

## BAFFI RESEARCH CENTER

### Working Paper Master Theses Series

# Female Strategic Substantive Representation: Evidence from two Italian Radical Right Leaders

Sveva Manfredi | 2024



Università  
Bocconi

BAFFI  
Centre on Economics,  
Finance and Regulation

# Female Strategic Substantive Representation: Evidence from two Italian Radical Right Leaders

Sveva Manfredi\*†

## Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of the engendering of Radical Right Parties (RRP) in Europe on female Substantive Representation, intended as the increasing discussion of female issues by female politicians. The paper contributes to the literature on political representation and political communication, using a large dataset and building a novel dictionary in Italian for topic classification with Python to fill the gap in prior research. Using Facebook captions from leaders of two Italian Radical Right parties, the study challenges the assumption that more female politicians lead to more discussions on female issues. Surprisingly, no significant difference was found in the likelihood of Meloni discussing female issues compared to Salvini. However, during Salvini's time in office, Meloni's likelihood of posting about female issues increased, suggesting strategic behaviour in response to political competition. This research introduces the new concept of Strategic Substantive Representation, highlighting how female RRP politicians may strategically engage with these topics.

**Keywords:** gender representation, political strategy, radical right, Facebook, Italy

---

\*I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Prof. Paola Profeta, for guidance and support throughout this research. I also wish to thank Prof. Massimo Morelli, Prof. Chris Anderson, and Prof. Germán Gauthier for their feedback. This paper has also benefited from comments received during presentations at the London School of Economics. All errors are my own.

†AXA Research Lab on Gender Equality (Bocconi University).

# 1 Introduction

The question of whether “the election of more and more women means that women will be better represented” (Reingold, 2000, p.2) has long motivated research in political representation and political economy. This question has gained renewed relevance with the increasing presence of women in elected office across Western Europe, particularly within Radical Right Parties (RRPs). As these parties grow in electoral strength, their leadership is becoming increasingly gender-diverse. Yet, it remains unclear whether this descriptive shift translates into a greater substantive focus on women’s issues in political discourse and policymaking.

The established literature on political representation distinguishes between Descriptive Representation, defined as the numerical presence of women in political institutions, and Substantive Representation, understood as the advancement of women’s interests in policy or public debate (Pitkin, 1972; Mansbridge, 1999; Dovi, 2007). While much of this scholarship has focused on progressive parties, less is known about the dynamics of representation within RRPs. Traditionally, women’s issues in Western Europe have been championed primarily by left-wing parties and politicians, making RRPs an especially unlikely context for substantive gender advocacy. This is a significant gap, given that several prominent RRP leaders have actively campaigned on their gender identity, framing it as a unique political advantage.

This paper investigates whether the growing descriptive presence of women in RRPs results in a corresponding increase in the saliency of women’s issues in their political communication. More specifically, it examines whether female leaders in RRPs are more likely than their male counterparts to publicly address women’s issues, and under what conditions such attention intensifies. The study focuses on the Italian context, comparing Facebook posts from Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d’Italia) and Matteo Salvini (Lega) between 2017 and 2022, a period during which Meloni was in opposition and Salvini held government office.

This research engages with two intersecting bodies of literature. First, political representation scholarship has often assumed that women, irrespective of ideology, will represent women’s interests in similar ways. However, emerging studies suggest a more complex picture

within conservative parties, where female politicians may address different issues or adopt divergent framings (Celis and Erzeel, 2015; Arfini et al., 2019). Second, political communication scholarship highlights the growing centrality of social media as a site for elite–public interaction (Jungherr, 2016; Nulty et al., 2016; Magin et al., 2017; Heft et al., 2023). Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, are widely used by RRP leaders and provide a unique opportunity to analyse public claim-making on a large scale. Building on these insights, this paper adopts a performative view of Substantive Representation, defining it not as policy output, but as the saliency of representative claims in digital communication (Severs, 2012; Saward, 2006).

To empirically test this framework, I use Italy as a case study, focusing on two prominent political leaders: Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini. I compiled a new dataset consisting of nearly 40,000 Facebook captions posted by these two leaders over a six-year period. Each caption was classified as either related or unrelated to women’s issues. This classification was carried out using a supervised machine learning method (Guo et al., 2016; Riffe et al., 2019), based on a custom dictionary developed specifically for this study due to the lack of an established standard in Italian. I then employed binary logistic regression models to estimate the likelihood that a caption addresses a female issue. The models include controls for political competition, leader popularity, and time trends. To strengthen the reliability of the classification, I used AI-assisted annotation as an additional validation step. The robustness of the regression results was also confirmed through non-parametric bootstrapping.

The findings offer several important insights. First, there is no statistically significant difference in the likelihood that Giorgia Meloni discusses women’s issues compared to Matteo Salvini. This challenges the conventional expectation that Descriptive Representation leads to greater Substantive Representation. Second, introducing an interaction term reveals that Meloni’s likelihood of addressing female issues increases by 25% (significant at the 1% level) when Salvini is in government. This suggests that political competition, rather

than gender alone, may incentivise increased attention to women’s issues. Finally, an extension analysing issue framing reveals that Meloni adopts a less pro-gender-equality stance than Salvini, further complicating assumptions about the ideological content of female politicians’ communication within RRPs.

This paper makes three main contributions. First, it advances the concept of *Strategic Substantive Representation*, highlighting how political competition conditions the relationship between descriptive presence and substantive advocacy. Second, it introduces a novel, data-rich approach to measuring issue saliency using supervised machine learning and AI validation in a context where human coding may be costly or biased. Third, it contributes to a growing literature on the engendering of RRPs by systematically assessing when and how women’s issues are raised within their communication strategies.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the existing literature on political representation and political communication. Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework and develops the concept of Strategic Substantive Representation. Section 4 discusses the case study selection. Section 5 details the data construction, dictionary development, and methodological approach. Section 6 provides descriptive trends and motivation. Section 7 presents the main empirical results. Section 8 evaluates the robustness and validity of the topic classification and model specification. Section 9 offers an extension analysing framing and outlines broader policy implications. Finally, Section 10 concludes.

## 2 Background Literature

This section reviews the core literature underpinning the paper and introduces key definitions linking Descriptive and Substantive Representation. It focuses on two strands: women’s political participation and leadership in Radical Right Parties (RRPs), and the role of social media as a venue for political claim-making.

Stereotypes about women’s domestic role have long hindered their political participa-

tion (Krook, 2017; Mechkova and Wilson, 2021). Although universal suffrage spread across Western democracies in the twentieth century, gender parity in political office remains elusive. RRP<sub>s</sub> in particular were historically described as “Männerparteien” that excluded women from leadership positions (Mudde, 2009). Only recently have Western European RRP<sub>s</sub> elected prominent female leaders such as Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni and Alice Weidel, signalling an “engendering” of these parties (Ben-shitrit et al., 2022). Yet it remains unclear whether these leaders substantively advance women’s interests or whether their gender is primarily instrumental to broader nationalist and populist projects.

Voters tend to attribute stereotypically feminine traits, such as empathy and nurturance, to women candidates and to associate them with issues like education, healthcare and family policy (King and Matland, 1999; Koch, 1999; Brown et al., 1993). For RRP<sub>s</sub>, whose traditional platforms centre on nationalism and securitisation, female leaders may draw on these expectations to claim ownership of “feminine” issues, either sincerely or strategically.

The rise of digital platforms has transformed how political elites communicate, allowing them to bypass traditional media, interact directly with followers and monitor reactions in real time (Jungherr, 2016; Nulty et al., 2016). For RRP<sub>s</sub>, often marginalised in mainstream outlets, social media are especially valuable for disseminating unfiltered messages and testing new rhetorical strategies (Caiani and Wagemann, 2009). Facebook data therefore provide a natural laboratory for analysing issue salience and claim-making and, in this paper, are used to measure Substantive Representation by Italian RRP leaders.

## 2.1 Definition of Descriptive and Substantive Representation

The increasing prominence of women within RRP<sub>s</sub> across Europe provides the empirical motivation for this study. The theoretical foundation rests on the distinction between two core dimensions of political representation: Descriptive and Substantive. This conceptual division was first articulated by Pitkin (1972), who differentiated between representatives who “stand for” particular groups by virtue of shared characteristics and those who “act

for” constituents by advocating their interests.

Descriptive Representation refers to the extent to which the composition of elected bodies reflects the demographic characteristics of the population, such as gender, ethnicity or class. In this context, the presence of women within a legislature or party leadership is considered a proxy for Descriptive Representation (Mansbridge, 1999; Powell, 2004). From a normative perspective grounded in democratic theory, the inclusion of historically marginalised or disadvantaged groups is assumed to enhance the responsiveness of the political system to their preferences and needs (Dovi, 2007; Griffin and Newman, 2008).

Substantive Representation, by contrast, concerns the extent to which elected representatives advance the interests or policy preferences of those groups. According to this view, representation should not be assessed solely on descriptive grounds, but rather in terms of actual responsiveness. Pitkin’s original critique cautions against an overemphasis on numerical inclusion at the expense of examining the outcomes of representation itself (Pitkin, 1972).

The relationship between Descriptive and Substantive Representation has since become a focal point of empirical and theoretical inquiry. A central question is whether the presence of women in elected office leads to greater attention to, or advocacy for, women’s issues, particularly in contexts where ideological constraints, such as those found in RRP, may condition or suppress issue articulation despite descriptive presence.

Recent contributions have questioned whether identity alone provides sufficient grounds for inferring interest alignment. As Runciman (2009, p. 15) notes, the fact of “being female” (standing for) does not inherently imply acting substantively in the interest of women. This conceptual gap motivates the need for a more nuanced understanding of how, and under what conditions, Descriptive Representation may translate into Substantive Representation.

An alternative approach is provided by Saward (2006, p. 302), who reconceptualises political representation as a process of claim-making rather than identity-matching. Substantive Representation, in this view, emerges not from shared characteristics but from the public

articulation of claims to speak for or act on behalf of a group. The emphasis therefore shifts from objective characteristics to performative and communicative acts, situating the analysis within the broader literature on political communication.

This shift is particularly pertinent given the increasing role of social media platforms in shaping political discourse. From this perspective, Substantive Representation can be operationalised through the frequency and prominence of representative claims about women, rather than through assumptions about inherent group loyalty. This rationale underpins the empirical focus of this paper, which analyses political communication on Facebook as a vehicle for examining Substantive Representation.

For the purpose of this study, Substantive Representation is therefore defined as the saliency of issues related to women in the public communication of political leaders. The next section presents a formal model that links Descriptive Representation to Substantive Representation, conceptualised as a strategic response to political competition and institutional context.

## 2.2 Why Not the Framing

The previous sections defined Substantive Representation as the saliency of women's issues in political discourse, rather than as the ideological content or framing of those issues. This choice reflects both theoretical and empirical considerations. While the Substantive Representation Theory (SRT) posits that female politicians, by virtue of shared identity, are more likely to promote women's interests, it is increasingly clear that ideological alignment plays a mediating role. This is particularly evident within the Radical Right, where the framing of women's issues is often inconsistent, instrumental or ideologically constrained.

Some strands of the literature have assumed that female representatives, regardless of party affiliation, share a common policy agenda grounded in women's priorities such as gender equality and reproductive rights (Mansbridge, 1999; Celis and Erzeel, 2015). However, empirical research suggests that this assumption may not hold uniformly. While some

studies find policy convergence across progressive and conservative female legislators, others document marked differences in both issue selection and framing (Arfini et al., 2019; Scrinzi, 2017). In particular, within the RRP context, female leaders often adopt framings that are ideologically aligned with party narratives rather than reflecting an essentialised notion of women's interests.

