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Did sexist voters bring Italy its first female Prime Minister?

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Abstract. We examined the role of hostile sexism in vote at the 2022 general election in Italy, where the largest among center-right parties was led by a woman, Giorgia Meloni. We analyzed data from a sample of 1635 voters who participated in the 2022 ITANES survey. Hostile sexism was associated with male gender, lower education, higher religiosity, and right-wing orientation. As to vote choice, hostile sexism was positively associated with vote for Brothers of Italy and the other center-right parties. However, such association was significantly moderated by the evaluation of Giorgia Meloni, and disappeared among voters with a positive evaluation of her. Discussion focusses on the interplay between gender-related attitudes and candidate-based heuristics in vote choice.

Keywords: hostile sexism, candidate evaluation, voting choice, political orientation, gender.

1. INTRODUCTION

In October 2022 Giorgia Meloni was elected Prime Minister of Italy following her victory in the September 25th general election, becoming the first woman to hold the post. This event marked a milestone in women's representation in Italian politics, although Meloni's party (Brothers of Italy) and its allies have historically championed traditional gender roles and norms (Gaweda, et al. 2022), often denouncing feminism as a dangerous ideology aimed at undermining the social order (Kottig, et al., 2017). They have also vociferously opposed electoral regulations aimed at increasing women's representation in political bodies (Sampugnaro & Montemagno 2020), sometimes resorting to legal loopholes to promote male candidates over female ones (Legnante & Regalia 2020). Right-wing women leaders had already broken the so-called glass ceiling in other European countries. In the United Kingdom, Margaret Thatcher, a Conservative politician, became the first woman prime minister in, 1979. After her election, she rarely acknowledged her gender as a relevant factor in her career or political decisions (Bashevkin, 1996; Ponton, 2010). A similar approach was taken by Angela Merkel, who was the first woman chancellor in Germany between 2005 and 2021 and came from the conservative Christian Democratic Union. She also tended

not to emphasize her gender in political discussions, so much so that she has been called a "reluctant feminist" (Mushaben, 2017).

One may wonder about the reasons of success of women leaders in conservative and right-wing parties, whose prevailing voter attitudes traditionally oppose gender equality (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). In this vein, Cavazza and Roccato (2024) investigated voting choice at the 2022 Italian general elections, using data from two national representative samples. They analysed the link between voters' own gender and beliefs about gender equality and vote for Giorgia Meloni's party. However, they found no association between these variables and vote.

In this paper, we further investigated this topic, using data from the 2022 ITANES[1] election survey. In doing so, we considered two further variables that we expected would play a role in the outcome of the 2022 election: voters' hostile sexism and their evaluation of the most relevant woman candidate running at the election, namely Giorgia Meloni. Hostile sexism is a sub-dimension of the broader concept of sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996) and represents the tendency to exclude women from certain activities and roles, such as in organizations and in the political arena. Consistent with previous research (Glick, 2019; Gaweda et al., 2022), we expected to find a positive association between hostile sexism and vote for the center-right parties. However, we also expected that this association would be partially moderated by voters' evaluation of Giorgia Meloni. Such moderating effect would be consistent with previous research indicating that candidate evaluation can sometimes drive vote choice above and beyond other value- or ideologically based factors (Catellani & Alberici, 2012; Coffé & von Schoultz, 2021; Garzia & De Angelis, 2016). Our main hypothesis was that this would be the case also with hostile sexism. Therefore, we expected a strong association between hostile sexism and vote among voters who had a low or average evaluation of the woman candidate, while the association would be less pronounced among voters who had a high evaluation of her. This interaction between hostile sexism and candidate evaluation has not been investigated previously and can provide an explanation of the apparent paradox of the relationship between hostile sexism and vote for a woman party leader.

2. HOSTILE SEXISM AND VOTING BEHAVIOR

Discrimination against women in politics has been examined from different points of view, ranging from the observation and measurement of a gender gap in political participation and representation (Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2012), to comparative research on the institutional, political, and cultural factors associated with it (Gray et al., 2006; Inglehart & Norris, 2003), to the investigation of the individual voters' attitudes, beliefs and values that are associated with a low presence of women in politics (Burns & Gallagher, 2010; Ditonto, 2019; Schneider & Bos, 2019). In our study, we focused on sexist attitudes, defined as the set of (generally negative) attitudes regarding women as a social group and their role in society (Becker & Sibley, 2015 Swim & Hyers, 2009). These sexist attitudes form the basis upon which, despite the existence of well-established legislative and social norms prescribing gender equality, the under-representation of women in politics is overlooked or even justified.

