

Masculinity Norms and the Far-Right Backlash Against Female Leadership*

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Abstract

Does electing a female political leader fuel a far-right backlash? Using a regression discontinuity design on close mixed-gender mayoral races in Italian municipalities, we find that electing a female mayor raises the vote share of Lega—Italy’s main populist radical right party—by 2.0 percentage points at the next general election, nearly doubling the average change. To investigate the mechanisms, we construct novel municipal-level indices of *masculinity norms* and *gender norms*, and show that the reaction is concentrated where dominance-oriented masculinity norms are stronger and is further amplified by local economic insecurity, while exhibiting no clear gradient along gender norms. This pattern is consistent with a status-threat mechanism. The results provide causal evidence that advances in women’s political leadership generate a far-right electoral backlash, and identify dominance-oriented masculinity—rather than gender norms *per se*—as the cultural margin along which it operates.

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Keywords: Female mayors, far-right voting, backlash, masculinity norms, gender norms, regression discontinuity.

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1 Introduction

Western democracies face a paradox. Women have moved into political leadership at an unprecedented pace, while populist radical right (PRR) parties—some of which, alongside immigration and national sovereignty, have made opposition to feminism and gender-equality policies a prominent feature of their platforms—have simultaneously surged at the polls (Donà, 2021; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). The cultural backlash thesis posits that the second is, in part, a reaction to the first: as societies become more liberal on issues of gender and identity, segments of the electorate react by supporting parties that promise to restore traditional hierarchies (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Survey evidence is consistent with this view: sexism, modern-sexist attitudes, and conservative gender values predict PRR voting in cross-country and within-country data (Anduiza and Rico, 2024; Coffé, 2019; Off, 2023, 2024). Establishing whether this correlation reflects a genuine electoral reaction to advances in women’s status, however, requires variation in exposure to female leadership that is plausibly orthogonal to pre-existing attitudes—a setting that survey-based designs cannot easily provide. A broader literature in economics and political science has identified economic shocks (Algan et al., 2017; Bonomi et al., 2021; Dal Bo’ et al., 2023; Fetzer, 2019; Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022), trade and labour-market dislocation (Autor et al., 2020; Colantone and Stanig, 2018; Dippel et al., 2022; Rodrik, 2021), and immigration (Barone et al., 2016; Dustmann et al., 2019; Mayda et al., 2022) as key drivers of PRR support. What remains missing, to date, is causal evidence on whether the visible advance of women into political office itself triggers a far-right electoral backlash, on the cultural margin along which that reaction operates, and on the economic conditions that amplify it.

This paper provides causal evidence that electing a female political leader increases support for the far right. We study Italian municipal elections from 2013 onward, focusing on races in which both a male and a female candidate competed for the position of mayor. Exploiting the quasi-random assignment of the mayor’s gender in close mixed-gender elections through a regression discontinuity design (RDD), we estimate the causal effect of electing a female mayor on the change in vote shares for national parties at the subsequent general election. We find that the election of a female mayor increases the vote share of Lega—Italy’s main populist radical right party—by approximately 2.0 percentage points at the following general election, relative to a control mean of 1.4 percentage points. This is a substantively large effect, nearly doubling the average change in Lega’s vote share. Importantly, the effect is specific to Lega: the gains in its vote share appear to draw on voters defecting from both the rest of the right-wing coalition—reflecting a reallocation from the moderate wing toward its more extreme component—and from the broader progressive bloc, comprising the centre-left and the Five Star Movement. We find

no effect on voter turnout, whether measured overall or separately for men and women, indicating that the backlash operates through the choice of party rather than through the decision to vote.

To understand what shapes this backlash, we investigate the role of local cultural norms. We construct two novel municipal-level indices of social norms that capture distinct dimensions of local culture. The *Masculinity Index* measures the prevalence of dominance-oriented masculinity norms—social prescriptions about how men should behave, emphasizing toughness, dominance, control, risk-taking, competitiveness, and the assertion of male status—based on indicators such as the share of workers in traditionally male occupations, gambling behaviour, reluctance to seek help for mental health issues, and attitudes toward emotional expression. The *Gender Index* captures the prevalence of traditional norms about the role of women in society—local beliefs about female empowerment and the appropriate socio-economic roles of women relative to men—based on indicators such as the gender employment gap, historical referendum votes on divorce, female representation in local councils, and the share of homemakers. In short, the Masculinity Index measures local norms about how men ought to behave, while the Gender Index measures the prevalence of traditional norms regarding female empowerment and women’s socio-economic roles.¹

The two indices are positively correlated; yet, they are far from being collinear and speak to two conceptually different dimensions of local culture. A recent and rapidly growing literature in economics argues that masculinity norms are analytically and empirically distinct from gender norms more broadly, and that they have independent explanatory power for outcomes ranging from labour supply to mental health to political preferences (De Haas et al., 2024; Matavelli et al., 2026). Documenting that masculinity norms explain the far-right backlash against female leadership while gender norms do not is at the heart of our contribution. Conceptually, one story predicts that the backlash should be concentrated where gender norms are traditional—that is, where female leadership is likely to be less readily accepted—while the other story predicts that the backlash should be concentrated where dominance-oriented masculinity norms are stronger—that is, where (male) voters perceive the election of a woman to a leadership position as a threat to their social status.

Our heterogeneity analysis reveals a novel pattern. The backlash effect is concentrated in municipalities where masculinity norms are stronger: the RDD estimate is larger and statistically significant in above-median Masculinity Index municipalities, while we find no effect below the median. By contrast, when we split the sample along the Gender Index,

¹The two indices are intended as empirical proxies for latent cultural constructs: their components are motivated by correlates of masculinity and gender norms documented in the existing literature (De Haas et al., 2024; Matavelli et al., 2026), rather than by an assumed causal relationship between each component and the underlying norms. Accordingly, the indices should be interpreted as descriptive measures of local cultural patterns, without attaching a normative ranking to higher or lower values.

the point estimates are positive throughout and do not exhibit a clear gradient—the effect is not systematically larger in municipalities with relatively more traditional gender norms. This asymmetry suggests that the backlash against female mayors operates not primarily through conservative views about the role of women in society, but specifically through the strength of dominance-oriented masculinity norms in the local community. Where these norms are stronger, the election of a woman to a leadership position is more likely to be perceived as a threat to male social status, triggering a compensatory political response in the form of greater support for the far right.

We further explore the role of the masculinity threat mechanism along two additional dimensions. First, the backlash is concentrated in municipalities with worse economic conditions, as measured by the local unemployment rate. This evidence is consistent with the idea that economic insecurity is itself a driver of populist support (Autor et al., 2020; Colantone and Stanig, 2018; Dal Bo’ et al., 2023; Guiso et al., 2024). Crucially, however, the interaction between the two dimensions provides the most informative insight: the largest effects emerge in municipalities that are simultaneously high in dominance masculinity norms and high in unemployment, while the backlash is muted where either dimension is low.² This pattern is consistent with the interpretation that the symbolic threat to male status is sharper where the material foundations of that status are themselves eroding. Second, the backlash is driven by municipalities where the female mayor is affiliated with the centre-left or the Five Star Movement, and is substantially weaker—or absent—when she is affiliated with the centre-right. This pattern indicates that the backlash is amplified when the female mayor is herself associated with a gender-progressive political agenda, and therefore poses a more visible challenge to traditional gender hierarchies.

This paper contributes to several literatures. First, we contribute to the literature on the determinants of support for populist radical right parties. A large body of work has identified economic shocks and recessions (Algan et al., 2017; Bonomi et al., 2021; Dal Bo’ et al., 2023; Fetzer, 2019; Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022; Panunzi et al., 2024), exposure to import competition and labour-market dislocation (Autor et al., 2020; Colantone and Stanig, 2018; Dippel et al., 2022; Rodrik, 2021), immigration and refugee inflows (Barone et al., 2016; Dustmann et al., 2019; Mayda et al., 2022), broadband and social media diffusion (Manacorda et al., 2026), and cultural grievances (Anduiza and Rico, 2024; Carreras et al., 2019; Green and Shorrocks, 2023; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Off, 2023, 2024) as factors behind the success of PRR parties. A parallel body of work has documented the central role of anti-feminist versus femonationalist appeals in the platforms of European far-right parties, including Lega and Fratelli d’Italia in Italy (Björkdahl and Cognini, 2026; Cianciara, 2025; Donà, 2021, 2022; Lavizzari, 2025) and Vox in Spain

²Conversely, we do not find any evidence that traditional gender norms explain the backlash even when restricting attention to municipalities experiencing high unemployment rate.

(Bernárdez-Rodal et al., 2022; Fernández-Suárez, 2021; Ferreira, 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). Building on this evidence, we provide causal evidence that politicians’ personal identity—specifically, the election of a female mayor—increases far-right support, and that the effect is concentrated where dominance masculinity norms are stronger.

Second, we contribute to the literature on the political consequences of female representation. A large body of work has studied how electing women affects policy outcomes (Baskaran and Hessami, 2025; Carozzi and Gago, 2023; Carrer and Masi, 2023; Casarico et al., 2022; Hessami and da Fonseca, 2020; Renzullo, 2024), the quality and selection of politicians (Baltrunaite et al., 2014; Besley et al., 2017), the political pipeline for other women (Baskaran and Hessami, 2018; Brown et al., 2025; Kjølner et al., 2026), women’s persistence after electoral wins and losses (Nzabonimpa, 2023; Peveri and Sangnier, 2023; Wasserman, 2023), and women’s access to top leadership positions (Huidobro and Falcó-Gimeno, 2023; Kansikas and Bagues, 2026). The literature also documents that holding office can impose higher personal costs on women than on men, including a greater risk of divorce (Folke and Rickne, 2020) and exposure to violence (Daniele et al., 2025; Håkansson, 2021). The closest antecedent of our paper is Negri and Romarri (2025), who show using survey data that the election of a female councillor in English local authorities causes a shift toward more conservative gender attitudes among male respondents and among respondents exposed to economic insecurity. We add three new dimensions to this literature. First, we show that the backlash documented in attitude surveys translates into a measurable far-right electoral response in national-level elections: the election of a female mayor causally increases the vote share of the country’s main populist radical right party at the next general election. Second, we show that this electoral backlash is rooted in dominance *masculinity norms* rather than in traditional norms about the role of women in society. Third, we provide direct evidence that the backlash is amplified by economic insecurity, consistent with the mechanism in Negri and Romarri (2025).

Third, we contribute to the literature on masculinity norms, fragile masculinity, and political behaviour. Social and psychological research argues that manhood is a precarious social status that must be earned and continuously validated, and that men respond to threats to their masculine status with compensatory attitudes and behaviours (Cheryan et al., 2015; DiMuccio and Knowles, 2020; Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2016; Vandello and Bosson, 2013; Vandello et al., 2008; Willer et al., 2013). This literature has documented that masculinity threat predicts support for masculine political leadership, including a desire for a “masculine president” that translated into greater support for Donald Trump in 2016 (Carian and Sobotka, 2018; Gidengil and Stolle, 2021; Kimmel, 2017), and that masculine personality traits and conformity to dominance-oriented masculinity norms³ predict support for European radical right parties more broadly (Coffé,

³Conformity to dominance-oriented masculinity norms is typically measured with the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (Mahalik et al., 2003; Parent and Moradi, 2009).

2019; Coffé et al., 2023; Oshri et al., 2023; Ralph-Morrow, 2022). A complementary economics literature has begun to study masculinity norms as distinct from gender norms more broadly: De Haas et al. (2024) provide large-scale cross-country evidence that adherence to “dominance-oriented masculinity” norms predicts labour supply, risk-taking, and support for anti-democratic and anti-market strongman leadership, and Matavelli et al. (2026) synthesize evidence from across disciplines and document, using survey data from seventy countries, that masculinity norms vary substantially across societies and predict a range of socioeconomic and political outcomes. Our paper provides what is, to our knowledge, the first causal evidence that the political backlash against female leadership varies systematically with local masculinity norms but not with gender norms. In doing so, we show that these two conceptually distinct dimensions of local culture can be empirically distinguished by how they condition a causally identified political response.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 provides institutional background. Section 3 describes the data and the construction of the Masculinity and Gender Indices. Section 4 presents the empirical strategy, and Section 5 reports the baseline results. Section 6 explores the mechanisms behind the backlash, focusing on the distinction between masculinity and gender norms, the amplifying role of economic insecurity, and the political affiliation of the elected mayor. Section 7 addresses alternative explanations and reports robustness checks. Section 8 concludes.

2 Institutional Background

2.1 The Rise of the Far Right in Italy: Lega and Fratelli d’Italia

Lega (originally *Lega Nord*) was founded in 1989 under the leadership of Umberto Bossi as a local federalist party advocating for the autonomy, and eventually the secession, of northern Italy. Since 2013, under the new leadership of Matteo Salvini, the party underwent a radical transformation: it dropped “Nord” from its name, nationalised its platform, and repositioned itself as a populist radical right party in the European mould (Albertazzi et al., 2018; Donà, 2021). Immigration, Euroscepticism, and the defence of the “traditional family” became central pillars of the party’s ideology (Donà, 2020; Lavizzari, 2025).

Fratelli d’Italia (FdI, Brothers of Italy) was founded in 2012, but its political roots extend deep into the history of Republican Italy. The party is the most recent successor to the post-fascist tradition previously represented by the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) and Alleanza Nazionale (AN). Since its foundation, FdI has been led by Giorgia Meloni, Italy’s current Prime Minister (Baldini et al., 2022; Vampa, 2023a). The party’s original ideology combined nationalism, sovereignism, and authoritarianism with an increasingly radical stance on gender issues (Donà, 2022; Vampa, 2023b).

The two parties share some of the core ideological commitments of the European populist radical right⁴—nationalism, sovereignism, scepticism toward supranational institutions, and opposition to immigration—and converge in their conservative positions on gender roles and family policy. Given this proximity on gender issues, how should we expect the election of women to positions of power to affect the two parties’ electoral support? Building on evidence that voters respond to the rhetoric and communication of political leaders (Barrera et al., 2020), we argue that the way leaders campaign on these issues is itself relevant. Examining the academic and anecdotal evidence on the rhetorical strategies of the two leaders therefore can generate a prediction about which party stands to gain from voters’ exposure to female political leadership.

Turning first to the academic literature, Björkdahl and Cognini (2026)—while addressing themes that extend well beyond gender norms—show that the discursive repertoire of the radical right depends in part on the identity of the political messenger and on the audience it seeks to mobilise. They argue, more specifically, that Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini adopt distinct rhetorical styles on these issues. Meloni, as the female leader of a far-right party, advances a “femonationalist” rhetoric through which she appears to defend women, motherhood, and more traditional gender roles, rendering her positions more palatable to mainstream audiences and to conservative women in particular. Salvini, by contrast, employs a “reactionary masculinity” discourse of a more confrontational kind: he projects a strongman image and frames gender equality as subordinate to ostensibly more pressing national priorities such as immigration and security.

This characterisation of Salvini’s rhetoric finds anecdotal support in press coverage. Capecchi (2026), for example, analyses the masculine aesthetics through which Salvini performs a strongman self-representation online, cementing his public image around imaginaries of male dominance. This performative dimension is mirrored in the substantive issues he has championed, several of which map onto traits that Matavelli et al. (2026) document as correlates of dominance-oriented masculinity norms and that we use to construct the Masculinity Index in Section 3.2. For example, his advocacy of a “legitimate defence” law easing penalties for shooting intruders (Reuters, 2019) and of looser restrictions on the private purchase of firearms (la Repubblica, 2019), his opposition to lower urban speed limits (Reuters, 2024), and his support for reintroducing compulsory military service (ANSA, 2024b) jointly evoke the risk-taking and military-valorisation dimensions, which are key predictors of dominance masculinity norms and ingredients of our composite Masculinity Index.⁵

⁴In recent years, as electoral support increased, FdI took a less populist and more mainstream conservative position on these issues, with its delegation being accepted into the “European Conservatives and Reformists Group” of the European Parliament and including in its ranks politicians with a more moderate ideological background.

