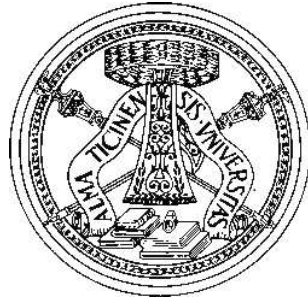


**UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PAVIA**  
**Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali**  
**Corso di Laurea in World Politics and International Relations**



**The Italian gender cleavage: digital socialization  
and the role of populist mobilization**

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# INDEX

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. ITALIAN ELECTIONS IN 2022 AND GENERATIONAL GENDER GAP ...</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1 The results .....	3
1.2 Youth voting patterns .....	5
1.3 Abstentionism: the silent crisis of engagement .....	8
1.4 Divergence between men and women .....	11
1.5 Is this new? Is the divide widening? .....	12
<b>2. FROM CLASS CLEAVAGE TO IDENTITY CLEAVAGE? .....</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1 Theory of cleavages .....	14
2.1.1 What is a structural cleavage? .....	15
2.1.2 From Dealignment to re-alignment: the “thawing” of the political market .....	17
2.2 Socio-economic transformations of the youth: precariousness and structural asymmetries .....	18
2.2.1 The “Precariat” and the collapse of the generational pact .....	18
2.2.2 The educational sorpasso .....	19
2.2.3 Economic insecurity and the paradox of inactivity .....	20
2.2.4 Liquid modernity .....	21
2.3 Gender as a political identity: the emergence of a parallel cleavage .....	22
2.3.1 Cultural transformations and the politicization of gender .....	22
2.3.2 Testing the cleavage: Bartolini-Mair criteria .....	25
2.3.3 A parallel fracture: intersectionality and pluralism of the youth .....	27
<b>3. SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF DIVERGENCE.....</b>	<b>29</b>
3.1 The Youth digital information ecosystem: disintermediation and exclusion .....	29
3.2 Algorithmic architecture: the “scrolling backwards” phenomenon .....	31
3.3 Digital communities: the Italian “manosphere” and the far-right shift .....	34
3.4 Cleavage stabilization and digital encapsulation .....	36
<b>4. POPULISM AND IDENTITY MOBILIZATION .....</b>	<b>39</b>
4.1 Defining populism: the moralization of conflict .....	39
4.2 Italian populism and the architecture of identity rhetoric .....	44

4.3	Populism and gender: constructing a gendered “people” .....	45
4.4	Populism as a catalyst: translating insecurity into antagonism .....	50
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>		<b>52</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>		<b>54</b>



## INTRODUCTION

The Italian general election held on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022, is frequently noted for its significant “first”: Giorgia Meloni becomes the first female Prime Minister of the Country. It was considered a relevant shift that seemed to suggest a new era for female leadership. Yet, behind this symbolic breakthrough lies a much quieter, more unsettling story. As the headlines emphasized a move toward the right, a significant divide was emerging among the youngest Italians. We are witnessing a “Parallel Fracture” – a phenomenon where young men and women, despite growing up in the same towns, attending the same school, and facing the same economic insecurities, are beginning to inhabit two entirely different ideological realities.

Historically, political science focused on class, religion, and territory as the primary engines of electoral stability. In that world, gender was just a footnote – a demographic detail that rarely disrupted the status quo. But today, in the wake of the *educational sorpasso* – where young women are now consistently outperforming their male peers – and the collapse of the traditional communities that once “encapsulated” us, gender has moved from the sidelines to the very center of the political battlefield.

The central research question of this thesis is: *How has digital socialization, mediated by populist rhetoric and algorithmic filtering, transformed the gender gap among Italian youth into a structural political cleavage?*

To answer this, the thesis is structured into four chapters. Chapter 1 analyses the 2022 electoral data, highlighting the paradox of high abstentionism among women, especially in the South, and the rightward shift of young men. Chapter 2 applies classical cleavage theory to these findings, examining the socio-economic roots of the “Precariat”<sup>1</sup> and the status anxiety triggered by women’s educational gains.

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<sup>1</sup> Standing, G. (2011). *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Chapter 3 explores the technological mechanism of this divide, proposing the concept of “Digital Encapsulation” as a modern replacement for the physical subcultures of the 20th century. Finally, Chapter 4 examines the “supply side” of the fracture, analysing how populist actors utilize gendered narratives to mobilize or disenfranchise different segments of the youth electorate.

Ultimately, this work suggests that the “Parallel Fracture” is not a temporary glitch in Italian democracy, but a structural realignment that challenges the very foundations of social cohesion in the digital age.

# 1. Italian elections in 2022 and generational gender gap

The 2022 Italian general election serves as a foundational case study for analysing the structural reconfiguration of the European electorate. While the victory of Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) was the headline result, a deeper analysis of the post-vote data reveals a profound disconnect between the national average and the voting behaviour of the youngest cohorts: this can suggest a deep structural realignment. This chapter maps the 2022 results to demonstrate that the "Parallel Fracture" – a divergence in political socialization between young men and women – is an empirical phenomenon rooted in specific socio-demographic cleavages.

## 1.1 The results

The most important result was the clear victory of Fratelli d'Italia (a national-conservative and right-wing populist party) which became the largest party mainly thanks to strong electoral flows from the Lega and the Five Star Movement, rather than from former non-voters. In particular, a large share of Lega voters from 2019 shifted to FdI, showing a clear change within the centre-right. What is worth mentioning is the massive consensus towards FdI which earned + 21,7% with an increase of 6 million votes compared to 2018, which, in percentage terms of number of votes, are worth +410.4%. At the same time, Lega was the right-wing party that lost the most: compared to the 2018 European elections it lost many voters (-8,8%), who either moved to FdI or chose not to vote, contributing to higher abstentionism. The M5S, even though it did better than expected in early polls, declined sharply compared to 2018 (-17,3%). Only a small part of its previous voters confirmed their choice, while many abstained or switched to FdI. The Democratic Party, instead, kept a relatively stable electorate but struggled to grow

(-0.2%), failing to attract new voters and losing some support to Azione–Italia Viva.<sup>23</sup>

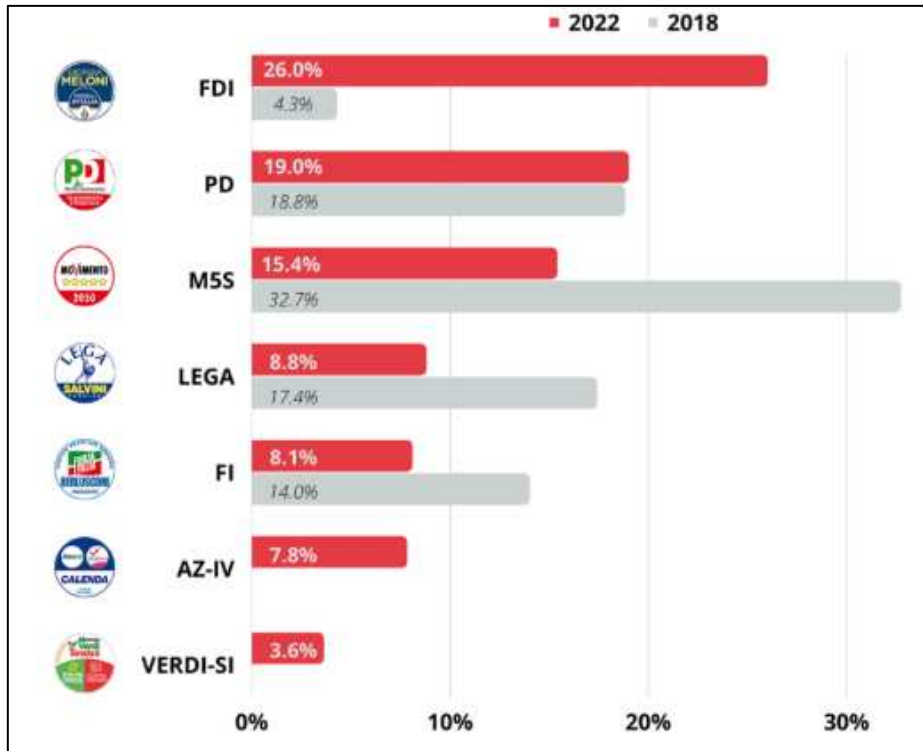


Table 1. Conflavoro (2022). Elezioni Politiche 2022: i dati finali.

Looking at table 2, it is easy to notice that the support for the Partito Democratico (PD) is positively correlated with high educational attainment, reaching its peak among university graduates (24.5%). Conversely, Fratelli d’Italia (FdI) demonstrates a dominant presence among voters with a lower secondary education (*licenza media*, 31.7%). This “graduate divide” suggests that the PD has solidified its role as the party of the “intellectual elite” or “cognitive class”, whereas FdI and M5S interpellated segments of the population with lower cultural capital.

<sup>2</sup> Ipsos (2022). Elezioni politiche 25 settembre 2022: i risultati elettorali e le analisi post-voto di Ipsos. [online] Ipsos. Available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/it-it/elezioni-politiche-risultati-elettorali-analisi-post-voto-ipsos>

<sup>3</sup> Conflavoro (2022). Elezioni Politiche 2022: i dati finali. [online] www.conflavoro.it. Available at: <https://www.conflavoro.it/elezioni-politiche-2022-dati-finali/>

The distribution of the vote by professional status indicates a total subversion of traditional class-based voting. FdI has effectively replaced the Left as the primary representative of the working class, securing 33.4% among blue-collar workers (*operai*). The PD, historically the “party of the workers”, garnered only 13.9% in this segment. The Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) remains the dominant force among the economically vulnerable, leading among the unemployed and students (25.1%). The PD’s base is heavily leaning toward retirees (23.4%) and public sector employees, reinforcing its image as a party of stability rather than transformative change.<sup>4</sup>

## IL VOTO SECONDO LE CARATTERISTICHE SOCIO-DEMOGRAFICHE

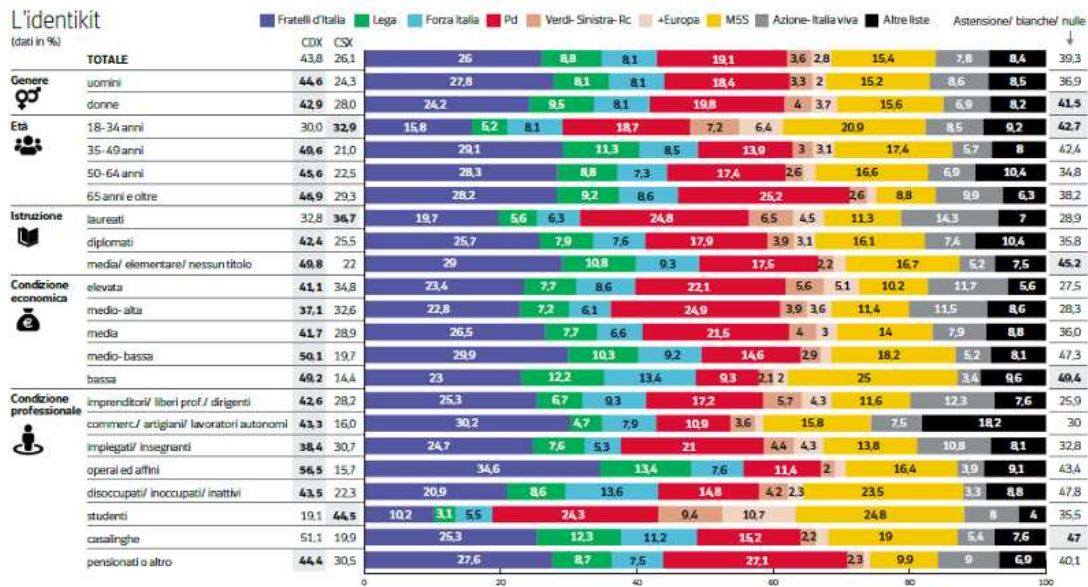


Table 2. Ipsos (2022). Elezioni politiche 25 settembre 2022: i risultati elettorali e le analisi post-voto.

