p. larger share of women in city councils, a 42% increase compared to the mean; a 1 SD increase in rice produced in a town in the 1923-1929 period is instead associated with a 6.9 p.p. increase in the share of female councilors. Additionally, Figures 7 and 8 show that the effects are positive and quite stable for each electoral cycle that took place in Italian towns between 1986 and 2021, suggesting strong persistence of the effect of the presence of rice weeders on female political representation.

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<sup>16</sup>Local elections in Italy take place in different years for different towns; while we consider the inclusion of fixed effects for electoral cycles as the most appropriate choice to account for multiple observations per town, our results are robust to using election year fixed effects instead of electoral cycle ones.

These results suggest that women living in the rice belt were (and are) more empowered, compared to women in other Italian towns, and therefore more likely to participate in politics. The observed patterns may arise if women living in the rice fields are more interested in participating in politics because of looser time constraints associated with their home duties, arguably because of higher bargaining power in the household (see, e.g., [Schlozman et al., 1994](#)), or being more self-confident ([Fox and Lawless, 2004](#)). Additionally, by looking at the number of *elected* politicians,<sup>17</sup> our results may be affected by the role of parties, so that women in the Italian rice belt would not simply be more likely to run, but also more able to be elected once running for office, winning the within-party competition ([Kunovich and Paxton, 2005](#)).<sup>18</sup> These results are consistent with rice weeders both being more prone to political participation and leaving a vivid memory of their mobilization on the following generation of women in towns where they used to work.

### 6.3 Cultivation of rice and nursery schools

In order to test for the policy consequences of the past presence of rice weeders (and their history of empowerment), we explore whether governments of towns with a historical tradition of rice production provided public goods that were particularly relevant for women. When analyzing public goods provided by town governments in the Italian setting, the presence of nursery schools is a natural candidate to study for investment in female-relevant public goods ([Bianchi et al., 2021](#)). Nursery school provision is a service particularly relevant for women, as it may be essential to allow them to work; additionally, town governments are responsible to create (and fund) nursery schools, so that differences in constituencies between towns can lead to differences in the provision of such a service; finally, also because of the cost of private nursery schools, demand for public nursery schools is vastly higher than supply, making their funding a salient spending area.

In Table 6 we test for the effect of rice production in the 1923-1929 period on the presence of nursery schools between 1991 and 2011. Columns (2) and (6) replicate results from Table 3, while other columns report results from different specifications.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of the specification, results show that towns where rice was more relevant are significantly more likely to provide nursery school services. A 1 SD increase in the share of land devoted to rice (as predicted by our instrument) is associated with a 64.8 p.p. increase in the likelihood to host a nursery school, while a 1 SD increase in rice produced in a town is associated with a 53 p.p. increase in such likelihood.

Both female voters ([Funk and Gathmann, 2015](#)) and politicians ([Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004](#)) have been shown to have different preferences over public spending; when given the chance, women decide to preferably allocate public funds to programs more aligned with their preferences.

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<sup>17</sup>Wide coverage town-level data on candidates to Italian town elections are, unfortunately, not available.

<sup>18</sup>On the other side, the smaller and mostly not significant results on the likelihood to have a female mayor do not support this hypothesis.

<sup>19</sup>We use data from three Censuses, ending up with three observations per town (except for missing values in 2001); each specification includes census year fixed effects.

Therefore, also in light of previous results on the share of elected politicians, evidence from this section can be consistent with both politicians providing public services targeted towards a prominent group of voters (i.e., relatively more empowered women), and with female politicians elected in larger numbers who succeed to push the government to invest more in spending categories that appeal the group they belong to.

## 6.4 Additional analyses and robustness

In Table A.1 we find evidence fully consistent with our main results when looking at reduced form estimates of the effect of land for rice on our measures of female empowerment.

We also obtain consistent results when using alternative measures of rice production, i.e., average production per hectare and an indicator variable for the presence of rice fields in a town, as shown in Table A.2; such evidence corroborates our main results, despite the risk of capturing effects of differences in productivity of farmers from different towns (in the case of average production), or of losing important sources of variation (in the case of the indicator variable), which are the reasons leading us to choose the two measures used in the main analysis.

In Table A.3 we show that our results are robust (and are, in fact, larger in magnitude) to restricting the analysis to towns in Northern Italy. In Tables A.4 and A.5 we show that the effect of rice production (and of the former presence of rice weeders) on the provision of nursery school services is statistically significant (although less robust) also when observing towns separately in 1991 and 2011. In table A.6 we also provide results that rice production in 1923-1929 is associated with another measure of nursery school provision, i.e., the share of children enrolled in nursery schools.<sup>20</sup>

Evidence from Table A.7 suggests the past presence of rice weeders could be (positively) associated with the likelihood of electing a female mayor; however, results are imprecisely estimated and not robust to the inclusion of controls.

Finally, in Table A.8 we detect no clear pattern in the relationship between rice production and votes supporting the legalization of abortion (from the 1981 referendum).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Such a measure is built as the share of children enrolled in nursery schools over a town's population; in the absence of information for each town on the number of children eligible to be enrolled, we focus on the indicator variable for the presence of nursery school services.

<sup>21</sup>This result seems at odds with previous results on votes in favor of civil rights and evidence regarding female empowerment. While suggestive, a potential explanation may come from anecdotal evidence claiming women in the rice belt were particularly successful in birth-control practices, at least since the beginning of the XIX century (Zappi Gentili, 1991). An interpretation consistent with results on abortion, therefore, could be that legal abortion was not an issue particularly prominent for rice weeders, or at least not comparatively more prominent for them than for women from other Italian towns.

