

Quaderni dell'Osservatorio elettorale

QOE IJES

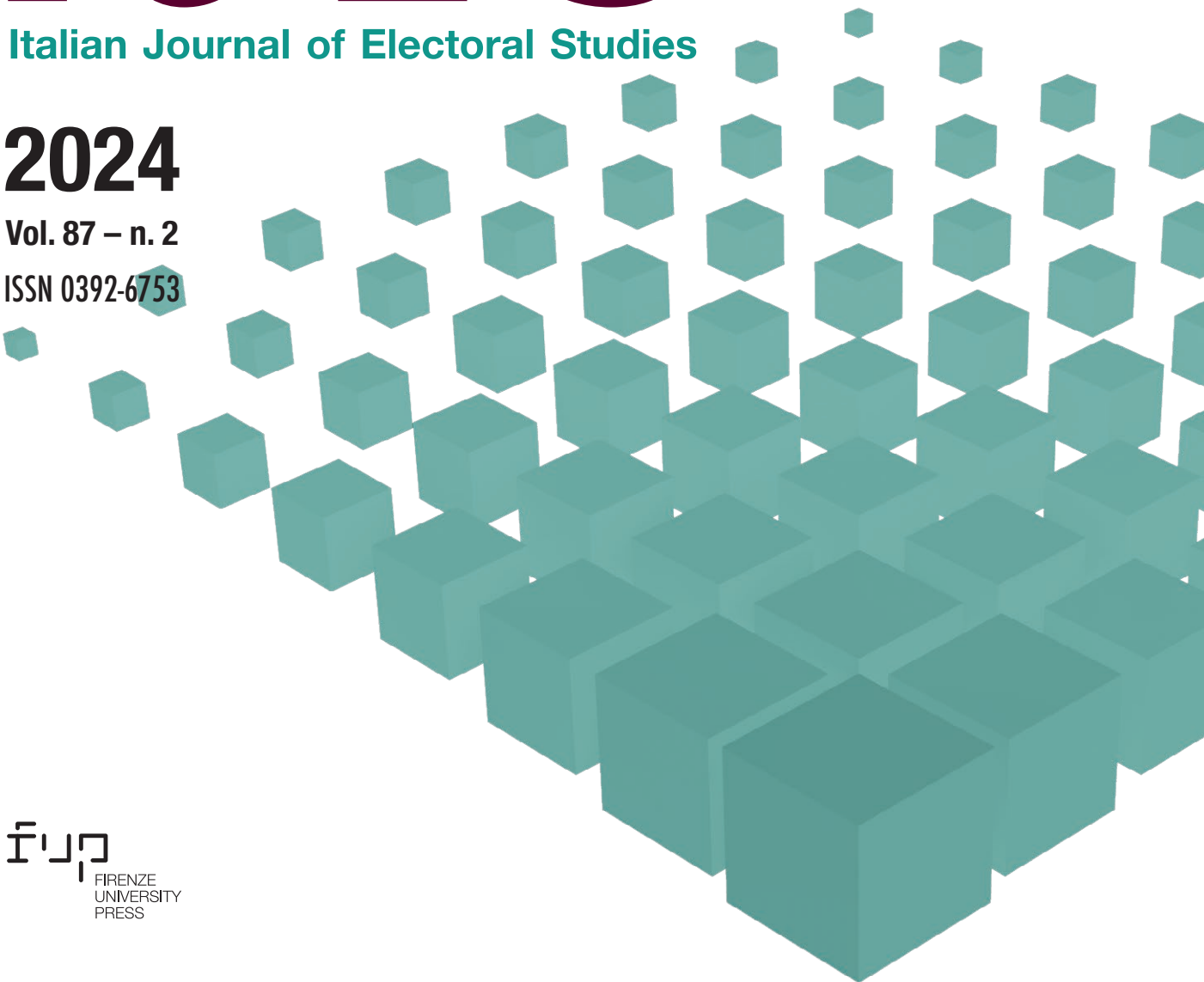
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Founded in 1977 by Mario Caciagli (University of Florence), *QOE-IJES* is a reference for electoral studies in Italy. Almost half a century later, *QOE-IJES* is now the official journal of the Italian Society for Electoral Studies (SISE). The Journal aims at continuing publishing high-quality original papers from both Italian and international scholars, with the aim to further becoming a main outlet of elections and voting, public opinion, political behavior and party studies in Italy and beyond.

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Editorial Note

I Quaderni dell'Osservatorio Elettorale – Italian Journal of Electoral Studies. La più originale e duratura invenzione di Mario Caciagli

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Il 17 maggio 2024 ci ha lasciati Mario Caciagli, fondatore e primo Direttore di questa rivista. Vogliamo ricordarlo in queste pagine dando merito a quella che è stata una delle sue imprese scientifiche maggiori e, dal nostro punto di vista, quella fondamentale: la fondazione della rivista nella sua prima veste, quella dei *Quaderni dell'Osservatorio elettorale (QOE)*.

Ripercorriamo dunque la nascita di questa avventura scientifica e editoriale e dedichiamo poi qualche riflessione al contributo scientifico che Caciagli ha dato alla rivista stessa attraverso alcuni saggi.

UN FELICE CONNUBIO TRA STUDI ELETTORALI E SCIENZE SOCIALI

I *Quaderni dell'Osservatorio Elettorale (QOE)* nacquero quasi mezzo secolo fa, nel 1977, nell'ambito di un Osservatorio elettorale che la Regione Toscana aveva voluto attivare al momento stesso della sua nascita, nel 1970, raccogliendo a sua volta una sollecitazione della pre-esistente Unione delle province toscane, per volontà del primo presidente della Regione, Lelio Lagorio. In particolare, i *Quaderni* nacquero per iniziativa di due funzionari della neonata Regione, Andrea Bucciarelli e Mario Gabelli, con l'obiettivo iniziale di raccogliere in modo sistematico, e mettere così a disposizione di tutti i politici, amministratori e studiosi, i dati elettorali per ogni tipo di elezione che si sarebbe svolta in Toscana.

Mario Caciagli fu subito tra i collaboratori esterni della rivista e ne fu di fatto l'anima editoriale prima ancora di diventarne responsabile formalmente. La collaborazione iniziò anche grazie all'amicizia che lo legava a Mario Gabelli, un comunista maremmano tutto d'un pezzo che, come Caciagli, aveva il culto dell'impegno e del lavoro – che doveva essere ben fatto o non esisteva proprio.

Il primo numero dei *QOE* uscì nell'ottobre 1977, con una periodicità che sarebbe rimasta sempre semestrale. Inizialmente era curato da un gruppo di studio sul comportamento elettorale in Toscana coordinato, oltre che da Mario Caciagli, da Mario Gabelli e Andrea Bucciarelli, e composto da studiosi quali Paolo Baglioni, Paolo Da Pozzo, Bruno Chiandotto. Il gruppo

di studio si sarebbe nel tempo trasformato in Comitato Editoriale della rivista, allargandosi ad altri studiosi accademici quali Pier Luigi Ballini, Paolo Giovannini, Alberto Marradi e Maria Tinacci Mossello.

Dopo aver collaborato dall'esterno ai primissimi numeri dei *QOE*, dal 1980 Caciagli ne divenne formalmente Coordinatore scientifico unico e, dal 1982, Direttore, con nomina dell'allora assessore competente, Edda Fagni. In quell'anno, come segretario di Redazione, iniziò anche la collaborazione, anch'essa quarantennale, di Carlo Baccetti.

I *Quaderni dell'Osservatorio elettorale* sono stati, senza timore di smentita, una creatura di Mario Caciagli. Fin dal momento iniziale, in cui egli raccolse lo spunto e la volontà della Regione Toscana, e poi lungo il corso dei decenni successivi in cui dette a questa invenzione una fisionomia, un carattere peculiare che rispecchiava la creatività scientifica e la versatilità del suo fondatore.

Anche l'impostazione redazionale era originale: tre saggi corposi – più corposi di quanto le altre riviste scientifiche di solito accettavano; una periodicità semestrale (che continua ancora oggi); e soprattutto l'invenzione delle due Rubriche “Le elezioni in Italia” e “Le elezioni nel Mondo” che riprendevano, allargandola ed affidandola a collaboratori di primissimo ordine, l'idea iniziale della rivista di fornire agli studiosi un osservatorio commentato ma agile di tutti gli appuntamenti elettorali – locali, parlamentari, presidenziali, europei – in Italia e nei regimi democratici di tutto il mondo.

Ma la maggiore originalità dei *QOE*, l'impronta autentica che Caciagli gli ha impresso, è stata la multidisciplinarietà. Caciagli ha sempre cercato contributi che venissero a sottolineare la complessità del fenomeno elettorale e ne approfondissero, di volta in volta, gli aspetti normativi, giuridici, sistemici, storici, comparati; e che venissero perciò affrontati da esperti capaci di utilizzare strumentazioni molteplici: non solo scienziati politici, ma anche sociologi, storici, giuristi, antropologi, statistici, economisti. Una rivista multidisciplinare quindi, nello spirito autentico di questo termine. E una rivista che, grazie all'internazionalizzazione che la figura stessa di Mario Caciagli rappresentava nel mondo degli scienziati politici della sua generazione, è riuscita e pubblicare decine di contributi originali forniti da studiosi di tutte, ma proprie tutte, le parti del mondo.

Caciagli fece dei *QOE*, secondo la propria indole scientifica una rivista “curiosa”, di una curiosità che l'ha portato a pubblicare articoli elettorali i più vari per argomento e taglio metodologico, che andavano ad indagare i cambiamenti che stavano avvenendo nei più diversi angoli del mondo e nei più diversi sistemi politici. I *Quaderni* hanno così pubblicato i primi saggi sui

sistemi elettorali dei regimi post sovietici in Russia e in vari paesi ex socialisti. Sono stati pubblicati saggi sui sistemi elettorali post dittatoriali in America Latina, ma anche saggi sulla fragile democrazia marocchina, sul Giappone, sui paesi scandinavi. Insomma, ovunque ci fossero ragioni specifiche che giustificassero analisi elettorali di cambiamenti politici importanti. Oltre ai primissimi saggi pubblicati in Italia sull'avvio dell'esperienza elettorale democratica in Spagna, nel 1978 e poi nel 1982, ad opera dello stesso Caciagli e di cui ripareremo in seguito. I *Quaderni* hanno pubblicato articoli importanti anche sul peso che la comunicazione cominciava ad assumere nei processi elettorali; hanno stimolato e pubblicato i primi saggi sui sistemi elettorali comunali dopo la legge 81/93 sull'elezione diretta del sindaco in Italia. Insomma, ovunque ci fosse da scavare e capire le novità, con studi del caso che magari indagavano realtà micro fino a analisi storiche comparate di grande respiro come quelle sui sistemi politici di Germania e Francia, i *QOE* tempestivamente c'erano.

Nel 2020, dopo quarant'anni, Mario Caciagli ha lasciato la guida della rivista a una nuova squadra. Nel volume 82 un editoriale (Bellucci e Bolgherini, 2020) dei nuovi Direttori ha sancito ufficialmente il passaggio. Passaggio che non è avvenuto certo per stanchezza – che era parola a lui sconosciuta, fino almeno alla malattia che lo costrinse a rallentare i ritmi di lavoro e di vita – ma per una volontà di effettuare un necessario passaggio generazionale e lasciare il compito di rinnovare la rivista per il futuro.

L'avventura dei *QOE*, adesso nella sua nuova veste di *QOE-IJES* non si è quindi fermata. La rivista è tuttora, come alle sue origini, la prima e unica rivista di studi elettorali in Italia, con una vocazione, se possibile, ancora più internazionalizzata.

I CONTRIBUTI AI *QOE*: ANALISI EMPIRICA CONTESTUALIZZATA DI MOMENTI CHIAVE DELLA STORIA D'EUROPA

Se la Direzione dei *QOE* è stata l'impegno più costante di Mario Caciagli nella sua lunga e ricca attività scientifica e, quindi, la sua opera più originale e la sua eredità più grande, alla rivista Mario Caciagli ha contribuito, oltre che come autorevole e appassionata guida, anche come studioso.

Per la rivista Caciagli ha scritto in 40 anni “soltanto” quattro saggi, mantenendo così quell'opportuno distacco tra il ruolo di direttore e quello di autore di un saggio nella rivista da lui stesso diretta.

Ma questi quattro sono saggi importanti. Perché centrati su momenti chiave della storia elettorale di due

delle maggiori democrazie europee, Spagna e Germania, e perché esemplari del modo di Caciagli di guardare e descrivere i fenomeni politico-elettorali, ovvero con uno sguardo ampio e di lungo respiro.

I primi due saggi, usciti rispettivamente nel 1978 e nel 1983, trattano delle elezioni in Spagna. Il saggio del 1978 (Caciagli, 1978), pubblicato sul numero 3 dei *QOE*, commenta i risultati elettorali delle elezioni del 15 giugno 1977, le prime dopo il ritorno alla democrazia a seguito della caduta del regime franchista. Il saggio del 1983 (Caciagli, 1983), pubblicato invece sul numero 11, è un'analisi delle elezioni del giugno 1982, che videro l'affermazione del PSOE guidato da Felipe Gonzalez e l'inizio di un lungo ciclo della Spagna a guida socialista. Sono, come già detto, tra i primissimi saggi pubblicati in Italia sulle due elezioni spagnole dell'immediato post-franchismo. E sono anche analisi condotte sul campo, con dati raccolti direttamente in loco e integrati con interviste a candidati, partecipazione alla campagna elettorale e colloqui serrati con i colleghi elettoralisti.

Con lo stesso metodo empirico e con la stessa prospettiva di lungo respiro – anzi in questo caso forse ancor più – sono stati scritti gli altri due, che analizzano invece le elezioni in Germania, l'altro suo paese prediletto. Pubblicati rispettivamente nel 1993 e poi nel 2014, a 30 anni di distanza l'uno dall'altro, il primo è uscito nel numero 30 dei *QOE* (Caciagli, 1993), mentre il secondo nel numero 72 (Caciagli, 2014). Il primo saggio traccia una panoramica delle elezioni nella Repubblica federale tedesca (RFT) nel primo quarantennio democratico – quindi dalle prime elezioni del 1949 dopo la fine del conflitto e del regime nazista alle prime della riunificazione delle due Germanie nel 1990. Il secondo analizza il successivo ventennio dalle prime elezioni post-riunificazione nel 1993 fino alle elezioni del 2013, caratterizzate dal multipartitismo fluido che persiste ancora oggi.

Proprio per il taglio di grande respiro che Mario Caciagli sempre dava ai propri studi, queste analisi offrono molti spunti e toccano una serie di elementi chiave, imprescindibili, delle analisi elettorali. Spaziano infatti dal sistema elettorale (quello in vigore nelle elezioni analizzate e le sue eventuali modificazioni, e effetti conseguenti, nel corso del tempo) all'analisi dei dati (affluenza alle urne, volatilità, ruolo di alcune variabili socio-anagrafiche). Abbracciano dalle principali tendenze e spiegazioni del comportamento di voto alla geografia elettorale, un aspetto particolarmente amato e sempre approfondito. Ma, soprattutto, ruotano intorno al voto ai partiti, ai loro equilibri sistemici e dunque agli assetti e alle evoluzioni del sistema partitico, il vero nucleo analitico su cui questi contributi si incentrano.

Si tratta dunque di quattro saggi che racchiudono i maggiori interessi di Mario Caciagli: partiti, sistemi di partito, sistemi elettorali, geografia elettorale e determinanti del voto. Ma allo stesso tempo sono anche una lucida analisi che racchiude, in relativamente poche pagine, quello che è, e deve essere, il cuore fondamentale di qualsiasi analisi elettorale empirica.

Il maggior punto di forza di questi saggi – e quindi l'importanza come lascito e contributo scientifico – è infatti il saper unire il rigore dell'analisi dei dati con la loro contestualizzazione, storica, sociale e politica. Non sono sofisticate analisi quantitative su un micro-aspetto delle elezioni, e neanche quadri descrittivi *tout-court*. Sono invece un esempio magistrale di accurata analisi empirica contestualizzata. I dati elettorali, raccolti sul campo – in un periodo in cui i dati ministeriali non erano ancora così facilmente accessibili, tantomeno a distanza – sono interpretati alla luce di elementi storico-politici, socio-economici e sistemici. L'analisi elettorale si inserisce e prende significato soltanto attraverso l'inquadramento in un contesto più ampio, che permette di coglierne maggiori sfumature e ulteriori aspetti, meno scontati proprio perché non eradicati nella loro singolarità, ma invece innervati di spazio e tempo.

Infine, sono un insieme di saggi centrati su momenti particolarmente significativi – giunture critiche o analisi di tendenze di lungo periodo – della storia elettorale di due grandi paesi. Non sono quindi, oltre a quanto detto sinora, saggi di mera analisi elettorale, ma contributi importanti su alcuni eventi chiave della storia politica di due grandi democrazie occidentali, e, quindi, della storia d'Europa.

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Actors and structures in politics

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Abstract. This text consists of tentative but hopefully not random thoughts on the topic of the relationship between ‘actors’ and ‘structures’ in politics. It defends some lines of research that the author regards as definitely needed in the current state of the discipline. It covers a great number of complex topics that is compelled to treat succinctly and for this owes apologies to the audience. The title includes three terms; actors, structures and politics. The first two terms do not require special clarification, except for two points. First, they are used as synonymous of the terms ‘micro’ (referring to actors) and ‘macro’ (referring to structures). Second, the text avoids to enter in the extensive theoretical literature that discuss the terms ‘structure’ and ‘structuralism’. The term ‘structure’ is used for the ‘constellation of political actors’, as discussed later in the text. In this context, the term ‘politics’ means simply that the relationship between actors and structures will be seen from the specific point of view of political science. This is a vantage point of view with respect to how the problem is usually framed in sociology and economics.

Keywords: structures, actors, micro, macro, politics.

1. INTRODUCTION: PROBLEMS OF SCALE

This talk consists of tentative but hopefully not random thoughts on the topic of the relationship between ‘actors’ and ‘structures’ in politics. It defends some lines of research that the author regards as definitely needed in the current state of the discipline. It covers a great number of complex topics that is compelled to treat succinctly and for this owes apologies to the audience.

The title includes three terms; *actors*, *structures* and *politics*. The first two terms do not require special clarification, except for two points. First, they are used as synonymous of the terms ‘micro’ (referring to actors) and ‘macro’ (referring to structures). Second, the text avoids to enter in the extensive theoretical literature that discuss the terms ‘structure’ and ‘structuralism’. I use the term ‘structure’ for the ‘constellation of political actors’, as discussed later in the text.

In this context, the term ‘*politics*’ means simply that the relationship between actors and structures will be seen from the specific point of view of

This manuscript reports, with minor variations, the opening Key Lecture of the Italian Political Science Association Conference held in Trieste on September 12, 2024.

political science. This, I will argue, is a vantage point of view with respect to how the problem is usually framed in sociology and economics.

