

Narrativas políticas y de género: una inmersión en la Italia contemporánea a través de la lente social de las líderes femeninas

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Resumen. Este artículo presenta un análisis comparativo entre dos destacadas figuras de la política italiana contemporánea, Giorgia Meloni y Elly Schlein, con un enfoque particular en las dinámicas de género que impregnan su contexto político y que influyen en su trayectoria pública. A través de una exploración en profundidad de sus narrativas políticas, el análisis se centra en el uso del género como un elemento central en las estrategias de ambos líderes. La fase inicial del análisis implicó una evaluación cuantitativa realizada a través del análisis de datos sociales para comprender la extensión de la presencia en línea y la influencia de las dos figuras políticas examinadas. Solo posteriormente se destacan y analizan los discursos y las comunicaciones públicas relacionadas con las mujeres, la familia y cuestiones de género. Esta investigación tiene como objetivo proporcionar una perspectiva única sobre cómo las posiciones políticas y de género influyen en la política y contribuyen a una comprensión de las dinámicas políticas contemporáneas en Italia.

Palabras clave: Narrativas Políticas; Género y Política; Análisis Comparativo; Liderazgo Femenino; Presencia en Línea.

[en] Political and gender narratives: An immersion in contemporary Italy through the social lens on women leaders

Abstract. This article presents a comparative analysis between two prominent figures in contemporary Italian politics, Giorgia Meloni and Elly Schlein, with a particular focus on the gender dynamics that permeate their political context and influence their public trajectory. Through an in-depth exploration of their political narratives, the analysis centers on the use of gender as a central element in both leaders' strategies. The initial phase of the analysis involved a quantitative assessment conducted through social data analysis to understand the extent of online presence and influence of the two political figures under examination. Only subsequently are the discourses and public communications related to women, family, and gender issues highlighted and analyzed. This research aims to provide a unique perspective on how political and gender positions influence politics and contribute to an understanding of contemporary political dynamics in Italy.

Keywords: Political Narratives; Gender and Politics; Comparative Analysis; Female Leadership; Online Presence.

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1. Introduction

In the context of contemporary political dynamics, understanding the communication strategies adopted by political leaders is of growing importance (Charteris-Black, 2009; Marletti, 2009; De Blasio, *et al.* 2012; Campus, 2020; Battista, 2023a). In particular, the analysis of political narratives in the light of gender issues plays a central role in deepening the understanding of complex political and social dynamics (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2007; Edwards, 2009; Holman, 2016; Solomon, 2023). This study aims to explore these aspects through a comparative analysis related to the communication employed by two prominent figures in Italian politics, in the context of

a country where gender issues are emerging as key political concerns. Through an in-depth exploration of political narratives and public communications, the primary objective of this research is to investigate how gender is used as a central element in the political communication strategies of Giorgia Meloni and Elly Schlein.

The proposed analysis offers a unique opportunity to explore the complex intersections of gender, politics, and communication in Italy, thus contributing to an understanding of contemporary political dynamics and the challenges that gender politics faces in Italian society. All of this is set within a backdrop of fragmentation in the public sphere and the compartmentalization of political agendas, which are distinctive

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features of post-democracy (Sorice, 2014). This research takes into consideration the historical context in which major political parties are led by women and how this circumstance may contribute to the emergence of polarization, which can result from real factors or be fueled by sensationalistic strategies aimed at generating media interest in relation to the positions taken by the two prominent figures. However, some key dimensions that have shaped the study's context should be considered. Firstly, the personalization of political competition is highlighted (Calise; 2011; Bordignon, 2013), a phenomenon that reflects how contemporary political competition is increasingly centered on the individual figure of leaders, rather than party platforms (Battista, 2023b). Secondly, the importance of the digitalization of leadership and political communication is emphasized (Giansante, 2014; Calise & Musella, 2019). This digital transformation has made the use of online platforms and social media crucial as tools to reach the public and influence public opinion (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.* 2014; Stier *et al.* 2018).

Furthermore, the popularization of political communication is considered prominent, a trend that refers to the inclination of political leaders to use a more accessible and direct language and communication style to engage and connect with the public (Pels, 2003; Tyron, 2008; Mazzoleni & Sfarini, 2009; Dei, 2011; Ciaglia *et al.* 2014; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2019; Manfredi Sánchez *et al.* 2021). Additionally, the strategy of message and political communication is paramount, as this element encompasses the analysis of political speeches, rhetoric, and communication tactics employed by political leaders to convey their message (Lauerbach & Fetzer, 2007; Cacciotto, 2011; Wilson, 2015). This plurality of facets provides a comprehensive analysis of the main variables involved in the analysis of contemporary political communication, thus contributing to delineating a complex and in-depth picture of the dynamics taking shape within the examined political context. This framework is essential for a complete and multifaceted understanding of the current reality, promoting a critical and in-depth perspective within the Italian political landscape regarding the construction of female leadership, which is particularly influenced by the ways in which the media represent women based on entrenched stereotypes (Campus, 2013).