## 7 Discussion

### 7.1 Cultivation of rice and unionization of rice weeders

Why did rice weeders, among other categories of women facing arduous working conditions, have such a high level of unionization, and why did this affect their political empowerment? As mentioned in section 3, among other factors that made rice weeders workers with high bargaining power (including, crucially, working in teams), the Italian anti-malaria campaign and the means of its implementation played an important role in raising weeders consciousness about their condition as workers and women.

Starting in the 1890s, the Italian central government, in cooperation with local authorities, launched several initiatives to eradicate malaria, which was endemic and affected a third of the Italian territory (Majori, 2010); such initiatives mostly affected three pilot zones, which included the rice district in Northern Italy. The measures involved a massive provision of quinine at a subsidized price, an increase in the number of facilities distributing quinine, hospitals treating malaria patients, and information campaigns on self-protection and the use of quinine. Funding for these measures came from a quinine tax levied on landlords of towns of malarial zones. In such a way, the state's effort to eradicate malaria affected the perception of workers and changed their relationship with employers, signaling that workers were entitled to healthy and fair working conditions, that malaria was the result of negligence, and that landlords had to be kept accountable of such negligence (Snowden, 2003).

As gaining citizens' trust proved difficult, physicians (as well as teachers of peasant schools) coupled the government's effort with intense volunteering activity aimed at educating agricultural workers, later organizing in two associations operating to eradicate malaria.<sup>22</sup> Most volunteers of the anti-malaria campaign were close to the socialist movement (Snowden, 2003), and their teaching often included not only instructions on malaria prophylaxis but also lessons on workers' rights, women's rights, and feminism. The several components of the malaria eradication campaign paved the way to the unionization of rice weeders, by increasing consciousness about their rights; such a situation (coupled with the rising interest of unions) made rice weeders a strongly organized group able to protest effectively against their employers and arguably made them more willing to mobilize for women's rights also in the political arena. While most of the malarial zones were exposed to the campaign and to the radical teachings by volunteers, the anti-malaria effort likely spurred the mobilization and unionization of women especially in the rice district, as in this area malaria was a disease predominantly affecting women (who mainly worked in flooded fields) while in other malarial zones in Southern Italy men were overwhelmingly more targeted by the disease.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>*Society for the Study of Malaria and National League against Malaria.*

<sup>23</sup>Wheat production in Southern Italy had been, until the end of the XIX century, almost exclusively a prerogative of male workers. While the mass out-migration and World War I balanced the gender composition of the agricultural workforce also in Southern Italy, in these areas malaria still affected both genders, so that the association between the movement against malaria and the



## 7.2 Attributing the effects of rice production to the presence of female weed-ers

Throughout our empirical analysis, mainly for lack of fine-grained data on the presence (and the number) of rice weeders in Italian towns, we used rice production as a proxy for rice weeders. Can, instead, the effects we estimate be attributed to other socio-economic characteristics of towns commonly associated with rice production, like differences in income or political views of citizens?

In Italy, rice was a very valuable crop compared to, e.g., wheat or maize (Camp, 1992) and this may have caused rice-producing towns to be wealthier than others. If income were correlated with our outcomes of interest, we would be capturing a causal effect of rice production that does not transmit through the presence of weeders. Yet, this is not obvious. In fact, the comparison group for towns producing rice includes towns where manufacturing is predominant and the average income is probably higher.<sup>24</sup>

Regarding the socialist presence, we may think that agricultural workers in rice-producing areas, independently of their gender, may have been subject to stronger socialist propaganda (being more likely to be employed by capitalist employers) and this may have affected political outcomes directly. Indeed, female weeders were frequently organized under the guidance of socialist leaders and ideology. Nevertheless, being Italy a predominantly agricultural economy until the end of the 1950s, socialists and communists heavily invested in mobilizing workers in the countryside also where no rice production (nor female rice weeders) was present. An example of this activism is Giuseppe Di Vittorio, the founder of the biggest labor union in Italy (CGIL) and communist politician, who started his political activity in the countryside of Apulia. In addition, massive and widespread land occupations and strikes among landless farmers characterized the whole Italian countryside between 1946 and 1950 (Percoco, 2014; Caprettini et al., 2022).<sup>25</sup> Such anecdotal evidence suggests that, even if female weeders were mobilized by socialists and communist leaders, socialist mobilization was not rare among Italian agricultural workers. Yet, weeders' activism was unique among female agricultural workers.

## 8 Conclusion

In this paper, we study the effects of past work practices in agriculture on female empowerment, focusing on the case of Italian female rice weeders between the second half of the XIX century and the first half of the XX century. Analyzing differences in the presence of rice cultivation across

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movement for women's rights was less marked.

<sup>24</sup>This is not a concern for our identification strategy because we predict rice cultivation presence using geographically determined (exogenous) potential yield.

<sup>25</sup>The most infamous episode being the Portella della Ginestra massacre in 1947, plausibly commissioned for political reasons by anti-communist groups, where 11 agricultural workers and peasants were killed and 27 wounded by bandits during the Labor Day rally; such an episode signals the relevance of the communist/socialist movement in Sicily and its countryside during the 1950s.

Italian towns, we find that in towns where rice production is more common (and where, therefore, female rice weeders worked until the end of the 1960s), more voters supported divorce in 1974, more women get elected in city councils in the 1986-2021 elections, and local governments are more likely to provide nursery school services since 1991.