The micro/macro, actors/structures debate in the social sciences goes on since more than one century. Let me start by pointing that this debate resembles considerably a similar problem in physics: the incompatibility between general relativity and quantum electro mechanics, two extremely powerful theories elaborated more or less at the same time. Quantum theory was introduced to explain the inexplicable behavior of atoms and molecules, as revealed by the spectrum of light they emit. But quantum effects (such as the uncertainty principle) become prominent only when one considers very small systems at the atomic and sub-atomic levels. General relativity is relevant to a much higher-level scale and dominant at high speeds, great masses and enormous gravity. It works with astronomical and cosmological objects (black holes, early universe, etc.). Relativity considers objects as indivisible masses in space-time, while quantum mechanics views matter as probability waves rather than localized particles. Quantum mechanics is non-deterministic because it has to incorporate two incompatible properties into one whole. It has to explain how an object can behave as both a wave and a particle. General relativity theory assumes a strong deterministic nature. Relativity is inside the light cone phenomena (since nothing can travel faster than light), while quantum mechanics is outside the light cone phenomena allowing instant communications in 'quantum entanglement' experiments. Both phenomena are like two sides of the same coin, dictated just by the scale. Both theories are believed to be true for all physical things, but it remains hard to combine them, and, more importantly, it is considered impossible, so far, to resolve the issue in the laboratory. The somehow paradoxical result is that physics, the queen of the experimental scientific method, has ended up accepting two different ontologies which both depends on the scale of the phenomena and on what instrument of measurement the physicists use.

Without any intention to mimic or assimilate the sciences of the humans, in which what is possible is not necessary and what it is necessary is often impossible, to that of the physical world, in which possibility becomes necessity, it seems however that the two situations have striking similarities.

In the social sciences of the last century we observe a similar (growing?) incompatibility between micro and macro theory. On the one hand, we have micro theories based on individual actors' interactions (often resorting to highly sophisticated techniques) and, on the other hand, we have macro-theories based on historical pro-

cess of macro constellation configurations. We have theories of how human individuals and even micro aggregates of humans interact, orient themselves, and generate outcomes. We also have powerful macro historical and social science accounts of how macro-constellations have come about and how they affect actors' interactions. However, we definitely find difficult to insert the micro actors into the macro accounts, and to insert the latter in the micro theories. In general, while micro-theory does not acknowledge the role of the macro-constellations, macro-theory does not go down enough to reach the level of individual actors' interactions.

In specific contributions such as case studies and comparative empirical research, the interaction between actors and structures is more likely to be focalized and discussed in a pragmatic way. However, at the theoretical level we can rest only on radical interpretative alternatives that favor one solution or the other. These solutions tend to cluster around three interpretations.

On the one hand, the micro-macro problem is framed in a *radical intentionalists* perspective. Only individuals act, *therefore*, any explanation has to go down to individual actors and actions – see for instance Raymond Boudon (1977), James Coleman (1990), and rational choice scholars in general.

On the other hand, we have scholars who favor a *radical structuralist* view. Structures determine so much individual choices that the latter are often no choice at all – see Louis Althusser (1965), David Easton (1990), Niklas Luhmann (1995), and macro social science in general.

A third perspective is suggested by a number of theorists that recognize the respective role of the micro and macro, but usually interpret micro and macro (or actors and structures) as being both active and effective, that is embedded, within the individual understanding of reality – see the works of Anthony Giddens (1984), Pierre Bourdieu (1998), Margaret Archer (1995).

One may be tempted to conclude that if in more than one century we have not been able to offer accepted solutions for the micro-macro problem, then either we are not smart enough to solve the problem or the problem itself is unsolvable.

Let's note, however, that, first, these authors and theories usually frame the problem at the highest possible level of abstraction, engaged in offering an ontological foundation to the social sciences. It would probably be more productive to engage in reducing the theoretical gap between the micro and the macro without framing it as a battle between contending ontologies (what really exists out there?).

Second, sociologists (and economists) have dominated these debates. It is fair to recognize that with few

exceptions political scientists have escaped facing theoretically this problem and have often relied on imported theories from these more theoretically attentive disciplines. However, there are peculiarities of politics rooted in the type of actors involved, in the unidimensional stratification of the political, and in its explicit aim to produce behavioral conformity. Perhaps these peculiarities make it easier in politics the aforementioned task of ‘reducing the gap’ between actors and structures. Hence, it is essential that political scientists and political theory elaborate their own contribution to the actor/structure debates starting from the peculiarities of politics and relying less on sociology and economics theories.

Third, the actor/structure dichotomy naturally drives the debate towards ontological issues; on whether structures can be seen as existing entities and on whether actors have real choices. Focusing on ‘actors’ inevitably leads to focus on ‘acting’ and the conclusion that only individual humans act is an obvious platitude. Structures do not act, but ‘condition the acting’, namely the ‘orientations’ of the actors and their ‘choices’.

Some forms of conditioning are well knowns and amply debated and utilized in political research. To the best of my knowledge, nobody rejects the idea of a *cultural conditioning* of acting based on norms as culturally stabilized systems of meanings, conventions and customs, social norms, practices and routines, role expectations. Similarly, nobody rejects the *regulative conditioning* of acting through ‘rules’ (private as well as public rules). Certain actions are forbidden and sanctioned, procedures must be respected penalty the nullity of acts, torts must be repaired, etc.

On the basis of this consideration, unless we want to declare the irrelevance of the conditioning of the norms and rules, it is advisable to rephrase the actor/structure dichotomy with the acting/conditioning dichotomy. In some case this conditioning may be mild and limited, hard and even cruel in other cases. Moreover, we need to explicitly acknowledge that both the acting and the acting conditioning ‘have a causal power’. Radical intentionalists deny the causal power of structures; radical structuralists deny the acting autonomy of actors. We need not to adhere to one of these positions and keep the autonomy of acting and the conditioning of structures as both operative causal factors.

The role of ‘structural conditioning’ goes far beyond the case of normative and regulative structures. In this talk I leave normative and regulative structures aside and I want to discuss the possible conditioning role of ‘*political structures*’. That is, the role of specific configuration of political actors that contribute to define the situation in which actors are created and act. We should there-

fore begin asking ‘who acts in politics’ and what kind of actors are there. I will call this the problem of ‘actors’ designation’. Note that the answer to the question ‘who acts in politics’ would require a clear definition of what is ‘political action’, a problem I do not consider here, but for the claim that a micro-foundation of the political action is a vital necessity for political science, and insufficient energy is devoted to this task so far.

2. ACTORS’ DESIGNATION

Economists do not spend much time to designate their actors. They mainly deal with flat landscapes of consumers, investors, firms, taxpayers, or with institutional actors as governments and central banks. Sociologists have the challenging problem that society is stratified along many and non-necessarily overlapping dimensions: wealth, income, status, education, ethnicity, religion, etc. But even in political science, where the system of political stratification is somehow simpler and unidirectional, an accepted typology of actors is lacking.

I propose to start with a tentative and simplified typology of individual and supra-individual actors of various types, differentiating them on the basis of character of their political action being:

- Intentional or not (we are not really interested in non-intentional actions);
- Interactive or not (whether their actions are unilateral or require interaction with other actors);
- Strategic or not (whether the actor considers what other interacting actors may do);
- Coordinated or not (through which means the actor coordinate with other actors);
- Leading to emerging properties or not (whether these interactions let emerge new properties which are not ‘intended’ as a goal of the actors).

I stress that the typology that is presented in Table 1 is provisional and tentative and my thinking on this issue is far from being consolidated.

Not much needs to be said here about Individual actors given the extended literature about them. Individuals are always regarded as able to ‘act’ intentionally, unilaterally or interacting with other individuals, under condition of strategic or non-strategic interactions, coordinating when necessary with other actors through non-cooperative games, mutual adjustment solutions (Charles E. Lindblom 1965) or negative coordination solutions (Robert Dahl 1989).

I define as Assemblages groups of individuals denominated by the observer for her own goals. Properly they are not actors as they do not act per se, they

Table 1. A Typology of actors.

Type of entities	Subtypes	Intentional	Interactive	Strategic	Coordinated	Leading to emerging properties	Examples
Individuals		Yes	Possible	Possible	Non-cooperative games, mutual adjustment, negative coordination	none	
Assemblages		No	No	No	None	None	Elderly, rural resident'
Aggregates	Compositional aggregates	No	Yes	No	None	Some	Traffic jam
	Hidden-hand aggregates	No	Yes	Yes	None	Some	Markets fluctuations
	Intentional aggregates	Yes	No	No	None	None	Voters for a party
Micro groups	Meetings, Committees, Caucus, Clubs	??	Yes	No/Yes	Same as for individuals	Limited	
Networks		Yes	Yes	No	None	Limited	
Movements		Yes	Yes	(Limited)	Limited	Limited	
Collective actors	Associational	Yes	Yes	Yes	Political institutions	Extended	Interest groups, parties, professional associations
	Corporate	Yes	Yes	Yes	Hierarchy	Limited	Firms
	Institutional	No/Yes	Yes/no	Yes/No	Hierarchy	Limited	Protective professional mechanical bureaucracies
Composite actors	Association of associations	Yes	Yes	Yes, but difficult	Weak institutions	Extended	Trade Unions, Business confederations
	Coalitions	Yes	Yes	Difficult	Limited	None	
	Governance	Yes	No	No	Mutual adjustment and negative coordination	Limited	

Source: Author's own elaboration.

lack any individual intention to regroup and clearly no collective intentionality. They are sometimes useful for heuristic purposes and interesting because, in principle, they may evolve into actors.

Aggregates are more interesting because they represent groups of people who share at least one of the core characteristics of intentionality, interactions, and strategic orientation. This is so because there are different types of aggregates. Compositional Aggregates result from interactions among individual actors deprived of intentionality and of strategic orientation (example: traffic jam). Hidden-hand Aggregates are made up by individual who have and individual intentionality but no common intentionality, their members interact with other individuals and do so often strategically (example:

market interactions and fluctuations). Finally Intentional Aggregates are made up by people who share an intention but do not interact (example: group of voters for the same party).

Time prevent me a full discussion of the categories of Table 1, but with the same logic I distinguish other kind of supra-individual actors such as Micro groups (meetings, committees, caucus, clubs), Networks and Movements. The three types of Collective Actors (Associational, Corporate, and Institutional) all evidence a supra-individual intentionality, interact with other similar actors and often are driven by strategic considerations, but what is more important is that they are supra-individual actors endowed with powerful mechanism of internal coordination represented by politi-

cal institutions that in some cases assume the need to aggregate the preference of the members (associational) and in other case the efficiency of coordination through hierarchy.

Finally, to complete the scheme we need to consider Composite Actors, that is supra-individual actors that result from the aggregation of other supra-individual actors. Here I distinguish Associations of Associations such as Trade Unions or Business Confederations, Coalitions and Governance.

This tentative scheme focuses on the differential capacity to act of individual and supra-individual actors. Clearly such capacity cannot be guaranteed or assumed, but must be discussed based on various sources of cohesion. The capacity for intentional, interactive, strategic coordinated action depends from many aspects: transfer of rights of individual members to leading positions; control of collective resources; level of emotional solidarity; cognitive convergence among members; mechanisms of coordination producing the integration of preference and the resolution of conflicts.

The capacity for supra-individual action depends primarily on the convergence of preferences and on the capacity of conflict resolution through political institutions. These elements guarantee the possibility to trade interest and preferences in one area to the advantages of other interest and preferences considered more important; the capacity to accept some losses in order to obtain larger overall gains (or to avoid larger overall losses); the capacity to sacrifice the interest of some member or subgroup for the greater benefit of the collectivity and the capacity to compensate the losers.

The typology of different actors succinctly delineated above is useful to the extent that it allows us to deduce empirically testable propositions concerning the potential action capacity of individual and supra-individual actors. I mention a few propositions of this type below.

Movements have a low capacity for coordination through conflict resolutions mechanisms. However, movements strong emotional solidarity and ideological commitments may make the preference of the members to converge considerably.

Corporate and institutional collective actors with majoritarian and hierarchical decision making have a higher capacity for conflict resolutions and consequently action. However, this conflict resolution mechanisms may be catastrophic if used to solve conflicts among subgroups with divergent cognitive maps and worldviews.

Associational actors that outlive their individual members are more likely to extend their time horizon in the calculation of their interest more than the single individual is. They are more effective than the individual

can be in their dealing with other actors of any type and in forming even higher-level actors (Composite actors). Preferences of the collective actors are often articulated and known publicly, while individual preferences are difficult to ascertain. They often develop official ideologies or programs that facilitate greatly the individual calculation of preferences.

Composite actors that have to solve internal conflict with negotiation have a low capacity of conflict resolution than those which can resort to voting and hierarchical decisions. Unless interests converge to begin with, the transaction costs of negotiations may be prohibitive.

With some simplification, the conclusion of the discussion above is that we should not discuss the very abstract opposition between 'individual actors versus structures', but begin with the recognition of the presence of different kinds of supra-individual actors. Individuals define a first level actor. Aggregates may define a second level actor with limitations in either intentionality, interactions, or strategic action. Movements and Networks can be seen as a third level supra-individual actor. The different types of Collective actors define a fourth level actor. And finally Composite actors can be seen as still acting entities, and as a fifth level actor.

Therefore, to bridge the micro and macro approaches a theory of different actors' designation is essential. We should avoid using simple dyadic configurations such as individual-collective. They often ignore or underestimate the complex hierarchy of different types of actors that together provide the bridge between individual at the micro level and the macro-level constellations (or configurations) of actors.

In fact, the presence of supra-individual actors already produces forms of individual action conditioning. Though you can exit or voice as a member of an associational actor you are conditioned by the norms/rules, alliances, divisions, etc. that prevail in the supra-individual actors and by the rules that are active there. Individual actors may have a variety of orientations including egotism and altruism, competitive and solidaristic, antagonist and even mutual destruction. Certain actors' orientations that are perfectly acceptable at the level of the individual actors cannot be entertained at the level of the supra-individual actor. Altruistic, masochistic, or mutual destruction orientations often present at the individual level will be unaccepted in a supra-individual actor. Similarly, in interaction among collective actors in politics' the selfish assumption and the related indifference to the others' payoff cannot be sustained: interactions are 'competitive', not selfish, and you cannot be uninterested or unaffected by the payoff of other collective actors.

3. ABOVE COMPOSITE ACTORS: CONSTELLATIONS OF ACTORS AND STRUCTURAL CONDITIONING

Above composite actors any reference to actors and to action is lost. We only have political structures as complex constellations of different types of actors and these constellations do not act. The knowledge enterprise changes direction and we can only work under the hypothesis of various kinds of conditioning, no longer of acting.

Individuals aggregate in movements and parties, parties generate alliances and coalitions, and these supra-individual actors compose a structure identified as different types of party systems. Individuals also aggregate in interest and other kinds of groups which together define as structure of interest intermediation with different characteristics and properties. Individuals are characterized by political divisions and their interaction with supra-individual associations and parties generate cleavage (or divide) structures of different nature.

We observe different types of center- or periphery-oriented actors, but also center-periphery structures. All these are macro Constellation of Actors for which no category of acting is appropriate, but whose role in conditioning the orientations and choice of established and new individual and supra-individual actors cannot, in my opinion, be ignored without paying high prices.

Some elements of the actors' constellations are produced by historical critical junctures that shape the types of actors. Other elements of the constellation may result from the stabilization of patterns of interaction among actors, by the creation of rules and norms of behavior, the persistent historical coalitions among set of actors and finally the development of inter-organizational linkages among different types of actors.

The properties that we attribute to the constellations of actors may sometimes be explained in terms of lower-level entities or properties (e.g. organizational cohesion or loyalty of the members). However, in many cases these properties cannot be related and explained in reference to lower-entity properties and they represent emerging properties of the macro constellation. (e.g. fragmentation: no single part can be regarded as fragmented but only the whole).

Existing constellations of actors shape the opportunities for action of actors and can also foster or inhibit and frustrate the creation of other actors.

A great deal of scholarship has offered theories of structural configuration of political actors and there are considerable variations in political structuring. To the limited extent that a short talk permits, let me consider a few examples.

There are considerable variations across countries in the relationship between the forms of functional representation and the forms of territorial representation depending on the complexity of the cultural infrastructure of the state and its territorial peripheries.

If the cultural infrastructure of the polity was characterized by high national cultural standardization and homogeneity, socio-political alliances tended to prevail within the context of a unitary and centralized state (see Table 2). If, on the contrary, the cultural infrastructure was highly heterogeneous, socio-functional groups and conflicts intertwined with territorial and cultural ones. If cultural heterogeneity had a clear territorial dimension, this tended to generate either secessionist pushes or territorial arrangements of conflicts (federalization) that fragmented and weakened the socio-political oppositions. If instead, the cultural heterogeneity had no clear territorial dimension, then there was no other possible strategy than its suppression or 'pillarization' into social segments.

As well, historical processes affect the organization dimension and we can observe a considerable variation in the organizational development of the structures conceived as constellations of actors (see Table 3). Political organizations active in the interest and political electoral channels could be more or less divided along cultural lines (culturally segmented); more or less territorially centralized depending on the level of national integration as opposed to the persistence of territorial organizational autonomy (territorial centralization), more or less 'pluralist' depending on the level of ideological competition among different organizations in the same field

Table 2. A map of political structuring variations in cultural-territorial outcomes.

	relative homogeneity	→	unitary nation state
cultural infrastructure			secession
		→ it has a territorial dimension	federalisation (terr.units)
	strong heterogeneity		suppression
		→ it does not have a territorial dimension	pillarization (social units)

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Table 3. A map of political structuring variations in organizational forms.

		Cultural segmentation								
		segmented		integrated						
Territorial centralisation	centralised	<i>Patterns of organisational structuring</i>				Inter-locked	Organisational interlocking			
	decentralised					separate				
						fragmented		integrated		
						Organisational fragmentation				

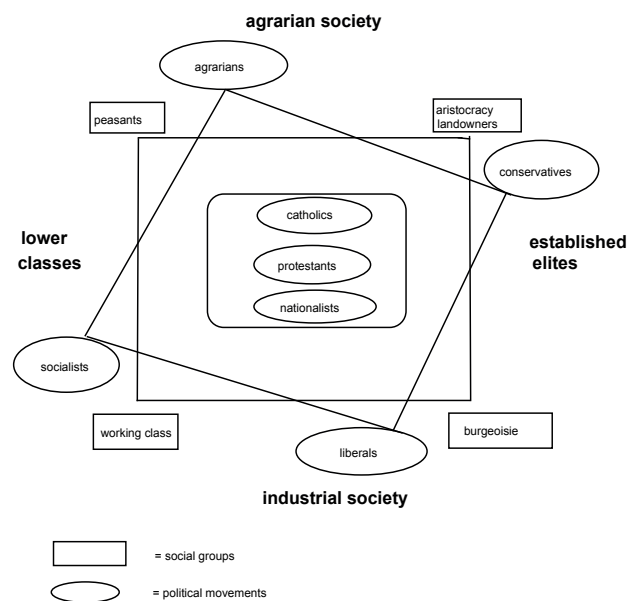
Source: Author's own elaboration.

(two-party systems versus multi-party fragmentation; peak associations versus a pluralist fragmentation of interest organization); finally, organizations and movements active in the different channels (parties, pressure groups, territorial movements) could be strongly interlocked across the channels or be highly independent and deprived of solid linkages to each other.

If social positions are easily converted into political awareness and collective action, the main social groups tend towards self-representation (in Table 4 the squares would tend to coincide with the ellipses). The peasant world would thus organize into an agrarian party; the aristocracy, the landowners, and the dynastic bureaucratic interests would organize instead for a conservative defense of their position; the bourgeoisie would express its vision of society through a liberal party; and the working-class would set up a socialist movement. This perfect coupling is rare, however: peasants and landowners may find their position very close in the defense of common interests. The working-class and the bourgeoisie, both of which represent industrial society, can share interests and forms of representation for quite a while in an early phase. Common interests can exist between parts of the peasantry and the working-class movement on the one side, or between the bourgeoisie, the landowners and aristocratic interests, on the other. The picture becomes more complicated if in the process of political mobilization, forces exist with no clear relation to the main social groups and cut across them. Denominational, nationalist, and even populist territorial mobilizations have few clear social references and were able to drain support from all the most important social groups.