2. Context and scenarios

In a political context characterized by an almost hegemonic male presence, there is an urgent need to

explore the distinctive features of women in politics. Despite significant progress in opening the political world to women in recent decades, data on women's participation and their presence in prominent positions within political institutions still indicate a significant gap compared to their male counterparts. According to the Gender Equality Index developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), the political sector has made significant progress in closing the gender gap over the past decade. However, it continues to be marked by one of the most pronounced gender differences. EIGE highlights that the majority of political parties in the European Union (EU) are currently led by men, underscoring the persistence of gender inequalities in positions of power and decision-making processes.

The analysis conducted reveals that in 2022, only 16% of party secretaries and 36% of vice-presidents of major political parties in the EU are women. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that when comparing this data over time, a significant increase is observed. In 1979, during the first direct elections to the European Parliament, the percentage of women in the Chamber was only 16.6%, but it increased to 41% in the 2019 elections. Despite this progress, significant disparities persist among EU member states. Some countries, such as Finland and Sweden, have achieved gender parity of 50%, while others, like Romania (18.2%), Slovakia (21.4%), and Cyprus, with a 0% representation of women MEPs, continue to experience significant gender imbalances within European institutions. Furthermore, the prevalence of men in political leadership positions is a global phenomenon (Dahlerup & Leyenaar, 2013). Shifting our focus to the Italian case, the presence of women in the Italian parliament has undergone significant changes over the years, reflecting a noteworthy trend in Italian politics.

At the beginning of the new millennium, in 2004, female representation within the Italian Parliament was extremely limited, with only 9.9% of parliament members being women. This percentage was one of the lowest in Europe, surpassing only a few other nations, including Malta, Cyprus, and Hungary. However, over the next fifteen years, Italy witnessed a significant increase in female representation in parliament, reaching 35.8% in 2019, thanks in part to a series of targeted laws².

This significant increase of 25.9 percentage points represents the widest growth in Europe during this period. Countries like France and Portugal have also recorded increases exceeding 20%, reflecting a broader trend towards greater inclusion of women in European politics. This substantial change in female

² In Italy, the political representation system includes the adoption of both legislative and voluntary quotas aimed at promoting greater gender equity in the composition of electoral lists. Similar to the Spanish model, Italian electoral law establishes that the maximum percentage of candidates of the same gender on electoral lists, both for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, cannot exceed 60%. If this provision is not respected, the electoral lists in question are excluded from the electoral competition, as provided for in Article 1, paragraph 10 of the legislative act. It should be noted that among the political parties represented in Parliament, the Partito Democratico is the only one that has introduced the practice of voluntary quotas within its procedures. In particular, this party has stipulated that at least 50% of the candidates on its electoral lists must be female.

representation within the Italian Parliament undoubtedly constitutes a significant step towards greater gender equity in the country’s political sphere. The positive evolution of this percentage reflects the commitment to addressing gender inequalities and promoting a more diversified and inclusive political rep-

resentation. It should be noted that, despite the significant progress, as evident in the graph (Fig. 1), there are still challenges to overcome to ensure full gender parity in Italian politics. However, this development represents a sign of positive change and an openness to greater gender equity in the Italian political arena.

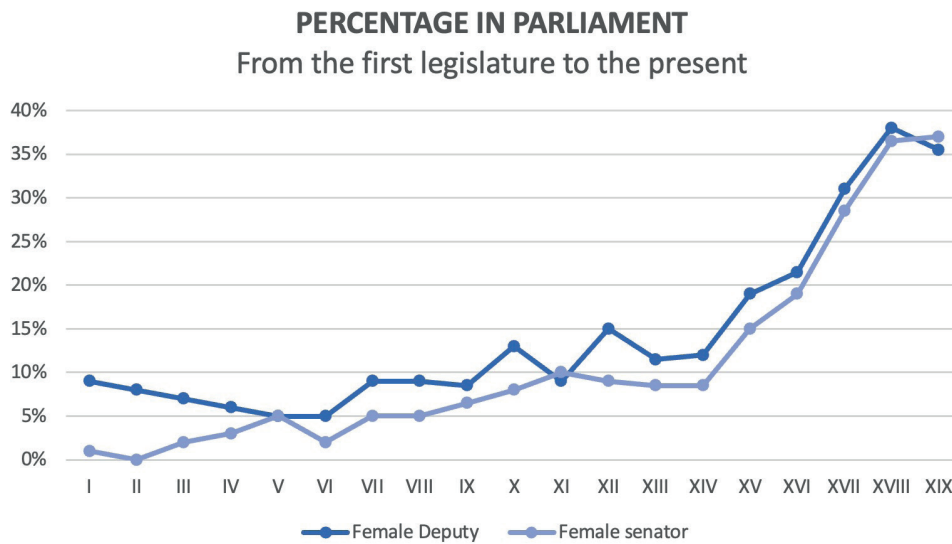


Figure 1: Data reworking from Eurostat.

