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ARTICLE



Does perceived inequality promote abstention and protest voting? A study of the 2022 Italian general election

Nicoletta Cavazza ^a, Chiara Volpato ^b and Michele Roccatò ^c

^aDepartment of Communication and Economics, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Reggio Emilia, Italy; ^bDepartment of Psychology, University of Milano-Bicocca, Milan, Italy; ^cDepartment of Psychology, University of Torino, Turin, Italy

ABSTRACT

We focus on the role of perceived economic inequality as a possible antecedent of abstention and protest voting in the 2022 Italian general election. In particular, we hypothesize that citizens' perceived economic inequality (and the perception that it will grow), reinforced by the negative emotions the perception trigger, may undermine citizens' trust in institutions. We also investigate whether the erosion of trust is associated with abstention (as an exit option) and protest voting, operationalized as voting for Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi), i.e. the only party that did not support the Draghi government (as a voting voice option). We analysed data from the two waves of an online election survey conducted by ITANES (the Italian National Election Study) on a quota sample of the Italian adult population and tested a moderated – mediated model aimed at predicting the association between perceived inequality when eliciting negative emotions, and the probability of voting for Fdi or not casting a valid vote. The mediating variable was institutional distrust and the moderating variable was (lack of) political interest. The analyses confirmed that perceived economic inequality does play a role in promoting abstention and protest voting.

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Introduction

The 2022 Italian general election produced two main results: a significant increase in abstention and a huge expansion in the number of votes for Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI). These results can be interpreted, at least in part, as a sign of dissatisfaction with the previously ruling parties and distrust towards political institutions and the entire political system (Chiaromonte 2023). In this article, we focus on the role of perceived economic inequality as a possible antecedent of abstention and protest voting in the 2022 Italian general election. In particular, we hypothesize that Italian citizens' perception of economic inequality (and the perception that it will likely grow), reinforced by the negative emotions such perception triggers, undermines their trust in institutions. Building on Hirschman's (1970) well-known scheme, often applied to the political

domain (e.g. Dowding et al. 2000), we also investigate whether this erosion of trust is associated with abstention (as an exit option) and voting for FDI (as a voice option).

Political consequences of economic inequalities

Since it began to grow in the 1980s, economic inequality has risen sharply in advanced democracies, this as a result of economic globalization, technological innovation and liberal redistribution (Triglia 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis resulting from the Russian-Ukrainian war have exacerbated this situation (Moyer et al. 2022). Even before the pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war, many empirical studies consistently showed that increasing inequality has a negative impact on democracy. Some of them are particularly important for the purposes of this study.

First, objective economic inequality weakens citizens' participation in social, civic and political activities (Schäfer and Schwander 2019; Solt 2008). This effect has been interpreted in social psychological terms as being related to the fact that inequality promotes status competition, as well as to individual feelings of powerlessness and anxiety, which in turn hinder social and political participation (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009a, 2009b). Moreover, economic inequality reduces, between individuals and social groups, the number of the shared common goals that act as motivators for collective behaviours (Jetten et al. 2021). A multilevel study conducted in 24 European countries showed that not only does macro-level income inequality have a negative impact on civic participation, but that it also interacts with individual income in weakening civic participation: the difference in participation between more and less affluent citizens is much larger in societies with greater than with less inequality (Lancee and Van de Werfhorst 2012). A similar result was also observed in Vezzoli et al., (2023a) recent study of a representative sample of Italian citizens, which analysed the interaction effect exerted by perceived economic inequality and socioeconomic class on political participation. These authors showed that while high levels of perceived economic inequality promoted political action among participants belonging to the better-off class, it depressed the political action of participants from the worse-off class.

A second political effect of economic inequality is directly reflected in the appeal of populist parties. Indeed, economic inequality has been seen as a distal cause of the rise of far-right populism (Inglehart and Norris 2017). Beyond purely economic explanations (Pástor and Veronesi 2021), this branch of research refers to three social- psychological mechanisms through which inequality could lead to support for populist movements: i) the erosion of social trust and social cohesion, ii) the reinforcement of national identity as a means of gaining security, and iii) the fear resulting from perceived limited resources and emphasized by the rhetoric of populist leaders (Jetten et al. 2015, 2017; for a review, see; Jay et al. 2019). These mechanisms, which affect social groups regardless of their economic position, are blamed for the appeal of far-right populism, because inequality exacerbates intergroup divisions and reinforces intergroup hostility, prejudice and stereotypes (Jetten et al. 2021).