The examples I have chosen to qualify these propositions can be easily related to specific and well-known national experiences. Was the process of state formation (the Spanish/British wars) responsible for the outcome that in Belgium we have a single religious denomination and

Table 4. A map of political structuring variations in XX century's socio-political inputs



Source: Author's own elaboration.

plural linguistic communities, and in the Netherlands, a few kilometers away, we observe a single linguistic community and a plurality of denomination? This, of course, fostered a completely different actors' constellation.

As a result of this, the Belgian working-class manual worker could choose between voting catholic party, socialist party or Flemish party in the 1960-70, according to which identity prevailed in the political choice. But he could not have an option between a conservative versus labor alternative, as in Britain, or between a socialist versus a coalition of secular/conservative alternatives, as in Sweden. For each individual manual worker the structure of political divisions and related alter-

natives was given and no choice could escape it easily. Repeated choices could in principle modify the inherited structure, but every single choice could not modify it in the short term.

To live within a segmented political culture such as that of Switzerland, the choice available to actors in the prevailing consociational culture was constrained and alternatives were not easily available. It can be argued that certain individual or collective actors could refuse to accept the prevailing structural conditioning and, for instance, vote for a party who aimed at overcoming it, found associations uncompromised and uncompromising, refuse the accommodation culture of negotiation that prevailed. However, it is likely that these deviations from the predominant structural conditioning will imply heavy costs in the short term and offer no guarantee to be rewarded in the medium-long term with the change in the structural conditions. In the long run, though, they may be able to modify the predominant actors' constellation and orientations.

The central idea of this section is that domestic political actors – and particularly the supra-individual actors we must deal with – are historically grounded in specific configurations of economic, cultural, administrative and coercion processes of confinement.

Among those who deny the causal role of structural conditioning one line of thought insists that macro constellations of actors are the result, or the precipitate, of actions and choices made in the past by individuals. It is difficult to counter such a sweeping statement. However, it is equally difficult to deny that it is impossible to reconstruct the innumerable choices of individual and supra-individual actors through a long period of time, many of which could be inconsequential and many of which could lead to unexpected outcomes and engender the modifications of actors' orientations. In any case, even admitting the possibility of the individualistic reconstruction, the question remains of the extent to which reconstructed structure limit and condition the choices that can be made in the present.

A second line of thought argues that the conditioning effect of macro structure is known and considered by actors so that their action strategy already incorporates them. They are, in a sense, elements of the available choices. In this case we need to assume that actors are fully and correctly aware of the conditioning structures. This condition of full information about the structural conditioning may be reasonable in some case, but completely unreasonable in others. More importantly, if we do not conceptualize and study the conditioning role of macro structure and its intensity (minor, moderate, strong, dramatic in some cases) how can we evaluate the

way in which actors incorporate them in their action's strategies? In the absence of an explicit study of the structural conditioning, we need to assume its role within the individual actor, in which case the individualistic perspective becomes unbeatable and somehow tautological, true by virtue of its logical form alone.

The structures as constellation of actors are both the result of micro-processes that define the actions and strategies on individual/supra-individual actors and of the macro-processes that set the fundamental alternatives available and condition the actors' strategies and actions. More research should focus explicitly and theoretically on this interaction. We continue to be primarily either scholars of the macro-structures or scholars of micro-(individual) behaviors.

My claim is that in the knowledge enterprise we need to keep open both micro and macro perspectives and try to work toward a narrowing of the gap between the two rather than widening it transforming different perspectives in methodological factional wars. And this is perhaps easier to do in the study of politics than in other fields.

4. SOME (TENTATIVE) THEORETICAL CONCLUSIONS

In the end, in what specific way do structures condition actors' choices and orientations? What concretely happen in the passage from the micro to the macro. Let me conclude by venturing some directions of inquiry and some tentative hypothesis. If we accept to focus on both the micro and the macro perspectives we give birth to different and necessary strategies of research (Table 5). At the micro level and at each given time we can identify empirically relevant and qualified individual and supra-individual actors' and their preferences/values/interests. Therefore, each choice decision, each single outcome may be rationalized in term of a specific analytical profile of actors' preferences, orientations, and strategies.

Table 5. Strategies of research for a micro-macro linkage.

	Analytical profiles	Dynamic processes
Micro (individual and supra-individual actors)	Interests, preferences, strategies	Changes of interests, preferences and strategies
Macro (collectivities and structures)	Structure of constraints due to the constellation of actors, resources and institutions	Unintended developmental trends

Source: Author's own elaboration.

At the macro level at any given time the analytical profile also corresponds to an empirically identifiable constellation of actors, resources and institutions that together constitute the structure of constraints that condition those same future actors.

A micro-macro framework links actors' options and choices to aggregate outcomes, but also links structural profiles and dynamic processes. Over time (column two) dynamic processes are characterized by the emergence of new actors, who had not participated to the earlier 'games', by new institutional arrangements and by unintended and unexpected consequences of actors' choices and by the related changes in actors' preferences, orientations, etc.

If we add a dynamic developmental perspective we then focus on how interests, preferences and strategies change over time and how the interactions between these changes and the structure of constraints produces outcomes difficult to predict and often unintended consequences. In the long run, dynamic process of development become hard to be explained by a consecutive set of analytical profiles and individual choices, even if at each moment they result into new analytical profile. It is hard to keep the four perspectives and the corresponding research strategies under control at the same time. It is, however, unwise to select only one perspective – and even worst to declare it to be the only one that counts.

We may observe changes at the level of the macro constellation of actors as well as changes at the level of actors' interests, preferences and strategies. However, the rhythm, the pace or the rate of change of the macro constellations is much slower than the rate of change of actors' interests, preferences and strategies. That is, the micro-interactions of components (actors) tend to take place at rhythms, which are more diffused in space and more rapid in time than the macro interactions. These micro interactions may find equilibria or return to equilibria or quasi equilibria much more rapidly and frequently than the macro interactions.

So, we have two levels which are interrelated, move in parallel, but at very different change speed. This suggests that a certain amount of micro-level interactions is inconsequential, disappear, or cancel each other out in the passage from the micro to the macro, from the actors to the constellation of actors. In other words, many micro differences will not make any difference for macro interactions, the latter being less numerous and much slower than the micro ones.

Therefore, a great deal of different actors' interaction situations and their analytical profile outcomes become undistinguishable on the macroscopic scale in the specific sense that there is little or no possibility for the

observer to perceive any change at the macro level. The processes of aggregation of individuals in the change of scale is important because it determines a situation in which a number of possible individual's micro states are incompatible with a reduced set of macro states whose number is far less numerous than the possible combination of individual micro states.

The randomness of preference, strategies and actions of individuals is largely reduced by their being and becoming members of large supra-individual actors and of being subject to less numerous structural conditioning affecting them. A great deal of the micro interactions quickly occurring through space and time will cancel each other out and only the most robust and redundant or compatible with the conditioning macro-structure will remain as characteristics of the aggregate unit.

The basic idea of structural conditioning is that the increase in the scale – both the space scale and the time scale – has a crucial impact to the extent that reduces the contribution and influence of the changes and fluctuations at the micro level.

The study of entropy in a variety of disciplines, including economics and sociology, links the number of possible microscopic situations which are compatible with a given macroscopic configuration. It is, therefore, crucial to an understanding of the complex micro/macro linkage. In one of its many possible definitions and application, entropy measures the number of microscopic changes that can be given or introduced in a macro-system without modifying it. That is, it deals with the exact contrary of what we usually do when we study the number and type of micro interactions that change the macro configuration.

It is extremely rare – in my view – that the details of the inter individuals dynamics will propagate their effects towards the higher level, while the 'average' or more frequent values of the dynamic interactions will be more robustly represented. This is what, in the end, makes it possible to analyze system of enormous complexity without knowing completely and exhaustively the details of the internal interaction dynamics.

In this case, the multiplication of innumerable micro observations is a failing strategy because it will never result into the macro outcome. The fact that certain theoretically possible states of the interaction do not realize when we change the scale of observation is what we should call a 'structure', a constraint over dynamic processes.

Behind these scattered notes lies a more profound issue. The relationship between structure and actor it is not one that can be adjudicated empirically as any given set of empirical observations can be accounted for in more or less agential, or more or less structural terms.

In this sense, the ontological cannot be conflated with the empirical, or the other way around. If ontology precedes epistemology, this means that we must take a stand on what exists out there (ontology) before we move to discuss how we can go about acquiring knowledge of it (epistemology). It follows from this that we cannot hope to decide about contending ontologies on the basis of what we can observe empirically, no more that we can decide between contending epistemologies (ways of knowing) on the basis of different ontologies.

If our ontology informs us on what we see in the first place and, therefore, where we look for causal mechanisms, then how can we rely on what we observe to adjudicate between contending ontologies? Therefore, in my modest opinion, different perspectives on the question of structures and actors cannot be falsified. We should therefore avoid choosing an ontology which decides our epistemology (and even methodology). Perhaps, it is wiser to renounce to a unified ontology, and, like physicists, leave open the question whether the world is made up by particles or waves, actors or structures.

I have tried to argue that the domain of politics offers perhaps some advantages in reducing the gap between these different perspectives given its peculiarities: supra-individual actors are essential and much easier to be identified; unilateral actions are difficult; interactions are forced; agreements and contracts between the parts have a limited role; there is a straightforward way to produce macro outcomes by collectivized decisions.

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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.

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); a characterization that continues to shape the public's perception and the tailoring of the political supply. According to a coherent, trans-

The authors have contributed equally to the research's outcome, representing one of several co-authored publications. The order of names reflects a principle of rotation.

national 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. 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, Rebecchi & 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 (Rebecchi & 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 (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 (Metzger, 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.”² 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 & 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. Fur-

thermore, 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,³ 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.⁴ 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 protec-

² That is to say, those workers who are employed yet subsist below the poverty threshold.

³ Until 2017, the party’s name was Lega Nord (Northern League).

⁴ Both parties are categorized as “populist” and “far-right” in the Populist (Rooduijn et al., 2023).

tion 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 (Rebecchi & 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 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.⁵

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 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;⁶ (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.

- *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

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.”

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 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.⁷

⁷ The variables introduced in Model 2 were treated as continuous to achieve more parsimonious models. We conducted various robust-

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

ness 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		M5S				PRR (Fdl + League)				Abstainers					
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2				
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
Satisfaction 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. R² is McFadden's pseudo R²

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

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 having joined 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 concentrat-

ed 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

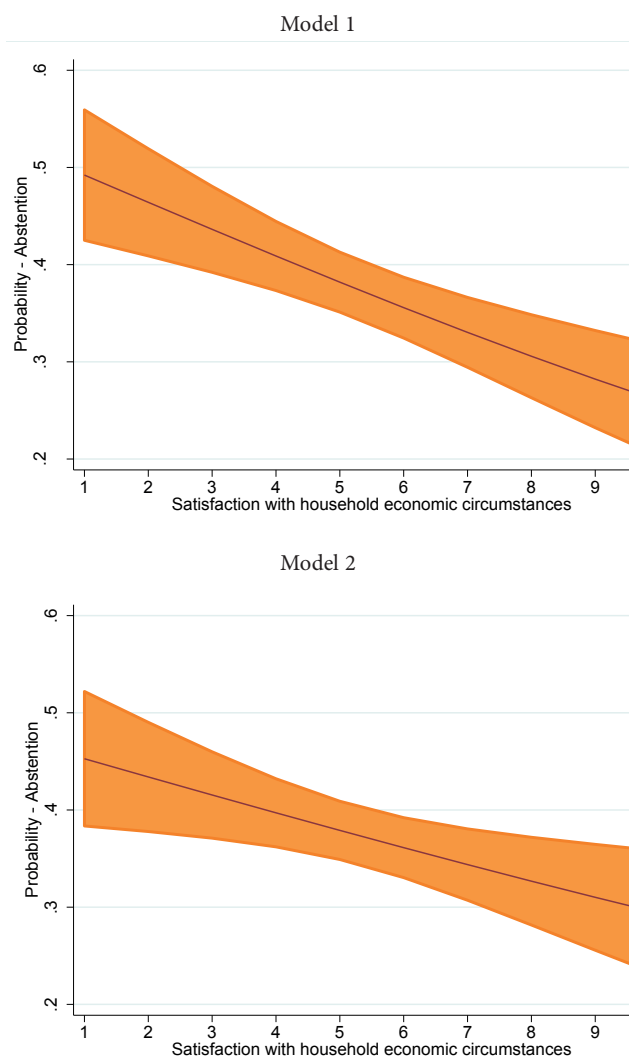


Figure 1. Predicted probability of abstention according to different levels of satisfaction with household economic circumstances – Logistic Regression Models. Source: LaPolis Electoral Observatory, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, October 2022 (base: 1,315 cases).

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.

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 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 associ-

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

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Losers of globalization? Politics in the Prosecco Hills region in Italy as a case of radical right-wing populism in a (wealthy) rural area

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Abstract. Electoral success of radical right-wing populist parties (RRPPs) is often associated with the ‘losers of globalization’. Such broad and stylized accounts may, at least apparently and/or partially, enter in collision with empirical reality, though. This research focuses on the mechanisms of (re)production of the political consensus for RRPPs in an emblematic rural area of North-Eastern Italy: the “Prosecco Hills”. It is a wealthy area, where export-oriented intensive agriculture and tourism are both well-established and on the rise, in a province where the unemployment rate is 50% lower than the national average: quite far from the usual depiction of those places left behind by globalization processes. Our research aims at offering some accounts for the long-lasting and even increasing popular support for RRPPs in this area, marked by strongly majoritarian pro-autonomist stances amongst the population. The paper relies on the collection and the analysis of individual-level survey data from an on-line questionnaire submitted through local Facebook groups, as well as on semi-structured interviews with available survey respondents. Our findings point at the centrality of producerism as a cultural-identitarian glue easing the process of political articulation of localist, pro-autonomist positions by RRPPs. We also contend that both the continuity with the Christian Democracy era and the recent electoral rise by Fratelli d’Italia at the expense of the League help also understand that localism and producerism are not inherently radical-right elements, while they are much resistant to party cues. Localism and producerism are logics of understanding politics, rooted in the structure of social relations that characterize a certain territory, that, in certain conditions, provide RRPPs with a substantial electoral advantage. However, our findings also find some evidences of existing frictions between (majoritarian) producerist attitudes and the mounting sensibility for environmental issues, which may suggest some tensions between localist and producerist logics in the near future.

Keywords: populism, localism, producerism, Veneto, losers of globalization, subnational politics.

INTRODUCTION: THE PUZZLE

Electoral success of radical right-wing radical populist parties (RRPPs) has been explained by different – albeit not necessarily mutually exclusive

– arguments. Since RRPPs generally tend to receive disproportionate support from categories such as production workers, artisans and small business owners, some studies have consequently put a stronger emphasis on the negative economic effects of neoliberalism on those categories to account for the electoral fortunes of RRPPs (e.g. Oesch, 2012; Arzheimer, 2013). Other studies, in turn, consider cultural conservatism either as a crucial intervening variable between class and (populist) voting choice (Gidron and Hall, 2017; Bornschier and Kriesi, 2013; Langsaether, 2018) or as the main driver for the support towards RRPPs (Inglehart and Norris, 2016).

A further strain of literature focuses on ‘where’ populist voters live instead on ‘who’ they are, consequently understands the rise of RRPPs as a sort of ‘revenge of the places that don’t matter’ (Rodríguez-Pose, 2017), which are normally identified in declining and lagged-behind areas, as the success of Brexit movement, Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen, all of them enjoying stronger support in de-industrialised and impoverished regions, would empirically suggest (Fieschi, 2019). Despite their very different hypothesized mechanisms and potential analytical consequences, all of these rival hypotheses agree on the identification of RRPPs’ voters with the (either actual or potential) ‘losers of globalization’ (Kriesi et al., 2006; Teney et al., 2014; Dunin-Wąsowicz and Gartzou-Katsouyanni, 2023). Such broad and stylized accounts may, at least apparently and/or partially, enter in collision with empirical reality, though, at least in certain socio-territorial contexts. This research focuses on the mechanisms of (re)production of the political consensus of radical right-wing populism in an emblematic rural area of North-Eastern Italy, and specifically in the sub-region known as “Prosecco Hills” (PH, *Colline del Prosecco*), the area in which Prosecco wine has been historically produced¹.

PH is a wealthy area, with quite satisfying economic indicators and a long-lasting political dominance of radical right populism in its different incarnation, from the Northern League to the League to Brothers of Italy, which has been consistently attracting higher electoral

support than at the national, regional and provincial level. An area where export-oriented intensive agriculture and tourist industry is both well-established and on the rise, in a province where unemployment rate is slightly more than half than the national average (ISTAT 2022), PH is quite far from the usual depiction of those ‘places left behind’ by ‘globalization processes’ which would represent the perfect *humus* for RRPPs support. The number of Prosecco bottles produced in a year went from 142 million in 2011 to 464 million in 2019, and 78% of them were exported (Ponte, 2021): rather far from ‘losers of globalization’.

Nor, at a first glance, a process of gradual impoverishment of the middle classes – a process recently identified as strictly associated to the rise of League’s support (Bloise, Chironi and Pianta, 2020) seems to have occurred. Our single-case study research focuses on PH because of its representativeness of quite well-off, rural-hilly areas composed by an ensemble of small-to-medium cities and villages in North-Eastern Italy where radical right populism imposed its political hegemony (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018). Furthermore, it is an area where social and environmental consequences of agro-industry have triggered different local conflicts (Ponte, 2021) that nonetheless did not challenge the ruling party’s hegemony.

