

Female Leadership, Gender Neutralization, and the Populist Radical Right: The Case of Giorgia Meloni

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Abstract

The growing presence of women at the helm of populist radical right parties has raised important questions about the role of gender in the construction and perception of political leadership. While existing literature has explored the feminization of leadership, the rise of strongwomen, and the strategic value of female leaders, less attention has been devoted to how female leadership is perceived and evaluated within populist radical right parties. This article addresses this gap by examining the case of Giorgia Meloni and Fratelli d'Italia, investigating whether gender constitutes a meaningful category through which leadership is interpreted within the party. Drawing on 21 semi-structured interviews with party representatives at different organizational levels, the article analyses perceptions of leadership in relation to electoral appeal, membership recruitment, and internal party functioning. The findings point to a process of gender neutralization whereby Meloni is primarily evaluated through apparently gender-neutral qualities such as coherence, sacrifice, competence, and loyalty rather than through explicitly gendered criteria.

Keywords

female leadership; Fratelli d'Italia; gender neutralization; Giorgia Meloni; party organization; populist radical right

1. Introduction

Female leadership within populist radical right (PRR) parties presents a puzzle for the literature on both gender and populism. Although PRR parties have been typically characterized by male-dominated organizations and traditionalist views on gender roles, a growing number of women have attained leadership positions within them. This has raised questions about how female leadership operates in such contexts and

the extent to which gender influences recruitment processes, internal functioning, and electoral support (e.g., Celis & Childs, 2018; De Giorgi et al., 2023; Geva, 2020; Meret, 2015). But how party actors interpret and evaluate female leadership within a PRR party, and whether gender constitutes a meaningful category through which leadership is understood, remain largely understudied. This article addresses these issues by focusing on the case of Giorgia Meloni and Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI), currently one of the most successful PRR parties in Europe.

Meloni's political trajectory and the rise of FdI offer a particularly instructive case for examining the relationship between leadership, party development, and gender. As the first woman prime minister in Italy and long-standing leader of a party rooted in the post-fascist tradition, Meloni combines high levels of personalization and political visibility with strong ideological continuity within the Italian right (Donà, 2024; Melito & Zulianello, 2024). This combination allows us to explore whether gender matters in shaping leadership perceptions and organizational functioning in a PRR party, or not.

Empirically, the article draws on semi-structured interviews with representatives of FdI, analyzing how Meloni's leadership is narrated from within the party and how gender is framed across multiple dimensions: its electoral appeal, the recruitment of new members, and its internal functioning. Our findings point to a distinctive pattern of gender neutralization. On the one hand, Meloni is consistently portrayed as a central and foundational leader. On the other hand, her leadership traits are almost systematically articulated in gender-neutral terms. Indeed, being a woman is not identified as a specific source of electoral attractiveness, nor is it perceived as affecting the party's capacity to mobilize supporters or members, nor as producing a distinctive leadership style.

Notably, rather than being described in terms of gender-related attributes, Meloni is repeatedly portrayed as what one interviewee described as the "human prototype" of the right: a figure characterized by self-sacrifice, political dedication, discipline, and a meritocratic rise to prominence through long-standing activism and dedication. In this narrative, the legitimacy of leadership derives from consistency and loyalty to the party, not from gender-related experiences or claims. Gender, therefore, is neither openly mobilized nor openly contested: it is neutralized, allowing Meloni's leadership to be both exceptional—given her visibility and centrality—and fully institutionalized within the party's ideological and organizational culture.

By showing how Meloni's leadership and the development of FdI have evolved in a symbiotic and gender-neutral manner, this article contributes to the broader literature on female leadership in the PRR and, more generally, it sheds light on how these parties can accommodate female leadership without altering their essential ideological traits, offering insights for research on personalization, party organization, and gender in contemporary PRR politics and beyond.

The article is structured as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework and reviews the relevant literature on gender, leadership, and the PRR. The following one introduces the case of Giorgia Meloni and FdI. We then present the research design, data, and methods, and finally the empirical analysis, which is organized around the main themes emerging from the interviews.

2. Leadership, Gender, and the Populist Radical Right

This study draws on two interrelated strands of literature, both of which are fundamental to its analytical framework. The first concerns women's political leadership, a field of research that has expanded significantly in recent years (e.g., Beckwith, 2015; Cavalieri & De Giorgi, 2025; Meret et al., 2017; Pansardi, 2025). The second strand focuses on gender and the PRR, a field that has also grown in scope, as these parties have increasingly incorporated women into prominent roles and engaged, although selectively and usually with specific strategic aims, on gender-related issues (e.g., Farris, 2017). Bringing these two strands of research into dialogue allows us to better understand the dynamics of female leadership within PRR parties.