## 1.2 Youth voting patterns

The primary evidence for a generational fracture lies in the discrepancy between national outcomes and the preferences of the youngest cohort. While *Fratelli*

<sup>4</sup> Ipsos (2022). Elezioni politiche 25 settembre 2022: i risultati elettorali e le analisi post-voto di Ipsos.

d'Italia (FdI) secured a dominant 26% of the national vote, it encountered a significant “demographic ceiling” among the youngest voters.<sup>5</sup>

### COME HANNO VOTATO I GEN Z E I MILLENNIAL

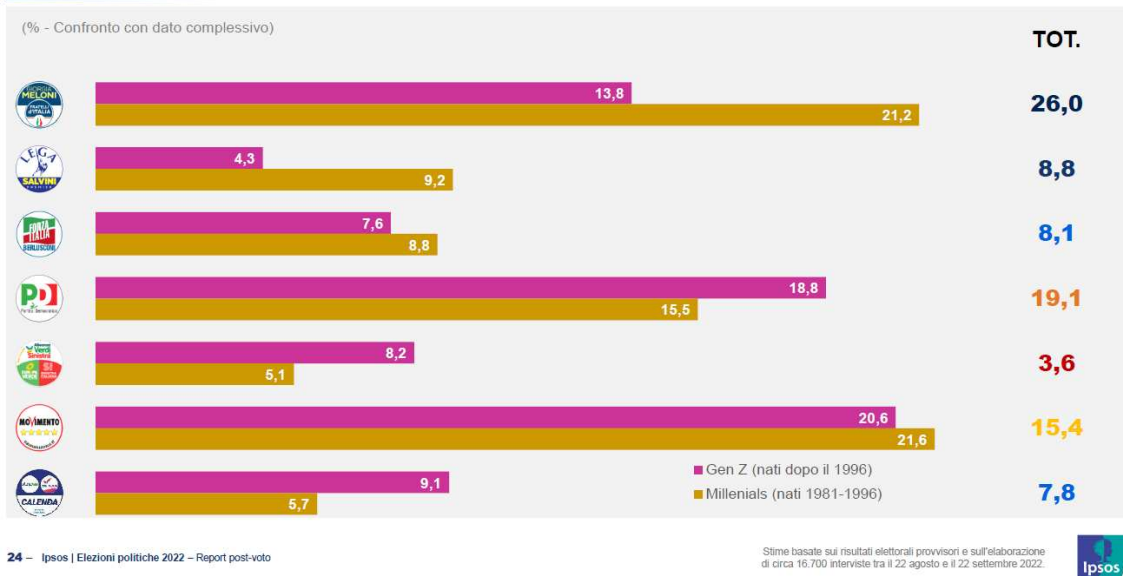


Table 3. Ipsos (2022): Elezioni politiche 25 settembre 2022: il confronto tra Generazione Z e Millennials

According to Ipsos, the distribution of preferences for the 18–24 age group reveals a tripolar competition:

- Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S): 21.6% for Millennials and 20.6% for Gen Z.
- Partito Democratico (PD): 15.5% for Millennials and 18.8% from Gen Z.
- Fratelli d'Italia (FdI): 21.2% for Millennials and 13.8% for Gen Z.<sup>6</sup>

This data suggests that the “Meloni wave” was a phenomenon primarily driven by older demographics. For Gen Z, the election was defined by a competition where the “anti-system” appeal of the M5S and the “progressive” appeal of the PD both outperformed the national winner. As Ipsos notes, FdI is the only major party that saw its support decrease as the age of the voter decreased, highlighting a clear

<sup>5</sup> Ipsos (2022). Elezioni politiche 25 settembre 2022: il confronto tra Generazione Z e Millennials. [online] Ipsos. Available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/it-it/millennials-generazione-z-rapporto-giovani-politica-italia>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*

generational resistance to the far-right's traditionalist platform, suggesting that its traditionalist message struggled to find resonance among those most socialized in digital environment.

This data confirms a state of partisan dealignment among the youth. As Maggini argues, the historical “Left” advantage among young people has evolved into a more volatile “opinion-based” vote, where the youngest voters gravitate toward parties that prioritize post-materialist values (such as environmentalism and civil rights) or anti-system populism.<sup>7</sup> The exceptional performance of AVS among Gen Z – nearly triple its national average – underscores a youth electorate that is ideologically out of sync with the conservative-traditionalist turn of the broader country.

A critical reason for this “distance” is the changing nature of political communication. Cepernich and Martella argue that the 2022 election marked a shift where politics moved from being a “subject” to an “object” of narration: “TikTok is not just another app [...] it is a heavy factor of innovation that is transforming political communication at the roots. [...] It generates a multitude of personal micro-programs”.<sup>8</sup>

This algorithmic logic favours a hyper-personalized and ultra-pop style. While Giorgia Meloni attempted to bridge this gap through a “strategy of normalization” – softening her image by focusing on her identity as a mother and woman – the results suggest that for Gen Z, this remained a performance rather than a point of authentic connection.

The voting patterns of Gen Z and Millennials in 2022 were characterized by a profound sense of alienation from traditional political communication. The political campaign was widely characterized as the “TikTok election”, with leaders

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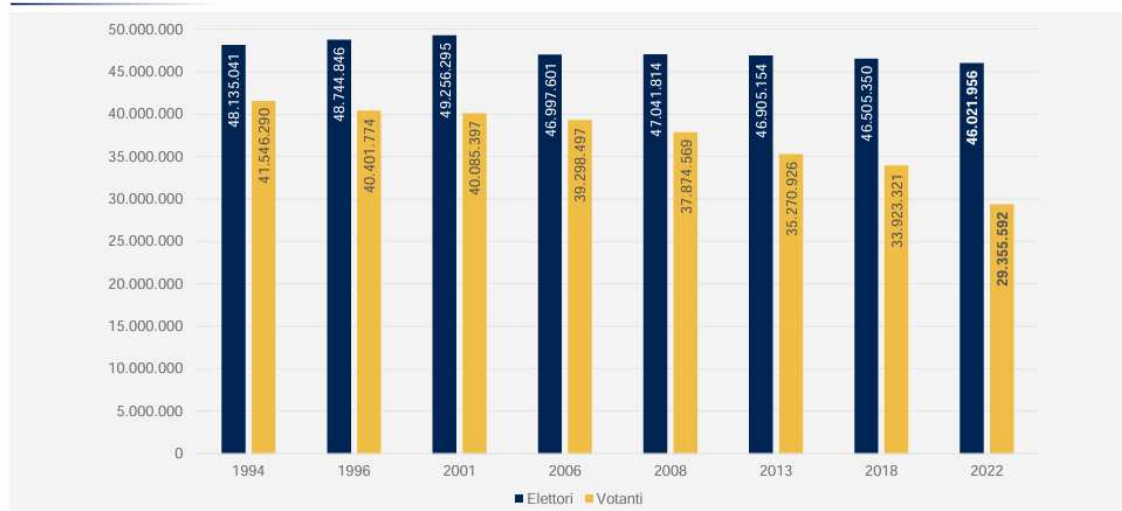
<sup>7</sup> Maggini, N. (2017). *Young People's Voting Behaviour in Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59243-9>.

<sup>8</sup> Cepernich, C. and Martella, A. (2024) La politica da soggetto a oggetto della narrazione elettorale. Le elezioni politiche 2022 su TikTok in Italia, *Rivista di Digital Politics*, 2, pp. 225.

attempting to bridge the gap through digital platforms. However, empirical evidence suggests that these efforts failed to produce a sense of genuine representation. Amendola and Masullo argue that while politicians “inhabited” the same digital spaces as Gen Z, they failed to master the operating rules of those spaces. The authors highlight a survey conducted by *Freeda*<sup>9</sup> on a sample of voters under 34, which found that 80% of respondents do not feel that the language used by political leaders reflects their own. Despite the massive use of social media (TikTok, Instagram) during the campaign: “The young and very young continue to perceive [politicians'] language as distant from that typical of Z generation”.<sup>10</sup>

### 1.3 Abstentionism: the silent crisis of engagement

#### L'AFFLUENZA VALORI ASSOLUTI - TREND



9 – Ipsos | Elezioni politiche 2022 – Report post-voto

Fonte: Ministero dell'Interno. I risultati delle elezioni 2022 sono aggiornati al 03/10 (11 sezioni mancanti).



Table 4. Ipsos (2022). Elezioni politiche 25 settembre 2022: i risultati elettorali e le analisi post-voto.

<sup>9</sup> Survey conducted by the page Freeda available at <https://www.instagram.com/freeda/?hl=it> cited in Amendola, A. and Masullo, M. (2023) Elezioni e social network: gli effetti della politica (ultra) pop sulla generazione Z

<sup>10</sup> Amendola, A. and Masullo, M. (2023) Elezioni e social network: gli effetti della politica (ultra) pop sulla generazione Z, *Rivista di Digital Politics*, 1, pp. 157-182.

The Italian general elections held on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2022 recorded the lowest voter turnout since the birth of the Republic at only 63.9%. This nearly 10-percentage-point drop from 2018 is not merely a quantitative decline but a qualitative shift in the relationship between citizens and the state.

As Tuorto and Sartori point out, the Italian case has been marked by an apparent contradiction: “female electoral mobilization has been massive since the early years of democracy,” yet it “has not been accompanied by an adequate enhancement of women’s presence in political institutions”.<sup>11</sup>

During the First Republic mass parties acted as powerful socialization agents that mobilized women effectively, often resulting in very high female turnout rates (exceeding 90%). In this context, “going to the polls was conceived as a duty by the majority of voters”, while “abstention was considered a form of unacceptable behaviour”.<sup>12</sup> In the Second Republic, women’s disengagement from electoral participation became more pronounced and structural. As the authors argue, “the increasing autonomy of women’s political choices has increasingly translated into abstention”.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, declining participation may also stem from the “rejection of a form of politics conceived as male, patriarchal, and not suited to women”.<sup>14</sup>

The analysis of women’s electoral participation in Italy reveals a complex trajectory, characterized by a profound transformation in the relationship between women and politics over time. According to Tuorto and Sartori, Italy’s historical “gender gap” in turnout has inverted. While women once participated at high rates,

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<sup>11</sup> Tuorto, D. and Sartori, L. (2020) Quale genere di astensionismo? La partecipazione elettorale delle donne in Italia nel periodo 1948-2018, *Società Mutamento Politica*, 11(22), p. 11

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem* p.12

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem* p.14

<sup>14</sup> Cavarero A. (2002), *Stately Bodies*, Michigan University Press, Chicago cit. in Tuorto, D. and Sartori, L. (2020) Quale genere di astensionismo? La partecipazione elettorale delle donne in Italia nel periodo 1948-2018

there is a decline among young adults where young women are more likely to abstain compared to their male counterparts.<sup>15</sup>

Falzetti and Maraviglia’s work led to the discovery of another distinction between Northern and Southern Italy (Tab.5). In the Northern regions, female turnout remains relatively high and stable, closely tracking male participation. This “virtuous” cycle is driven by higher levels of female labour market integration and a more robust civic culture. In these areas, voting is still perceived as a functional tool of citizenship. In Southern Italy, instead, the female turnout collapses. In many large Southern cities, the gap between male and female participation is double the national average. Political disaffection is not a choice, but a byproduct of structural marginalization.<sup>16</sup>

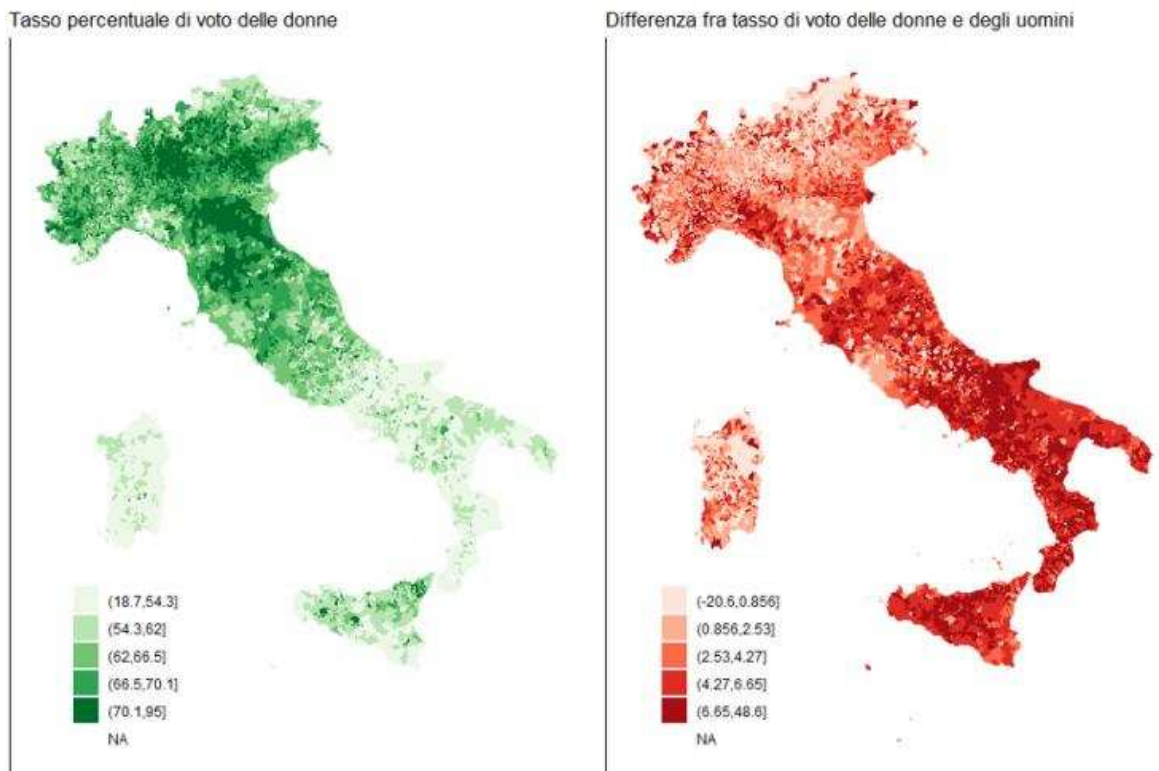


Table 5. Maraviglia, L. (2023). Due Italie nella disaffezione al voto delle donne