This paper thus aims at contributing to what has been authoritatively called ‘the localist turn in populism studies’ (Chou, Moffitt and Busbridge, 2022). Several studies (e.g. Heinisch et al., 2020; Moffitt, 2020), also focusing on the League’s case (McDonnell, 2006; Ardeni, 2020; Albertazzi and Zulianello, 2021), have already emphasized the importance that place and local identities play in (mostly, albeit not exclusively, right-wing; Heinisch and Jansesberger, 2023) populist discourses. Recently, Mazzoleni coined the concept of ‘territorial populism’ (2023) to identify the numerous RRPPs emphasizing territory belonging rather than other typical mobilizing issues (e.g., gender issues, xeno- and Islamophobia...). As Chou and colleagues highlight, ‘the question remains: how specifically do populist discourses and practices intersect with localist discourses and practices?’ (2022: 132). Right-wing populists typically adopt localist discourses to attract voters showing strong attachments towards their living areas or community, for example by associating ‘the local’ with a ‘traditional version of community’ idealizing ‘hard-working people’ (Fitzgerald, 2018) and often propagating a romanticized vision of rural life (Mamonova and Franquesa, 2019). In the specific case of the League, calls for political autonomy are added as a sort of policy addendum to the celebration of localist values (Zaslave, 2011). This paper, while confirming some of these findings,

¹ The area can be defined in two slightly different ways: the act of law (DM 17/2009) that established the “Protected and Guaranteed Designated of Origin” certification for Conegliano-Valdobbiadene historical Prosecco wine mentions 15 municipalites; the UNESCO decision that in 2019 recognised the Prosecco Hills as Wolrd Heritage also mentions 15 municipalities in the “Core” and “Buffer” zones. The two lists almost perfectly coincide, but one (Colle Umberto) is included in the former and not in the latter, and one (Revine Lago) viceversa. Thus, for the purposes of this paper we will refer with “Prosecco Hills” to the 16-municipality area that would result from merging the two existing defitions, including: Cison di Valmarino, Colle Umberto, Conegliano, Farra di Soligo, Follina, Miane, Pieve di Soligo, Refrontolo, Revine Lago, San Pietro di Feletto, San Vendemiano, Susegana, Tarzo, Valdobbiadene, Vidor, and Vittorio Veneto.

also contributes to qualify them, by identifying ‘producerism’ (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019: see the third section below) as a key discourse employed by right-wing populist actors to champion localist attitudes in wealthy or at least strongly economically integrated areas. Furthermore, this paper qualifies those arguments that suggest the possibility of support for right-wing populist actors being damaged by the presence of a lively local network of civic associations (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2018). We contend that specific associational networks nurtured by *bonding* (instead of *bridging*) social capital (Woolcock, 1998; Putnam, 2000) – networks that have a long history in the PH areas, mostly associated to the past Christian-Democrat hegemony – are instead key to understand the reproduction of conservative values, over which contemporary RRPPs have partially built their ongoing success. Against the literature emphasizing the correlation between populist voting and low social capital (Rodríguez-Pose, Lee and Lipp, 2021), we claim that bonding capital – defined by Tahlyan, Stathopoulos and Maness (2022) as “the capital gathered from close contacts, people who are similar in characteristics and ideologies (Nicholas et al., 2018), and helps people ‘get by’ in life [Stone et al., 2003]” – is at the core of RRPPs’ support in the PH.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT: RADICAL RIGHT-WING POPULISM(S)’ ENDURING DOMINANCE

Our research thus aims at offering some accounts for the long-lasting and even increasing popular support enjoyed by radical right-wing populist parties in this sub-region, a fact that it is even more striking if we take into account two different phenomena: the political evolution of the League under Matteo Salvini’s leadership and its partial substitution by Brothers of Italy as the stronger incarnation of radical right populism. First, between 2015 and 2019, the League (even changing its name, from “Lega Nord”, Northern League, to “Lega”, League) completed its transformation from an ethno-regionalist party to a populist-nationalist party. In both of these different phases of League’s history, all the main constitutive characteristic of the populist radical right (Mudde, 2007) have been (and still are) clearly present: anti-establishment narrative, authoritarianism and nativism (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018). However, such attributes are now declined in a different manner, coherently with the recent shift from an ethno-regionalist to a nationalist platform. The establishment to attack, once identified in “Rome” and the Italian centralist state, is now mainly identified with the European institutions. The founder of the party Umberto Bossi, for a long time

the unchallenged leader of the Northern League, has been eclipsed by the rise of Salvini. The League’s nativism has changed from “Northern Italy First” (*Prima il Nord*) to “Italian Firsts” (*Prima gli Italiani*), a transformation that also highlights how much the party, once presenting itself as the defender of a specific territory, has shifted towards an ethnic definition of its core-constituencies (although nativist and xenophobic appeals were present well before Salvini’s turn). Secondly, between 2019 and 2022, Brothers of Italy (“Fratelli d’Italia”, FDI), under the leadership of Giorgia Meloni, heir of a post-fascist tradition that had historically been marginal both at the national and the regional level (see Table 1), gradually took the League’s place as the leading radical right populist party both in Italy and in Veneto. In particular, the choice to oppose, between 2021 and 2022, Mario Draghi’s technocrat-led grand-coalition government, that the League instead supported, provided Meloni with a unique chance to claim the monopoly of Euroscepticism and nativism, leading to Brothers of Italy’s triumph at the general elections of 2022. In that occasion, for the first time in history, Brothers of Italy was not only the largest party in Italy, but also the largest party in Veneto, and in the Prosecco Hills.

As said, the Veneto region has historically been a stronghold of the Christian-Democrats (“Democrazia Cristiana”, DC) during the so-called Italian ‘First Republic’ (1946-1992), and the PH area has been no exception. The Northern League has most strongly grown, since its own foundation (1983), particularly in rural provinces in the Prealpine valleys of Lombardy and Veneto, by successfully inheriting the Christian Democrat hegemony in those areas (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018), of which the PH are almost a prototypical example. From data exposed in Table 1, it emerges that the correlation between the vote share in the PH municipalities for the DC in 1976 and the League in both 2013 (when the LN was highly affected by financial scandals) and 2019 (the peak of the League’s history) was still very high ($R^2=0.72$ in 2013 and 0.54 in 2019)². The Northern League has also benefitted, in Veneto, from the increasing political-institutional relevance of the region as sub-

² As a comparison, see the correlation between DC’s voting share in 1976 and *Forza Italia/PDL*’s voting share (see Table 2) in 1994 ($R^2=0.35$), 2013 ($R^2=0.36$) and 2019, when the party had a major downturn ($R^2=-0.08$). The dominant party of the right was less able than the League to appeal to rural areas (in the PH, the correlation between municipality size and voting share for the League – but not for FI – is consistently negative). However, the correlation between DC’s voting share in 1976 and the voting share of all the right-of-center parties is highly positive in 1994, 2013, 2019 and 2022 ($R^2=0.35, 0.75, 0.61$ and 0.63 respectively), thus testifying a strong and historically rooted right-wing hegemony in the area.

Table 1. Vote share in the PH municipalities of FDI and the League in 2013 (national elections), 2019 (European elections) and 2022 (national elections), compared with Christian-Democrats in 1976 and with Christian Democrats and the League in 1992.

Municipality	Residents (2019)	Vote Share for DC		Vote Share for League			Vote share for FDI			
		1976	1992	1992	2013	2019	2022	2013	2019	2022
Cison di Valmarino	2.596	48,11	34,01	17,07	11,38	54,05	17,06	1,71	5,68	34,37
Colle Umberto	5.079	49,24	29,84	26,60	12,13	53,67	17,91	1,24	7,02	31,79
Conegliano	34.642	46,45	25,65	22,48	9,47	44,40	12,09	1,33	6,75	31,65
Farra di Soligo	8.503	49,84	32,48	26,72	19,63	59,97	19,01	1,01	7,09	38,70
Follina	3.567	52,52	31,91	20,13	12,85	51,02	17,07	1,35	8,31	34,96
Miane	3.113	47,69	32,76	19,18	16,79	54,91	19,94	1,06	7,74	34,28
Pieve di Soligo	11.793	55,86	28,39	31,88	16,19	54,94	18,64	1,09	6,27	33,77
Refrontolo	1.724	58,25	30,52	32,24	22,66	63,73	21,77	0,66	5,57	40,07
Revine Lago	2.090	43,19	27,75	24,48	12,12	52,27	18,43	1,52	6,30	29,99
San Pietro di Feletto	5.136	43,84	25,51	29,94	13,89	52,48	15,35	1,28	7,18	34,63
San Vendemiano	9.872	47,86	29,32	21,36	15,12	58,58	17,91	0,95	5,50	33,89
Susegana	11.678	42,88	24,72	26,33	12,80	58,58	15,92	1,01	5,88	36,39
Tarzo	4.249	40,86	26,58	23,98	17,32	59,38	28,67	0,57	5,71	29,18
Valdobbiadene	10.163	58,50	32,36	25,61	21,44	58,92	17,52	1,34	8,27	42,20
Vidor	3.645	66,44	35,83	27,46	22,25	62,57	20,59	1,06	5,84	36,05
Vittorio Veneto	27.307	38,76	23,69	23,39	9,76	46,48	13,94	1,09	6,17	29,69
Prosecco Hills Area	145.157	45,51	26,31	23,55	12,98	50,66	14,93	1,12	6,38	31,09
Treviso (Province)	887.806	54,11	32,90	21,54	13,30	53,64	17,30	1,01	6,09	32,30
Veneto (Region)	4.879.133	51,76	30,67	16,29	10,53	49,88	14,50	1,50	6,76	32,70
Italy (Country)	59.641.488	38,71	29,66	8,65	4,09	34,33	8,79	1,96	6,46	25,98

national level of government: the current governor, the *leghista* Luca Zaia, has dominated each of the three elections he ran for, and, in 2020, also benefitting from the strong role assumed during the COVID-19 pandemic, reached an unprecedented 77 percent of the votes.

FDI, on its part, is the almost direct political heir of the post-fascist “Movimento Sociale Italiano” (MSI; see Vassallo and Vignati 2023), which was never able to reach electorally relevant results in most of Northern Italy. FDI’s roots in a different (and much electorally weaker) political culture are witnessed by the correlation between its vote share in 2013 (when, however, the party was electorally irrelevant: $R^2=-0.03$) and 2019 ($R^2=0.12$) and the vote share of the DC in 1976. However, things dramatically changed in 2022, when FDI, at both the national and regional levels, eroded much of the support enjoyed by the League: in 2022, the correlation with the vote share of the DC in 1976 was much higher for FDI ($R^2=0.65$) than for the League ($R^2=0.17$). These data already suggest that the hegemony of RRPPs goes beyond the – though far from irrelevant – party identification with the League and the latter’s organizational strength and rootedness. Research at the national level has pointed out how FDI’s victory in 2022 was mainly

the result of internal shifts within the right-wing bloc: the electoral support for the coalition did not considerably increase in comparison with the previous elections, while FDI was able to attract disappointed League voters, that in turn had previously been Forza Italia voters (Roncarolo and Vezzoni, 2023). Our analysis roots this shift in a peculiar socio-territorial context, pointing out the elements that allowed this continuity.

In the last few years, Veneto in general and the PH in particular have witnessed a double political shift: from the old Northern League to the new national League and from the latter to FDI. Our article points out that this double shift could happen, apparently seamlessly, because it has taken place within the scope of the same RRP hegemony, within a right-wing electorate that already shared at least two fundamental axes: localism and producerism.

HYPOTHESES: LOCALISM AND PRODUCERISM, THE KEYS FOR RRPPS’ HEGEMONY?

Our hypothesis is that, amongst the multiple mechanisms and strategies exploited by RRPPs to maintain

Table 2. Vote share in the PH municipalities of FI-PdL and the right-wing coalition as a whole in 1994 (national elections), 2013 (national elections), 2019 (European elections) and 2022 (national elections).

Municipality	Residents (2019)	Vote Share for FI-PdL				Vote share for right-wing coal.			
		1994	2013	2019	2022	1994	2013	2019	2022
Cison di Valmarino	2.596	21,48	20,42	7,57	6,58	51,73	34,68	67,30	58,70
Colle Umberto	5.079	20,49	15,50	5,40	6,29	55,01	29,54	66,09	57,41
Conegliano	34.642	22,05	18,64	7,90	6,38	54,78	30,01	59,05	51,78
Farra di Soligo	8.503	21,06	17,45	5,60	7,58	52,52	38,99	72,66	66,43
Follina	3.567	18,65	15,99	6,04	5,43	49,70	31,76	65,37	58,72
Miane	3.113	19,97	13,98	4,79	5,08	47,92	32,53	67,44	61,90
Pieve di Soligo	11.793	21,24	17,96	7,03	7,58	55,25	36,93	68,24	61,08
Refrontolo	1.724	17,57	18,89	6,08	7,52	53,18	43,15	75,38	69,86
Revine Lago	2.090	19,25	14,18	6,30	4,97	50,11	29,73	64,87	54,60
San Pietro di Felleto	5.136	16,59	18,22	6,18	6,93	56,88	34,35	65,84	58,47
San Vendemiano	9.872	22,07	16,34	5,31	6,97	54,46	32,88	69,39	59,93
Susegana	11.678	20,69	18,33	4,77	6,77	57,73	32,72	69,23	61,00
Tarzo	4.249	18,21	16,14	5,08	4,71	53,24	35,88	70,17	63,13
Valdobbiadene	10.163	35,82	19,50	6,10	6,73	57,16	43,44	73,29	68,11
Vidor	3.645	21,57	17,22	3,93	5,82	59,53	41,27	72,34	64,34
Vittorio Veneto	27.307	20,09	14,72	5,11	5,19	53,15	26,35	57,76	49,97
Prosecco Hills Area	145.157	19,67	16,61	5,89	5,84	51,72	29,38	62,93	54,98
Treviso (Province)	887.806	22,20	17,86	5,72	6,80	49,80	32,93	65,45	58,50
Veneto (Region)	4.879.133	23,60	18,09	6,05	6,69	47,80	30,79	62,69	54,03
Italy (Country)	59.641.488	21,01	21,56	8,79	8,11	42,84	29,18	49,58	43,79

Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs. DC=Democrazia Cristiana; FI=Forza Italia; PdL=Popolo della Libertà. “Right-wing coalition”=includes FI/PdL; League; AN (*Alleanza Nazionale*) and FDI.

their electoral dominancy, a central role may be played by what we define as ‘localist politics’ (see also Wills, 2015). Apart from favourable political-cultural conditions (e.g., the heritage of the old Catholic-conservative subculture), support to the League and to Brothers of Italy may be assured by the reproduction of a hegemonic understanding of the role of ‘politics’ (both at the institutional and at the societal level) as a (more delegative than participative) tool to protect, and ease concrete improvements of social, cultural and economic conditions of ‘local communities’. Such an understanding of the role of political activities may not only prepare a fertile terrain for the socio-political demarcation of an ‘out-group’ on ethno-cultural bases (which is a typical feature of RRPPs). It may also make the politicization of different social, redistributive and environmental conflicts more difficult, or, at the very least, it may force social and political contentious actors to negotiate with such hegemonic ‘localism’ and to frame their activities consequently. Local political officials, in this vein, are seen as representative of a local community, more than of a political or socio-economic group, and expected to defend and promote local interests. Local identities

trump any other belonging³ and localist politics may arguably favour ‘horizontal’, inter-local conflicts over scarce public and private resources, instead of triggering processes of articulation of political discontent towards more far-reaching and politically sensitive goals.

We also contend that, to understand the reasons for the reproduction of an extremely high support to radical right populism in wealthy areas such as PH, ‘localism’ should be read in conjunction with another key concept that has already been vastly associated to the core of the populist radical right identities and proposals (e.g. Rathgeb, 2021), that is, *producerism*. Producerism consists in the idea that “the ‘producers’ of the nation’s wealth should enjoy the economic fruits of their own labors [...] Individuals and groups driven by work are seen as superior, both economically and culturally [...] they embody virtue and morality, as opposed to ‘parasites’ at the top and bottom of society [...] aristocrats, bankers, the undeserving poor, and immigrants” (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019: 7).

³ Vanzetto (2022), in his study of peasant political culture in Veneto in the 19th and 20th century, has coined the concept of ‘amoral townism’ (“paesismo amorale”) to identify this mechanism.

RRPPs' typical social policy proposals (often inspired by welfare chauvinism [Mudde, 2007] and by the distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving poor'), calls for state retrenchment and critiques against (national and supranational) bureaucracies, and possibly even anti-intellectualism and scepticism against experts (also associated to the PRR: e.g. Merkley, 2020).

Furthermore, localism and producerism can easily be combined and even mutually reinforce, through different ways, as in the case of the so-called 'nationalism of the rich' (Dalle Mulle, 2018) in which 'local people' legitimise their secessionist aspirations through a contraposition between an 'us' – the hard-workers, the *producers*, but politically weak and excluded, with their own cultures disregarded as 'provincialism/parochialism' – and a 'them' – parasitic but controlling state power and resources and hegemonic at the cultural level. Said otherwise, such localist/producerist discourse builds upon the disalignment between a (high) economic status and a (low) political and (possibly) cultural statuses and thus points at correcting it and to obtain political (and, in case, cultural) recognition.

Another way to tie localism and producerism – already identified as a major driver for right-wing populism in Europe (Mamonova and Franquesa, 2019) is probably more strictly associated with 'the politics of rural' (Brooks, 2020): this discursive mechanism builds on the rural/urban cleavage to identify rural areas as a sort of national *heartland* (Taggart, 2000: 95), "*a territory of the imagination... an evocation of that life and those qualities worth defending... that place, embodying the positive aspects of everyday life*". Celebration of rural (or, in a more cautious form, non-urban) values as central for the national (or subnational) 'heartlands' can be declined in quite different ways. One that deserves to be mentioned here is 'gastronationalism' (DeSoucey, 2010), which "*signals the use of food production, distribution, and consumption to demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment, as well as the use of nationalist sentiments to produce and market food*" (DeSoucey, 2010: 433). Gastronationalism in Italy has been extensively analysed (see Sassatelli, 2020), since 'Made in Italy' rhetoric applied to production and consumption in different sectors (including food) has become a sort of valence issue that most political forces try to own. As Rabbiosi (2020: 73) emphasizes, "the identity of Italian cuisine [a key part, or ingredient, of 'Italianness'] is paradoxically based on two coexistent principles: an absolutely local nature and a profoundly national one". 'Gastronationalism' can be declined in very different ideological ways and appeal to quite different social sectors, ranging from forms of 'food chauvinism' and stigmatization of foreign food

cultures⁴ to what has been defined as 'middle-class food activism', consisting of "*efforts by those with financial means, interest, and critical thinking to make consumption choices toward more sustainable and equitable food*" (Counihan, 2020: 103).

Localism and producerism, in our analysis, are not populist radical right strategies or frames; they are logics of understanding politics, rooted in the structure of social relations that characterize a certain territory. In the previous section, we have pointed out the electoral continuity between the old DC (that was far from a RRPP) and League and FDI: this continuity shows that RRPPs are far from being the only actors able to exploit localism and producerism for political support. What we claim is that, thanks to the resonance between these two hegemonic political logics and some of the main traits of radical right populism, RRPPs tend to have a structural advantage in the territories in which such logics are prevalent.

The research adopts a multi-method approach to test to which extent localist and producerist views are widespread, amongst the broad electorate and local activism and militancy, and to which extent it can be associated with the support for the radical right populism. The article thus relies on the collection and the analysis of individual-level survey data from an original on-line questionnaire to be submitted through local Facebook groups, as well as on semi-structured interviews with local key players such as party representatives, social activists and interest-groups' leaders. While the next section is devoted to specify our methodological choices, the two following sections focus on presenting our findings in relationship with localist and producerist views respectively, on the basis of the data collected. Discussion and conclusions, including comments on the generalizability of our findings and suggestions for further research avenues, then follow.

METHODS

We opted for a research design based on a mixed-method approach, involving the use of an original survey (N=415) followed by semi-structured interviews (N=6) to selected survey respondents amongst those who gave their availability for a follow-up interview.

⁴ Benasso and Stagi (2019: 237) links such practices to 'food porn', i.e. the "overabundance of discourses around food, which has spread in a reflective way among the different levels and scopes of cultural production, as well as the practice of photographing food and sharing the image on social media". League's leader Matteo Salvini notoriously vastly engage with such latter practice for evident political purposes, while the Meloni government has established a ministry for "Made in Italy" and a ministry for "food sovereignty".

The CAWI survey was not conducted on a representative sample of the population of the Prosecco Hills area, but on a sample based on voluntary participation. We gathered our sample by circulating, in the second half of July 2020, the survey link in 16 existing Facebook groups – one for each of the municipalities that are part of PH – entitled “You are from [municipality] if...”.⁵ These are fairly popular Facebook groups (a total of 30,578 members at the beginning of the data collection period) where content such as vintage photographs and mementos, local news and politics, information about upcoming social and cultural events, etc. are typically produced. This sampling strategy enabled a good number of respondents to be collected quickly. At the same time, the non-probabilistic nature of the sample discouraged the adoption of common statistical tools for multivariate analysis (e.g. regressions). We thus presented and analysed our results through descriptive statistics. In particular, we put in evidence, for each of our variables of interest (see below), the differences between the mean scores of voters (measured through voting intention at the national level) of RRPPs, voters of the so-called ‘broad camp’ (*campo largo*: left, centre-left and M5S voters) and respondents oriented towards abstention⁶. To assess the statistical significance of the results, we relied on paired t-test of means (RRPP vs ‘Broad Camp; RRPP vs ‘Abstention’) for continuous variable and on chi-square test (by grouping respondents in the three aforementioned voting categories)⁷ for categorical variables.

