Economic insecurity in the 2022 Italian general election: mobilization or withdrawal?[*]

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Abstract:

A right-wing coalition led by Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (FdI) emerged as the clear winner of the 2022 Italian general election, with voter turnout reaching its lowest level in the history of the Italian Republic. This result unfolded amidst a long-standing sense of economic stagnation, escalating inequality, and rising inflation. The article explores the relationship between individual economic insecurity and the 2022 election results. There is an assumption in both public and scholarly discourse that economic insecurity is responsible for the rise of populist and, particularly, populist radical-right (PRR) parties. Does the 2022 Italian general election represent a case of mobilization or withdrawal of the economically insecure electorate? Building on the literature on populist success and the economy's effects on political behavior, we find that economic insecurity was not behind the success of the PRR parties (the League and FdI) in the 2022 election. It was also not associated with the vote for the main populist non-radical-right party in the Italian political landscape: the 5-Star Movement. On the contrary, in this election, economic insecurity mostly deterred voters from casting their ballots, and the success of the PRR can mostly be explained by anti-immigration attitudes.

Keywords:

Italian Elections; Voting; Populism; Populist Radical Right; Economic Dissatisfaction; Abstentionism.

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1 Introduction

There are many, often interrelated, reasons underlying voting choice and the choice to participate or abstain in elections. Among these, the role of the economy is often highlighted in the literature (Bossert et al., 2023; Dassonneville et al., 2022; Duch & Stevenson, 2008; King & Carberry, 2022), with economic insecurity frequently associated with the rise of populist parties (Scheiring et al., 2024). This assumed connection routinely underpins pundits' interpretations and characterizations of electoral outcomes (Angelucci & De Sio, 2021); this characterization continues to shape the public's perception and the tailoring of the political supply. According to a coherent, transnational reading, the success of populist parties and, specifically, those of the populist radical right (PRR) is fueled by economic hardship. Despite this, empirical evidence reveals that the political landscape is less clearly defined.

We engage in this debate by scrutinizing the Italian case, focusing on the 2022 Italian parliamentary election to evaluate the presence, extent, and direction of the electoral impact of perceived economic insecurity, starting with the link between economic insecurity and populist success. We believe that the Italian case is particularly relevant since the national economy has long been stagnating; there has been a steady decrease in "real wages" for the last three decades, and rising inequalities were exacerbated by the 2008 Great Recession. Against this backdrop, the "pure people" vs. "corrupt elites" dichotomy (Mudde, 2004) could be a valuable electoral tool to channel pervasive economic dissatisfaction.

Among the electoral options in Italy, the PRR is embodied by two right-wing coalition parties, FdI (Fratelli d'Italia—Brothers of Italy) and the League (Lega). These two—the first objects of our investigation—joined forces with FI (Forza Italia—Go Italy!) and other minor parties in the last national election, producing a winning coalition with a significant lead over the competitors. However, the Italian electoral landscape is also characterized by another populist (non-radical-right) party, the M5S (Movimento 5 Stelle—5-Star Movement). The political manifesto of the M5S devoted great prominence to economic and anti-poverty issues, and it has

introduced policies like the "Reddito di cittadinanza" (*citizenship income*), to which a segment of the electorate is particularly receptive. As such, we are compelled to investigate whether this party has also captured the section of the electorate experiencing a high degree of economic insecurity.

Electoral studies often focus on the voting choice, limiting their analysis to those who showed up to cast a ballot. By contrast, our contribution to the literature is to study the hypothesized effect on the entire electorate. Given the unprecedented rate of abstention during the 2022 Italian election—the highest (ca. 36%) since the birth of the Italian Republic in 1946—we consider this approach particularly appropriate. We extend our inquiry to whether economically insecure voters demonstrate an increased propensity to non-participation in the electoral process. In sum, we aim to test whether, for the 2022 general election, current economic insecurity mobilized voters in a populist direction or was associated with withdrawal from the electoral process.

We test our hypotheses using post-electoral survey data collected in October 2022 by LaPolis Electoral Observatory, University of Urbino Carlo Bo. Data are analyzed through logistic regression models in which specific declared individual voting choices are the dependent variables, with the independent variables being (i) individual occupational status and (ii) individual satisfaction with the economic circumstances of one's household.

In Section 2, we review the existing academic literature and theories underpinning our research. We propose the theoretical foundation for our empirical analysis and set out our hypotheses for testing. In Section 3, we contextualize our hypotheses with an overview of the Italian political landscape in 2022. In Section 4, we present the data and detail our methodology. Section 5 focuses on our research findings that ground our conclusions, which are presented and summarized in Section 6, alongside reflections on our study's implications.

2   Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Two contrasting theories can explain the role of economic insecurity in shaping electoral results: the *withdrawal* theory and the *mobilization* theory.

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The former suggests that economic adversity and unemployment reduce voter participation (Rosenstone, 1982; Passarelli & Tuorto, 2014; Schlozman et al., 2018; Azzolini, 2021; Tuorto, 2023). The latter posits that economic hardship and unemployment, in fact, spur voters to express dissatisfaction through increased engagement (Burden & Wichowsky, 2014; Bossert et al., 2023). The early decades of the 21st century have seen economic crises across countries, a surge in populist parties, and the advent of what Oesch and Rennwald (2018) call a "tripolar competition" resulting from the electoral success of parties on the far right. These readings seem especially relevant during economic downturns when a shift toward electoral abstention or populist voting is likely and incumbent governments and "traditional" parties are punished.