Our results are in line with previous studies on the long-run effects of traditional work practices on women's labor force participation, their bargaining power within the household, and beliefs about women (Qian, 2008; Alesina et al., 2013; Xue, 2016). While previous research studied settings in which female empowerment arises from a tradition of high relevance of women for the household's income, through the case of Italian rice weeders we point out another important factor determining empowerment, complementary to income: the ability of women to mobilize and engage in collective action. Such effects could potentially extend out of agriculture and be found in other work settings in which women work in teams and have the power to improve their condition through group bargaining.

The detectable effects of the presence of female rice weeders on female empowerment even decades after the disappearance of weeding as an occupation suggests the memory of unionized working women can affect female empowerment of generations subsequent to the ones directly exposed to weeding. It is still an open question whether the obsolescence of weeders at the beginning of the 1970s decreased (or, in any case, changed) their political power by arguably reducing their bargaining power as workers.

Finally, another question to be addressed in future research work is whether the effects we find will fade away or persist even when towns' voters will be only composed of citizens who could never choose to work as weeders and whether persistence could work through cultural (e.g., within-family intergenerational transmission of values) or institutional channels.

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# Tables and Figures

**Table 1: Summary statistics**

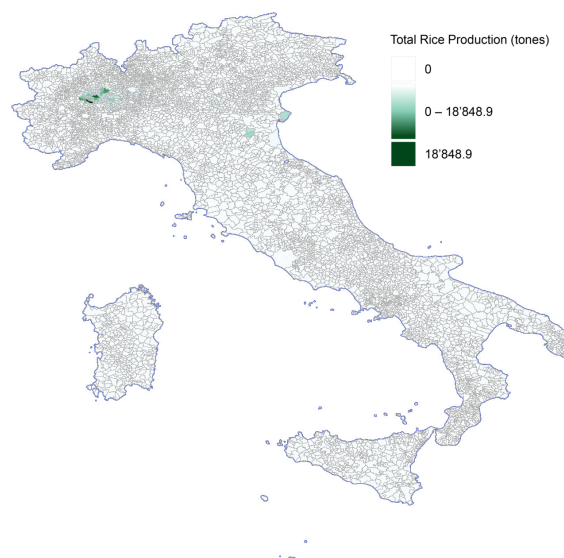
	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Rice Potential Yield (Mid-Input, Rainfed)	7785	0.53	1.39	0.00	5.68
Ratio of Land Cultivating Rice	7785	0.01	0.06	0.00	0.84
Total Production of Rice (1923-1929, 100t)	7785	0.89	6.49	0.00	188.49
Share of "No" to repeal Divorce Law	7662	0.49	0.15	0.08	0.94
Average Share of Female Councilors (1986-2021)	7782	0.19	0.06	0.01	0.44
Nursery School in 1991	7785	0.60	0.49	0.00	1.00
Nursery School in 2011	7776	0.59	0.49	0.00	1.00
Area (ha)	7785	3853.23	5259.70	14.94	149943.69
Distance from Coast (km)	7785	69.40	55.13	0.02	229.28
Distance from Province Capital (km)	7785	29.85	18.02	0.00	209.76
Distance from Rome (km)	7785	383.11	143.23	0.00	699.61
Slope (degrees)	7785	3.02	2.92	0.01	16.16
Log Elevation (m)	7733	5.55	1.34	-3.86	7.94
Population in 1951	7773	6096.66	31787.29	0	1651754

*Notes:* The table reports summary statistics for the main regression variables of interest: potential yield for rainfed rice with medium inputs level from FAO-GAEZ (see Section 4 for additional details), share of a town's area cultivated with rice, total production of rice in the town in hundreds of tons, the share of votes in a town against the repeal of divorce in the 1974 referendum, the share of women elected in the town's city council (elections between 1986 and 2021), whether the town had a nursery school in 1991 and 2011, area of the town in hectares, distance from the coast, distance from province capital in kilometers, slope in degrees, log elevation in meters, town's population in 1951.