<sup>15</sup> Tuorto, D. and Sartori, L. (2020) Quale genere di astensionismo? La partecipazione elettorale delle donne in Italia nel periodo 1948-2018, *Società Mutamento Politica*, 11(22), p. 11

<sup>16</sup> Maraviglia, L. (2023). Due Italie nella disaffezione al voto delle donne. P. Falzetti e L. Maraviglia. [online] Lavoce.info. Available at: <https://lavoce.info/archives/99656/duo-italie-nella-disaffezione-al-voto-delle-donne/>

## 1.4 Divergence between men and women

### COME HANNO VOTATO LE DONNE E GLI UOMINI

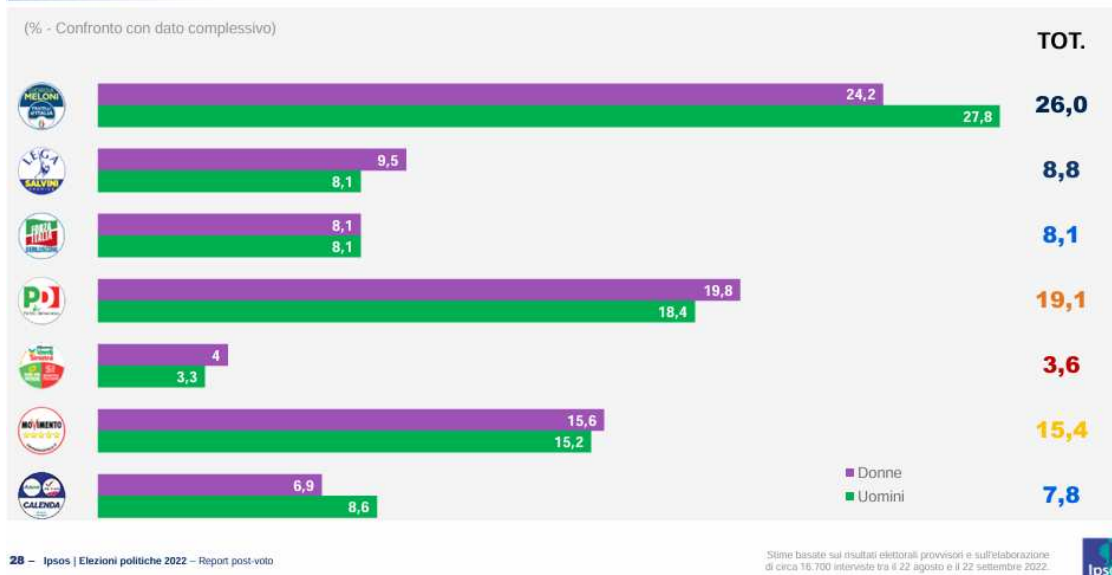


Table 6. Ipsos (2022). Elezioni politiche 25 settembre 2022: i risultati elettorali e le analisi post-voto.

The 2022 election solidified a clear gendered characterization of Italian political poles. The Ipsos data highlights a “masculinization” of the Right: Fratelli d’Italia and the Lega possess electorates that are predominantly male (53% and 56% respectively), whereas the Partito Democratico remains the only major force with a majority female base (52%).<sup>17</sup>

A study from the Monitoring Democracy observatory at Bocconi University’s Department of Social and Political Sciences collected some data regarding the vote among young women and men and the results show that Brothers of Italy covered the 15% among young men, and only 4.2% among young women. The opposite happens for Partito Democratico which has the majority of young female voters at 11% and 8.4% of young males.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ipsos (2022) Elezioni politiche 2022: le analisi Ipsos post-voto, *Ipsos Italia*. p.4

<sup>18</sup> Paolo Decrestina (2025). Ragazzi a destra, ragazze a sinistra. Il voto polarizzato dei giovani secondo la Bocconi. [online] *Corriere della Sera*. Available at: [https://www.corriere.it/politica/25\\_marzo\\_24/ragazzi-a-destra-ragazze-a-sinistra-il-voto-polarizzato-dei-giovani-secondo-la-bocconi-fc4834a8-b78c-455a-bd68-180e31d81x1k.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/politica/25_marzo_24/ragazzi-a-destra-ragazze-a-sinistra-il-voto-polarizzato-dei-giovani-secondo-la-bocconi-fc4834a8-b78c-455a-bd68-180e31d81x1k.shtml)

While these numbers represent the total electorate, the divergence is even more pronounced when combined with the “rightward shift” observed globally among young men. Thompson argues that the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst – a “triggering event” – pushing a generation of young men toward the right as they reacted against perceived “liberal overreach” and lockdowns.<sup>19</sup> This global shift matches the European context described by Cokelaere, who notes that far-right parties are no longer just for *boomers* but are increasingly successful in capturing the rebellious vote of young men who feel displaced by progressive cultural shifts.<sup>20</sup>

In Italy, this is fuelled by the digital *Manosphere* (discussed in later chapters), which provides the ideological bridge between young men’s subjective sense of status loss and the “sovereignist” rhetoric of parties like FdI and the Lega.

### **1.5 Is this new? Is the divide widening?**

To understand if this divide is “new”, we must look at the historical trajectory of youth voting. Maggini points out that for decades, “being young” used to be considered as a synonym of “being left-wing” in Europe.<sup>21</sup> This was rooted in the “silent revolution” of post-materialism, where younger generations universally prioritized expressive freedoms over traditional security.<sup>22</sup>

However, the 2022 elections confirm a state of “dealignment”: in many European countries, including Italy, the left-wing advantage among the youth has eroded,

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<sup>19</sup> Thompson, D. (2025) How COVID Pushed a Generation of Young People to the Right, *The Atlantic*. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/02/covid-youth-conservative-shift/681705/>

<sup>20</sup> Cokelaere, H. (2024) It’s not just boomers, young people are voting far right too, *POLITICO*. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-young-people-right-wing-voters-far-right-politics-eu-elections-parliament/>

<sup>21</sup> Maggini, N. (2022). New challenges for representative democracy: The changing political space in Western Europe. *Quaderni dell’Osservatorio elettorale – Italian Journal of Electoral Studies*, 85(2), pp.41–58. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.36253/qoe%2012629>

<sup>22</sup> Inglehart, R. (1977). *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics*. Princeton, New Jersey Princeton University Press.

replaced by the conflict between libertarian and authoritarian values, leaving the youth electorate increasingly polarised between post-materialist agendas and identitarian concerns. This shift is asymmetrical: young women are holding on to post-materialist, progressive values (such as environmentalism and civil rights), while young men are gravitating toward authoritarian or identitarian frames as a defensive response to their perceived social marginalisation. The creation of two parallel systems that no longer share a common political language or set of priorities seems unavoidable. This divergence indicates that gender might have replaced (or joined) class as the primary axis of political socialisation for the digital generation.

## 2. From class cleavage to identity cleavage?

### 2.1 Theory of cleavages

The concept of political cleavage is fundamental in comparative political sociology. It was thoroughly developed by Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan in their influential work *Cleavage Structures, Party Systems and Voter Alignments: An Introduction* in 1967. Their theoretical framework continues to be a key model for analysing the organization of party systems and the enduring patterns of political alignment over time.<sup>23</sup>

According to the authors, a cleavage is not only a social difference or a temporary political disagreement: it is a line of conflict that becomes institutionalised within the party system that has social and historical roots. Cleavages originate in major historical transformations, such as the Industrial Revolution, which created lasting divisions within European societies.

The most significant contribution of Lipset and Rokkan was the *Freezing Hypothesis*, which assumed that “the party systems of the 1960s reflect, with few but significant exceptions, the cleavage structures of the 1920s”.<sup>24</sup>

This suggested that once a social conflict is institutionalized within a party system, it *freezes* the political alternatives available to the electorate, creating a lasting link between social groups and political families.

Political parties function as key intermediaries that give expression to the enduring structural cleavages within a society. They interpret these underlying divisions, transform them into political issues, and organize the demands of the social groups they represent. Accordingly, when a particular cleavage becomes sufficiently

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<sup>23</sup> Lipset, S.M. and Rokkan, S. (1967) *Cleavage Structures, Party Systems and Voter Alignments: An Introduction*, in Lipset, S.M. and Rokkan, S. (eds.) *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*. New York: Free Press.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*

salient and deeply embedded in the social fabric, it creates the structural conditions for the rise and institutionalization of new political parties.<sup>25</sup>

The authors identify four fundamental cleavages in Western Europe. Two of them are considered as “national revolutions” while the other two are related to the industrial revolution:

1. Centre versus Periphery (arising from nation-building processes).
2. State versus Church (conflict over secularisation and authority).
3. Urban versus Rural (linked to economic modernisation).
4. Owner versus Worker (stemming from industrialisation and class conflict).

### 2.1.1 What is a structural cleavage?

With newer studies, the concept received redefinition by specifying the conditions under which a social division qualifies as a cleavage. Bartolini and Mair in 1990 gave a crucial contribution by conceptualising cleavages as multidimensional phenomena composed of three distinct but interrelated dimensions.

1. The empirical element: this refers to the objective social base of the conflict. It is defined by a *solid social base* where individuals share specific socio-demographic characteristics, such as class, occupation, or religious denomination;
2. The normative element: this involves the development of a *collective identity*. It represents the “set of values and beliefs which provides a sense

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<sup>25</sup> Mirko Crulli (2022). e-lezioni22 | L'Italia al voto, tra vecchi e nuovi cleavages - S-citizenship. [online] S-citizenship. Available at: <https://s-citizenship.com/socialmente/e-lezioni22-litalia-al-voto-tra-vecchi-e-nuovi-cleavages/>

of identity to the group, and which serves to give a meaning to its role within the social structure”;<sup>26</sup>

3. The organizational element: this is the most crucial for political stability. It is the *institutionalization of the conflict* through “a set of organizations and institutions which are part of the cleavage”,<sup>27</sup> such as political parties, trade unions, and – in the contemporary context – digital media structures.

By emphasizing this third element, Bartolini and Mair highlight that a social division does not automatically become a political one. Rather, “social distinctions become political cleavages only when they are organized as such”.<sup>28</sup>

The primary mechanism that links these three elements is what the authors term *encapsulation*. This refers to the process by which political parties and their associated organizations create dense social networks around their supporters. Bartolini and Mair contend that “the freezing of the party systems was essentially a process of the closing of the market”.<sup>29</sup> By creating “organizational enclaves” – where, historically, a worker lived in a socialist neighbourhood, read a socialist paper, and joined a socialist union – parties ensured that the voter was never truly “available” for persuasion by opposing forces. In this framework, stability is maintained by “the development of powerful organizational networks which encapsulated the electorate and shielded it from the appeals of the competitors”.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Bartolini, S. and Mair, P. (1990) *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability: The Stabilisation of European Electorates 1885–1985*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.215

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem* p.215

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem* p.216

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem* p.16

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem* p.224

### 2.1.2 From Dealignment to re-alignment: the “thawing” of the political market

The stability described by the *Freezing Hypothesis* and the dense encapsulation analysed by Bartolini and Mair began to erode in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, giving away a period of *dealignment*. As noted by Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck in 1984, the traditional structural anchors of religion and class underwent a *thawing* process, leading to a significant decline in partisan identification and a rise in electoral volatility.<sup>31</sup>

In Italy, this transition was particularly blunt, as the collapse of the *Prima Repubblica* in the early 1990s dismantled the subcultural networks, the social enclaves, that had previously protected voters from opposing ideological appeals.<sup>32</sup>

However, contemporary scholarship suggests that this *thaw* did not lead to a permanent state of ideological vacuum, but rather to a *re-alignment* around new critical junctures. Hooghe and Marks in 2018 argue that Western societies are currently experiencing a “transnational revolution” that is generating a new line of conflict, often indicated as the “GAL-TAN divide” (Green-Alternative-Libertarian versus Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist).<sup>33</sup> In this new landscape, gender emerges as a primary identitarian fault line rather than a secondary demographic variable.

While traditional cleavages were rooted in the industrial workplace or the parish, this emerging fracture is driven by what Inglehart in 1977 termed the *Silent Revolution*<sup>34</sup>, a fundamental transformation of political cultures in advanced industrial societies. This shift marks a transition from concerns over economic and

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<sup>31</sup> Dalton, R. J., Flanagan, S. C. and Beck, P. A. (eds.) (1984) *Electoral Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies: Realignment or Dealignment?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>32</sup> Mair, P. (1997) *Party System Change: Approaches and Interpretations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>33</sup> Hooghe, L. and Marks, G. (2017). Cleavage theory meets Europe’s crises: Lipset, Rokkan, and the transnational cleavage. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(1), pp.109–135.

<sup>34</sup> Inglehart, R. (1977) *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 3

physical security toward post-materialist values centred on self-expression, quality of life, and identity.<sup>35</sup>

While the 20th century relied on physical mass organizations for encapsulation, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is witnessing the rise of *algorithmic encapsulation*. In this new digital ecosystem, social media platforms and populist rhetoric act as the contemporary functional equivalents of the old trade unions or churches, effectively “locking” young men and women into divergent value systems and political blocks.