Third, objective economic inequality fosters social and institutional distrust. Several studies (e.g. Elgar 2010; Loveless 2013; Uslaner and Brown 2005) have emphasized that economic inequality creates a threatening and distrustful social climate that undermines civic culture and participation. More importantly for our argument, empirical evidence

has confirmed that economic inequality, especially when associated with the evaluation that it is unjust, increases dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy and weakens political and institutional trust, which in turn demotivates people to participate actively in politics (Anderson and Singer 2008; Goubin 2020; Guinjoan and Rico 2018; Schäfer 2012; Zmerli and Castillo 2015), although this notion has recently been challenged (Kim et al. 2022). The negative impact of economic inequality on institutional trust may be the result of citizens' perception that political institutions are unable to create more just and egalitarian conditions (Van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017), at least for those citizens who believe that inequality is unjust. This is not always the case (Tyler 2015); in line with research drawing on system justification theory (Jost and van der Toorn 2012) as a theoretical framework, there is a widespread tendency to view the status quo as fair and legitimate, in order to avoid the distressing uncertainty of social change (Liaquat, Jost, and Balcetis 2023).

Most of the studies reviewed so far have examined the political consequences of economic inequality using objective indicators, such as the Gini index, to operationalize the macro-structural level of inequality. However, if the effects investigated concern social-psychological orientations and reactions, then the subjective experience of inequality is a more suitable construct (Schmalor and Heine 2022). Indeed, a focus on the perception of inequality at the individual level can capture the way people perceive their environment and determine how the affective reactions elicited are related to many social psychological consequences and are also relevant to the political domain (Brown-Iannuzzi, Lundberg, and McKee 2017; Buttrick and Oishi 2017).

Based on the literature discussed above, we formulated our first three hypotheses as follows:

H1. The perception that the level of economic inequality is high (rather than low) is associated with non-participation in parliamentary elections.

H2. In the case of voting, the perception that the level of economic inequality is high (rather than low) is associated with voting for FdI, which has never previously participated in the government of Italy.

H3. Perceived economic inequality is associated with institutional distrust, especially when it triggers negative emotions, which is considered a social- psychological outcome of the perception of the unfairness of inequality. From a statistical perspective, we expect an association between the interaction effect between perceived economic inequality and negative emotions on the one hand and institutional distrust on the other.

Indirect political consequences of economic inequality

The erosion of citizens' political trust associated with perceived inequality and the negative emotions it triggers can also have behavioural consequences that undermine the quality of democracy. In particular, several studies have confirmed that institutional mistrust leads people to abstain from voting or to vote for anti-system populist parties

(like FdI), and in the long run, both consequences could negatively affect the perceived legitimacy of democracy (Bélanger and Nadeau 2005; Grönlund and Setälä 2007; Hadjar and Beck 2010; Pástor and Veronesi 2021).

According to Hirschman's (1970) classic scheme, these voting decisions can be understood as exit or voice strategies for coping with political dissatisfaction. Indeed, 'exit' and 'voice' are possible reactions to the deterioration of product quality or of the ability of an organization to perform its function. In the political sphere, when these conditions are present, a first possibility is that distrustful citizens may choose the exit option and refrain from any political participation, including voting (e.g. Hooghe, Marien, and Pauwels 2011). A second possibility is that distrustful citizens voice their dissatisfaction by favouring parties and candidates that challenge the established political system. In this case, voting may be an expression of protest against the established parties and their policies, while abstention may represent a more radical rejection of the entire political system. A recent study analysing data from Central and Eastern European countries has shown that non-voters and radical-right populist voters differ significantly in terms of politically relevant attitudes such as hostility to immigrants and Euroscepticism (Zagorski and Santana 2021). Overall, these results suggest a relevant social-psychological difference between non-voters and protest voters.

However, we must also take into account that voice is more costly than exit. Indeed, use of the voice strategy presupposes the representation of an alternative and desirable state of affairs which can be achieved if citizens remain interested in politics despite their criticism of it.