Moreover, the presence of women in leadership roles in politics remains a global phenomenon that continues to face significant challenges and structural limitations. Undoubtedly, there have been significant advancements in achieving gender equality in the field of political participation. However, it’s essential to note that alongside these progressions, there are persistent and substantial barriers that hinder the actual realization of such equality. While there have indeed been increases in women’s political participation and their representation in decision-making institutions, cultural, social, and structural barriers continue to negatively influence progress toward full gender equality (Ford, 2018). Women in politics, or female representation in positions of power and political authority, is a reality that is inadequately established in many parts of the world. These gender inequalities can be attributed to various factors, including cultural barriers, deeply rooted gender stereotypes, discriminatory social norms, and political systems that do not promote gender equality (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014).

Therefore, despite significant strides in promoting gender equality and women’s political participation, women in politics remain a reality that requires further efforts and actions to be fully integrated in many areas of the world (Sacchett, 2008). The relationship between gender and politics is, therefore, a highly relevant theme in today’s societies. However, despite numerous pieces of evidence regarding gender inequalities and the underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions, this topic continues to face challenges in its full integration into the demo-

cratic discourse (Duverger, 1955; Connell, 2002). It’s important to note that the characteristics of women in politics can vary based on the cultural context, the specific personalities of the leaders, and the political goals they pursue. This is why the Italian case represents an intriguing and complex research field that deserves an in-depth analysis to fully understand its impact on the current landscape. The top representation of Giorgia Meloni and Elly Schlein assumes a significant role on the global stage concerning the subject under consideration.

2.1. Who is Giorgia Meloni? History and political vision

Giorgia Meloni represents a unique political figure in Italian history, being the first woman to be tasked with forming a government and subsequently becoming the Prime Minister of the Italian Republic. Her political journey began at a young age, in 1992, when at only 15 years old, she joined the Youth Front, the youth organization of the Movimento Sociale Italiano, a party with roots in neo-fascism. Her parliamentary career began in 2006 at the age of 29, making her the youngest parliamentarian of that legislative session. She quickly assumed the role of Vice President of the Chamber of Deputies, serving alongside the President, Gianfranco Fini, the leader of her party, Alleanza Nazionale. In 2009, she held the position of Minister for Youth Policies, later renamed the Ministry of Youth, in Berlusconi’s government. After 2010, with the dissolution of National Alliance, Meloni remained in Silvio Berlusconi’s People of Free-

dom party. However, in 2012, she decided to leave the People of Freedom when Berlusconi chose not to hold primary elections for selecting the party's leader ahead of the 2013 general elections. Along with Ignazio La Russa and Guido Crosetto, she founded Fratelli d'Italia. This new party received 1.9% of the votes in the 2013 elections, gradually growing to 4.3% in 2018. In 2016, she ran for the position of Mayor of Rome, receiving 20.6% of the votes, while her party's list garnered 12.2%. Since entering Parliament, Fratelli d'Italia remained in opposition in various center-left and center-right governments.

The current government marks the first time Giorgia Meloni's party will be part of the governing majority. This represents a significant milestone in her political career and in the evolution of the Italian political landscape. An analysis of Giorgia Meloni's political history reveals an initial connection to the context of the Italian far-right. This affiliation became evident during periods when her party was in opposition, characterized using strongly polarizing rhetoric. In an international context, the Financial Times identified her as a „rising star“ in Italian far-right politics, recognizing her growing influence on the country's political landscape. The political positions of Meloni and her party concerning fascism and neo-fascism have been the subject of numerous controversies and debates, especially during her tenure as the government leader. Some members of her own party have contributed to raising these issues, fueling public debate about the political orientation of Fratelli d'Italia. Regarding immigration, Meloni has advocated for restrictive policies, including proposing the establishment of a naval blockade in the Mediterranean to prevent arrivals. She emphasized her government as an entity no longer „under the influence of Europe“ in immigration-related matters. Her opposition to „*ius soli*“ and the intention to remove special protection for migrants arriving in Italy have also been significant issues.

Another central aspect of her political agenda pertains to birth rates, with Meloni highlighting the importance of encouraging demographic growth. However, she has shown a hostile stance toward LGBTQ+ families, adoption by same-sex couples, and the practice of surrogacy. On the environmental front, she has expressed scepticism toward the so-called „climate fundamentalism,“ prioritizing other issues over climate concerns. Moreover, her government has renewed public funding for fossil fuels until 2028. Economically, Meloni has proposed a tax reform aimed at reducing personal income tax (IRPEF), primarily benefiting wealthier taxpayers, and easing controls on large corporations. Internationally, she is the President of the European Conservatives and Reformists group, a political group that includes conservative parties such as Law and Justice in Poland and far-right parties like Vox in Spain. In general, her ideology amalgamates elements of nationalism with perspectives considered critical or extreme within

the feminist movement and can be situated within the phenomenon known as femonationalism. This conception aims to outline an interpretation of feminism characterized by nationalist traits, often accompanied by criticisms that accuse it of perpetuating exclusions or discriminations against specific groups of women based on national or ethnic connotations (Colella, 2021). It should be noted that this label is used in a critical and controversial manner, as it represents an attempt to define an ideology that, according to some interpreters, integrates nationalism with feminist views that may be problematic in terms of inclusivity and pluralism (Popič & Gorjanc, 2023).