⁵Tellingly, this emphasis is not shared across the radical right: Guido Crosetto, a co-founder of Fratelli d’Italia and current Minister for Defence, has publicly rejected the use of the armed forces to “educate” the young, arguing that the military should train professionals to defend institutions rather than serve

This rhetorical asymmetry generates a testable prediction. If the electoral backlash against female mayors operates through the activation of masculinity norms—rather than through generic far-right or anti-feminist sentiment—it should disproportionately benefit the party whose discourse most directly appeals to those norms. Lega, under Salvini’s leadership, fits this description: its rhetoric explicitly mobilises an accentuated masculine identity that is both threatened by, and offered as a response to, the visible advance of women into political leadership. Fratelli d’Italia, by contrast, articulates its conservative gender agenda through a female leader and in a register designed to broaden rather than polarise its appeal along gender lines. Consistent with this characterisation, Lega also stands out for the limited institutional weight of its female representatives. Using Openpolis’s *indice di forza*—which weights politicians according to the institutional offices they hold in parliament and government, so that a party’s female share of strength reflects not only how many women it has but also how senior the positions they occupy are—women accounted for only 16.5% of Lega’s total institutional strength in 2024, the lowest value among all parties with representation in parliament and roughly half the value obtained by Fratelli d’Italia, which scores 30.3% (Openpolis, 2024).⁶

2.2 Italian National and Municipal Elections

Italy has approximately 8,000 municipalities (*comuni*), which constitute the lowest tier of local government.⁷ The mayor (*sindaco*) is the most important local political figure, heading the executive branch and representing the municipality. Mayors are directly elected by the citizens of the municipality. The electoral system for municipalities differs by population size. In municipalities with fewer than 15,000 inhabitants, the mayor is elected by plurality rule in a single round: the candidate who receives the most votes wins. In municipalities with 15,000 or more inhabitants, a runoff system is used, with a second round between the top two candidates if no candidate receives an absolute majority in the first round (Bordignon et al., 2016; Cipullo, 2021; Gamalerio et al., 2025).

as a vehicle for civic formation (ANSA, 2024a). This contrast reinforces our interpretation that Lega, rather than the far right as a whole, most directly mobilises dominance masculinity norms.

⁶More broadly, heterogeneity among PRR parties in this regard extends beyond Italy. While parties such as Vox in Spain and the AfD in Germany have also developed explicitly anti-feminist repertoires, other populist radical-right parties, most notably Rassemblement National under Marine Le Pen, have increasingly incorporated selected women’s-rights claims into their political appeals. These differences caution against treating the European radical right as homogeneous in its gender rhetoric and are consistent with our argument that Lega’s distinctive appeal lies not simply in conservative gender positions, but in a political discourse that more directly mobilises masculinity and opposition to feminism. Lega’s decision to field Roberto Vannacci—whose public interventions had attacked feminism, emphasised traditional gender roles, and articulated a distinctly dominance-oriented conception of masculinity—in the 2024 European elections provides a further illustration of this rhetorical orientation.

⁷Italy is divided into three vertically integrated layers of local government. From the top to the bottom, these are the regions (*regioni*), the provinces (*province*), and the municipalities. Five regions (the so-called special-statute regions) are granted special autonomy which includes discretion over the voting system for municipal elections. As discussed in Section 3.1, we exclude them from our analysis.

Italian mayoral candidates can be backed by national political parties from both the centre-left and centre-right coalitions, as well as by civic lists—locally based political organisations that operate independently of national parties (Gamalerio, 2020; Gamalerio et al., 2025). The presence of civic lists is particularly widespread in Italian municipal elections, especially in smaller municipalities. Municipal elections do not take place on a single national election day. Instead, elections are held on a rolling basis, with each municipality voting at the end of each five-year mayoral term. This staggered timing means that the interval between a municipal election and the next general election (for the national Parliament) varies across municipalities.

At the national level, Italy is a parliamentary democracy. Parliament is composed of the Senate (*Senato della Repubblica*) and the Chamber of Deputies (*Camera dei deputati*), elected by popular vote concurrently with elections regularly scheduled every five years.⁸ The Prime Minister is formally appointed by the President of the Republic but needs explicit support via confidence votes by both branches of Parliament. During the period covered by our analysis, national elections took place on February 24–25, 2013, March 4, 2018, and September 25, 2022. The 2013 election was held under the 2005 electoral law—a proportional system with a sizable majority premium awarded to coalition receiving the most votes. The 2018 and 2022 elections were instead held under the 2017 electoral law—a mixed-member system with roughly forty percent of seats assigned with first-past-the-post and the remaining seats assigned proportionally. A common feature of both voting systems is the explicit incentive to create party coalitions prior to elections. Indeed, the competition during this period was mainly structured around a centre-left bloc anchored by the Democratic Party, a centre-right bloc including Forza Italia, Lega, and Fratelli d’Italia, and the Five Star Movement, which entered Parliament in 2013 as an anti-establishment and ideologically less conventional actor.

3 Data

3.1 Italian municipalities’ data

Our analysis combines administrative data on Italian municipal and national elections with information on politicians’ characteristics and municipal covariates. The municipal election data cover the period 2013–2022, while the national general elections considered are those held in 2013, 2018, and 2022. Due to data limitations and the fact that municipalities in special-statute regions follow somewhat different voting rules, we restrict the sample to municipalities that belong to ordinary regions. Figure A.1 presents a timeline

⁸All individuals aged 18 or older are eligible to vote for the Chamber of Deputies. Eligibility to vote for the upper house was restricted to individuals aged 25 or older until a constitutional reform approved in 2021. Early terminations are common due to frequent government crises and inability to form stable governing majorities (Cipullo, 2023).

reporting the dates of all municipal and general elections included in the analysis. All electoral results are drawn from the historical election archive of the Italian Ministry of the Interior (*Archivio storico delle elezioni del Ministero dell’Interno*). Information on the personal characteristics of politicians, including gender and other individual attributes, comes from the registry of local administrators maintained by the Ministry of the Interior (*Anagrafe degli Amministratori Locali*). Data on municipal characteristics are obtained from the 2011 Italian Population Census conducted by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT). Tables B.1 and B.2 present descriptive statistics for the main variables included in the analysis.

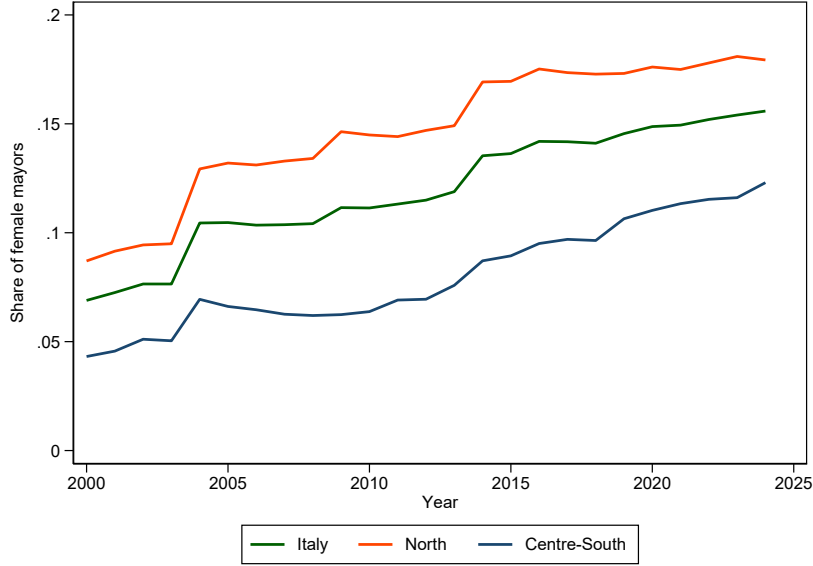
From these sources, we recover the identity, gender, political affiliation, and vote shares of all mayoral candidates. We focus on elections in which at least one male and one female candidate competed for mayor, which we define as “mixed-gender competitions”. This restriction is necessary for the construction of our running variable, namely the female–male vote-share margin. We then match each municipal election to the previous and the subsequent national general election. Our main outcome variable is the change in political parties’ vote share between the general election preceding the municipal election and the first general election following it, measured at the municipal level. We construct these outcome variables for all parties, coalitions, and electoral turnout. Throughout the paper, vote shares are measured relative to the number of eligible voters rather than valid votes, so as to abstract from differences in electoral participation across municipalities and over time.

Figure 1 plots the share of female mayors in Italy over the period 2000–2024, separately for the country as a whole, the North, and the Centre-South. The share increases steadily in all areas, indicating a gradual increase in women’s representation in local executive office. A persistent North–South gap is nevertheless visible, with the North displaying higher shares throughout. Figure 2 maps the geographic distribution of municipalities that experienced at least one mixed-gender competition (left panel) and at least one female mayor (right panel) between 2013 and 2022. Mixed-gender competitions are widespread across the country, ensuring broad geographic coverage for the analysis. Municipalities that elected at least one female mayor are likewise observed throughout Italy, though somewhat more frequently in the North than in the South.

3.2 Masculinity and Gender Indices

A central contribution of this paper is the construction of two municipal-level indices designed to capture distinct dimensions of local culture. The indices combine observable area-level correlates of the prevalence of a set of social prescriptions that the existing literature identifies as correlates of masculinity and gender norms. Their construction therefore exploits the systematic association between these characteristics and the un-

Figure 1: Share of Female Mayors in Office



Notes: The figure shows the share of female mayors in office in Italian municipalities from 2000 to 2024.

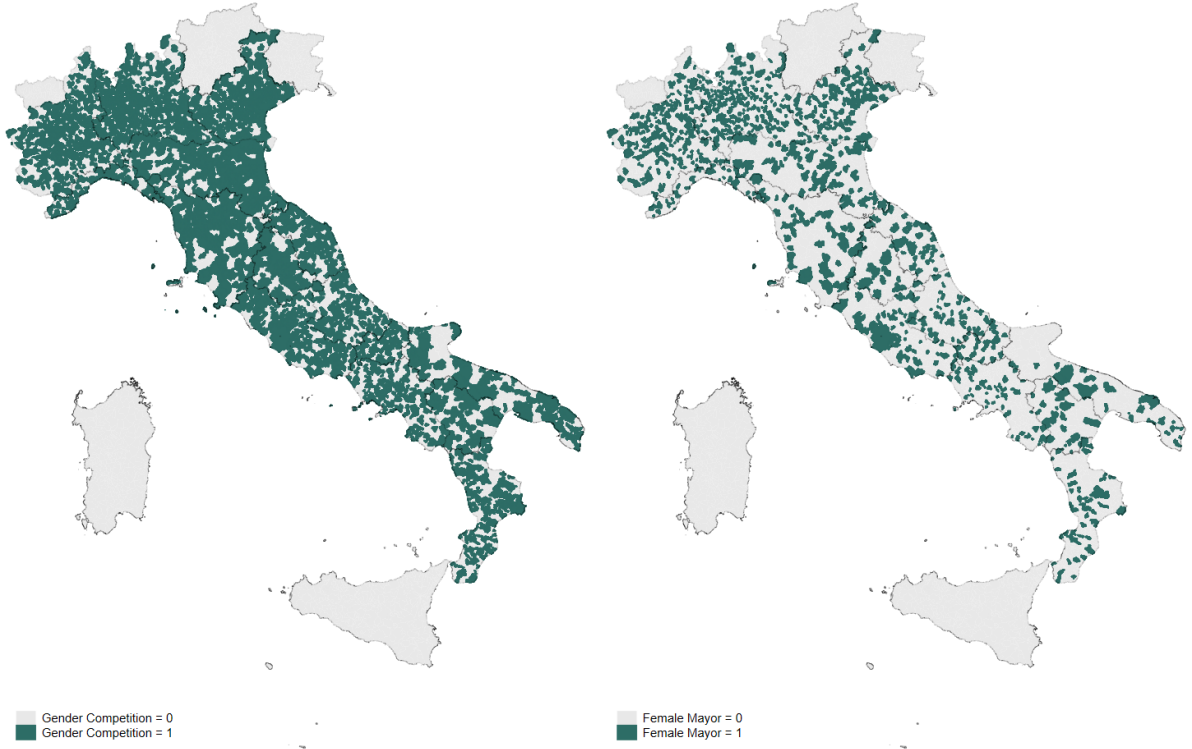
derlying cultural constructs, without implying that any individual component causally determines those norms. Moreover, the direction of each index is purely positive: higher values indicate stronger dominance-oriented masculinity norms or more traditional gender norms, respectively, and should not be interpreted as implying a normative ranking across municipalities.⁹

Each index is obtained from the first component of a principal component analysis (PCA) and then standardized to have mean zero and unit standard deviation. Appendix Table B.3 reports, for each variable included in the PCA, its name, territorial level of measurement, source, year, the sign with which it enters the PCA (positive or negative, so as to ensure coherence in the interpretation of the index), and the loading on the first principal component.

The **Masculinity Index** is intended to capture the prevalence of dominance-oriented masculinity norms in the local population. It is constructed from variables related to long working hours, unskilled blue-collar employment, armed forces personnel, employment in the primary sector, gambling intensity, failure to wear a seatbelt, reluctance to seek help for depression, self-reported feelings of sadness or anxiety, and opposition to the right of opposition parties to criticize the government. Higher values of the index indicate

⁹The components of the indices should be interpreted as aggregate proxies for local cultural patterns rather than as measures of individual attitudes. Their inclusion reflects their empirical association with the latent constructs of interest and does not imply that individuals belonging to any particular occupational, family-status, or demographic category necessarily endorse the corresponding norms. Accordingly, the indices are intended as descriptive measures of local cultural environments and neither attach a normative nor a moral ranking to the characteristics from which they are constructed.

Figure 2: Geographic Distribution of Gender Competitions and Female Mayors



Notes: The figure shows municipalities that experienced at least one mixed-gender mayoral race between 2013 and 2022 (left panel) and municipalities that elected at least one female mayor between 2013 and 2022 (right panel).

stronger adherence to dominance-oriented masculinity norms. The choice of variables is guided by the evidence in [De Haas et al. \(2024\)](#).¹⁰ The first principal component accounts for 48% of the total variance. Table B.4 reports the correlation matrix for the variables entering the Masculinity Index.

The **Gender Index** is designed to capture the prevalence of traditional gender norms in the local community. It is constructed from variables measuring the gender employment gap, voting patterns in the divorce referendum, the share of women on the municipal council, the share of divorced individuals, educational attainment, urbanisation, the share of homemakers, and the presence of a kindergarten in the municipality.¹¹ Higher values

¹⁰In their framework, dominance-oriented masculinity is measured through attitudes toward winning, violence, help avoidance, male control, and heterosexual identity, and is shown to correlate with a range of behavioural and political outcomes. We therefore select municipal-level proxies that capture these dimensions, or their observable correlates, at the local level. Long working hours proxy competitiveness and endurance; unskilled blue-collar employment and employment in the primary sector capture sorting into traditionally male occupations; the share of armed forces personnel proxies support for military values and hierarchical authority; gambling intensity and failure to wear a seatbelt capture risk-taking and lower preventive behaviour; reluctance to seek help for depression directly captures help avoidance; self-reported sadness, depression, and anxiety capture the mental-health dimension associated with emotional restraint and help avoidance; and opposition to the right of opposition parties to criticize the government proxies weaker support for liberal-democratic norms, consistent with their evidence on support for strong leaders and army rule.

¹¹Given their negative correlation with more traditional gender norms, the following variables were

of the index indicate more traditional gender norms. The choice of variables is guided in part by [De Haas et al. \(2024\)](#) and in part by the broader literature on gender norms.¹² The first principal component accounts for more than 30% of the total variance. Table [B.5](#) reports the correlation matrix for the variables entering the Gender Index.

Figure [3](#) displays the geographic distribution of the two indices. Both indices take particularly high values in the South and in parts of central Italy, while they take considerably lower values in the North. Figure [4](#) further shows that the two indices are positively correlated but far from collinear: the estimated correlation coefficient between the Masculinity Index and the Gender Index is 0.567. This pattern is consistent with recent work emphasizing that masculinity norms are conceptually and empirically distinct from gender norms more broadly, which concern the relative roles and status of men and women ([De Haas et al., 2024](#); [Matavelli et al., 2026](#)). A municipality may display strong dominance-oriented masculinity norms while at the same time not exhibiting traditional gender norms, and vice versa. Distinguishing between these two dimensions is central to the heterogeneity analysis that follows.