Women's access to political leadership positions is hindered by a series of obstacles that more broadly reflect gender inequalities in political participation. The literature on feminist institutionalism highlights how, alongside institutional rules and structures implicitly or explicitly designed with men in mind, there operates a complex set of social and organizational constraints which limit women's opportunities for advancement. These constraints include formal and informal barriers, often difficult to identify, which contribute to making access to top-level roles more selective and unequal (Müller & Tömmel, 2022).

A key concept for understanding these processes is that of the "glass ceiling" (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986), which describes an invisible barrier that hinders women's (and other marginalized groups') access to leadership positions, even when they hold qualifications and skills which are equal or even superior to those of their male colleagues. Unlike the legal barriers of the past, the glass ceiling is difficult to identify because it does not manifest itself through formal rules, but through implicit biases, informal institutional practices, and persistent gender stereotypes which tend to favor male leadership.

These obstacles are further exacerbated by the way leadership is commonly defined and evaluated. As highlighted by the social role congruity theory, expectations associated with leadership positions have historically aligned with traits considered masculine, such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and emotional detachment, while qualities traditionally attributed to women, such as empathy, helpfulness, and relational attentiveness, are perceived as incompatible with the exercise of authority (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Consequently, women aspiring to leadership face a dual constraint: either adapting to dominant models and risking being judged negatively for transgressing gender norms or conforming to expectations of femininity at the cost of a diminished legitimacy as leaders (Gipson et al., 2017).

Alongside the glass ceiling, literature has developed a further explanatory model: the glass-cliff theory, proposed by Ryan and Haslam (2005). This theory highlights how women are more likely to be selected for leadership roles in phases of political, organizational, or electoral crisis, when the risk of failure is higher. In these contexts, women may be seen as particularly suitable because they are perceived as less compromised by previous elites and more capable of signaling discontinuity and change (O'Brien, 2015). Several European female political leaders have, in fact, risen to the leadership of their respective parties in moments of crisis.

A similar dynamic has also been identified in the study of the recent increase in women leading PRR parties (Weeks et al., 2023). Although these parties generally support conservative visions of women's role in society, recent years have witnessed a growing feminization of leadership, with figures such as Marine Le Pen, Alice

Weidel, and Giorgia Meloni herself. According to the extant literature, these choices are partly a response to strategies to broaden the electorate, particularly among women, who are traditionally less inclined to support the PRR (Donà et al., 2025).

However, the increased presence of women in leadership positions does not automatically imply equal treatment or a transformation of gender norms in politics. Notably, women leaders continue to be evaluated using different criteria than men, especially in the media (Campus, 2016).

The presence of a woman at the top of the party often coexists with the persistence of traditional organizational, cultural, and ideological models. From this perspective, the acceptance and legitimization of female leadership seem to depend precisely on its compatibility with the dominant gender order, rather than on its capacity to challenge it (Liveriero & Preda, 2025). Although the existing literature does not explicitly employ the concept of gender neutralization, it describes a closely related phenomenon: the leader's gender remains visible and, in certain circumstances, is even symbolically valorized, yet it does not function as a primary lens through which her political action and leadership are interpreted.

Another strand of research focuses on the so-called “paradox” of female leadership within the PRR. Numerous studies have highlighted how parties characterized by conservative values and, in some cases, openly anti-feminist positions are increasingly led by highly successful women. To explain this apparent contradiction, Casullo (2025) argues that figures such as Le Pen, Weidel, and Meloni can combine traits traditionally associated with masculine leadership—such as assertiveness, toughness, and authority—with characteristics conventionally linked to femininity, including empathy, care, and relational proximity. In this perspective emerged the figure of the “strongwoman,” a concept derived from that of the strongman (an authoritarian, tough, and assertive leader) and subsequently developed by other scholars as well (Griffini & Montecchio, 2026). PRR strongwomen embody a hybrid form of leadership, which combines determination and the defense of traditional values with references to motherhood, family, and, in some cases, the protection of women, all within a broader hierarchical and conservative understanding of society and gender relations.

One further growing line of research has drawn attention to the increasing centrality of gender issues within the contemporary PRR. Over the last decade, these parties have incorporated themes related to gender and sexuality into their political agendas, both through mobilization against the so-called “gender ideology” and through broader critiques of feminism and changing family norms. As Scrinzi (2026) demonstrates, gender-related issues have become an important component of the identity-building and discursive strategies of many European PRR parties. This literature is particularly relevant to the present study because it points to an interesting tension. While gender has become increasingly politicized at the programmatic and discursive levels, it may simultaneously become surprisingly marginal when party actors describe and evaluate their own leader. It is precisely this possibility that motivates this work, which focuses on the case of Giorgia Meloni, leader of the PRR party FdI and currently prime minister of Italy: rather than observing a constant negotiation between masculinity and femininity or an ongoing mobilization of gender identity, we expect to find a form of gender suspension in the interpretation of Meloni's leadership.