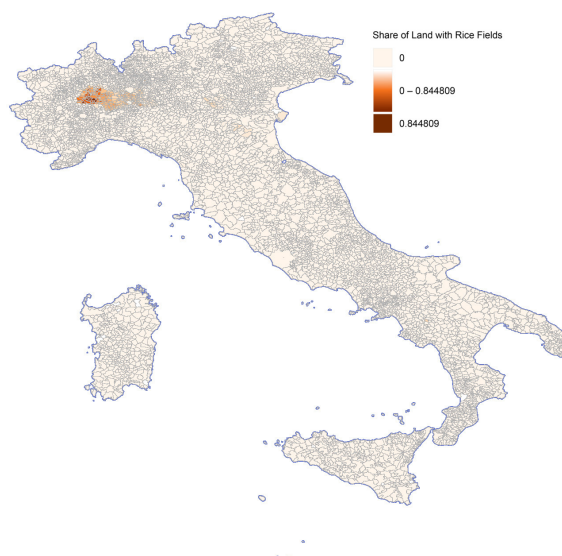
**Figure 1: Rice potential yield**



**Figure 2: Total rice production**

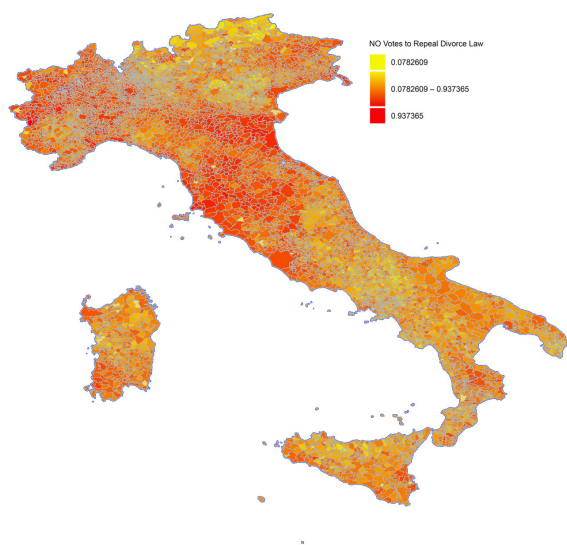


**Figure 3: Share of land cultivated with rice**

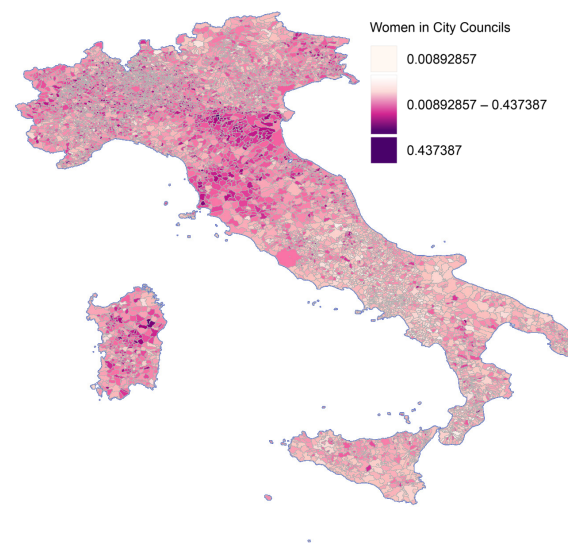


*Notes:* Figure 1 maps rice potential yield in Italian towns from [FAO \(2015\)](#). Figure 2 maps the annual total rice production in Italian towns between 1923 and 1929. Figure 3 maps the share of a town's area cultivated with rice. Darker colors are associated with larger values.

**Figure 4: Share against repeal of divorce**



**Figure 5: Share of women in city councils**



**Figure 6: Presence of nursery schools**



*Notes:* Figure 4 maps the share of "No" votes, against the repeal of divorce in 1974 referendum (red = higher share). Figure 5 maps the share of women in city council for Italian towns in election years between 1986 and 2021 (purple = larger share). Figure 6 maps whether a town has a nursery school (purple) or not (white).

**Table 2: First stage: Potential yield for rice and rice production**

	Ratio of Land Cultivating Rice		Total Production of Rice (1923-1929, 100t)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Land Suitability for Rice (Mid-Input, Rainfed)	0.00715*** (0.000907)	0.00404*** (0.00101)	0.673*** (0.100)	0.496*** (0.107)
DV Mean	0.00996	0.00996	89.15	89.15
Crop controls	no	yes	no	yes
Observations	7785	7785	7785	7785
R-squared	0.0147	0.0514	0.0108	0.0350

Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Notes:* The table reports  $\theta$  coefficients from first stage equation 5.1. Units of observation are towns. In columns 1 and 2, the dependent variable is the share of the town's area cultivated with rice. In columns 3 and 4, the dependent variable is the average total production of rice in the town between 1923 and 1929. The explanatory variable is the (standardized) potential yield for rainfed rice with medium inputs level from FAO-GAEZ (see Section 4 for additional details). Columns 2 and 4 control for the potential yield with medium inputs level of a number of other crops: tomato, olive, potato, summer wheat, maize, oat, summer rye, and barley. *DV Mean* is the dependent variable mean. Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

**Table 3: Cultivation of rice and female empowerment**

	NO to Repeal Divorce Law		Women in City Council		Presence of Nursery Schools	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Ratio of Land Cultivating Rice	1.7745*** (0.6184)		1.3262*** (0.3867)		10.7916*** (3.2659)	
Total Production(1923-1929, 100t)		0.0146*** (0.0048)		0.0107*** (0.0028)		0.0821*** (0.0214)
DV Mean	0.49	0.49	0.19	0.19	0.62	0.62
F-Statistics of excluded instrument	23.46	28.32	166.61	207.02	51.85	68.31
Crop Controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Year/Election FE			yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	7,598	7,598	64,590	64,590	20,197	20,197

*Notes:* The table reports  $\beta$  coefficients from the IV regression from Equation 5.2. Units of observation are town in columns 1 and 2, town  $\times$  election in columns 3 and 4, and town\*year in columns 5 and 6. In columns 1 and 2 the dependent variable is the share of votes in a town against the repeal of divorce in the 1974 referendum. In columns 3 and 4, the dependent variable is the share of women elected in the town's city council (elections between 1986 and 2021). In columns 5 and 6, the dependent variable is a dummy equal to 1 if the town has a nursery school and 0 otherwise (years 1991 and 2011). The explanatory variables are the share of the town's area cultivated with rice (columns 1, 3, and 5) and the average total production of rice in hundreds of tons in the town between 1923 and 1929 (columns 2, 4, and 6). They are instrumented by the (standardized) potential yield for rainfed rice with medium inputs level from FAO-GAEZ (see Section 4 for additional details). Columns 3 and 4 control for election FE and columns 5 and 6 control for year FE. All columns control for the potential yield with medium inputs level of a number of other crops: tomato, olive, potato, summer wheat, maize, oat, summer rye, and barley. *DV Mean* is the dependent variable mean. In parentheses: robust standard errors (columns 1 and 2) and clustered standard errors at the town level (columns 3 to 6). \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