Therefore, in accordance with our final two hypotheses, we expect that:

H4. Overall, distrust of political institutions will be associated with a higher probability of voting for FdI.

H5. (Lack of) interest in politics will weaken the association between distrust of political institutions and voting. Specifically, we expect distrustful citizens who are less interested in politics to be more likely to resort to the exit option (i.e. abstaining from voting) and distrustful citizens who are more interested in politics to be more likely to resort to the voice option (i.e. voting for FdI).

Specifically, we tested the model shown in [Figure 1](#).

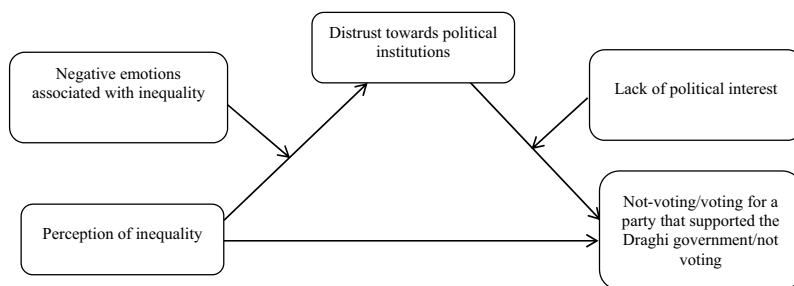


Figure 1. The model we tested (control variables: gender, age and years of education).

The present study

Materials and methods

To test our hypotheses, we analysed data from a two-wave online election survey conducted by ITANES (the Italian National Election Studies; <http://www.itanes.org>) on a quota sample of the Italian adult population, stratified by gender, age and area of residence. The pre-election wave was conducted between 5 and 24 September 2022 using a rolling cross-section design, while the post-election wave was conducted between 12 and 15 October 2022. The resulting sample consisted of 1,572 people. Due to missing values in the variables we used (see below), we conducted our predictive analyses with 1,372 participants.

Measures

The control variables, the perception of inequality in Italian society, the negative emotions this perception triggers and distrust in Italian political institutions were assessed in the pre-election wave. The control variables were gender (0 = man, 1 = woman), age and years of formal education.

Following Vezzoli et al. (2023a), the perception of inequality in Italian society was measured using the following three items: i) 'In your opinion, is the level of economic inequality in Italy currently: very low (= 1), low (= 2), neither low nor high (= 3), high (= 4), very high? (= 5), Don't know (= 6); ii) 'In your opinion, compared to the period before the pandemic, is the level of economic inequality in Italy: much lower (= 1), lower (= 2), the same (= 3), higher (= 4), much higher? (= 5), Don't know (= 6)', and iii) 'In your opinion, in the next three years, will economic inequality in Italy: decrease a lot (= 1), decrease somewhat (= 2), stay the same as now (= 3), increase somewhat (= 4), increase a lot? (= 5), Don't know (= 6)'. We excluded from the analysis participants who answered 'Don't know' to at least one of these items. The items showed satisfactory reliability, with $\alpha = .76$.

Following Vezzoli et al. (2023b), the negative emotions triggered by inequality in Italian society were measured using the following two items: i) 'When you think about economic inequality in Italy, how much anxiety do you feel? None at all (= 1), a little (= 2), some (= 3), or a lot? (= 4)', and ii) 'When you think about economic inequality in Italy, how much anger do you feel? None at all (= 1), a little (= 2), some (= 3), or a lot? (= 4)'. The two items showed a strong positive correlation, with $r = .59$, and $p < .001$.

Finally, distrust of Italian political institutions (the Italian parliament and Italian political parties) was measured using two eleven-category items (0 = 'No trust at all', 10 = 'Complete trust'). These items were taken from the Eurobarometer (<https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/screen/home>) and showed satisfactory reliability, with $\alpha = .89$. Higher scores corresponded to greater distrust.

In the post-election wave, political interest was measured using a four-category European Social Survey (ESS; <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>) item: 'How interested are you in politics?' (1 = Very much, 2 = to some extent, 3 = a little, or 4 = not at all?).

