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When a woman asks a sexist constituency to be voted: was Giorgia Meloni's gender an advantage, a disadvantage or an irrelevant factor in the 2022 Italian general election?

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Abstract:

In this study, we investigated whether Giorgia Meloni's gender was an advantage, a disadvantage or an irrelevant factor in the 2022 Italian general election. Using datasets from two election surveys conducted with two quota samples of the adult Italian population, Ns = 1,572 (ITANES dataset) and 1,150 (COCO dataset), we predicted the vote in the election as a function of participants' gender, beliefs about gender and their interaction, controlling for the key sociodemographic and political variables. Two multinomial logistic regression revealed that gender and beliefs about gender were neither additively nor multiplicatively associated with the vote. We therefore conclude that Meloni's gender did not affect the outcome of the 2022 Italian general election.

Keywords:

Gender; Gender beliefs; General election; Vote choice.

Introduction

The 2022 election was the first in the 74-year history of the Italian Republic in which a woman had a concrete chance to win a parliamentary election and thus be appointed as the first minister. And that is exactly what happened: after winning the election, Giorgia Meloni, leader of Fratelli d'Italia, became the first Italian female prime minister, to the head of a right-wing government.

Given that few women have been elected to or are active in Italian politics, this innovation was highlighted by the media. In the debate that followed, many right-leaning journalists and commentators provocatively pointed out an interesting paradox: Meloni's appointment represented an important breakthrough in a male-dominated and conceived field such as politics, especially in Italy (Cavazza & Pacilli, 2021), but came from the unexpected side of the political field, i.e. the relatively more sexist political culture of the right. Indeed, right-wing conservative parties typically tend to favour more traditional gender roles (e.g. Cassese & Holman, 2017) and people who are characterised by high levels of sexism are more likely to support right-wing ideologies and to vote for conservative parties (e.g. Christopher & Mull, 2006; de Geus et al., 2022). In contrast, left-leaning progressive parties are more likely to espouse gender-egalitarian ideologies and tend to attract fewer sexist voters (e.g. Beckwith, 2000). For these reasons, it is not particularly surprising that Fratelli d'Italia has the lowest percentage of women in the current parliament, and that Meloni's government has the lowest percentage of women in the last decade.

This apparent contradiction is not new: some other notable cases of female political leaders coming from the (centre) right of the political spectrum (e.g. Marine Le Pen in France and Angela Merkel in Germany), as well as the cases of three female prime ministers brought to power in the United Kingdom by the Conservative Party (Margaret

Thatcher, Theresa May and Liz Truss), have been analysed (e.g. Berthezène & Gottlieb, 2019; Mushaben, 2022). Several studies specifically examined the relationship among female leadership, charisma and gender issues in the populist radical right (e.g. Geva, 2020; Meret et al., 2016; Snipes & Mudde, 2020). We argue that a social psychological approach that takes cues from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) and the literature on the effects of sexism in politics (e.g. De Geus et al., 2022) is well-suited to help understand the electoral dynamics that characterised the 2022 general election in Italy.

In this context, we aimed to investigate whether the fact that Fratelli d'Italia had a female leader was an advantage, a disadvantage or an irrelevant factor in the 2022 Italian general election. All three possibilities seem plausible. Meloni's gender might have been a disadvantage, as the typical right-wing voter might prefer a conservative party coherently led by a man to a conservative party innovatively led by a woman. Indeed, the former would be more consistent with his/her beliefs about gender than the latter. Therefore, a negative relationship between traditional beliefs about gender and Meloni's party choice could be expected. Consistent with this, previous studies have shown that in political contests where women run, the influence of sexism on voting decisions is stronger than in contests without women (Cassese & Barnes, 2019; Valentino et al., 2018).

However, in the 2022 Italian general election women might have seen an opportunity to support a leader who embodies women's conquest of a traditionally male domain. This would be consistent with the social psychology literature on social identity (Tajfel, 1981), that is, 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his[/her] knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership' (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). According to