This tendency toward the neutralization of gender, or its use primarily for instrumental purposes, can also be observed when examining the Meloni government, i.e., the first government in Italian history headed by a woman. Despite the symbolic significance of this achievement, female leadership at the executive level has

not been accompanied by a comparable redistribution of power between men and women. On the contrary, women hold fewer ministerial positions than in some previous governments and continue to be concentrated in portfolios traditionally regarded as less politically influential (Barbieri & Pansardi, 2026). This suggests that the presence of a woman in the highest political office does not automatically translate into a transformation of gender relations within political institutions. Hence, feminization appears to be largely symbolic: significant in terms of descriptive representation, yet much more limited in terms of the substantive redistribution of political power.

The case of Giorgia Meloni is hence very intriguing, as it shows all the just-mentioned paradoxes. Meloni does not deny her identity as a woman, despite embodying a highly personalized leadership style and featuring traits traditionally associated with masculinity—such as assertiveness, harsh language, and organizational control. Her style is based on a selective negotiation between masculine and feminine elements (Campus & Mazzoni, 2021). She emphasizes motherhood not as a limitation, but as a symbolic resource, constructing the image of a “superwoman” capable of reconciling public and private responsibilities (Icardi, 2025). Like other female leaders in the PRR before her, Giorgia Meloni’s leadership is based on a strategic combination of features traditionally associated with both the masculine and the feminine, recalling the metaphor of the “two-headed hydra” proposed by Geva (2020) for the case of Marine Le Pen. Meloni’s success seems to rest on her ability to navigate gender expectations without openly questioning them: her leadership does not challenge the male power structures which characterize Italian politics. On the contrary, Meloni appears fully compatible with a model that interprets political success as the result of sacrifice, discipline, and personal determination (Liveriero & Preda, 2025). In this sense, although she represents a symbolic break with traditional male leadership, her figure does not threaten the existing gender structure but rather contributes to its legitimacy.

We expect the Meloni case to show how female leadership can assert itself without politicizing gender, through a process of neutralization, which makes the presence of women at the top compatible with PRR ideology and highly hierarchical organizations.

3. A Symbiotic Rise: Giorgia Meloni and Fdl

Giorgia Meloni is one of the founders and the long-time leader of Fdl, a PRR party established in late 2012 ahead of the 2013 general election. Fdl originated as a splinter from the center-right Popolo della Libertà, itself the product of the merger between Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia and National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale, AN). Despite its creation as a new political actor, Fdl displays strong elements of continuity with AN, both in organizational and symbolic terms: a large share of its leadership previously belonged to AN, and references to AN were explicitly incorporated into Fdl’s statute and symbol until 2019. From its foundation, however, the party has been strongly personalized around Meloni, who quickly emerged as its most visible and defining figure.

Meloni’s political career long predates the founding of Fdl. She became politically active in the early 1990s through the youth organization of the Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI), and subsequently rose through the ranks of AN, leading both its student and youth organizations. She was first elected to office at the local level in 1998 and entered the Chamber of Deputies in 2006, becoming one of its vice-presidents. Following the 2008 elections, she was appointed Minister for Youth in Silvio Berlusconi’s

government, at the age of 31. After leaving Popolo della Libertà in 2012, in part due to disagreements over Berlusconi's leadership and the cancellation of the coalition's primaries for the 2013 election, she co-founded Fdl with other former MSI and AN members. Re-elected to parliament in 2013, she assumed the leadership of the parliamentary party group and became party president in 2014.

Contrary to a pattern frequently observed among women leaders, also in PRR parties, Meloni's trajectory is not characterized by a "legacy advantage" derived from family ties to prominent male politicians (Baker & Palmieri, 2023). Instead, her leadership is rooted in long-term organizational activism and the political capital she has accumulated within the post-fascist right. The coexistence of outsider credentials and accumulated political experience is one of Meloni's most salient strengths, allowing her to consolidate internal leadership while maintaining strong electoral appeal.

Under Meloni's leadership, Fdl experienced steady electoral growth, remaining in opposition throughout the 2013–2022 period, but progressively expanding its parliamentary presence and popular support. The party eventually emerged as the largest force in the 2022 general election, leading to Meloni's appointment as Italy's first woman prime minister, and currently at the helm of one of the longest-serving governments in Italian history (Improta, 2026). Her personal approval ratings rose in parallel with the party's fortunes, contributing to her consolidation as the dominant leader of the Italian right (De Giorgi et al., 2023).

Within Fdl, women who reach positions of power tend to follow career paths which are similar to those of their male counterparts, reproducing the party's political culture rather than challenging it (Donà, 2024). In terms of policy positions, for instance, Meloni's stances on women-related and gender issues closely align with the broader right-wing and party agenda. She is openly critical of feminism, which she portrays as an ideological instrument opposed to conservative politics rather than a genuinely pro-women discourse. Her positions on abortion, family policy, and LGBTQ+ rights reflect a combination of cultural conservatism and Catholic references, often articulated through critiques of the European Union and alleged threats posed by the so-called "gender ideology" to traditional family structures and motherhood (De Giorgi et al., 2023).