Social psychological research on stereotyping (Glick & Fiske, 1996) has taken an in-depth look at the personal characteristics, abilities, and limitations that people typically attribute to men and women. Glick and Fiske (1996) argued that the relationship between men and women is inherently ambivalent: While the former traditionally held control over social, political, and economic structures, the latter dominated unchallenged the realm of family and interpersonal relationships. This led to the development of two complementary types of attitudes toward women, termed benevolent and hostile sexism. Benevolent sexism recognizes the generative power of women and is sympathetic to feelings of affection and protection for them. It allows for the presence of women in typically male domains, albeit in a "protected" and diminished capacity, e.g., by finding subdomains in which the stereotypical characteristics attributed to women are seen as useful. Hostile sexism, on the other hand, seeks to exclude women from certain activities and roles, such as in work organizations and the political arena, thereby justifying male dominance over, and exploitation of, women. Hostile sexism therefore underlies the active discrimination and resistance to the presence of women in positions of power (Cassese & Holman, 2019), and it is the dimension of sexism more directly associated with the systemic scarcity of women in political positions (e.g., in party ranks and institutional offices), and with voters' reluctance to choose women in electoral contests (Ratliff et al., 2019). Furthermore, hostile sexism correlates with other forms of beliefs and attitudes based on a hierarchical worldview (Christopher & Mull, 2006), such as Social Dominance

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[1] The ITANES group has been analysing voting behaviour in Italy since the beginning of 1990s. Readers interested in more details regarding the ITANES research program can visit the website https://www.itanes.it

Orientation (SDO; Sidanius, et al., 1994), which is the tendency to reject members of outgroups deemed inferior or a threat to the ingroup's status. Religiosity has also been shown to correlate positively with hostile sexism, both in Catholic (López-Sáez, et al., 2020) and predominantly Protestant (Glick, 2019) countries.

In our study, we examined the prevalence of hostile sexism among voters in the 2022 Italian general election, and the sociodemographic characteristics associated with it. In line with previous research which has found a relationship between hostile sexism and conservative worldviews (Christopher & Mull, 2006; Golec de Zavala & Bierwiaczonek, 2021; Sibley, et al., 2007), we expected this dimension of sexism to be stronger among right-wing participants than among centrist and left-wing participants.

Few studies so far have examined the relationship between hostile sexism and specific political behavior, such as voting choice for specific political parties and candidates. In Western democracies the issue of women's representation in politics has traditionally been associated with progressive, liberal, and left-wing parties (Lovenduski & Norris, 1993), and conservative and right-wing parties typically had smaller numbers of women in their higher ranks (Celis & Childs, 2018). In the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, which featured the first female nominee of a major party (Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton), some studies have found evidence of a positive association between hostile sexism and support for Republican candidates, both presidential (Bock, et al., 2017) and congressional (Winter, 2022). In addition, hostile sexism was found to be among the most important factors explaining polarization among white voters (Schaffner et al., 2019). Finally, hostile sexism was found to predict lower support for Clinton and greater support for Trump, especially among women (Cassese & Barnes, 2019; Glick, 2019). Consistent with findings in the U.S., a study conducted on U.K. samples during the 2019 U.K. general election found that hostile sexism was associated with voting for the Conservative Party (De Geus et al., 2022). A similar result was found when analyzing the 2016 Brexit referendum. In fact, the authors found a correlation between hostile sexism and the "Yes" vote, which was in line with the Conservative Party's position. In contrast, benevolent sexism was not associated with voting for the Conservative Party or support for Brexit.

3. THE MODERATING ROLE OF CANDIDATE EVALUATION

Despite the established link between right-wing political orientation and sexism, women sometimes do lead conservative, right-wing and populist parties without depleting their electoral base (but rather sometimes widening it). In addition to the already mentioned Margaret Thatcher and Angela Merkel, there are some other notable cases, such as Marine Le Pen, who has been leading the right-wing Front (later Rassemblement) National for several years, and Pia Kjærsgaard has led the right-wing Danish People Party in Denmark (Meret et al., 2017). Giorgia Meloni might be added to this list, as she managed to turn her party, Brothers of Italy, from a fringe partner within the center-right coalition to its largest component.

But how do right-wing voters reconcile the apparent contradiction between their attitudes (against women in power positions) and their voting behavior (in support of certain women in power positions)? It is possible that they do it as part of the general tendency to focus on political leaders, and discount other elements when making electoral choices. This is of course not limited to conservative and right-wing voters, but more broadly observable within the so-called "demand side" of the phenomenon of the personalization of politics (McAllister, 2007). As with other forms of decision-making, vote choice is often simplified and made quicker through the use of cognitive shortcuts (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001) based on readily available and easy to understand information (Caprara et al., 2007). There is ample evidence that, in this process, candidate evaluation can outweigh other factors, such as economic evaluations (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008), political issues and policy preferences (Bellucci et al., 2015), and even party affiliation and stable political orientations (Garzia et al., 2022). This appears to be more likely under certain conditions (Barisione, 2009) or among voters with certain characteristics (Dassonneville, 2016), or in a combination of the two, such as among undecided voters towards the end of the electoral campaign (Catellani & Alberici, 2012).

So far, little research has investigated whether a positive evaluation of a candidate can directly outweigh existing negative attitudes, such as those based on racism, sexism, or other form of discrimination that would otherwise undermine support for the same candidate. Some studies have explored the factors leading (or preventing) Republican voters to vote for black candidates (Hood & McKee, 2015; Kidd et al., 2007). Other studies have investigated European conservatives' likelihood of voting for immigrant (Street, 2014), and gay and lesbian candidates (Everitt & Horvath, 2021). These studies identified some specific candidate features associated with greater likelihood of being chosen by voters, but did not find a more general explanation of the phenomenon.

In the present study, we argued that the potential paradox of hostile sexist attitudes and vote for a right-

wing, woman-led party could be explained by the fact that individual levels of hostile sexism associated with vote for a right-wing party were moderated by the voter's positive evaluation of the woman leader of that party.