**Table 4: Cultivation of rice and votes for divorce**

	NO to Repeal of Divorce Law							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Ratio of Land Cultivating Rice	1.6137*** (0.2653)	1.7745*** (0.6184)	2.7938** (1.2288)	1.3180** (0.6197)				
Total Production (1923-1929, 100t)					0.0171*** (0.0030)	0.0146*** (0.0048)	0.0189*** (0.0068)	0.0088** (0.0037)
DV Mean	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.49
F-Statistic	119.72	23.46	9.51	21.19	88.98	28.32	16.95	38.06
Crop Controls	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
Geographical Controls	no	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	yes
Region FE	no	no	no	yes	no	no	no	yes
Observations	7,598	7,598	7,598	7,598	7,598	7,598	7,598	7,598

Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Notes:* The table reports  $\beta$  coefficients from the IV regression from Equation 5.2, verifying robustness to different specifications. Units of observation are towns. The dependent variable is the share of votes in a town against the repeal of divorce in the 1974 referendum. The explanatory variables are the share of the town's area cultivated with rice (columns 1 to 4) and the average total production of rice in hundreds of tons in the town between 1923 and 1929 (columns 5 to 8). They are instrumented by the (standardized) potential yield for rainfed rice with medium inputs level from FAO-GAEZ (see Section 4 for additional details). Columns 1 and 5 do not include controls, columns 2 and 6 control for the potential yield with medium inputs level of a number of other crops: tomato, olive, potato, summer wheat, maize, oat, summer rye, and barley. Columns 3 and 7 add geographical controls: the area of the town (only when the explanatory variable is total production), whether the town is a province capital, distance from the coast, distance from Rome, slope, log elevation, population in 1951. Columns 4 and 8 add region fixed-effects. *DV Mean* is the dependent variable mean. Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

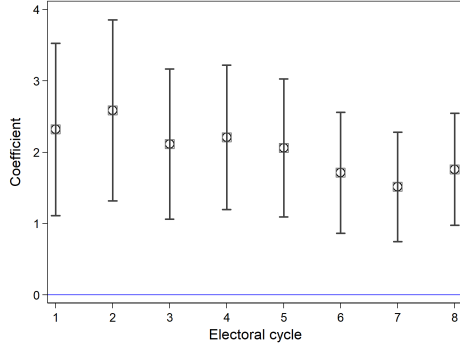
**Table 5: Cultivation of rice and female politicians**

	Women in City Council							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Ratio of Land Cultivating Rice	1.5377*** (0.2058)	1.3258*** (0.3866)	1.4144** (0.6706)	0.5774** (0.2813)				
Total Production (1923-1929, 100t)					0.0162*** (0.0025)	0.0107*** (0.0028)	0.0090*** (0.0033)	0.0038** (0.0016)
DV Mean	0.19	0.19	0.19	0.19	0.19	0.19	0.19	0.19
F-Statistic	954.86	166.62	59.53	159.54	705.70	207.03	117.49	296.18
Crop Controls	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
Geographical Controls	no	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	yes
Region FE	no	no	no	yes	no	no	no	yes
Election FE	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	64,590	64,590	64,590	64,590	64,590	64,590	64,590	64,590

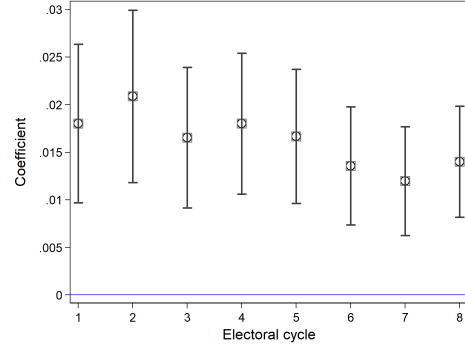
Clustered standard errors in parentheses (town level). \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Notes:* The table reports  $\beta$  coefficients from the IV regression from Equation 5.2, verifying robustness to different specifications. Units of observation are town  $\times$  election. The dependent variable is the share of women elected in the town's city council (elections between 1986 and 2021). The explanatory variables are the share of the town's area cultivated with rice (columns 1 to 4) and the average total rice production in hundreds of tons in the town between 1923 and 1929 (columns 5 to 8). They are instrumented by the (standardized) potential yield for rainfed rice with medium inputs level from FAO-GAEZ (see Section 4 for additional details). All regressions include electoral cycle fixed effects. Columns 1 and 5 do not include additional controls, columns 2 and 6 additionally control for the potential yield with medium inputs level of a number of other crops: tomato, olive, potato, summer wheat, maize, oat, summer rye, and barley. Columns 3 and 7 add geographical controls: the area of the town (only when the explanatory variable is total production), whether the town is a province capital, distance from the coast, distance from Rome, slope, log elevation, population in 1951. Columns 4 and 8 add region fixed-effects. *DV Mean* is the dependent variable mean. In parentheses: standard errors clustered at the town level. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

**Figure 7: Rice land ratio and female politicians: effects by election cycle**



**Figure 8: Rice production and female politicians: effects by election cycle**



*Notes:* Figures 7 plots estimated coefficients from a single regression of the effects of the share of a town's land cultivating rice on the share of women in city councils, separately for each election cycle of the town in the 1986-2021 period. Figure 8 show coefficients from a similar regression using total production of rice (in 100 tones) as proxy for rice cultivation. Both regression include potential yields for tomato, olive, potato, summer wheat, maize, oat, summer rye and barley as controls.