Ultimately, the alignment between Meloni's positions and those of her party points to a symbiotic relationship in which leadership and organizational development have progressed in tandem, with Meloni's stances and the party's agenda mutually reinforcing one another, and with gender playing little to no role in shaping this convergence.

4. Data and Methods

Existing research shows that Fdl is characterized by a relatively cohesive party elite, combining some degree of social and political diversification with strong ideological continuity (Melito & Zulianello, 2024; Tronconi et al., 2025). While the party has attracted a growing number of members without prior connections to the post-fascist right, especially since the mid-2010s leadership positions—particularly at the national level—have remained largely occupied by actors with long-standing ties with the MSI and its successor organizations. Despite heterogeneous backgrounds, elites display highly homogeneous ideological orientations and limited internal variation on key political issues. This combination of organizational discipline and ideological coherence supports the use of interviews with party representatives as a reliable source for reconstructing Fdl's internal political culture and leadership narratives.

To explore how female leadership is perceived within PRR parties, this article employs qualitative semi-structured interviews with party representatives, in line with other recent works on this party family (e.g., Albertazzi et al., 2025; Melito & Zulianello, 2024). This methodological approach enables us to gather information on perspectives rarely captured through external observation or media analysis, providing a unique understanding of how “insiders” construct and interpret their political experience.

The interview protocol was developed within a broader research project examining multiple dimensions of Fdl’s internal life. For the present purposes, the key questions of interest are the following, although relevant insights could also emerge at different points during the interviews:

- In your opinion, what are the motivations that lead voters to choose Fdl?
- Why do people join (or not join) the party?
- What kind of community does the party create for its members?
- To what extent does the leader influence the party’s decision-making procedures?

We conducted 21 interviews (for details, see the Supplementary File) between September 2023 and February 2024, mostly face-to-face. The identification of potential respondents followed purposive sampling criteria, targeting individuals positioned to provide substantive and contextually rich information relevant to our research goals (Kelly, 2010). Initial participants were identified through established party networks, with subsequent recruitment proceeding via snowball sampling among available interviewees. This recruitment strategy, while effective in reaching individuals with substantive knowledge of the party’s internal life, may have privileged respondents who are well integrated into established party networks and therefore more likely to reproduce dominant narratives; interviewees more critical of, or more marginal to, these networks may be under-represented in the sample.

All participants were de-identified to ensure confidentiality, and fieldwork concluded upon reaching theoretical saturation (Hennink et al., 2017). Interviewees were informed in advance about the study’s aims and data protection procedures and consented to being recorded. Interviews lasted between 26 minutes and 1 hour and 17 minutes. To address potential respondent bias, the sample encompasses diverse organizational levels and socio-demographic profiles, covering three Italian regions chosen for their distinct political significance to Fdl: Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Lazio, and Marche (for further details, see the Supplementary File). Within each region, seven respondents were interviewed across both urban and rural areas. The sample ensured variation in gender (around 30% female, mirroring Fdl’s parliamentary representation), age (from young activists to veterans of predecessor parties like AN and MSI), and role (MPs, regional and municipal councilors, and party executives). Upon completion of the interviews, the recorded material was transcribed verbatim. In the following pages, the letter “f” is added after the interview number in case of female respondents.

A methodological clarification is warranted regarding the treatment of gender in the interview protocol. Gender was not a topic that interviewees were explicitly invited to discuss. Rather, as noted above, the interviews focused on respondents’ motivations for voting for Fdl, joining the party, perceptions of its internal community, and assessments of the leader’s role in decision-making. By avoiding direct prompts about gender, we are better able to assess whether and how gender emerges as a salient dimension in respondents’ narratives, or conversely, whether it remains largely absent from their understandings of

Meloni's leadership. As we show below, the limited presence of gender-based considerations in the interviews constitutes an important empirical finding in its own, rather than an artefact of the research design. In this respect, transcripts were examined using four categories: explicit references to Meloni's gender; gendered metaphors applied to her leadership (e.g., familial imagery); the attribution of masculine- or feminine-coded traits (e.g., determination, toughness, empathy) to her leadership style; and explicit statements denying or downplaying the relevance of gender to her leadership. Finally, we acknowledge that a protocol explicitly probing gender might have generated richer and more explicit reflections on this dimension. Future research could usefully combine direct and indirect elicitation strategies to further investigate these dynamics.

5. Empirical Analysis: Leadership Across Party Dimensions

The empirical analysis is organized around three inter-related dimensions of Meloni's leadership as narrated by Fdl's representatives: her contribution to the party's electoral appeal (Section 5.1), her role in membership recruitment (Section 5.2), and her influence on internal functioning (Section 5.3). Across all three dimensions we show how gender is consistently absent from the vocabulary through which the interviewees portray Meloni's leadership, even where, as we discuss in the concluding section, this absence is itself open to more than one interpretation.