4. RESEARCH OVERVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

By analyzing data from a representative sample of voters in the ITANES 2022 survey before and after the 2022 general election in Italy, we explored the relationship between hostile sexism and voting, and the expected moderating role of candidate evaluation.

In line with previous research showing a significant relationship between hostile sexism and vote (Cassese & Barnes, 2019; De Geus et al., 2022; Glick, 2019), our aim was to investigate the prevalence of hostile sexism and its correlates among Italian voters. For this reason, we formulated a research question that guided our preliminary analyses.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What sociodemographic characteristics are associated with hostile sexism among voters?

Consistent with results found in other comparable voter samples in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other national contexts (see the introductory sections), we expected that hostile sexism in Italy would also be associated with male gender, older age, lower education level, greater religiosity, and a right-wing political orientation.

We then focused on the relationship between hostile sexism and voting choice and formulated the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Hostile sexism is positively associated with vote for one of the main parties of the center-right coalition in Italy, namely Brothers of Italy (H1a), Lega (H1b), and Forza Italia (H1c). Conversely, hostile sexism is negatively associated with vote for parties in the center and left of the political spectrum (H1d).

As discussed above, we also anticipated that, in the case of the right-wing party led by a woman, the association between hostile sexism and vote choice would be moderated by voters' evaluation of the party leader. Therefore, we formulated the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The association between hostile sexism and vote for the right-wing party Brothers of Italy is comparatively stronger among voters with a less positive evaluation of its woman leader and weaker among voters with a more positive evaluation of her.

A confirmation of this hypothesis would provide a plausible explanation for the apparent paradox whereby right-wing voters opt for a party with a female leader.

5. METHOD

Participants and procedure

In this study, we analyzed data from the 2022 ITANES nationwide panel survey. The survey was conducted before and after the September 25, 2022 general elections in Italy. The total representative sample consisted of N = 6264 Italian voters, of whom N = 4703 participated in both the pre-election and post-election surveys. A subset (N = 1635) of these participants were administered a specific survey module that included the hostile sexism measure used in this study. Therefore, we limited our analysis to this group of participants. Among these, 804 (52.4%) were men, 730 (47.6%) were women, and 3 did not report their gender. The age range was between 19 and 93 years old (M = 51.4, SD = 16.3). As for education level, 1.3% of the participants had an elementary school degree, 10.4% had a middle school degree, 52.4 % had a high school degree, 6 % had a bachelor's degree, 8.3% had a master's degree, and 0.5% had a degree equivalent to a PhD. Unless otherwise specified, all measures used in this study were collected in the pre-electoral survey.

Measures

Hostile sexism

We measured sexist attitudes based on participants' agreement on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) on the following three items: "Women try to control men to gain power", "Most women interpret innocent remarks or gestures as being sexist", and "Women generally tend to ignore what men do for them". The items were selected from the Italian validated version of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Manganelli, et al., 2008), a widely used measure of benevolent and hostile sexism that is frequently employed in research on stereotypes and gender-related issues. A single mean index was calculated that showed high reliability (α = .803), with higher scores representing higher levels of hostile sexism.

Voting choice

Voting choice was measured in the post-electoral survey, by asking participants to indicate which party

they voted for in the House of Representatives elections, from a list of 17 parties, plus an "Other party or list" option. Only participants who selected one of the 7 major parties (Brothers of Italy, League, Forza Italia, Azione/Italia Viva, Five Star Movement, Democratic Party, Green and Left Alliance) and those who declared not having voted at the election (N = 288) were included in the main analysis.

Political orientation

Respondents were asked to position themselves on the left-right axis of the political spectrum: "When people talk about politics, they use the words "left" and "right". Here is a series of boxes going from left to right. When you think about your political views, which box would you choose?". The possible answers were rated on a scale from 0 (Left) to 10 (Right), with two additional options of "I don't know" and "None of the above". A simple continuous index from left to right was used in the main analyses, and participants who did not indicate their orientation were excluded. A substantial number of participants (N = 286) did not report their political orientation, and were thus excluded from analyses involving this variable.

Evaluation of Giorgia Meloni

Participants' evaluation of Giorgia Meloni was measured by the following question: "What do you think of the leader Giorgia Meloni?". Participants were asked to give a judgement on a scale ranging from 0 to 10, where 0 indicated that they did not like the leader at all and 10 indicated that they liked her a lot.

Gender

Participants' gender was captured by a single item, "Can you indicate your gender?" with four response options: "Male", "Female", "Other", "I would prefer not to answer". Participants who selected "I prefer not to answer" or "Other" (N = 3) were excluded from analyses.

School education

Participants' education was assessed with the following question: "What educational degree do you have?", where response options included "elementary school degree", "junior high school degree", "high school diploma", "bachelor's degree", "master's degree", and "doctorate or other post-tertiary education". Responses were recoded as the number of years required to attain each title to obtain a quantitative and discrete variable. For example, an elementary school degree equals 5 years of study, a high school degree equals 8 years, and so on.

Religiosity

Participants' religiosity was measured with the following question: "How often do you go to church [participate in religious events, excluding ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, etc.]. The possible response options were as follows: "Never", "Once a year", "Twice or more a year", "Once a month", "Twice or more a month", "Once a week or more", indicating a low (1) or high (6) religiosity.

Marital status

Participants marital status was determined by the following question: "What is your marital status?". The possible responses to this question were the following: "married or cohabiting", "widowed", "divorced or separated", "single, never married". We then created a dummy variable for each response option, using "married" (the most frequently selected option) as the reference category.