For example, RRPs frequently invoke gender equality in opposition to immigration or Islam, while simultaneously endorsing traditionalist positions on issues such as abortion, family policy or divorce (Akkerman, 2015; de Lange and Mügge, 2015; Farris, 2017). This instrumental use of gender discourse has led some scholars to characterise women's issues in RRPs as "Janus-faced" topics, both progressive and regressive depending on political context and strategic need (Scrinzi, 2017; Spierings, 2020).

Consequently, focusing on framing presents both conceptual and methodological challenges. Conceptually, it assumes ideological coherence where empirical evidence suggests ambivalence. Methodologically, framing is inherently less systematic and harder to measure reliably across cases or time. As such, any analysis that aims to test the link between Descriptive and Substantive Representation risks conflation if it relies on framing as the primary operationalisation.

For these reasons, this study restricts its focus to saliency, that is, the extent to which women's issues are discussed, rather than how they are framed. Saliency is both more easily observable and more closely aligned with the performative understanding of representation articulated by Saward (2006), where the act of making a representative claim itself constitutes Substantive Representation. This approach is particularly suitable for the study of RRPs, where ideological flexibility and instrumentalisation complicate traditional identity-based assumptions.

The remainder of this section introduces the concept of Strategic Substantive Representation, which formalises the conditional relationship between Descriptive and Substantive Representation in high-competition settings. This conceptual innovation forms the theoret-

ical basis for the empirical analysis that follows.

## 2.3 Saliency over Framing: A New Strategic Substantive Representation

The preceding discussion established that framing is a theoretically ambiguous and empirically unstable foundation for measuring Substantive Representation, particularly within RRP<sub>s</sub>. In contrast, this study adopts a saliency-based approach, which conceptualises Substantive Representation as the relative attention devoted to women's issues in political communication. This approach offers greater analytical clarity and empirical tractability, especially when examining strategic behaviour by political elites.

According to SRT, female politicians are expected to discuss women's issues more frequently than their male counterparts. However, growing evidence suggests that this relationship is moderated by contextual and institutional factors. In particular, the extent to which female leaders raise women's issues is shaped not only by identity but also by strategic considerations related to party position, competition intensity and parliamentary dynamics.

First, party status, whether in government or opposition, significantly influences communication priorities. Opposition parties typically have greater latitude to emphasise niche or identity-based issues, both for ideological expression and strategic differentiation (De Giorgi, 2016). This aligns with the saliency and issue-ownership literature, which posits that parties allocate attention to issues where they hold a perceived advantage or can damage opponents (Petrocik, 1996; Budge, 2015).

Second, opposition parties often respond reactively to government policy by raising counterclaims in domains where the incumbent is perceived as weak or inattentive (Norton, 2008). In this setting, women's issues may emerge as focal points in opposition discourse if they provide strategic leverage or reputational gains. Such responsiveness is likely to be further intensified by electoral competition, media visibility or internal party dynamics.

Taken together, these mechanisms suggest that women's issues may be instrumentalised

by RRP leaders in response to political incentives, rather than reflecting intrinsic gender-based commitment. This insight challenges the linear view that Descriptive Representation leads directly to Substantive Representation and instead supports a more conditional, context-dependent framework.

To capture this nuance, this paper introduces the concept of Strategic Substantive Representation, defined as the saliency of women's issues in political discourse as a function of both descriptive identity and strategic context. This formulation recognises that while descriptive presence may be a necessary condition for Substantive Representation, it is not sufficient in the absence of political incentives that make the articulation of women's issues electorally advantageous.

In sum, this section has reviewed the evolving role of women in politics, particularly within RRPs, and the emergence of social media as a venue for political claim-making. The existing literature leaves open two questions. Does descriptive gender presence in RRPs translate into substantive attention to women's issues? And can social media data capture this phenomenon more precisely than traditional measures? The present paper addresses these questions by introducing the concept of Strategic Substantive Representation and testing it through a detailed analysis of Facebook posts by two leading Italian RRP figures.

### 3 The Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 An Illustrative Strategic Framework

Building on the conceptual distinction between Descriptive and Substantive Representation, this section outlines a simple illustrative framework for how political leaders allocate attention to women's issues in public discourse. The framework is intentionally stylised and is not meant to provide a fully fledged formal theory; its purpose is to clarify the mechanism that will be tested empirically. The central proposition is that Substantive Representation, understood as the salience of women's issues, is not a mechanical outcome of Descriptive

Representation. Rather, it is conditioned by strategic considerations, particularly in the context of political competition.

The model considers two political actors: a male leader and a female leader, each choosing the proportion  $q_i \in [0, 1]$  of their public communication dedicated to women's issues. This communication can be operationalised through social media content (e.g., Facebook posts), providing a measurable output of strategic attention.

Each leader seeks to maximise an objective function that reflects three components: a baseline electoral benefit from discussing women's issues ( $\alpha_i$ ), a strategic complementarity or competitive payoff from aligning with the other leader's communication ( $\beta_i q_i q_{-i} C$ ), and a convex cost associated with allocating communication effort to this domain ( $\gamma_i q_i^2$ ). The level of political competition is captured by the parameter  $C$ , which amplifies the strategic interaction term. Formally, the utility function for leader  $i$  is:

$$U_i(q_i, q_{-i}, C) = \alpha_i q_i + \beta_i q_i q_{-i} C - \gamma_i q_i^2$$

The first-order condition yields the best-response function:

$$\frac{\partial U_i}{\partial q_i} = \alpha_i + \beta_i q_{-i} C - 2\gamma_i q_i = 0$$

Solving for the equilibrium yields:

$$q_i^* = \frac{\alpha_i + \beta_i q_{-i} C}{2\gamma_i}$$

This system implies a strategic interdependence between the two actors. Empirical observations presented in Section 7 suggest that the male leader's strategy is largely determined by  $\alpha_M$ , with minimal responsiveness to competitive pressures ( $\beta_M \approx 0$ ). In contrast, the female leader adjusts her communication in response to both her own incentives and the strategic environment, particularly as  $C$  increases. This is reflected in a positive and significant  $\beta_F$ , suggesting that the saliency of women's issues is influenced not only by gender identity but

by context-dependent strategic calculations.

To incorporate the potential implications for policy outcomes, a simple additive interaction function is introduced:

$$P(q_F^*, q_M^*) = \delta_F q_F^* + \delta_M q_M^* + \eta q_F^* q_M^*$$

Here,  $\delta_F$  and  $\delta_M$  capture the individual contributions of each leader to policy output related to women's issues, while  $\eta$  reflects possible synergistic or antagonistic interactions. Although highly stylised, this extension illustrates how communicative saliency could, in principle, translate into policy outcomes through electoral and parliamentary institutions; however, this link remains beyond the empirical scope of the paper.

The model aligns with the representational claim framework introduced by Saward (2006), in which representation is constituted through public claims rather than presumed by identity. Within this framework, Substantive Representation is conceptualised as the observable saliency of women's issues, consistent with the communicative focus of this study.

This strategic model offers a formal foundation for the empirical analysis that follows. It provides testable predictions regarding the conditions under which Descriptive Representation, embodied in the presence of a female leader, translates into increased communicative saliency of women's issues, conditional on political competition.

This conceptual innovation forms the basis of the empirical investigation that follows. Specifically, the analysis tests whether a female leader in an RRP, Giorgia Meloni, exhibits systematically higher saliency of women's issues in public communication compared to her male counterpart, Matteo Salvini, conditional on being in opposition. The empirical design thus operationalises the core hypothesis of Strategic Substantive Representation in a setting characterised by high ideological rigidity and institutional constraint.

## 4 The Empirical Case Study

With the exception of a few Scandinavian cases, most female political leaders in Europe in recent years have emerged from Radical Right Parties (RRPs). In Italy, until 2013, no political party, whether mainstream or radical right, had ever been led by a woman. This changed on 25 September 2022, when Giorgia Meloni's party won the general election and she was subsequently appointed as Prime Minister, the first woman to hold this office in Italian history.

Giorgia Meloni offers a compelling case study for examining the relationship between Descriptive and Substantive Representation within the RRP context for two main reasons.

First, her election was widely perceived by the media and public opinion as a milestone for female political representation in Italy. This case is particularly noteworthy given its rarity: a major radical right party won the highest number of votes and was led by a female Prime Minister. This rare political setting provides an ideal context for exploring the central research question of this paper. Meloni is the founder and leader of *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI), a party classified as radical right by scholars (Puleo and Piccolino, 2022). Her leadership and political positioning remain relatively understudied in the academic literature (Campus, 2020; Feo and Lavizzari, 2021; Gaweda et al., 2022), yet have received significant media attention, particularly due to the novelty of her role in the Italian political landscape.

Second, Meloni has consistently built her political image around a gendered and conservative identity, encapsulated in the slogan: "*I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a Christian*". This phrase underscores her appeal to traditional gender roles while positioning her identity as a woman as an advantage over her political rivals.

Together, these elements make Italy, and Giorgia Meloni in particular, a rich and timely case for investigating whether Descriptive Representation in the radical right translates into greater Substantive Representation of female interests.

## 5 Data and Methodology

This Section provides comprehensive details regarding the data used and outlines the hypotheses and empirical strategy.

### 5.1 Data and outcomes

The dataset includes every Facebook caption of posts (either status, photos, or videos) published by Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini on their official pages between 1 January 2017, the year Giorgia Meloni was confirmed as leader of FdI for the second time, and 24 September 2022, the day before the Italian general elections. The final sample includes 12,813 posts from Giorgia Meloni and 23,508 from Matteo Salvini, totalling 36,321 posts. Posts without a caption, or with captions containing only punctuation or emoticons, were excluded due to the lack of interpretable content. Data were downloaded from Facebook using Fanpage](<https://www.fanpagekarma.comFanpage>) Karma, an online social media analytics tool compliant with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The caption of each post is used as an objective proxy for content and intent.

Each post was coded according to a set of female-related issues adapted from Evans (2016), originally applied to US politicians in the 2012 elections and extended to the Italian context. An ad-hoc dictionary in Italian was constructed for this purpose due to the absence of an appropriate existing classification. Section 5.2 details the construction and use of this original dictionary. Table 1 presents the classification of issues and their definitions.

To control for the impact of electoral competition, a dummy variable was constructed equal to 1 if a post was published within one month prior to a municipal, regional, national, or European election. A list of elections considered is provided in Table 5 in Appendix B. The main explanatory variable capturing the gendered nature of RRP representation is a dummy coded 1 if Giorgia Meloni is the author, and 0 otherwise. As Giorgia Meloni remained in opposition throughout the study period, an additional dummy variable was created for

Table 1: List of Issues - Classification and Definition

Issue	Meaning	Female Issue
campaign	Related to electoral campaign	
family	Related to the family sphere (includes LGBT+ rights)	✓
economy	Related to taxation, public finances and labour market	
national_values	Related to nationalistic and traditional Italian values	
media	Related to presence on social media, television and newspapers	
migration	Related to the migration crisis	
other	Not classified under any other category	
violence	Related to domestic violence and violence against women	✓
youth	Related to youth development and lifestyle	
party-position	Related to party ideology and positioning	
environment	Related to environmental and animal protection	✓
women	Related to Italian female figures	✓
defence	Related to crime, defence and security (national and international)	
welfare	Related to welfare and assistance	✓
culture	Related to art and music	✓
education	Related to all levels of education	✓
healthcare	Related to healthcare services and crisis	

**Notes:** Unlike in previous literature, 'healthcare' is not considered a female issue in this study to isolate the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic, which dominated discourse between 2020 and 2022 and could bias results.