The concurrence of these phenomena might suggest causation that flows from economic trends to political outcomes. This picture becomes more complex when considering that an insecurity-driven shift to populist voting is, in fact, related to cultural factors (Georgiadou et al., 2018; Margalit, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Similar links are identified to explain the support for far-right parties (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Gidron & Mijs, 2019). The above studies gave rise to the *cultural backlash* thesis (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), whereas others have emphasized the role of the economy as contributing to the *Economic Insecurity* thesis (Kriesi, 2014; Scheiring et al., 2024).

Investigating this latter thesis, Rebechi & Rohde (2022) find that economic insecurity has an impact on right-wing populism, although this is weaker than the effect of "perceived reverse discrimination." With negative feelings toward outsiders being associated with economic insecurity and authoritarianism (Watson et al., 2022), an economically insecure electorate seems to gravitate toward right-wing forms of populism, although its nativist appeal and claims of social protection and nationalism are also attractive (Rebechi & Rohde, 2022). Further, as suggested by Oesch and Rennwald (2018), voters' social class may remain important in interpreting electoral outcomes, with the left and radical-right parties jointly garnering the highest share of votes from production workers—who are often recognized as more likely than others to suffer from economic

dissatisfaction. However, social class is equally—or more—important as an explanation for electoral turnout (Lahtinen et al., 2017; Heath, 2018). Other studies find a positive relationship between rising inequality and increasing support for radical-right-wing parties among manual laborers and "routine non-manual workers" (Han, 2016), people in precarious employment (Antonucci et al., 2023), and the general electorate (Engler & Weisstanner, 2021).

However, these findings are disputed; others find no substantial empirical evidence to support these connections (Coffé et al., 2007; Gidron & Mijs, 2019). It might be that, due to *welfare chauvinism*, those who are more likely to opt for radical-right parties are, in fact, better-off voters, positioning themselves against redistributive policies favoring those who are worse off. Various mechanisms are proposed in the literature to explain the association between income inequality and the populist vote (economic insecurities, social integration, trust in political elites, and identity). Stoetzer et al. (2023) find that none of these explanations adequately account for the impact of income inequality on populist voting. Yet, rather than economic insecurity, mistrust of elites seems to be the most significant mediator of this relationship. Finally, and remarkably, Gidron & Mijs (2019) show that income loss promotes voting for radical-left (and not radical-right) parties. Sipma et al. (2023) return a similar finding; that is, there is a positive relationship between *actual* economic insecurity and voting for radical-left (but not radical-right) parties. However, Sipma et al. (2023) also find a weak but positive relationship between *perceived* job insecurity and votes for a radical right-wing party. This suggests that the fear and perception of economic insecurity, together with anti-immigration attitudes and a generally pessimistic view of society, can influence voters in this direction.

While in line with previously cited studies and supporting the argument that economic insecurity raises the vote share for populist parties, Guiso et al. (2024) also find a positive effect of economic insecurity on the abstention rate. According to this study, economic crisis sparks disillusion among supporters of traditional parties, which is only partially resolved by voting for populist parties. Consistent with this position, as Plaza-Colodro & Lisi

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(2024) find, populist voters and abstainers are likely similar in their political "protest" attitudes. Both populists and non-voters might see their strategy as punishing the "traditional" parties in the first case and the political system as a whole in the second. Building on the long-lasting scholarship that positively links income levels with electoral turnout (Schlozman et al., 1998), there is a fairly novel literature focusing on the association between not voting and economic crisis (Morlino & Raniolo, 2017), labor market inequalities (Cetrulo et al., 2023), unemployment, and perceived economic insecurity (Passarelli & Tuorto, 2014).

Following these different strands of the literature, we formulate two hypotheses regarding the electoral effects of economic insecurity. Both concern a general mechanism, echoing readings of anti-political sentiment (Mete, 2023) and recognizing a protest strategy in response to the identification of political elites as responsible for the negative state of the household economy.

The first hypothesis emphasizes the potential to *voice* economic insecurity within the political system (Hirschman, 1972). This possibility assumes that populist parties are more likely to take advantage of the electorate's economic insecurities and turn this against their political adversaries.

H1. Economic insecurity is positively associated with populist voting (*mobilization hypothesis*).

The other hypothesis involves the potential *withdrawal* from the ballot box of those who are dissatisfied with their current economic situation. This act of protest points toward a delegitimization of the current political offering or the democratic process as a whole. We can expect that, driven by feelings of helplessness and despair regarding its economic circumstances and anger toward those recognized as the cause of such a situation, the economically insecure electorate might decide to abstain in protest. Therefore, parallel to the electorate's choice to *voice* its protest, we hypothesize an *exit* from the democratic game: a refusal to provide a handhold to any political representative.

H2. Economic insecurity is positively associated with electoral abstention (*withdrawal hypothesis*).