## **2.2 Socio-economic transformations of the youth: precariousness and structural asymmetries**

The structural foundations of the Italian youth experience have undergone a shift over the last three decades. To understand gender as a political identity, one must first analyse the empirical-structural<sup>36</sup> reality from which it emerges. This section argues that the Italian youth is navigating a landscape characterized by the dissolution of traditional life cycles, a crisis of social mobility, and a profound gendered asymmetry in educational and professional expectations.

### **2.2.1 The “Precariat” and the collapse of the generational pact**

The defining feature of the younger generations in Italy is a condition of chronic insecurity. According to Guy Standing, “to be a precariat is to have a status that offers no sense of career, no sense of secure occupational identity, and few, if any, of the entitlements that the old working class and the salariat took for granted”.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem* p. 4

<sup>36</sup> Bartolini, S. and Mair, P. (1990) *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability: The Stabilisation of European Electorates 1885–1985*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 215

<sup>37</sup> Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. p.10

In Italy, this lack of “occupational identity” in the labour market is a structural trap. As Standing further observes, this condition produces a “precaritized mind”, characterized by a “sense of a short-term future” which prevents the long-term life planning necessary for traditional social integration.<sup>38</sup>

The ISTAT Annual Report (2025) confirms that while absolute employment has reached historical peaks, the “quality” of work for the youth is lagging. According to the report, “nearly 32% of workers aged 15-34 are in condition of labour vulnerability”, identified by involuntary part-time work or short-term contracts.<sup>39</sup>

### **2.2.2 The educational sorpasso**

The reversal of the gender gap in education – the *educational sorpasso* – has emerged as the primary engine of the modern gender cleavage in Italy. While the Italian population generally exhibits a delay in educational attainment compared to European average, the internal distribution of human capital has become intensely asymmetrical.

According to the ISTAT Annual Report, the gender divide in tertiary education is now a consolidated structural feature: among the 25-34 age cohort, 38,5% of women hold a university degree, compared to only 25,0% of men.<sup>40</sup> This gap of 13,5 percentage point represents more than just a demographic shift; it shows different adaptations to the precarity of the Italian labour market. It might seem like higher education has become an essential “shield” for young women. The ISTAT data confirms that while the general employment gap between men and women stands at 17,8 percentage points (71,1% for men vs. 53,3% for women),<sup>41</sup> this disparity effectively collapses among those who possess a university degree. In fact, for graduates, the gender difference in the probability of perceiving labor

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem* p.18

<sup>39</sup> Istat (2025) *Rapporto Annuale 2025: La situazione del Paese*. Roma: Istat. p.87

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem* p.79

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem* p.86

income is described as *poco marcata* (hardly marked), as female employment has grown by 4.5% while male employment has slightly decreased.<sup>42</sup>

This creates a condition of “cognitive mobilization”<sup>43</sup>: women are not just more educated; they are more intellectually equipped to challenge traditional hierarchies, achieving *complessivamente migliori* (overall better) results and greater punctuality in completing their studies than their male peers.<sup>44</sup>

While women utilise university to escape structural exclusion – noting that a degree increases the probability of moving to a higher income bracket by 17,6 points<sup>45</sup> – a larger segment of young men remains anchored to a shrinking market of traditional labour, making them more susceptible to “nostalgic” political narratives (TAN values) that promise to restore lost social hierarchies.

### **2.2.3 Economic insecurity and the paradox of inactivity**

The insecurity of the Italian labour market is not distributed equally, creating a profound structural divergence that exacerbates the “Savage Age” (*l’età selvaggia*) identified by Censis. In this “era”, where 55,2% of young Italians believe that progress has ended, the lack of a secure future leads to a retreat into the “present”, but this retreat takes different gendered forms.<sup>46</sup>

ISTAT highlights a chronic low labour participation rate, particularly among women, whose inactivity rate (42,2%) remains 13.1 percentage points higher than the EU average but the rate lowers to 4,4 points for men.<sup>47</sup> However, a critical paradox emerges: youth inactivity (ages 15-24) has increase to 75,3%, a shift driven exclusively by young women’s increased participation in the education

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem* p.184

<sup>43</sup> Dalton, R. J. (1984). Cognitive Mobilization and Partisan Dealignment in Advanced Industrial Democracies. *The Journal of Politics*, 46(1), 264–284. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2130444>

<sup>44</sup> Istat (2025) *Rapporto Annuale 2025*. p.188

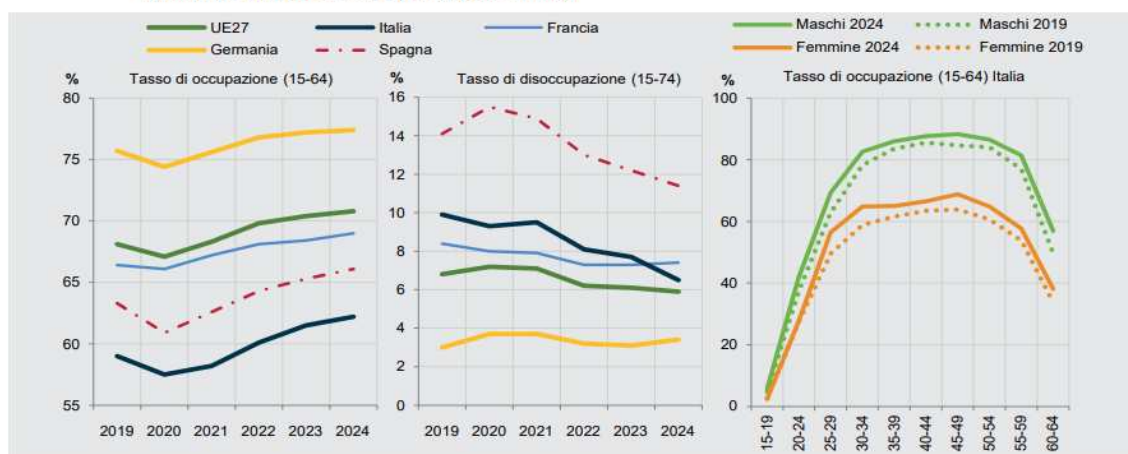
<sup>45</sup> Istat (2025) *Rapporto Annuale 2025*. p.186

<sup>46</sup> Censis (2025) *59° Rapporto sulla situazione sociale del Paese*. Milano: FrancoAngeli. p. 3

<sup>47</sup> Istat (2025) *Rapporto Annuale 2025: La situazione del Paese*. Roma: Istat. p.86

system.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, 21,2% of workers with low education face labour vulnerability (involuntary part-time or temporary contracts), compared to only 15,0% of graduates.<sup>49</sup>

Figura 2.10 Tasso di occupazione (15-64 anni) (sinistra) e tasso di disoccupazione (15-74 anni) (centro) nelle maggiori economie dell'UE27, e tasso di occupazione in Italia (15-64 anni) per classe di età e sesso (destra). Anni 2019-2024 (valori percentuali)



Fonte: Istat, Elaborazioni su dati Eurostat, Labour Force Survey; Istat, Rilevazione sulle forze di lavoro

Table 7. Istat (2025). Rapporto Annuale 2025 - La situazione del Paese. p.85

## 2.2.4 Liquid modernity

Italy appears to have transitioned into what Bauman characterizes as “Liquid Modernity”. In this state, identity is no longer a “given” but has instead become a “task” that individuals must repeatedly perform.<sup>50</sup> As traditional social structures dissolve, gender has emerged as a primary axis of divergence. Data from the ISTAT 2025 Report suggests that while young women increasingly utilise higher education and the pursuit of rights as tools to navigate precariousness, young men – facing a decline in traditional economic certainty – may turn to a “nostalgic” defence of masculine identity to mitigate their perceived loss of status. This structural polarization might constitute the empirical element of a new social cleavage: despite sharing a precarious economic reality, men and women “belong

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem* p.86

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem* p.88

<sup>50</sup> Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press. p. 162

to different social groups” defined by their distinct structural position and expectations.<sup>51</sup>

### **2.3 Gender as a political identity: the emergence of a parallel cleavage**

The transition from being a demographic category to a political identity may occur when gender becomes a primary lens through which individuals perceive power, rights, and social order. This section evaluates whether the growing divergence between young men and women satisfies the criteria for a structural cleavage as defined by Bartolini and Mair in 1990.<sup>52</sup> I argue that while this fracture does not replace traditional class-based conflicts, it is emerging as a powerful parallel line of conflict, structured by cultural transformations and stabilized by the digital ecosystem.

#### **2.3.1 Cultural transformations and the politicization of gender**

Historically in the Italian model, gender roles were largely relegated to the private sphere, governed by the family and the Church. The politicization of gender occurs as these traditional pillars erode, moving gender from a pre-political condition to a central part of ideological competition. As Inglehart and Norris have documented, advanced industrial societies have shifted from a “traditional” gender gap – where women were more conservative due to religious rules – to a “modern” one, where women move to the left-wing.<sup>53</sup>

Once the traditional anchors like the Church or mass parties have faded, gender has stepped into the vacuum as a source of meaning. For young women, the

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<sup>51</sup> Bartolini, S. and Mair, P. (1990) *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability: The Stabilisation of European Electorates 1885–1985*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 215

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>53</sup> Inglehart, R. and Norris, P. (2003) *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change Around the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

“reversal of the gender gap in education”<sup>54</sup> has acted as a catalyst for what Dalton defines “cognitive mobilization”<sup>55</sup>. This has empowered them to challenge patriarchal legacies, moving their political identity toward the Green-Alternative-Libertarian (GAL) pole of the value spectrum.<sup>56</sup> Better education and political skills have given young women the tools to escape old electoral boxes. They aren’t just following traditional patterns anymore; instead, they are forming a new kind of political voice centred on rights and autonomy.

Conversely, young men are increasingly falling into a “stagnation trap”. As the industrial economy that once guaranteed stability to low-skilled men erodes, this group experiences a decline of their ‘subjective social status’. By following Ridgeway,<sup>57</sup> Gidron and Hall define a person’s subjective social status “as the level of social respect or esteem people believe is accorded them within the social order. [...] It embodies a person’s sense of where she stands in relation to the full social assembly and, in that respect, might be said to represent social integration”.<sup>58</sup>

At the same time, this shift toward progressive gender roles has caused what Norris and Inglehart in 2019 identify as a *cultural backlash*.<sup>59</sup>

A backlash against gender equality is one of the universal drivers of the polarisation between young men and women around the world, says Dr. Evans, senior lecturer in the social science of development at King’s College: “There is a growing concern among young men that maybe DEI [diversity, equity, and

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem* p. 95

<sup>55</sup> Dalton, R.J. (1984). Cognitive Mobilization and Partisan Dealignment in Advanced Industrial Democracies. *The Journal of Politics*, 46(1), pp.264–284.

<sup>56</sup> Hooghe, L. and Marks, G. (2018) Cleavage theory meets 21st century politics, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(1), pp. 109–135.

<sup>57</sup> Ridgeway, C.L. (2014) Why Status Matters for Inequality, *American Sociological Review* 79(1): 1–16 cit. in Gidron, N. and Hall, P. (2017) The Politics of Social Status: Economic and Cultural Roots of the Populist Right

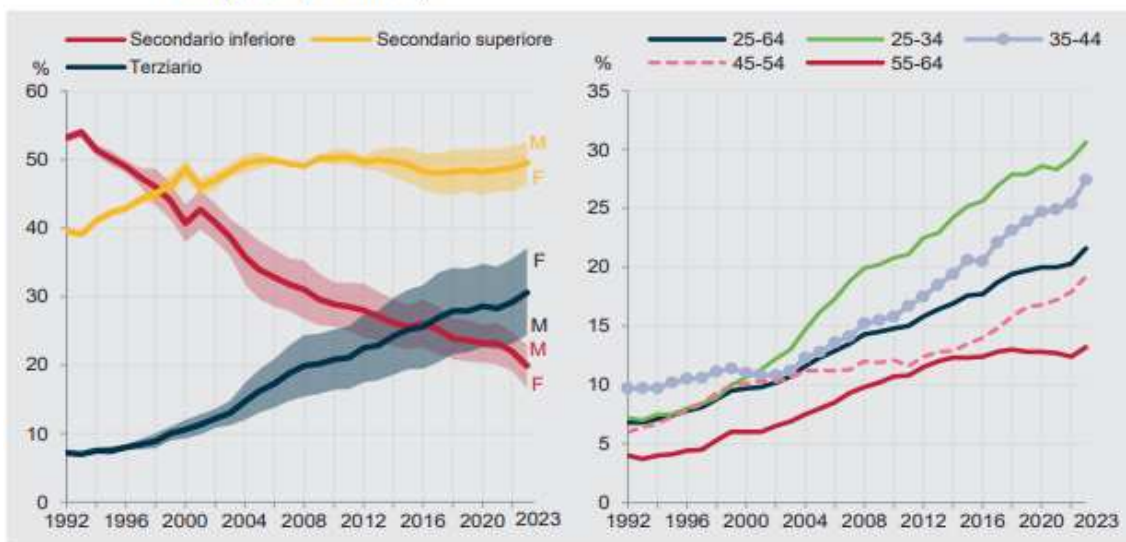
<sup>58</sup> Gidron, N. and Hall, P. (2017) The Politics of Social Status: Economic and Cultural Roots of the Populist Right, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 68(S1). p.S61