Occupational status

Participants' occupational status was measured with the following question: "How would you describe your occupation?". The possible response options to the questions were the following: "employed full-time", "employed part-time", "unemployed", "retired", "homemaker", "student", "other". We then created a dummy variable for each response option, with "employed full-time" (the most frequently selected option) serving as the reference category.

6. RESULTS

Preliminary analyses: hostile sexism among Italian voters

The distribution of the index of hostile sexism was slightly skewed toward a lower average level of sexism (M = 2.6, SD = .99). This suggests that, overall, participants expressed moderate to low levels of agreement with the statements in the hostile sexism scale. The individual items had a similar distribution to the aver-

age index, with slightly higher agreement for the item "Most women interpret innocent remarks or gestures as sexist" (M = 2.9, SD = 1.16) and lower average agreement for the other two items, namely: "Women generally tend to ignore what men do for them", M = 2.53, SD = 1.15, and "Women try to control men to gain power", M = 2.38, SD = 1.18. Overall, the hostile sexism scores in this study were slightly lower than those found in a British sample by De Geus et al. (2022) and those found in an American sample by Edwards and Schaffner (2020). The American sample also showed greater variance in agreement with statements about hostile sexism. In fact, a greater number of responses were recorded at the extremes than in the middle of the response scale, whereas the mode of the frequency distribution in the Italian sample coincided with the scale midpoint (i.e., 3).

Table 1 reports zero-order correlations between hostile sexism and the other main variables. Sexism was significantly higher among men (M = 2.80, SD = 0.97) than women (M = 2.39, SD = 0.98), $t(1550)$ = 8.12, p < .001, Cohen's d = .412. We also found significant differences also between age groups, $F(5, 1550)$ = 4.72, p < .001, η^2 = .015. The youngest group (18-24 years) reported the lowest level of sexism, M = 2.33, SD = 1.02, followed by the 55-64 years group, M = 2.47, SD = 1.01, and the 64+ years group, M = 2.57, SD = 1.00. The groups with higher mean scores for hostile sexism were in the middle, namely the 25-34-year-old group, M = 2.62, SD = 1.07, the 35-44 years group, M = 2.78, SD = 0.97, and the 45-54 years group, M = 2.69, SD = 0.95. This result suggests that there are two separate cohort effects, namely greater support for gender equality among people born in the 1960s and the 2000s, and weaker support (and therefore more sexism) among people born in the intervening decades. Hostile sexism was also positively related to religiosity, $r(1514)$ = .161, p < .001, and negatively related to scholarization, $r(1554)$ = -.088, p = .001. There was no significant effect of marital status, $F(4, 1178)$ = 1.68, p = .152, η^2 = .006, and a small effect of occupational status, $F(6,$

1145)$ = 3.60, p = .002, η^2 = .019, which depended mainly on students (M = 2.17, SD = 0.95) being significantly less sexist than full-time employees (M = 2.70, SD = 0.97), p < .001, part-time employees (M = 2.62, SD = 0.90), p = .051, and homemakers (M = 2.65, SD = 0.95), p = .038.

Finally, hostile sexism was moderately correlated with right-wing political orientation, $r(1261)$ =.301, p < .001. Participants who did not position themselves on the left-right axis did not differ significantly in hostile sexism from the rest of participants, $t(1554)$ = 0.83, p = .407, d = .005.

In sum, our results were consistent with previous research on the sociodemographic and political correlates of sexism in other national samples (as in the British case, see De Geus et al., 2022). Hostile sexism overall was positively associated with male gender, greater religiosity, and age between 35 and 54 (or over 65), and negatively associated with female gender, young (18-24) or late adulthood (55-64), and student status. The analysis also corroborated our expectation regarding the positive association between hostile sexism and right-wing political orientation.

Main analysis: hostile sexism and voting choice

To test our hypotheses on the relationship between hostile sexism and voting choice in the 2022 Italian parliamentary elections, we conducted a multinomial logistic regression using categorical voting choice as the dependent variable (with abstention as the reference category). Predictors were entered in two steps, first gender, age, education, political orientation and Giorgia Meloni's evaluation as main predictors and then hostile sexism and its interaction with Meloni's evaluation. This allowed us to determine the extent to which hostile sexism contributed to participants' vote choice and whether its effect was moderated by the evaluation of the woman who led the Brothers of Italy and eventually became Prime Minister, as we hypothesized. We report here the results of the

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the main variables.

	N	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Hostile Sexism	1556	2.60 (0.99)	-	.001	-.202**	-.088**	.161**	.301**	.244**
2. Age	1556	51.47 (16.39)		-	.007	-.210**	.137**	-.019	.100**
3. Gender (M = 0, F = 1)	1552	M: 52.4% F: 47.6%			-	-.042	-.001	-.010	-.005
4. Education	1556	13. 17 (2.83)				-	-.006	-.133**	-.108**
5. Religiosity	1516	2.71 (1.79)					-	.199**	.209**
6. Political Orientation	1263	4.80 (2.95)						-	.704**
7. Evaluation of Meloni	1144	3.61 (3.74)							-

Table 2. Multinomial logistic regression for vote in the 2022 Italian general election, basic model.