**Table 6: Cultivation of rice and nursery schools**

	Presence of Nursery Schools							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Ratio of Land Cultivating Rice	6.2928*** (1.0728)	10.7916*** (3.2659)	18.2053** (8.3432)	9.4297** (3.9699)				
Total Production (1923-1929, 100t)					0.0647*** (0.0122)	0.0821*** (0.0214)	0.1063*** (0.0326)	0.0553*** (0.0168)
DV Mean	0.62	0.62	0.62	0.62	0.62	0.62	0.62	0.62
F-Statistic	281.47	51.85	17.75	45.20	205.97	68.31	39.34	97.74
Crop Controls	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
Geographical Controls	no	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	yes
Region FE	no	no	no	yes	no	no	no	yes
Year FE	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	20,197	20,197	20,197	20,197	20,197	20,197	20,197	20,197

Clustered standard errors in parentheses (town level). \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

*Notes:* The table reports  $\beta$  coefficients from the IV regression from Equation 5.2, verifying robustness to different specifications. Units of observation are town\*year. The dependent variable is a dummy equal to 1 if the town has a nursery school, and 0 otherwise (years 1991 and 2011). The explanatory variables are the share of the town's area cultivated with rice (columns 1 to 4) and the average total production of rice in hundreds of tons in the town between 1923 and 1929 (columns 5 to 8). They are instrumented by the (standardized) potential yield for rainfed rice with medium inputs level from FAO-GAEZ (see Section 4 for additional details). All regressions include census year fixed effects. Columns 1 and 5 do not include additional controls, columns 2 and 6 additionally control for the potential yield with medium inputs level of a number of other crops: tomato, olive, potato, summer wheat, maize, oat, summer rye, and barley. Columns 3 and 7 add geographical controls: the area of the town (only when the explanatory variable is total production), whether the town is a province capital, distance from the coast, distance from Rome, slope, log elevation, population in 1951. Columns 4 and 8 add region fixed effects. *DV Mean* is the dependent variable mean. In parentheses: standard errors clustered at the town level. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

# Appendix

## Additional tables

**Table A.1: Cultivation of rice and female empowerment - Reduced form estimates**

	NO to Repeal Divorce Law	Women in City Council	Presence of Nursery Schools
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Rice (Mid-Input, Rainfed)	0.0077*** (0.0022)	0.0052*** (0.0008)	0.0409*** (0.0052)
DV Mean	0.49	0.19	0.62
Crop Controls	yes	yes	yes
Year/Election FE		yes	yes
Observations	7598	64590	20197

*Notes:* The table reports  $\beta$  coefficients from the reduced form Equation 13. Units of observation are town in column 1, town  $\times$  election in column 2, and town\*year in column 3. In column 1 the dependent variable is the share of votes in a town against the repeal of divorce in the 1974 referendum. In column 2 the dependent variable is the share of women elected in the town's city council (elections between 1986 and 2021). In column 3 the dependent variable is a dummy equal to 1 if the town has a nursery school, 0 otherwise (years 1991 and 2011). The explanatory variable is the (standardised) potential yield for rainfed rice with medium inputs level from FAO-GAEZ (see Section 4 for additional details). Column 2 controls for election FE and column 3 controls for year FE. All columns control for the potential yield with medium inputs level of a number of other crops: tomato, olive, potato, summer wheat, maize, oat, summer rye, and barley. *DV Mean* is the dependent variable mean. In parentheses: robust standard errors (column 1) and clustered standard errors at the town-level (column 2 and 3). \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .



**Table A.2: Cultivation of rice and female empowerment - Other measures of rice production**

	"No" to Repeal Divorce Law		Women in City Council		Presence of Nursery Schools	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Average Production (1923-1929, t/ha)	0.0964*** (0.0323)		0.0758*** (0.0233)		0.5812*** (0.1827)	
Actual Rice Produced (Dummy)		0.4003*** (0.1326)		0.3066*** (0.0857)		2.3691*** (0.6766)
DV Mean	0.49	0.49	0.19	0.19	0.62	0.62
F-Statistic	23.72	30.63	151.39	204.99	49.42	65.89
Crop Controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Year/Election FE			yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	7,598	7,598	64,590	64,590	20,197	20,197

Clustered standard errors in parentheses (town level). \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Notes:* The table reports  $\beta$  coefficients from the IV regression from Equation 5.2, checking robustness using other measures of rice cultivation. Units of observation are town in column 1 and 2, town  $\times$  election in column 3 and 4, and town\*year in column 5 and 6. In column 1 and 2 the dependent variable is the share of votes in a town against the repeal of divorce in the 1974 referendum. In column 3 and 4 the dependent variable is the share of women elected in the town's city council (elections between 1986 and 2021). In column 5 and 6 the dependent variable is a dummy equal to 1 if the town has a nursery school, 0 otherwise (years 1991 and 2011). The explanatory variables are average rice production per hectare in tons (columns 1, 3, and 5) and a dummy equal to 1 whether the town cultivates rice between 1923 and 1929 and 0 otherwise (columns 2, 4, and 6). They are instrumented by the (standardised) potential yield for rainfed rice with medium inputs level from FAO-GAEZ (see Section 4 for additional details). Columns 3 and 4 control for election FE and column 5 and 6 control for year FE. All columns control for the potential yield with medium inputs level of a number of other crops: tomato, olive, potato, summer wheat, maize, oat, summer rye, and barley. *DV Mean* is the dependent variable mean. In parentheses: robust standard errors (column 1 and 2) and clustered standard errors at the town level (column 3 to 6). \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

**Table A.3: Cultivation of rice and female empowerment - Towns in Northern Italy**

	NO to Repeal Divorce Law		Women in City Council		Presence of Nursery Schools	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Ratio of Land Cultivating Rice	3.3948*** (0.9128)		1.6852*** (0.4584)		12.6559*** (3.6349)	
Total Production (1923-1929, 100t)		0.0272*** (0.0065)		0.0132*** (0.0032)		0.0940*** (0.0228)
DV Mean	0.51	0.51	0.21	0.21	0.59	0.59
F-Statistic	12.79	16.33	93.20	121.93	29.35	40.51
Crop Controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Year/Election FE			yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	4,231	4,231	35,857	35,857	11,359	11,359