The dependent variable was respondents' self-reported voting behaviour, recoded as a three-category variable: (a) not voting or not casting a valid vote

($n = 162$); (b) voting for a party that supported the Draghi government (Forza Italia, Azione, Italia Viva, Partito Democratico, + Europa, Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra, Impegno Civico, Noi Moderati, Lega Salvini Premier or Movimento 5 Stelle; $n = 683$), or (c) voting for FdI ($n = 152$). We excluded from the analyses respondents who had a missing value for at least one of the two variables we used to classify participants' voting behaviour: 'Did you vote in the election on 25 September?' and 'Which party did you vote for in the Chamber of Deputies election on 25 September?'

The scores for these variables were calculated as the average of the items used to measure them. The interaction between of the perception of inequality in Italian society and the negative emotions this perception triggers as well as the interaction between trust in political institutions and (lack of) political interest, were calculated after centring the variables. [Table 1](#) shows the descriptive statistics for the study variables and the bivariate correlations between them.

Data analyses

Using MPLUS, version 8 (Muthén and Muthén 1998–2017), we carried out a preliminary multinomial logistic regression analysis to predict participants' voting as a function of the control variables, of their perception of inequality, of the negative emotions this perception triggers and of their interaction. We then added the mediator and moderators and tested our full model. On the left-hand side of the model, controlling for participants' gender, age and education, we predicted participants' distrust of Italian political institutions as a function of their perception of economic inequality in Italian society, the negative emotions this perception triggers and their interaction. On the right-hand side of the model, we predicted the probability of not voting or not casting a valid vote on the one hand, and the probability of voting for FdI on the other hand, as a function of distrust of Italian political institutions, lack of interest in politics and their interaction. Voting for a party that supported the Draghi government served as the reference category.

Results

[Table 2](#) reports the results of the preliminary analysis. Age and education were negatively associated with not-voting vs. voting for a governing party, while the other control variables were unassociated with respondents' voting behaviour. More interesting in terms of our research objectives was that, in contrast to H1 and H2, perceived economic inequality and the negative emotions triggered by this perception were not directly associated with voting for FdI or not voting.

[Table 3](#) shows the results of the entire model test. As for the left part of the model, being a woman was positively associated with distrust of Italian political institutions; age and education were negatively associated with it, while the other control variables were not significantly associated with distrust. More interesting in terms of our research objectives was that the perception of high levels of inequality in Italian society was positively associated with distrust of Italian political institutions. However, in contrast to H3, its interaction with the negative emotions that the perception of inequality in Italian society triggers was not significantly associated with distrust.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the study variables and bivariate correlations between them.

	Mean	SD	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Woman	.49	.05	.03	.03	-.00	.15***	.04	.06*	.22***	.00	.03	-.01	-.02
2. Age	50.95	16.34	-	-.26***	.13***	-.03	-.00	-.06*	-.18***	.00	-.08	.02	.06
3. Years of formal education	13.45	2.90	-	-.02	-.02	.02	.00	-.03	-.16***	.01	.17***	.25***	.12***
4. Perception of inequality in Italian society	.68	.68	-	-	.29***	-.01	.33***	-.11***	.05*	-.01	-.01	.04	-.04
5. Negative emotions triggered by the inequality of Italian society	.77	.77	-	-	-.11***	.09***	.03	-.00	-.03	-.00	-.01	-.02	.02
6. Perception of inequality in Italian society * Negative emotions triggered by the inequality of Italian society	.18	.56	-	-	-	-	-	-.07*	-.07*	-.00	-.01	.01	.00
7. Distrust towards Italian political institutions	2.39	2.39	-	-	-	-	-	.08**	.08**	-.06*	.10	-.09	.01
8. Lack of interest in politics	.82	.82	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.16***	.06	-.07	.00
9. Distrust towards Italian political institutions * Lack of interest in politics	2.00	2.00	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.09	-.08	-.02
10. Did not go to the polls or did not cast a valid vote	.15	.39	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.98***	-.72***
11. Voted for a governing party	.67	.47	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.96***
12. Voted for Fratelli d'Italia	.15	.36	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. When a cardinal and a dummy variable are involved, the point-biserial correlation is presented. When two dummy variables are involved, the polychoric correlation is presented.

Table 2. Preliminary analysis.