3   The Italian Context

In Italy, economic inequality has significantly increased over the past three decades—primarily in terms of income but also in wealth (Franzini, 2022). In the period from 1994 to 2018, "real income" has decreased overall, particularly for low-income individuals, and apart from the wealthiest 10% (Bloise et al., 2023). The same period also saw the rise of novel trends, such as a significant segment of the workforce finding itself categorized as among the "working poor."[1] Economic imbalances of this kind invariably lead to social immobility (Franzini 2022). The repercussions of the 2008 global financial crisis, a growing perception of economic insecurity, and increasing inequalities have intensified political discontent; this is reflected in a profound disenchantment with traditional parties and the political system at large (Itanes 2013; 2018; Franzini 2022; Bloise et al., 2023; Bordignon & Salvarani, 2023). The center-left has paid a higher price in electoral terms, progressively losing relevant segments of its base. In particular, the center-left appears to have lost the votes of precarious workers unhappy with labor market measures introduced by center-left governments (Bloise et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this state of affairs, and political elites responded with a grand coalition "technocratic" government led by the former President of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi (2021–2022). For many, the Russian war in Ukraine (which began in February 2022) has heightened insecurities, including economic ones.

In discussing Italian economic performance and its political outcomes, Franzini (2022) introduces the concept of "losers of inequality," which echoes the idea of a social group comprising those "left behind" (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) and more explicitly, "losers of modernity" (Betz &

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[1] That is to say, those workers who are employed yet subsist below the poverty threshold.

Immerfall, 1998) and "losers of globalization" (Kriesi et al., 2008), reflecting two other pivotal analytical lenses. This latter framing underscores the role of globalization in driving electoral choices, especially in the direction of the radical right. When assuming this perspective mainly focused on the economy, the scholarship also considers the interplay between cultural and economic factors (Ceccarini, 2018). Franzini (2022) links these phenomena to recent trends in Italian electoral behavior, namely with the ascent of populist parties and the widespread and growing electoral abstention. The latter, he suggests, may be due to the lack of a political supply equipped (and willing) to address the fundamental causes of economic and political inequality. Furthermore, at the time of the 2022 election, around 70% of the electorate judged the country's economic performance in the preceding year as negative (Bellucci, 2023). It was in this context that the 2022 electoral campaign and the electoral consultation of September 25 took place. In which direction did prevailing economic insecurity drive the electorate in this general election? The hypotheses formulated in the previous section suggest that there are different possible answers to this question.

3.1. Did economic insecurity favor the populist radical right?

The first expectation from our theoretical framework is that economic insecurity rewarded the winning center-right coalition and, specifically, its (predominant) PRR component. Although long part of the political establishment (directly or indirectly), FdI and the League still adopted a discourse against the establishment in their electoral campaigns, pointing to this as comprising cultural and economic elites, mainly identified with "leftist" intellectuals, journalists, parties, entrepreneurs, and politicians. Over the years, the center-right coalition has used this rhetorical scheme in several ways. The coalition and the single parties in it have drawn votes in regions characterized by a decline in employment (primarily in the country's south) and in those (northern and central) regions with a consistently impoverished middle class (Bloise et al., 2023). This seems to be consistent with the strand of literature showing that the more

conservative parties are those preferred by economically insecure voters (Bossert et al., 2023).

Even if the League lost substantial votes in the 2022 general election—in comparison with the 2018 parliamentary election (17%) and the 2019 European election (34%)—it could still rely on a reservoir of votes from a loyal electorate primarily based in northern Italy,[2] which awarded the party around 9% of valid votes. Colloca et al. (2021) attribute the League's electoral success in the 2018 general election to the marginalized areas of Italy's central and northern regions, which are particularly vulnerable to socio-economic malaise. Together with FdI, the League has long represented the PRR of the Italian electorate.[3] To this day, both parties see an unmediated relationship between followers and leaders, and the radical rhetoric of their leaders, Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, could make them more appealing to those wanting a radical change. Their claims of social protection and their nationalist posture might be especially appealing to the economically insecure, providing a sense of security rooted in an invented homogeneity of the national state; this pattern is seen in other contexts (Rebechi & Rohde, 2022; Watson et al., 2022). In this regard, the strategic use of the "Made in Italy" brand and of religion and ethnicity have been central to the campaigns of the FdI and the League. As in the tradition of exclusionary populism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013), migrants are said to be "stealing jobs" or "lowering the salaries" of native Italian citizens, especially in low-skill sectors. Those to blame for this are migrants, ONGs, and "the left."

Remaining outside of the grand coalition government (notable for its unprecedented and comprehensive parliamentary support), FdI could position itself as *the* opposition party in campaigning and more easily criticize the policies of the Draghi government. In doing so, the party hoped to capture the "protest vote," offering itself as an alternative for the electorate disenchanted with the coalition's policies (especially its economic policies). Giorgia Meloni also promised tax relief in her campaign

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[2] Until 2017, the party's name was Lega Nord (Northern League).

[3] Both parties are categorized as "populist" and "far-right" in the PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2023).

in favor of traditional families, which may have been received sympathetically by large economically insecure households.

3.2 Did economic insecurity favor the populist (non-radical-right) M5S?

In the context of Italy's multifaceted populism, however, our first hypothesis is consistent with another scenario in which economic insecurity finds an alternative populist electoral outlet. The Italian political system has, in fact, been profoundly shaped by a populist yet non-radical right party, the post-ideological, multi-ideological (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2018) or valence populist (Zulianello, 2021) M5S.