Matteo Salvini to indicate whether he was in government, equal to 1 during his tenure as Deputy Prime Minister (1 June 2018 to 4 September 2019), and 0 otherwise.

To account for public opinion, the models include control variables capturing the politician's popularity, measured using Supermedia data from YouTrend, which aggregates Italian opinion surveys with weighted averages. The weighting scheme favours more recent surveys and those with larger sample sizes and greater institutional reliability.

Year fixed effects from 2017 to 2022 are also included to control for time-specific variation.

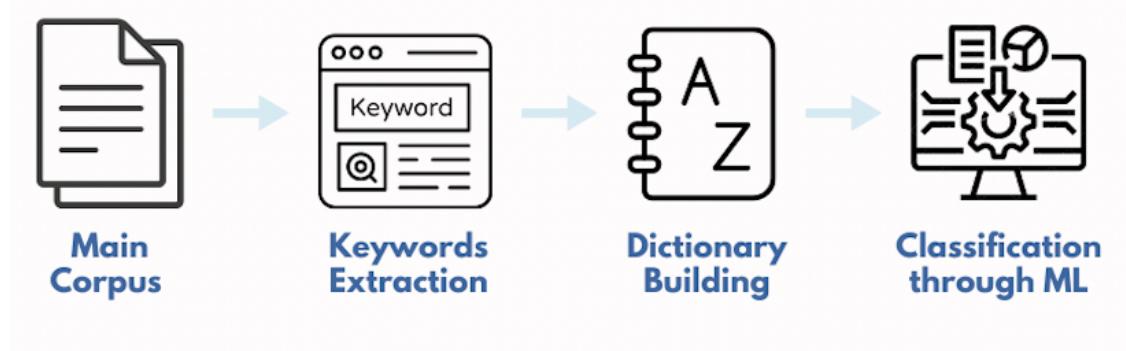
## 5.2 Supervised Machine Learning Classification of Issues

To classify Facebook posts by topic, a supervised machine learning (ML) approach was employed (Riffe et al., 2019). Given the predefined categories based on Evans (2016), a supervised rather than unsupervised method was deemed more appropriate (Guo et al., 2016). Figure 1 outlines the classification process.

Initially, word frequencies were analysed for both politicians. Punctuation, numbers, whitespace, special characters, and stop words were removed, and a term-frequency list was generated. Words appearing more than 300 times were reviewed and matched to topic categories derived from the literature. These categories were adjusted and finalised manually based on observed frequencies. Keywords were then sorted into female and male issue categories, following Evans (2016). Section 8.1 presents robustness checks validating this classification.

A prediction model was implemented to estimate the probability that each caption pertained to a female issue. The model assessed each caption by calculating the relative frequency of keywords corresponding to each topic category and selecting the highest-probability match. Captions without sufficient keyword matches were flagged as 'Unknown'. These cases were manually reviewed and recoded as either the most appropriate category or as 'other'. Short, ambiguous words were excluded from the dictionary to avoid false positives. All text was converted to lowercase during tokenisation.

Figure 1: Supervised ML Approach Explained



Source: Own production.

### 5.3 Hypotheses

Based on the literature on Substantive Representation and political competition, the following hypotheses are formulated. The analysis compares the Facebook activity of Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini, who share a common ideological background, to isolate gender and strategic effects.

**Hypothesis 1** *Female issues are as salient in Giorgia Meloni's social media agenda as in Matteo Salvini's because they are not core issues in RRP*s.

**Sub-hypothesis 1.1** *Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini demonstrate equal commitment to promoting gender equality in their political agendas.*

**Hypothesis 2** *Female issues become more salient in Giorgia Meloni's social media agenda when she faces direct competition from Matteo Salvini (i.e., when he is in government).*

Evidence supporting Hypothesis 1 would indicate no significant difference in the likelihood that a post from Giorgia Meloni addresses a female issue, suggesting that descriptive representation alone does not drive topic saliency. Sub-hypothesis 1.1 focuses on the framing of such issues. If Hypothesis 1 holds, this extension explores whether Meloni promotes gender equality to the same extent as Salvini. This analysis is presented in Section 9.

Support for Hypothesis 2 would indicate increased likelihood of Meloni addressing female issues during periods of heightened political competition, consistent with theories of strategic communication.

## 5.4 Empirical Strategy

To assess differences in the likelihood of discussing female issues, the analysis proceeds in two stages. First, a binary logistic regression model is estimated, where the dependent variable equals 1 if a post addresses a female issue and 0 otherwise. Covariates include electoral competition, public opinion, whether Salvini is in government, and year fixed effects.

The baseline model is specified as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{logit}(P(Y_i = 1 | x_1, \dots, x_k)) = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Salvini\_gov}_i + \beta_2 \text{Meloni}_i + \beta_3 \text{election}_i \\ & + \beta_4 \text{public\_opinion}_i + \delta_i \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

Here,  $Y_i$  is a binary indicator of whether a caption concerns a female issue.  $\text{Meloni}_i$  equals 1 if the caption is authored by Giorgia Meloni, 0 otherwise. Control variables include  $\text{Salvini\_gov}_i$ , indicating whether Salvini is in government;  $\text{election}_i$ , indicating proximity to an election;  $\text{public\_opinion}_i$ , the politician's popularity; and  $\delta_i$ , year fixed effects.

The second specification introduces an interaction term to test strategic responsiveness:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{logit}(P(Y_i = 1 | x_1, \dots, x_k)) = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Salvini\_gov}_i + \beta_2 \text{Meloni}_i \\ & + \beta_3 \text{Salvini\_gov}_i \times \text{Meloni}_i + \beta_4 \text{election}_i \\ & + \beta_5 \text{public\_opinion}_i + \delta_i \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

This interaction term captures whether Meloni's attention to female issues increases when Salvini is in office, offering a direct test of Hypothesis 2.

## 6 Descriptive Evidence

Before presenting the regression results on the effect of gender on the likelihood of discussing female issues among Italian RRP leaders, this Section provides descriptive evidence on the outcomes of interest.

Descriptive statistics for all variables are reported in Table 6 in Appendix B. Matteo Salvini's posting frequency is approximately twice that of Giorgia Meloni over the period considered. This is consistent with his broader social media strategy, aimed at fostering discontent during election periods (Kalia et al., 2018). Additionally, Salvini's tenure in government introduces interpretative complexity regarding his use of Facebook.

Table 7 reveals a higher proportion of posts classified as 'other' on Salvini's page compared to Meloni's. This could reflect Salvini's tendency to use his institutional page for personal content (e.g., family photographs), which falls outside the constructed dictionary's classification scope. Nevertheless, because the focus is solely on posts classified under female issues, the unequal sample size is not problematic; in those categories, post counts are comparable. Non-parametric bootstrapping in Section 8 supports the robustness of these results.

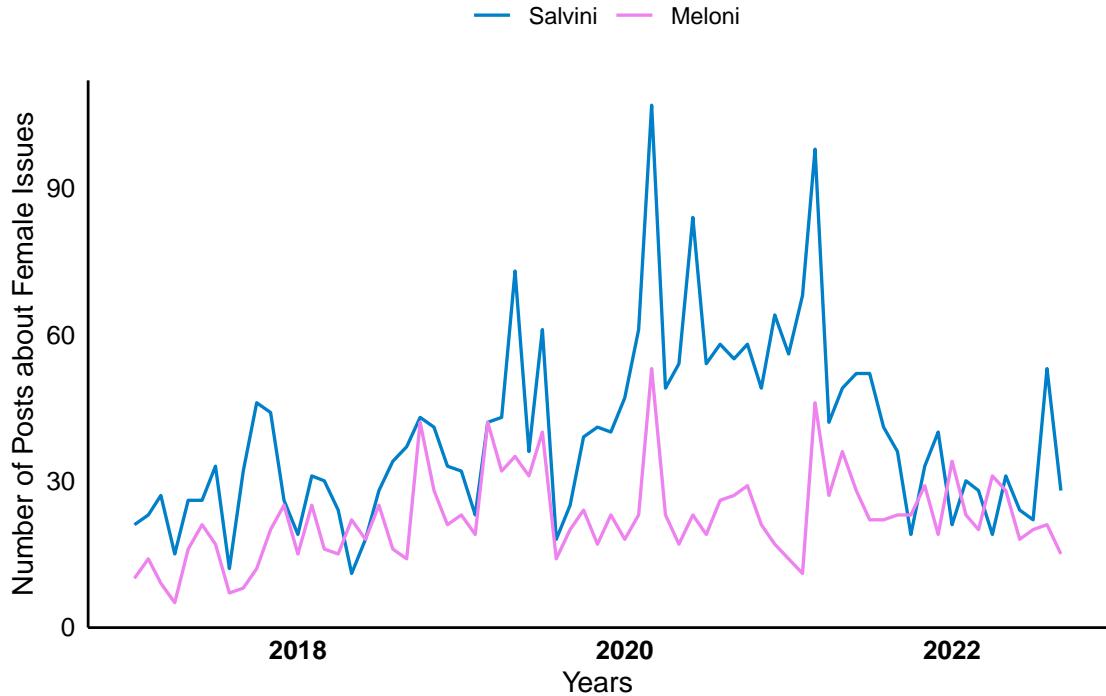
The data also reveal important thematic similarities between the two politicians. Table 7 ranks topic proportions and shows that 'party position', 'campaign', 'national values', 'media presence', 'migration', and 'defence' dominate for both leaders. Female issues are marginal, reinforcing Hypothesis 1, which suggests that the Substantive Representation Theory (SRT) does not significantly apply to the Facebook agendas of RRP leaders: Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini address female issues at similar rates.

Figure 2 shows monthly trends in posts related to female issues by both politicians. Despite occasional deviations, the trends closely track each other. This consistency reinforces Hypothesis 1, indicating that Meloni does not systematically discuss female issues more frequently than Salvini.

Figure 3 plots the smoothed difference in monthly female-issue-related posts between the

two politicians using the loess method. This non-parametric regression technique provides a clearer visualisation of temporal patterns. Figure 4 displays the distribution of classified issues in the two datasets.