<sup>59</sup> Norris, P. and Inglehart, R. (2019) *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

inclusion] is going too far,” she says, adding “some question if women’s gains are coming at the expense of them”.<sup>60</sup>

For a many young men, these changes feel like a threat to the old social hierarchies, resulting in a type of politics that centres on a reactive defence of masculinity. Later in the thesis the reader will find that this sense of displacement has been intercepted by populist actors who politicize masculinity by framing it as a “marginalized identity”. As Giddens suggests in his theory of “reflexive modernization”, identity has become a project that individuals must actively defend, transforming cultural habits into political markers of belonging.<sup>61</sup>

**Figura 4.9** Giovani tra 25 e 34 anni per livello di istruzione e sesso (sinistra), e progresso nell’acquisizione di titoli terziari dei 25-64enni per classe di età (destra). Anni 1992-2023 (valori percentuali)



Fonte: Eurostat, Population by educational attainment level, sex and age

Table 8. Istat (2025). Rapporto Annuale 2025 - La situazione del Paese. p.175

<sup>60</sup> Yerushalmy, J. (2024). What’s behind the global political divide between young men and women? [online] *the Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/14/us-election-donald-trump-voters-gender-race-data>

<sup>61</sup> Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

### **2.3.2 Testing the cleavage: Bartolini-Mair criteria**

To determine whether the contemporary gender divide among Italian youth has transitioned from a mere demographic difference into a structured political conflict - and therefore truly becoming a structural cleavage - it is necessary to measure it against the three constitutive dimensions identified by Bartolini and Mair.<sup>62</sup>

#### **2.3.2.1 The empirical-structural element: does it have a social base?**

A cleavage requires a “solid social base”.<sup>63</sup> In the Italian case, this base is defined by the “reversal of the gender gap in education”.<sup>64</sup> This structural shift has acted as the engine for “cognitive mobilization”, providing young women with the intellectual resources to challenge traditional hierarchies.<sup>65</sup>

Conversely, young men often occupy a different structural position, frequently experiencing a sense of “status loss” as traditional economic and social roles erode. This might create two distinct social locations: a cognitively mobilized, cosmopolitan-oriented female base and a more traditional, status-anxious male base.<sup>66</sup>

#### **2.3.2.2 The normative-ideological element: does it produce Collective identities?**

According to Hooghe and Marks, the contemporary “transnational cleavage” pits GAL (Green-Alternative-Libertarian) values against TAN (Traditional-

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<sup>62</sup> Bartolini, S. and Mair, P. (1990) *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability: The Stabilisation of European Electorates 1885–1985*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem* p. 215

<sup>64</sup> Inglehart, R. and Norris, P. (2003) *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change Around the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.95

<sup>65</sup> Dalton, R.J. (2013). *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. CQ Press.

<sup>66</sup> Gidron, N. and Hall, P. A. (2017) The politics of social status: economic and cultural roots of the populist right, *British Journal of Sociology*.

Authoritarian-Nationalist) values.<sup>67</sup> Gender is central to this divide: young women are increasingly the primary carriers of GAL values - prioritizing gender equality, environmentalism, and pluralism - while young men, feeling a sense of “status loss”, are increasingly attracted to TAN values.<sup>68</sup> This suggests that gender is no longer just a demographic trait, but a normative identity that dictates how individuals perceive social justice and national identity.

In chapter 3 there will be a deeper analysis of the role of social media in this division.

### **2.3.2.3 The organizational-behavioural element: does it translate into a consistent electoral behaviour?**

The final and most crucial dimension is the institutionalization of conflict through “a set of organizations and institutions which are part of the cleavage”.<sup>69</sup> As already said, Bartolini and Mair argue that cleavages are stabilized through “encapsulation”, which creates “social enclaves” that shield voters from opposing appeals.<sup>70</sup> In other words, a cleavage requires parties to organize the social division. While the 20<sup>th</sup> century relied on physical mass organizations, the 21<sup>st</sup> century utilizes the digital ecosystem to achieve a “closing of the market”.<sup>71</sup>

Through the rise of populist movements and algorithmic filtering, young Italians are being organized into divergent political block. Populist parties in Italy have successfully mobilized what Graff and Korolczuk identify as the “anxiety, shame, and anger”<sup>72</sup> rooted in neoliberal precariousness, using gender as a “symbolic

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<sup>67</sup> Hooghe, L. and Marks, G. (2018) *Cleavage theory meets 21st century politics*, Journal of European Public Policy, 25(1), pp. 109–135.

<sup>68</sup> Gidron, N. and Hall, P. A. (2017) The politics of social status: economic and cultural roots of the populist right

<sup>69</sup> Bartolini, S. and Mair, P. (1990) *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability: The Stabilisation of European Electorates 1885–1985*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.215

<sup>70</sup> Ibidem p.224

<sup>71</sup> Ibidem p.19

<sup>72</sup> Graff, A. and Korolczuk, E. (2021) *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*. Routledge. p. 165

glue”<sup>73</sup> to create new organizational walls, ensuring that a social distinction becomes a political cleavage. This reduces electoral availability, as the digital environment functions as a modern form of encapsulation that prevents cross-gender political persuasion.

### **2.3.3 A parallel fracture: intersectionality and pluralism of the youth**

The emergence of gender as a cleavage does not operate in a vacuum; it is a parallel fracture that intersects with other structural variables such as geography, field of study, and economic vulnerability. While arguing that traditional approaches to discrimination fail to understand the experiences of black women, Kimberlé Crenshaw introduces the concept of *intersectionality* to explain how systems of oppression – such as racism and sexism – interact and overlap, creating unique forms of discrimination that cannot be understood by examining each category separately.<sup>74</sup>

Said so, it seems relevant to analyse different factors like inactivity, territorial divergence, and educational separation. The previously mentioned ISTAT data – that indicates that the female inactivity rate is at 42,4% (13,1 percentage point higher than the EU average)<sup>75</sup> – confirms that for a large segment of young women, the *educational sorpasso* has not yet translated into labour market inclusion, creating a group of over-educated but under-unemployed individuals.

Geography is a crucial dividing factor that defines the social bare of the cleavage. A territorial dualism is reflected in the employment gap between the North (69,7%) and the Mezzogiorno (49,4%), a distance that remains over 20 percentage points.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Kováts, E. and Põim, M. (2015). Gender as symbolic glue: the position and role of conservative and far right parties in the anti-gender mobilization in Europe. Budapest: Foundation For European Progressive Studies.

<sup>74</sup> Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. [online] University of Chicago Legal Forum. p.140

<sup>75</sup> Istat (2025) Rapporto Annuale 2025: La situazione del Paese. Roma: Istat. p.86

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem* p.86

Furthermore, workers in the South face a significantly higher vulnerability rate of 23,5%, compared to 14,6% in the North-West.<sup>77</sup>

Finally, the gendered divergence in academic paths is already visible in secondary education: 64,7% of girls choose a *liceo*, while only 39,6% of boys do so, favouring technical institutes (42,3%). Even within the *liceo* system, boys predominantly select the scientific track (65,6%), while girls' choices are more diversified across humanities and social sciences.<sup>78</sup> While women are more educated, they remain concentrated in humanities, choosing these paths 18,8% more frequently than men for bachelor's degrees and 14,1% more for master's degrees.<sup>79</sup> This distance might mean that women still face structural barriers in high-tech sectors.

Moving beyond a view of gender as a simple demographic monolith allows us to see it as a dynamic axis of political engagement. In the Italian context, it is inseparable from structural realities; it is filtered through long-standing regional disparities and the specific educational trajectories that are currently redrawing the map of the country's socio-political landscape.

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem* p.88

<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem* p.81

<sup>79</sup> *Ibidem* p.188

### **3. Social media and the construction of Divergence**

The emergence of the new gender cleavage among young Italians cannot be fully understood if confined solely to structural basis such as educational attainment or job market status. In today's environment, technology is not a passive medium for ideas; instead, it serves as a dynamic tool for shaping reality. Social media, through its algorithmic structures, does not just mirror the divide between young men and women; it amplifies, displays, and ultimately reinforces it as a key political identity. This chapter explores how the digital ecosystem operates as the main laboratory for the parallel fracture discussed in the earlier sections.

#### **3.1 The Youth digital information ecosystem: disintermediation and exclusion**

The starting point is the radical transformation of information consumption habits since it serves as the foundational catalyst for gendered political divergence. For younger generations, the media diet is almost exclusively digital and defined by a profound process of political disintermediation.<sup>80</sup> This phenomenon represents a fundamental change where the conventional “gatekeepers” of political discourse – including professional journalists and established party organizations – are consistently bypassed in favor of a direct, unfiltered connection between political actors and citizens. “Based on the logics of production and distribution, election candidates can engage in “personalized politics” by [...] disseminating information directly to supporters and potential voters through social media posts and tweets.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Maggini, N. (2022) New challenges for representative democracy: The changing political space in Western Europe, *Quaderni dell'Osservatorio elettorale - Italian Journal of Electoral Studies*, 85(2), p. 41

<sup>81</sup> McGregor, S. C. (2017). Personalization, social media, and voting: Effects of candidate self-personalization on vote intention. *New Media & Society*, 20(3), 1139–1160.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816686103> cit. in Chan, M. and Yi, J. (2024). Social Media Use and Political Engagement in Polarized Times. Examining the Contextual Roles of Issue and Affective

As Maggini suggests, this transition facilitates a more immediate link between the citizen and the political “supply”, but it simultaneously strips away the interpretative frameworks that once moderated and contextualized political conflict: “Indeed, as ideological orientations structure party choices, an eventual lack of ideological anchors among the young will be likely to make voting even more volatile in the long run, with potential implication for the quality of democracy and the stability of political systems.”<sup>82</sup>

In the Italian context, ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) have become “an invisible yet fundamental infrastructure” of daily life, particularly for Gen Z and Millennials.<sup>83</sup> However, this transition is not a guarantee of democratic health; ISTAT warns of “generational exclusion” for those lacking the critical skills to navigate this complex environment, creating a divide between “active digital citizens” and “passive consumers”.<sup>84</sup> This lack of institutional mediation creates a significant vacuum in youth socialization and it might be observed a significant gap in the levels of cultural participation and the conscious use of the web, mirroring the boundaries of the gender cleavage. In 2023, the highest level of cultural participation outside the home, 35.2% of the population aged 10 and over were recorded among youth aged 15 to 24.<sup>85</sup> Paradoxically, this high participation exists alongside a collapse in traditional media consumption, such as the reading of printed newspapers.<sup>86</sup>

In the void left by traditional gatekeepers, politics has migrated to social networks where journalistic mediation is replaced by a direct often emotional relationship. As Cass Sunstein in 2017 notes, this leads to the creation of the “Daily Me”, or a

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Polarization in Developed Democracies. *Political Communication*, [online] 41(5), pp.743–762. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2325423>

<sup>82</sup> Maggini, N. (2022) pp.42-43

<sup>83</sup> Istat (2025) *Rapporto Annuale 2025: La situazione del Paese*. Roma: Istat. p.139

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem* p.137

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem* p.139

“What-Pleases-Me.com”<sup>87</sup>: a hyper-personalized communications universe where the process of disintermediation allows individuals to filter out any content that does not align with their pre-existing identity and primarily encounter “the voices of people like themselves”, filtering out dissenting perspectives.<sup>88</sup> Sunstein argues that a functioning democracy requires an *architecture of serendipity* – the presence of “unchosen and unanticipated encounters” with opposing views “ensures that every week, and maybe every day, you will run into things that catch your eye, bring you up short, and maybe even change your life. [...] Indispensable not only to education but also to citizenship itself”.<sup>89</sup>

### 3.2 Algorithmic architecture: the “scrolling backwards” phenomenon

The quality of information in this ecosystem is dictated by platform algorithms. In this concept, the idea of the “Filter Bubble”<sup>90</sup> is pivotal: personalization tends to show users only content that confirms their prior preferences, creating “information cocoons” that shield individuals from cognitive dissonance.<sup>91</sup> “In cyberspace, we already have the ability to filter out everything but what we wish to see, hear, and read. Tomorrow, our power to filter promises to increase exponentially. With the advent of the Daily Me, you see only the sports highlights that concern your teams, read about only the issues that interest you, encounter in the op-ed pages only the opinions with which you agree”.<sup>92</sup>

Sunstein identifies two fundamental *desiderata* – or structural requirements – for a functioning democracy that are currently under threat by this technological shift.

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<sup>87</sup> Sunstein, C.R. (2025). The Architecture of Serendipity. *The Harvard Crimson*. [online] Thecrimson.com. Available at: <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2008/6/4/the-architecture-of-serendipity-this-years/>

<sup>88</sup> Sunstein, C. R. (2017) #Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p.1

<sup>89</sup> Sunstein, C.R. (2025). The Architecture of Serendipity

<sup>90</sup> Pariser, E. (2011) The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You. London: Penguin Books.