As for the League, in the recent past, the economic crisis has represented a key ingredient of the political discourse and electoral success of the M5S (Caiani & Padoan, 2021). The M5S 2022 electoral campaign entailed defending one of the party's most significant achievements in the 2018–2022 legislature, namely the introduction of *citizenship income*. The party began with a heterogeneous support base (Diamanti, 2013). However, after the party's strong (extra-parliamentary) anti-austerity and anti-elite campaigns during Monti's government (2011–2013) and again in the 2018 parliamentary election, the success of M5S (in 2018, 32.7% of votes), especially in the southern regions has been largely attributed to a widespread socio-economic malaise (Colloca et al., 2021).

In the following years, the party's new leader, Giuseppe Conte, redefined its manifesto toward redistribution, emphasizing the old idea of "abolishing poverty" in Italy by proposing new policies, for example, introducing a minimum salary. It is reasonable to infer that the M5S, probably more than the PRR parties, attracted votes from among those suffering from economic insecurity. Despite this support, its central role in all the governments of the XVIII legislature diminished its appeal for those voting on the basis of discontent and in protest in the 2022 election. Nevertheless, the M5S contributed to the fall of Draghi's government and, during the campaign, neglected to mention the *National Recovery and Resilience Plan* (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza—PNRR), one of the main contributions of such government (Bellucci, 2023). This strategy was

probably intended to win back a portion of the electorate by positioning itself as an outsider to the "real" establishment.

3.3. Did economic insecurity favor electoral abstention?

The Italian electoral scenario in 2022 was also an ideal testing ground for our second hypothesis regarding political disengagement. The most striking outcome of the general election was, in fact, the level of abstention, which rose to 36%, the highest rate ever observed for a first-order election. Tuorto (2018) notes that prior to the inception of the Second Republic (in 1994) and, more notably, with the dissolution of the conventional mass parties that could mobilize vast segments of the population throughout the 1990s, abstention was predominantly seen among those with fewer resources or who were politically apathetic––that is, among those who were profoundly disengaged from the political system. Such abstention was considered "physiological" and was arguably limited by the formally *mandatory* nature of voting; this never prompted any form of punishment and was eliminated in 1993.

With the progressive decline of the robust political identities that characterized the First Republic, abstention in Italy seems to have evolved into a distinct political choice. Although it should always be framed as a complex phenomenon with multiple explanations, in the Italian context, it seems that a representation deficit—and not political apathy—appears to play a central role in the Italian context (Bordignon & Salvarani, 2023). Given the exceptionally high rate of abstention, we expect that it holds appeal for those who are dissatisfied with their household's economic circumstances.

The following section sets out the research design we applied to empirically test our hypotheses.

4   Data and Method

The analyses presented in this article are based on a post-election survey conducted by LaPolis Electoral Observatory – University of Urbino Carlo Bo.

The survey was conducted two weeks after the election day (field: October 10–20, 2022) by the private polling institute Demetra using a mixed-mode method of interviewing: CATI, CAMI, and CAWI. The national sample of respondents (1,315 cases) is representative of the Italian voting-age population in terms of gender, age, and territorial distribution. The models presented below refer to a sub-sample covering the entire electorate, including abstainers (N=1016) from the Italian general election of September 25, 2022, and excluding non-respondents and those claiming to have cast an invalid (blank or null) ballot.[4]

Two logistic regression models were fitted to assess the effect of economic insecurity on voting behavior, controlling for the main sociodemographic variables (Model 1) and for these and other predictors related to the domains of social, cultural, and political orientation (Model 2). This latter choice aims to test our hypotheses against alternative explanations of the vote choice, which could depress or strengthen the effects of interest.

The dependent variables are dichotomous variables in which the "1s" identify different electoral choices. One dependent variable isolates the role of PRR parties (given by the sum of the electorate voting for the FdI and the League). The limited sample size prompted us to merge the two parties' voters into a single category, thereby precluding a separate analysis of Salvini's party. However, this decision aligns with our objective of assessing the specific appeal of PRR parties for economically insecure voters. Additionally, existing studies on the 2022 Italian General Election highlight the significant overlap of the potential electorates of the two parties (Maggini & Vezzoni 2023) and the substantial number of voters who

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[4] As we investigate electoral abstention through a survey, methodological caveats are in order. First, we recognize that interviewing is likely to underestimate the extent of non-voting because the social desirability bias can drive people to say that they have voted even when they have not. In addition, political surveys are more likely to include those who are most interested in politics. We cannot entirely avoid the issues of social desirability and self-selection, which can result in an underestimation of the abstention rate in surveys. However, following Blais and Daoust (2020), we decided to limit this problem by making use of turnout-weighted data to obtain reported turnout rates corresponding to the official 2022 turnout.

switched between them (De Sio & Paparo 2023). We complete the testing of H1 by selecting another dependent variable to focus on the M5s electorate.

We test H2 by selecting non-voting as the dependent variable. Finally, as a point of reference and to complete our assessment of the major parties, we also ran the two models with voting for PD (Partito Democratico— Democratic Party) as the dependent variable. In the Italian political landscape, the PD can indeed be considered a prototypical mainstream party.