Clustered standard errors in parentheses (town level). \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Notes:* The table reports  $\beta$  coefficients from the IV regression from Equation 5.2, including in the sample only regions in the North of Italy. Units of observation are town in column 1 and 2, town  $\times$  election in column 3 and 4, and town\*year in column 5 and 6. In column 1 and 2 the dependent variable is the share of votes in a town against the repeal of divorce in the 1974 referendum. In column 3 and 4 the dependent variable is the share of women elected in the town's city council (elections between 1986 and 2021). In column 5 and 6 the dependent variable is a dummy equal to 1 if the town has a nursery school, 0 otherwise (years 1991 and 2011). The explanatory variables are the share of the town's area cultivated with rice (columns 1, 3, and 5) and the annual total production of rice in hundreds of tons in the town between 1923 and 1929 (columns 2, 4, and 6). They are instrumented by the (standardised) potential yield for rainfed rice with medium inputs level from FAO-GAEZ (see Section 4 for additional details). Columns 3 and 4 control for election FE and column 5 and 6 control for year FE. All columns control for the potential yield with medium inputs level of a number of other crops: tomato, olive, potato, summer wheat, maize, oat, summer rye, and barley. *DV Mean* is the dependent variable mean. In parentheses: robust standard errors (column 1 and 2) and clustered standard errors at the town-level (column 3 to 6). \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

**Table A.4: Cultivation of rice and nursery schools in 1991**

	Presence of Nursery Schools in 1991							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Ratio of Land Cultivating Rice	6.8427*** (1.2062)	13.3941*** (3.9572)	22.4458** (9.7215)	10.5565** (4.2513)				
Total Production (1923-1929, 100t)					0.0723*** (0.0137)	0.1092*** (0.0283)	0.1464*** (0.0449)	0.0696*** (0.0214)
DV Mean	0.60	0.60	0.60	0.60	0.60	0.60	0.60	0.60
F-Statistic	116.80	21.64	7.98	19.94	86.93	26.71	15.24	36.86
Crop Controls	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
Geographical Controls	no	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	yes
Region FE	no	no	no	yes	no	no	no	yes
Observations	7,721	7,721	7,721	7,721	7,721	7,721	7,721	7,721

Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Notes:* The table reports  $\beta$  coefficients from the IV regression from Equation 5.2, verifying robustness to different specifications. Units of observation are towns. The dependent variable is a dummy equal to 1 if the town has a nursery school in 1991, 0 otherwise. The explanatory variables are the share of the town's area cultivated with rice (columns 1 to 4) and the annual total production of rice in hundreds of tons in the town between 1923 and 1929 (columns 5 to 8). They are instrumented by the (standardised) potential yield for rainfed rice with medium inputs level from FAO-GAEZ (see Section 4 for additional details). Columns 1 and 5 do not include additional controls, columns 2 and 6 additionally control for the potential yield with medium inputs level of a number of other crops: tomato, olive, potato, summer wheat, maize, oat, summer rye, and barley. Columns 3 and 7 add geographical controls: the area of the town (only when the explanatory variable is total production), whether the town is a province capital, distance from the coast, distance from Rome, slope, log elevation, population in 1951. Columns 4 and 8 add region fixed effects. *DV Mean* is the dependent variable mean. Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

**Table A.5: Cultivation of rice and nursery schools in 2011**

	Presence of Nursery Schools in 2011							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Ratio of Land Cultivating Rice	7.4711*** (1.2027)	9.6165*** (3.0040)	14.5592** (6.5513)	8.4357** (3.4239)				
Total Production (1923-1929, 100t)					0.0790*** (0.0140)	0.0784*** (0.0220)	0.0950*** (0.0316)	0.0556*** (0.0179)
DV Mean	0.58	0.58	0.58	0.58	0.58	0.58	0.58	0.58
F-Statistic	116.80	21.64	7.98	19.94	86.93	26.71	15.24	36.86
Crop Controls	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
Geographical Controls	no	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	yes
Region FE	no	no	no	yes	no	no	no	yes
Observations	7,721	7,721	7,721	7,721	7,721	7,721	7,721	7,721

Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Notes:* The table reports  $\beta$  coefficients from the IV regression from Equation 5.2, verifying robustness to different specifications. Units of observation are towns. The dependent variable is a dummy equal to 1 if the town has a nursery school in 2011, 0 otherwise. The explanatory variables are the share of the town's area cultivated with rice (columns 1 to 4) and the annual total production of rice in hundreds of tons in the town between 1923 and 1929 (columns 5 to 8). They are instrumented by the (standardised) potential yield for rainfed rice with medium inputs level from FAO-GAEZ (see Section 4 for additional details). Columns 1 and 5 do not include additional controls, columns 2 and 6 additionally control for the potential yield with medium inputs level of a number of other crops: tomato, olive, potato, summer wheat, maize, oat, summer rye, and barley. Columns 3 and 7 add geographical controls: the area of the town (only when the explanatory variable is total production), whether the town is a province capital, distance from the coast, distance from Rome, slope, log elevation, population in 1951. Columns 4 and 8 add region fixed effects. *DV Mean* is the dependent variable mean. Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