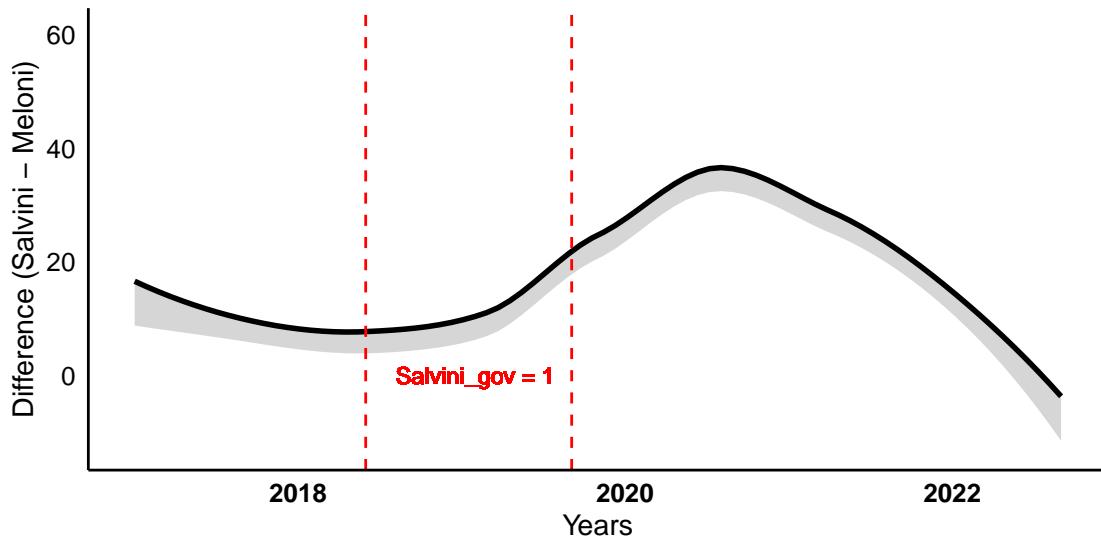
Figure 2: Distribution Across Years of the Number of Facebook Posts about Female Issues Per Month Published by Meloni and Salvini



Further descriptive evidence also supports Hypothesis 2. Table 8 shows the proportion of Meloni's posts during the period when Salvini served as Deputy Prime Minister. During this time, the share of Meloni's captions on issues such as 'family', 'environment', and 'violence' against women increased markedly compared to her overall posting pattern. This trend anticipates a positive and statistically significant coefficient on the interaction term  $\text{Salvini\_gov}_i \times \text{Meloni}_i$ , thereby supporting Hypothesis 2, which links issue salience to political competition. This observation aligns with issue ownership theory as proposed by Petrocik (1996).

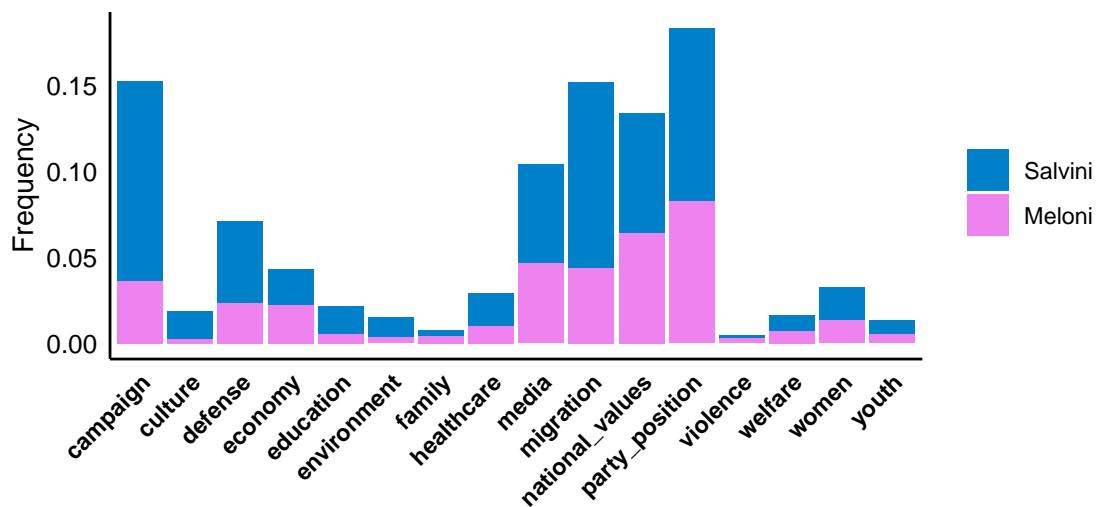
The following Section presents formal regression results to further test the main hypotheses, namely the similarity in Facebook communication regarding female issues between

Figure 3: Smoothed Difference between Salvini's and Meloni's Number of Facebook Posts about Female Issues Per Month



**Notes** This graph represents the smoothed difference between Salvini's and Meloni's number of Facebook posts concerning Female Issues per month. The shaded area below the curve is the confidence interval which provides a range within which you can reasonably expect the true value to fall with a 5

Figure 4: Topics Distribution



**Notes** This graph represents the distribution of captions by Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini across all the different topics.

Meloni and Salvini, and the increased salience of these issues for Meloni during Salvini’s period in government.

## 7 Main Results

As outlined in Section 5.4, the empirical analysis begins with a binary logistic regression model that investigates the impact of Far Right engendering, defined as whether the caption was authored by Giorgia Meloni rather than Matteo Salvini, on the likelihood that a Facebook post concerns a female issue. The estimates of Model 1 are presented in columns (1), (2), and (3) of Table 2. To assess the coefficients’ validity and interpretability, I first run the regression separately for Salvini and Meloni in Columns (1) and (2). Then, I estimate the model on the combined sample of posts in Column (3), which is the primary specification used to test Hypothesis 1.

To test Hypothesis 2, the model is augmented with an interaction term between Meloni and whether Salvini was in government. This specification corresponds to Model 2, reported in Column (4).

In all four models, the dependent variable is a dummy indicating whether a Facebook caption addresses a classified female issue. Coefficient interpretations assume *ceteris paribus* conditions.

In Column (1), the regression on Salvini's sample indicates he discusses female issues more frequently while in government, though the coefficient is only marginally statistically significant ( $p < 0.1$ ). Election proximity, defined as being within 30 days before or after an election, increases the likelihood of discussing female issues, and this effect is statistically significant at the 1% level. A one-unit increase in public opinion score also has a positive and statistically significant effect.

Regarding time effects<sup>1</sup>, Salvini's attention to female issues appears lower from 2017 to 2020, roughly corresponding to his time in office. Although the coefficient on  $\text{Salvini\_gov}_i$  is positive, it is not statistically significant. The coefficient for 2020 is positive but not statistically significant, likely reflecting pandemic-related disruptions. However, coefficients for 2021 and 2022 are positive, indicating increased attention to female issues and aligning with trends in Figure 3.

Similar patterns emerge in Column (2), based on Meloni's sample. She appears to discuss more female issues when Salvini is in office and when her popularity increases, though the magnitude of both effects is small. During election periods, she discusses fewer female issues, likely reflecting a focus on campaign-related content such as 'party position', 'media presence', and 'campaign'. No coefficients are statistically significant except those for the years 2020, 2021, and 2022. She discusses female issues more frequently in 2017, which aligns with the interpretation that Salvini being in government at that time shaped Meloni's agenda. Again, increases in 2021 and 2022 may reflect post-pandemic emphasis on family and welfare.

In Column (3), the full sample is used to compare Meloni and Salvini directly. Both leaders are more likely to post about female issues during election periods and as their popularity

---

<sup>1</sup>Time-effect coefficients are not shown in Table 2 for visual clarity but are discussed here for completeness.

rises, although the magnitudes are small and not statistically significant. The coefficient on  $Meloni_i$ , measuring the Far Right engendering effect, is positive but not statistically significant. Thus, we fail to reject the null hypothesis in Hypothesis 1, as the coefficient  $\beta_2$  is not statistically different from zero.

Column (4) includes the interaction term, allowing interpretation of the coefficient  $\beta_3$  from Model 2, which captures whether Meloni is more likely to post about female issues when Salvini is in government. This coefficient is strongly statistically significant at the 1% level.

The interpretation is that when Salvini is in government, Meloni's likelihood of posting about a female issue increases by 25% compared to Salvini<sup>2</sup>. By contrast, when Salvini is not in government, Meloni posts less about female issues than her male counterpart, but this coefficient is not statistically significant.

Year dummies from 2017 to 2022 are statistically significant and consistent in sign and interpretation across models.

In summary, while Meloni may appear to post more about female issues, this effect is not statistically significant. However, the significant interaction term indicates that political competition, specifically Salvini's role in government, amplifies Meloni's engagement with female issues. These findings are further discussed in Section 7.1 and evaluated for robustness in Section 8.2.

## 7.1 Discussion of the Main Results

The results in Section 7 show that although Giorgia Meloni is 2.3% more likely than Matteo Salvini to post about female issues, this coefficient is not statistically significant at the 5% level. Therefore, we do not reject Hypothesis 1.

The interaction term in Model 2 supports Hypothesis 2. When Salvini is in government,  $Meloni_i = 1$  increases the likelihood of discussing female issues by 25% relative to Salvini.

---

<sup>2</sup>Calculated as  $\exp(\beta_2 + \beta_3) - 1 = \exp(0.266 - 0.041) - 1 = 0.252$ .

However, when Salvini is not in office, Meloni posts slightly less, though this difference is not statistically significant.

These findings are illustrated in Figure 5, which plots the predicted marginal effects. As also shown in Section 6, there is no substantial or systematic difference in the frequency of female-issue-related posts between the two leaders.

The evidence points towards a strategic use of female issues influenced by political context. As described in Section 2.3, the Strategic Substantive Representation Framework offers a viable interpretation. Meloni may increase her focus on female issues when facing direct political competition from Salvini, leveraging perceived advantages in those domains.

This supports the article's central claim and contributes to the formulation of the concept of Strategic Substantive Representation. Meloni's engagement with female issues appears to be driven less by her identity as a woman and more by strategic electoral considerations. Whether she substantively advances women's interests or how she frames these issues lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Another potential explanation could be her reaction to the contemporaneous government agenda, using female issues to articulate opposition to the ruling coalition's stance. While this mechanism is plausible, its empirical testing would require alternative specifications and data.

Another potential explanation could be her reaction to the contemporaneous government agenda, using female issues to articulate opposition to the ruling coalition's stance. Empirically assessing this mechanism would require additional data on the timing and content of government initiatives related to women's issues (for example, cabinet proposals, decree laws, parliamentary debates or budget measures) and a systematic measure of their salience. One could then implement an event-study design around key legislative milestones, or estimate models that relate Meloni's attention to female issues to lagged changes in the government's agenda. These analyses are beyond the scope of the present paper, which relies solely on social media data from party leaders and does not include systematic information on policy

outputs. Finally, exogenous news events, such as International Women’s Day or high-profile cases of gender-based violence, could have elevated the salience of female issues independently of partisan strategies. Testing this channel would require a time-stamped dataset of major news shocks and commemorative events, allowing for an event-study design comparing posting behaviour in windows around these dates with neighbouring periods or with placebo events. These extensions represent promising directions for future research.

## 8 Validity & Robustness Checks

### 8.1 Validity and Robustness of the Topic Classification

In the academic debate on political communication, the validity and robustness of computational methods are considered essential (Scharkow, 2013; van Atteveldt and Peng, 2018). When applying topic classification, researchers risk drawing inaccurate conclusions from computer-assisted textual data unless they validate the results using approaches that account for word meaning in context (Krippendorff, 2019, p.218).

#### Methodological Framework and Motivation

This study employs automated content analysis by combining supervised machine learning (keyword extraction from the main corpus using Python) with manual dictionary-based classification. The dictionary, built from relevant literature, categorises words into male and female issue groups. The model is trained to replicate labels from a manually coded dataset (Boumans, J. W., & Trilling, D., 2016; Scharkow, 2013). Yet, classifying words is inherently complex. Female-related issues may appear in subtle, ambiguous, or latent forms, especially when overlapping with broader themes such as migration or hate speech, as discussed in Section 3.