	Not-voting or not casting a valid vote vs. voting for a governing party			Vote for Fratelli d'Italia vs. voting for a governing party		
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Significance	Odds ratio	<i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Significance	Odds ratio
Woman	.10 (.19)	$p = .585$	1.11	-.16 (.20)	$p = .436$	.86
Age	-.03 (.01)	$p < .001$	.97	.01 (.01)	$p = .239$	1.01
Years of formal education	-.12 (.04)	$p < .001$	.88	-.05 (.03)	$p = .108$	.95
Perception of inequality in Italian society	.12 (.14)	$p = .357$	1.13	-.22 (.14)	$p = .116$	.80
Negative emotions triggered by the inequality of Italian society	-.02 (.14)	$p = .870$	.98	-.04 (.13)	$p = .740$	.96
Perception of inequality in Italian society * Negative emotions triggered by inequality in Italian society	-.15 (.16)	$p = .366$	.86	-.01 (.15)	$p = .972$	1.00

Table 3. The tested model.

	Distrust towards Italian political institutions (mediator)			Not-voting or not casting a valid vote vs. voting for a governing party			Vote for Fratelli d'Italia vs. voting for a governing party		
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>p</i> = .366	Beta (<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Significance	Odds ratio	<i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Significance	Odds ratio
Woman	.33 (.12)	$p = .008$	.07 (.21)	-.29 (.21)	$p = .166$	.75	-.26 (.21)	$p = .218$	.78
Age	-.02 (.00)	$p < .001$	-.10 (.01)	-.02 (.01)	$p = .006$	.98	.01 (.01)	$p = .145$	1.01
Years of formal education	-.07 (.02)	$p < .001$	-.09 (.04)	-.06 (.04)	$p = .143$	.95	-.04 (.04)	$p = .214$	.96
Perception of inequality in Italian society	1.19 (.09)	$p < .001$	.35 (.16)	-.14 (.16)	$p = .376$	.87	-.38 (.14)	$p = .008$	.68
Negative emotions triggered by the inequality of Italian society	-.04 (.09)	$p = .692$	-.01 (.14)	.05 (.14)	$p = .745$	1.05	-.06 (.13)	$p = .678$	.95
Perception of inequality in Italian society * Negative emotions triggered by inequality of Italian society	.12 (.13)	$p = .352$	.03 (.18)	-.07 (.18)	$p = .707$	.94	-.02 (.15)	$p = .909$	.98
Distrust towards Italian political institutions				.25 (.05)	$p < .001$	1.29	.16 (.05)	$p = .001$	1.17
Lack of interest in politics				.79 (.15)	$p < .001$	2.20	.06 (.14)	$p = .645$	1.07
Distrust towards Italian political institutions * Lack of interest in politics				-.03 (.06)	$p = .645$	.97	-.07 (.05)	$p = .147$	.93

As for the right-hand side of the model, the control variables and the variables we used to predict distrust of Italian political institutions were not associated with participants' voting, with only one exception. The exception was age, which was negatively associated with not voting vs. voting for a governing party. More interestingly in terms of our research objectives, perception of a high level of inequality in Italian society was negatively associated with voting for FdI. Lack of interest in politics was positively associated with both not voting and voting for FdI vs. voting for a governing party. Partly in line with H4, distrust of Italian political institutions was positively associated with not-voting

vs. voting for a governing party and with voting for FdI. In contrast to H5, the interaction between distrust of political institutions and lack of interest in politics was not associated with voting. However, lack of interest in politics differentiated between not-voting and voting for FdI, as it was positively associated with the former, but not with the latter.

Discussion

The two main results of the 2022 Italian general election – the increase in abstention and the growth in the proportion of the vote going to FdI – have already been analysed, suggesting a role for numerous contextual, political and individual factors (e.g. ITANES 2023). Based on the many studies documenting the multifaceted political effects of economic inequality (e.g. Kuhn et al. 2016; Lee, Chang, and Hur 2021), and adopting a social-psychological perspective, in this study we have investigated whether the subjective perception of economic inequality in Italian society, especially when it evokes negative emotions on the part of citizens, might have played a role in the outcome of the Italian general election.