4 Empirical Strategy

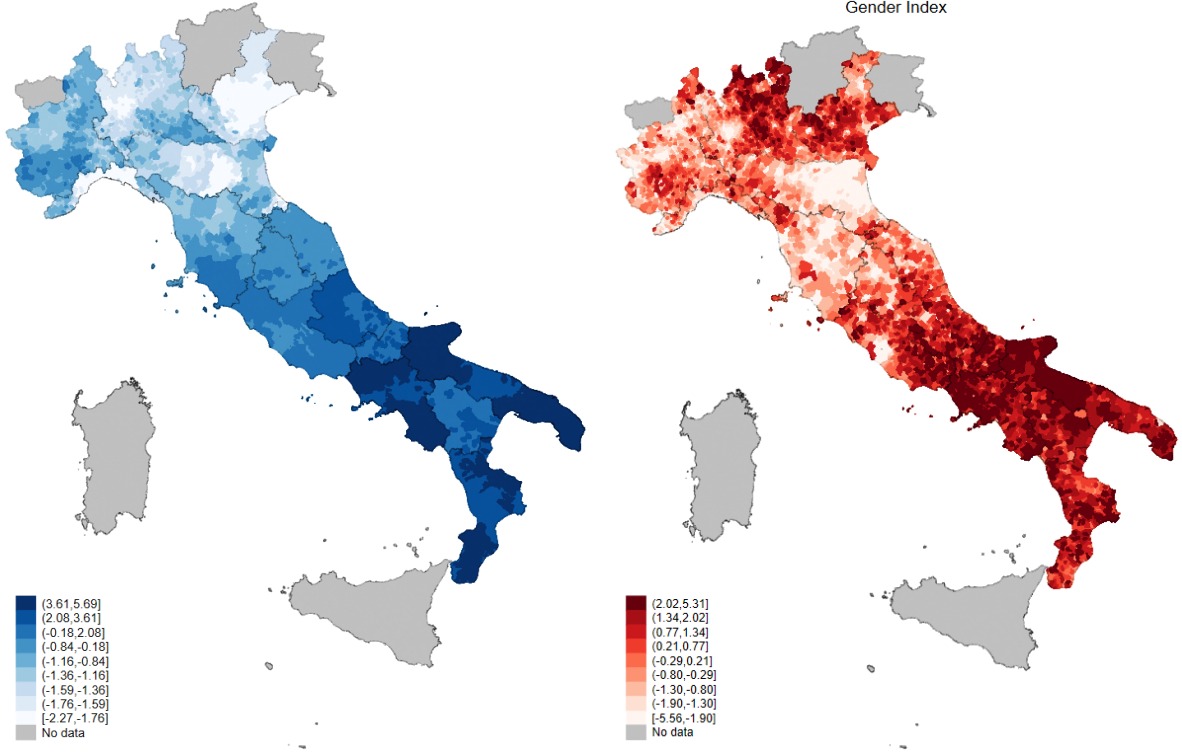
4.1 Regression Discontinuity Design

We exploit the quasi-random assignment of the mayor’s gender in close elections to identify the causal effect of electing a female mayor on subsequent voting behaviour. Our approach follows the standard RDD framework used in the literature on the effects of female political representation ([Baskaran and Hessami, 2018](#); [Casarico et al., 2022](#); [Daniele et al., 2025](#); [Huidobro and Falcó-Gimeno, 2023](#)). The running variable is the vote share margin of the leading female candidate relative to the leading male candidate in the municipal election. Specifically, for each gender competition in municipality i at time t , we

reverse-coded prior to their inclusion in the principal component analysis: support for the “No” vote in the divorce referendum, the share of divorced individuals, the share of university graduates, urban status, and the presence of a kindergarten.

¹²[De Haas et al. \(2024\)](#) show that gender role attitudes are systematically associated with education and urbanisation, with more educated and more urban individuals holding less traditional views about the role of women in society. We therefore include educational attainment and urbanisation (following the DEGURBA classification) among the components of the index. Moreover, the variables are chosen to capture salient manifestations of traditional gender norms in the local context, including local family structure, proxied by the share of divorced individuals, and family law attitudes, as reflected in the referendum about the right to divorce law ([Daniele et al., 2025](#)); women’s political representation ([Bozzano, 2017](#)); gender gaps in labour market participation; the share of homemakers ([Righetto, 2023](#)); and the local availability of childcare services ([Marchese et al., 2025](#)). The referendum outcome and the share of divorced individuals capture persistent local variation in family-related norms. Their inclusion reflects this measurement purpose and does not entail a normative assessment of individual or collective choices regarding marriage, divorce, and family life.

Figure 3: Geographic Distribution of Masculinity and Gender Indices



Notes: The figure shows the Masculinity Index by municipality in the left panel, where higher values (darker shading) indicate stronger adherence to dominance-oriented masculinity norms, and the Gender Index by municipality in the right panel, where higher values (darker shading) indicate more traditional gender norms.

define:

$$M_{it} = \text{Vote Share}_{it}^F - \text{Vote Share}_{it}^M \quad (1)$$

where Vote Share_{it}^F and Vote Share_{it}^M denote the vote shares of the top female and top male candidates, respectively.¹³ The treatment indicator $D_{it} = \mathbb{1}[M_{it} > 0]$ equals one when the female candidate wins the election.

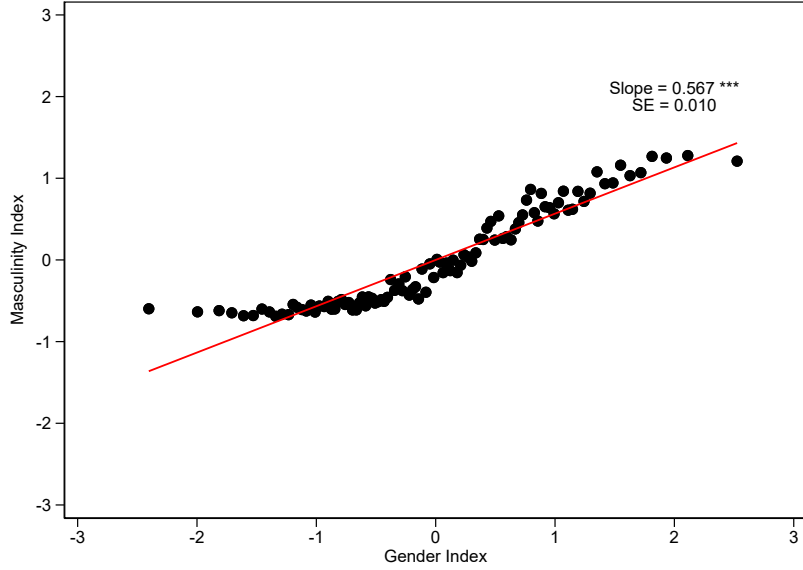
We estimate the following local linear regression:

$$\Delta Y_{i,t+1} = \alpha + \tau D_{it} + \beta_1 M_{it} + \beta_2 D_{it} \times M_{it} + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

where $\Delta Y_{i,t+1}$ is the change in the outcome variable (e.g., Lega's vote share) between the general election preceding and the general election following the municipal election, γ_t are municipal election date fixed effects, and ε_{it} is the error term. The parameter of interest is τ , which captures the causal effect of electing a female mayor on the outcome. Standard errors are clustered at the provincial level.

¹³For elections in which a second round takes place to determine the winner, we focus on the second round. To this end, our sample restriction criteria in these cases imply that we only keep elections in which a second round occurred if one of the top two candidates was a man and the other was a woman.

Figure 4: Correlation between Masculinity and Gender Indices



Notes: The figure shows a binned scatterplot of the standardized Masculinity Index (y-axis) against the standardized Gender Index (x-axis), together with the fitted linear relationship.

We follow the data-driven bandwidth selection procedure of [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) and report results using both the optimal bandwidth selected for the Lega outcome and outcome-specific optimal bandwidths. We use triangular kernel weights to give more weight to observations closer to the threshold. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects to account for the fact that the political environment varies across election cycles. To ensure that every individual voter is assigned equal weight regardless of the municipality in which they reside—as is customary in the analysis of nationwide elections (see, e.g., [Autor et al., 2020](#); [Cipullo and Lee, 2025](#))—we weight observations by the number of eligible voters in each municipality.

4.2 Identifying Assumptions

The key identifying assumption of the RDD analysis is the continuity of potential outcomes assumption, which requires that observable and unobservable determinants of the outcome vary smoothly through the threshold $M_{it} = 0$.

We assess this assumption in two ways. First, we conduct a formal test for manipulation of the running variable around the threshold ([Cattaneo et al., 2018](#); [McCrary, 2008](#)) to verify whether the density of the running variable is continuous at the threshold. Figure [A.2](#) reports the results and shows no evidence of bunching around the cutoff. Second, we conduct a comprehensive balancing test in which we estimate our RDD specification using a wide range of predetermined municipal characteristics as outcomes. Crucially, we also verify balancing on the lagged outcome $\Delta Y_{i,t}$ —the change in Y between the two na-

tional elections preceding the municipal election that determines treatment—which rules out divergent pre-trends across the threshold. Figure A.3 reports the results: none of the characteristics shows a statistically significant discontinuity at the threshold, confirming that municipalities on either side of the cutoff are comparable in terms of observables.

Moreover, recent work by Marshall (2024) discusses that close-election RDD analyses that focus on the comparison between politicians’ individual characteristics requires imposing further assumptions to conclude that the results are driven by the personal characteristics of interest and not by other individual differences. We offer an extensive discussion and provide evidence in support of our conclusions in Section 7.2.

5 Baseline Results

5.1 Effect on Lega and the Centre-Right

Table 1 presents our main results using outcome-specific optimal bandwidths. The dependent variables are the change in vote shares for Lega (column 1), the centre-right coalition excluding Lega (column 2), the whole centre-right coalition¹⁴ (column 3), the extreme centre-right—i.e., the sum of Lega and Fratelli d’Italia (column 4), and the moderate centre-right—Forza Italia and smaller allies (column 5).

We find that the election of a female mayor increases Lega’s vote share by 2.0 percentage points (column 1), statistically significant at the 5% level. Given a control mean of 1.4 percentage points, this represents a substantial increase compared to the average change in the control group. In Figure 5, we plot the relationship between M_{it} and Δ Lega. The estimated jump is sizable and visible already when simply looking at the raw data.

Only a part of the effect comes from a within-coalition reallocation: in column (2), we estimate that the effect on the centre-right coalition excluding Lega is negative and statistically significant at the 10 percent level but its magnitude is roughly half that of the coefficient estimated in column (1). Indeed, the effect on the overall centre-right coalition (column 3) is positive and non-negligible in magnitude, although it is not statistically significant at conventional levels. Decomposing the effect into the moderate and the far-right component of the coalition is also informative: the extreme right (Lega plus FdI) shows a marginally significant positive effect of 1.9 percentage points (column 4), while the moderate centre-right exhibits a very small negative coefficient of -0.5 percentage points, statistically insignificant (column 5). Taken together, these results indicate that electing a female mayor increases support for Lega, which appears to operate in part

¹⁴The centre-right coalition consists of Lega, Fratelli d’Italia, Forza Italia, and several smaller parties, including Il Popolo della Libertà, La Destra–Fiamma Tricolore, Movimento per l’Autonomia, Moderati in Rivoluzione, Partito Pensionati, Intesa Popolare, Liberi per un’Italia Equa, and Noi con l’Italia.

Table 1: Effect of Electing a Female Mayor on Far-Right Voting — Optimal Bandwidth

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Δ Lega	Δ Centre-Right - Lega	Δ Centre-Right	Δ Extreme Centre-Right	Δ Moderate Centre-Right
Female Mayor	0.020** (0.009)	-0.010* (0.006)	0.013 (0.009)	0.019* (0.010)	-0.005 (0.004)
Observations	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540
Control mean	0.014	0.025	0.039	0.092	-0.053
Effective obs.	2138	1724	1980	1874	2014
Bandwidth	0.211	0.166	0.193	0.181	0.196
Robust 95% C.I.	[0.002; 0.042]	[-0.027; 0.002]	[-0.005; 0.033]	[-0.002; 0.044]	[-0.014; 0.004]
Election date FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eligible weights	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Optimal bandwidth	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Notes: The table reports RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on changes in vote shares between consecutive general elections. The running variable is the female–male vote-share margin. The dependent variables are: change in vote share for Lega (column 1); change in vote share for the centre-right coalition with the exclusion of Lega (column 2); change in the vote share for the centre-right coalition (column 3); change in vote share for the extreme centre-right, defined as Lega plus Fratelli d’Italia (column 4); change in vote share for the moderate centre-right, defined as Forza Italia plus smaller centrist allies (column 5). Each column uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure, and estimates are obtained using the conventional RD estimator. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Standard errors clustered at the province level are in parentheses. *, **, *** represent the 10%, 5%, 1% significance levels, respectively, based on robust bias-corrected inference.

through a reallocation of electoral support within the right-wing coalition.¹⁵

5.2 Effect on Other Parties and Turnout

Table 2 examines additional outcomes: voter turnout (overall, male, and female separately), the centre-left, and the Five Star Movement. Across all specifications, none of these outcomes shows a statistically significant effect of electing a female mayor. The point estimates are small and not statistically significant.¹⁶

The absence of effects on gender-specific turnout is particularly noteworthy. One might expect the election of a female mayor to mobilise women to vote at higher rates, or conversely to discourage male voters. We find no evidence of either pattern, suggesting that the backlash operates through the choice of party rather than through the decision to vote. Finally, the negative coefficients in columns 4 and 5 suggest that the increase in Lega’s vote share following the election of a female mayor partly reflects a decline in support for the broader progressive bloc encompassing the centre-left parties and the Five Star Movement. Combined with the reshuffling of votes within the centre-right coalition documented in Section 5.1, this pattern suggests that Lega’s gains votes from both its

¹⁵Appendix Table B.6 confirms these results using a fixed bandwidth chosen to match the optimal bandwidth for the Lega outcome.

¹⁶Appendix Table B.7 replicates these estimates using a fixed bandwidth set equal to the optimal bandwidth for the Lega outcome, confirming the pattern.

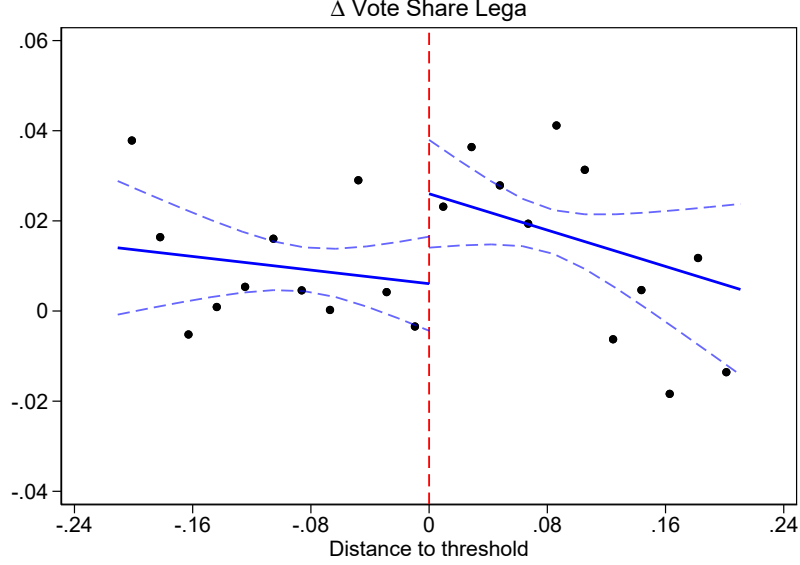


Figure 5: RD plot for Δ Lega

Notes: The figure reports the relationship between the running variable M_{it} , which measures the female–male vote-share margin, and Δ Lega, which measures the change in vote share for Lega. Solid lines report local linear fits estimated separately on the two sides of the threshold, while dashed lines report 95% conventional confidence intervals. The fitted lines use the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the province level. Markers report weighted means within bins of width 0.02 in the interval $[-0.22; 0.22]$.

coalition partners and other parties.

6 Mechanisms

6.1 Masculinity vs. Gender Norms

In this section, we explore two potential mechanisms behind the backlash by examining how the effect varies along two distinct cultural margins of local communities.

The first margin concerns the prevalence of traditional gender norms: local beliefs about female empowerment and about the appropriate socio-economic roles of men and women. In communities where these norms are stronger, women may be less often expected to hold positions of public authority, so that the election of a female mayor is less readily accepted. By contrast, we would expect no comparable reaction in communities where local cultural norms are more accepting of women holding positions of power.