This phenomenon raises relevant issues regarding intersections between gender identity, nationality, and ethnicity, necessitating an in-depth analysis of ideological dynamics and related social consequences (Kaskinen & Ranta, 2023). The Italian gender regime under the leadership of Giorgia Meloni maintains its intrinsic characteristic of adherence to the public-conservative paradigm, distinctly different, for instance, from the Spanish gender regime that demonstrates a clear progressive tendency in the public sphere (Alonso *et al.*, 2023). This distinction also underscores the diversity of gender dynamics in national contexts, providing insights for further exploration into the configuration and evolution of gender policies in Southern Europe.

2.2. Who is Elly Schlein? History and political vision.

Elena Ethel Schlein, known as „Elly,“ has a political biography that begins with her education in Law, where she graduated with top honors in Bologna, a city that later granted her the political success she enjoys today. Despite being born in a small Swiss municipality in the Lugano district, she also holds American citizenship. Her father, Melvin Schlein, is a professor of Political Science at Franklin University in Lugano. Her first significant political experience developed beyond the ocean in 2008, in Chicago, where she volunteered for Barack Obama's victorious campaign. However, it is with her anti-Renzi stance that Schlein began her political ascent. She participated in protests after the failure of Romano Prodi's candidacy for the Italian presidency, caused by 101 parliamentarians who went against their own party, and contributed to the #OccupyPD campaign, promoted by new dissidents against the formation of a grand coalition government in 2013 under the leadership of Enrico Letta. In the same year, for the primaries that crowned Matteo Renzi, she supported the candidacy of Pippo Civati and was elected to the national board of the PD. The following year, in 2014, she ran in the European elections and secured a seat in Strasbourg with over 53,000 preferences. As a Member of the European Parliament, she continued to stand out for her commitment to migrants and the reform of the Dublin Treaty. However, after a year,

she left the PD due to disagreements with Secretary Renzi.

The year 2020 marked a turning point in her political career with her election to the Regional Council of Emilia-Romagna, supported by Article 1, Yes, and other entities. On this occasion, Schlein received an unprecedented number of preferences, over 22,000, surpassing all the prominent names of her former party. As the deputy to her future challenger for the party leadership, Stefano Bonaccini, she became the Welfare Commissioner and advanced the causes that made her well-known, including the fight against Salvini's decrees, the defense of LGBT rights (as an openly bisexual person), and environmental protection. In the early elections of September 2022, despite not being a party member, she ran with the Partito Democratico and was elected to the Chamber of Deputies. The change in leadership in the race for the Secretary of the PD was an unexpected event compared to previous predictions and can be considered the most significant event in Italian politics in the first quarter of 2023.

The political figure in question, who until a few days before the presentation of her candidacy was not a member of the party, surprisingly defeated the traditional wing of the PD, which strongly supported Stefano Bonaccini as a representative of continuity in line with the work of previous secretaries. Although Bonaccini had won decisively in the first round, open exclusively to PD members, with 54% of the votes in his favor against Schlein's 36%, the result was completely reversed in the second round, open to all adult Italian voters, with 54% of the votes in favor of Schlein and 46% for Bonaccini. This result was primarily determined by the contribution of those who were not party members. Her political approach emphasizes the fundamental non-hierarchization of social and civil rights and continues to underline the essential incompatibility between a party's political positions and assuming public and administrative roles. Her central purpose lies in reforming the PD, aiming to define a clear party identity to attract new supporters and build a broader and more inclusive consensus base. This intent is reflected in her strategic vision, focused on promoting social equity, protecting civil rights, safeguarding the environment, tax reform, and other initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life for Italian citizens. This approach certainly reflects an open and progressive political perspective in stark contrast to that of Giorgia Meloni, making the comparison from this point of view the best way to outline a clear state of affairs overall.

3. Methodology

The research methodology employed is structured into two distinct levels of observation and, in its initial phase, is based on the analysis of quantitative data extracted from social media channels. This anal-

ysis focuses on several key parameters, including the number of followers, the dissemination of posts, and user interaction with the promoted content. Additionally, it encompasses the analysis of overall interactions within the social media environment.

Therefore, it can be affirmed that the use of tools such as Live Insights Blogmeter and Fanpage Karma primarily fits within a methodological framework aimed at the collection and analysis of quantitative data. The choice to periodize the analysis within a timeframe spanning from September 26, 2022, to September 25, 2023, aims to provide a diachronic perspective to the study, offering a chronologically organized representation of the current situation. Although the initial analysis primarily focuses on the evaluation of quantitative data, it is important to note that it has been enriched and complemented using qualitative methodologies. Text analysis and the application of sentiment analysis techniques are crucial tools for gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning and perception associated with the content disseminated by the two leaders through social media channels (Haselmayer & Jenny, 2017).