We employ two primary independent variables to capture economic insecurity and test our main hypotheses: (i) Individual occupational status, which measures unemployment with a dichotomous variable; [5] (ii) Satisfaction with the household's economic circumstances, measured on a scale of 1 to 10. This latter measure is designed to capture the degree of economic insecurity and reflect the individual's egotropic assessment at the time of the interview (and thus approximately at the time of the election). The focus on individual satisfaction with household income differs from other measures of economic insecurity, which often rely on broader categorical assessments of the household's economic situation. These measures typically ask respondents to classify their situation as "living comfortably," "coping," "difficult," or "very difficult [to cope]" with respect to their household income (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). In contrast, our approach employs a scale from 1 (being the lowest) to 10 (being the highest level of satisfaction), allowing for a more detailed operationalization of an individual assessment.

The relationship among the variables above is tested at two levels by introducing five control variables into the models in the second step. Table 1, which is analyzed in the following section, summarizes the research strategy and the main results.

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[5] We assess individual unemployment status using respondents' self-reported data. The original survey question regarding current employment status offers thirteen categories: worker, employee or technician, manager, self-employed worker, trader, craftsperson, entrepreneur, student, homemaker, pensioner, military personnel, unemployed, and other. We recoded this variable into a binary format where 1 represents "Unemployed" and 0 represents "Other."

- *Model 1* controls for key sociodemographic attributes as follows. *Gender*: This is a dichotomous variable reflecting an individual's self-reported gender identity, with men as the reference category. *Age class*: Categorical variable on five levels: 18–29 years (reference category); 30–44; 45–54; 55–64; and 65 and over. *Education*: Categorical variable on three levels—low (up to lower secondary education); medium (up to upper secondary education); high (tertiary education). *Geopolitical area*: This variable is included because of the traditional connection between voting choice and territory in the Italian political system (Diamanti, 2009; Caciagli, 2011; D'Alimonte & Emanuele, 2023). Another reason for its inclusion in the models pertains to the stark, persistent differences between different areas of the country in terms of economic development and occupation. These factors could confound the relationship between our outcome variable and the core explanatory variables.

- *Model 2* introduces additional predictors of the voting choice, focusing on other potential sources of insecurity, social, cultural, and political. As mentioned above, Italy's election results (and in particular, the rise of PRR parties) have been read as the effect of an economic malaise and the result of a cultural malaise linked to international migration (Emanuele & Paparo 2018). We thus included two indicators of immigration-related insecurity from previous studies (Bordignon et al. 2018). *Border protection* (vs. international openness): respondents were asked to choose between two competing statements—1) Italy should open up to the world more (reference category for a dichotomous variable), and 2) Italy's borders should be more closely controlled. *Fear of migrants*: this variable refers to a cultural sense of insecurity linked to anti-immigration attitudes. It measures agreement with the statement, "Migrants are a danger to public order and security," on a four-point scale. Moreover, populist voting and abstention are often interpreted as the result of a political malaise regarding the functioning of

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democratic institutions and the mechanisms of representation. Therefore, we also control for *democratic satisfaction*: satisfaction at the individual level with how democracy works in Italy is measured on a scale of 1 to 10.

These expressions of economic, cultural, and political malaise are often treated as the effect of distress arising from the contemporary global scenario and its recurring multiple crises; the vote for populist parties has been described as the vote of the "losers of globalization" (Kriesi et al., 2008). For these reasons, two potential predictors were included to measure this more general globalization-related form of insecurity. *Uncertainty regarding the future*: this variable refers to the degree of agreement with the statement, "Today it is pointless to make big plans for oneself and one's family because the future is uncertain and full of risks," measured on a 4-point scale. *Global anxiety*: this variable references the degree of agreement with the statement, "Today's world makes me anxious," measured on a 4-point scale.[6]

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[6] The variables introduced in Model 2 were treated as continuous to achieve more parsimonious models. We conducted various robustness checks, treating these as dichotomous and categorical. The resulting models did not substantively alter the interpretation of the studied effects and, in particular, did not change the sign and significance of our key independent variable parameters. These models can be supplied upon request.

Table 1. Logistic Regression Models (Dependent variables: vote for the main parties and abstention)