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	p	Exp(B)	95% C.I. Exp(B) Lower	95% C.I. Exp(B) Upper
Brothers of Italy	Intercept	-6.135	1.105	30.830	1	.000			
	Gender (F =1)	.003	.009	.083	1	.774	1.003	.985	1.021
	Age	-.373	.278	1.799	1	.180	.689	.399	1.188
	Education	.096	.051	3.520	1	.061	1.100	.996	1.216
	Political Orientation	.223	.071	9.951	1	.002	1.249	1.088	1.434
	Eval. of Meloni	.577	.068	72.211	1	.000	1.780	1.559	2.034
Lega	Intercept	-4.950	1.490	11.041	1	.001			
	Gender (F =1)	.002	.013	.030	1	.862	1.002	.978	1.027
	Age	.088	.372	.056	1	.812	1.092	.527	2.266
	Education	-.037	.067	.303	1	.582	.964	.844	1.100
	Political Orientation	.427	.104	16.741	1	.000	1.532	1.249	1.880
	Eval. of Meloni	.179	.070	6.548	1	.010	1.196	1.043	1.371
Forza Italia	Intercept	-6.102	1.502	16.496	1	.000			
	Gender (F =1)	.019	.013	2.275	1	.131	1.020	.994	1.046
	Age	.199	.382	.271	1	.603	1.220	.577	2.581
	Education	.052	.068	.589	1	.443	1.053	.923	1.202
	Political Orientation	.295	.100	8.736	1	.003	1.344	1.105	1.635
	Eval. of Meloni	.151	.070	4.726	1	.030	1.163	1.015	1.333
Action/IV	Intercept	-3.698	1.069	11.974	1	.001			
	Gender (F =1)	.021	.009	5.570	1	.018	1.021	1.004	1.039
	Age	-.218	.289	.565	1	.452	.804	.456	1.419
	Education	.181	.052	12.328	1	.000	1.199	1.083	1.327
	Political Orientation	.020	.067	.089	1	.766	1.020	.895	1.162
	Eval. of Meloni	-.128	.053	5.858	1	.016	.880	.793	.976
5-Star Movement	Intercept	.944	.969	.948	1	.330			
	Gender (F =1)	.004	.008	.254	1	.614	1.004	.989	1.020
	Age	-.120	.252	.225	1	.635	.887	.541	1.454
	Education	.002	.047	.002	1	.965	1.002	.913	1.100
	Political Orientation	-.215	.060	12.959	1	.000	.807	.718	.907
	Eval. of Meloni	-.154	.049	9.855	1	.002	.858	.779	.944
Democratic Party	Intercept	-1.209	.914	1.750	1	.186			
	Gender (F =1)	.024	.008	10.029	1	.002	1.024	1.009	1.039
	Age	.127	.238	.283	1	.595	1.135	.712	1.811
	Education	.104	.044	5.466	1	.019	1.109	1.017	1.210
	Political Orientation	-.253	.058	19.326	1	.000	.777	.694	.869
	Eval. of Meloni	-.237	.049	22.932	1	.000	.789	.716	.869
Green and Left Alliance	Intercept	-1.620	1.330	1.482	1	.223			
	Gender (F =1)	.018	.011	2.925	1	.087	1.019	.997	1.040
	Age	-.291	.359	.657	1	.418	.748	.370	1.510
	Education	.160	.067	5.625	1	.018	1.173	1.028	1.339
	Political Orientation	-.592	.103	33.115	1	.000	.553	.452	.677
	Eval. of Meloni	-.229	.092	6.209	1	.013	.795	.664	.952

Note: a. The reference category is non-voters.

first step (also reported in Table 2), followed by the effects of the predictors added in the second step (see Table 3 for the full regression model results).

The results show that the socio-demographic and political attitude variables (political orientation and evaluation of Meloni) together explained a large share of the

Table 3. Multinomial logistic regression for vote in the 2022 Italian general election, full model.