These qualitative methodologies have allowed for the exploration of semantic nuances present in the published messages and the identification of thematic content. In this way, the analysis overview is completed, enabling not only the quantification of interaction but also its qualification on different topics. The adopted mixed methodology serves as a powerful tool for examining the influence generated by the activities conducted on social media by the two profiles under consideration. At the same time, it allows for continuous and accurate monitoring of the evolution of users' emotional reactions to these profiles, closely examining the presence and variation of specific study subjects. In other words, this combination of methods not only facilitates the assessment of the effectiveness of the initiatives undertaken by the two profiles but also enables the observation of how these opinions and perceptions develop over time. This provides a comprehensive and sophisticated framework to understand both the impact of social media activities and the dynamics related to the highlighted topics of interest.

4. Analysis and results

During the analysis period, there was a significant reshaping of the political landscape, characterized by the prominent presence of two female leaders who, at times, dominated the political scene, relegating other political actors to much less visibility. Undoubtedly, this year's developments have emphasized the prominent role assumed by Giorgia Meloni within the digital political context. Through an extraordinary performance, she successfully navigated all challenges, both within her center-right coalition and in the broader context, emerging as a prominent figure

in this environment where the connection between the offline and digital dimensions is well established (Boccia Artieri, 2012).

Throughout this, it became evident not only that Meloni currently boasts one of the largest followings among political leaders on digital platforms, but also that the destinies, both digital and physical, of her party are closely intertwined with her political trajectory. This connection is so strong that it justifies the use of the symbolic metaphor “Fratelli di Giorgia” (Battista, 2023c; Vassallo & Vignati, 2023) to describe this intrinsic dynamic. This situation unequivocally represents a clear indication of the evolution in which political identification with the party has gradually been replaced by an increasingly marked identification with the leader (Ceccobelli, 2017), with the personalization of the leadership role assuming undeniable structural significance.

On the digital front, in the twelve months following the September 25th vote, the leader’s name keyword received 639,000 mentions, generating a total volume of 154 million interactions. However, it should be noted that the year under review was also characterized by the considerable visibility of Elly Schlein, who cleverly leveraged the momentum stemming from her election as the national secretary of the PD. This sparked significant interest and attention both online and on social platforms. There was a substantial increase in new followers, with signifi-

cant increases, for example, of 274% on Instagram and 80% on other platforms like X. Furthermore, it’s worth highlighting that the engagement generated by online conversations related to a specific keyword associated with Elly Schlein ranked second only after the significantly more extraordinary one related to Giorgia Meloni. The current Prime Minister, indeed, delivered exceptional performances that significantly strengthened her reputation, creating a substantial gap compared to the past.

Three additional quantitative data points are worth mentioning, in addition to those discussed earlier: the total increase in new followers on the four major social platforms was 3.2 million; the first ten video contents posted on TikTok received over 38 million views in total; the top ten Instagram posts collected more than 2.5 million likes in total. As highlighted, one year after the electoral victory, Italian online users continue to exhibit predominantly positive support for the leader under consideration, as indicated by a sentiment rate of 39%, the highest among all the leaders. Furthermore, there is a noticeable and consistent increase in new followers on her social channels (Fig. 2), with particular emphasis on Instagram with an 89% increase and TikTok with a remarkable 430% increase. It should be noted that the increase on TikTok represents the most significant among all the social platforms of the various leaders considered.

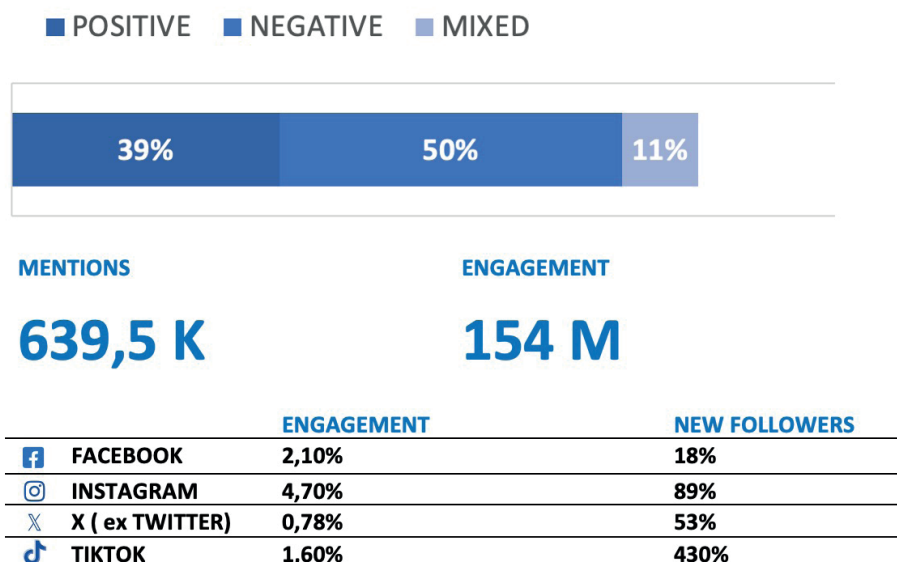


Figure 2: Data processing conducted with Live Insights Blogmeter/Fanpage Karma.