#### Illustrative Example

For example, consider the following caption by Giorgia Meloni (June 2019):

*“No, it’s not Saudi Arabia. This lady covered from head to toe was photographed*

*in the Milan metro. Is it possible that years of battles and achievements for women's emancipation give way to all this? Let's stop this drift before it's too late: STOP ISLAMISATION!"*

A frequency-based approach may classify this caption as a female issue, based on references to women's emancipation. However, from a contextual perspective, the central message is about migration and Islamisation, not gender-related policy. This example highlights the limitations of keyword approaches and the need for validation to prevent misclassification.

### **Validation with ChatGPT**

To assess the validity and robustness of the classification method, I use ChatGPT as an alternative annotator. Unlike traditional approaches that rely on multiple human coders (Gilardi et al., 2023), this method offers a cost-effective and scalable solution. ChatGPT, launched by OpenAI in 2022, has shown high performance in both objective and subjective tasks (Guo et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2023) and is increasingly adopted in academic research.

#### **8.1.1 AI-Based Classification Procedure**

Human annotation is often used to verify whether topic labels correspond to the intended conceptual categories (Benoit et al., 2016). However, due to resource constraints, I implement validation through AI. ChatGPT relies on Reinforcement Learning from Human Feedback (RLHF), incorporating extensive annotated data (OpenAI, 2022), making it a reliable alternative.

I prompted the AI using the following instruction:

*"Given this definition of female issue: 'A female issue is an issue explicitly concerning women or reflecting female traits, as defined in the gender literature, including family, violence against women or children, the environment and animals, welfare, culture, education, or general references to women.' Is this post about a female issue? Answer only 'yes' or 'no'. Analyse carefully and do not answer 'unknown'. Text:"*

This prompt ensured a binary outcome aligned with the paper’s conceptual framework. The responses were stored as a dummy variable, `chat_gpt_female_issue_i`, where 1 denotes a “yes” classification and 0 includes “no” or “unknown”. This new outcome variable is used in the replication exercise below.

### 8.1.2 Replication Exercise

To test robustness, I re-estimate Model 1 and Model 2 using the ChatGPT-based classifications across Salvini’s posts, Meloni’s posts, and the combined dataset.

The replication confirms the study’s main results using a method that is arguably more precise and consistent. ChatGPT enhances efficiency and reduces the financial and ethical burdens associated with human annotation. While no classification method is entirely free from bias, AI bias stems from the data and instructions provided by humans. As such, total neutrality in either human or machine annotation is unlikely (Baum and Villasenor, 2023). Nonetheless, this validation exercise supports the reliability of the study’s findings and demonstrates the utility of large language models in political text analysis.

## 8.2 Validity and Robustness of the Model Specification

The validity of the estimates reported in Table 2 relies on two key assumptions. First, the independent variables should be free from multicollinearity. This is verified through the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), as shown in Table 9 in Appendix B, which confirms that multicollinearity is not a concern. Second, unlike linear regression models, the logit of the dependent variable must have a linear relationship with the independent variables. This is essential for the correct specification of the model.

To support this, I also compute Akaike’s Information Criterion (AIC) and the Likelihood Ratio (LR) test. Both indicate that including the covariates selected in Models 1 and 2 improves model fit, supporting their specification.

In terms of robustness, the non-parametric bootstrapping results in Table 10 (Appendix

B) show minimal bias in the subset estimates. This suggests that the results remain consistent across randomly drawn subsamples. As discussed in Section 7, coefficients from the separate subsample regressions align with those from the full model, further confirming robustness. To ensure the reliability of these estimates, all regressions are also run with robust standard errors.

Taken together, these diagnostic tests indicate that the logistic models used in this study are both statistically valid and robust.

### 8.3 Limitations

This study has four main limitations. First, the dataset includes only data from the five years preceding Giorgia Meloni’s appointment as Italian Prime Minister. As a result, it does not capture her behaviour in government. This limitation stems from the timing of the research. Moreover, the analysis is restricted to Facebook posts and does not include content from other platforms such as Twitter, Instagram or TikTok. This choice reflects both data availability and substantive considerations: during the period studied, Facebook was the primary platform used by Italian RRP leaders for long-form political messaging, and it offers a consistent archive over time. Including multiple platforms would have introduced cross-platform comparability issues (different audiences, formats and algorithms) that are beyond the scope of this paper.

Second, while testing Hypothesis 2, I do not include an interaction term between  $\text{election}_i$  and  $\text{Meloni}_i$ . This decision was made because such a specification could lead to misleading interpretations. During election periods, Meloni competed not only with Salvini but also with other party leaders. To isolate the specific effect of direct political competition, as emphasised in Issue Ownership Theory, the focus was placed solely on the periods when Salvini was in government. Including broader electoral dynamics would have introduced confounding effects.

Third, the empirical strategy does not allow for causal inference. The binary logistic

model identifies associations rather than causal relationships, which limits the generalisability of findings. However, as discussed in Section 4, the case selection strategy supports the theoretical extension of these findings to similar political contexts, namely, Western right-wing populist settings where male and female leaders operate within comparable ideological and communicative frameworks (Newth, 2022; Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2018).

Finally, training the AI algorithm with examples grounded in the study’s conceptual framework introduces a potential source of bias. However, as with all research methods, the trade-off between bias and practicality must be considered. In this case, the benefits of AI, lower financial costs and fewer ethical concerns compared to human annotation, justify its use. Moreover, perceptions of bias in AI tools are often shaped by subjective human interpretations. What is considered neutral by one user may be perceived as biased by another. Therefore, achieving an entirely unbiased chatbot is likely unattainable (Baum and Villasenor, 2023).

## 9 Further Analysis

The previous section underscored the importance of contextual word usage and highlighted how AI-assisted classification can offer a more efficient alternative to human annotation. Leveraging such tools helps address one of the key limitations of this study, namely, its emphasis on the *saliency* rather than the *framing* of female issues, as introduced in Section 3.

To this point, there has been insufficient statistical evidence to reject Hypothesis 1. In contrast, support for Hypothesis 2 lays the groundwork for Strategic Substantive Representation Theory, suggesting a potential strategic use of female issues by female RRP leaders. Giorgia Meloni, while in opposition, aligns well with this theoretical framework. However, understanding female issue salience requires not only examining *how much* they are discussed but also *how* they are framed.

To address this limitation and explore policy implications, this section tests Subhypothesis 1.1, which investigates whether Giorgia Meloni adopts a more pro-gender equality stance than Matteo Salvini during the observed period.

## 9.1 AI Answer Collection

As described in Section 8, I employed AI to classify all 36,321 Facebook captions. Initially, ChatGPT was asked to define gender equality, and the generated response was:

*”Gender equality refers to the equal rights, opportunities, and treatment of individuals, regardless of their gender. It involves the removal of discrimination and biases based on gender, ensuring that both men and women have the same access to resources, education, employment, and decision-making positions.”*

To generate a consistent and concise classification, the following prompt was finalised:

*”Is this caption pro- or anti-gender equality? Answer only 'pro', 'against', or 'unknown'. Text:”*

The responses were stored in a new variable,  $\text{pro\_gender\_equality}_i$ , where 1 indicates a "pro" response, and 0 denotes either "against" or "unknown". This variable forms the outcome of the models estimated below.

## 9.2 Descriptive Evidence

This section presents descriptive patterns underpinning Subhypothesis 1.1. As established in Section 7, there is no significant difference between Meloni and Salvini regarding the overall discussion of female issues. Yet, since Meloni tends to increase her engagement on these issues when in opposition, it becomes important to assess whether her framing aligns more positively with gender equality.

Figure 7 shows the frequency of pro-, anti-, and unknown-gender-equality captions. Interestingly, Salvini appears more likely than Meloni to publish posts expressing support for gender equality, at least in relative terms.

A more detailed view over time (Figures 8 and 9) indicates an uptick in pro-gender-equality posts during Salvini’s time in government. The increase is sharper for Salvini than for Meloni, whose trend remains relatively flat.

These trends provide a nuanced picture of gender equality discourse among RRP leaders, offering initial insight into the strategic framing of such issues. The next section turns to formal hypothesis testing.

### 9.3 Main Results

To test Subhypothesis 1.1, I re-estimate Models 1 and 2, using  $\text{pro\_gender\_equality}_i$  as the outcome. Table 4 displays the results.

Both Meloni and Salvini are more likely to publish pro-gender equality content when Salvini is in office, with the effect statistically significant at the 1% level. However, the coefficient for  $\text{Meloni}_i = 1$  is negative and also statistically significant at 1%, indicating that Meloni is less likely to express support for gender equality compared to Salvini.

Focusing on Column (2), this tendency persists even when accounting for government status. Regardless of whether Salvini is in power, Meloni is consistently less likely to adopt a pro-gender equality stance.

These findings hold important policy implications. They challenge the notion, frequently assumed by scholars and public discourse, that the rise of female leadership within the RRP leads to stronger gender advocacy. Although both leaders adopt pro-gender rhetoric more frequently during Salvini’s government term, Meloni’s framing remains significantly less aligned with gender equality values.

This contradicts narratives shaped by Meloni’s own self-presentation (*”I am Giorgia, I*

*am a woman, I am a mother, I am a Christian”*) and raises doubts about whether increasing female representation in RRP politics results in greater policy protection for women’s interests.

## 10 Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine whether the increasing Descriptive Representation of women (i.e., the rising proportion of female politicians in Western European Radical Right Parties (RRPs) translates into greater Substantive Representation through claim-making activity on social media. In doing so, it introduced the concept of Strategic Substantive Representation.

The motivation for this study stems from a well-established body of literature suggesting that greater involvement of social groups in political and policymaking processes leads to outcomes more closely aligned with their preferences. This is the basis for linking Descriptive and Substantive Representation. At the same time, the rise of digital media has transformed how political actors engage with the public, making social media platforms especially vital for radical right figures who benefit from direct, unmediated communication (Heft et al., 2023).

Consequently, a new stream of research has framed Substantive Representation as a form of claim-making. Within the RRP context, female issues are viewed as strategically salient but also rhetorically ambiguous, complicating systematic analysis. Exploring the conditions under which female RRP politicians choose to engage with such topics thus directly addresses questions of gendered political representation and strategic communication.

Public discourse often frames increased female representation as a democratic achievement. However, the literature has tended to treat women’s interests as uniform, largely through a feminist theoretical lens. This perspective suggests that both progressive and conservative female politicians should address female issues similarly. In contrast, this thesis

moves beyond that assumption by investigating whether the "engendering" of the Far Right, through increased female leadership, leads to more discussion of female issues, as predicted by Substantive Representation Theory (SRT).

To that end, I analysed all Facebook captions published by Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni between 2017 and 2022. The Italian case was chosen due to its underexploration in the literature and the media attention surrounding Meloni's rise. Nearly 40,000 Facebook posts were classified using a supervised machine learning approach, with a bespoke Italian-language dictionary created for topic classification.

The results from two logit regressions suggest that Giorgia Meloni is no more likely than Matteo Salvini to post about female issues, challenging the assumptions of SRT. Both leaders appear to engage with such topics to a similar extent in terms of salience (i.e., frequency of discussion).