this literature, people tend to exhibit an intergroup bias that aims to favour the social categories to which they belong in order to bolster their self-esteem. Against this backdrop, women might be induced to vote for a female candidate regardless of their political views, in order to favour the ingroup defined by their gender. Accordingly, previous research has shown that social identity dynamics are systematically at play in the political arena (e.g. Abrams & Emler, 1992; Pacilli et al., 2016). In particular, a meta-analysis of 67 survey experiments recently found support for the gender affinity hypothesis (i.e. women prefer female candidates, Schwarz & Coppock, 2022). Moreover, a woman's leadership role may have widened her constituency by attracting the less sexist voter segments despite her membership in a relatively sexist cultural group, as beliefs about gender may play an important role in candidate evaluations and in voting decisions (Deckman & Cassese, 2021). In Italy, the gender gap in politics (i.e., women are more conservative than men) narrowed starting from 1968 and disappeared in the 2006 general election (Corbetta & Cavazza, 2008). However, the possibility of electing a woman to the highest office in government may have pushed female voters back to the conservative side. This happened for example in France, where Marine Le Pen succeeded in closing the so called 'radical right gender gap' and attracted the vote of women who were traditionally less prone than men to this political offer (Mayer, 2022). This is consistent with other findings showing that in the case of populist radical right parties (such as Meloni's party), a female leader is able to mitigate the threat posed by her their (too) though masculine image (e.g. Ben-Shitrit et al., 2022; Meret et al., 2019). From this perspective, Meloni's gender may have been an advantage in the 2022 Italian general election.

However, there is also a third possibility. Overall, Meloni's gender may have been an irrelevant factor in the 2022 Italian general election. The absence of associations

between the voter's gender and sexism, on the one hand, and his or her voting decision for or against Meloni's party, on the other, could be the effect of a truly weak relevance of the leader's gender (e.g. Cassese & Barnes, 2019). Moreover, such null associations could be the result of a relative balance between the advantages and disadvantages of a right-leaning woman as a political leader. From this perspective, the two effects above could cancel each other out.

In this study, we compared these three reasonable predictions (Meloni's gender was an advantage, a disadvantage or an irrelevant factor in the 2022 Italian general election).

The present study

In the 2022 general election, right-leaning voters in Italy were able for the first time to choose between parties that differed not only in their political programme, but also in the gender of their leader. What role, if any, did voters' gender and sexism play in this political choice? To answer this question, we analysed data from two different election surveys and examined whether Meloni's gender played a role (positive or negative) or was irrelevant, controlling for voters' main sociodemographic variables and ideological leanings.

Method

We analysed data from two independent election studies conducted on two quota samples of the adult Italian population. The first study was a two-wave survey conducted by ITANES (ITAlian National Election Studies, www.itanes.org). Data for the pre-election wave were collected between September 5 and 24, 2022, using a rolling cross-sectional design; data for the post-election wave were collected between October 12 and 15, 2022. A total of 1,572 respondents participated in both waves. The second study was a post-election survey conducted as the 7th wave of the COCO (COnsequences of COvid-19) project

(https://www.dippsicologia.unito.it/do/progetti.pl/Show?_id=9fxo). Data were collected between October 13 and 24, 2022, from a sample of 1,150 people. Both surveys were conducted online.

In both datasets, we predicted participants' voting behaviour, which was recoded into a 4-category variable: 1 = the participant voted for a non-right-wing party (Azione, Italia Viva, Movimento 5 Stelle, Partito Democratico or + Europa con Emma Bonino), 2 = the participant voted for Fratelli d'Italia, 3 = the participant voted for another right-wing party (Lega Salvini premier or Forza Italia Berlusconi president) and 4 = the participant did not vote or did not cast a valid vote. We excluded from the analyses the participants who voted for the minor parties. Table 1 reports the *N*s of these variables in the two datasets.

As independent variables we used participants' gender (1 = woman, 0 = man), beliefs about gender and their interaction, calculated after recoding the 0s at the first into -1s and centring the second. The proxy measures for beliefs about gender available in the two datasets were different. In the ITANES dataset, the following 5-category item (borrowed from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems questionnaire: see www.cses.org) was available: 'Policies to increase the representation of women in politics have gone too far'. In the COCO data set, the following 4-category item was available: 'Under the guise of equality for women, men are actually being discriminated against' (Zehnter et al., 2021). We coded these two items so that high scores expressed high levels of traditionalism in gender beliefs.

Because women are less socially advantaged then men, we partialled out the role of the other main indicators of social (dis)advantage. Thus, in the regressions we controlled for respondents' age and years of education. Moreover, we partialled out participants' political orientation, measured with the following 11-category item (1 = 'extreme left',

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11 = 'extreme right') from the European Social Survey item (see

www.europeansocialsurvey.org): "In politics, people often refer to 'the left' and the 'the

right'. Thinking about your political opinions, how would you place your views on this

scale?".

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the study variables and Table 3 their

bivariate correlations.

Results

The results of the two data sets agreed well (see Table 4). Two multinomial logistic

regressions (we used participants who did not vote or did not cast a valid vote as the

reference category) showed that, despite of the often-discussed weakening of the

importance of the traditional left-right distinction (e.g. Bauer et al., 2017; Cavazza et al.,

2022), Italians' political orientation was the most important predictor of their vote in the

2022 election. The other control variables did not show strong associations with the

vote, except for age, which showed a positive association with voting for a non-right-

wing party and for Fratelli d'Italia (in the COCO dataset, the first association was not

significant, but in the right direction). In addition, there were significant or trending

associations between education and the likelihood of voting for Fratelli d'Italia and for a

non-right-wing party. More interestingly for our research objectives, participants'

gender was not associated with their voting decision. The same was true for their sexism

and for the interactions between gender and sexism.