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	p	Exp(B)	95% C.I. Exp(B) Lower	Upper
Brothers of Italy	Intercept	-8.138	1.603	25.762	1	.000			
	Gender (F =1)	-0.367	0.286	1.642	1	0.2	0.693	0.396	1.214
	Age	0.003	0.009	0.086	1	.769	1.003	0.985	1.021
	Education	0.098	0.051	3.705	1	.054	1.103	0.998	1.219
	Political Orientation	0.213	0.071	9.086	1	.003	1.237	1.077	1.42
	Eval. of Meloni	0.648	0.079	66.972	1	.000	1.912	1.637	2.233
	Hostile Sexism	0.575	0.314	3.358	1	.067	1.778	0.961	3.289
	Host. Sexism ´ Eval. of Meloni	-0,607	0,257	5,582	1	.018	0.545	0.329	0.902
Lega	Intercept	-6.432	1.863	11.913	1	.000			
	Gender (F =1)	0.095	0.381	0.062	1	.803	1.1	0.521	2.321
	Age	0.002	0.013	0.022	1	.883	1.002	0.977	1.027
	Education	-0.03	0.068	0.2	1	.655	0.97	0.85	1.108
	Political Orientation	0.4	0.105	14.484	1	.000	1.493	1.214	1.834
	Eval. of Meloni	0.249	0.085	8.571	1	.003	1.283	1.086	1.516
	Hostile Sexism	0.421	0.298	2	1	.157	1.524	0.85	2.731
	Host. Sexism ´ Eval. of Meloni	-0.503	0.254	3.919	1	.048	0.605	0.367	0.995
Forza Italia	Intercept	-6.818	1.799	14.362	1	.000			
	Gender (F =1)	0.186	0.391	0.228	1	.633	1.205	0.56	2.592
	Age	0.02	0.013	2.279	1	.131	1.02	0.994	1.046
	Education	0.054	0.068	0.628	1	.428	1.055	0.924	1.205
	Political Orientation	0.282	0.101	7.828	1	.005	1.326	1.088	1.616
	Eval. of Meloni	0.192	0.077	6.197	1	.013	1.211	1.042	1.408
	Hostile Sexism	0.216	0.274	0.618	1	.432	1.241	0.725	2.125
	Host. Sexism ´ Eval. of Meloni	-0.42	0.244	2.965	1	.085	0.657	0.408	1.06
Action/IV	Intercept	-2.532	1.194	4.502	1	.034			
	Gender (F =1)	-0.341	0.298	1.309	1	.253	0.711	0.397	1.275
	Age	0.02	0.009	5.027	1	.025	1.02	1.003	1.038
	Education	0.177	0.052	11.471	1	.000	1.193	1.077	1.322
	Political Orientation	0.032	0.068	0.215	1	.643	1.032	0.903	1.179
	Eval. of Meloni	-0.122	0.054	5.035	1	.025	0.885	0.796	0.985
	Hostile Sexism	-0.358	0.169	4.502	1	.034	0.699	0.502	0.973
	Host. Sexism ´ Eval. of Meloni	-0.279	0.186	2.239	1	.135	0.757	0.525	1.09
5-Star Movement	Intercept	0.933	1.09	0.733	1	.392			
	Gender (F =1)	-0.116	0.258	0.2	1	.654	0.891	0.537	1.477
	Age	0.003	0.008	0.18	1	.671	1.003	0.988	1.019
	Education	0.004	0.048	0.007	1	.931	1.004	0.915	1.102
	Political Orientation	-0.217	0.06	13.042	1	.000	0.805	0.715	0.905
	Eval. of Meloni	-0.151	0.05	9.132	1	.003	0.86	0.779	0.948
	Hostile Sexism	0.010	0.156	0.004	1	.951	1.01	0.743	1.372
	Host. Sexism ´ Eval. of Meloni	-0.105	0.174	0.363	1	.547	0.9	0.64	1.266
Democratic Party	Intercept	-0.941	1.033	0.83	1	.362			
	Gender (F =1)	0.078	0.244	0.102	1	.75	1.081	0.67	1.743
	Age	0.023	0.007	9.759	1	.002	1.024	1.009	1.039
	Education	0.099	0.044	4.987	1	.026	1.104	1.012	1.205
	Political Orientation	-0.248	0.058	18.219	1	.000	0.78	0.696	0.874
	Eval. of Meloni	-0.231	0.05	21.027	1	.000	0.794	0.719	0.876
	Hostile Sexism	-0.059	0.16	0.135	1	.713	0.943	0.689	1.29
	Host. Sexism ´ Eval. of Meloni	-0.007	0.178	0.001	1	.97	0.993	0.701	1.407

Table 3. (Continued).

| | | B | S.E. | Wald | df | p | Exp(B) | 95% C.I. Exp(B) | |
								Lower	Upper
Green and Left Alliance	Intercept	0.383	1.645	0.054	1	.816			
	Gender (F =1)	-0.525	0.37	2.017	1	.156	0.591	0.286	1.221
	Age	0.02	0.011	3.198	1	.074	1.02	0.998	1.042
	Education	0.136	0.068	3.921	1	.048	1.145	1.001	1.31
	Political Orientation	-0.562	0.105	28.583	1	.000	0.57	0.464	0.7
	Eval. of Meloni	-0.2	0.102	3.872	1	.049	0.819	0.671	0.999
	Hostile Sexism	-0.654	0.336	3.782	1	.052	0.52	-0.269	1.005
	Host. Sexism ´ Eval. of Meloni	-0.161	0.373	0.186	1	.666	0.851	0.41	1.768

Note: a. The reference category is non-voters.

variance, Nagelkerke's R^2 = .607, χ^2(35) = 764.48, p < .001. Voting for the Brothers of Italy was significantly associated with a right-wing political orientation, B = .223, Exp(B) = 1.249, p = .002, and even more strongly associated with the evaluation of Giorgia Meloni, B = .577, Exp(B) = 1.780, p < .001, while none of the socio-demographic variables had significant effects. Voting for the League and Forza Italia were also significantly associated with a right-wing political orientation, B = .427, Exp(B) = 1.532, p < .001 and B = .295, Exp(B) = 1.344, p = .003, respectively, while their associations with the evaluation of Giorgia Meloni were weaker, B = .179, Exp(B) = 1.196, p = .010 and B = .151, Exp(B) = 1.163, p = .030, respectively. Voting for Action/Italia Viva was not associated with political orientation, B = .020, Exp(B) = 1.020, p < .766, reflecting its centrist positioning on the political spectrum, but it was significantly and negatively associated with the evaluation of Meloni, B = -.128, Exp(B) = 0.880, p = .016. Voting for the other left-leaning parties, namely the 5-Star Movement, the Democratic Party, and the Green/Left Alliance, was significantly associated with left-leaning political orientation, B = -.215, Exp(B) = 0.807, p < .001, B = -.253, Exp(B) = 0.777, p < .001, and B = -.592, Exp(B) = 0.553, p < .001, respectively, and negatively associated with the evaluation of Meloni, B = -.154, Exp(B) = 0.858, p = .002, B = -.237, Exp(B) = 0.789, p < .001, and B = -.229, Exp(B) = 0.795, p = .013, respectively. Overall, the results showed that the evaluation of Giorgia Meloni was significantly associated with voting for each party, with positive effects in the case of the center-right parties, and negative effects in the case of the center and center-left parties.