Over the past twelve months, Elly Schlein has demonstrated an exceptional ability to maximize the carryover effect, achieving remarkable results that few before her had accomplished. In the two months following her victory in the PD primaries, social and digital analyses revealed extraordinary growth (Fig.3). Her three social channels recorded

significant increases in new followers, and between February and March, mentions and engagement reached unprecedented peak levels. However, the performance stabilized with the arrival of summer, and during the last four months, the effectiveness in attracting and engaging the audience has significantly decreased.

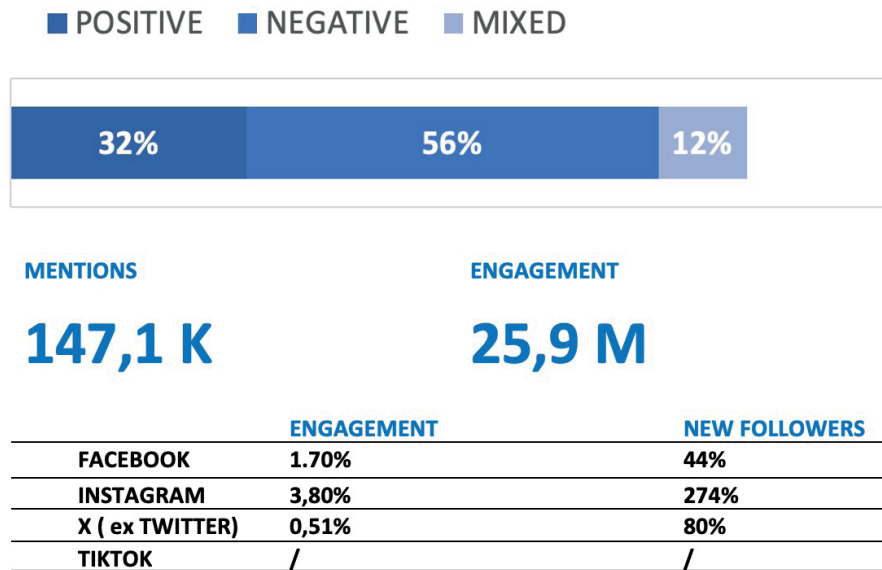


Figure 3: Data processing conducted with Live Insights Blogmeter/Fanpage Karma.

Reaching this point, our analysis shifts towards examining the theme we had previously defined as the subject of study within the communication dynamics of the two leaders under consideration. Commencing our analysis with Prime Minister Meloni, we cannot help but start with a pivotal concept in her discourse, namely, the fundamental importance attributed to the family. In her communicative narrative, everything happens in the name of tradition and in opposition to the demands of social reform that threaten the family as the fundamental unit of the nation.

This political agenda seems to be closely linked to the battle conducted in the name of identity. In this case, there is no better explanation than Giorgia Meloni’s famous phrase, which also helps to better highlight her character and attribute part of her success and ideology to the resonance created by this statement: “I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am Italian, I am a mother, I am Christian, you will not take that away from me”. Gender has often represented a primary dimension of identity threatened by “globalist” forces and cosmopolitan elites that corrupt even the traditional cultures of nations. Fundamentally, it is about protecting the conservative way of life from the threat of open societies, as expressed several times in various statements. Undeniably, the moment of greatest media resonance was her speech during the third edition of the States-General of Birthrate, where she emphasized how, in today’s era, addressing issues related to birthrate, motherhood, and family has become increasingly complex, at times even akin to an act of rupture from the norm. Promoting birthrate and family has been placed at the top of her political commitment’s priorities, a choice she has substantially adopted, with the goal of giving Italy a future perspective according to this conception. Naturally, this priority permeates all government policies, and the choice of a ministry dedicated to this matter is

not the choice of sectoral policies but signifies having a 360-degree family perspective on all government policies. Clearly, the establishment of a ministry specifically dedicated to birthrate is closely connected to the issues of family and equal opportunities.

This connection is not purely nominal but represents a substantive approach. The emphasis on names should not overshadow a highly symbolic choice made by the leader of Fratelli D’Italia through the adoption of the title “Il Presidente” (The President) for her public role, using a grammatical form in the masculine gender despite positioning herself as a model in the role of the mother of the nation (Schwartzberg, 1977). Giorgia Meloni’s choice of a masculine gender title could be interpreted considering a nearly certain intention to reinforce the traditional gender role associated with political leadership. This gesture might be seen as an attempt to conform to established social expectations regarding gender roles in politics, reflecting the persistence of a traditional and patriarchal view of leadership (Vezzosi, 2011). Referring to the considerations expressed by Angelica Mucchi-Faina (2005), it becomes evident that the use of generic masculine language can result in the invisibility of women since it is used to represent both sexes. However, the adoption of dissymmetrical feminine grammatical forms, even though it makes the female gender explicit, creates lexical asymmetry, limiting such explicitness to women. Mucchi-Faina argues that, to promote non-sexist language use, it is necessary to consider grammatical forms that are inclusive and encompass both genders. This can be achieved through the adoption of linguistic forms that give visibility to women, both using existing feminine forms and through the creation of new forms capable of explicitly and overtly indicating gender membership in a neutral manner.