In addition to the analyses presented above, we conducted five parallel analyses. In the

first set, we used as the reference category the participants who voted for a non-rightist

political party. In the second set, we used only participants' gender or sexism as

predictors, without adding their interaction. In the third, we added the interactions

between gender and sexism on the one hand and political self-placing on the other. In

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the fourth, we added the interactions between gender and sexism on the one hand and political interest on the other. Finally, in the fifth, we added the interactions between gender and sexism on the one hand and age on the other. All the results we obtained (available upon request from the corresponding author) were essentially analogous to those we presented.

Discussion

In this study, we analysed the role of voters' gender and sexism in Giorgia Meloni's success in the 2022 general election and proposed three reasonable alternative hypotheses. First, Meloni's gender could have been a disadvantage, as a female candidate led a right-leaning party, which is at odds with the relatively high gender traditionalism of right-leaning voters (Cassese & Barnes, 2019; Valentino et al., 2018). However, Meloni's gender might also have been an advantage, as it may have led female voters to seize the opportunity to support a woman in a traditionally male-dominated field, consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978, 1981). Finally, Meloni's gender may have been irrelevant, because, although it was a highly innovative element in Italian politics, it was a truly secondary factor in voters' electoral decisions (e.g. Cassese & Barnes, 2019) or because the processes that led to Meloni's gender being an advantage or a disadvantage cancelled each other out.

Analyses conducted on two independent datasets confirmed the third prediction: when the role of the other main indicators of social disadvantage was partialled out, Meloni's gender was an irrelevant factor in the 2022 Italian general election. Voters' gender and gender beliefs were not directly or interactively associated with their voting decisions. As expected, the results could be due to a number of factors, not least the fact that gender and sexism were not salient aspects of campaign rhetoric, or to the intervention of some moderating factors related to the salience of voters' gender identity at the time

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of the election. Unfortunately, our data could not help reveal the mechanism that led to this irrelevance. Its analysis could be an interesting task for researchers who want to get to the bottom of the processes that led to the epochal results of the 2022 Italian general election.

Until the 1980s, politics in Western countries was characterised by a gender gap: Women voted more conservatively than men (e.g. Almond & Verba, 1989; Lipset, 1960). In Italy, this phenomenon persisted even longer than elsewhere and disappeared only in the 2006 general election, presumably as a result of the radical reduction of the relative disadvantage between men and women in terms of occupational status and education, as well as their differences in terms of religiosity (Corbetta & Cavazza, 2008). The 2022 general election was a very important opportunity to resurrect this divide, given the high probability of an electoral victory by a female candidate from the right. However, our results show that Meloni's gender did not trigger a resurgence of the gender gap, as women were no more likely than men to vote for her party than for the other parties. Does this result evidence the irreversibility of the end of the gender gap or is it an artefact due to the contingency of the 2022 Italian elections (a female candidate asking sexist voters to vote for her)? The answer to this question presupposes an election with a leftist female candidate prime minister who wants to be elected by non-sexist voters.

Regardless of the irrelevance of her gender in relation to the election, Meloni quickly sought to stage her success as a woman after winning the election, for example, by using male generic terms in reference to herself and typically wearing male-style suits. At first glance, this decision might be seen as detrimental, as people who do not behave accordingly to gender role expectations tend to worsen the impression others have of them (e.g. Courtemanche & Connor Green, 2020). In particular, female politicians seem

to suffer the worst sanctions when they violate gender role expectations (Schneider et al., 2022). However, it will be interesting to see if Meloni's style could, on the contrary, solidify her success, as a masculine leadership style, even when embodied by a woman, does not pose a threat to the *status quo* and thus could reassure her conservative constituency. In this sense, the 'leaders-not-ladies theory' (Brooks, 2013) suggests that women in politics are not seen primarily as members of their gender category, but as part of the category of politicians. A direct test of this idea might be interesting.

As is often the case, there were some limitations to this study, most notably the fact that standard items measuring sexism (e.g. Glick & Fiske, 1996) were not available in the datasets we used. New studies with more convincing sexism measures are needed to substantiate our findings. On a positive note, however, we obtained converging results from two independent data sets. This speaks to the robustness of the results. Despite the above limitation, thus, we believe that our results help shed light on how and under what conditions women's active participation in politics is accepted and encouraged by public opinion.