The original questionnaire that we drafted, fully available in Annex A, included questions on: socio-demographic information; political participation and on trust in different institutions; attitudes on immigration; voting intention (at the regional and national level), ideological self-placement, populist attitudes. Crucially, we included batteries of questions to assess localist and producerist attitudes. As for localism, we firstly asked for the level of attachment to different territorial identities (local, regional, national and European); then we proposed a battery of questions looking at the role of political-institutional political representation from a normative point of view, by putting in contrast territorial representation vs. class-, interest- or ideology-based representation⁸. As for producerism, we relied on: i) a

question focusing on both the idea of the existence of an organic community of producers (“The interests of entrepreneurs generally do not conflict with those of workers; the good of one is the good of the other”; 0-4 Likert scale); ii) a couple of questions on the individual understanding of the concept of ‘worker’: “When I think of the word ‘workers’, I think to... a) everyone with a job, regardless of occupation and contractual status; b) waged workers; c) self-employed workers; d) hard-working people; e) trade unions; “The first opposite of ‘workers’ that come to my mind is... a) unemployed; b) entrepreneurs; c) lazy people; iii) a battery of questions focusing on the individual assessment, in terms of environmental and economic consequences, of the inclusion of the PH area in the list of UNESCO World Heritage; iv) a battery of questions putting in contrast the ecological transition and economic growth, also declining such contrast in local terms (i.e., focusing on Prosecco economy). Descriptive data analysis is reported in the tables included in Annex C.

As said, the questionnaire ended asking for the eventual availability to a follow-up interview. 25 respondents gave their availability; we selected six of them, by assuring variation in terms of voting intention in view of the upcoming regional election and gender (see Annex D). The interviews, lasting 50 minutes on average and collected between August and November 2020, were structured as a comment of the answers given in the questionnaire, by asking interviewees for elaborating their answers (particularly on questions measuring localist and producerist attitudes) more in-depth.

DATA ANALYSIS: LOCALISM

Amongst survey respondents who accepted to report their voting intention at the national level (N=247), the four most reported answers were: Democratic Party (“Partito Democratico”, PD) and centrist parties (28 percent); Blank/Abstention (24 percent); League (19 percent); FDI (14 percent). League’s and FDI’s voters were nearly indistinguishable in terms of: left-right self-placement (7.3 in a 1-9 scale for League; 7.9 for FDI); populist attitudes, measured through a ‘populism index’ (scale 1-5) based on seven items (see Annex A); Alpha’s Cronbach=0.81 (3.21 for the League, 3.01 for FDI); and also,

where he or she was elected instead of those of his or her own party”; A parliamentarian’s job is to bring forward the demands of the territory where he was elected rather than those of certain social classes”; “The mayor is first and foremost a representative of the citizens and not of the party to which he belongs”; “I feel closer to people who live in my area, even if they are of different social status, than people of my same social status who live in other parts of Italy”; Likert scale (0-4).

⁵ For more details, see Annex B.

⁶ In any case, it is curious to note that the distribution of voting intentions for the president of the Veneto region within our sample was very similar to what later occurred in the regional elections held two months after the data collection period.

⁷ Voters for the Venetian Independent Party (N=13) and for other centre-right parties (N=4) formed too small categories to be considered. For full descriptive statistics, see Annex C, Section e).

⁸ “A parliamentarian’s job is to advance the demands of the territory

Table 3. Localist attitudes: mean scores per voting intention.

Dependent Variable (0-4, Likert Scale)	RRPP	Broad Camp	Abstention
DV1: An MP's job is to advance the demands of the territory where he or she was elected instead of those of his or her own party	3.04	2.34***	2.91
DV2: An MP's job is to bring forward the demands of the territory where s/ he was elected rather than those of certain social classes	3.23	2.28***	2.87**
DV3: The mayor is first and foremost a representative of the citizens and not of the party to which he belongs	3.55	3.36	3.52
DV4: I feel closer to people who live in my area, even if they are of different social status, than people of my same social status who live in other parts of Italy	2.69	1.73***	2.29**

Source: Author's Elaboration. ***=p<0.01; **=p<0.05; *=p<0.10 (paired means, t-test).

interestingly, for territorial attachment at different levels. 50 percent of League's voters reported to identify themselves as more Venetian than Italian (41 percent of FDI's voters, and 9 percent of centre-left voters), while only 2 percent of League's voters reported the opposite (9 percent of FDI's voters, 46 percent of center-left voters). Differences between RRPPs and centre-left voters are the highest in terms of attachment to European identity (FDI=0.9; League=1.2; centre-left=2.2, in a 0-3 scale) and the lowest in terms of attachment to municipal identity (FDI=2.35; League=2.24; centre-left=2.17 in a 0-3 scale). Data suggest that municipal identity is not divisive, in contrast to provincial and regional (both dominant – particularly the regional one – amongst RRPPs, including FDI) and national and European identities (much higher amongst centre-left voters).

The answers to our battery of questions specifically conceived to measure localist attitudes confirm the correlation between the latter and RRPPs voting intention. Table 3 summarizes the results for our four different dependent variables of interest (each corresponding to the Likert score of questions measuring localist attitudes). With the exception of DV3 (which received high scores from all respondents) the differences in terms of localist attitudes amongst RRPPs' voters and the rest (particularly in comparison with left-of-centre voters) are clear. Furthermore, as results on DV1 shows, the (reported) rejection of partisan reasonings when opposed to the defence of 'territory' is very similar between, on the one hand, FDI's and Leagues' voters and,

on the other hand, citizens oriented towards abstention (who however are more attentive to class-related understanding of politics: see DV2 and DV4). For all the variables considered in Table 3, no statistical differences between FDI's and League's voters emerge.

Our qualitative interviews confirm the same tendency and provide more ground for analysis. On the one hand, localism seems to be strongly rooted in a certain regional identity, the same that was at the core of the League's discourse during its autonomist years, based on the idea that Veneto's economic growth during the last few decades took place in spite of an excessive political and fiscal oppression by the central government, as stated by a resident of the PH who never voted for the League:

The problem is Rome, is taxes. And here there is a lot of pride. People are proud of what they have managed to do. They are proud and they think it was all thanks to them. (I4)

But localism, as it emerges from our interviews, is not limited to claims of Venetian identity. Localism is seen by many as an ethical guarantee of political representation: local politics is considered inherently morally superior to other level of institutional representation, as in the words of a supporter of regional president Luca Zaia:

The closer you are to the territory, the more practical you are and the fewer chances you have of cheating. My mistrust of politicians is completely based on ethics. [...] I feel much closer, at a political level, to the municipality, because it is accountable to a microcosm. You can try to cheat also at the municipal level, but you are under constant evaluation. People know who is a good mayor and who is not. Who does something for the community and who does not. (I2)

Other than the moral superiority of local government, in this excerpt we find two crucial elements of the way on understanding politics we are calling "localism": on the one hand, the idea that a good politician is someone "practical", someone that "does" (a "doer", former US president George W. Bush once said); on the other hand, the reference to "the territory", "the community" as the one entity to which politicians need to be accountable. The same principles were spelled out by other interviewees, with I2 explaining Luca Zaia's success based on the fact that "if there is some weather trouble in Verona, he goes there, he does stuff, he is practical" and I5 defining good politics as doing "things that valorize the territory [...] for everyone's good". Localism, from this point of view, entails an understanding of politics in which populism, organicism and

technocracy are combined based on the centrality of the local territory and community. Matters of ideology, or class, or anything else, do not appear in this model of how politics should work. Rather, localist politics is understood as a chain of territorial linkages, a scale of institutionalised local representation, as it was well explained by an interviewee:

Everything should start from the municipality, from the mayor that comes here, drinks a coffee, listens, and then at the provincial level he will be able to assert the needs, like “Look, in my municipality there is no bike lane to allow to move from the province of Treviso to the province of Padua”. Then, starting from the mayor and going to bigger and bigger level you get to have a total vision. (I1)

This micropolitical chain of representation, completely depoliticised, does not entail any role for political parties. Representation is entirely institutional and territorial, relying on an established system of social relations that allows politicians to extend their roots in local communities. In fact, the relevance of localism is also visible in the answers to the battery of questions measuring citizens’ trust in different social, economic and political organizations and institutions (Table 4). To be sure, the impact of partisan reasoning needs to be considered: voters for either FDI or the League consistently show more trust in political institutions occupied by their own preferred parties (which happen at the local and regional levels) and the same apply for voters for either PD or other left-of-centre parties, including the Five Star Movement (i.e. the coalition ruling, at the time of the survey, at the national level). RRPPs’ voters also display less trust in almost any social and economic association, including *associazioni di categoria* (grouping self-employed workers and small and medium enterprises) and *liste civiche* (local-level electoral slates, often centre-left-leaning, at least in the PH area). Interestingly, there are no statistically significant differences when political parties are concerned, nor, crucially, on voluntary associations operating at the local level, to which RRPPs’ voters show higher (albeit not statistically significant) levels of trust: this is the case of *Pro Loco* (groups typically organizing local events) and of *Protezione Civile* (Civil Defence, typically involved in emergency operations in human-made and natural disasters). In the case of *Alpini* – the Italian Army’s specialist mountain infantry, very much part of Venetian identity and whose retired members are involved in voluntary activities at the local level – trust amongst RRPPs’ voters is significantly higher than among centre-left voters.

Overall, organizations relying on, and nurturing, forms of bonding (instead of bridging) social capital are well-trusted by RRPPs’ voters. Also when looking

Table 4. Trust (scale 1-10) in institutions and social organizations per voting intention (means).

Institutions/Associations	Populist Radical Right	Centre-Left + M5S	
President of Republic (Mattarella)	3,7	7,7	**
EU	2,9	7,1	**
Region	8,2	5,8	**
President of Region (Zaia)	9,0	5,4	**
Prime Minister (Conte)	3,1	6,8	**
Parliament	2,8	5,4	**
Province	6,5	4,4	**
Municipality	7,4	6,3	**
Mayor	7,3	6,1	**
Municipal Council	6,8	5,8	**
Parties	3,1	3,6	
Local-Level Political Lists (<i>Civiche</i>)	3,7	4,9	**
Unions	3,1	4,4	**
Self-Employed’s and SME Associations	3,9	4,5	*
<i>ProLoco</i>	6,1	5,5	
<i>Protezione Civile</i>	7,8	7,3	
<i>Alpini</i>	8,4	7,2	**
Sport Associations	6,6	7,0	
AVIS (Blood Donors)	8,0	8,0	
Volunteering Associations	5,3	7,0	**
Environmental Organizations	4,6	6,8	**
ARCI (Left-wing Recreatory Associations)	3,6	6,2	**
Associations for Immigrants’ Rights	2,4	6,1	**
Territorial Committees	5,0	6,2	**
Social Centres	2,3	5,1	**
Groups for Social Collective Purchasing	4,7	6,7	**

**=p<0.05; *=p<0.10 (paired means, t-test).

at the percentage of membership into different organizations – and considering that low number of observations prevents, in this case, from drawing any conclusion – the picture seems similar: in our sample, 23 percent of RRPPs’ voters declared to be involved in a *Pro Loco* (vs 15 percent of centre-left voters), and 11 percent of the former (vs 5 percent of the latter) declared to be part of *Alpini*; in contrast, 17 percent of centre-left voters (vs 2 percent of RRPPs’) declared to participate in some environmentalist organizations⁹. Our data confirms that

⁹ As for the intersection between localism and nativism, 92 percent of RRPPs’ voters declare to have little or any trust in migrants (vs 28 percent amongst centre-left voters), and 13 percent of RRPPs’ voters report to have little or any trust in local people (vs 24 percent). 54 percent of RRPPs’ voters disagree with the statement “who grow up in Veneto is Venetian, families’ origins do not matter” (vs 21 percent). 98 percent of centre-left voters report to have not had any personal problems with immigrant residents – vs 64 percent amongst RRPPs’ voters.

bonding capital is indeed at the core of RRPPs' support in the PH. Evidence from our interviews also strengthens this argument, while also emphasizing the contact points with producerist attitudes and self-narratives in the PH. First of all, these organisations testify the tendency to "do" and the moral superiority of being "practical" that was already identified as virtuous when discussing politicians, as an interviewee well explained, with a clear cross-class understanding of society:

Here they are not sitting on their hands, no welfarism, they are doing their own thing and are able to organize themselves. Alpini, Avis and Pro Loco are thriving associations, with written documents and formal procedures [...]! Pro Loco organising festivals on the basis of programmatic documents! Managerial skills, even to organize a village festival. This cohesion is stronger than expecting someone's help. [...] I'm an advocate of associationism, it's essential to engage with people from different social classes as well, because often in the Pro Loco, in associations, there is the manager and the worker, the farmer and the bank manager, a little bit of everything (I5);

In the same vein, the same territorial understanding of politics is applied to associations, with the implied moral superiority of the local level once again coming to the fore, based on the direct accountability to the community:

In my opinion the closer you are to the territory the more practical you are and the less opportunity you have to cheat. Of course even in local associations you have internal conflicts, for power. But still they do something for the territory, which is traceable. Every association that is big, Italian European global... you get lost there. There is opacity, there is no transparency, too many steps, and these too many steps create possibilities of cheating. (I2);

Yet, where associational linkages emerge as peculiar of what we are calling in this article "localism" is not in their parallelism with politics, but rather in their oppositional comparison to politics. Many interviewees promote a certain type of civic association exactly because they entail a model of representation that is different from the one embodied by political parties. On the one hand, parties (but also unions) are considered inherently partisan, violating the organicist unity of the local community that we have already seen as one of the main pillars of localism, while this type of associations represent exactly community:

That type of associations, like the Alpini, the Protezione Civile, they are associations in which there is a person who wants to help another person. Political parties, instead, but also unions, give me the idea that you want to go against certain people to help others. (I1)

On the other hand, the comparison between these organisations and political parties stresses the other pillar of localism we mentioned before: the cult of "doing", of practicality, of concreteness, that is strictly linked to the territorial dimension:

I consider much more concrete the participation in organisations like Avis. [...] Even the Pro Loco is much more concrete than parties, in which the strategic line is decided elsewhere, in other territories. If I have to choose, I certainly prefer the territorial and associational dimension. (I5)

Based on this analysis, localism emerges as rooted in an established system of relationships at the territorial level, in which the prevalence of depoliticised and community-based models of activation favours an understanding of politics as a chain of institutional-territorial representation, with virtually no role for ideologies and parties.

DATA ANALYSIS: PRODUCERISM

In the previous section we have already had the opportunity to grasp how localist and producerist worldviews are often intertwined and strongly correlated with the vote for RRPPs. In this section we present further evidence to support the close relationship between producerist attitudes and the hegemony of RRPPs in the PH area.

As already reported in the Methods section, several questions were included in the survey to act as indicators for the presence of producerist attitudes. As we saw, producerism is based on an imaged organic community between entrepreneurs and workers "*opposed to 'parasites' at the top and bottom of society*" (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019: 7). The idea of such an organic community is captured by the item "The interests of entrepreneurs and workers coincide, the good of one is the good of the other" (Likert scale, 1-5: see table 5), while the antagonism between 'hardworkers' and 'parasites' is measured through the two items reported in table 6. As table 4 show, the idea of the existence of such an organic, non-internally conflictual community is much less widespread amongst left-of-centre voters. The same applies to the idea of a community of 'hardworkers' people opposed to 'non-workers' (Table 5). The opposition between 'hardworkers' and 'non-workers' is much more widespread amongst League's voters (48 percent) than amongst FdI's voters (20 percent), thus suggesting that the championing of producerist values is part of the identity of the League, i.e. the party with stronger rootedness and tradition.

Interestingly enough, the organicistic view of society and politics that producerism entails, when applied to

Table 5. Producerist Attitudes (organic community of producers). Mean scores per voting intention.

Dependent Variable (1-5, Likert Scale)	RRPP	Broad Camp	Abstention
DV1: The interests of entrepreneurs and workers coincide, the good of one is the good of the other	2.42	2.00**	2.38

Source: Author’s Elaboration. ***=p<0.01; **=p<0.05; *=p<0.10 (paired means, t-test).

Table 6. Producerist Attitudes (concept of ‘worker’). Percentages of ‘Yes’ answers per voting intention.

Dependent Variable (1-5, Likert Scale)	RRPP	Broad Camp	Abstention	Chi-square, p-value
DV1: When I think of the word ‘workers’, I think to... ‘hardworkers’ (0= ‘everyone with a job, regardless of occupation and contractual status; ‘waged workers’, ‘self-employed workers’ or ‘trade unions’)	21.3	7.9	22.4	0.022**
DV2: The first opposite of ‘workers’ that come to my mind is... ‘lazy people’ (0= ‘entrepreneurs’ or ‘unemployed’)	35.7	14.8	34.0	0.006***

Source: Author’s Elaboration. ***=p<0.01; **=p<0.05; *=p<0.10 (chi square test; N=222 and N=204).

the realm of political representation, tends to end up in technocracy. The base of this logic is the same centrality of “doing” that we have already discussed in the previous section, and that is inherent to producerism, as an interview excerpt clearly shows:

You can put the word “politician” on your identity card. But basically it is not a job. You don’t build anything, you do not create anything, you do not produce. This is what bothers me. [...] I have always held this idea. I have distrust in the people who are in charge, who want to rule us, because they are not competent. (I1)

The culture of “doing”, of the superiority of practicality over reflection, seems to be strongly rooted, and is very clear also to those who criticize it, like in the case of this interviewee, who explicitly mentions the habit to “dumb down” his discourse in order to make it fit into the producerist framework:

For example: when someone does not study, what do they tend to say if they have had some success? Culture is *ciacole*¹⁰. Poems. [...] The League takes root in a context where culture is almost a negative value. I now do consultancy. When I establish relations I have to be careful about the language I use, I have to stay down to earth, because otherwise that short circuit will be created whereby “yes, yes, chit chat, words, we need to do something, to hammer a nail”. The culture of “doing” is favored, and everything that gets in the way – and culture is sometimes an obstacle – is underestimated. (I6)

If “doing” is important, culture and discourse are indifferent when they are not explicitly opposed, and parties and ideologies are substituted by a chain of associational linkages and territorial institutional representation, then the step towards technocracy is not that long:

You would have to be a technician to know what the public [sector] can do. I do not have much faith in the public [sector], in the sense that in my opinion the public [sector] must learn to think as the private sector would think. Only in this way things can change. [...] An entrepreneurial and managerial culture is needed. Things that happen in the public [sector] do not exist in the private one: after two seconds you are out, as it should be! Either you bring results or you are out. Bureaucracy, barons who no one knows why they are there, lack of merit. One has to prove that he is good. [...] The people like me, I know nothing about these things, I can get an idea but decisions must be made by competent people. The people must have their say, then the competent people listen to everyone and make decisions based on the opinions of the majority. (I2)

Coherently with the producerist understanding of society, the economy of Prosecco wine is generally welcome and appreciated in the area, as is the territorial promotion ensured by UNESCO thanks to the decision to include the PH as “world heritage”. Table 7 shows clear associations between support towards RRPPs and support towards the UNESCO decision and its consequences. No statistically significant differences have been found between League’s and FdI’s voters.