In this context, Giorgia Meloni's self-attribution of the title "Il Presidente" can be seen as a tangible example of how a political figure seeks to make explicit her leadership role, emphasizing the gender aspect in a context previously dominated by the masculine. This act represents an attempt to bring visibility to the female gender within a political context that has often been traditionally oriented toward the male, in parallel with Mucchi-Faina's argument in favor of inclusive and neutral grammatical forms. Meloni's choice to adopt a grammatically masculine title could be interpreted to make her leadership position visible while simultaneously raising important questions about language use and the explicit representation of gender in political discourse. Conversely, Elly Schlein's openness about her same-sex relationship represents an act of challenging traditional social norms. Through this public expression of her sexual identity, Schlein positions herself as a figure who openly challenges social norms and conventions, contributing to a growing discussion about diversity and inclusion in a political context often characterized by rigidly traditional norms.

These two aspects offer a fundamental point of reflection on gender and sexuality dynamics in Italian politics, paving the way for a broader discussion on the need to recognize and embrace diversity within political institutions. More broadly, it is worth noting that all of this takes place in a complex framework characterized by the persistence of forces and factors that constitute a significant obstacle to women's active participation in society. The hindrance of women from the public arena is reflected in a series of complex dynamics, often rooted in gender biases, social expectations, and systemic disparities (De Simone *et al.* 2018; Pacilli *et al.* 2012). It is realized that this discussion not only impacts the evolution of Italian politics but also constitutes a significant contribution to the current global debate on representation and inclusion in the political sphere. We are faced with a political power that polarizes on two completely opposite ends, both female-oriented, but only to some extent continuously speaks a language that can be ascribed to feminist struggles.

Over time, Meloni has made her positions on gender and family issues even clearer, asserting that, in her view, merely proclaiming oneself a woman is not enough, as gender identity is intrinsic to the body, an incontrovertible and unchangeable biological factor. She argues that gender ideology would erase the natural differences between male and female, with women being the primary victims of this erasure. In the context of Giorgia Meloni's statement on gender ideology, her words spoken on International Women's Day have sparked discussions. On this specific occasion, we witnessed a strong stance on gender identity and the right to change one's sex, opposition to surrogacy, and support for the traditional family. "Children have the right to have the best: a mother and a father," she asserted in response to a question about the impor-

tance of having parents of the opposite sex. Concerning abortion, when addressing a woman who decides to terminate her pregnancy, the Prime Minister, on the same occasion, encouraged her to give herself a chance, reminding her that she is not alone, and that the state will provide the necessary tools to ensure she doesn't deny herself the joy of raising her child and bringing them into the world under the best possible conditions. Additionally, she cited a supposed "gender ideology" and argued, "Today, there is a claim for the unilateral right to declare oneself a woman or a man, regardless of any surgical, pharmacological, or administrative process. Male and female are rooted in the body, and this is an incontrovertible fact. Academic literature addressing the relationship between gender and the far right (Akkerman, 2015; Erzeel & Rashkova, 2017) highlights the fundamental importance of anti-genderism within the ideological framework of the right. This anti-genderism is considered essential for maintaining social order and countering elites and their progressive project, which is believed to have exceeded certain limits.

This progressive project has been accused of pushing the boundaries by challenging traditional gender roles and family dynamics and promoting an "Us versus Them" approach. This approach is based on the perception of a supposed external threat to native society members, as also emphasized by the Italian Prime Minister, and this narrative is further amplified by social media (Bernardez-Rodal *et al.* 2022). Prime Minister Meloni continues this trajectory when she argues that today's concept of being a woman seems to be reduced to a mere self-definition, while simultaneously witnessing efforts to downplay the importance of the body, the essence, and the intrinsic diversity of the female gender. In this perspective, women might be considered the first to be adversely affected by gender ideology. On the other hand, the subject of our analysis, the Secretary of the Partito Democratico, Elly Schlein, has made an open statement about her sexual orientation, revealing that she is in a relationship with another woman.

This explicit demonstration of gender identity and sexual orientation within the Italian political class draws attention to the theme of diversity and inclusion within the political arena. She is described as queer, intersectional feminist, and trans-feminist, representing a party in line with Western progressivism, with a strong focus on gender and LGBTQ+ issues. She claims to be an emancipated woman, one who is no less of a woman than others simply because she hasn't experienced motherhood, and, above all, she advocates for more freedom and absolute self-determination. Her advocacy for absolute self-determination extends to areas that have drawn criticism from certain segments of the feminist movement, including support for surrogacy, viewing sex work as legitimate labor, and endorsing children's transition, views perceived as stemming from a transhuman and neo-patriarchal liberalism. Right from the start,