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Tables

Table 1. Frequency of the dependent variable

	ITANES (ITAlian National Election Studies) data set	COCO (COnsequences of COvid-19) data set
Vote for a non-rightist party	438	446
Vote for Fratelli d'Italia	134	175
Vote for another right-wing party	91	150
Did not cast a valid vote	190	179
Participants excluded from the analysis	719	200
Total	1,572	1,150

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the study variables

	ITANES (ITAlian National Election Studies) data set		COCO (COnsequences of COvid-19) data set	
	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*
Woman	.51	.50	.51	.50
Sexism	1.62	1.21	2.02	.90
Woman*sexism	-.09	1.21	-.24	.86
Age	50.43	22.33	46.66	15.62
Years of education	11.66	3.47	14.26	3.49
Rightist political orientation	4.94	3.01	6.78	2.86
Vote for a non-rightist party	.51	.50	.39	.49
Vote for Fratelli d'Italia	.15	.36	.15	.36
Vote for another right-wing party	.10	.31	.13	.34
Did not cast a valid vote	.22	.41	.33	.47

Note. When a dummy variable is concerned, the 'mean' is the proportion, on a 0-1 range, of the 1 category. In the ITANES dataset, sexism was measured using the following item:'Policies to increase the representation of women in politics have gone too far'. In the COCO dataset, it was measured using the following item: 'Under the guise of equality for women, men are actually being discriminated against'.

Table 3. Bivariate correlations between the study variables

	1.	2	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Woman	-	-.07**	.01	-.00	-.05	-.01	-.05	.10**	-.06	.04
2. Sexism	-.27***	-	-.02	-.02	-.02	.30***	.10**	.16***	-.22***	.06
3. Woman*sexism	.01	.00	-	.01	-.04	.02	.01	.04	-.07	.04
4. Age	-.04	.03	.03	-	-.32***	.05	.11***	.01	-.01	-.09*
5. Years of education	-.08**	.04	-.06*	-.26***	-	-.16***	-.06	-.06	.17***	-.10**
6. Rightist political orientation	-.06	.26***	-.02	.00	-.05	-	.45***	.37***	-.58***	.00
7. Vote for a non-rightist party	-.07*	-.07*	-.00	-.01	-.20***	-.48***	-	-.15***	-.44***	-.23***
8. Vote for Fratelli d'Italia	-.05	.08**	.02	.13***	-.12***	.41***	-.15***	-	-.36***	-.19***
9. Vote for another right-wing party	.04	.03	-.04	.00	-.11***	.29***	-.14***	-.08***	-	-.55***
10. Did not cast a valid vote	.08*	-.02	.02	-.09**	-.18***	-.07	-.23***	-.13***	-.12***	-

Note. The parameters from the ITANES dataset are presented in the cells above the principal diagonal and those from the COCO dataset in the cells below it. In the ITANES dataset, sexism was measured using the following item:'Policies to increase the representation of women in politics have gone too far'. In the COCO dataset, it was measured using the following item: 'Under the guise of equality for women, men are actually being discriminated against'. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

Table 4. Vote prediction

	ITANES (ITAlian National Election Studies) data set			COCO (COnsequences of COvid-19) data set		
	Vote for a non-rightist party	Vote for Fratelli d'Italia	Vote for another right-wing party	Vote for a non-rightist party	Vote for Fratelli d'Italia	Vote for another right-wing party
	B	B	B	B	B	B
	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)
Constant	.02	-7.62***	-6.04***	.60	-7.31	-3.56***
	(.76)	(1.90)	(1.29)	(.82)	(1.13)	(1.04)
Woman	.09	-.27	.35	-.01	.02	.25
	(.12)	(.17)	(.19)	(.14)	(.16)	(.16)
Sexism 1	-.11	-.15	.06			
	(.11)	(.15)	(.15)			
Sexism 2				.07	-.10	-.10
				(.16)	(.19)	(.19)
Woman*sexism 1	-.20	-.11	-.27			
	(.10)	(.14)	(.15)			
Woman*sexism 2				.06	.20	-.01
				(.15)	(.18)	(.19)
Age	.02***	.04***	.02	.01	.03**	.01
	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)
Years of education	.08	.12*	.05	.10*	.07	.00
	(.04)	(.05)	(.06)	(.04)	(.05)	(.05)
Rightist political orientation	-.21***	.70***	.63***	-.16**	.69***	.51***
	(.05)	(.09)	(.09)	(.05)	(.08)	(.07)
Cox & Snell's pseudo R^2		.46			.40	
Nagelkerke's pseudo R^2		.51			.44	
McFadden's pseudo R^2		.27			.21	

Note. Sexism 1: 'Policies to increase the representation of women in politics have gone too far'. Sexism 2: 'Under the guise of equality for women, men are actually being discriminated against'. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.