5.1. Electoral Appeal

Interviews reveal a nearly unanimous consensus regarding the central role played by Giorgia Meloni's leadership as the primary driver of Fdl's electoral appeal, and the data highlight several factors behind her attractiveness. Respondents emphasize the coherence demonstrated by the party leader since the party's foundation (Interviews I3f, I5, I6, I10f, I12, I13, I15f, I16, I19f). As explained by a female representative (I19f), a big role is played "by the coherence shown by the party over the years and by our leader, Giorgia Meloni. Certainly, much of our electorate revolves around her, the proposals she has championed, and her ideas" (I19f; see also I8).

This "image of coherence and seriousness" (I6), embodied both by Meloni and her party, is framed by several interviewees as a refusal to compromise and a rejection of the tactical "maneuvering" (*giochetti*) considered endemic to traditional Italian politics (I10f; see also I12). In this respect, Meloni is credited with the merit and ability to maintain a "steadfast political stance on major issues over time" (I13), "even at the cost of renunciation and sacrifice" (I15f). This narrative of exceptional dedication and self-sacrifice resonates with O'Brien's (2015) finding that women party leaders are typically held to a more demanding performance standard than their male counterparts and are expected to demonstrate a higher level of commitment that legitimizes their position compared to men. Among the factors explaining why Meloni's leadership fostered electoral support for Fdl, her ability to embody the party's core values clearly stands out. For instance, an interviewee (I12) argues that "Italian citizens chose Fdl due to an adherence to a worldview and core values that the party has always embraced and based on the way its leader interprets them."

According to the respondents, this perception fostered a deep sense of trust among the electorate (I2, I5, I9f, I12, I14), in some cases even re-engaging citizens who had previously abstained from voting (I14), allowing Meloni to achieve "an approval rating significantly higher than that of the party itself" (I2). Notably, a crucial

aspect underlined by Fdl's representatives is Meloni's ability to convert her long-standing coherence into efficacy once becoming prime minister in 2022. As explained by two interviewees:

Meloni has also been recognized for an operational capacity that, especially on the international stage, has earned her support beyond what she initially mobilized through the idea of coherence and socio-cultural issues. (I13)

[She is] a leader capable of governing Italy, as she is doing now. (I7)

More generally, essential to attracting voters are specific personality and relational traits of Meloni, in particular the perception of her as a charismatic leader (I4, I7, I9f, I16). For instance, interviewee 7, self-described as always having had a "right-wing soul," argues that one of the crucial reasons that led him to approach Fdl was seeing "a charismatic leader in Giorgia Meloni" (I7). Representatives' framing of Meloni's charisma as an individual, non-gendered attribute parallels Meret's (2015) study of Pia Kjærsgaard's leadership of the Danish People's Party, where charismatic authority was likewise narrated as a personal quality rather than a gendered one. This gender-neutral framing of charisma is itself analytically significant. Classical and contemporary theorizations of charismatic authority have historically constructed it as an implicitly masculine attribute, with women's access to charismatic legitimacy treated as the exception rather than the norm (Joosse & Willey, 2020). Hence, the findings point to a broader framework in which charisma and femininity have rarely been considered compatible.

An integral part of the perception of Meloni's charisma is represented by her closeness to ordinary citizens and their needs, differently from other politicians and traditional party elites (I16, I18, I21f). Indeed, "her approach is so natural, so authentic, so unusual, because politics often seems stagnant or inaccessible. Instead, [she] is so immediate" (I16). She is thus credited with an atypical natural and immediate approach, alongside an extraordinary "capacity to communicate" (I16). The authenticity of Meloni is decisively influenced by her background and the persistent perception of her being an outsider, despite her entry into the mainstream of national politics, also thanks to the consistent posture adopted by Fdl over the years. Interviewee 21 describes Fdl's leader as "a serious, coherent, and humble person who worked her way up and went against the grain of political standards," and who maintains "a down-to-earth profile when it comes to her approach to the territory, to her roots" (I21), even as prime minister. In this respect, a female representative (I18f) explains that Meloni "has managed to bring the people closer...reaching out to the most vulnerable working classes without neglecting high-profile entrepreneurial sectors." In this way, by combining charisma, communication skills, and proximity to the people, Meloni manages to be simultaneously an ordinary and an extraordinary leader, in line with the well-known definition of the successful populist leader (in general) provided by Taggart (2000).

While nearly all interviewees emphasize Meloni's pivotal role, four respondents do not explicitly cite the party leader as a primary voting motivation for Fdl (I1, I11, I17, I20). Nonetheless, even these respondents refer to the aforementioned elements such as coherence (I17, I20), values (I11), and grassroots rooting (I1), but with reference to the party itself rather than its leader.

These accounts resonate with the debates on gendered leadership evaluation discussed above. Respondents' emphasis on coherence, charisma, and closeness to ordinary citizens, rather than on gender-specific qualities, suggests that Meloni's electoral appeal is constructed through criteria that appear gender-neutral.