However, when including an interaction term for the period in which Salvini was in government, a significant result emerged. During this time, Meloni's likelihood of discussing female issues increased by approximately 25% relative to Salvini's, and this result is statistically significant at the 1% level. This suggests that when faced with direct political competition from Salvini in government, Meloni strategically increases her engagement with female issues, possibly leveraging her gender to gain a rhetorical advantage. This finding supports the proposed concept of Strategic Substantive Representation and questions the presumed causal link between Descriptive and Substantive Representation in RRP contexts. These findings were validated through a robustness check using AI-generated annotations.

The analysis was then extended to examine how these issues are framed. After categorising captions about female issues as "pro" gender equality, "against", or "unknown", I re-estimated the models. The results indicate that Meloni is statistically less likely to adopt a pro-gender-equality framing than Salvini. This challenges the assumption, often echoed in media and political narratives, that female leadership within RRPs leads to more progressive gender discourses.

In conclusion, this thesis demonstrates that, within the Italian RRP context, Giorgia Meloni's gender identity has not translated into more frequent or more progressive discussions of female issues on Facebook compared to her male counterpart. In fact, her likelihood of adopting a pro-gender equality stance is lower than Salvini's. At the same time, the evidence shows that her attention to these issues responds to changes in the political environment—most notably, increasing during Salvini's time in government—highlighting the most plausible strategic and conditional nature of her engagement with women's issues. Taken together, these findings may cast doubt on the claim that simply increasing the number of female leaders in RRPs will mechanically produce more advocacy on behalf of women or the promotion of gender-equal policies; instead, substantive representation appears to be shaped by competitive incentives.

Nonetheless, this study has limitations in terms of external validity. Future research should apply the concept of Strategic Substantive Representation to other political systems and social media platforms to explore its broader relevance. A larger, more diverse sample, comprising both male and female politicians across ideological lines, would provide further insight. In the Italian context, an important extension would involve analysing Meloni's behaviour after her appointment as Prime Minister. This event could serve as a natural experiment to assess causal effects and improve external validity.

## References

Akkerman, T. (2015). Gender and the radical right in western europe: a comparative analysis of policy agendas. *Patterns Prejudice*, 49(1-2):37–60.

Arfini, E., Ghigi, R., and Magaraggia, S. (2019). Can feminism be right? a content analysis of discourses about women by female italian right-wing politicians. *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 60(4):693–719.

Baum, J. and Villasenor, J. (2023). The politics of AI: ChatGPT and political bias. <https://>

[www.brookings.edu/articles/the-politics-of-ai-chatgpt-and-political-bias/](http://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-politics-of-ai-chatgpt-and-political-bias/).

Accessed: 2024-1-10.

Ben-shitrit, L., Elad-strenger, J., and Hirsch-hoefler, S. (2022). Pinkwashing the radical-right: Gender and the mainstreaming of radical-right policies and actions. Eur. J. Polit. Res., 61(1):86–110.

Benoit, K., Conway, D., Lauderdale, B. E., Laver, M., and Mikhaylov, S. (2016). Crowd-sourced text analysis: Reproducible and agile production of political data. Am. Polit. Sci. Rev., 110(2):278–295.

Boumans, J. W., & Trilling, D. (2016). Taking stock of the toolkit: An overview of relevant automated content analysis approaches and techniques for digital journalism scholars. Digital Journalism, 4(1):8–23.

Brown, C., Heighberger, N. R., and Shocket, P. A. (1993). Gender-based differences in perceptions of male and female city council candidates. Women & Politics, 13(1):1–17.

Budge, I. (2015). Issue emphases, saliency theory and issue ownership: A historical and conceptual analysis. West European Politics, 38(4):761–777.

Caiani, M. and Wagemann, C. (2009). Online networks of the italian and german extreme right. information. Communication & Society, 12(1):66–109.

Campus, D. (2020). Female populist leaders and communication: Does gender make a difference? In B. Krämer & C. Holtz-Bacha (Eds.), Perspectives on populism and the media, pages 235–254. Nomos.

Celis, K. and Erzeel, S. (2015). Beyond the usual suspects: Non-left, male and non-feminist MPs and the substantive representation of women. Government and Opposition, 50(1):45–64.

De Giorgi, E. (2016). L'opposizione parlamentare in Italia. Dall'antiberlusconismo all'antipolitica. Parliamentary opposition in Italy. From antiberlusconism to antipolitics. Carocci.

de Lange, S. L. and Mügge, L. M. (2015). Gender and right-wing populism in the low countries: ideological variations across parties and time. Patterns Prejudice, 49(1-2):61–80.

Dovi, S. (2007). The Good Representative. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.

Evans, H. (2016). Do women only talk about “female issues”? gender and issue discussion on twitter. Online Inf. Rev., 40(5):660–672.

Farris, S. R. (2017). In the name of women's rights: The rise of femonationalism. Duke University Press.

Feo, F. and Lavizzari, A. (2021). Triumph of the women? The female face of right-wing populism and extremism. Case Study Italy.

Gaweda, B., Siddi, M., and Miller, C. (2022). What's in a name? gender equality and the european conservatives and reformists' group in the european parliament. Party Politics, page 135406882211162.

Gilardi, F., Alizadeh, M., and Kubli, M. (2023). ChatGPT outperforms crowd workers for text-annotation tasks. Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U. S. A., 120(30).

Griffin, J. D. and Newman, B. (2008). Minority report: Evaluating political equality in America. University of Chicago Press.

Guo, B., Zhang, X., Wang, Z., Jiang, M., Nie, J., Ding, Y., Yue, J., and Wu, Y. (2023). How close is ChatGPT to human experts? comparison corpus, evaluation, and detection.

Guo, L., Vargo, C. J., Pan, Z., Ding, W., and Ishwar, P. (2016). Big social data analytics in journalism and mass communication: Comparing dictionary-based text analysis and

unsupervised topic modeling. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 93(2):332–359.

Heft, A., Pfetsch, B., Voskresenskii, V., and Benert, V. (2023). Transnational issue agendas of the radical right? parties' facebook campaign communication in six countries during the 2019 european parliament election. *Eur. J. Commun.*, 38(1):22–42.

Huang, F., Kwak, H., and An, J. (2023). Is ChatGPT better than human annotators? potential and limitations of ChatGPT in explaining implicit hate speech. In *Companion Proceedings of the ACM Web Conference 2023*, New York, NY, USA. ACM.

Jungherr, A. (2016). Twitter use in election campaigns: A systematic literature review. *J. Inf. Technol. Politics*, 13(1):72–91.

Kalia, A., Barr, C., and Giuffrida, A. (2018). Revealed: how italy's populists used facebook to win power. *Guardian*.

King, D. and Matland, R. E. (1999). Partisanship and the impact of candidate gender in congressional elections: Results of an experiment. In *Women Transforming Congress conference*.

Koch, J. (1999). Candidate gender and assessments of senate candidates. *Social Science Quarterly*, 80(1):84–96.

Krippendorff, K. (2019). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). Sage.

Krook, M. L. (2017). Violence against women in politics. *J. Democr.*, 28(1):74–88.

Magin, M., Podschuweit, N., and Hassler, J. (2017). Campaigning in the fourth age of political communication. a multi-method study on the use of facebook by german and austrian parties in the 2013 national election campaigns. *Information Communication and Society*, 20(11):1698–1719.

Mansbridge, J. (1999). Should blacks represent blacks and women represent women? a contingent ‘yes. The Journal of Politics, 61(3):628–657.

Mazzoleni, G. and Bracciale, R. (2018). Socially mediated populism: the communicative strategies of political leaders on facebook. Palgrave Commun., 4(1).

Mechkova, V. and Wilson, S. L. (2021). Norms and rage: Gender and social media in the 2018 U.S. mid-term elections. Elect. Stud., 69(102268):102268.

Mudde, C. (2009). Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Newth, G. (2022). MATTEO SALVINI, GIORGIA MELONI, AND ‘POST-FASCISM’ AS POLITICAL LOGIC. Psa.ac.uk.

Norton, P. (2008). Making sense of opposition. The Journal of Legislative Studies, 14(1/2):236–250.

Nulty, P., Theocharis, Y., Popa, S. A., Pernet, O., and Benoit, K. (2016). Social media and political communication in the 2014 elections to the european parliament. Elect. Stud., 44:429–444.

OpenAI (2022). Introducing ChatGPT. <https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt>. Accessed: 2024-1-10.

Petrocik, J. R. (1996). Issue ownership in presidential elections, with a 1980 case study. Am. J. Pol. Sci., 40(3):825.

Pitkin, H. F. (1972). Concept of Representation. University of California Press.

Powell, Jr, G. B. (2004). Political representation in comparative politics. Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci. (Palo Alto), 7:273–296.

Puleo, L. and Piccolino, G. (2022). Back to the post-fascist past or landing in the populist radical right? the brothers of italy between continuity and change. South Eur. Soc. Polit., 27(3):359–383.

Reingold, B. (2000). Representing Women: Sex, Gender and Legislative Behavior in Arizona and California. University of North Carolina Press.

Riffe, D., Lacy, S., Fico, F., and Watson, B. (2019). Analyzing media messages: Using quantitative content analysis in research. Routledge.

Runciman, D. (2009). Hobbes's theory of representation: anti-democratic or proto-democratic. In I. Shapiro, S. Stokes, E. Wood, & A. Kirshner (Eds.), Political Representation, pages 15–34. Cambridge University Press.

Saward, M. (2006). The representative claim. Contemp. Polit. Theory, 5(3):297–318.

Scharkow, M. (2013). Thematic content analysis using supervised machine learning: An empirical evaluation using german online news. Qual. Quant., 47(2):761–773.

Scrinzi, F. (2017). A “new” national front? gender, religion, secularism and the french populist radical right. In Köttig, M., Bitzan, R., and Petö, A., editors, Gender and far right politics in Europe, pages 127–140. Springer.

Severs, E. (2012). Substantive representation through a claims-making lens: A strategy for the identification and analysis of substantive claims. Representation (McDougall Trust), 48(2):169–181.

Spierings, N. (2020). Why gender and sexuality are both trivial and pivotal in populist radical right politics. In Right-Wing Populism and Gender, pages 41–58. transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, Germany.

van Atteveldt, W. and Peng, T.-Q. (2018). When communication meets computation: Opportunities, challenges, and pitfalls in computational communication science. Commun. Methods Meas., 12(2-3):81–92.

## A Acronyms and Glossary

### List of Acronyms

**RRP** Radical Right Parties **SRT** Substantive Representation Theory

### Glossary

- **Descriptive Representation:** The proportion of female politicians in an elected institution.
- **Female Issue:** An issue that explicitly concerns women or reflects female traits, as defined by Evans (2016). See Table 1 for a detailed classification.
- **Strategic Substantive Representation:** A concept proposed in this paper describing how female RRP politicians selectively engage with female issues when it is politically strategic.
- **Substantive Representation:** Refers to increased political discourse and policy attention to female issues by conservative female leaders.

Table 2: Estimates from Logit Regressions

<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Pr(Dictionary_female_issue)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Salvini_gov	0.179*	0.166	0.234***	0.135*
	(0.093)	(0.109)	(0.068)	(0.075)
Meloni			0.023	−0.041
			(0.034)	(0.040)
Salvini_gov:Meloni				0.266***
				(0.080)
Election	0.592***	−0.019	0.175	0.172
	(0.195)	(0.201)	(0.128)	(0.128)
Public_opinion	0.008***	0.001	0.001*	0.001
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Constant	−2.236***	−2.278***	−2.215***	−2.187***
	(0.065)	(0.170)	(0.057)	(0.058)
Year FE	YES	YES	YES	YES
Sample	Salvini	Meloni	Both	Both
Observations	23,508	12,813	36,321	36,321
Log Likelihood	−8,309.100	−4,698.332	−13,031.170	−13,025.590
Akaike Inf. Crit.	16,636.200	9,414.664	26,082.330	26,073.180

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

**Notes** The dependent variable is the logit of the likelihood that a caption is classified as a female issue ( $Y = 1$ ). Column 1 reports the results for Salvini. Column 2 for Meloni. Column 3 includes both politicians without interaction. Column 4 includes the interaction term.