The second margin concerns dominance-oriented masculinity norms: social prescriptions about how men should behave—tough, dominant, in control. Where such norms are stronger, (male) voters may perceive a female mayor as a threat to their social status and respond in a compensatory manner, generating a backlash ([De Haas et al., 2024](#);

Table 2: Effect of Electing a Female Mayor — Additional Outcomes (Optimal Bandwidth)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Δ Turnout	Δ Male Turnout	Δ Female Turnout	Δ Centre-Left	Δ Five Star Movement
Female Mayor	−0.001 (0.006)	−0.002 (0.006)	0.000 (0.006)	−0.009 (0.007)	−0.009 (0.013)
Observations	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540
Control mean	−0.054	−0.058	−0.050	−0.032	−0.053
Effective obs.	1446	1436	1507	1221	1706
Bandwidth	0.135	0.133	0.141	0.110	0.164
Robust 95% C.I.	[−0.014; 0.013]	[−0.016; 0.011]	[−0.012; 0.014]	[−0.029; 0.004]	[−0.037; 0.021]
Election date FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eligible weights	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Optimal bandwidth	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Notes: The table reports RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on changes in vote shares between consecutive general elections. The running variable is the female–male vote-share margin. The dependent variables are: change in overall voter turnout (column 1), change in male turnout (column 2), change in female turnout (column 3), change in vote share for the centre-left coalition (column 4), and change in vote share for the Five Star Movement (column 5). Each column uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure, and estimates are obtained using the conventional RD estimator. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Standard errors clustered at the province level are in parentheses. *, **, *** represent the 10%, 5%, 1% significance levels, respectively, based on robust bias-corrected inference.

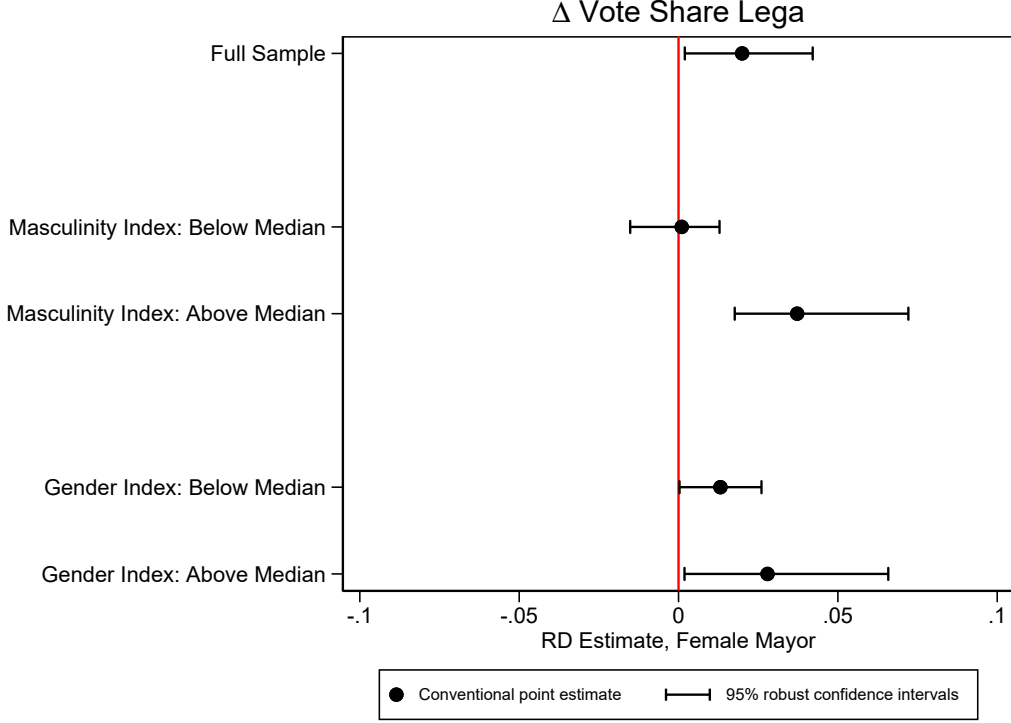
[Matavelli et al., 2026](#)). Where such norms are weaker, this mechanism should be muted or absent.

We capture these two dimensions through the indices introduced in Section 3. Although our two indices positively correlate, they capture conceptually distinct dimensions of local culture. Figure 6 reports the heterogeneity analysis that arbitrates between these two mechanisms. The pattern is asymmetric. Splitting the sample at the median of the Masculinity Index, the backlash effect is markedly larger in above-median municipalities.¹⁷ By contrast, splitting by the Gender Index produces positive point estimates throughout but no clear gradient: the backlash is not systematically stronger in municipalities with more traditional gender norms. This asymmetry is a key finding of the paper. The far-right backlash against female mayors is not primarily a reaction motivated by traditional gender norms about the role of women in society. Rather, it appears to be driven by dominance-oriented masculinity norms—the cultural prescriptions about how men ought to behave. In turn, the election of a female mayor is perceived as a symbolic challenge to these prescriptions and triggers a compensatory political response that takes the form of greater support for the far right.

This interpretation aligns with the psychological literature on “precarious manhood” and “fragile masculinity” ([Cheryan et al., 2015](#); [DiMuccio and Knowles, 2020](#); [Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2016](#); [Vandello and Bosson, 2013](#); [Vandello et al., 2008](#); [Willer et al.,](#)

¹⁷Appendix Figure A.4 reports the graphical relationship between the running variable M_{it} and Δ Lega in the two subsamples defined by the Masculinity Index.

Figure 6: Heterogeneity of the Backlash by Masculinity and Gender Indices



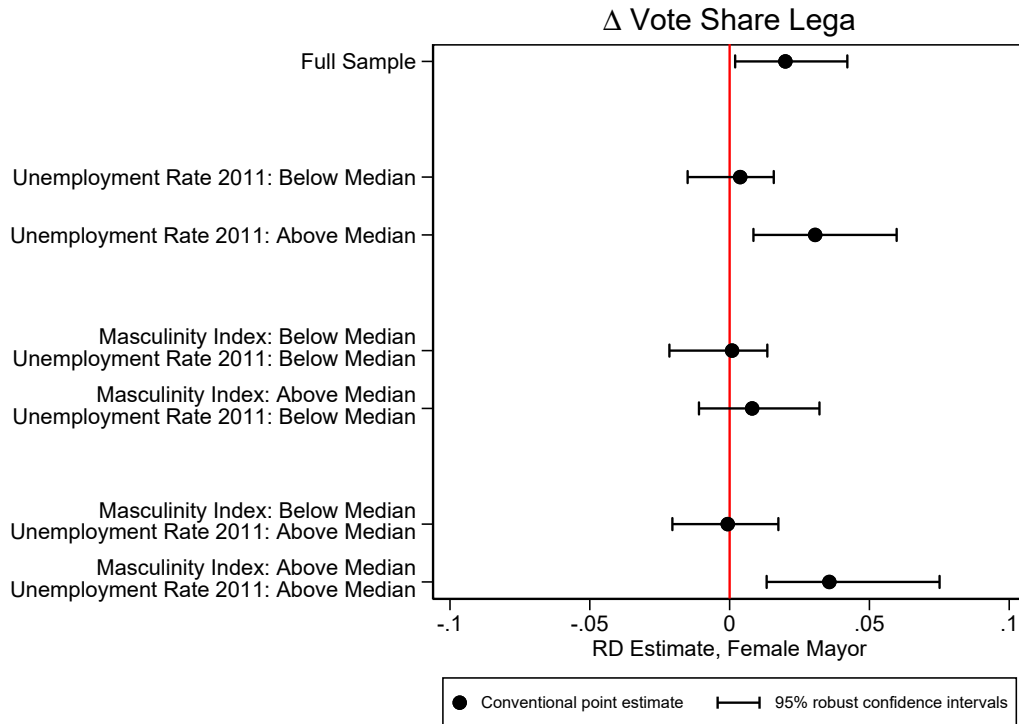
Notes: The figure shows RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on Δ Lega vote share for the full sample and for subsamples defined by whether the Masculinity Index and the Gender Index are below or above their respective medians. Dots represent conventional point estimates, while bars indicate 95% robust confidence intervals based on the robust estimator. Each regression uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the province level.

2013), which emphasises that men respond to threats to their masculine status with compensatory attitudes. It is also consistent with evidence that masculinity threat shifts political preferences toward masculine leadership—most notably in U.S. presidential voting ([Carian and Sobotka, 2018](#); [Gidengil and Stolle, 2021](#))—and that conformity to masculine norms predicts support for European radical right parties ([Coffé, 2019](#); [Coffé et al., 2023](#); [Oshri et al., 2023](#); [Ralph-Morrow, 2022](#)).

6.2 Economic insecurity

The previous results indicate that the backlash is concentrated where dominance-oriented masculinity norms are stronger, consistent with the interpretation that the election of a female mayor is perceived as a threat to male status in such communities. A natural extension of this argument is that the same threat should be more salient where the traditional material foundations of male status are themselves precarious. Economic insecurity, in other words, may amplify the cultural mechanism documented above: when

Figure 7: Heterogeneity of the Backlash by Unemployment Rate and Masculinity Index

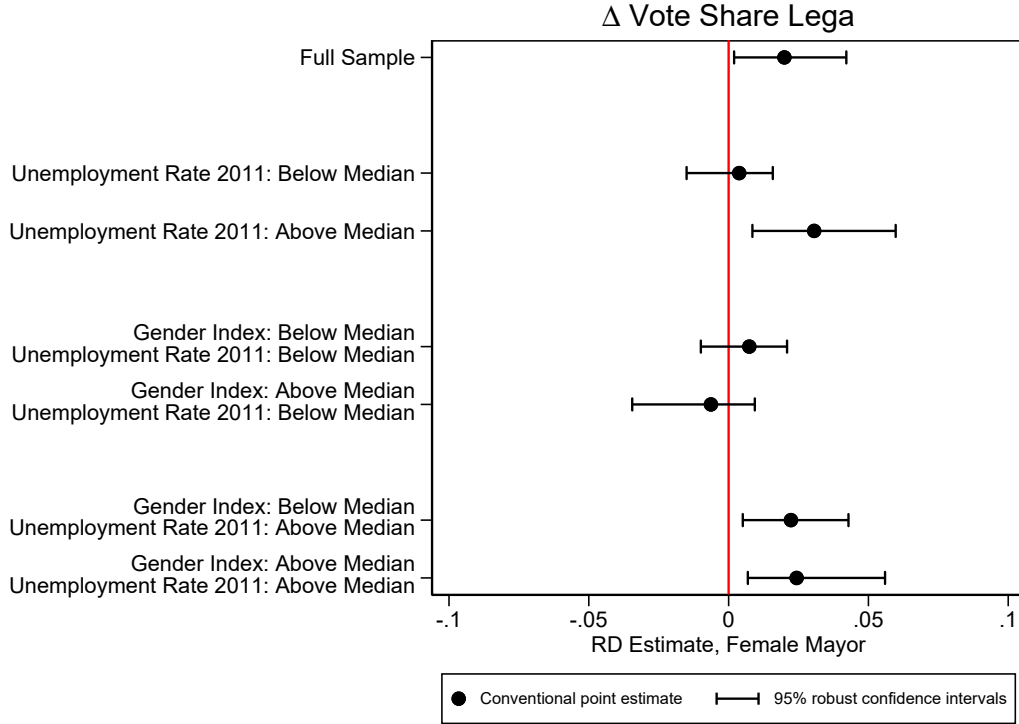


Notes: The figure shows RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on Δ Lega vote share for the full sample, for subsamples defined by whether the 2011 unemployment rate is below or above its median, and for subsamples jointly defined by whether the Masculinity Index and the 2011 unemployment rate are below or above their respective medians. Dots represent conventional point estimates, while bars indicate 95% robust confidence intervals based on the robust estimator. Each regression uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the province level.

men's labour-market position is already fragile, the symbolic challenge posed by a female mayor is more likely to elicit a compensatory political response. This hypothesis is motivated by the results in [Negri and Romarri \(2025\)](#)—who document that individuals experiencing a fragile economic context report more conservative views on gender issues upon the election of a woman to the local council—and by the broader literature linking economic insecurity to populist and far-right voting ([Colantone and Stanig, 2018](#); [Fetzer, 2019](#); [Guiso et al., 2024](#); [Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022](#)). We therefore expect the electoral backlash to be strongest where dominance-oriented masculinity norms and economic insecurity coincide.

The results presented in Figure 7 are in line with this idea. When the sample is split by the median unemployment rate at baseline (2011 census), the estimated backlash is larger in municipalities with above-median unemployment, suggesting that the political reaction to the election of a female mayor is amplified in economically more fragile contexts.

Figure 8: Heterogeneity of the Backlash by Unemployment Rate and Gender Index



Notes: The figure shows RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on Δ Lega vote share for the full sample, for subsamples defined by whether the 2011 unemployment rate is below or above its median, and for subsamples jointly defined by whether the Gender Index and the 2011 unemployment rate are below or above their respective medians. Dots represent conventional point estimates, while bars indicate 95% robust confidence intervals based on the robust estimator. Each regression uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the province level.

The four-way split provides sharper evidence.¹⁸ Dividing municipalities according to the combination of their unemployment rate and their Masculinity Index, we find that the largest backlash effect emerges in municipalities in which both are simultaneously higher. The strongest electoral backlash thus occurs where dominance masculinity norms are reinforced by relatively high unemployment, consistent with the view that economic insecurity intensifies the political consequences of gender-based status threat.

Finally, in Figure 8, we test whether the interaction between traditional gender norms and economic insecurity explains the far-right backlash against female leadership. In contrast to the results obtained for the interaction between dominance-oriented masculinity norms and economic insecurity, we find that the size of the backlash is independent of whether the municipality has relatively more traditional gender norms, even when restricting attention to municipalities with an above-median unemployment rate.

¹⁸The correlation between the Masculinity Index and the baseline (2011) unemployment rate is $\rho = 0.66$, indicating a substantial association but not perfect collinearity.

6.3 Political Affiliation of the Mayor

Figure 9 examines whether the backlash varies with the political affiliation of the elected female mayor. The backlash is strongest when the female mayor is affiliated with the centre-left or the Five Star Movement, while it is substantially weaker—or altogether absent—when she is affiliated with the centre-right. No significant effect is found when the elected female mayor belongs to a civic list or, more generally, to a list that cannot be clearly mapped into a national party family. This pattern is consistent with the interpretation that the backlash is amplified when the female mayor is herself associated with a gender-progressive political agenda: centre-left and Five Star Movement parties may be perceived as the most credible champions of that agenda. Their victory therefore poses a sharper symbolic challenge to traditional gender hierarchies—and a stronger trigger for the masculinity-driven backlash—than the election of a centre-right woman, whose political identity is less compatible with this interpretation and less likely to be perceived as a cultural threat.¹⁹

7 Alternative stories and robustness checks

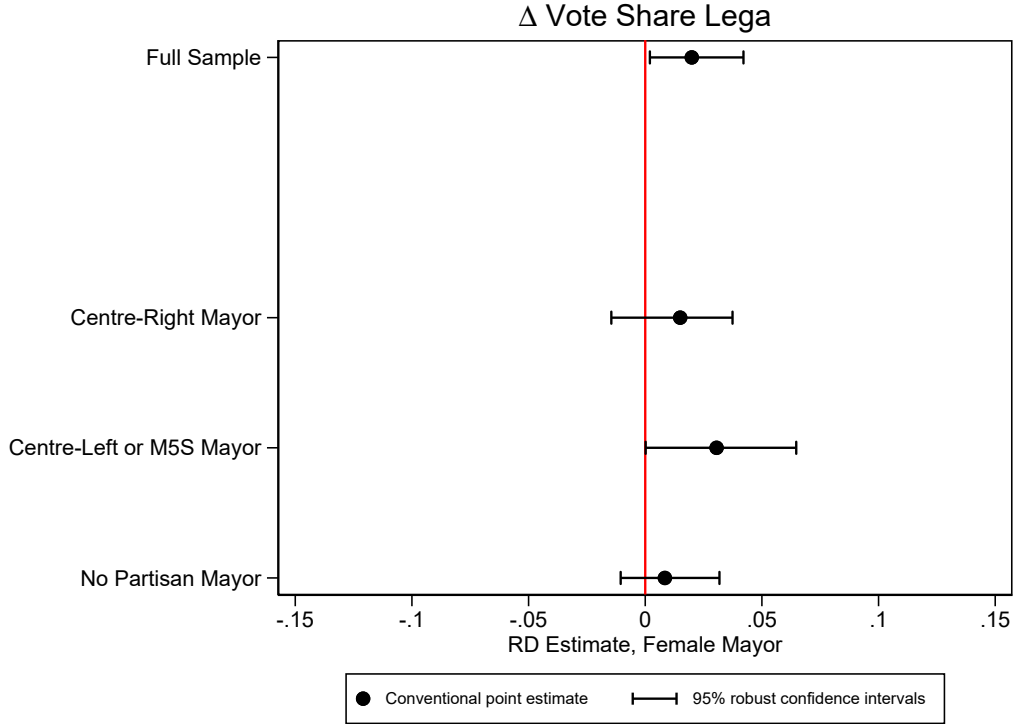
7.1 Alternative Explanations

Two alternative explanations could in principle account for the rise in Lega’s vote share following the narrow election of a female mayor. The first is that female and male mayors implement systematically different policies, so that what we identify as a backlash against female leadership is in fact a reaction to the policies that female mayors enact. The second is that female candidates may be more likely to be left-wing, so that close mixed-gender races coincide with close left-versus-right contests; in that case, our estimates would capture a reaction to the narrow election of a left-wing mayor rather than a gender-specific backlash. We address each in turn.