This is consistent with what Meret et al. (2017) describe as the capacity of women leaders to succeed within structurally masculine PRR parties by anchoring their legitimacy in a specific declination of charisma rather than in gender-specific terms.

5.2. Membership Recruitment

The interviews reveal the decisive role of Meloni in attracting new members to FdI. The data suggest a nearly unanimous consensus among representatives on the pattern of “spontaneous affiliation” of new members (e.g., I2, I10f, I16) that the party has experienced over the last few years. This point is broadly consistent with the party’s own reported membership figures (280,000 members in 2023), which point to a marked national increase in registered members over the same period (“Arianna Meloni, campagna,” 2023). Interviewees maintain that this is part of the central importance of party leaders in contemporary politics (I1, I13, I15f). As explained by a representative:

The recruitment process is entirely centered on the leader’s image. [It] relies on the capacity for persuasion and fascination of the leader. I believe that charismatic parties are the parties of the modern era, nearly all of them. (I13)

In the specific case of FdI, this is fostered by Meloni’s personal characteristics (I1, I2, I8, I10f, I13). In this respect, a recurring explanation provided by the interviewees points to trust in Meloni (e.g., I2, I10f, I14), primarily due to her “way of doing politics” (I17). Such attractiveness of Meloni in drawing new members and sympathizers is well explained by an interviewee:

There is great trust in Giorgia Meloni’s leadership. We see it clearly when we are out on the streets; people stop at our stalls and gazebos to compliment Meloni. This indicates her capacity to attract support or, at the very least, the sympathy of many people. (I2)

This trust is considered to be also fostered by the positive opinion of Meloni’s performance, especially since taking office, which has led to a significant shift compared to the past, as expressed by a long-standing member of FdI:

I have been part of this party since we were at 2%. At that time, it was a cultural and identity-based affiliation....Now it has become much easier because many people say, “Giorgia Meloni is doing well, and we want to join the party to support her.” (I8)

As previously mentioned, Meloni is considered able to instill trust in the broader electorate, some of whom decide to join the party or become sympathizers to contribute to her political project (I8, I9f, I10f, I13, I19f), in the case of the latter a clear instance of “purposive incentive” (Albertazzi et al., 2025), closely linked to the embodiment of the party message within the leader. Indeed, Meloni emerges as a role model not only for new members and sympathizers, but also for representatives themselves: to them, activism is also “a way to signal trust to the premier....A way of saying to the premier and to us, the politicians representing the party, ‘we are here, we are present’” (I10f).

Joining the party is seen as an opportunity to contribute to change and to feel “part of something” (I10f, I19f; see also the next section for details), a clear instance of communitarian incentive (Albertazzi et al., 2025), thanks to the perceived capacity of Meloni to listen and be a direct and charismatic leader who is accessible to members. As explained by a female representative: “[She] is not seen as someone distant....She is very charismatic, very direct. She is not the typical distant leader” (I10f).

This perception of closeness to Meloni is decisively fostered by the effort of FdI to invest in physical activism (Melito & Zulianello, 2024), which is underlined by the explicit effort of the party in bringing people closer through “listening and seeking solutions to their problems” (I17). This acts as a catalyst for recruiting new members and sympathizers, by developing a close connection between the party and its leader:

Those who are fascinated by Meloni see that message, that image, embodied in human beings....Because Italians identify with the leader and want to do something more. They want to be there. (I13)

Notably, physical activism thus plays a highly relevant role in attracting new members, in addition to boosting electoral success (Melito & Zulianello, 2024), as it provides a physical manifestation of the goals to be pursued, which are themselves important factors in the choice to join (I1, I9f, I13, I14, I19f). Nevertheless, some interviewees emphasize the role of social media instead, especially Meloni’s communication on such channels, rather than physical activism (I9f, I13, I16, I19f). Rather than pointing to the substitution of one channel of engagement for another, this pattern is consistent with what Zulianello (2021) defines as “phygital activism”: a continuous interaction between online and offline forms of participation that jointly reinforce the party’s organizational presence and digital visibility. The combination of personal trust, identification with the leader, and the leader’s capacity to personify the party and its message also echoes recent findings on the factors underpinning the success of PRR parties, both in mobilizing electoral support and attracting new members (Albertazzi et al., 2025).