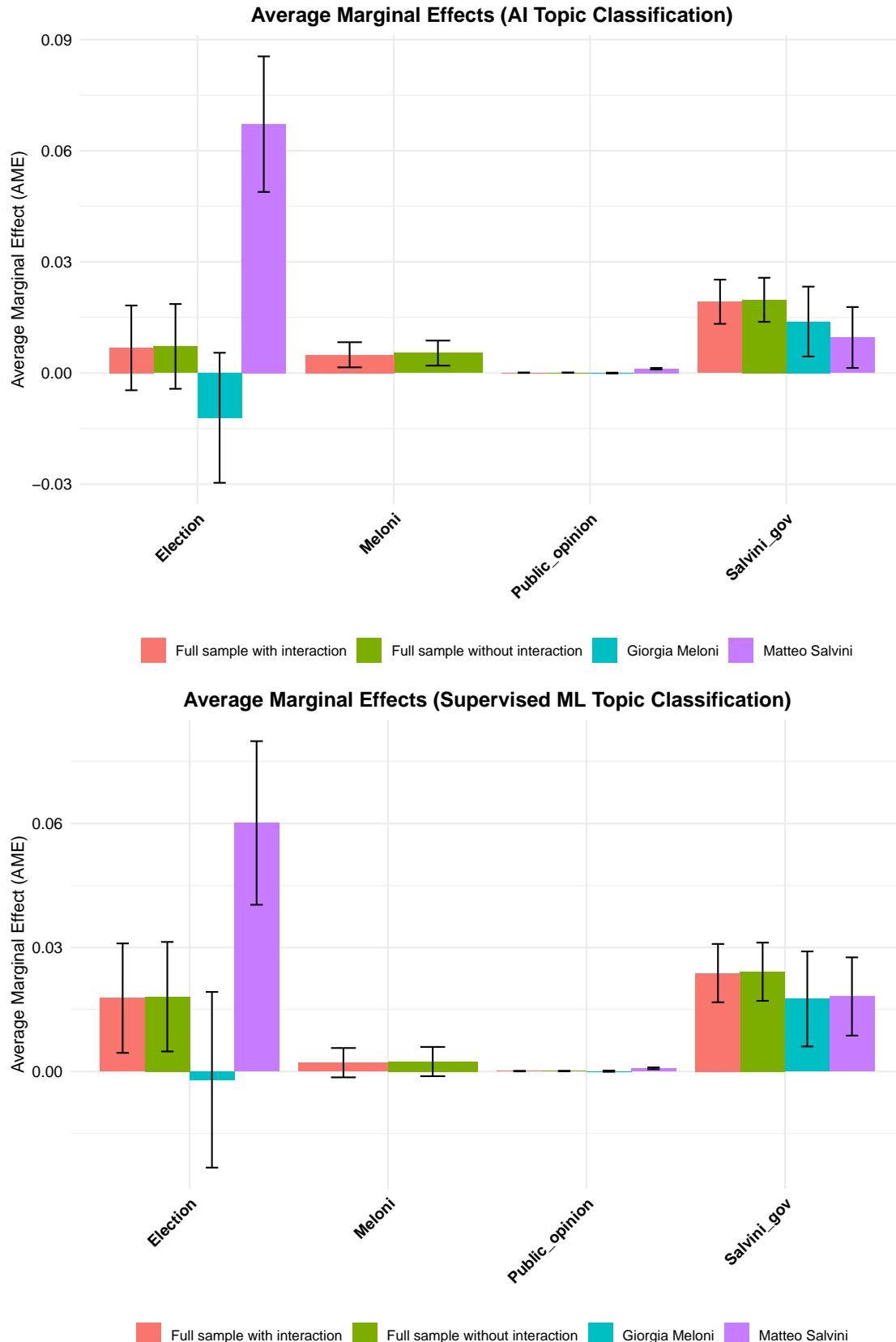
Table 3: Estimates from Logit Regressions

<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Pr(AI_female_issue)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Salvini_gov	0.103 (0.088)	0.149 (0.101)	0.212*** (0.064)	0.102 (0.070)
Meloni			0.058 (0.036)	−0.033 (0.044)
Salvini_gov:Meloni				0.296*** (0.078)
Election	0.721*** (0.196)	−0.129 (0.188)	0.077 (0.122)	0.073 (0.123)
Public_opinion	0.012*** (0.002)	−0.0003 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Constant	−2.139*** (0.063)	−2.061*** (0.159)	−2.078*** (0.055)	−2.038*** (0.056)
Year FE	YES	YES	YES	YES
Sample	Salvini	Meloni	Both	Both
Observations	23,508	12,813	36,321	36,321
Log Likelihood	−7,771.236	−4,229.141	−12,041.560	−12,034.440
Akaike Inf. Crit.	15,560.470	8,476.281	24,103.120	24,090.890

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

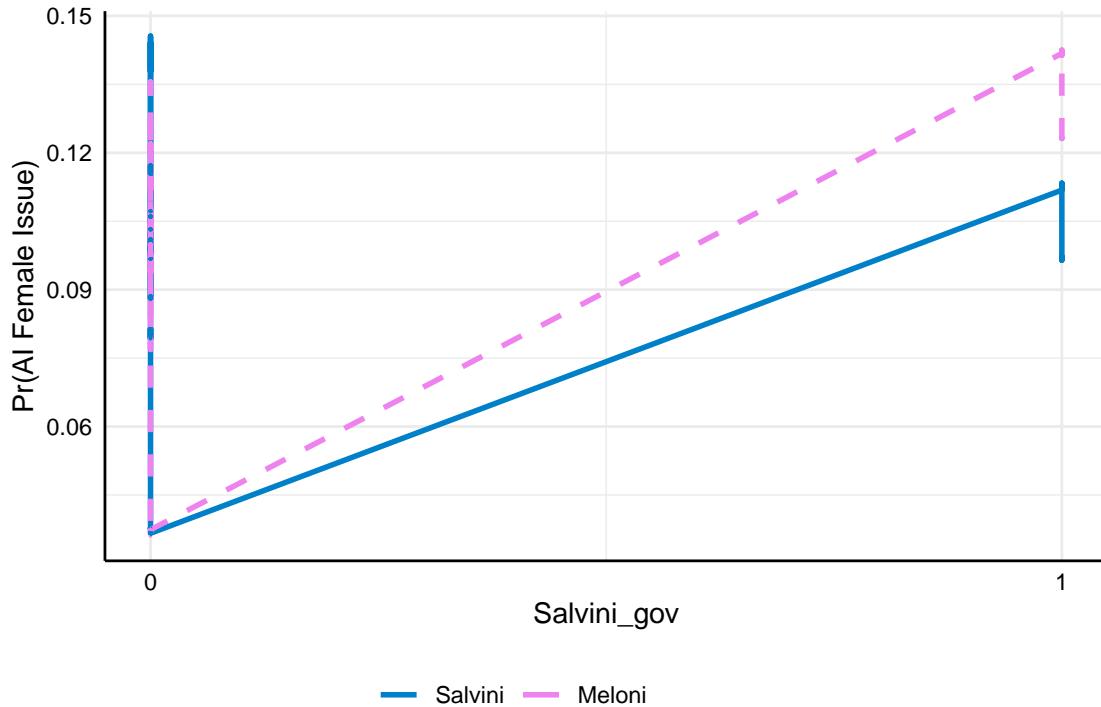
**Notes:** The dependent variable is a binary indicator for whether a caption is classified as a female issue ( $Y = 1$ ). Column 1 reports results for Salvini's posts, Column 2 for Meloni's posts, Column 3 combines both without interaction, and Column 4 includes the interaction term.

Figure 5: Change in Likelihood of Discussing Female Issues



**Notes:** These graphs compare marginal effects from <sup>14</sup> supervised ML classification and ChatGPT-based classification.

Figure 6: Strategic Change in Female Issue Discussion (AI Outcome)



**Notes:** This graph shows how the probability of Meloni discussing female issues increases when Salvini is in government, in comparison to Salvini's own behaviour.