	PD Model 1 Coef. (sig.)	S.E.	PD Model 2 Coef. (sig.)	S.E.	M5S Model 1 Coef. (sig.)	S.E.	M5S Model 2 Coef. (sig.)	S.E.	PRR (FdI + League) Model 1 Coef. (sig.)	S.E.	PRR Model 2 Coef. (sig.)	S.E.	Abstainers Model 1 Coef. (sig.)	S.E.	Abstainers Model 2 Coef. (sig.)	S.E.
Gender (ref: male)	0.075	0.209	0.084	0.231	-0.572 *	0.239	-0.863 ***	0.258	0.070	0.169	0.414 *	0.190	0.204	0.149	0.111	0.156
Age (Ref: 18-29)																
30-44	-0.523	0.364	-0.341	0.383	-0.091	0.321	0.087	0.332	-0.114	0.303	-0.509	0.331	0.530 *	0.249	0.538 *	0.257
45-54	-0.421	0.378	-0.529	0.400	-0.850 *	0.389	-0.688	0.405	0.656 *	0.287	0.422	0.317	0.260	0.262	0.329	0.269
55-64	0.259	0.369	0.308	0.392	-0.598	0.388	-0.663	0.410	0.036	0.321	-0.249	0.349	0.182	0.278	0.263	0.286
65+	0.608	0.339	0.378	0.366	-1.425 **	0.439	-1.259 **	0.456	0.342	0.298	0.106	0.330	0.101	0.270	0.167	0.280
Education (ref: low)																
medium	0.626 *	0.253	0.323	0.277	0.021	0.291	-0.153	0.311	0.030	0.200	0.281	0.219	-0.940 ***	0.182	-1.038 ***	0.190
high	0.744 *	0.308	0.199	0.337	-0.195	0.361	-0.505	0.394	-0.212	0.261	0.406	0.297	-0.951 ***	0.232	-1.127 ***	0.247
Geo-political area (ref: North West)																
North East	0.189	0.359	0.622	0.389	-0.491	0.522	-0.474	0.533	-0.424	0.279	-0.875 **	0.306	0.389	0.250	0.401	0.261
Centre	0.385	0.304	0.713 *	0.327	-0.489	0.465	-0.651	0.476	-0.841 **	0.270	-1.039 ***	0.296	0.805 ***	0.223	0.750 **	0.230
South and Island	-0.052	0.262	0.229	0.284	0.893 **	0.297	0.811 **	0.311	-0.397 *	0.193	-0.659 **	0.219	0.462 *	0.185	0.500 *	0.195
Occupation: unemployed	0.269	0.431	0.652	0.459	-0.911	0.549	-0.821	0.559	-1.044 *	0.462	-1.374 **	0.489	0.738 **	0.279	0.827 **	0.290
Satifaction with household econ. circ. (1-10)	0.154 **	0.048	0.026	0.056	-0.038	0.048	-0.014	0.053	0.063	0.036	0.074	0.043	-0.122 ***	0.030	-0.087 **	0.034
Fear of migrants[1] (1-4)			-0.383 *	0.158			-0.522 ***	0.155			0.671 ***	0.117			-0.176	0.097
Borders control[2] (dic.)			-0.926 ***	0.274			-0.367	0.277			1.326 ***	0.231			-0.040	0.176
Satisfaction with how democracy works in Italy (1-10)			0.301 ***	0.055			-0.075	0.051			0.093 *	0.040			-0.168 ***	0.033
Future uncertainty[3] (1-4)			-0.310 *	0.135			0.115	0.146			0.107	0.117			-0.209 *	0.092
Global anxiety[4] (1-4)			0.079	0.138			0.309 *	0.155			-0.212	0.122			-0.094	0.097
constant	-3.424	0.486	-2.593	0.782	-1.529	0.459	-1.031	0.823	-1.491	0.361	-4.094	0.634	-0.199	0.313	1.662	0.520
pseudo-R^2 (McFadden)	0.056		0.173		0.089		0.133		0.040		0.176		0.080		0.111	
N	1016		1016		1016		1013		1016		1016		1016		1016	

[1] Agreement with the statement: "Migrants are a danger for public order and security".

[2] Respondents were asked to choose between two competing statements: 1. "Italy should open up more to the world" (ref); 2. "Italy's borders should be more closely controlled".

[3] Agreement with the statement: "Today it is pointless to make big plans for oneself and one's family, because the future is uncertain and full of risks".

[4] Agreement with the statement: "Today's world makes me anxious".

Sig. indicates the level of significance; * $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$; *** $p<0.001$. R^2 is McFadden's pseudo R^2

Source: LaPolis Electoral Observatory, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, October 2022 (base: 1,315 cases)

5   Results

Table 1 summarizes the results for all models. Figure 1 depicts the predicted probabilities of abstention at different levels of egotropic economic satisfaction in Models 1 and 2.

Starting with Hypothesis H1, the results provide no evidence that economic insecurity drives the vote toward the PRR parties. On the contrary, there is evidence of a negative relationship with unemployment status. However, we cannot recognize any effect of negative economic evaluations on the household economy. These results are consistent with Azzolini et al. (2023), which shows how, in Italy, the self-expressed ideological orientation of those who are most economically fragile is not on the right of the political spectrum. At most, the opposite may be true, as unemployment is negatively associated with voting for PRR parties. This could partially support the *welfare chauvinism* thesis that those most likely to opt for radical-right parties are, in fact, better-off voters who do not want to lose their socio-economic standing. These findings are also in line with other strands of research. Angelucci & De Sio (2021) show that fighting poverty has a negative but statistically weak effect on the probability that an individual will join the FdI's electorate in 2018. More generally, as existing studies (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012) show, radical-right voting may be more strongly rooted in perceived cultural threats than economic ones.

Thus, our results align with the *cultural backlash* thesis (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Model 2, reported in Table 1, demonstrates how voting for Brothers of Italy and the League is primarily associated with a cultural malaise; this is evidenced by a preference for closed borders and perceiving migrants as a threat to public order and security. Perhaps surprisingly, PRR voters also reveal a higher degree of satisfaction with how democracy works in the country than other segments of the electorate. Nevertheless, we should note that this effect appears statistically weak. We should recall that the data used in this research were collected in the context of a post-election survey, in which PRR voters already knew that their coalition had won and Giorgia Meloni was ready to take the helm of the national government.