<sup>91</sup> Sunstein, C.R. (2017) #Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media p.13

<sup>92</sup> *Ibidem* p.1

The first of these requirements is that citizens must be exposed to materials and perspectives that they would not have chosen in advance. This *architecture of serendipity* is not a luxury but a functional necessity; it ensures that individuals encounter dissenting views that challenge their internal biases. In a traditional media environment, a young person can come across a news story or an opinion piece that complicates their view and makes them question their points. In the disintermediated digital world, however, this kind of opportunity is disappearing since the individual is surrounded by whatever they decided to turn their algorithm into. When that architecture collapses, the result is an increasingly difficult for individuals to even comprehend – and respect – the logic of an opposing side for the emerging cleavage, this might mean that young men and women are being deprived of the very friction required to prevent radicalization.<sup>93</sup> The author adds: “Serendipity is crucial because it expands your horizons. You need that if you want to be free”.<sup>94</sup>

The second *desideratum* is the necessity for citizen to share a “wide range of common experiences” to foster social cohesion; these shared experiences serve as a “social glue”. Without a common set of facts or a shared public square, the social fabric frays into “fragmented enclaves” where group identity takes precedence over civic belonging. In the Italian context, this lack of commonality is particularly corrosive: if young men and women are socialized through entirely different digital narratives – one centred on male grievances and other on progressive rights – they cease to inhabit a shared normative reality. This atomization ensures the “other” gender is no longer seen as a fellow citizen with a different opinion, but as an ideological antagonist belonging to a different universe.<sup>95</sup>

The failure of these requirements activates the “group polarization”: talking only to like-minded peers moves individuals toward more extreme versions of their

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibidem* pp.6-7

<sup>94</sup> Pazzanese, C. (2017). Cass Sunstein’s ‘#Republic’ explores dangers of social media curation. [online] Harvard Gazette. Available at: <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/03/cass-sunsteins-republic-explores-dangers-of-social-media-curation/>

<sup>95</sup> Sunstein, C.R. (2017) #Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media pp. 7-8

original positions.<sup>96</sup> In an email exchange with the Harvard Gazette, Sunstein states that group polarization “means that if you listen to people like you, you’ll probably get more extreme and more confident too. If Republicans talk or listen to each other, they’ll probably become more extreme, and the same is true for Democrats. We’ve seen plenty of that, and we’re going to see more”.<sup>97</sup>

Recent empirical evidence suggests a direct, measurable link between digital consumption and regressive values – a phenomenon described as “Scrolling Backwards”: high-frequency social media use (especially Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube) is consistently associated with more regressive gender attitudes across Europe.<sup>98</sup>

Wallaschek and Minkus discuss the relevance of the *intensity* of use of social media: high-intensity users (spending more than two hours a day online) are significantly less supportive of gender equality and more likely to hold hostile views toward feminists.<sup>99</sup> This is driven by the fact that negativity and resentment – often termed “out-group animosity” – spread faster than positive content in algorithmic environments.<sup>100</sup> Across Europe, nearly 50% of survey respondents now agree with the statement that “most feminists just hate men”, a sentiment that finds its ideological home in specific digital enclaves.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibidem* p.68

<sup>97</sup> Pazzanese, C. (2017). Cass Sunstein’s ‘#Republic’ explores dangers of social media curation. [online] Harvard Gazette

<sup>98</sup> Wallaschek, S. and Minkus, L. (2025) Scrolling Backwards? The Link Between Social Media Use and Gender Attitudes in Europe. p.1

<sup>99</sup> *Ibidem* p.13-14

<sup>100</sup> *Ibidem* p.3

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem* p.13

### 3.3 Digital communities: the Italian “manosphere” and the far-right shift

While the preceding sections established the algorithmic mechanics of the “filter bubble”, it is within the specific subcultures of the Italian digital landscape that these mechanisms find their most potent ideological expression.

The rise of the manosphere represents a critical development in the gender restructuring of political identity. The manosphere is not a singular entity but an umbrella term for a diverse, overlapping network of digital movements, including Men's rights activists (MRAs), who focus on perceived legal biases in divorce and custody; men going their own way (MGTOW), who advocate for a total social withdrawal from women; and involuntary celibates (Incels), who often adopts a more fatalistic and biologically deterministic view of gender relations – the Incel subculture adopts a pseudo-scientific approach, utilizing the “LMS” (Look, Money, Status) framework to explain their perceived social exclusion.<sup>102</sup>

“Websites like *Il Maschicidio*, *Diritti Maschili – Equità e Umanità*, and *Smascheriamo il Femminismo* serve as authoritative entities within the network, indicating their role as primary sources of information and ideology in the Italian manosphere”.<sup>103</sup>

These groups use digital spaces to reassert traditional gender hierarchies, often portraying men as the “true victims” of a “gynocentric” social order. They do not merely exist as fringe internet forums; they function as a normative laboratory where a segment of the young male population reinterprets their social positioning. In response to women’s educational advancement and the perceived decline of traditional patriarchal certainties, these enclaves foster a deep narrative of male victimhood, portraying men as the main victims of systemic discrimination.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ignazzi, E., Maretti, M. e Fontanella, L. (2025) The Italian Manosphere: Composition, Structure, and Functions of a Digital Network, *Social Inclusion*, 13(9341), p. 1, 6.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibidem* p.9

<sup>104</sup> *Ibidem* p.23

The rhetorical strategy used in these Italian online platforms frequently rely on the normalization of misogynistic ideas that are later spread into wider social media conversations through a process Wallaschek and Minkus describe as “Scrolling Backwards”. Their research suggests that high frequent interaction with platforms such as YouTube and Instagram is statistically linked to a shift toward regressive gender attitudes, as the Algorithmic environment incentivizes out-group animosity toward feminists.<sup>105</sup> This perceived victimhood serves as a powerful mobilizer for young men who feel displaced by the *educational sorpasso* of their female peers. In these enclaves, relationships are often framed as instruments of “female subjugation”, and misogynistic rhetoric is normalized through repetition.<sup>106</sup>

Moreover, the manosphere support Red Pill ideology, a metaphor from the movie *The Matrix* that reveals the truth to the hero after he consumes the “red pill”. “This metaphor not only reflects but also amplifies the ideological dynamics of the manosphere, becoming a powerful rhetorical tool that transcends the boundaries of individual groups to permeate broader cultural discourse”.<sup>107</sup> Inside these enclaves, the degradation of women and the rejection of gender equality as a “radical feminist” scheme are essential for sustaining group unity.

The psychological impact is measurable: nearly half of young survey respondents now concur with the trope that “most feminists just hate men,” a sentiment that flourishes in digital environments where “out-group animosity” is algorithmically incentivized.<sup>108</sup> By transforming the psychological “status loss” of young men into a collective identity of resistance, the manosphere acts as a primary agent of political socialization that bypasses traditional family or institutional mediation.

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<sup>105</sup> Wallaschek, S. e Minkus, L. (2025) *Scrolling Backwards? The Link Between Social Media Use and Gender Attitudes in Europe*. pp.1, 3, 13.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem* pp. 4, 23

<sup>107</sup> Ignazzi, E. (2025) et al. *The Italian Manosphere: Composition, Structure, and Functions of a Digital Network* p.2

<sup>108</sup> Wallaschek, S. e Minkus, L. (2025) *Scrolling Backwards? The Link Between Social Media Use and Gender Attitudes in Europe* pp.3, 13

The political fallout of this digital socialization is already visible. The 2024 European Parliament elections revealed an unprecedented gender divide in support for the far right among “digital natives”. Backing for far-right parties peaked at over 21% among young men, while it was only 14% among young women. This 7-point gap is especially notable among Millennials and Gen Z, indicating that for these “digital natives”, the online space serves a stronger influence on political socialization than conventional family or class connections.<sup>109</sup>

This digital radicalization has a direct and quantifiable corollary in the electoral arena, specifically regarding the “supply side” of far-right politics. In Italy, this shift is characterized by young men gravitating toward the TAN pole, which successfully intercepts the anxieties cultivated within the manosphere by framing gender equality as a threat to national and traditional stability. Conversely, young women have moved decisively toward the GAL pole, creating a political landscape where gender equality policies have become the new “structuring axis” of partisan competition.<sup>110</sup> Consequently, the digital sphere has facilitated a reality where young men and women are not merely disagreeing on policy but are being socialized into two antithetical “normative realities”<sup>111</sup>, making cross-gender political persuasion increasingly difficult and solidifying gender as the most salient cleavage of the digital age.

### **3.4 Cleavage stabilization and digital encapsulation**

In conclusion, social media acts as a catalyst for a new, modernized form of what contemporary scholarship describes as “encapsulation”. Historically, cleavages

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<sup>109</sup> Milosav, Đ., Dickson, Z., Hobolt, S.B., Klüver, H., Kuhn, T. and Rodon, T. (2025). The Youth Gender Gap in Support for the Far Right. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 33(2), pp.1-2. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2025.2481181>

<sup>110</sup> Wallaschek, S., Verbalyte, M. and Eigmüller, M. (2024). Cleavage theory meets gender equality: examining party positions in Germany. *European politics and society*, pp. 2-3 Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2024.2304591>

<sup>111</sup> Sunstein, C. R. (2017) #Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p.5

were stabilized by physical social enclaves – such as trade unions or churches – that protected voters from the appeals of the opposing side. Today, algorithmic filtering and the absence of “unplanned and unanticipated encounters”<sup>112</sup> function as modern forms of isolation that effectively “close the market”<sup>113</sup>, preventing cross-gender political persuasion.

While traditional research often overlooked gender, the GAL-TAN divide is now increasingly structured around gender equality policies.<sup>114</sup> Young women are gravitating toward the “Green-Alternative-Libertarian” (GAL) pole, while a segment of young men is being pushed toward the Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist” (TAN) pole through digital socialization.<sup>115</sup> As Maggini notes in 2022, while this political space remains volatile, the digital ecosystem has ensured that gender is no longer just a demographic trait, but a permanent symbolic conflict.<sup>116</sup>

The result is a generation that, while sharing the same physical geography, inhabits two entirely different “normative realities” where the “other” gender is increasingly viewed as an ideological antagonist rather than a fellow citizen. “In highly polarized countries, political actors’ strategic use of rhetoric can enlarge cleavages in society by stoking in-group/out-group resentment and even hate.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Sunstein, C. R. (2017) #Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p.5

<sup>113</sup> Bartolini, S. and Mair, P. (1990) Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability: The Stabilisation of European Electorates 1885-1985. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

<sup>114</sup> Wallaschek, S., Verbalyte, M. and Eigmüller, M. (2024) Cleavage Theory Meets Gender Equality: Examining Party Positions in Germany, *European Politics and Society*. pp. 2-3

<sup>115</sup> *Ibidem* p.32

<sup>116</sup> Maggini, N. (2022) New challenges for representative democracy: The changing political space in Western Europe, *Quaderni dell'Osservatorio elettorale - Italian Journal of Electoral Studies*, 85(2), p. 58.

<sup>117</sup> McCoy, J., & Somer, M. (2018). Toward a theory of pernicious polarization and how it harms democracies: Comparative evidence and possible remedies. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 234–271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218818782> cit. in Chan, M. and Yi, J. (2024). Social Media Use and Political Engagement in Polarized Times. Examining the Contextual Roles of Issue and Affective Polarization in Developed Democracies. *Political Communication*, [online] 41(5), p.744. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2325423>

This rhetoric, in turn, can be amplified exponentially across social media among users who come across and share political content.<sup>118</sup>

According to the World Economic Report, “societies may become polarized not only in their political affiliations, but also in their perceptions of reality, posing a serious challenge to social cohesion and even mental health. When emotions and ideologies overshadow facts, manipulative narratives can infiltrate the public discourse on issues ranging from public health to social justice and education to the environment. Falsified information can also fuel animosity, from bias and discrimination in the workplace to violent protests, hate crimes and terrorism”.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Kubin, E., & von Sikorski, C. (2021). The role of (social) media in political polarization: A systematic review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 45(3), 188–206.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2021.1976070> cit. in Chan, M. and Yi, J. (2024). Social Media Use and Political Engagement in Polarized Times. Examining the Contextual Roles of Issue and Affective Polarization in Developed Democracies.

<sup>119</sup> World Economic Forum (2024) *The Global Risks Report 2024*. Geneva: World Economic Forum. p.20 Available at <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2024/digest/>

## 4. Populism and identity mobilization

While the preceding chapters established the algorithmic mechanics of the “filter bubble” and the specific subcultures of the Italian manosphere, this final chapter explores the ‘supply side’ of the political equation. Populism does not merely reflect existing social tensions; it acts as a political weapon that identifies, organizes, and fortifies these fractures. In the Italian context, populist movements have successfully intercepted the identity anxieties of young men and women, translating digital grievances into a new, antagonistic political language that hardens the ‘parallel fracture’.

### 4.1 Defining populism: the moralization of conflict

To understand how populism organizes the gender divide, we must first establish a rigorous theoretical definition. Cas Mudde defines populism as a “thin-centred ideology” that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”. Since it’s “thin-centered”, populism rarely exists in a vacuum; it attaches itself to “thicker” ideologies – such as nationalism on the right or socialism on the left – to give it substance.<sup>120</sup>

In this framework, the ‘elite’ is accusing of betraying the general will of the people in favour of its own interests. When applied to the gender cleavage, this rhetoric allows populist actors to frame gender equality ideas not as progress, but as an ideological imposition’ by feminist/nazi-feminist/woke elites against the ‘natural’ and traditional order and values of the people. By moralizing the divide, populism makes compromise impossible, as one cannot negotiate with the ‘evil’.