Policy differences. First, we show that our results are unlikely to be driven by differences in the policy implemented by male vs. female mayors. Figures A.6 and A.7 report RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on the share of current spending across municipal budget categories (social services, territory and environment, education, and police), and show that the estimated effects are small in magnitude and statistically indistinguishable from zero. This lack of systematic differences in the overall budgetary

¹⁹Appendix Figure A.5 applies an alternative methodology to define the mayor’s partisan affiliation, designed to address the widespread presence of civic lists in Italian municipal elections. Many mayors run under civic lists at the time of election and therefore lack a clear national partisan label. To recover their political orientation, we exploit information from their broader political trajectory—including affiliations observed in past and subsequent elections—which we use to classify mayors who would otherwise be coded as non-partisan. The qualitative pattern remains unchanged.

Figure 9: Heterogeneity by Political Affiliation of the Mayor



Notes: The figure shows RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on Δ Lega vote share for the full sample and separately by the political affiliation of the elected mayor: centre-right, centre-left or Five Star Movement, and no partisan affiliation (civic lists). Dots represent conventional point estimates, while bars indicate 95% robust confidence intervals based on the robust estimator. Each regression uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the province level.

allocation is consistent with previous findings documented by [Daniele et al. \(2025\)](#) and [Casarico et al. \(2022\)](#). Yet, the existing literature finds mixed evidence on whether men and women tend to implement similar or alternative policies ([Baskaran and Hessami, 2025](#); [Carozzi and Gago, 2023](#); [Hessami and da Fonseca, 2020](#); [Renzullo, 2024](#)).

To further reassure against policy differences as a key driver of our results, we leverage variation in the time distance between the municipal election in which our quasi-randomization occurs and the national election in which we measure the outcome variable. Notably, this variation is solely induced by the staggered election schedule of municipal elections, which is largely due to historical reasons ([Cipullo, 2023](#); [Repetto, 2018](#)). The logic is as follows. When the general election takes place shortly after the municipal election, voters have been exposed to the gender of the newly elected mayor but the mayor has had little time to propose and implement policies whose consequences are observable to voters. When the general election takes place farther away, both channels are potentially at work: the salience of the mayor's gender persists, and policy differences, if any,

have had time to materialise. If policy differences were the main driver of the backlash, the estimated effect should therefore increase with the time distance to the next general election. Appendix Figure A.8 shows that the estimated effect on Δ Lega is positive in both subsamples, and the point estimates are virtually identical when the next general election is closer to or farther from the municipal election, although the former is less precisely estimated and not statistically significant at conventional levels. The confidence intervals overlap, providing no evidence of statistically meaningful heterogeneity by time distance. The stability of the effect across horizons is difficult to reconcile with a policy-driven explanation and complements the direct evidence on budget allocations in Figures A.6 and A.7.

Moreover, if the mayor’s identity is the key driver of our findings, the effect should be stronger in contexts where voters have less direct personal knowledge of the mayor and are therefore more likely to rely on easily observable characteristics. Consistent with this view, Appendix Figure A.9 shows that the magnitude of our main results depends on municipal population. More specifically, we find no difference at the threshold in Δ Lega among municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, while the positive effect is concentrated among municipalities with more than 5,000 inhabitants and is even larger when we restrict the sample to municipalities with at least 15,000 inhabitants. This pattern corroborates our interpretation because, in small municipalities, voters are likely to have more precise knowledge of the characteristics of their local leadership, so mayoral gender per se may not be particularly salient. Conversely, in relatively larger towns, voters are less likely to have direct personal knowledge of the mayor and may therefore rely more heavily on easily observable characteristics, such as gender, to infer the mayor’s type.

Progressive ideology. Second, the result does not appear to reflect a generic reaction to the narrow victory of a left-wing or Five Star Movement candidate. As discussed above, the concern is that female candidates may be more likely to be left-wing, so that close mixed-gender races may overlap with close left-versus-right contests, and our estimates may therefore capture a reaction to the narrow election of a left-wing mayor rather than a gender-specific backlash. To assess this possibility, we implement a placebo RDD that shifts attention from the gender of the winner to the winner’s political affiliation. Specifically, Appendix Table B.8 estimates the effect of electing a centre-left (or Five Star Movement) mayor on Δ Lega using two alternative running variables based on the left candidate’s electoral margin. In column (1), the running variable is the centre-left candidate’s vote-share margin relative to the centre-right candidate, so identification comes from municipalities in which the two blocs are separated by a very narrow margin. In column (2), the running variable is the centre-left candidate’s vote-share margin relative to all other candidates, including civic lists, providing a broader measure of electoral

competitiveness. Under the alternative conjecture that the greater support for Lega is triggered by electing a left-wing mayoral candidate rather than a female candidate, we should expect a positive and statistically significant effect on Δ Lega. Instead, the estimated effects are negative, modest in magnitude, and, if anything, point in the opposite direction. This evidence weighs against the view that our main result is driven by a generic right-wing reaction to the narrow electoral success of a left-wing mayor.

7.2 Other individual characteristics of the elected mayor

As emphasized by [Marshall \(2024\)](#), close-election RDDs in which treatment is defined by a personal characteristic of politicians do not, under the standard RD assumptions alone, necessarily identify the ceteris-paribus effect of that characteristic while holding all other candidate attributes fixed. Rather, candidates who remain competitive in close races may differ along other dimensions that compensate for the electoral advantages or disadvantages associated with the characteristic that defines treatment. That is, the estimand should not be read as the effect of changing only the mayor’s gender while keeping all other personal characteristics fixed. Instead, it captures the local effect of narrowly electing a female rather than a male mayor, which may encompass other candidate-level traits that are systematically associated with female victories in close elections.

In [Figure A.10](#), we estimate our baseline model using as dependent variables a rich set of individual characteristics of the elected mayor. Several of these characteristics are balanced at the threshold: in particular, we detect no discontinuity in whether the mayor was the incumbent in the previous term, in prior experience as a councillor, or in incumbency as a councillor. We do, however, detect discontinuities for three characteristics: prior experience as a mayor, age—measured by an indicator for being at least 50 years old—and education, measured by an indicator for having completed college or higher education. We then ask whether the observed discontinuities are likely to account for the estimated electoral response.

We address this question in two ways. First, [Table B.9](#) reports specifications that add the imbalanced mayoral characteristics as controls. Although covariate adjustment cannot, by itself, eliminate all concerns raised by politician-characteristic RDDs, the stability of the coefficient of interest is informative about the empirical relevance of these observable imbalances. Across all specifications, the estimated effect remains virtually unchanged and statistically significant at the 5% level. Second, [Figure A.11](#) examines whether the candidate traits that are imbalanced in our baseline design generate outcome patterns similar to the one attributed to female mayoral victories according to our main results. Specifically, we estimate alternative RDD specifications in which we compare municipalities that narrowly elected (i) an experienced rather than an inexperienced mayor, (ii) a college-educated rather than a non-college-educated mayor, and (iii) an

older rather than a younger mayor. In all three cases, the estimated effects on Δ Lega are close to zero and statistically insignificant.

Taken together, these results indicate that the observed imbalances in mayoral age, education, and prior experience do not explain the baseline effect. Although we cannot formally rule out that marginally elected male and female mayors differ in other unobservable traits, the evidence suggests that the estimated backlash relates to the gender of the elected mayor rather than to other personal characteristics.

7.3 Additional Robustness Checks

We subject our main findings to two further specification checks. First, Figure A.12 shows the RDD estimate for Δ Lega across a wide range of bandwidths. The point estimate is stable and positive throughout, and statistically significant for a broad range of bandwidths around the optimal one, confirming that the result is not driven by a particular bandwidth choice. Second, Tables B.10–B.13 replicate our main results using a quadratic polynomial in the running variable instead of a local linear specification. The results are fully consistent: the effect on Lega remains approximately 2.9 percentage points (significant at the 5% level), while additional outcomes remain insignificant.

8 Conclusion

This paper provides the first causal evidence that the election of a female political leader fuels an electoral backlash for the populist radical right. Exploiting close mixed-gender mayoral races in Italy since 2013 within a regression discontinuity design, we show that electing a female mayor raises the vote share of Lega—Italy’s main populist radical right party—by approximately 2.0 percentage points at the subsequent general election, more than doubling the average change observed in the control group. The effect is specific to the far right: we detect no impact on the centre-left, the Five Star Movement, or voter turnout, indicating that the backlash operates through party choice rather than through the decision to vote. Lega’s gains appear to draw on voters defecting from both the moderate wing of the right-wing coalition and the broader progressive bloc.

Our central contribution is to separate two cultural margins along which this backlash may operate. Building on a recent literature that argues that masculinity norms are conceptually and empirically distinct from gender norms more broadly (De Haas et al., 2024; Matavelli et al., 2026), we construct two novel municipal-level indices that capture these two dimensions separately. The heterogeneity analysis reveals an asymmetric pattern: the backlash is concentrated in municipalities where dominance masculinity norms are stronger, while it does not exhibit a clear gradient along gender norms. The far-right reaction to female leadership is therefore not primarily a response to conservative

views about the role of women in society, but rather to the strength of local prescriptions about how men ought to behave. Where these prescriptions are stronger, the election of a woman to a leadership position is more likely to be perceived as a symbolic threat to male status, triggering a compensatory political response in the form of greater support for the far right. Consistent with a status-threat interpretation, the backlash is further amplified in municipalities with weaker labour-market conditions, where the material foundations of male status are themselves precarious, and is driven by the election of female mayors affiliated with the centre-left or the Five Star Movement, whose political identity poses a sharper challenge to traditional gender hierarchies.

These findings may have implications for the advancement of gender equality in political representation and in leadership positions in general. Given that higher gender-equality tends to improve productivity (Cuberes and Teignier, 2016), the allocation of talent in the economy (Hsieh et al., 2019), and development (Duflo, 2012), understanding and reducing the sources of resistance to female empowerment is important for making such promotion sustainable and durable. As our results indicate that this counter-reaction is rooted in the cultural prescriptions surrounding dominance-oriented masculinity, rather than in attitudes about women’s roles per se, its mitigation may require weakening expectations that equate male status with dominance, control, emotional suppression, or exclusive authority, while recognizing constructive male identities and the importance of relational maturity.

Following this line of argument, a recent literature suggests that families and schools may be two natural sites at which such norms can be reshaped. Carlana (2019) shows that teachers’ implicit gender stereotypes shape girls’ academic performance and career trajectories from an early age; symmetrically, the same channel could be used to educate boys towards a self-image and a set of social roles that are more compatible with gender equality, rather than anchored in dominance-oriented masculinity norms. Farré et al. (2024) provide causal evidence that direct childhood exposure to fathers who took up paternity leave—and hence to a less stereotypical division of family roles—makes the next generation of children more egalitarian in their attitudes. Whether public policies of this kind can also moderate the political counter-reaction documented here—and, more broadly, whether they can help men navigate a more gender-equal society without that advancement generating an electoral backlash that puts it at risk—is an important question for future research.

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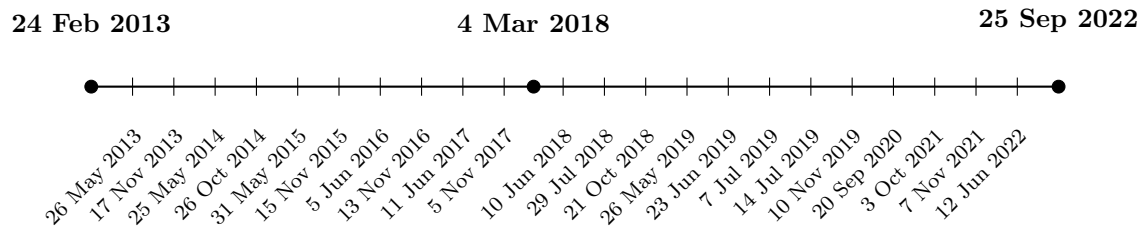
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A Appendix Figures

Figure A.1: Timeline

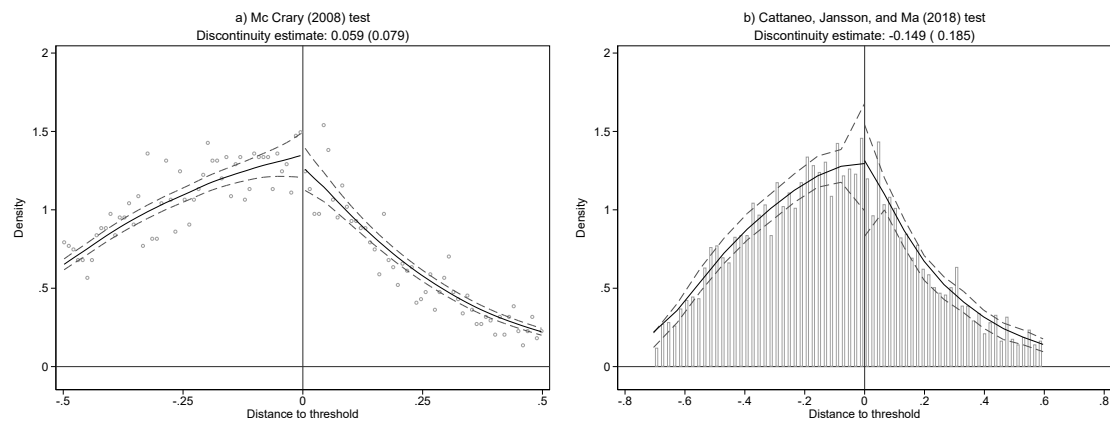
General Elections



Municipal Elections

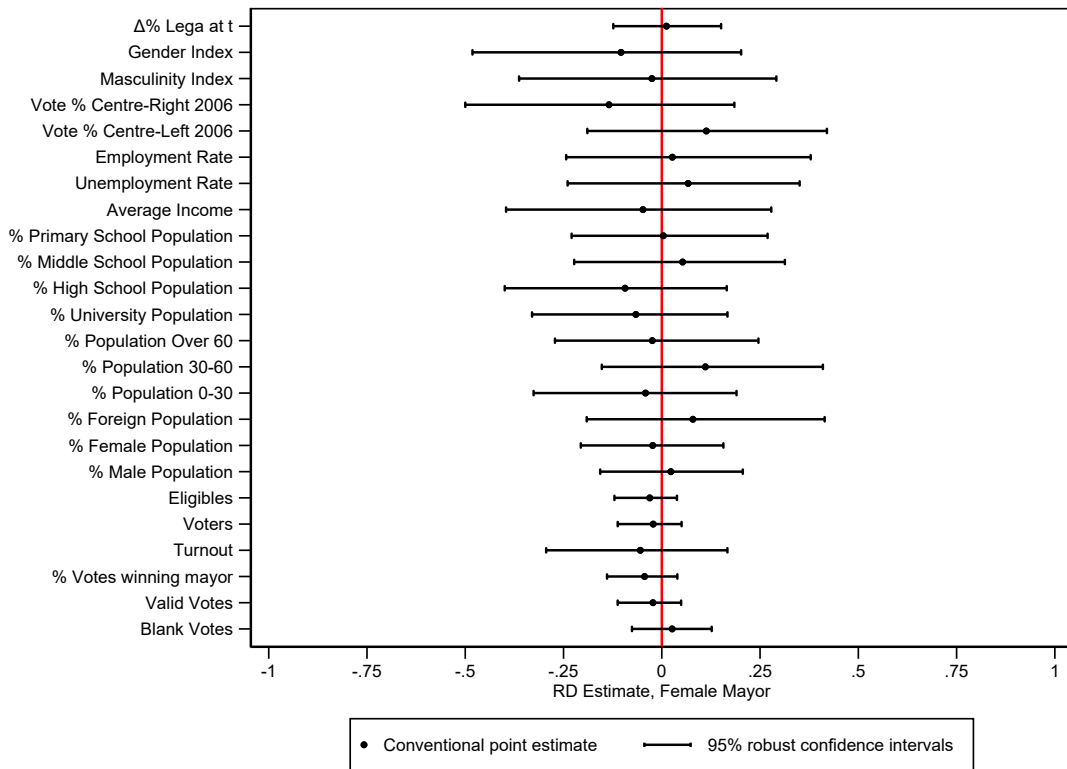
Notes: The figure shows the timeline of Italian general and municipal elections used in the analysis.