Furthermore, the environmental issues raised by the production of prosecco represent a significant tension between localism and producerism, between the defence of the local territory and the prevalence of economic growth over anything else. From this point of view, as Table 8 illustrates, there is a clear association between vote for RRPPs (either League or FdI) and sceptical when not openly oppositional attitudes towards the transition to a green economy and its social consequences.

¹⁰ Idle chit chat, in Venetian.

Table 7. Producerist Attitudes (on PH's inclusion in UNESCO Heritage Sites). Mean scores per voting intention.

Dependent Variable (1-4, Likert Scale)	RRPP	Broad Camp	Abstention
DV1: It is a great honor	2.56	1.89***	1.64***
DV2: It will ensure the protection of the environment from speculation and pollution	1.86	1.11***	1.09***
DV3: It will attract tourism and this is good for our economy	2.39	2.14**	2.16
DV4: It will attract tourism and this is a problem because it will increase rental costs	1.16	1.11	1.12
DV5: It will promote the Prosecco economy and therefore pollution	1.12	1.96***	1.85***
DV6: It will foster the Prosecco economy and therefore create new jobs	2.07	1.70***	1.70**

Source: Author's Elaboration. ***=p<0.01; **=p<0.05; *=p<0.10 (paired means; t-test).

While, in quantitative terms, producerism seems to prevail over localism when there is a tension among the two elements, in our qualitative fieldwork we have also witnessed cases in which localist environmentalist clearly emerges as a dominant force, as in this excerpt:

[From politics] I would expect that the priority is to protect what allowed us to get here. We are here for the grapes, for the vineyard. This type of added value must be preserved, preserving nature, tradition, and our territory. With certain legislation, with bans, which first of all protect the environment, water, air, and then the rest follows accordingly. Because if I have good wine and good water I have a better quality of life. I have a beautiful territory, I protect it in the best possible way, and from there a sustainable economy can revolve around it, which brings jobs, a sustainable environment, and then tourism that makes everyone feel good. (I1)

Reading this against the backdrop of the climate crisis allows to point out both an element of tension in the dominant political framework in the PH, built on localism and producerism, and early occurrences of the emerging political polarisation over climate and the green transition that is becoming yet another component of the culture war carried out by conservative forces in many areas of the world.

CONCLUSIONS

This article addresses the success of RRPPs in a rural area that cannot be defined as populated by “losers of

Table 8. Producerist Attitudes (on Environmental Issues). Percentages of ‘Yes’ answer per voting intention.

Dependent Variable (Binary)	RRPP	Broad Camp	Abstention	Chi-square, p-value
It is necessary to impose changes and new laws to protect the environment, the goodwill of individuals is not enough (0= Each of us can already do a lot by reducing waste and changing our lifestyles)	48.5	62.7	60.4	0.191
Environmental protection is more important than economic growth (0= It is easy to talk about environmental defense without thinking about the economic consequences)	33.3	74.1	73.1	0.000***
Green economy (e.g., using renewable energy) would boost our economy (0= Shifting to a green economy, at least at first, would mean a loss to our economy)	66.1	94.4	88.0	0.000***
New jobs will be generated, however, it will be difficult to find jobs for those who will lose their jobs in traditional polluting industries (0= New jobs will be generated that will offset the loss of jobs in traditional polluting sectors)	57.1	26.4	32.6	0.001***

Source: Author's Elaboration. ***=p<0.01; **=p<0.05; *=p<0.10 (chi-square test).

globalization” but that rather witnessed an unprecedented economic growth thanks to the capacity to produce and export sparkling wine. Winners of globalization do, indeed, vote for RRPPs, in certain conditions. Our analysis, in the specific case of the PH in Veneto, Italy, identifies this condition in the hegemony of localism and producerism in the shared understanding of politics in the area. A few final considerations need to be made.

First of all, localism and producerism, as we understand them, are strongly interrelated. They are two sides of the same coin, two complementary aspects of the depoliticisation of institutional representation, of the decline of political parties, of the emergence of a technical-managerial understanding of politics. This dominant understanding of politics at the local level seems to play in favour of RRPPs, notwithstanding their differences: not only the area has seen the electoral prevalence of

the Northern League, of Salvini's national League and of Brothers of Italy, but even before the last transformation, when the League was still dominant, its voters and those supporting Brothers of Italy were mostly aligned on the indicators analyzed in this article. This seems to imply, on the one hand, the existence of a relatively stable bloc of RRPP voters, not attached to a single party but rather to the right-wing electoral coalition and ready to support different parties, within the coalition, in different cases. On the one hand, the literature on the Italian party system has already pointed out how, in the so-called Second Republic, electoral volatility between parties has dramatically increased in comparison with the First Republic, while bloc volatility has remained structurally low (D'Alimonte and Bartolini, 1997; Bardi, 2007; Regalia, 2018; Roncarolo and Vezzoni, 2023), supporting the hypothesis of a declining identification with parties and an increasing identification with broad political coalitions. In this context, a common political culture or common political opportunities can be shared by multiple parties within the same space, since voters tend to freely choose among them without changing their political identity. On the other hand, our results strongly qualify the argument of Heinisch and Jansesberger (2023), who, finding that 'the League supporters of 2018 had a more pronounced nation-state identity than did those of other parties [...] starkly different from their equivalents in 2016 [i.e. when the Salvini's nationalist turn was still in its infancy]', concluded that "voters respond to party cues as these changes were initiated by the party not the voters". This paper rather suggests that, at least in the wealthy PH area, right-wing voters' territorial identities are much more resistant to party cues: arguably, Heinisch and Jansesberger's findings may better portray the evolution of the League's electorate at the national level.

It needs also to be pointed out that the localist-producerist logic of understanding politics was not born yesterday, but it is rather rooted in the history of the Italian Republic. In particular, the role of civic associations in providing political linkages while party organizations remain relatively weak is coherent with what we know of the "white subculture" that characterized Veneto in the First Republic as a system of social relations and organizations built around the structure of the village and of the Catholic Church (Triglia, 1986; Cento Bull, 2000; Almagisti, 2016). This continuity with the Christian Democracy era helps also understand that localism and producerism are not inherently radical-right elements: they are logics of understanding politics, rooted in the structure of social relations that characterize a certain territory, that, in certain conditions, provide RRPPs with a substantial electoral advantage.

A discussion of the reasons behind the particularly relevant role of local and producerism in Venetian politics goes beyond the scope of this article. The persistence of some of the historical traits of the "white subculture", including the prevalence of the State vs. Church and centre vs. periphery cleavages over the class one (Diamanti and Riccamboni, 1992), can reasonably be expected, and has already been observed for what concerns "anti-state localism" (Almagisti and Zanellato, 2021). Historians have found traces of this model of understanding politics even before the Second World War, tracing its origins in the limited integration of Venetian rural areas into the Italian national project (Vanzetto, 2022). The partial de-industrialisation of the region (Zazzara, 2020) may also have played a significant role in the most recent evolutions.

Furthermore, Veneto in general and the PH in particular are not the only socio-territorial context in which localism and producerism play a role. We have investigated this territory because, on the one hand, the combination between the heritage of the "white subculture" and the socio-territorial characteristics of Veneto are particularly favorable for localism and producerism, and, on the other hand, the PH provide a particularly poignant case of RRPPs-voting "winners of globalization". Still, the prevalence of such political logics is also linked to broad societal phenomena, such as the decline of class identities and political ideologies, that might make them significant also in other socio-territorial contexts. Further research should explore the difference between the role of localism and producerism in the PH area and the one the same factors play elsewhere.

Finally, we cannot avoid to observe that, notwithstanding the strong relationship between localism and producerism, environmental issues and struggles are an element of structural tensions between the two. It is not by chance that Veneto has hosted in the last few years a significant number of territorial conflicts (Fregolent, 2015), even if the environmental issue has rarely been appropriated by the political centre-left as a central element in its political platform, and the attempt to reproduce a partially amended and softened version of the right-wing localist and producerist agenda has prevailed. Still, even in the PH, environmental protests against the Prosecco monoculture are not rare (Basso & Fregolent, 2021). Such a centrality of the territory is inherently in tension with the habit of considering the territory as an infinite resource that traditionally characterize producerism.

Finalizing this article in 2024 implies taking into account the crisis that the League is undergoing in Veneto, including the PH, after the 2022 elections, that was FDI as the largest party in the Region. The conflict

between the supporters of Matteo Salvini's national radical-right strategy and those (partially identifying with the regional president Luca Zaia) proposing a comeback of a regionalist/autonomist agenda is open, and has directly involved the PH: Gianantonio Da Re, former mayor of Vittorio Veneto, member of the European Parliament and local leader of the League for more than three decades, was formally expelled from the party in March 2024 after his strong critiques against the 'radical Right' and anti-autonomist turn of the Salvini's League. The fracture brought to local splits in a few municipalities, allowing for example the centre-left to win the mayoral elections in Vittorio Veneto in June 2024.

It is much too early to say if this is the beginning of a region-wide split or even of a structural decline of the domination of the League over Venetian politics. What we have presented in this paper, and recent development in the regional politics, suggest that the persistent characters of local politics matter more than their party carriers, in fostering the domination of the populist radical-right in well-off rural areas. At the same time, we fully acknowledge the limitations of this article in terms of our survey data collection strategy, which is surely innovative and promising (in terms of benefit-cost ratio) but at the same time unable to build a representative sample. In this sense, our research may hopefully represent a starting point for further research on RR politics in specific contexts as well as on politics in North-Eastern Italy. This region seems not only understudied (at least from a political science perspective), but also a laboratory of local, environmental and/or economic conflicts, often entailing highly complex social and cultural struggles currently championed by the radical right (not only in rural areas: see as an example the case of the once left-oriented industrial town of Monfalcone) deserving much attention in our discipline.

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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 ITANES¹ 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

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 & Bierwaczek, 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 Kjaersgaard 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 ($\alpha = .803$), 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 “doc-

torate or other post-tertiary education”. Responses were recorded 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”, “home-maker”, “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, $F(5, 1550) = 4.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .015$. 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 schol- arization, $r(1554) = -.088$, $p = .001$. There was no significant effect of marital status, $F(4, 1178) = 1.68$, $p = .152$, $\eta^2 = .006$, and a small effect of occupational status, $F(6,$

1145) = 3.60, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .019$, 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.

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	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 (<i>M</i> = 0, <i>F</i> = 1)	1552	<i>M</i> : 52.4% <i>F</i> : 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.

		<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	95% C.I. <i>Exp(B)</i>	
								Lower	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.

		<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	95% C.I. <i>Exp(B)</i>	
								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

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

		<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	95% C.I. <i>Exp(B)</i>	
								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 $R^2 = .607$, $\chi^2(35) = 764.48$, $p < .001$. 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 $R^2 = .619$, $\chi^2(49) = 789.99$, $p < .001$. 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, $B = -.503$,

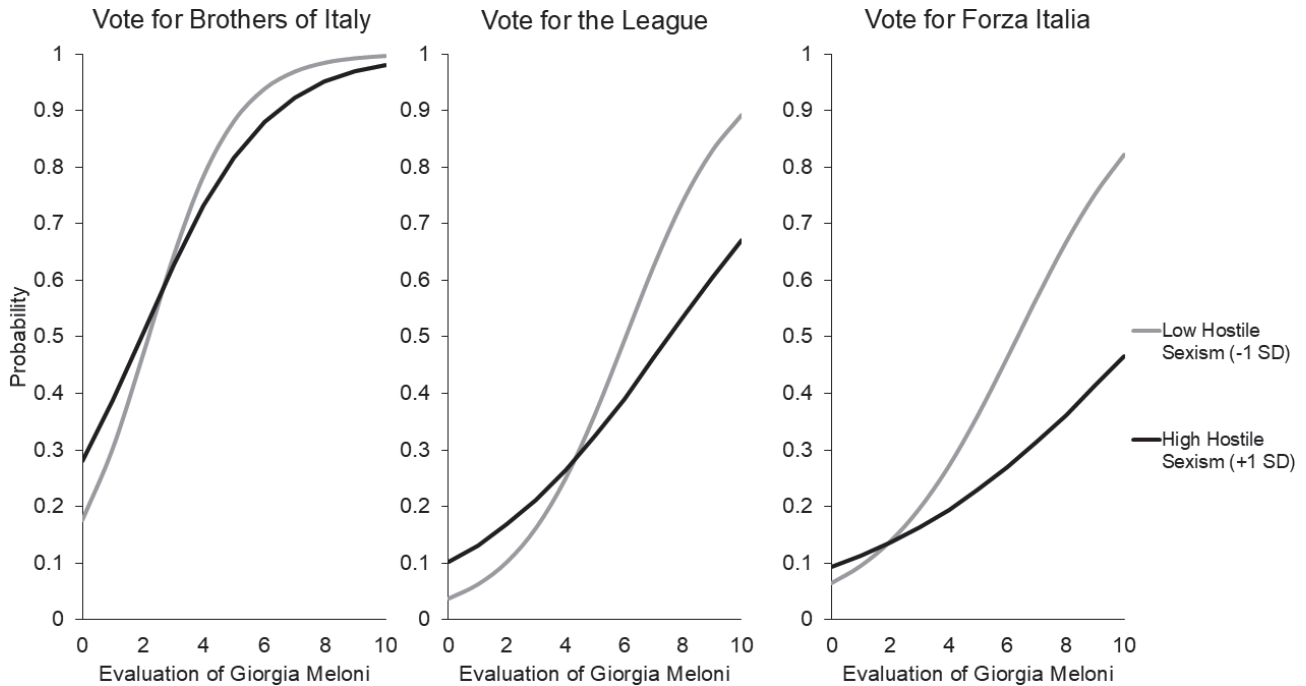


Figure 1. Multinomial logistic regression on vote for the center-right parties.

$\text{Exp}(B) = 0.605$, $p = .048$, and Forza Italia (although not significant), $B = -.420$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.657$, $p = .085$ (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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The dark side of simultaneous elections. The case of Sicily in 2022 Italian national elections

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Abstract. Instruments of “electoral engineering” such as compulsory voting, incentives and simultaneous multi-level voting, have become pretty common in contemporary democracies, especially in areas with low turnout rates. Simultaneous elections – i.e. the practice of establishing an election day when different governments (usually at local and national level, or including referendums) are elected – implies a reduction of costs for the institutions and increased empowerment for voters. However, these kinds of measures do not address the deep sentiments of disaffection for political institutions that often lie at the origin of non-voting. Moreover, simultaneous elections with different voting rules might confuse voters, thus increasing the number of invalid votes or no-choice. In order to examine the advantages and the threats of simultaneous elections, this study focuses on the recent case of the Italian general elections of 25th of September 2022, during which also the elections of the president and the regional assembly of Sicily were run simultaneously. This represents a regional context where atavistic disaffection and high volatility have marked the turnout rate of the last thirty years. By looking at the results of national elections within municipalities through a difference-in-difference strategy, we observe a slight increase in turnout rate in Sicilian municipalities. However, the number of both null and blank votes is significantly higher in Sicilian towns, suggesting a threatening effect of simultaneous voting.

Keywords: turnout, simultaneous elections, invalid vote.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite different definitions of liberal representative democracy, the vast majority of scholars agree on the point that elections are at the very core of any democratic system. Elections must be ruled through key mechanisms that ensure fair and open competition as well as voting expression. Whether the level of participation is crucial for representativity or not is a contentious issue. However, turnout is largely considered an indicator of “healthy” democratic status, since it is associated with the way the demand and the supply side of a political space is balanced. On the other hand, poor electoral participation relates to disaffection toward institutions and citizens’ alienation (Lijphart, 1997).

Instruments of “electoral engineering” such as compulsory voting, incentives and simultaneous multi-level voting have become quite common in

contemporary democracies, especially in areas with low turnout rates. Simultaneous (or concurrent) elections – i.e. the practice of conducting the elections of different institutional bodies (usually at local and national level, or including referendums) on the same day – proved to be in some cases quite effective in raising the turnout level (Cantoni et al., 2021; Leininger et al., 2018). The engine of this success is mainly the opportunity to cut citizens' costs of voting as well as institutional budgets. At the same time, these kinds of measures do not address the deep sentiments of disaffection for political institutions that often are at the origin of not voting. They cut voting fatigue but do not necessarily improve citizens' political efficacy nor support for parties and the system as a whole.

Consequently, the benefits of concurrent elections still need more evidence through different contexts. We intend to address the following questions: Is the possibility to vote simultaneously for different levels of governments enough to increase voting participation, especially in those contexts with high disaffection toward politics and institutions? Is the output of concurrent elections without negative effects for voting choice?

Simultaneous elections indeed mix elections with different levels of saliency, potentially affecting the number of empty ballot papers. Moreover, different electoral rules in simultaneous competitions might increase the likelihood of citizens making mistakes in casting their votes. When elections are held on the same day but have different rules, voters might be confused and the number of invalid votes may increase. While political offer (that is sometimes different across elections levels) remains a major explanatory element of voting behavior, variation in electoral rules in simultaneous elections is often poorly considered by both institutional actors and the scientific literature.

We address the above questions by observing the recent case of the Italian general elections of 25 September 2022, in which also the election of the president and the regional assembly of Sicily were run simultaneously. This represents a quasi-natural experiment in a regional context where atavistic disaffection and high volatility have marked the turnout rate of the last thirty years (Cerruto and La Bella, 2022). By using the results of 2022 national elections, with municipalities as units of analysis, we specifically test through difference-in-difference (DD) models whether a) simultaneous elections of the regional government/parliament and the national parliament increased the turnout rate; and b) whether different electoral rules for the elections of the three institutional bodies (the president of the region, the regional parliament and the national parliament) had some effects in terms of blank and null votes. The data

show a positive effect on turnout in the Sicilian context compared to the regions of the south. At the same time, both blank and null votes show higher percentages in Sicily, suggesting a possible threatening effect of concurrent elections having different electoral rules.

2. A NEW PARLIAMENT, OLD PROBLEMS: SOME KEY CONTEXTUAL ELEMENTS OF THE 2022 ELECTIONS

The general elections of 25 September 2022 marked the early end of the 13th Legislature of the Italian Parliament (2018-2022) and confirmed the deinstitutionalization of the Italian party system (Chiaromonte & Emanuele, 2013; Chiaromonte et al., 2018). Elections were held after the different experiences of Conte's (M5S) and Draghi's governments¹.

In June 2022, Mario Draghi, the former President of the Council of Ministers resigned after a vote of confidence in the Senate, when he obtained the support of only a relative majority, given the abstention of the senators of the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five Stars Movement – M5S), of Forza Italia (FI) and the Lega. Already during his mandate, President Draghi had difficulty in holding together such a heterogeneous government coalition. The attempt to reposition the M5S on the progressive front, by Conte as the new political leader (Carteny & Puleo, 2022), and the attempt of Forza Italia and the League to respond to electoral pressures stemming from the success of Fratelli D'Italia (Brothers of Italy – FdI), are among the key political issues that undermined the incumbent government during 2022.