5.3. Internal Functioning

Meloni is portrayed as an effective and competent leader, who is “very present in the party” (I8) as well as “very attentive, very meticulous” (I3f). Indeed, several respondents praise Meloni’s capacity to be present and to follow the internal workings of the party, including the details. For instance, a National Directorate member (I2) explains that “Giorgia is very attentive, she wants to know...even today, despite her thousand governmental responsibilities, she manages to keep an eye on the party.” In addition, she emerges as a demanding leader, as she requires that both representatives and members “know how to run” (I3f) and “dedicate themselves totally” (I6), as she needs “a team of thoroughbreds” (I6). Critically, a female representative explains:

She asks everyone to give their contribution, so she is not the authoritarian father, but the good father of the family. [But] she is a woman [smiles], [and] I have never heard anyone say “mother of the family” [neither within the party nor outside it]. (I3f)

This points to a crucial finding: respondents regard Meloni as an effective and decisive leader, while largely disconnecting their evaluations from her gender. In this sense, she appears to embody a form of “gender-neutralized” leadership, in which gender is neither invoked nor considered particularly relevant in

accounts of political authority. Yet, as Geva (2020) suggests, such apparent neutrality does not imply the absence of gendered meanings. Even when respondents explicitly reject gender-based interpretations of leadership, the language they employ continues to draw on implicitly gendered understandings, as evidenced by the absence of a maternal equivalent to the “father of the family” metaphor discussed above.

Instead, interviewees emphasize the symbiotic relationship between leader and party, together with their ability to sustain a narrative of *outsidership* even while occupying positions of political power. As an interviewee acutely explained to us, Meloni is the human prototype of the right:

She has set the imprint of the human prototype, I would say. People are expected to try to be like her. This whole underdog narrative is very powerful: she is the typical, and rare, case of someone who has made herself, through hard work and study....There is a “Meloni model” defined by dedication, sacrifice, commitment to learning, and the rejection of opportunism. (I13)

Notably, these qualities have historically been coded as masculine within dominant paradigms (Eagly & Karau, 2002); while interviewees present them as neutral, universal markers of leadership quality, this reproduces rather than overcomes a masculine-coded idea of leadership. This distinction matters: it suggests that gender neutralization, far from signaling the irrelevance of gender, may itself operate as a gendered strategy through which Meloni’s leadership is made legitimate by conforming to an implicitly masculine standard.

Notably, Meloni’s internal influence on the party proves decisive regarding the human model to follow. She “influences greatly because she has solid credibility” (I14), which is determined by three factors:

1) Because she made herself; 2) because she demonstrated that a woman can succeed if capable of building herself, not thanks to someone else but thanks to herself; and 3) because Giorgia Meloni is premier but remains the last of the militants. (I14)

This self-made narrative can be read through two partly divergent theoretical lenses. On the one hand, it exemplifies what Casullo (2025) describes as the radical right “strongwoman”: a leader whose authority rests on the display of traditionally masculine-coded traits, such as determination and toughness, presented as the result of personal achievement rather than as a challenge to gender norms. On the other hand, it complicates the glass-cliff hypothesis (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), which suggests that women are more likely to attain leadership positions during periods of organizational crisis and vulnerability. Fdl representatives portray Meloni’s rise not as an opportunity created by the party’s precarious circumstances, but as the product of individual merit, thereby lending support to O’Brien’s (2015) argument that women leaders are expected to meet higher standards of performance to be regarded as legitimate.

The second point of the quote also conveys that it remains unusual for a woman to reach such a position independently; however, being a woman does not seem to influence, per se, her leadership style or attractiveness. For these reasons, belonging to Fdl is perceived as a source of “pride,” with “a leader like Giorgia Meloni who gives you standing, gives you status” (I16): she is portrayed as “an extraordinary woman” and “a point of reference” (I16), embodying a model of someone “who made herself from scratch and who from scratch brought her ideas to the top” (I14). This again highlights the importance of the leader as a role model for activists and activism in general: a female representative (I18f) states, “Each of us, in our small way, tries to be a little Meloni.”

At the decision-making level, Meloni stands at the apex of a party defined as “hierarchical” and “almost military” (I18f). At the national level, Meloni carries substantial decisional weight (I1, I2, I8, I11, I14, I18f, I21): while interviewee 8 characterizes her influence as “almost total” (I8), interviewee 9, a female representative, argues that she is not “a woman alone in command, as some would have it” (I9f). The latter view is shared by another female representative (I15f), who maintains that she has created a group sharing “a harmony of methods, values, and *modus operandi*” (I15f). Another female representative (I3f) emphasizes Meloni’s capacity to select “trustworthy people, loyal people,” using the previously mentioned metaphor of “mother of the family” to highlight Meloni’s responsibility—one of the few gendered references from interviews.