Figure A.2: McCrary Density Test and Manipulation Test

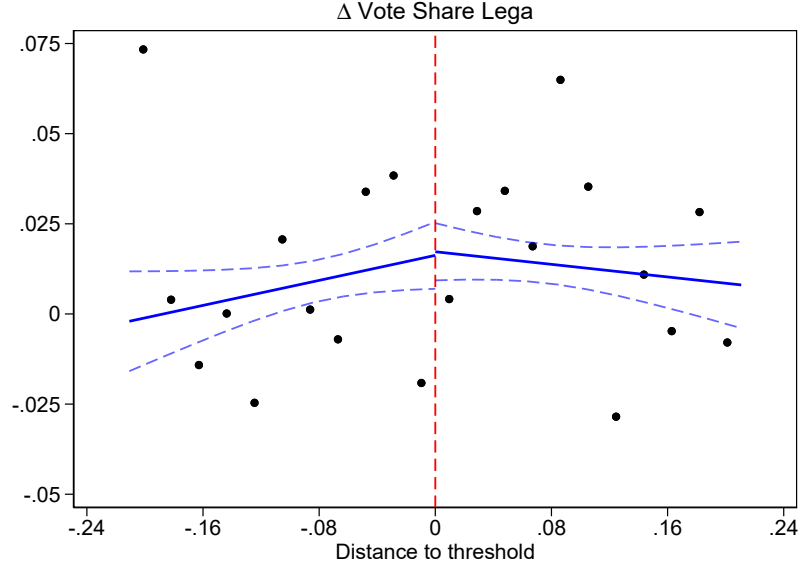


Notes: The figure shows the results of the McCrary density test ([McCrary, 2008](#)) and of the manipulation test proposed by [Cattaneo et al. \(2018\)](#) for the running variable (female–male vote share margin).

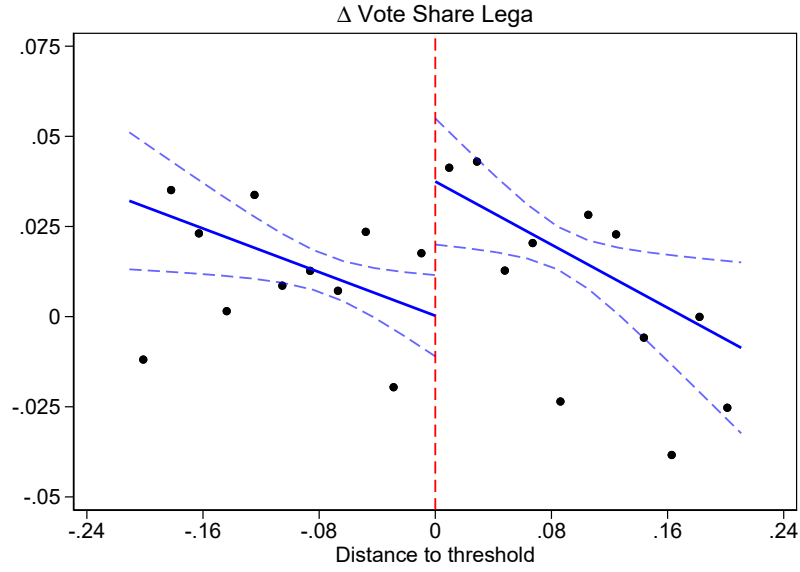
Figure A.3: Balancing Test



Notes: The figure shows RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on a wide range of predetermined municipal characteristics. Dots represent conventional point estimates, while bars indicate 95% robust confidence intervals based on the robust estimator. Each regression uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the province level.



(a) Masculinity Index: Below Median

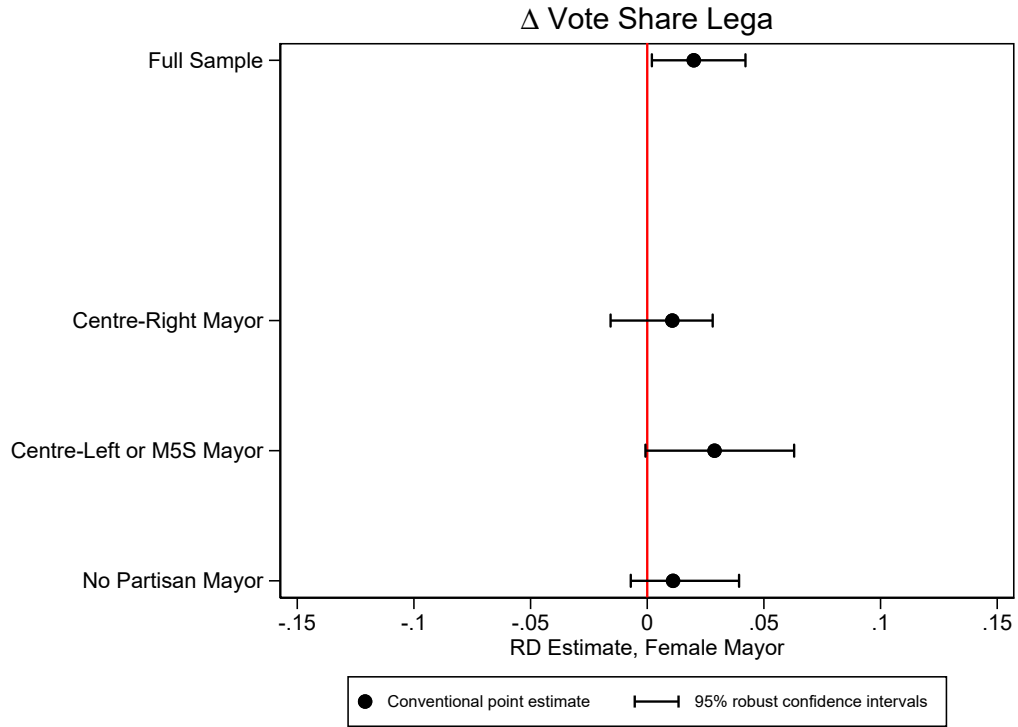


(b) Masculinity Index: Above Median

Figure A.4: RD plot for Δ Lega – Heterogeneity by Masculinity

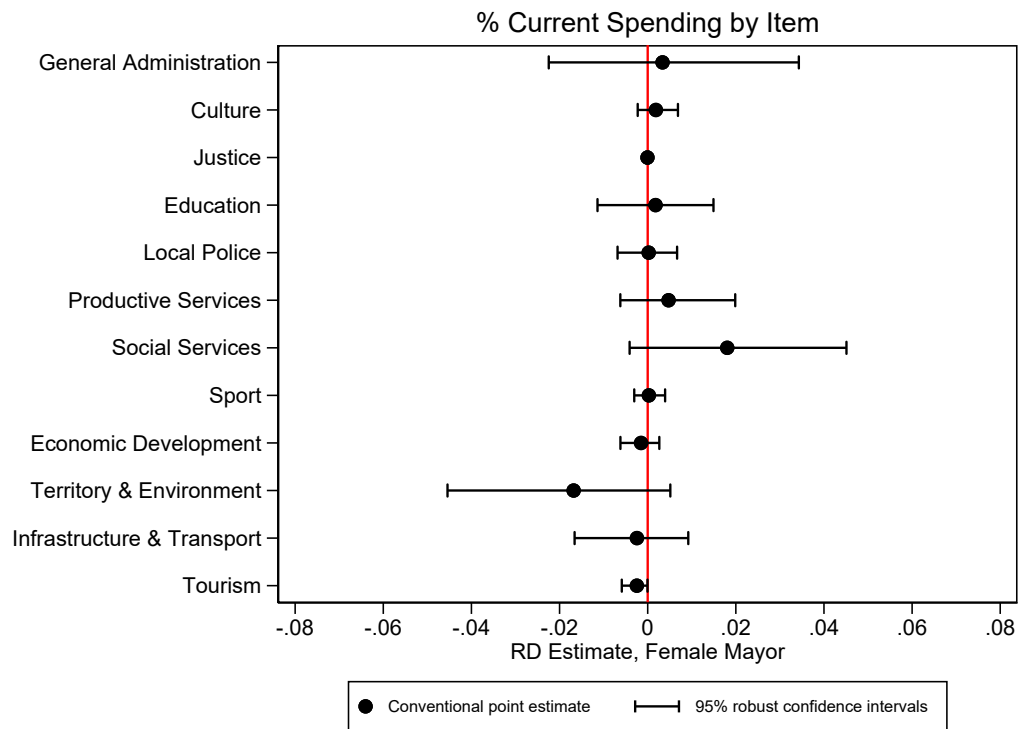
Notes: The figure reports the relationship between the running variable M_{it} , which measures the female–male vote-share margin, and Δ Lega, which measures the change in vote share for Lega. In panel (a), the sample is restricted to municipalities where the Masculinity Index is below its median. In panel (b), the sample is restricted to municipalities where the Masculinity Index is above its median. Solid lines report local linear fits estimated separately on the two sides of the threshold, while dashed lines report 95% conventional confidence intervals. The fitted lines use the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the province level. Markers report weighted means within bins of width 0.02 in the interval $[-0.22; 0.22]$.

Figure A.5: Heterogeneity by Political Affiliation of the Mayor (Historical)



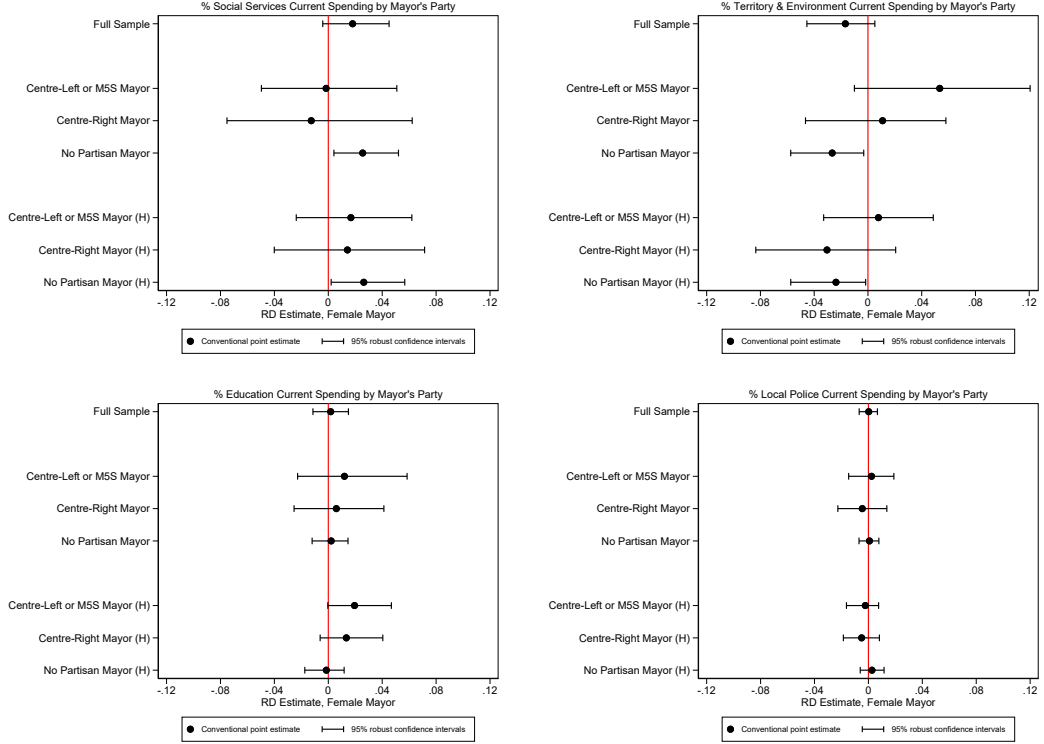
Notes: The figure shows RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on Δ Lega vote share for the full sample and separately by the political affiliation of the elected mayor, where political affiliation is classified using information from the mayor's full political trajectory, including affiliations observed both before and after the election in question: centre-right, centre-left or Five Star Movement, and no partisan affiliation (civic lists). Dots represent conventional point estimates, while bars indicate 95% robust confidence intervals based on the robust estimator. Each regression uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the province level.

Figure A.6: Share of Current Spending by Budget Item



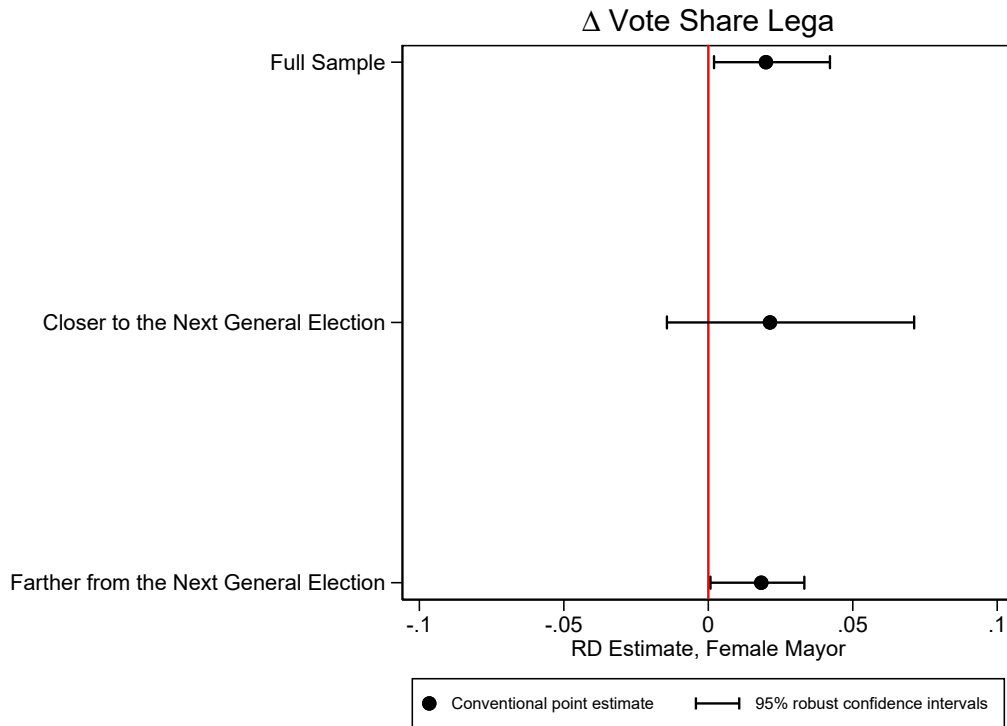
Notes: The figure reports RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on the share of current spending in the municipal budget across broad expenditure categories. Dots represent conventional point estimates, while bars indicate 95% robust confidence intervals based on the robust estimator. Each regression uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the province level.