The coefficients for unemployment and satisfaction with the household economy are also not significant for the M5S in Models 1 and 2, leading us to further reject H1. Thus, economic insecurity cannot be clearly associated with the 5-Star vote in the 2022 general election. The attempt by the M5S to regain electoral support by distancing itself from Draghi's agenda and the government it had endorsed (and playing a non-marginal role in its fall) does not appear to have produced meaningful results, at least as regards the economically insecure electorate. This seems to confirm the findings in Giuliani (2023), who casts severe doubts on there being a causal relationship between those who benefited from the M5S's flagship measure of *citizenship income* and the vote share of M5S. However, it may also be the case that other determinants of the 5-Star vote subsume the economic dimension.
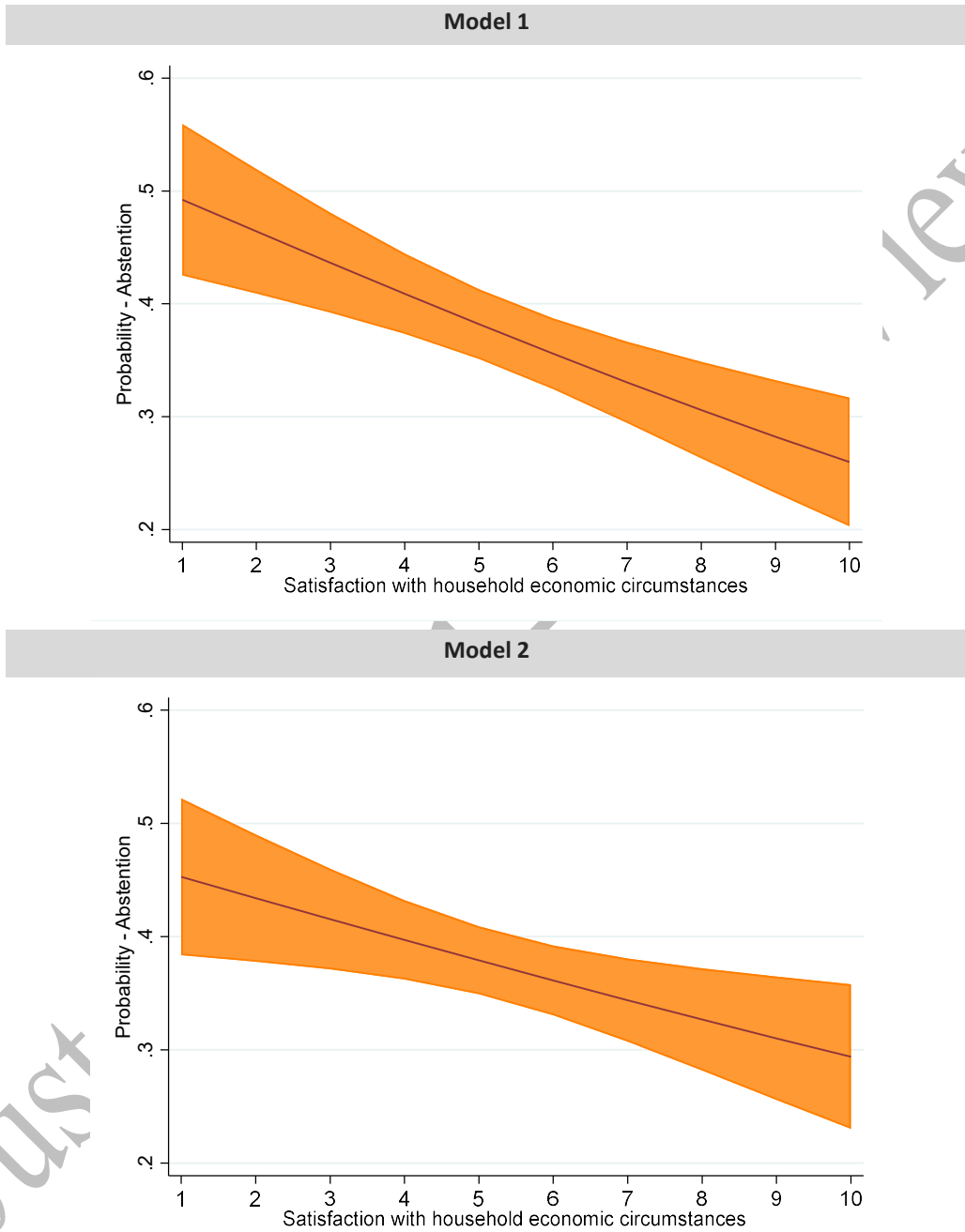
Our findings suggest that the vote for Conte's party is mainly explained by lower levels of insecurity regarding immigration and a non-negligible level of "global anxiety." If this latter relationship is consistent with the profile of this populist *movement party* since its origins, the greater openness to immigration confirms the recent and considerable outflows regarding the right-wing component of its composite electorate (De Sio and Paparo, 2023). In parallel, it confirms the party's progressive positioning on the left after joining Salvini's League to participate in the so-called *yellow-green* government.