The introduction of hostile sexism and the interaction term into the full model resulted in a small increase in explained variance, Nagelkerke's R^2 = .619, χ^2(49) = 789.99, p < .001. Interestingly, the effect of hostile sexism on voting for Brothers of Italy was positive as predict-ed, but just above the conventional significance threshold, B = .575, Exp(B) = 1.778, p = .067, providing only partial support for H1a. Similarly, hostile sexism was positively associated with voting for both the League, B = .421, Exp(B) = 1.524, p = .157, and Forza Italia, B = .216, Exp(B) = 1.241, p = .432, but neither effect was significant and thus did not confirm our H1b and H1c. As for voting for the Center and Center-Left parties, we found a significant, negative association between hostile sexism and voting for Action/Italia Viva, B = -.358, Exp(B) = 0.699, p = .034, a nearly significant negative association in the case of voting for the Green and Left Alliance, B = -.654, Exp(B) = 0.520, p = .052, a negative, non-significant relationship with voting for the Democratic Party, B = -.059, Exp(B) = 0.943, p = .713, and an essentially non-existent effect in the case of voting for the Five Star Movement, B = .010, Exp(B) = 1.010, p = .951. These results partially supported our H1d.

Finally, the interaction effect between hostile sexism and the evaluation of Giorgia Meloni was significant in the case of voting for Brothers of Italy, B = -.607, Exp(B) = 0.545, p = .018 (Figure 1, left panel). We conducted a conditional effects analysis to test our moderation hypothesis. Results showed that the positive relationship between hostile sexism and voting for Brothers of Italy was significant for participants with a less positive (-1 SD) evaluation of Giorgia Meloni, B = .743, p =.034, whereas it became negative and nonsignificant for participants with a more positive (+1 SD) evaluation of Giorgia Meloni, B = -.139, p =.407. This result supported our H2, as it showed that the relationship between hostile sexism and voting for the right-wing party Brothers of Italy is comparatively stronger among voters with a less positive evaluation of the female leader and conversely weaker among voters with a more positive evaluation of her. Similar, albeit weaker, results were found in the case of votes for the League, B = -.503,
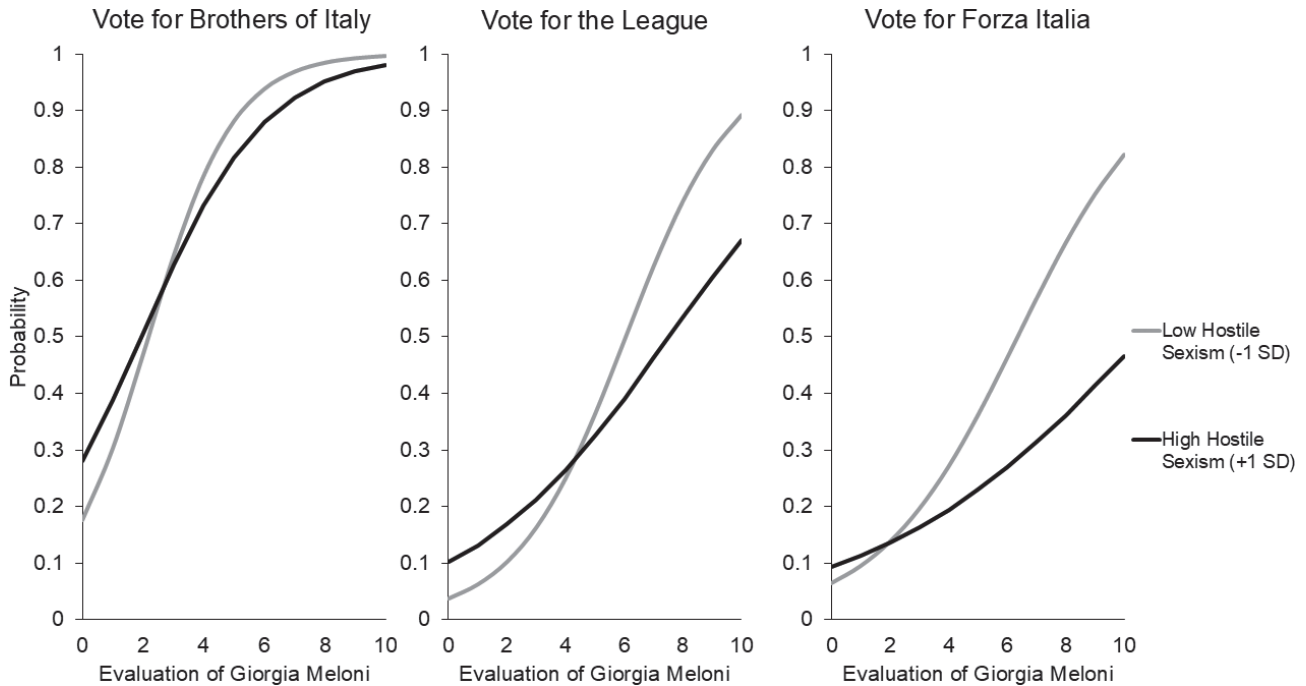
Figure 1. Multinomial logistic regression on vote for the center-right parties.