Figure A.7: Share of Current Spending by Sector



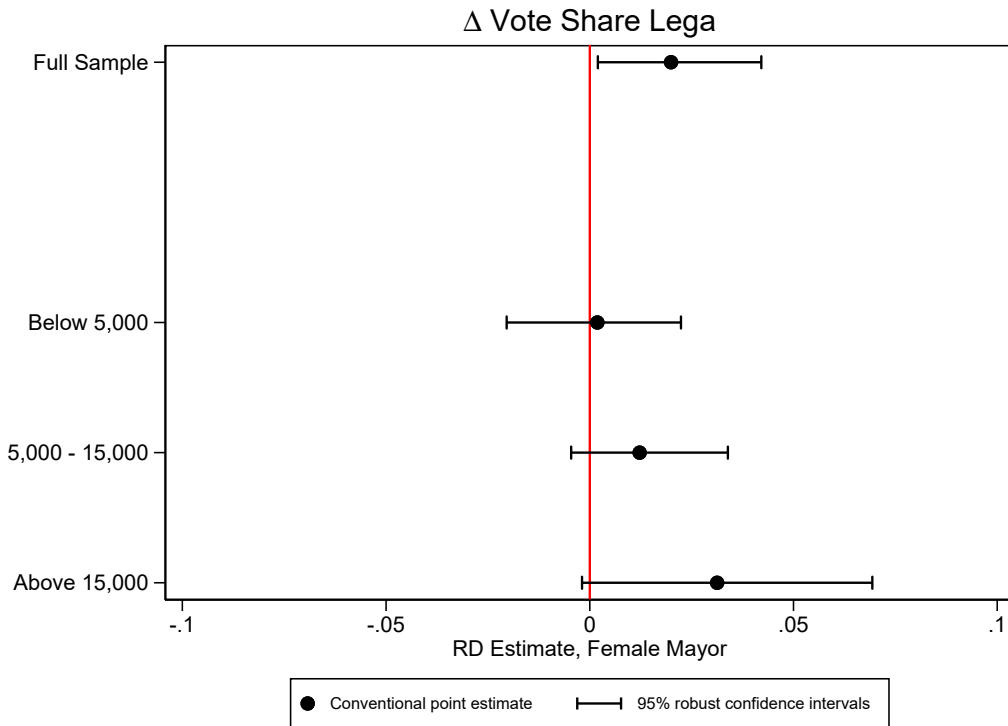
Notes: The figure shows RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on the share of current spending allocated to social services (top-left), territory and environment (top-right), education (bottom-left), and local police (bottom-right), for the full sample and separately for municipalities that elected a centre-right mayor, a centre-left or Five Star Movement mayor, or a non-partisan mayor. For each panel, we report the political orientation of the mayor, classified either solely on the basis of the election under consideration or reconstructed by tracing the mayor's full political trajectory as defined in A.5. Dots represent conventional point estimates, while bars indicate 95% robust confidence intervals based on the robust estimator. Each regression uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the Calonico et al. (2014) procedure. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the province level.

Figure A.8: Heterogeneity by Distance from the Next General Election



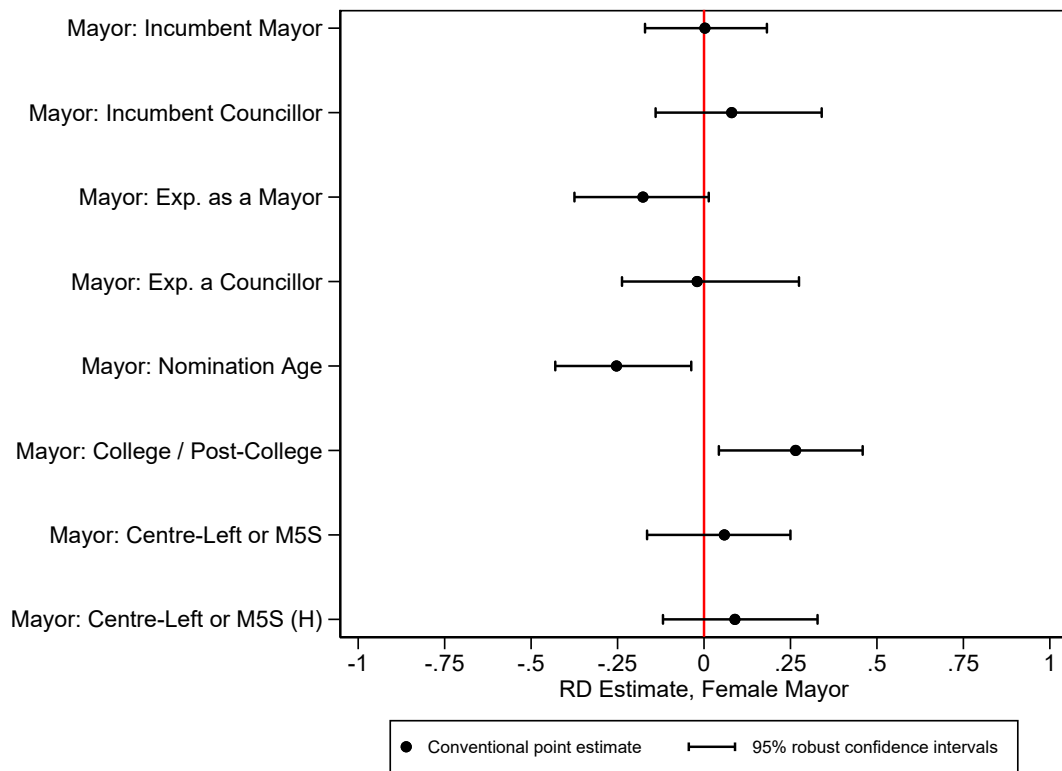
Notes: The figure shows RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on Δ Lega vote share by temporal distance between the municipal election and the next general election. The subsample labels indicate below-median distance and above-median distance. Dots represent conventional point estimates, while bars indicate 95% robust confidence intervals based on the robust estimator. Each regression uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the province level.

Figure A.9: Heterogeneity by Municipality Size



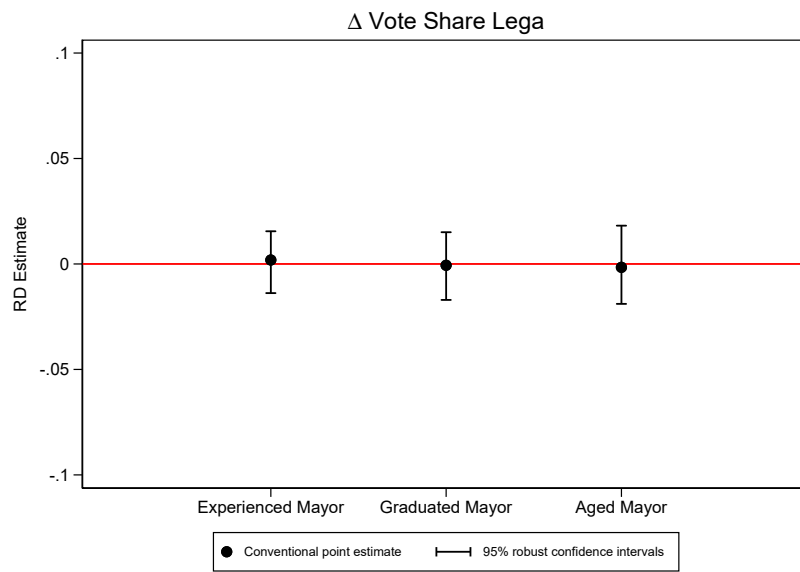
Notes: The figure shows RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on Δ Lega vote share separately for municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, municipalities between 5,000 and 15,000 inhabitants, and municipalities with 15,000 or more inhabitants, based on the 2011 Census. Dots represent conventional point estimates, while bars indicate 95% robust confidence intervals based on the robust estimator. Each regression uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the province level.

Figure A.10: Balancing Test



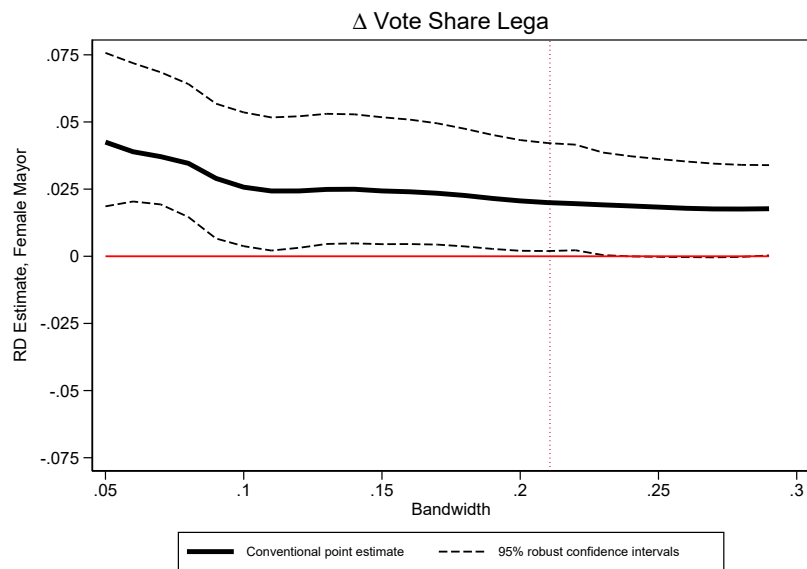
Notes: The figure shows RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on a wide range of individual characteristics of the elected mayor. Dots represent conventional point estimates, while bars indicate 95% robust confidence intervals based on the robust estimator. Each regression uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the province level.

Figure A.11: Alternative RDD Design



Notes: The figure shows RDD estimates of the effect of electing an experienced rather than an inexperienced mayor, a college-educated rather than a non-college-educated mayor, and an older rather than a younger mayor on Δ Lega vote share. Dots represent conventional point estimates, while bars indicate 95% robust confidence intervals based on the robust estimator. Each regression uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the province level.

Figure A.12: Bandwidth Sensitivity



Notes: The figure shows the RDD estimate of the effect of electing a female mayor on Δ Lega vote share across a range of bandwidths. The vertical dashed line indicates the optimal bandwidth. The solid line reports conventional point estimates, while the dashed lines report 95% robust confidence intervals based on the robust estimator.

B Appendix Tables

Table B.1: Descriptive Statistics (I)

Variable	Obs	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Running Variable					
Female Mayor Winning Margin	4,564	-0.111	0.327	-0.982	1.000
Dependent Variables					
Δ Centre-Right	4,540	0.041	0.054	-0.281	0.311
Δ Extreme Centre-Right	4,540	0.094	0.059	-0.211	0.390
Δ Moderate Centre-Right	4,540	-0.053	0.033	-0.243	0.257
Δ Lega	4,540	0.015	0.119	-0.299	0.343
Δ Centre-Right - Lega	4,540	0.026	0.091	-0.329	0.368
Δ Turnout	4,540	-0.053	0.057	-0.758	0.460
Δ Male Turnout	4,540	-0.057	0.061	-1.115	0.477
Δ Female Turnout	4,540	-0.049	0.058	-0.326	0.473
Δ Centre-Left	4,540	-0.032	0.044	-0.382	0.155
Δ Five Star Movement	4,540	-0.054	0.091	-0.510	0.393
Masculinity Index					
Masculinity Index	4,563	-0.121	0.945	-1.087	2.637
Share of employed working more that 40 hours in a week	4,564	0.192	0.014	0.164	0.230
Share of unskilled blue-collar	4,564	0.163	0.031	0.120	0.295
Share of employed primary sector	4,563	0.075	0.075	0.000	0.785
Average bet amount	4,563	230.547	501.214	0.000	22,312.709
Share wearing the car belt	4,564	0.880	0.073	0.665	0.957
Share seeking help for depression	4,564	0.596	0.051	0.437	0.752
Share feeling sad, depressed and anxious	4,564	0.221	0.026	0.197	0.264
Share of armed forces	4,564	0.013	0.010	0.004	0.052
Share opp. parties should be free to criticize the gov.	4,564	0.795	0.035	0.731	0.825
Gender Index					
Gender Index	4,563	0.129	1.003	-3.341	3.332
Employment Rate Gap	4,563	21.108	6.199	-14.586	57.255
Share Voting No in Divorce Referendum	4,563	52.621	15.553	0.106	94.760
Share of Female in Municipality Council	4,563	21.613	11.724	0.000	100.000
Share of Divorced	4,563	4.225	1.614	0.255	13.869
Share of Graduated	4,563	7.624	2.759	0.000	27.474
Share of Homemakers	4,563	0.098	0.032	0.013	0.263
Urban Area	4,564	0.458	0.498	0.000	1.000
Presence of Kindergarten	4,563	0.561	0.496	0.000	1.000
Mayor's Political Affiliation					
Centre-Right Mayor	4,564	0.082	0.275	0.000	1.000
Centre-Right Mayor (H)	4,564	0.147	0.354	0.000	1.000
Centre-Left Mayor	4,564	0.089	0.285	0.000	1.000
Centre-Left Mayor (H)	4,564	0.188	0.391	0.000	1.000
M5S Mayor	4,564	0.007	0.083	0.000	1.000
M5S Mayor (H)	4,564	0.009	0.094	0.000	1.000
Other Variables					
Population	4,563	9,355.931	51,047.683	46.000	2,617,175.000
Unemployment Rate	4,563	0.065	0.030	0.000	0.232
Distance Next General Election (Days)	4,564	1,032.885	462.225	105.000	1,743.000
Alternative Running Variables					
Experienced Mayor Winning Margin	2,872	-0.006	0.327	-0.965	0.982
Graduated Mayor Winning Margin	2,256	0.050	0.305	-0.910	0.982
Aged Mayor Winning Margin	2,497	0.191	0.280	-0.612	1.000

Notes: The table reports the mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum, and number of observations for the main variables used in the empirical analysis. The running variables are defined as the vote-share margin between candidates differing in gender (*Female mayor*), prior mayoral experience (*Experienced mayor*), age (*Aged mayor*, defined as older versus younger than 50 years old), and educational attainment (*Graduated mayor*, defined as having completed higher education versus not). The mayor's political affiliation is classified either according to the affiliation at the election under consideration or expanded by incorporating political affiliations before and after the election, with these expanded classifications labeled (H). A description of the data sources, the level of disaggregation, and the reference year for the components of the masculinity and gender indices is provided in Table B.3.

Table B.2: Descriptive Statistics (II)

Variable	Obs	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<i>Municipal Covariates</i>					
Gender Index	4,563	-0.129	1.003	-3.332	3.341
Masculinity Index	4,563	-0.121	0.945	-1.087	2.637
Share Votes Centre-Right 2006	4,563	0.429	0.104	0.097	0.786
Share Votes Centre-Left 2006	4,563	0.393	0.098	0.106	0.742
Employment Rate	4,563	0.625	0.086	0.317	0.903
Unemployment Rate	4,563	0.065	0.030	0.000	0.232
Average Income	4,562	19,294.269	4,148.203	8,150.058	49,543.719
Share Primary School Population	4,563	0.231	0.045	0.076	0.570
Share Middle School Population	4,563	0.311	0.038	0.115	0.480
Share High School Population	4,563	0.289	0.040	0.115	0.482
Share University Population	4,563	0.081	0.029	0.000	0.294
Share Population Over 60	4,563	0.287	0.060	0.087	0.685
Share Population 30-60	4,563	0.433	0.030	0.239	0.583
Share Population 0-30	4,563	0.280	0.043	0.042	0.482
Share Foreign Population	4,563	0.068	0.043	0.000	0.276
Share Female Population	4,563	0.509	0.015	0.344	0.589
Share Male Population	4,563	0.491	0.015	0.411	0.656
Eligibles	4,564	7,911.025	44,272.127	67.000	2,363,776.000
Voters	4,564	4,766.167	22,506.237	32.000	1,185,280.000
Turnout	4,564	0.666	0.108	0.146	0.945
Share Votes Winning Mayor	4,564	0.565	0.134	0.199	1.000
Valid Votes	4,564	4,610.317	21,804.868	26.000	1,147,499.000
Blank Votes	4,564	54.685	226.533	0.000	9,933.000
<i>Individual Mayoral Characteristics</i>					
Incumbent Mayor	4,564	0.376	0.484	0.000	1.000
Incumbent Councillor	4,564	0.712	0.453	0.000	1.000
Exp. as a Mayor	4,564	0.434	0.496	0.000	1.000
Exp. as a Councillor	4,564	0.823	0.382	0.000	1.000
Nomination Age	4,564	0.518	0.500	0.000	1.000
College / Post-College	4,165	0.522	0.500	0.000	1.000
Centre-Left or M5S	4,564	0.093	0.291	0.000	1.000
Centre-Left or M5S (H)	4,564	0.193	0.394	0.000	1.000
<i>Current Spending Budget Item</i>					
Share General Administration	22,598	0.385	0.122	0.000	1.000
Share Culture	22,598	0.018	0.020	0.000	0.439
Share Justice	22,598	0.000	0.003	0.000	0.261
Share Education	22,598	0.095	0.051	0.000	0.400
Share Local Police	22,598	0.040	0.030	0.000	0.438
Share Productive Services	22,598	0.008	0.054	0.000	0.874
Share Social Services	22,598	0.118	0.081	0.000	0.831
Share Sport	22,598	0.013	0.015	0.000	0.266
Share Economic Development	22,598	0.009	0.023	0.000	0.381
Share Territory & Environment	22,598	0.219	0.098	0.000	0.841
Share Infrastructure & Transport	22,598	0.087	0.049	0.000	0.654
Share Tourism	22,598	0.006	0.016	0.000	0.378

Notes: The table reports the mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum, and number of observations for the main variables used in the empirical analysis.