Figure 7: Frequency of Captions by Meloni and Salvini by Classification

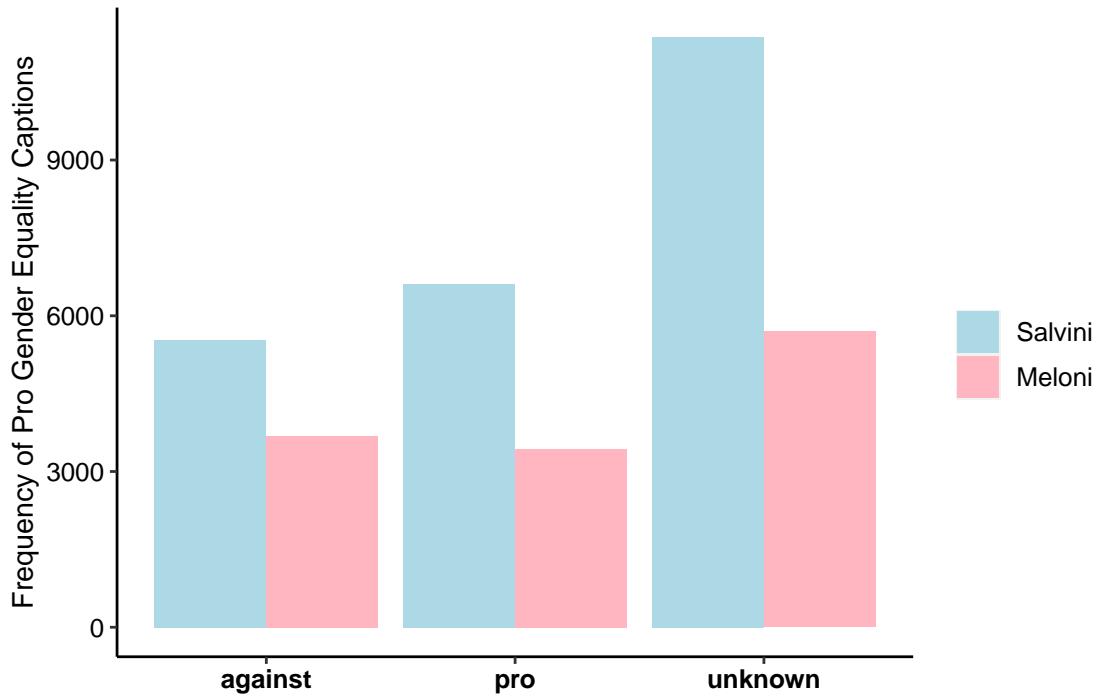


Figure 8: Distribution of Pro-Gender Equality Posts by Meloni and Salvini

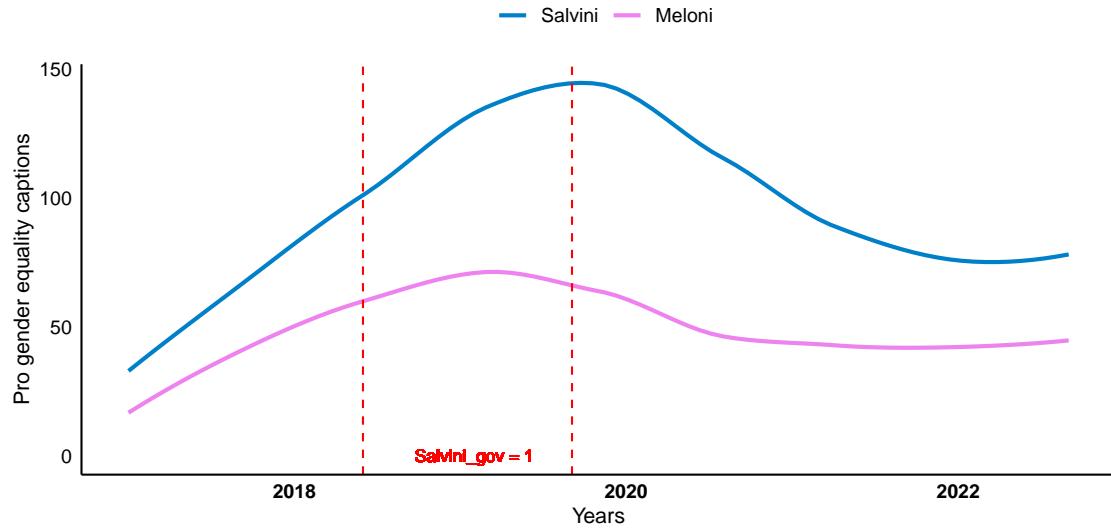


Figure 9: Trend of Meloni's Pro-Gender Equality Posts Over Time

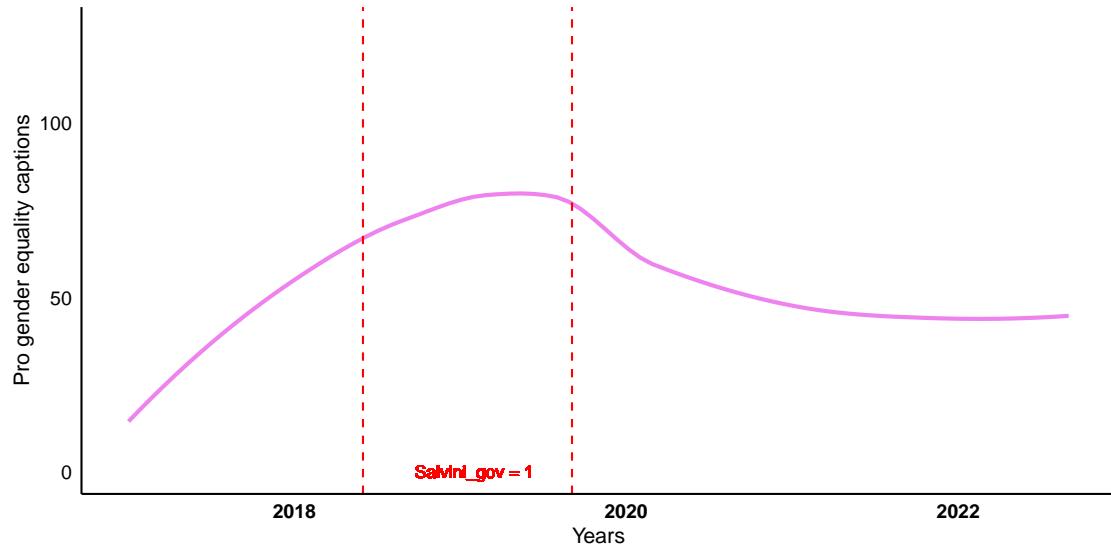


Table 4: Estimates from Logit Regressions

<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Pr(pro_gender_equality)	
	(1)	(2)
Salvini_gov	0.188*** (0.042)	0.222*** (0.051)
Meloni	−0.173*** (0.035)	−0.173*** (0.035)
Salvini_gov:Meloni		−0.083 (0.072)
Election	0.023 (0.083)	0.005 (0.085)
Public_opinion	−0.002*** (0.0005)	−0.002*** (0.001)
Constant	−1.140*** (0.043)	−1.125*** (0.045)
Year FE	YES	YES
Sample	Both	Both
Observations	36,321	36,321
Log Likelihood	−21,325.920	−21,325.260
Akaike Inf. Crit.	42,671.850	42,672.520

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

**Notes** The dependent variable is the logit of the likelihood that a caption is classified as pro-gender equality ( $Y = 1$ ). Column 1 reports the results for the full sample without interaction. Column 2 includes the interaction term.

## B Additional Tables

Table 5: Election Dates

Election Date	Regional	National	Municipal	European
6/11/2017				x
11/5/2017				x
3/4/2018	x	x		
6/10/2018				x
7/29/2018				x
10/21/2018				x
2/10/2019	x			
3/24/2019	x			
5/26/2019				x
5/26/2019	x			
6/16/2019				x
6/23/2019				x
7/7/2019				x
7/14/2019				x
10/27/2019	x			
11/10/2019				x
1/26/2020	x			
9/20/2020	x			
10/25/2020				x
10/3/2021				x
10/10/2021				x
11/7/2021				x
6/12/2022	x			
9/25/2022				x
11/27/2022				x

**Notes** Data about Regional, National, Municipal and European elections has been gathered from elezioni-istorico.interno.gov.it.

Table 6: Complete Dataset Descriptive Statistics

Matteo Salvini					
Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
dummy_campn	23,512	.17	.37	0	1
dummy_culture	23,512	.02	.15	0	1
dummy_defense	23,512	.07	.25	0	1
dummy_economy	23,512	.03	.17	0	1
dummy_education	23,512	.02	.15	0	1
dummy_environment	23,512	.02	.18	0	1
dummy_family	23,512	.07	.07	0	1
dummy_healthcare	23,512	.03	.16	0	1
dummy_media	23,512	.08	.28	0	1
dummy_migration	23,512	.16	.36	0	1
dummy_national_values	23,512	.30	.30	0	1
dummy_other	23,512	.10	.30	0	1
dummy_women	23,512	.03	.17	0	1
dummy_welfare	23,512	.01	.11	0	1
dummy_youth	23,512	.01	.11	0	1
public_opinion	23,512	40.44	21.02	1	70.00
election	23,512	.0282009	.1655498	0	1
Salvini_gov	23,512	.2645121	.4410822	0	1

Giorgia Meloni					
Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
dummy_campn	12,809	.010	.29	0	1
dummy_culture	12,809	.01	.083	0	1
dummy_defense	12,809	.06	.24	0	1
dummy_economy	12,809	.06	.24	0	1
dummy_education	12,809	.01	.12	0	1
dummy_environment	12,809	.01	.09	0	1
dummy_family	12,809	.01	.10	0	1
dummy_healthcare	12,809	.03	.16	0	1
dummy_media	12,809	.12	.33	0	1
dummy_migration	12,809	.12	.32	0	1
dummy_national_values	12,809	.37	.3749575	0	1
dummy_other	12,809	.02	.14	0	1
dummy_women	12,809	.03	.18	0	1
dummy_welfare	12,809	.02	.17	0	1
dummy_youth	12,809	.01	.11	0	1
public_opinion	12,809	32.32	19.05	1.00	62.0
election	12,809	.03	.1780719	0	1
Salvini_gov	12,809	.28	.4497643	0	1

**Notes** This table presents general descriptive statistics for the complete dataset. It is important to note that the dataset is balanced and does not contain any missing values.

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics - Issues' Distribution

Classification	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
<b>Matteo Salvini</b>			
other	2384	10.15	10.15
campaign	3928	16.70	26.85
culture	532	2.26	29.11
defense	1606	6.83	35.94
economy	705	3.00	38.94
education	546	2.32	41.26
environment	400	1.70	42.96
family	117	0.50	43.46
healthcare	652	2.77	46.23
media	1938	8.25	54.48
migration	3651	15.54	70.02
national_values	2372	10.10	80.12
party_position	3408	14.51	94.63
violence	65	0.28	94.91
welfare	296	1.26	96.17
women	659	2.81	98.98
youth	282	1.20	100.00
Total	23512	100.00	
<b>Giorgia Meloni</b>			
other	238	1.86	1.86
campaign	1220	9.52	11.38
culture	89	0.69	12.07
defense	793	6.19	18.26
economy	755	5.89	24.15
education	179	1.40	25.55
environment	111	0.87	26.42
family	142	1.11	27.53
healthcare	335	2.61	30.14
media	1570	12.25	42.39
migration	1475	11.51	53.90
national_values	2166	16.92	70.82
party_position	2787	21.76	92.58
violence	94	0.73	93.31
welfare	242	1.89	95.20
women	444	3.47	98.67
youth	169	1.32	100.00
Total	12809	100.00	

**Notes** Comments about this table can be found in Section 6.

Table 8: Descriptive Statistics - Issues' Distribution when Salvini is in the Government

Classification	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
<b>Matteo Salvini</b>			
other	721	11.58	11.58
campaign	951	15.28	26.86
culture	148	2.38	29.24
defense	554	8.90	38.14
economy	122	1.95	40.09
education	119	1.91	42.00
environment	117	1.88	43.88
family	22	0.35	44.23
healthcare	74	1.19	45.42
media	536	8.61	54.03
migration	1245	20.00	74.03
national_values	575	9.24	83.27
party_position	755	12.13	95.40
violence	11	0.17	95.57
welfare	69	1.10	96.67
women	153	2.46	99.13
youth	53	0.85	100.00
Total	6225	100.00	
<b>Giorgia Meloni</b>			
campaign	392	10.87	10.87
culture	16	0.44	11.31
defense	288	7.98	19.30
economy	261	7.24	26.53
education	32	0.89	27.42
environment	44	1.22	28.64
family	62	1.72	30.36
healthcare	46	1.28	31.63
media	391	10.84	42.47
migration	528	14.64	57.11
national_values	627	17.38	74.49
other	64	1.77	76.27
party_position	599	16.61	92.87
violence	35	0.97	93.85
welfare	50	1.39	95.23
women	134	3.71	98.95
youth	38	1.05	100.00
Total	3606	100.00	

**Notes** Comments about this table can be found in Section 6.

Table 9: Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)

Variable	VIF	$GVIF^{1/(2 \cdot Df)}$
Salvini_gov	3.11	1.764501
Meloni	1.02	1.008996
election	1.51	1.229551
public_opinion	1.84	1.357292
year	4.57	1.164196

**Notes** This table shows VIF values for all the variables included in the regression. All values computed are below the critical value - i.e., 10 - confirming that multicollinearity is not a threat to our model.

Table 10: Non-parametric Bootstrap Results for Logistic Regression with Interaction

Term	Statistic	Bias	Std. Error
(Intercept)	-2.19	0	0
Salvini_gov	0.135	0	0
Meloni	-0.0412	0	0
election	0.172	0	0
public_opinion	0.00100	0	0
year2018	-0.239	0	0
year2019	-0.415	0	0
year2020	0.254	0	0
year2021	0.542	0	0
year2022	0.415	0	0
Salvini_gov:Meloni	0.266	0	0

**Notes** This table shows non-parametric bootstrapped estimates. By comparing Observed with Bootstrap estimates, the bias is zero corroborating the robustness of our main results.