Beyond the negative effect of considering migrants a danger to public order and security, the geopolitical pattern of the M5S vote is also notable. The territorial distribution of the party vote is, in fact, mainly concentrated in the islands and the south of the Italian Peninsula. Thus, if there is an association between economic insecurity and M5S's share of votes, it might be hidden by the interplay of other determinants of the vote or this specific geopolitical component. Furthermore, we should underline that our analysis focuses on the entire electorate, while analyses focusing on valid ballots revealed a positive (albeit weak) relationship between economic insecurity and the vote for the M5s in the 2022 general election (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2023). In essence, the capacity to appeal to an economically

distressed electorate was a distinctive feature of the party, which disappeared when abstainers were also included in the analysis.

The strongest and most robust relationships across the various models presented here are those concerning non-voting, thus supporting our Hypothesis H2. Dissatisfaction with economic circumstances at the household level and individual unemployment status are positively associated with electoral abstention. Rather than following a pattern of mobilization, this result suggests the relevance of the *withdrawal* theory in this context, particularly regarding perceived economic insecurity. Our empirical analysis (see the margins graphs in Figure 1) shows how the individual probability of abstaining decreases along with perceived economic insecurity. While losing some of its explanatory power when variables capturing other political attitudes enter the model, economic insecurity remains a significant factor. In addition to being linked to low educational attainment, residence in the central and southern regions, unemployment, and uncertainty about the future, abstention appears to be driven by high levels of dissatisfaction with the way democracy works in Italy. This latter finding stresses the need to interpret the choice to abstain as resulting from a combination of economic and political factors.

Figure 1. Predicted probability of abstention according to different levels of satisfaction with household economic circumstances - Logistic Regression Models

As a reference and to enhance the understanding of the Italian electoral landscape, we also considered the share of the vote of the Democratic Party. In this case, the relationship with economic satisfaction is positive when controlling for the main sociodemographic variables and geographic area. This finding is consistent with the party's full alignment in its electoral campaign with the Draghi government and its economic policies. It also confirms the specific appeal of the largest center-left party to those segments of the electorate that are more satisfied and less affected by economic hardship. However, in Model 2, the variable reflecting perceived economic insecurity is no longer significant, but in this case, voting for the PD appears to be driven mainly by a more open attitude toward immigration, greater democratic satisfaction, and lower degrees of uncertainty regarding the future. Finally, for the Democratic Party's share of the electorate, individual occupational status is not significant in Models 1 or 2.

6   Conclusions

While focused on the Italian context, this article offers insights into the relationship between citizens' perceptions of the economy and political trends in Europe and beyond. We also specifically aimed to build a more complete picture of Italy's political landscape, where we believe that the narrative linking populist and PRR voting with economic insecurity is particularly strong. Given the surge of electoral abstention, we broadened the scope of the research by testing a diverging hypothesis on the relationship between economic insecurity and political disengagement in the 2022 election. The two hypotheses regarding the association between economic insecurity and (H1) the mobilization or (H2) the withdrawal of the electorate have also been tested against the potential effects of other forms of individual orientations and discontent.

Prior to this last general election, a decade after the grand coalition government led by Mario Monti and marking the end of the XVIII legislature, the country's government was entrusted to the technocratic experiment of the Draghi cabinet. This was supported by an outsized parliamentary

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majority, including all the major parties except one, FdI. The former President of the European Central Bank was called upon to steer the country through stormy waters: the final stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and the new international emergency in the form of war in Ukraine. Given the impact of these new global crises and in light of the long-term consequences of the earlier global financial crisis and structural economic concerns, managing the fragile Italian economy was a central theme of the so-called "Draghi agenda" *and* the 2022 electoral campaign. Five years after the 2018 Italian populist wave, the 2022 general election saw the main challenger to the incumbent government succeeding.

Nevertheless, the analyses here have suggested that the PRR electoral success in 2022 was more associated with cultural concerns (specifically immigration) than economic issues. As such, the economic insecurity resulting from the perceived household-level economic hardship cannot be said to have favored PRR parties' success. Further, unemployment status appears to have actually had a significant negative effect on PRR voting. While not questioning the roots of populism per se, these results challenge the narrative by which we introduced our contribution. We can conclude that economic insecurity cannot be clearly associated with support for PRR parties in the current electoral context in Italy. Similarly, when considering the entire electorate, individual dissatisfaction with household economic circumstances also did not favor the main populist non-radical right party, the M5S. This is despite Conte's party strategically positioning itself as the leading advocate for economic issues, which involved distancing itself from the Draghi government and developing an anti-poverty economic platform.

The only statistically significant relationships that we identified are those explaining the choice to abstain: the economically insecure electorate mostly did not show up to vote. However, it cannot be assumed that perceived economic distress and unemployment are the only determinants of abstention. Rather, as shown by the significant effect on abstention of dissatisfaction with how democracy works, interpretations of the growing abstention rate should focus on the interplay between economic and eminently political malaise. These two orientations jointly push voters out of the democratic game rather than toward a specific electoral outlet, and

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no Italian party could claim to have truly represented the economically insecure electorate in the 2022 general election.

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