After the elections were called, the campaign focused the political debate on certain socio-economic issues

¹ In June 2018, the M5S and Matteo Salvini's Lega created the first full-fledged populist government in a major Western European country (Garzia, 2019). The government fell as early as August 2019, after the European elections, which saw a clear success of the League and the electoral collapse of the M5S (Chiaromonte et al., 2020), when Salvini tried to exploit his popularity by calling for early elections. Within a few weeks, however, the M5S and the PD reached an agreement for a new government and the second Conte government was born in September. Only a few months later, the second Conte government faced the Covid-19 emergency and responded with various containment measures. After an initial phase in which even the opposition parties showed relative unity in their response to the emergency (Albetazzi et al., 2021), the right-wing parties – Fratelli d'Italia and Lega in particular – began to loudly criticize the government on the most important issues related to the management of the pandemic, the acceptance of special funds from the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), and the overall governance of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Cavatorto et al., 2021). In October 2021, with the withdrawal of support from Renzi's 'Italia Viva' party, the government resigned. To overcome the crisis, several leaders and commentators expressed their support for a government led by Mario Draghi, which in 2021 took the form of a government of national unity, supported by all major parties except Fratelli d'Italia.

that are strongly intertwined with international ones. As citizens' voting behavior is influenced by contingent economic and social events (Schmitt, et al., 2021), the war in Ukraine (and its consequences on European economies, see Mbah and Wasum, 2022) was among the most salient topics of the elections (Lami and Sahota, 2022) contributing to an increasing citizens' insecurity.

The main result of the 2022 general elections was that the center-right won an absolute majority in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Fratelli d'Italia was by far the first party with an electoral result much superior to the coalition's allies. The League stopped at 8.8% and Forza Italia at 8.2%; however, both of them were crucial for the formation of the government majority. In reality, the victory of the center-right coalition was amplified (especially in the translation of votes into seats) by the absence of a cohesive alternative, since center-left forces remained divided into three subgroups (Vassallo and Verzichelli, 2023). The national elections of 2022 confirmed the already observed phenomena of volatility, fragmentation, rise of populism, polarization and reformulation of socio-economic and socio-cultural divisions (Giovannini, Valbruzzi, Vampa, 2023)².

The outcome of the Italian elections is consistent with the electoral dynamics that characterize Western European democracies. The progressive expansion of the radical right, in some cases, was favoured by the effects of the Covid-19 health emergency and, even more, by Putin's Russian invasion of Ukraine. The presidential and legislative elections in France are a clear example of radical changes in party competition dynamics (Durovic 2023). In Germany, the end of the Merkel era accelerated a process of increasing fluidity in inter-party relations with the consistent growth of the Greens (on the progressive side) and the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD), which profited from the raising saliency of some social and economic emergencies. The Spanish party system has become more fragmented and polarized (SimOn 2020). In Sweden, the growing influence of the populist radical right has led to the mainstreaming of anti-immigration rhetoric. This trend was already present in Denmark (Aylott and Bolin, 2023). In

2022, in Portugal, Chena – a nascent party in the galaxy of the European radical right – grew from 1.3 % to 7.2%.

The economic and political events that characterized the national political elections inevitably also had repercussions on the Sicilian political context. There is a strong link between the two scenarios – the national and the regional – highlighted by incumbent President Musumeci's U-turn from an initial will to run again for the presidency (the legislature having been completed) to the sudden decision to resign. The strategic intent was to strengthen cohesion within the Sicilian center-right by planning candidatures simultaneously at the regional and national level. The coalition of progressists showed also a national-regional linkage since Conte's (M5S) decision to break the coalition with the Democratic Party was consistent with the lack of support for the PD's candidature of Caterina Chinnici for the presidency of Sicily.

The electoral campaign began in a public environment highly dissatisfied with Musumeci's incumbent government. Criticism emerged especially on the systematic delay in the approval of the Budget Law – passed after the maximum time limit – and on the several reforms announced but, in the eyes of the public, poorly implemented. Thus, at the end of the legislature, several reforms in many areas such as waste management, water supply, bureaucracy, forestry etc. were poorly addressed by both the regional governmental and parliamentary activities.

The outcome of the Sicilian regional elections – held simultaneously on 25 September 2022 – was consistent with that of National elections. In Sicily the competition was played out on two different levels: the one of the candidates for the presidency of the Region (the regional lists), and that of the territorial constituencies (therefore of the provincial lists that contribute to 62 seats out of 70 in the Sicilian Regional Assembly – ARS). The center-right coalition was the winner of regional elections, getting the presidency (42.1% of votes) and the majority within the regional Assembly. Looking at the votes for candidates to the presidency, the center-left parties remained below the twenty per cent of preferences (Chinnici 16.2%, and the M5S candidate Di Paola 15.2%), while the emerging South calls North (Sud chiama Nord) regional populist party gained a surprising 24% of preferences for its leader Cateno De Luca.

3. ELECTORAL RULES AND POLITICAL "OFFER" IN SICILIAN AND NATIONAL ELECTIONS OF 2022

The political dynamics and the results of national and Sicilian regional elections of September 2022 appear in fact highly related to each other. Despite these strong

² There are many common features between the 2022 elections and the 2013 elections, especially when one looks at the structure of the political offer. As in the 2013 elections, upon the fall of the technical government led by Mario Monti, the main parties of the (large) majority positioned themselves in different groupings. One substantial difference is the fact that Draghi, unlike Monti, did not directly participate in the elections. Moreover, Draghi's legacy was much more popular than Monti's one, as he implemented public expenditure, whereas Monti had to promote harsh austerity measures. In general, researchers have observed that successive waves of Italian populism have emerged in a context of economic stagnation and precarioussness (Vampa 2023).

ties, the electoral systems and rules differed in some aspects that might turn out to be crucial for participation and voting choices.

At the national level, for the second time, Italians voted with the mixed (proportional and majoritarian) system introduced in 2017 (Chiaramonte & D'Alimonte, 2018). Nevertheless, two constitutional reforms – approved by Constitutional Law 1/2021 – have changed the rules in the last five years. First, eighteen years old citizens may now vote for candidates to both chambers (previously the limit was set at 25 for the Senate). This made the electorate of the two Chambers completely overlapping. Secondly, the number of deputies was reduced from 630 to 400 in the Chamber of Deputies and from 315 to 200 in the Senate³.

The structure of the electoral law (the so-called ‘Rosatellum’) has remained essentially unchanged: a mixed electoral system assigns 37.5% of the seats through the uninominal majority method both in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate (excluding MPs elected abroad from the calculation, this amounts to 147 MPs, out of 392, and 74 senators, out of 196), while the remaining 62.5% of the seats (245 in the Chamber of Deputies and 122 in the Senate) are assigned through the proportional system⁴. To qualify for the proportional share, coalitions must attain at least 10% of the votes, while individual lists, whether cohesive or not, need the 3% of the votes⁵. An important aspect of the electoral law in its proportional component is the impossibility to choose a specific candidate. Those elected are proclaimed according to the order of presentation established by the list itself. The voter has no choice between the different candidates on each list. Finally, it is important to bear in mind that, despite the coexistence of two different systems (majoritarian/plurality and proportional), there is only one ballot paper (for each Chamber) and it is not possible to vote different lists for the two systems.

In terms of electoral offerings, the general elections of 25 September 2022 present many elements of continuity with the past. The main forces in the field were the same as the last two elections: the center-right coalition, the center-left coalition and the Five Star Move-

ment (M5S) (D'Alimononte and De Sio, 2024). However, the Italian party system, as we have seen in the previous section, shows persisting instability due to tensions, fractures, new power relations and alliances (Sartori, 1976). The main novelty was represented by the reappearance of the centrist pole (present in 2013 but not in 2018). Moreover, the Italian case shows a strong weakness of the political class due to citizen disaffection and distrust, but also to the tendency to delegate to technocrats during harsh times. The 2022 general elections represented an attempt of the political class to regain control of the government (Pasquino, 2023).

The electoral system for the election of the President and the members of the Sicilian Regional Assembly is regulated by Regional Law No 7 of 3 June 2005. This is a mixed electoral system based on the proportional formula with a majority bonus and with the possibility of disjointed voting. This formula is in line with the neo-parliamentary form of government prefigured by the Constitutional Law No 2 of 2001, which in the Sicilian case was included in the statutory text (Vassallo and Baldini, 2000). Specifically, 62 out of 70 deputies are elected with the proportional system on a provincial basis (Hare quotient method), 7 deputies are elected in a regional blocked list, as a prize awarded to the winning coalition. The last seat goes to the presidential candidate ranked second. Finally, the law set some rules to foster gender balance within the elected parliament⁶. It included also a threshold of 5% at the regional level, the highest explicit threshold in force in Italy⁷. The law includes a majority bonus awarded only if the coalition linked to the elected presidential candidate does not reach 60% of seats. It relates to the number of seats that the winning coalition obtains in the proportional distribution. Therefore, it is not decisive in absolute terms, because it works only in the event of failure to reach an absolute majority of seats⁸.

The different electoral rules of the national and the Sicilian regional systems, here briefly described, might have consequences when the two electoral competitions are run simultaneously, especially in terms of blank and null votes.

Regarding the level of political supply and demand, the Sicilian political system has been characterized by

³ These are constitutional reforms strongly desired by the 5 Star Movement and confirmed by a national referendum in 2020 that called for a drastic reorganization of constituencies.

⁴ On the share of seats allocated by proportional method, there is a distinction between the Chamber and the Senate. In the Chamber of Deputies, the distribution is first on a national basis and then to the 28 regional or sub-regional constituencies. In the Senate, the distribution is on a regional basis, according to Article 57 of the Constitution.

⁵ However, if a list has received at least 1% of the valid votes, these are not dispersed but distributed among the other components of the coalition that have passed the threshold.

⁶ The candidates in each regional list must be included according to a criterion of alternating men and women, and in the provincial lists neither gender may be present for more than two-thirds of the number of candidates to be elected in the constituency.

⁷ According to the provisions contained in the transitional regulations of 2001. Law no. 43 of 23 February 1995 established a threshold of 3% of valid votes that would not apply if the list was linked to another list exceeding the 5%.

⁸ If the winning coalition exceeds 60% of the seats, it turns into a minority prize that transfers the seats of the regional lists to the losing proportional provincial lists (Cerruto & La Bella, 2022).

a series of phenomena – such as electoral absenteeism, voter instability, personalization of the vote – which contributed to radical changes at party system level during the 90s (Cerruto and Raniolo, 2009). The introduction of the direct election of the President of the Region poorly limited uncertainty and turbulence in the Sicilian political system (Cerruto and La Bella, 2018).

The Sicilian voter has traditionally shown a lower propensity to participate in elections (especially at regional/local level). Sicily shows (along with Calabria and Campania) the highest rates of electoral absenteeism, defining the Centre-North – South fracture in political participation (Caciagli, 1988). The political offer within the Sicilian regional system has been traditionally fragmented with a high number of parties and lists (Bartolini, 1986). Until the introduction of the direct election of the President of the Region, the number of lists presented was double that of the other regions (Feltrin, 1990). Sicily has also shown a high level of personalization of vote. This has been particularly evident in case of regional elections, since localistic factors and personalism emerge in the relationship between voters and parties (D’Amico 1993). These characteristics have been registered in the electoral behavior of Sicilians during the last 20 years. The substantial difference with the 1990s in the electoral offer can be seen by the affirmations of new populist political subjects such as the Movimento per le autonomie (Movement for Autonomy), the Magafono (Megaphone), the M5S and Sud Chiama Nord (South calls North). The electoral success of these parties, albeit in line with tendencies at national and European levels, was particularly significant in such a turbulent political scene where dissatisfaction is prevalent within the electorate (Cerruto and La Bella, 2024). However, the electoral success (and proliferation) of populist lists remained limited. The political offer for the 2022 regional elections confirms the reduction in the number of lists observed since 2017, with about 800 candidates for the Regional Assembly. The M5S was the third party in terms of preferences at regional level while mainstream lists of the center-right were the winning coalition. At the same time, the new populist regional list of Cateno De Luca was the “real” competitor for the presidency, and the second emerging force (about 24% of vote obtained for the candidate to the presidency).

The process of defining the coalition candidacies, as previously anticipated, was crossed by long and exhausting negotiations on which contingencies, internal and external to the natural dynamics of the regional political system, had a decisive impact. This is the case of the no-confidence vote in the Draghi government which had repercussions on the progress coalition that had

reached an agreement on the candidacy of Caterina Chinnici through primaries. In the center-right coalition, on the other hand, the diktats to Musumeci’s re-candidacy determined the resignation and, therefore, the choice to go to simultaneous elections.

On the whole, the electoral offer at regional level in 2022 was (as usual) smaller than the national one. In Sicily there were 6 regional lists and 19 linked provincial ones, while a larger offer (more than 30 symbols) was present at national level (see table D1 in the appendix).⁹ The political offer was then larger at national level. At the same time, it was quite overlapping, at least for the big parties. Mainstream parties such as PD, FdI, FI, M5S, and Salvini League were present in both regional and national elections. They attracted the greatest majority of preferences. The regional list of Cateno De Luca (Sud chiama Nord) had a great success in Sicily (24% versus the national 0.8%) but were present in both national and regional competitions. In short, the electoral offer in terms of parties and ideologic positions was basically overlapping between the regional and the national level. However, regional dynamics show different voting patterns due to the presence of some candidates (such as De Luca) or voters’ orientations.

4. HYPOTHESES

Both voting participation and the quality of vote represent key subjects of electoral studies and political research. Different paradigms and theoretical approaches have defined the sources of electoral participation across contexts and territorial entities. The list of the elements affecting (or relating) to turnout rate is quite long nowadays. At the individual level, different researchers have proved the influence of sociodemographic factors such as education, income/social status level, age, working condition (among others see Bhatti and Hansen, 2012; Fieldhouse, Tranmer and Russell, 2007), as well as attitudinal elements such as interest in politics, trust in institutions (Blondel, Sinnott and Svensson, 1997), and media exposure. At the sociotropic level, voting turnout shows significant variations across different level of economic conditions (e.g. Di Mauro, 2016), welfare, clientelism and corruption (Dahlberg and Solevid, 2016). Other factors relate to “electoral engineering” such as

⁹ 1.310 candidates for uninominal and 2.788 for plurinominal constituencies at the Chamber of deputies. 693 candidates for uninominal and 1.418 for plurinominal constituencies for the senate. 95 candidates for the Chamber and 41 for the senate in the foreign constituency. See <https://www.interno.gov.it/notizie/online-sul-sito-viminale-tutti-i-candidati-nelle-liste-e-nei-collegi-uninominali-elezionipolitiche2022> and <https://dait.interno.gov.it/elezioni/trasparenza/elezioni-politiche-2022>.

the dispositions included in the electoral law and the electoral procedures (see Chen, 2011): from the most substantial ones, concerning the way to cast voting preferences, to those appearing innocuous such as the form of the ballot papers or the day of the week where elections are held. These institutional arrangements include also the practice to conduct elections for different levels of representation (and government) on the same day.

Simultaneous (or concurrent) elections are largely spread across the globe within different democratic regimes. They present some intuitive benefits for institutions, political elites/parties and voters. Concurrent elections reduce organizational costs by doubling the election outcome in a single organizational effort. Elements such as recruitment of electoral commissions, data collection and treatment, supply material, updating of electoral lists, control activities, reservation and management of venues etc. are high demanding activities that might be cut by concentrating different elections on the same day. A consequent reduction of costs is an attractive reason to implement these types of measures. Parties benefit from concurrent elections by reducing the costs of their campaign, taking advantage of multiple arenas of communication (and conflict) and of bargaining political (potential) positions with alleys. Voters reduce also their participation fatigue by having the possibility to deal with different voting choices in one session. From a cost/benefit analysis, concurrent elections are then expected to produce higher levels of electoral participation. Some researchers have proved this relationship in different contexts. In Europe, Leininger et al. (2016) showed that simultaneous elections increase the turnout rate.

Italy is not a deviant case. As Cantoni et al. (2021) showed, concurrent elections in Italy increase the turnout level especially when high-saliency (national) elections were run simultaneously with low-saliency (regional, local, European) elections. We refer here to low/high saliency elections instead of “first/second order” elections (Reif and Smith, 1980). This last concept has had an extensive application in voting behavior analyses, but it has also attracted some criticism. Schakel and Jeffery (2013) observed that “the conceptual heritage mobilised by Reif and Schmitt has imported a ‘nationalizing’ bias into the study of regional elections” (p. 325). Their study demonstrated that “the second-order model has limited explanatory power in explaining regional election outcomes” (p.339). Entering into this debate is beyond the aims of this study. However, a national-driven perspective better applies to our case, since we observe national results. Accordingly, we prefer to refer to the saliency of elections within a polity rather than to an ordered logic. Assuming a national perspective, lower salient elections

are less considered in the political debate than national ones. This is the case of regional elections in Italy, since they usually are less salient in (national) political discourse and less participated. At the same time, the influence of national political dynamics (at party level) and issues on regional/municipal elections – a main argument of the second order thesis – does not always applies to these electoral competitions.

Some studies observed that a) “lower-saliency elections in the South increase turnout even when they concur with higher-saliency contests (Cantoni et al., 2021, p. 21); and b) “the margins for increasing political interest (hence, voter turnout) in the South may be wider, leaving more space for concurrent elections to increase political participation” (Cantoni et al., 2021, p. 21). In other words, since disaffection toward politics is higher in some contexts, simultaneity might be more important than saliency: the effects relate to simultaneity rather than to elections’ “order”. This is a less explored (and quite counterintuitive) perspective deserving more empirical investigation.

Consistently with this perspective, we hypothesize that *the level of turnout is significantly higher within municipalities in Sicily where concurrent elections were run on 25th of September 2022 (H1)*.

In this case the concurring effect of simultaneous lower-saliency elections (regional) would break the descending turnout trend in the island and reveal a clear gain in terms of participation.

The second hypothesis concerns blank ballots. If citizens feel empowered by the possibility to choose for different levels of representation in one day (and turnout increases) it is reasonable to expect a limited number of blank votes in concurrent elections. On the other hand, difference in electoral rules and campaign dynamics within concurrent elections might tarnish the vote of more salient elections such as national ones. In this case, some voters might be motivated principally by the will to vote for a candidate at regional level, having no clear choice for the national one. This dynamic is accentuated in local context where candidate compete for a personal vote and directly contact voters: the will to choose for a name at regional level (that is impossible due to blocked lists at national one) could represent an input to vote in both tournaments but does not imply a choice for the national elections. In other words, the differences in the electoral offer (between regional and national elections) might not be the only reason to vote blank, but it concurs with other aspects (such as individual preferences) linked to electoral rules and campaigns. In order to see this potentially threatening effect we hypothesize that *blank ballots are significantly higher within municipalities*

in Sicily where concurrent elections were run on 25th of September 2022 (H2).

Finally, we know that benefits on turnout are effective only if concurrent elections produce valid votes, and voting blank is different from invalid votes. Most of the studies proving an increase of turnout during unique election days show a positive effect in terms of valid votes. However, these researches mostly ignore differences in electoral rules or potential threats in technicalities. Our narrowed focus on the Sicilian case might address specifically this question after we discussed the differences in electoral rules and voting procedures. As we observed, these differences are potentially leading voters to mistakes when they cast their votes, at least for two main reasons: 1) the candidate selection and 2) the disjoint vote. The voter has the possibility to write a name of a favored candidate in the ballot paper of the regional elections but not to choose a candidate in the one of national elections (blocked lists). More importantly, at regional level, voters may choose for a candidate to the presidency and to a candidate for the regional parliament that are not in the same list (disjoint vote). This option might confuse voters since the national ballot paper has a similar scheme (see figures A1 and A2 in the appendix) with a candidate for each list running for the majoritarian seats and many others for the proportional ones. In the national case, of course, is not however possible to select two candidates (for the majoritarian and the proportional seats) running in different lists. In other words, the similarity of the ballot papers in the two concurring elections might increase voters' mistakes because electoral rules are different.