In addition, almost all interviewees also acknowledge the decisive role of Meloni in the creation and maintenance of an internal community (e.g., I2, I10f, I12, I14, I16, I17, I18f, I20). For instance, a representative (I17) speaks of a “very united group” that remains “always close to Giorgia Meloni.” The internal community is characterized as cohesive, and the absence of internal factions is primarily attributed to her ability as the leader (e.g., I12, I13). In this respect, various representatives appreciate the space for dialogue that Meloni provides, particularly noted by National Directorate and Assembly (Fdl’s internal bodies) members (I1, I2, I14, I19f). However, interviewee 14, while acknowledging “her great capacity to always listen to all militants,” characterizes her as “straight” and “difficult to influence” (I14); at the same time, a female local administrator (I3f) depicts her as a woman with clear ideas, determined by founding values, but open to dialogue. More generally, regarding the possibility of influencing Meloni, divergent views emerge. Interviewee 14 states, “Giorgia Meloni is never influenced by anyone because she is very straight,” though acknowledging her “great capacity to always listen” (I14). Many respondents (I1, I2, I4, I6, I16, I19f, I20, I21) suggest substantial control and centralized decision-making, while accounting for listening and synthesizing positions within the framework of the party’s coherence, values, and rules. In this respect, and more generally, at the local level greater independence from the leader seems to exist (I7, I17, I18f). This combination of uncompromising resolve and attentive listening mirrors the hybrid repertoire that Casullo (2025, p. 236) attributes to radical right strongwomen, who often “combine the titillating allure of aggression with the warmth and softness traditionally associated with femininity.”

Finally, some long-standing members express concerns about contemporary parties risking excessive dependence on the leader. According to interviewee 13, for instance, compared to AN, “with social media everything has changed”; now “the party risks every day...being bypassed by the fact that there is now a direct relationship [with the leader]” (I13). This creates a tension between Fdl’s continued territorial rootedness, within a broader context characterized by the growing importance of the leader, and its ability to combine features of an activist party with a clear mass-party vocation (see Melito & Zulianello, 2024).

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that Giorgia Meloni’s leadership constitutes a possible case of gender neutralization within a PRR party. Drawing on the perspectives of party representatives, the analysis shows how her identity as a woman is systematically subordinated to the fact that she embodies what interviewees describe as the “human prototype” of the right. In this construction, leadership legitimacy derives from discipline, self-sacrifice, meritocratic advancement, and ideological coherence rather than from explicit gendered experiences or attributes.

Gender neutrality emerges as a fundamental component of Fdl's political identity, operating both externally and internally. Externally, Meloni's appeal is not linked to stereotypically feminine traits or claims of gender representation, but rather to an image of political seriousness, consistency, and determination. She is often described as an "underdog" who has succeeded through perseverance and sacrifice, a narrative that emphasizes her closeness to ordinary citizens while conveying authority and competence. This allows her to reconcile strong leadership with populist authenticity without challenging the party's traditional ideological foundations. Internally, gender neutralization also shapes organizational dynamics. Fdl reproduces a hierarchical and highly centralized party structure in which Meloni's authority is both unquestioned and personalized, yet commonly portrayed as accessible and attentive.

Even when gendered metaphors such as that of the "mother of the family" are used, they serve less as indicators of femininity than as rhetorical devices highlighting Meloni's sense of responsibility, diligence, and concern for the organization. In this sense, gendered language is employed selectively while its political significance is downplayed. A brief reflection on possible differences between male and female respondents is warranted. Male respondents made no spontaneous reference to gender, describing Meloni's leadership in ungendered terms; while a few female interviewees explicitly acknowledged its gendered dimension, they ultimately neutralized or dismissed it.

Our interpretation of gender neutralization, however, is not free of ambiguity, and it is worth making the underlying tension explicit. One reading, consistent with our respondents' own accounts, is that Fdl representatives treat Meloni's leadership as substantively gender-neutral, evaluating her through the same criteria of coherence, sacrifice, and competence that would presumably apply to a male leader. A different, and in our view equally plausible, reading is that this apparent neutralization is itself a form of gendering: precisely because Meloni is a woman leading a party historically suspicious of female authority, her legitimacy may need to be secured through a more forceful disavowal of gender than would be required of a male leader, whose authority is rarely subject to comparable scrutiny or justification. Under this second reading, the "human prototype" is not so much a gender-neutral category as a masculine-coded default to which Meloni is granted access, on the condition that her womanhood remains unremarked. Our analysis cannot definitively adjudicate between these two interpretations, nor do we believe that the choice between them should be foreclosed. Rather, neutralization and gendering may operate simultaneously at different levels of the same discourse, reflecting the broader difficulty of studying a process that party actors themselves experience as unmarked and taken for granted.

More broadly, the Fdl case suggests that the growing presence of women in leadership positions within the PRR does not automatically entail a gendering of political styles, agendas, or organizational cultures. Meloni's leadership illustrates how female leaders can be fully integrated—and indeed central—within PRR parties through the neutralization rather than the mobilization of gender. This finding adds to the literature on female leadership and the PRR, demonstrating how visibility and authority can coexist with the reproduction of established ideological norms. Ultimately, Meloni's case shows that female leadership is not necessarily transformative and highlights the ability of PRR parties to welcome women into leadership roles while leaving gender in a position of political marginalization.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study consist of qualitative interviews with party representatives. To protect the anonymity of the participants, the interview transcripts have been de-identified and are not publicly available.

LLMs Disclosure

The authors used Microsoft 365 Copilot for language proofreading only.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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