To this end, we developed and tested a model to predict the association between the perception of inequality, the probability of voting for FdI and the probability of not casting a valid vote in the 2022 Italian general election, with distrust in political institutions as a mediating variable. We hypothesized that abstention could be interpreted as an exit strategy adopted by citizens due to the distrust in political institutions fostered by perceived economic inequality, especially when it evokes negative emotions. Similarly, we expected that voting for FdI, which was the only party that did not support the previous Draghi government, could be considered as a voice strategy derived from institutional distrust for citizens who remain interested in politics.

Moving from speculation to evidence, the analyses partially confirmed our hypotheses. Indeed, abstention was indirectly influenced by perceived inequality, but not by the negative emotions that this perception triggers, through the distrust of political institutions this perception fosters. In other words, our analyses confirmed that abstention is indeed an exit strategy for citizens who have little trust in politics owing to political actors' inability to address excessive economic inequality. The non-significant interaction effect between the cognitive (perception) and affective (negative emotions) components of inequality also suggests that the mere subjective representation of this social aspect can unconditionally influence political trust and voting decisions. On the other hand, voting for FdI was also influenced by perceived inequality both directly and through distrust of political institutions. In this case, however, the direction of influence defied our expectations, as the perception of a high level of inequality was associated with a smaller probability of having voted for FdI. Therefore this result does not confirm that voting for this party played the role of a voice option at least partly due to the dissatisfaction generated by rising inequality.

Two possible interpretations for this unexpected result can be suggested. First, FdI may have attracted voters who believe that social and economic inequality is natural and that politics can (and should) do nothing to solve this (false) problem. According to Bobbio (1996), indeed, the fundamental difference between the left and the right lies in attitudes towards inequality. Leftists tend to believe that inequality has social causes and favour parties that work to reduce it, while rightists tend to believe that inequality has natural causes and favour parties that work to promote it. Second, according to Napier

and Jost (2008), right-wingers are more likely to believe that they live in a just and fair world compared to left-wingers. Thus, they may believe that victims of inequality deserve their disadvantageous positions. One task for future research is to explore in more detail the factors underlying this negative association. Overall, the present findings suggest that perceived inequality is a key factor in citizens' political choices. In contrast, the (self reported) emotions associated with this perception do not appear to play a significant role. However, further research could test whether a different way of capturing the affective and cognitive dimensions of inequality (e.g. through experimental manipulation) produces different results.

The present study has certain limitations that enjoin caution. The most relevant limitation is probably the correlational nature of the study, which does not allow us to draw clear causal inferences. Future longitudinal studies could further advance this area of study. We also relied on secondary analysis. The advantages and disadvantages of such a method are well-known (e.g. Kiekolt and Nathan 1985). In this case, we were able to use high-quality data from an eminent source. However, we had to work with an existing set of variables, some of which were suboptimal. For example, perceived economic inequality was not operationalized as in Schmalor and Heine (2022). Therefore, our results cannot be compared with theirs. Considering these limitations, our results nevertheless complement previous contributions on the effects of economic inequality on citizens' political attitudes, opinions, orientations and behaviours and examine the factors driving abstention that fuel abstentionism and anti-system populist voting.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Nicoletta Cavazza is a full professor in Social Psychology the Department of Communication and Economics at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy. She teaches Psychology of persuasion; Social Psychology; Data collection and analysis techniques. Her main research interests are in the areas of political attitudes, food preferences, attitude change, and persuasive communication. She is member of ITANES (Italian National Election Studies). She has published numerous articles in journals such as *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *Sex Roles*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

Chiara Volpato is a senior full professor in Social Psychology at the Department of Psychology at the University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy. Her main research interests are in the area of social psychology of inequality, dehumanization and objectification processes, stereotypes and prejudices, social identity and intergroup relations, socio-psychological analysis of historical texts, social influence processes. She has published numerous articles in journals such as the *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *European Review of Social Psychology*, *Sex Roles* and *Journal of Social Issues*.

Michele Roccato is a full professor in Social Psychology at the Department of Psychology at the University of Torino, Italy. He teaches Social psychology and Research methodology. At present, his research mainly focuses on the long-term social-psychological consequences of COVID-19 and on sexism and gender discrimination. He has published numerous articles in journals such as the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *Social Science Research*, *Social Science Quarterly* and *Sexuality and Culture*.

ORCID

Nicoletta Cavazza  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6069-4601>

Chiara Volpato  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8511-8662>

Michele Roccato  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5817-7341>

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