she directly confronts the center-right, particularly the leadership of Giorgia Meloni, by stating, “Being a woman isn’t enough to help other women,” and “There’s a big difference between calling oneself feminine and feminist. If you choose not to defend women’s rights, starting with their rights over their own bodies.” These two statements, in addition to her declaration, “Yes, I’m a woman, I love another woman, and I’m not a mother. But that doesn’t make me any less of a woman,” clearly referencing the catchphrase of the leader of Fratelli D’Italia, position her as the “anti-Meloni” in the eyes of many. It becomes evident that beyond the perpetual campaign slogans (Blumenthal, 1980) and political spectacle (Campus, 2014; Zamora-Medina & Zurutuza-Muñoz, 2014), both leaders, regardless of their political positions, are intrinsic symbols of feminism because they are pioneering women who have reached privileged positions of power for the first time. They are true trailblazers who are writing an important chapter in history. It is no secret that in a national context like Italy’s, often characterized by a conservative profile and inclinations toward displays of conservatism, making significant progress toward a modern vision holds monumental significance. This is a historic turning point originating from the highest echelons of power and stands out for its transformative influence.

On one hand, Elly is advocating for the full legal recognition of children born to same-sex couples, while on the other hand, Giorgia is promoting a proposed law aimed at establishing international legislation declaring surrogacy as a criminal act on a global scale. The only shared element, to be precise, has been the public reference to the American writer and feminist, Lisa Levenstein. Initially, when Elly Schlein was appointed as the Secretary of the PD, she declared, “They didn’t see us coming this time either.” Subsequently, Giorgia Meloni expressed a similar concept, saying, “Being underestimated is a great advantage because often they don’t see you coming.” This event should not be underestimated because the impact of media representations holds significant importance for how the electorate and figures of leadership perceive themselves. In general, both leaders are immersed in an analysis that considers aspiring female candidates to be in a position where they must balance demonstrating assertiveness to avoid perceptions of weakness, which could question their suitability for leadership roles, while at the same time avoiding being seen as overly aggressive, as that could lead to criticism (Jamieson, 1995).

The considerable emphasis placed on public appearances takes on even greater significance when it comes to female leadership. A woman’s identity is no longer automatically associated, as it once was, with marriage and motherhood (Van Zoonen, 2006). In this regard, Elly represents an emblematic example of this evolution and reflects the observation that the media pays considerable attention to the private lives and physical appearance of female candidates

(Heldman *et al.* 2005; Stevens, 2007), to be honest, this happens with almost all women who have a high level of media exposure (Ejea Mendoza & Martínez Romero, 2022). What is certain is that both, in their own ways, have broken the preconceived patterns of politics and communication, considering the results they have achieved both online and offline. It should be emphasized that in the sphere of gender analysis and social roles, women are often subject to perceptions and judgments that consider them as “invaders of space” (Puwar, 2004).

This concept refers to the tendency to interpret women as “foreign” or “out of place” in contexts where traditionally, roles of leadership or public presence have been primarily attributed to men. This perception can be rooted in cultural and social dynamics that emphasize gender differences and establish specific norms and stereotypes outlining appropriate behavior for men and women. Analyzing these perception mechanisms and their impacts will be crucial in understanding the challenges women will face in the context of gender equality and in promoting more inclusive and equitable participation in all sectors of society.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of Giorgia Meloni and Elly Schlein, within the context of gender and Italian politics, reveals a profound transformation in the political and communicative landscape of the country. Both leaders represent pioneers, being the first women to occupy top positions in the Italian political arena, and they have brought gender and sexual identity-related issues to the forefront in substantially different ways. Giorgia Meloni has emphasized a traditionalist vision, placing emphasis on issues such as family, motherhood, and gender identity in line with her right-wing position. She has adopted a language that appeals to conservative values and has promoted policies that seek to uphold traditional gender roles, while criticizing gender ideology.

Her leadership is based on a gender and family vision rooted in traditional values. On the other hand, Elly Schlein represents a more progressive leadership model, advocating for openness to diversity and inclusion. She has openly declared her homosexuality, challenging traditional social norms and positioning herself as a figure advocating for a more open and progressive vision of gender identity and family relationships. Her leadership is based on a more inclusive and diversified view of gender and sexuality. In a traditionally conservative political context, the rise of these two women leaders represents a historic turning point that underscores the importance of a modern outlook in a national context like Italy. Both have challenged entrenched gender perceptions, highlighting the challenges women face in balancing assertiveness with avoiding judgments of weakness. Their presence in positions of power brings with it

the opportunity to promote a more inclusive and equitable political participation, laying the foundation for gender representation that embraces diversity and inclusion in contemporary society.

This essay provides a substantial contribution to the theoretical understanding of the political process underlying the change in gender regimes, focusing on the dynamic interaction of multiple elements intrinsic to the political sphere. The in-depth analysis conducted highlights how this historical period serves as a fundamental interpretative key to fully grasp the dissimilarity of the paths undertaken by the

two figures under examination. In summary, within the analysis of the political context, characterized by a certain hostility towards feminist and progressive forces, it becomes evident that the limited effectiveness in countering conservative and anti-gender forces, relevant in the political landscape, has significantly impacted the dynamics of gender change. This observation underscores the complexity of interactions between political forces and social dynamics, emphasizing how these elements have profoundly shaped the evolution of gender regimes in the examined context.

6. References

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