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<sup>120</sup> Mudde, C. (2004) The Populist Zeitgeist, *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), p. 543

“Perhaps crisis is too harsh a term, but the populist heartland becomes active only when there are special circumstances: most notably, the combination of persisting political resentment, a (perceived) serious challenge to ‘our way of life’, and the presence of an attractive populist leader”.<sup>121</sup>

“Populist right-wing parties in many locations have allied themselves with ultraconservative religious actors and embraced anti-gender rhetoric in order to enhance their popular appeal as defenders of the common people against the depraved elites. We call this relationship an opportunistic synergy, a dynamic that includes political alliances, ideological affinities and organizational ties that enable wide-scale elite change in governmental bodies, academia, cultural institutions and civil society”.<sup>122</sup>

“Objective social status is a relational variable, that is to say, it embodies a person’s sense of where she stands in relation to the full social assembly and, in that respect, might be said to represent social integration, namely, whether or not the person feels herself to be a fully recognized member of society. For our purposes, this is especially relevant because populist parties are often said to be appealing to people who feel ‘left behind’ by contemporary society”.<sup>123</sup>

Laura Minguzzi, through the article “A spectre is haunting political communication: the spectre of populism online”, analyses the populist communication style by defining four analytical categories. Criscitello’s *Hyperpolitics*<sup>124</sup> project resulted very useful in the construction of the categories thanks to its four quadrants of the “populism matrix”. “In this matrix, the four types

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<sup>121</sup> *Ibidem* p. 547

<sup>122</sup> Graff, A. and Korolczuk, E. (2021) *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*. Routledge. p.7

<sup>123</sup> Hochschild, A.R. (2016) *Strangers in their own Land*, New York: New Press; Inglehart, R.F. and Norris, P. (2017) Trump and the Xenophobic Populist Parties: The Silent Revolution in Reverse, *Perspectives on Politics* 15(2): 443–54. Cit. in Gidron, N. and Hall, P. (2017). The Politics of Social Status: Economic and Cultural Roots of the Populist Right. *The British Journal of Sociology*, [online] 68(S1) p.S61 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12319>

<sup>124</sup> Criscitiello, A. (2010), Populism, in M. Calise e T. J. Lowi (a cura di) *Hyperpolitics: An Interactive Dictionary of Political Science Concepts*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, pp. 191-192. Cit. in Minguzzi, L. (2023) Uno spettro si aggira nella comunicazione politica: il populismo in Rete, *Rivista di Digital Politics*, 1, p.159

of populism are analysed based on two dichotomous axes: the horizontal axis represents the subjects addressed by populists (individuals, on the left, or communities, on the right), while the vertical axis describes the nature of the populist movement's formation (whether it is an extra-parliamentary movement or part of the executive branch)".<sup>125</sup>

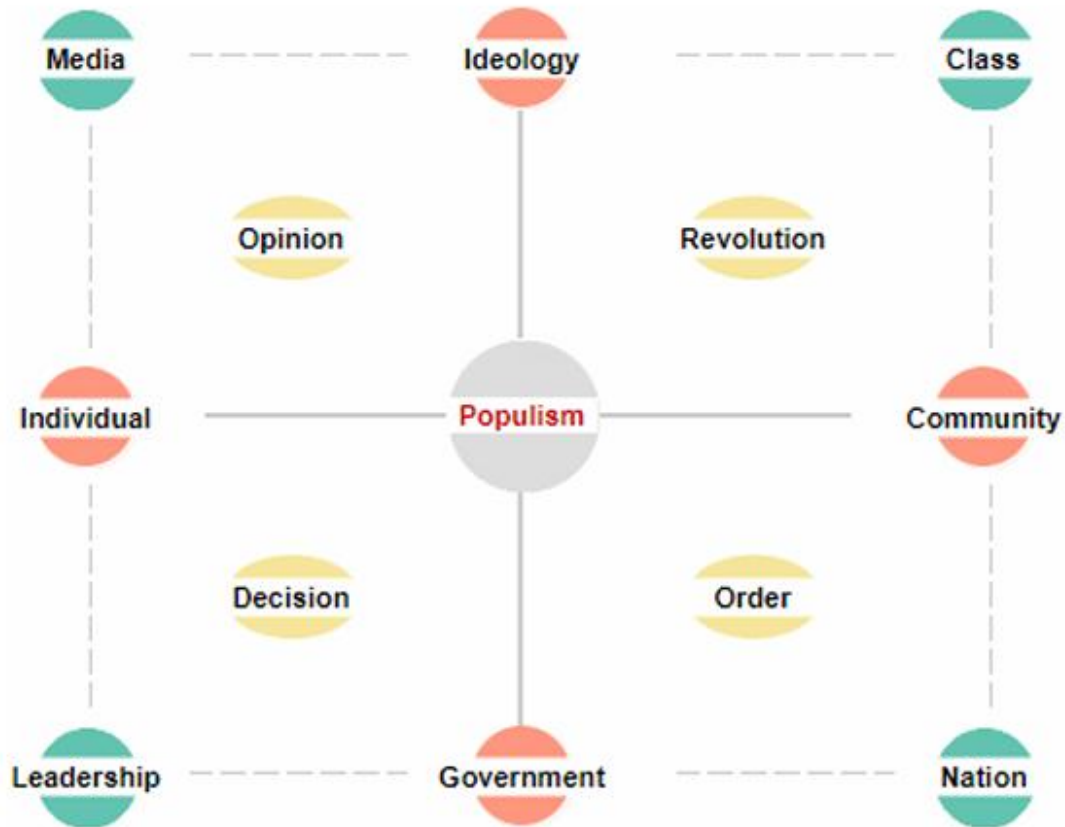


FIG. 1 Matrice di «Populism».  
Fonte: Calise e Lowi (2010, 191).

Table 9. Minguzzi, L. (2023) Uno spettro si aggira nella comunicazione politica: il populismo in Rete.

The upper-left section symbolizes “media populism” which is emblematic of the current era, where methods of communication have become essential for gaining public support, replacing the ideologies that once supported mass parties. “These ideologies are thus replaced by debates on often vague topics, conducted with the

<sup>125</sup> Minguzzi, L. (2023) Uno spettro si aggira nella comunicazione politica: il populismo in Rete, *Rivista di Digital Politics*, 1, p.159

typical tone of television talk shows”.<sup>126</sup> This definition leads to the “chameleonic” character of populism, it has no clear ideology but instead adjusts the socio-cultural environment in which it appears. “Depending on the setting, the populist agenda develops around issues that are ignored or neglected by the dominant elite”.<sup>127</sup>

The socio-economic populism of a revolutionary nature is to be found in the top-right quadrant. This underscores the anti-elitist nature of populism, which relentlessly challenges the current social structure. “The populist struggle against systemic corruption tends toward the subversion of the liberal democratic constitutional order in favour of a phantom-like representative democracy”.<sup>128</sup> “This trait is closely linked to the moral dimension and allows populists to present themselves as opponents of an elite viewed as the source of the ‘people’s’ problems”.<sup>129</sup>

The third characteristic of populism is in the bottom-left quadrant and is defined by the presence of a charismatic leader and the organization of the movement around them. “Populist leaders are able to establish a direct bond with the ‘people’, declaring themselves their ‘direct representatives’”.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, the anti-democratic tendency of populists is also perpetuated within party organization: the lack of internal stratification, in fact, renders party members subject to the direct will of these leaders”.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Criscitiello, A. (2010) cit. in Minguzzi, L. (2023) Uno spettro si aggira nella comunicazione politica: il populismo in Rete, *Rivista di Digital Politics*, 1, p.159

<sup>127</sup> Canovan, M. (1981), *Populism*, New York and London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; Taggart, P. (2000), *Populism*, Buckingham and Philadelphia, Open University Press cit. in Minguzzi, L. (2023) Uno spettro si aggira nella comunicazione politica: il populismo in Rete, *Rivista di Digital Politics*, 1, p.159

<sup>128</sup> Mény, Y. (2019), *Popolo ma non troppo: il malinteso democratico*, Bologna, Il Mulino cit. in Minguzzi, L. (2023) Uno spettro si aggira nella comunicazione politica: il populismo in Rete, *Rivista di Digital Politics*, 1, p.160

<sup>129</sup> Rodrik, D. (2018), *Populism and the Economics of Globalization*, in *Journal of International Business Policy* cit. in Minguzzi, L. (2023) Uno spettro si aggira nella comunicazione politica: il populismo in Rete, *Rivista di Digital Politics*, 1, p.160

<sup>130</sup> Urbinati, N. (2019), *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*, Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press cit. in Minguzzi, L. (2023) Uno spettro si aggira nella comunicazione politica: il populismo in Rete, *Rivista di Digital Politics*, 1, p.160

<sup>131</sup> Müller, J. W. (2016), *What is Populism?* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press cit. in Minguzzi, L. (2023) Uno spettro si aggira nella comunicazione politica: il populismo in Rete, *Rivista di Digital Politics*, 1, p.160

The bottom-right quadrant represents the moral dimension of populism which finds its roots in ethnic communities. In this context, “populists perceive themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of a morally upright ‘people’ in a Manichean struggle against the ‘other’, who is seen as a threat to their *heartland*”.<sup>132</sup> The ‘people’ is perceived as a unified whole, and anyone who disagrees with populist agendas is instantly labelled as “enemies of the people”.<sup>133</sup>

The author’s objective is to analyse populism as spectrum instead of a binary characteristic and get over the clear-cut separation between mainstream and niche parties. Niche parties differ from mass parties (often called mainstream) as they focus on issues that are seldom discussed in public discourse as their main agenda. “These issues often do not coincide with the classic left-right dichotomies; in this way, niche parties are able to reach voters across traditional partisan alignments”.

“The ‘people centrism’<sup>134</sup> component in populism – that is, the representation of the people as a pure and homogeneous group whose will should be the crucial reference for politicians – is the element that theoretically distinguishes populism from mere political discontent: “populism is not just a reaction against power structures but an appeal to a recognized authority”.<sup>135</sup> Indeed, what distinguishes the support for populism from simple political discontent and frustrations is that populism remains a politics of hope, that is, the hope that where established parties and elites have failed, ordinary folks, common sense, and the politicians who give

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<sup>132</sup> Taggart, P. (2000), *Populism*, Buckingham and Philadelphia, Open University Press; Müller, J. W. (2016), *What is Populism?* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania cit. in Minguzzi, L. (2023) Uno spettro si aggira nella comunicazione politica: il populismo in Rete, *Rivista di Digital Politics*, 1, p.160

<sup>133</sup> Meijers, M. J., Zaslove, A. (2021), Measuring Populism in Political Parties: Appraisal of a New Approach in «*Comparative Political Studies*», 54(2) pp. 372-407; Di Cocco, J. e Monechi, B. (2022), How Populist are Parties? Measuring Degrees of Populism in Party Manifestos Using Supervised Machine Learning, in «*Political Analysis*», 30(3) pp. 311-327 cit. in Minguzzi, L. (2023) Uno spettro si aggira nella comunicazione politica: il populismo in Rete, *Rivista di Digital Politics*, 1, p.160

<sup>134</sup> Rooduijn, M., Pauwels, T. (2011) Measuring Populism: Comparing Two Methods of Content Analysis. *West European Politics* 34: 1272-83. Cit. in Spruyt, B., Keppens, G. and Van Droogenbroeck, F. (2016) Who Supports Populism and What Attracts People to It? *Political Research Quarterly*, 69(2), p. 336

<sup>135</sup> Canovan, M. (1999) Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy. *Political Studies* 47:2-16 cit. in Spruyt, B., Keppens, G. and Van Droogenbroeck, F. (2016) Who Supports Populism and What Attracts People to It?

them a voice can find solutions. For this reason, Canovan labels populism as a kind of “redemptive politics” based on the democratic promise of a better world through the actions of the sovereign people”.<sup>136</sup>

## 4.2 Italian populism and the architecture of identity rhetoric

The Italian case provides a unique laboratory for observing populist communication in the digital age. Laura Minguzzi notes that the Covid-19 pandemic acted as an accelerator, forcing political leaders to rely almost exclusively on social media, thereby cementing a “spectre of populism online”. In Italy, this has manifested as a highly personalized form of communication where the leader – most notably Matteo Salvini or Giorgia Meloni – presents themselves as the sole authentic voice of the “ignored” citizen and embracing a disintermediated relationship with the electorate.<sup>137</sup>

Minguzzi emphasizes that the digital medium is not neutral; it rewards a specific rhetorical style: “‘Populist contagion’ goes beyond the simple use of communication techniques, and the results of the analysis seem to confirm how populist rhetoric also affects the way leaders (and thus parties) choose to address certain policy and programmatic issues, moving them, in some cases, away from their traditional agendas”.<sup>138</sup>

This communication style relies heavily on emotional mobilization. Suania Acampa explains that Italian populist rhetoric often intersects with disinformation to create “narrative battles” which are not designed to inform, but to create a sense of belonging. Acampa’s research reveals a crucial finding regarding platform behaviour: Facebook acts less as a content creator and more as a “sorting hub” that directs users toward increasingly polarized digital spaces. “Disinformation and

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<sup>136</sup> Spruyt, B., Keppens, G. and Van Droogenbroeck, F. (2016) Who Supports Populism and What Attracts People to It? *Political Research Quarterly*, 69(2), p. 336

<sup>137</sup> Minguzzi, L. (2023) Uno spettro si aggira nella comunicazione politica: il populismo in Rete, *Rivista di Digital Politics*, 1. p.2

<sup>138</sup> *Ibidem* p.157

populist communication feed the same type of arguments and sometimes overlap”.<sup>139</sup>

For young men, this often means being ‘sorted’ into the manosphere that validates their sense of “status loss”; for young women, it involves a defensive reaction against the perceived regressive nature of this very rhetoric. This disintermediated link is precisely what allows the “information cocoons” discussed in Chapter 3 to be harvested for electoral gain.