Exp(*B*) = 0.605, *p* = .048, and Forza Italia (although not significant), B = -.420, Exp(*B*) = 0.657, *p* = .085 (Figure 1, middle and right panels). These additional results shed some light on how Giorgia Meloni's rise to the top of the party affected voters across party lines and in the center-right coalition as a whole, as voters with low levels of hostile sexism and a positive personal view of Giorgia Meloni were more likely to vote not only for the Brothers of Italy, but also for the League and Forza Italia.

7. DISCUSSION

Using data from a representative sample of voters (the 2022 ITANES survey), we examined the link between hostile sexism and vote choice in the Italian 2022 general election, and showed for the first time that this link was partially moderated by voters' ratings of a woman right-wing candidate. Our results extend our knowledge of hostile sexism in the political context, and its role in voting decisions, from several perspectives.

We extended to Italian voters the results of research conducted in other European and Western countries on the presence of hostile sexism among voters and its association with sociodemographic variables and political orientation. The results show that hostile sexism scores are generally medium-low and they are higher among men than among women, among voters with lower levels

of education, and among more religious voters. The relationship between hostile sexism and age was not linear, as the most sexist age groups were those between 35 and 54, while lower scores were recorded in the youngest and oldest age groups. Taken together, these results suggest that the endorsement of sexist attitudes is strongly influenced by the social and cultural norms in voters' socialization environment. The analysis also confirmed the positive relationship between hostile sexism and right-wing political orientation. These findings are consistent with previous research on the sociodemographic and political predictors of sexism in other national samples (as in the British case, see De Geus et al., 2022).

Regarding the role of hostile sexism in voting choice, hostile sexism tended to be more positively (but not significantly) associated with voting for right-wing parties and more negatively associated with voting for left-wing parties. Importantly, however, the relationship between hostile sexism and voting was significantly moderated by the evaluation of right-wing leader Giorgia Meloni. For voters with a less positive evaluation of Giorgia Meloni, higher levels of hostile sexism were associated with a greater likelihood of voting for her party. For voters with a more positive evaluation of Giorgia Meloni, the difference between voters with higher or lower hostile sexism disappeared in the likelihood of voting for Giorgia Meloni's party. As for the other two major parties in the centre-right coalition, the results

suggest that they may have indirectly benefited from Meloni's presence in the coalition, even if this positive effect was limited to the less sexist voters (compared to the case of the Brothers of Italy).

Overall, our results suggest that Meloni's gender identity did not negatively affect support for her party, as the more sexist voters' potential hostility towards the idea of a woman leader was offset by their personal appreciation for her. Moreover, our findings suggest that the positive evaluation of Giorgia Meloni may have attracted some support from less sexist voters, who would have been otherwise less likely to vote for one of the center-right parties. These findings are consistent with the emerging hypothesis (Weeks et al., 2023) that conservative and right-wing parties may derive an electoral advantage from greater female representation. Whereas previous research looked solely at the objective presence of women (i.e., the observable number of female candidates and leaders within a party) as a potential driver of increased support for traditionally male-dominated and male-oriented parties, our findings suggest that female leadership may play a role at a broader attitudinal level.

Women leaders may exert a previously under investigated form of halo effect (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; van der Brug & Mughan, 2007) on voters, that is the tendency to use positive impressions of a candidate to infer further evaluations and judgements on other unrelated areas. In our study, a positive personal evaluation of the female leader may have led some voters to discount or underplay their distance with her coalition in terms of attitudes towards gender equality and gender representation. Past research has highlighted the importance of candidate evaluations, including those based on mere physical appearance (Hall, et al., 2009), and personality dimensions (Bertolotti et al., 2013; Bruckmüller & Methner, 2018; Catellani & Bertolotti, 2014). Our findings indicate that a female candidates' likability can also drive voters' decision to ignore a party's or coalition's standing on gender issues.

The generalizability of our results is the main limitation of our study, as it examined a single election in a single country. These results were necessarily tied to numerous factors specific to the 2022 Italian general election, such as the electoral system, the composition and relative strength of the coalition standing for election, and the social, political, and economic conditions in which the election took place. In particular, the rise of Giorgia Meloni was the result of several peculiar conditions, such as the relative weakness of the other parties in the coalition and their respective (male) leaders, as well as her "outsider" status resulting from her exclusion from the incumbent majority national unity government before the election. Nevertheless, future studies may try to test our hypotheses on other elections and other national contexts, in order to test their generalizability.

In conclusion, our study investigated the apparent paradox of a gender representation milestone such as the election of the first female Prime Minister being achieved through the electoral success of a right-wing party, traditionally opposed to gender equality and women's representation in politics. Our results indicate that this result was made possible by two concurrent reactions to such peculiar situation. On the one hand, the more sexist voters appear to have turned a blind eye on the gender of the leader of their favourite coalition. On the other hand, the less sexist voters' attention may have been attracted by the novelty of a female candidate, and her personal likability may have convinced some to ignore her party's record on gender issue and support her anyway.

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