Table B.3: Components of the Masculinity and Gender Indices

<i>Panel A: Masculinity Index</i>					
Variable	Level	Source	Year	Sign	Loading PC1
Share of employed working more that 40 hours in a week	Province	ISTAT	2011	+	0.09
Share of unskilled blue-collar	Province	ISTAT	2011	+	0.37
Share of employed primary sector	Municipal	ISTAT	2011	+	0.25
Average bet amount	Municipal	Customs and Monopolies Agency	2015	+	0.05
Share wearing the car belt	Regional		2011–2014	-	0.44
Share seeking help for depression	Regional	National Institute of Health	2011–2014	-	0.26
Share feeling sad, depressed and anxious	Macro-Region	ESS	2012	+	0.45
Share of armed forces	Province	ISTAT	2011	+	0.38
Share opposition parties should be free to criticize the government	Macro-Region	ESS	2012	-	0.43
<i>Panel B: Gender Index</i>					
Variable	Level	Source	Year	Sign	Loading PC1
Employment Rate Gap	Municipal	ISTAT	2011	+	0.49
Share No Referendum Divorce	Municipal	Ministry of the Interior	1974	-	0.45
Share of Female in Municipality Council	Municipal	Ministry of the Interior	2011	-	0.28
Share of Divorced	Municipal	ISTAT	2011	-	0.46
Share of Graduated	Municipal	ISTAT	2011	-	0.21
Share of Homemakers	Municipal	ISTAT	2011	+	0.43
Urban Area	Municipal	ISTAT	2011	-	0.07
Presence of Kindergarten	Municipal	ISTAT	2013	-	0.18

Notes: The table reports the variables used to construct the Masculinity Index (Panel A) and the Gender Index (Panel B). For each variable, the table reports the territorial level at which it is measured, the data source, the reference year, the sign with which the variable enters the principal component analysis (PCA), and its loading on the first principal component. Both indices are constructed as the first principal component of the corresponding set of variables and are standardized to have mean zero and unit standard deviation.

Table B.4: Correlation Matrix of the Masculinity Index

Variable	Share of employed working more that 40 hours in a week	Share of unskilled blue-collar	Share of employed primary sector	Average bet amount	Share wearing the car belt	Share seeking help for depression	Share feeling sad, depressed and anxious	Share of armed forces	Share opp. parties should be free to criticize the gov.
Share of employed working more that 40 hours in a week	1.000	0.107	0.209	-0.012	-0.128	-0.069	0.069	-0.004	-0.266
Share of unskilled blue-collar	0.107	1.000	0.555	0.047	-0.629	-0.253	0.646	0.468	-0.665
Share of employed primary sector	0.209	0.555	1.000	-0.005	-0.357	-0.086	0.373	0.256	-0.383
Average bet amount	-0.012	0.047	-0.005	1.000	-0.094	-0.051	0.094	0.080	-0.089
Share wearing the car belt	-0.128	-0.629	-0.357	-0.094	1.000	0.386	-0.893	-0.787	0.755
Share seeking help for depression	-0.069	-0.253	-0.086	-0.051	0.386	1.000	-0.499	-0.425	0.450
Share feeling sad, depressed and anxious	0.069	0.646	0.373	0.094	-0.893	-0.499	1.000	0.730	-0.869
Share of armed forces	-0.004	0.468	0.256	0.080	-0.787	-0.425	0.730	1.000	-0.587
Share opp. parties should be free to criticize the gov.	-0.266	-0.665	-0.383	-0.089	0.755	0.450	-0.869	-0.587	1.000

Notes: The table reports pairwise correlations among the variables used to construct the Masculinity Index.

Table B.5: Correlation Matrix of the Gender Index

Variable	Employment Rate Gap	Share Voting No in Divorce Referendum	Share of Female in Municipality Council	Share of Divorced	Share of Graduated	Share of Homemakers	Urban Area	Presence of Kindergarten
Employment Rate Gap	1.000	-0.377	-0.181	-0.410	-0.196	0.635	-0.026	-0.081
Share Voting No in Divorce Referendum	-0.377	1.000	0.231	0.510	0.200	-0.280	0.084	0.155
Share of Female in Municipality Council	-0.181	0.231	1.000	0.269	-0.044	-0.256	-0.099	0.070
Share of Divorced	-0.410	0.510	0.269	1.000	0.158	-0.325	0.062	0.137
Share of Graduated	-0.196	0.200	-0.044	0.158	1.000	-0.054	0.302	0.196
Share of Homemakers	0.635	-0.280	-0.256	-0.325	-0.054	1.000	0.197	-0.024
Urban Area	-0.026	0.084	-0.099	0.062	0.302	0.197	1.000	0.421
Presence of Kindergarten	-0.081	0.155	0.070	0.137	0.196	-0.024	0.421	1.000

Notes: The table reports pairwise correlations among the variables used to construct the Gender Index.

Table B.6: Effect of Electing a Female Mayor on Far-Right Voting — Fixed Bandwidth

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Δ Lega	Δ Centre-Right - Lega	Δ Centre-Right	Δ Extreme Centre-Right	Δ Moderate Centre-Right
Female Mayor	0.020** (0.009)	-0.007 (0.006)	0.013 (0.008)	0.017* (0.009)	-0.004 (0.004)
Observations	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540
Control mean	0.014	0.025	0.039	0.092	-0.053
Effective obs.	2138	2138	2138	2138	2138
Bandwidth	0.211	0.211	0.211	0.211	0.211
Robust 95% C.I.	[0.002; 0.042]	[-0.022; 0.005]	[-0.005; 0.032]	[-0.003; 0.039]	[-0.012; 0.005]
Election date FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eligible weights	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Optimal bandwidth	✓				

Notes: The table reports RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on changes in vote shares between consecutive general elections. The running variable is the female–male vote-share margin. The dependent variables are: change in vote share for Lega (column 1); change in vote share for the centre-right coalition with the exclusion of Lega (column 2); change in vote share for the centre-right coalition (column 3); change in vote share for the extreme centre-right, defined as Lega plus Fratelli d’Italia (column 4); change in vote share for the moderate centre-right, defined as Forza Italia plus smaller centrist allies (column 5). All columns are estimated using a common bandwidth set equal to the optimal bandwidth for the Δ Lega outcome, selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure, and estimates are obtained using the conventional RD estimator. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Standard errors clustered at the province level are in parentheses. *, **, *** represent the 10%, 5%, 1% significance levels, respectively, based on robust bias-corrected inference.

Table B.7: Effect of Electing a Female Mayor — Additional Outcomes (Fixed Bandwidth)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Δ Turnout	Δ Male Turnout	Δ Female Turnout	Δ Centre-Left	Δ Five Star Movement
Female Mayor	-0.002 (0.005)	-0.002 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.005)	0.000 (0.005)	-0.011 (0.012)
Observations	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540
Control mean	-0.054	-0.058	-0.050	-0.032	-0.053
Effective obs.	2138	2138	2138	2138	2138
Bandwidth	0.211	0.211	0.211	0.211	0.211
Robust 95% C.I.	[-0.012; 0.011]	[-0.014; 0.010]	[-0.011; 0.012]	[-0.016; 0.009]	[-0.037; 0.018]
Election date FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eligible weights	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Optimal bandwidth					

Notes: The table reports RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on changes in vote shares between consecutive general elections. The running variable is the female–male vote-share margin. The dependent variables are: change in overall voter turnout (column 1), change in male turnout (column 2), change in female turnout (column 3), change in vote share for the centre-left coalition (column 4), and change in vote share for the Five Star Movement (column 5). All columns are estimated using a common bandwidth set equal to the optimal bandwidth for the Δ Lega outcome, selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure, and estimates are obtained using the conventional RD estimator. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Standard errors clustered at the province level are in parentheses. *, **, *** represent the 10%, 5%, 1% significance levels, respectively, based on robust bias-corrected inference.

Table B.8: Effect of Electing a centre-Left Mayor on Lega Voting

	(1)	(2)
Centre-Left Mayor	Δ Lega -0.017 (0.011)	Δ Lega -0.016** (0.007)
Observations	1,210	2,248
Control mean	0.058	0.058
Effective obs.	544	885
Bandwidth	0.165	0.219
Robust 95% C.I.	[-0.045; 0.009]	[-0.036; -0.002]
Election date FE	✓	✓
Eligible weights	✓	✓
Optimal bandwidth	✓	✓

Notes: The table reports RDD estimates of the effect of electing a centre-left (or Five Star Movement) mayor on Δ Lega. The running variable in column (1) is the centre-left candidate's vote-share margin relative to the centre-right candidate; in column (2) it is the centre-left candidate's vote-share margin relative to all other candidates. Each column uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the Calonico et al. (2014) procedure, and estimates are obtained using the conventional RD estimator. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Standard errors clustered at the province level are in parentheses. *, **, *** represent the 10%, 5%, 1% significance levels, respectively, based on robust bias-corrected inference.

Table B.9: Robustness: Controlling for Mayor Characteristics

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>Dep. var.: Δ Lega</i>					
Female Mayor	0.020** (0.009)	0.020** (0.009)	0.020** (0.008)	0.020** (0.009)	0.020** (0.008)
Observations	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540
Control mean	0.014	0.014	0.014	0.014	0.014
Effective obs.	2138	2138	2138	2138	2138
Bandwidth	0.211	0.211	0.211	0.211	0.211
Robust 95% C.I.	[0.002; 0.042]	[0.002; 0.042]	[0.002; 0.041]	[0.002; 0.042]	[0.002; 0.041]
Election date FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mayor's Experience FE		✓			✓
Mayor's Education FE			✓		✓
Mayor's Age FE				✓	✓
Eligible weights	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Optimal bandwidth	✓				

Notes: The table reports RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on Δ Lega, subsequently adding controls for the mayor's experience (column 2), education (column 3), and age (column 4). Column 5 includes all three mayor controls simultaneously. The running variable is the female–male vote-share margin. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. The bandwidth is fixed throughout at the optimal bandwidth selected for column (1) by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure, and estimates are obtained using the conventional RD estimator. Standard errors clustered at the province level are in parentheses. *, **, *** represent the 10%, 5%, 1% significance levels, respectively, based on robust bias-corrected inference.

Table B.10: Quadratic Specification — Far-Right Voting (Optimal Bandwidth)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Δ Lega	Δ Centre-Right - Lega	Δ Centre-Right	Δ Extreme Centre-Right	Δ Moderate Centre-Right
Female Mayor	0.029** (0.012)	-0.017** (0.008)	0.013 (0.010)	0.019 (0.011)	-0.009* (0.005)
Observations	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540
Control mean	0.014	0.025	0.039	0.092	-0.053
Effective obs.	2034	1863	2301	2638	2038
Bandwidth	0.199	0.180	0.232	0.282	0.200
Robust 95% C.I.	[0.006; 0.059]	[-0.037; -0.003]	[-0.009; 0.035]	[-0.005; 0.044]	[-0.021; 0.000]
Election date FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eligible weights	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Optimal bandwidth	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Notes: The table reports RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on changes in vote shares between consecutive general elections, using a quadratic polynomial. The running variable is the female–male vote-share margin. The dependent variables are: change in vote share for Lega (column 1); change in vote share for the centre-right coalition with the exclusion of Lega (column 2); change in the vote share for the centre-right coalition (column 3); change in vote share for the extreme centre-right, defined as Lega plus Fratelli d’Italia (column 4); change in vote share for the moderate centre-right, defined as Forza Italia plus smaller centrist allies (column 5). Each column uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure, and estimates are obtained using the conventional RD estimator. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Standard errors clustered at the province level are in parentheses. *, **, *** represent the 10%, 5%, 1% significance levels, respectively, based on robust bias-corrected inference.

Table B.11: Quadratic Specification — Far-Right Voting (Fixed Bandwidth)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Δ Lega	Δ Centre-Right - Lega	Δ Centre-Right	Δ Extreme Centre-Right	Δ Moderate Centre-Right
Female Mayor	0.029** (0.012)	-0.017** (0.008)	0.012 (0.010)	0.021* (0.012)	-0.009** (0.005)
Observations	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540
Control mean	0.014	0.025	0.039	0.092	-0.053
Effective obs.	2034	2034	2034	2034	2034
Bandwidth	0.199	0.199	0.199	0.199	0.199
Robust 95% C.I.	[0.006; 0.059]	[-0.037; -0.004]	[-0.010; 0.034]	[-0.003; 0.049]	[-0.022; -0.001]
Election date FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eligible weights	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Optimal bandwidth	✓				

Notes: The table reports RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on changes in vote shares between consecutive general elections, using a quadratic polynomial. The running variable is the female-male vote-share margin. The dependent variables are: change in vote share for Lega (column 1); change in vote share for the centre-right coalition with the exclusion of Lega (column 2); change in the vote share for the centre-right coalition (column 3); change in vote share for the extreme centre-right, defined as Lega plus Fratelli d'Italia (column 4); change in vote share for the moderate centre-right, defined as Forza Italia plus smaller centrist allies (column 5). All columns are estimated using a common bandwidth set equal to the optimal bandwidth for the Δ Lega outcome, selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure, and estimates are obtained using the conventional RD estimator. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Standard errors clustered at the province level are in parentheses. *, **, *** represent the 10%, 5%, 1% significance levels, respectively, based on robust bias-corrected inference.

Table B.12: Quadratic Specification — Additional Outcomes (Optimal Bandwidth)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Δ Turnout	Δ Male Turnout	Δ Female Turnout	Δ Centre-Left	Δ Five Star Movement
Female Mayor	−0.001 (0.007)	−0.003 (0.007)	0.001 (0.007)	−0.012 (0.008)	−0.008 (0.016)
Observations	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540
Control mean	−0.054	−0.058	−0.050	−0.032	−0.053
Effective obs.	1853	1828	1916	1998	2323
Bandwidth	0.179	0.176	0.186	0.195	0.236
Robust 95% C.I.	[−0.016; 0.015]	[−0.019; 0.013]	[−0.015; 0.016]	[−0.033; 0.004]	[−0.040; 0.027]
Election date FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eligible weights	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Optimal bandwidth	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Notes: The table reports RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on changes in vote shares between consecutive general elections, using a quadratic polynomial. The running variable is the female–male vote-share margin. The dependent variables are: change in overall voter turnout (column 1), change in male turnout (column 2), change in female turnout (column 3), change in vote share for the centre-left coalition (column 4), and change in vote share for the Five Star Movement (column 5). Each column uses the outcome-specific optimal bandwidth selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure, and estimates are obtained using the conventional RD estimator. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Standard errors clustered at the province level are in parentheses. *, **, *** represent the 10%, 5%, 1% significance levels, respectively, based on robust bias-corrected inference.

Table B.13: Quadratic Specification — Additional Outcomes (Fixed Bandwidth)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Δ Turnout	Δ Male Turnout	Δ Female Turnout	Δ Centre-Left	Δ Five Star Movement
Female Mayor	-0.002 (0.007)	-0.003 (0.007)	-0.000 (0.007)	-0.012 (0.008)	-0.006 (0.016)
Observations	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540	4,540
Control mean	-0.054	-0.058	-0.050	-0.032	-0.053
Effective obs.	2034	2034	2034	2034	2034
Bandwidth	0.199	0.199	0.199	0.199	0.199
Robust 95% C.I.	[-0.018; 0.013]	[-0.020; 0.011]	[-0.016; 0.015]	[-0.033; 0.004]	[-0.040; 0.029]
Election date FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eligible weights	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Optimal bandwidth					

Notes: The table reports RDD estimates of the effect of electing a female mayor on changes in vote shares between consecutive general elections, using a quadratic polynomial. The running variable is the female–male vote-share margin. The dependent variables are: change in overall voter turnout (column 1), change in male turnout (column 2), change in female turnout (column 3), change in vote share for the centre-left coalition (column 4), and change in vote share for the Five Star Movement (column 5). All columns are estimated using a common bandwidth set equal to the optimal bandwidth for the Δ Lega outcome, selected by the [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#) procedure, and estimates are obtained using the conventional RD estimator. All specifications include municipal election date fixed effects and are weighted by the number of eligible voters. Standard errors clustered at the province level are in parentheses. *, **, *** represent the 10%, 5%, 1% significance levels, respectively, based on robust bias-corrected inference.