### **4.3 Populism and gender: constructing a gendered “people”**

The most profound impact of populism on the gender cleavage lies in how it constructs “the people”. Populist right-wing parties have moved beyond economic grievances to embrace what Graff and Korolczuk call an “opportunistic synergy”. This is a strategic alliance between populist actors and ultra-conservative religious or social movements to frame anti-gender rhetoric as a defence of the “common people” against “depraved elites”:

“Populist right-wing parties in many locations have allied themselves with ultraconservative religious actors and embraced anti-gender rhetoric in order to enhance their popular appeal as defenders of the common people against the depraved elites. We call this relationship an opportunistic synergy”.<sup>140</sup>

This synergy is particularly effective because it intercepts a specific psychological state: Subjective Social Status Loss. Gidron and Hall argue that support for the populist right is driven by a person’s sense of where they stand in relation to the “social assembly” They define this as a relational variable: “subjective social status is a relational variable, that is to say, it embodies a person’s sense of where she

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<sup>139</sup> Acampa, S. (2022) La disinformazione incontra il populismo. Un’analisi del contesto italiano, Il Mulino, pp. 1–15.

<sup>140</sup> Graff, A. and Korolczuk, E. (2021) Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Era. Routledge. p.7

stands in relation to the full social assembly and, in that respect, might be said to represent social integration, namely, whether or not the person feels herself to be a fully recognized member of society”.<sup>141</sup>

A critical question emerges: does populism speak differently to men and women? While populist rhetoric claims to represent ‘the people’ as a monolith, it often constructs this ‘people’ with implicit gender connotations. Research by Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck suggests that support for populism is deeply tied to a subjective sense of vulnerability and low social status and they argue that populism attracts those who feel stigmatized by the dominant cultural narrative: “populism is strongest supported by stigmatized groups who face difficulties in finding a positive social identity”.<sup>142</sup> They also add that: “a stigmatized group will find in the empty signifier, ‘the people’, a means to adopt a group perspective to interpret their social position and maintain their self-respect. Thus, the more the specific group position constitutes a core part of their identity, the more people will define themselves as part of the "common man" and the more they will be attracted to populism”.<sup>143</sup>

Moreover, Graff and Korolczuk affirm that “contemporary anti-gender discourse is structured as a populist discourse, in that it persistently juxtaposes innocent, gender-conservative people, whom it claims to represent, against corrupt, immoral elites who are accused of spreading ‘gender ideology’. Anti-gender actors consistently position themselves as warriors for justice and defenders of ordinary people against the corporate greed of global capital.”<sup>144</sup>

In the context of the *educational sorpasso* and the rise of the manosphere, many young Italian men experience this “status loss”. They feel like they are no longer

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<sup>141</sup> Gidron, N. and Hall, P. (2017) The Politics of Social Status: Economic and Cultural Roots of the Populist Right, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 68(S1). p.S61

<sup>142</sup> Spruyt, B., Keppens, G. and Van Droogenbroeck, F. (2016) Who Supports Populism and What Attracts People to It? *Political Research Quarterly*, 69(2), p. 335

<sup>143</sup> *Ibidem* p.344

<sup>144</sup> Graff, A. and Korolczuk, E. (2021) *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Era*. Routledge. p.7

“fully recognized members of society” and populism organizes this feeling of being left behind and gives it a political target: the feminist movement and the liberal elite. By emphasizing themes of order, tradition, and national identity, these parties offer a sense of stability to young men who feel displaced.

Within this context, education plays a crucial role, not merely as a mechanism of political socialization or civic competence, but increasingly as a status marker in contemporary “knowledge societies”. The centrality of education to social and political legitimacy is epitomized by Tony Blair’s assertion: “Ask me my three main priorities for government and I tell you education, education, and education”.<sup>145</sup> In societies where educational attainment is so strongly linked to status and authority, being labelled as “less educated” carries a distinct social stigma, even if individuals do not explicitly identify with this perceived deficiency. While the idea of an open educational revolt in so-called “diploma democracies”<sup>146</sup> may be overstated, empirical evidence suggests that the less educated are more likely to experience frustration stemming from the political dominance of higher-educated elites and from perceived contempt directed at them due to their educational background. These status-based grievances help explain why support for populism among the less educated cannot be reduced to diffuse political vulnerability alone but is also driven by resentment toward an education-based hierarchy that structures contemporary politics and social recognition.

As Margalit argues, “while economic change can be a source of grievance expressed along cultural lines, in the form of antipathy toward a certain ethnic group, it is also the other way around: cultural changes generate discontent around economic issues. Consequently, when populist politicians address issues such as

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<sup>145</sup> *Ibidem* p.338

<sup>146</sup> Bovens, M., and Anchrit, W. (2010) The Education Gap in Political Participation and Its Political Consequences. *Acta Politica* 45:393-422 cit. in Spruyt, B., Keppens, G. and Van Droogenbroeck, F. (2016) Who Supports Populism and What Attracts People to It? *Political Research Quarterly*, 69(2), p. 338

immigration, trade, or rural-urban disparities, they tap into public disaffection that goes beyond voters' concern with the material impact of those issues".<sup>147</sup>

"The support for populism unites very divergent grievances and draw specific attention to the special role the empty signifier, 'the people', plays in providing stigmatized groups a positive social identity".<sup>148</sup>

Graff and Korolczuk report what Laclau affirms: "populism is quite simply a way of constructing the political. 'The people' achieve unity not through adhering to a coherent ideology, but rather through opposing a common enemy and producing what Laclau calls "empty signifiers" (a set of ideals and concepts embedded in language)".<sup>149</sup>

An increasing amount of research indicates that populism lacks gender neutrality, as it shapes "the people" using implicitly gendered stories, ethical hierarchies, and appeals based on identity. Graff and Korolczuk suggest that the populist era is defined by a binary perspective of society split between 'the people' and 'the corrupt elite'. Nonetheless, this 'people' is not a vague or inclusive classification; instead, it is implicitly conceived as socially conservative, heteronormative, and based on traditional family frameworks. In this regard, populism not only activates political discontent but also embeds a distinct moral and social framework in which gender dynamics are key. Certainly, "gender is at the heart of this political realignment"<sup>150</sup>, serving as a central axis that delineates belonging and exclusion. The politicization of gender is essential for comprehending how populist figures create a collective identity that is confined both culturally and socially.

Populist rhetoric seems to impact men and women in varied ways, tapping into unique emotional experiences and identity-related anxieties. On one side, right-

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<sup>147</sup> Margalit, Y. (2019) Economic Insecurity and the Causes of Populism, Reconsidered, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 33(4), p. 166

<sup>148</sup> Spruyt, B., Keppens, G. and Van Droogenbroeck, F. (2016) Who Supports Populism and What Attracts People to It? *Political Research Quarterly*, 69(2), p. 335

<sup>149</sup> Laclau, E. (2005) On Populist Reason. New York: Verso cit. in Graff, A. and Korolczuk, E. (2021) *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Era*. Routledge. p.21

<sup>150</sup> Graff, A. and Korolczuk, E. (2021) *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Era*. Routledge. p.4

wing populism may be seen as a type of “masculinist identity politics”, intended to regain the perceived decline of male power in both public and private domains. As the writers indicate, this kind of discourse provides “points of reference for the re-establishment of traditional gender constellations” and directly appeals to the “little man in the streets”, thus rallying individuals who perceive themselves as deprived by economic changes, cultural shifts, and the progress of gender equality. In this context, populism addresses male status anxiety, reframing it as a wider fight against liberal elites and progressive ideals.<sup>151</sup>

Conversely, women are included in populist mobilization but are approached with distinct, yet complementary, narratives. Anti-gender rhetoric often portrays women mainly as mothers and caregivers, assigning them the duty of safeguarding children, family, and moral values. The significance of the family as both a political and emotional symbol is clear in how anti-gender movements depict it as a “refuge from neoliberalism”<sup>152</sup> and as the final stronghold against societal and cultural disintegration. This perspective triggers anxieties concerning the decline of conventional values, the unpredictability of social roles, and the perceived danger that “gender ideology” represents to children and procreation; “‘Gender’ is a stretchy category that serves as a screen for collective fears about change, loss of national identity, excessive influence of the West and its cultural hegemony”<sup>153</sup>, anti-gender rhetoric serves as “a screen for collective fears about change, loss of national identity, excessive influence of the West and its cultural hegemony”, thus connecting gender concerns to wider fears regarding modernity and globalization.

All these dynamics indicate that populism creates a gendered perception of ‘the people’ that is simultaneously exclusive and hierarchical. Men are frequently mobilized through stories of loss and recovery, whereas women are engaged through themes of protection, nurturing, and ethical obligation. In both instances, gender serves as an essential mechanism that shapes and activates political

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<sup>151</sup> *Ibidem* p.6

<sup>152</sup> *Ibidem* p.114

<sup>153</sup> *Ibidem* p.15

identities. Populism, thus, not only mirrors current gender divides but also strengthens them by integrating them into a wider ideological context that determines national belonging.

#### **4.4 Populism as a catalyst: translating insecurity into antagonism**

Populism acts as the final catalyst for the parallel fracture. It did not create the divide, but it provides what Sunstein defines the “normative reality” that prevents the divide from closing. By legitimizing the grievances of the manosphere and framing them as the struggle of the ‘pure people’, populist parties institutionalise gendered antagonism.

The danger of this process, as highlighted by Carnegie, Clark, and Zucker, is that populist governance often relies on information suppression or distortion to maintain its narrative. By delegitimising “expert” knowledge (such as gender studies or sociological data) as “elite propaganda”, populists ensure that their followers remain within their ideological enclaves.<sup>154</sup> The authors argue that populists often undermine global governance and democratic stability by distorting or suppressing scientific information that contradicts their narrative and: “a key means by which populists warp global governance is by distorting scientific information, which is necessary for global responses to many public health and environmental issues”.<sup>155</sup>

By delegitimising gender studies, ISTAT data, or feminist scholarship as “elite propaganda”, populists ensure that young men and women continue to inhabit two different worlds. The Italian gender cleavage is the result of a “perfect storm”: a technological environment that encourages isolation (social media), a sociological shift in status (the *educational sorpasso*), and a political actor (populism) that

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<sup>154</sup> Carnegie, A., Clark, R. and Zucker, N. (2024) Global Governance under Populism: The Challenge of Information Suppression, *World Politics*, 76(4), pp. 639–666.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibidem* p. 639

provides the language and the “Red Pill” logic to turn this insecurity into a permanent state of political war. The “parallel fracture” is therefore not a temporary glitch in Italian democracy, but a structural realignment where gender has become the primary axis of political socialisation and conflict.

## CONCLUSION

By analysing the 2022 elections through the lens of gender, digital socialization, and populist mobilization, we have seen how a new kind of “invisible wall” is being built between citizens. The evidence presented in this thesis leads to a definitive conclusion: the gender gap in Italian politics is no longer a mere difference in "preference," but has evolved into a structural cleavage characterized by distinct empirical, normative, and organizational elements.

Through the analysis of the Parallel Fracture, this study has demonstrated that the digital environment has fundamentally altered the process of political socialization. In the 20th century, voters were “encapsulated” by unions, churches, and local party sections, which provided a stable ideological anchor. Today, as argued in Chapter 3, this has been replaced by “Digital Encapsulation”. Algorithmic filtering and the “Red Pill” logic of the manosphere have created a self-reinforcing feedback loop for young men, while young women increasingly gravitate toward the “Green-Alternative-Libertarian” (GAL) pole in response to perceived threats to civil rights.

One of the most human elements uncovered in this research is the role of status anxiety. The *educational sorpasso* of women is a victory for equality, yet in an economy of scarcity and precariousness, it has been felt by many young men as a loss. Populism has been the only political force to provide a language for that loss, albeit a language of resentment. Meanwhile, the retreat of Southern women into abstentionism tells a story of exhaustion – a “silent crisis” where politics has simply stopped speaking to the daily struggle of making a life.

The implications for Italian democracy are significant: democracy cannot survive in a state of permanent “parallelism”. If young men and women continue to inhabit different “normative realities” where the other gender is viewed as an ideological antagonist, the possibility of a shared civic discourse diminishes. If we continue to allow algorithms to dictate our political socialization, the “other” gender will

increasingly be viewed not as a partner in the democratic project, but as an ideological antagonist.

The Parallel Fracture represents a challenge not only to political parties but to the very concept of a unified 'people'.

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