**Table A.6: Cultivation of rice and children enrolled in nursery schools**

	Number of children enrolled in nursery schools (per capita)							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Ratio of Land Cultivating Rice	0.0205*** (0.0040)	0.0430*** (0.0133)	0.0508** (0.0249)	0.0324** (0.0144)				
Total Production (1923-1929, 100t)					0.0002*** (0.0000)	0.0003*** (0.0001)	0.0003*** (0.0001)	0.0002*** (0.0001)
DV Mean	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
F-Statistic	281.57	51.91	17.78	45.24	206.04	68.37	39.37	97.78
Crop Controls	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
Geographical Controls	no	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	yes
Region FE	no	no	no	yes	no	no	no	yes
Year FE	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	20,196	20,196	20,196	20,196	20,196	20,196	20,196	20,196

*Notes:* The table reports  $\beta$  coefficients from the IV regression from Equation 5.2, verifying robustness to different specifications. Units of observation are town\*year. The dependent variable is the number of children enrolled in nursery schools per capita (years 1991 and 2011). The explanatory variables are the share of the town's area cultivated with rice (columns 1 to 4) and the annual total production of rice in hundreds of tons in the town between 1923 and 1929 (columns 5 to 8). They are instrumented by the (standardised) potential yield for rainfed rice with medium inputs level from FAO-GAEZ (see Section 4 for additional details). All regressions include year fixed effects. Columns 1 and 5 do not include additional controls, columns 2 and 6 additionally control for the potential yield with medium inputs level of a number of other crops: tomato, olive, potato, summer wheat, maize, oat, summer rye, and barley. Columns 3 and 7 add geographical controls: the area of the town (only when the explanatory variable is total production), whether the town is a province capital, distance from the coast, distance from Rome, slope, log elevation, population in 1951. Columns 4 and 8 add region fixed effects. *DV Mean* is the dependent variable mean. In parentheses: standard errors clustered at the town level. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

**Table A.7: Cultivation of rice and female mayors**

	Female Mayor							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Ratio of Land Cultivating Rice	1.5492*** (0.2939)	0.8852 (0.5828)	0.7528 (0.9593)	0.9527 (0.6542)				
Total Production(1923-1929, 100t)					0.0163*** (0.0034)	0.0071 (0.0046)	0.0048 (0.0059)	0.0062 (0.0040)
DV Mean	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09
F-Statistics of excluded instrument	946.05	164.45	58.44	156.76	700.05	205.54	116.62	293.59
Crop Controls		yes	yes	yes		yes	yes	yes
Geographical Controls			yes	yes			yes	yes
Region FE				yes				yes
Election FE	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	64,441	64,441	64,441	64,441	64,441	64,441	64,441	64,441

*Notes:* The table reports  $\beta$  coefficients from the IV regression from Equation 5.2, verifying robustness to different specifications. Units of observation are town  $\times$  election. The dependent variable is a dummy equal to 1 if a woman mayor is elected (elections between 1986 and 2021). The explanatory variables are the share of the town's area cultivated with rice (columns 1 to 4) and the annual total production of rice in hundreds of tons in the town between 1923 and 1929 (columns 5 to 8). They are instrumented by the (standardised) potential yield for rainfed rice with medium inputs level from FAO-GAEZ (see Section 4 for additional details). All regressions include election fixed effects. Columns 1 and 5 do not include additional controls, columns 2 and 6 additionally control for the potential yield with medium inputs level of a number of other crops: tomato, olive, potato, summer wheat, maize, oat, summer rye, and barley. Columns 3 and 7 add geographical controls: the area of the town (only when the explanatory variable is total production), whether the town is a province capital, distance from the coast, distance from Rome, slope, log elevation, population in 1951. Columns 4 and 8 add region fixed effects. *DV Mean* is the dependent variable mean. In parentheses: standard errors clustered at the town level. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

**Table A.8: Cultivation of rice and votes for abortion**

	NO to Repeal of Abortion Law							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Ratio of Land Cultivating Rice	-0.4942*** (0.1889)	0.3213 (0.4316)	1.9474* (0.9977)	0.3342 (0.4010)				
Total Production (1923-1929, 100t)					-0.0052** (0.0021)	0.0026 (0.0035)	0.0127** (0.0055)	0.0022 (0.0026)
DV Mean	0.56	0.56	0.56	0.56	0.56	0.56	0.56	0.56
F-Statistic	116.80	21.64	7.98	19.94	86.93	26.71	15.24	36.86
Crop Controls	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
Geographical Controls	no	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	yes
Region FE	no	no	no	yes	no	no	no	yes
Observations	7,721	7,721	7,721	7,721	7,721	7,721	7,721	7,721

Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Notes:* The table reports  $\beta$  coefficients from the IV regression from Equation 5.2, verifying robustness to different specifications. Units of observation are towns. The dependent variable is the share of votes in a town against the repeal of abortion in the 1981 referendum. The explanatory variables are the share of the town's area cultivated with rice (columns 1 to 4) and the annual total production of rice in hundreds of tons in the town between 1923 and 1929 (columns 5 to 8). They are instrumented by the (standardised) potential yield for rainfed rice with medium inputs level from FAO-GAEZ (see Section 4 for additional details). Columns 1 and 5 do not include controls, columns 2 and 6 control for the potential yield with medium inputs level of a number of other crops: tomato, olive, potato, summer wheat, maize, oat, summer rye, and barley. Columns 3 and 7 add geographical controls: the area of the town (only when the explanatory variable is total production), whether the town is a province capital, distance from the coast, distance from Rome, slope, log elevation, population in 1951. Columns 4 and 8 add region fixed effects. *DV Mean* is the dependent variable mean. Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.