According we hypothesize that *invalid votes within municipalities in Sicily are higher than in cities of other regions during 2022 general elections (H3).*

5. DATA AND METHOD

In order to test our hypotheses, we use official data of elections' results having municipalities as unit of analysis. Data provided by the Ministry of the Interior¹⁰ are collected in different files – both for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate – reporting the main variables for each constituency (number of voters, total votes casted, number of white ballot paper, null votes, etc.) as well as the votes for each list (about 107 thousand cases). Since we are not interested in votes by lists, we dropped redundant information by keeping only the variables

¹⁰ The Eligendo platform is the database of election results in Italy since 1946 from Ministry of Interior. Data might be accessed to the website <https://elezioni.interno.gov.it/>.

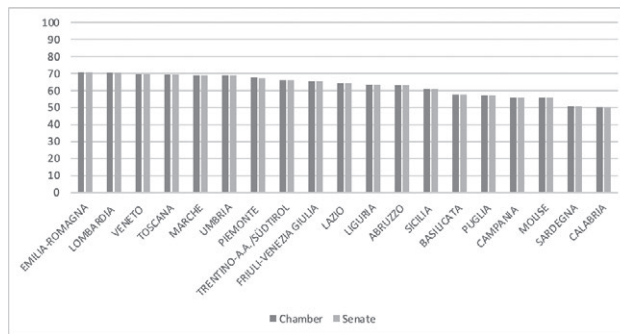


Figure 1. Average percentages of turnout rate in municipalities aggregated by region, Italian General Elections 2022. Source: own elaboration on municipalities from Eligendo.

for each constituency for a total of 7846 cases. They in fact corresponds to Italian towns/municipalities except for some big cities where the territory is divided in few (2 or 3) constituencies¹¹. Our first dependent variable is the turnout rate in percentage terms. We obtained this measure by creating a new variable that multiplies the number of casted votes by 100 and then divide it by the total number of voters (i.e. those who formally have the right to vote) for that town.

Aggregating the results at regional level, the north/south deep divide on turnout clearly appears. Northern and Center regions such as Emilia Romagna, Lombardy, Veneto and Toscana are at the top of the list while southern regions such as Campania and Puglia are at the bottom, with Calabria ranking last at about 50% of participation. Turnout rate in Sicily is in the middle-lower part of the list but clearly up other southern regions and Sardinia.

Our descriptive statistics shows consistent results with differences in regional levels of turnout during past elections¹²; while turnout in regional elections in Sicily was always different from national elections¹³.

Our second main dependent variable is the number of blank votes. This measure has been standardized by the number of vote casted in each municipality (number of blank*100/total votes). Descriptive data at regional

¹¹ Data for the Chamber of Deputies do not include towns in Valle D'Aosta.

¹² For an extensive analysis of trends of turnout in Italian elections (also by regions) see Angelucci et al (2024), Marini and Piccolino (2023) and Cantoni et al. (2021). Data show a continuous declining trend though Italian history (e.g. turnout rate was 85% in 2001 and declined constantly to 63.9%). Sicilian turnout rate in national elections made no exceptions decreasing from about 75% of 2008 to respectively 65% and 63% in 2013 and 2018.

¹³ Turnout in 2022 Sicilian regional elections was of 48.7% of the electorate (46% in 2017). Source <https://www.regione.sicilia.it/la-regione-informa/elezioni-regionali-sicilia-affluenza-al-4862-dalle-14-allo-scrutinio>

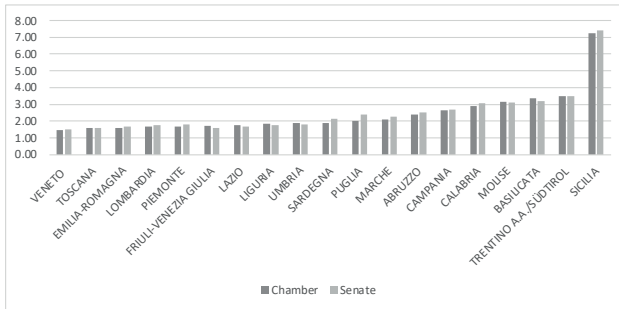


Figure 2. Average percentages of blank vote in municipalities aggregated by region, Italian General Elections 2022. Source: own elaboration on municipalities from Eligendo.

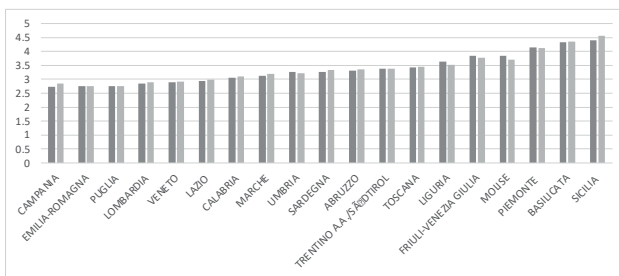


Figure 3. Standardized average percentages of null vote per municipality aggregated by region, Italian General Elections 2022. Source: own elaboration on municipalities from Eligendo.

level show an impressive difference of this percentage between Sicily and the other regions. At the national level, the municipalities register on average about the 2.25% of blank votes while in Sicily this percentage raises to 7% (fig. 2).

An indication of possible threatening effects of concurrent voting concerns also null votes. According to our third hypothesis we focus on null vote in order to assess whether simultaneous voting with different electoral rules may create confusion and relate to a higher number of invalid votes. Descriptive data shows some evidences supporting this hypothesis: the average number of null votes in Sicily is the highest registered (about 226 votes per town). We also standardized the frequency number by creating a measure of the percentage of null votes over the total casted votes (number of null*100/total votes). Once again Sicily results the region with the highest percentage of null votes (about the 4.4%) followed by Basilicata and Piemonte (figure 3).

Descriptive statistics on both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate show very similar (if not identical) results. Our main independent variable is the dummy (Sicily) distinguishing Sicilian municipalities (equals to 1) from others (at 0).

Once we generated the turnout and the standardized measures of blank and null votes, we proceeded to a DD comparison between municipalities in Sicily and two other groups: the municipalities of the national sample and those in Southern regions¹⁴. We believe the last group of cities to be very important to assess the relationships under analysis because it allows for a most-similar case design strategy. Despite differences among regions of the South, the literature proves key similarities in this part of the country ranging from economic indicators to political culture, institutional performance and citizens/parties behavioral and attitudinal aspects. The comparison on this selection of towns allows then to control for many aspects considered important for the DVs under analysis. Some indicators concerning these factors have been also included in the regression models on both the national and the southern regional sub-sample. Specifically, from the databank of the Italian Institute for Statistics (ISTAT) we collected key indicators concerning a) a standardized percentage of low salary per municipality¹⁵, b) the population size, and c) a basic measure of health services (standardized measure of public health structures per municipality¹⁶). The appendix reports their descriptive statistics (tables B1, B2 and B3). Despite the huge number of data collected by the national institute of statistics, data aggregated at town level relates only to a limited number of indicators. Moreover, only some of them are collected (and released) on yearly basis. Our selected variables refer to the year before elections and have been collected/released in 2022. We acknowledge these limits of our control variables albeit we still think they might be useful for our analysis, at least, for two main reasons. First, they grab the main dimensions of the differences between Italian regions especially in terms of economic development/well-being, welfare state services and demography. Within the Italian context these differences are clear especially between southern and center/northern regions. They are also persistent through the history of the country

¹⁴ In this definition we include six regions: Sicily, Basilicata, Campania, Calabria, Molise, and Puglia.

¹⁵ This is the result of the sum of total people declaring less than 15,000 euros multiplied by 100 and divided by the total number of people declaring some work-income per municipality. The institute of statistic (ISTAT) report the number of people declaring some income from working activities by four categories: 0-15000; 15000-26000; 26000-55000; 55000-75000; 75000-120000; more than 120000 (<http://dati.istat.it/index.aspx?queryid=31940>). Data are at 2021. According to the Ministry of the economy, the average Italian income is 22500 euros (<https://pagellapolitica.it/articoli/redditi-contribuenti-italiani-2022>).

¹⁶ We standardized the number of health structures reported by the ISTAT data by dividing their number for the population of each municipality and multiply by 1000. Data at 2021 (<http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS OSPEDSSN>).

Table 1. Regressions analysis: vote in Sicily and turnout rate, national and “south” sample.

	National				South			
	<i>Basic Chamber of Deputies</i>		<i>Controlled Chamber of Deputies</i>		<i>Basic Chamber of Deputies</i>		<i>Controlled Chamber of Deputies</i>	
	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error
Sicily	-.096	.441****	.080	.407****	.224	.430****	.231	.455****
Population Size								
1-4,999								
5,000-14,999			-.045	.214****			.023	.425
15,000-99,999			-.074	.303****			-.024	.557
100,000-199,999			-.019	1.410*			.018	2.761
200,000+			-.014	1.859			.015	3.186
% of low income			-.536	.008****			-.042	.019*
St. health structures			-.000	1.535			-.006	3.45
Cons (Coef.)	64.492	.099****	82.111	.366****	56.093	.183****	56.303	1.129****
N	7846		7720		2179		2170	
R	0.009		0.260		0.050		0.053	

Note: *p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01, ****p<0.001.

with very small variations in the long period and little or no variation from year to year.

6. RESULTS

In order to test the formulated hypotheses, we run different models for each dependent variable, for the two samples (national and southern regions) and concerning the vote for the Chamber and the Senate. Since the number of models is particularly high to represent, and the results for the two chambers almost completely overlap (their electorate is the same), we decided to show the models relating to the vote for the Chamber of Deputies and move the tables concerning the vote for the Senate in the appendix (Tables C1 to C3).

Regression analyses on turnout show some mixed results about the relationship with concurrent elections in Sicily. At the national level there is a negative statistically significant relationships between turnout rate in Sicilian towns and the whole sample of municipalities in the country. When we add controls, however, the sign turns positive indicating a positive increase in turnout for Sicilian towns. This is probably due to the effect of the percentage of low income per municipality that shows the higher coefficient. When we restrict the sample to southern regions (poorer in terms of average income), we observe a significant and positive relationship between the vote in Sicily and the electoral participation: turnout of municipalities in Sicily is significantly

higher than turnout within municipalities in the south (table 1), and the beta coefficient is the biggest value. Our first hypothesis is, accordingly, only partially confirmed: simultaneous elections show higher level of turnout mainly for homogeneous groups of regions. In those contexts, the effect of low income is reduced, as compared to the national sample, and slightly significant¹⁷.

We then moved to test the second hypothesis by observing the relationship between voting in Sicily and blank vote, both in the whole sample and the selected municipalities of the south. In this case a clear relationship immediately emerged: simultaneous vote in Sicily is associated to an increase of the percentage of blank vote (H2 confirmed). Beta coefficients (table 2) of the variables indicating Sicilian municipalities are particularly high in the models as well as the goodness of fit¹⁸.

An increase in turnout, albeit relative, sounds quite inconsistent with an increase in empty choice. It seems indeed that Sicilian citizens vote more than similar regions and leave empty ballot paper at the same time. A possible explanation of this phenomenon resides in the particular effect of concurrent lower-saliency elec-

¹⁷ VIF values are below 1.16 (1.17 for south sub-sample) suggesting no multicollinearity. In the Senate, the percentage of low income (0-15000 euros) show still a high beta coefficient, confirming a strong influence of low income on turnout. For an extensive analysis on the relationship between income and turnout in the Italian 2022 elections see Angelucci et al. (2024).

¹⁸ VIF values are below 1.16 (1.17 for south sub-sample) suggesting no multicollinearity.

Table 2. Regressions analysis: vote in Sicily and blank vote, national and “south” sample.

	National				South			
	<i>Basic Chamber of Deputies</i>		<i>Controlled Chamber of Deputies</i>		<i>Basic Chamber of Deputies</i>		<i>Controlled Chamber of Deputies</i>	
	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error
Sicily	.641	.071****	.598	.074****	.705	.099****	.708	.102****
Population Size								
1-4,999								
5,000-14,999			.005	.039			-.030	.097*
15,000-99,999			.002	.055			-.043	.127***
100,000-199,999			.010	.255			-.005	.627
200,000+			.024	.337***			.042	.724****
% of low income			.137	.001****			-.015	.004
St. health structures			-.007	.278			-.031	.786***
Cons (Coef.)	1.998	.016****	1.080	.066****	2.660	.042****	2.964	.257****
N	7,837		7,711		2,173		2,164	
R	0.411		0.431		0.497		0.502	

Note: *p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01, ****p<0.001.

tions observed in the past in southern Italy. In these regions, local elections positively increase participation also of (simultaneous) national one (Cantoni et al., 2021). As observed, this stimulating effect is also linked to the candidates' activity during the regional electoral campaign, aiming to acquire personal preferences, since the choice of a preferred candidate is allowed by the regional law. In other words, since voters may write down a name in regional elections (and not in national one), the pression of candidates at local level could be motivating to vote (see Cantoni and Pons, 2021); but while candidates might convince voters to choose them at regional level, the choice at national level could result empty. Proving this upside-down change in saliency from national to regional prevalence for some voters is behind the possibilities (and the aims) of this research. Moreover, grabbing the most important reasons bringing citizens to vote, and their effect on no-choice, might be very difficult because blank votes have a quite large set of motivations at the individual level. However, some data seem to support the candidate pression thesis. If we look at the average percentages of blank vote by cities, for instance, it emerges that cities over 200 thousand residents in Sicily have an impressive average percentage of blank vote (11%); very much higher than middle and small cities in the island (about 6%). This is not casual because the electoral campaign at regional level is massively focused on these centers: they are the towns of the main candidates to the presidency, and the largest basin of votes where competition brings to vic-

tory. Differences in the electoral offer between regional and national elections might also explain blank votes: as voters do not find their favorite list at national level, they might leave the ballot paper empty. In the case under analysis, however, the lists presented at national and regional level strongly overlap. The offer of national lists is also wider than the regional one, potentially giving the possibility to find the same favored list at regional and national level. However, the capacity of a list to attract voters might change across different contexts. It is then difficult to clearly distinguish between the effects of personalization of vote at regional level from that of lists attractiveness at regional and national levels on blank votes.

Finally, we run the same models also on the standardized percentage of null votes (table 3). Our hypothesis is that different electoral rules in Sicily brought a higher percentage of voters to make mistakes. Our results confirm this hypothesis (H3) both using the national and the southern sample of municipalities (for results about the senate see table C3 in the appendix): voting in Sicilian concurrent elections relates to higher percentages of null votes either if one look at the national territory or the southern part of the country¹⁹. The last result appears quite relevant, because it shows that Sicilian vote produced more mistakes even if compared to similar regional scenarios in terms of development, culture, social capital, etc.

¹⁹ Also in this case VIF values are below 1.17 (south sub-sample).

Table 3. Regressions analysis: vote in Sicily and null vote, national and “south” sample.

	National				South			
	<i>Basic Chamber of Deputies</i>		<i>Controlled Chamber of Deputies</i>		<i>Basic Chamber of Deputies</i>		<i>Controlled Chamber of Deputies</i>	
	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error
Sicily	.167	.077****	.176	.082****	.327	.080****	.344	.082****
Population Size								
1-4,999								
5000-14,999			-.049	.043****			-.013	.078
15,000-99,999			-.050	.060****			-.033	.102
100,000-199,999			-.015	.387			-.026	.507
200,000+			-.000	.371			.007	.585
% of low income			-.014	.002			-.062	.004***
St. health structures			-.007	.306			.011	.635
Cons (Coef.)	3.250	.017****	3.389	.073****	3.115	.034****	3.692	.207****
N	7,837		7,711		2,173		2,164	
R	0.028		0.033		0.111		0.113	

Note: *p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01, ****p<0.001.

As we observed for blank votes, the offer is strongly overlapping in national and regional Sicilian elections, but distinguishing precisely the main source of null-voting is beyond the possibility of our data.

Control variables show some interesting results in addition to the ones already discussed above.

Population size is mostly not significant, towns below 5000 residents tend to have a higher turnout rate and more null votes that middle-sized towns (not in the South sub sample). Big cities tend to show more blank votes. A high percentage of low-level income in a municipality is significantly related to lower turnout and higher blank vote in the national sample. This result confirms some negative influence of harsh income conditions on vote, albeit in the model on the south sub-sample, municipalities with high percentage of low income have lower null votes (but not in the Senate – table 3 and table C3 in the appendix).

7. CONCLUSIONS

Most studies emphasize that the number of voters who do not go to the polls constitutes an alarm for the future of the democratic systems. Indeed, there is no doubt that the quality of democratic representation is closely linked to the integrity of the electoral body. The idea that abstentionism is a consequence of the ‘matu-

rity’ of Western democracies²⁰ seems to have been discarded.

Consistently with this warning, democratic systems have planned and experienced practical instruments to foster participation and involve citizens on voting. Among them, concurrent/simultaneous elections have acquired a large fortune for the intuitive benefits they bring. Concentrating different electoral competitions in one day, they reduce costs and resources of elections for both parties and institutions involved. They are also supposed to halve the voters’ fatigue and increase their effort to go to the polls vis a vis the costs of voting. Many studies in the field showed a positive effect of concurrent elections on turnout, albeit doubts emerge in some contexts about both the efficacy and the “quality” of the electoral output. When electoral rules and contexts of simultaneous elections strongly differ, there might be indeed the risk to increase empty choice or invalid votes. In order to check for such possible adverse effects, we focused on the last Italian general elections of 2022, where also the regional elections of Sicily were run simultaneously. We consider this a quasi-natural experiment enabling a test on turnout, valid/null, and blank vote.

The Italian elections of 25th of September 2022 present the lowest level of turnout at the national level of

²⁰ According to Lipset, it is by no means self-evident that “a high level of participation is always a good thing for the democracy” (1963, 30). According to this political scientist, high participation can be the result of high ideological conflict that still radicalizes at the ballot box, producing instability.

the entire post-war period (63.8 percent). Clearly, such a marked drop in turnout (-9 percentage points compared to the previous elections in 2018; Vassallo and Verzichelli, 2023), is part of that trend of “global decline in voter turnout” that involves all advanced democracies for several decades now (Kostelka and Blais 2023). The analysis of the data also confirms a territorial anchoring of the decline in participation with the regions of the South, especially in Calabria and Sardinia, which recorded a turnout of just over 50% of the votes compared to the North – Emilia Romagna (about 71%), Lombardy, Veneto and Tuscany (below 70%).

Our tests show that simultaneous regional/national elections in Sicily do not relate to a significant increase in turnout versus the other regions. However, when compared with similar regional scenarios of the south, Sicilian turnout is significantly higher. Concurrent elections in this case seem then to have contributed to block abstentionism and even increased electoral participation, but only vis a vis the regions of the south. At the same time, Sicilian voters show significant higher percentages of blank and null votes compared both to the national and southern sample. The reasons behind blank and null votes (voluntary or not) cannot be directly inferred from real votes data. Moreover, we cannot assess whether null vote is a voluntary choice. Despite this consideration, our findings bring a dark shadow on simultaneous voting since, in the observed context, it does not implement the quality of casted vote but it seems to increase no choice (blank vote) and even mistakes (null votes).

We believe our results contribute to the existing knowledge on the strategies to increase electoral participation but also to the mechanisms behind citizens' voting. On this last aspect, we contend that those mechanisms, albeit increasing individual utilitarian gains, do not implement citizens' sense of efficacy through electoral participation. Voters, albeit participate more, are still often disoriented and confused in the polls, while they are taking decisions for multiple level of representation. This should be a warning for the debate on the citizens' empowerment and the “quality” of vote beyond formal rules.

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