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## Between populism and egalitarianism: mapping attitudes toward social and political issues during the Draghi government using exploratory graph analysis.

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## Abstract

Using a community sample of 323 individuals (74% women; Mean Age = 26.9 years), who completed an online survey from April 2021 to April 2022, the present study explored the relations among attitudes towards a variety of social and political issues that sparked social media debate. The study used the Attitudes towards Social and Political Issues (ASPI) survey, which covers attitudes towards COVID-19, vaccines, the European Union, migrants, LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, religion, and conspiracy beliefs. Using an Exploratory Graph Analysis, the study discovered three attitude communities. The first community, labeled equal rights & inclusion, encompassed positive attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality. The second community, labeled national populism, included hostility towards immigrants and anti-EU sentiments. The third community, labeled religiosity, emerged as an autonomous cluster related to national populism positively and equal rights and inclusion negatively. The ASPI scores were sensitive to individual differences in political and religious orientation. The national populism score was the most likely proxy for political orientation, while religiosity marked the difference between those who said they were Christians, or followed other religious or spiritual doctrines, and atheists or agnostics. Overall, the study provides insight into the complex social and political landscape in Italy during the Draghi government.

**Keywords:** social and political attitudes, Draghi government, right-wing populism, egalitarianism & inclusion, LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality.

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## Introduction

The appointment of Mario Draghi as head of a national unity government in Italy has redefined political divisions. Before his appointment, concerns related to pandemic management and economic recovery were linked to traditional left-right ideologies. However, the Draghi government has temporarily neutralized competition on the left-right axis (Donà, 2022; Russo & Valbruzzi, 2022). In 2021, there has been an escalation in political polarization about the key issues at the forefront of the Italian political discourse. Thus, matters like the restrictive measures to contain the pandemic and promoting the vaccination campaign, the reception of migrants, and LGBTQ+ rights had a significant impact on shaping the political attitudes and identities of Italian citizens (Russo & Valbruzzi, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a decline in public trust in traditional political parties and institutions, and an increase in support for populist and anti-establishment movements (Zanotti & Meléndez, 2022). Populist political parties were able to gain popularity by capitalizing on the heightened sense of insecurity caused by the virus (Scalia, 2021). Some individuals opposed vaccination, raising concerns about the safety, ethics, and long-term effects of vaccines (Pertwee et al., 2022).

During the past decades, there has been a long-standing decline in EU trust among Italian citizens, with negative peaks occurring during the 2010-2011 economic crisis and the 2015-2017 immigration crisis (Conti et al., 2020). Thus, Italian politics revolves around immigration because the country has been one of the most affected by migratory flows (Prisley et al., 2022).

Gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights have also been hot topics, with ongoing debates about equal marriage, adoption by same-sex couples, and protections against discrimination and violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Italy has traditionally been struggling with issues related to gender equality within the EU (Donà, 2021b, 2022). However, during the Draghi government, the rejection of the Zan law was a major political and mediatic event (de Blasio et al., 2022).

The traditional left-right political spectrum has been enriched by one centered on collective identities. The left has shifted its focus from achieving economic equality to advocating for the rights and equality of marginalized groups (Bobba & Seddone, 2021). Conversely, conservatives have rebranded themselves as patriots and prioritized the protection of traditional national identities and values (Combei & Giannetti, 2020; Jackson, 2020).

Financial and migration crises fueled globalization resentment (Modebadze, 2019; Walter, 2021), helping anti-establishment parties rise (Burgoon, 2013). Globalization created winners and losers, which may not follow traditional cleavage lines. Citizens whose life opportunities have been negatively impacted, are particularly susceptible to a “cultural backlash” (Inglehart & Norris, 2017) against the values typically held by wealthy post-material European countries, such as equality, tolerance, and the empowerment of ethnic, cultural, or sexual minorities.

These manifestations are examples of a phenomenon known as identity politics, encompassing a range of ideologies such as multiculturalism, feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, separatism, and ethnic and nationalist conflicts (Bernstein, 2005). Therefore, identity politics- or the pursuit of identity recognition- can shed light on a significant part of the global political landscape (Fukuyama, 2018). In Europe, the rise of right-wing populist

parties has been largely driven by identity issues (Noury & Roland, 2020). Thus, social and political attitudes can supplement the left-right political divide in Italy’s ideological analysis. Therefore, we propose that attitudes toward identity-based political issues can reveal an individual’s political beliefs and alignment.

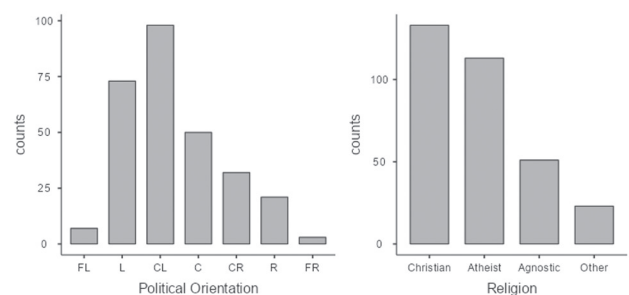
The main purpose of this study was to explore the structure of attitudes toward issues that sparked social media debate during the Draghi government. Accordingly, we developed a survey revolving around COVID-19, vaccines, EU, migrants, LGBTQ+ rights, and equal opportunities for women and men. To these, we added items covering religious beliefs and conspiracy theories. We expected separate attitude clusters to emerge according to their relative salience for people self-placing on the left or right political orientation, respectively. For example, anti-EU and opposition to immigration are signature issues of right-wing parties (Kende & Krekó, 2020), while conspiracism was associated with the surge of political populism in Italy (Pellegrini, 2023; Pellegrini et al., 2022). Conversely, LGBTQ+ and gender rights were “flagship policies” of Italian left parties (Donà, 2021b). Relatedly, a secondary goal of this paper was to investigate whether reliable scores can be obtained from our survey to describe the attitudes of people differing in political orientation and religion.

## Methods

### Participants and procedures

Participants were recruited using a link to an online survey circulating on social media and accessible to anyone interested in participating. A total of 346 participants filled out the survey. Twelve and five were excluded from the analysis because of EU and extra-EU citizenship, respectively. Six participants aged over 60 years old were excluded because they were univariate outliers in the age distribution. The analyses were carried out on 323 individuals with Italian citizenship, 238 of whom were women (74%). The sample was aged 18–59 ( $M = 26.9$ ;  $SD = 10.2$ ), educated in university (35.9%), high school (59.4%), and middle school (4.6%). 40.2% were single. Most of the sample lived with family (80.43%) and were students (61.92%). The sample leaned left politically (see Figure 1, Panel a). Religion was mostly Christian (Figure 1, Panel b). The data were collected as part of a larger study approved by the ethics committee of the Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology, and Health Studies (#0000394). All participants provided their informed consent voluntarily.

Fig. 1. Distribution of political orientation and religion.



Legend: FL = far-left; L = left; CL = center-left; C = center; CR = center-right; R = right; FR = far-right

*Instruments*

*Attitudes toward Social & Political Issues (ASPI).* Twenty-four items were generated to form the ASPI (see Supplementary Material Table S1). There were three items for each of the following issues: COVID-19, vaccines, Europe, migrants, LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, religious beliefs, and beliefs in conspiracy theories. We used a seven-step response scale (1 = completely disagree; 7 = completely agree).

*Socio-demographic form.* Age, gender, education, marital status, and with whom one cohabits were collected and used to describe the sample. The survey also included a question on what religion one identifies with and political orientation.

*Statistical Analyses*

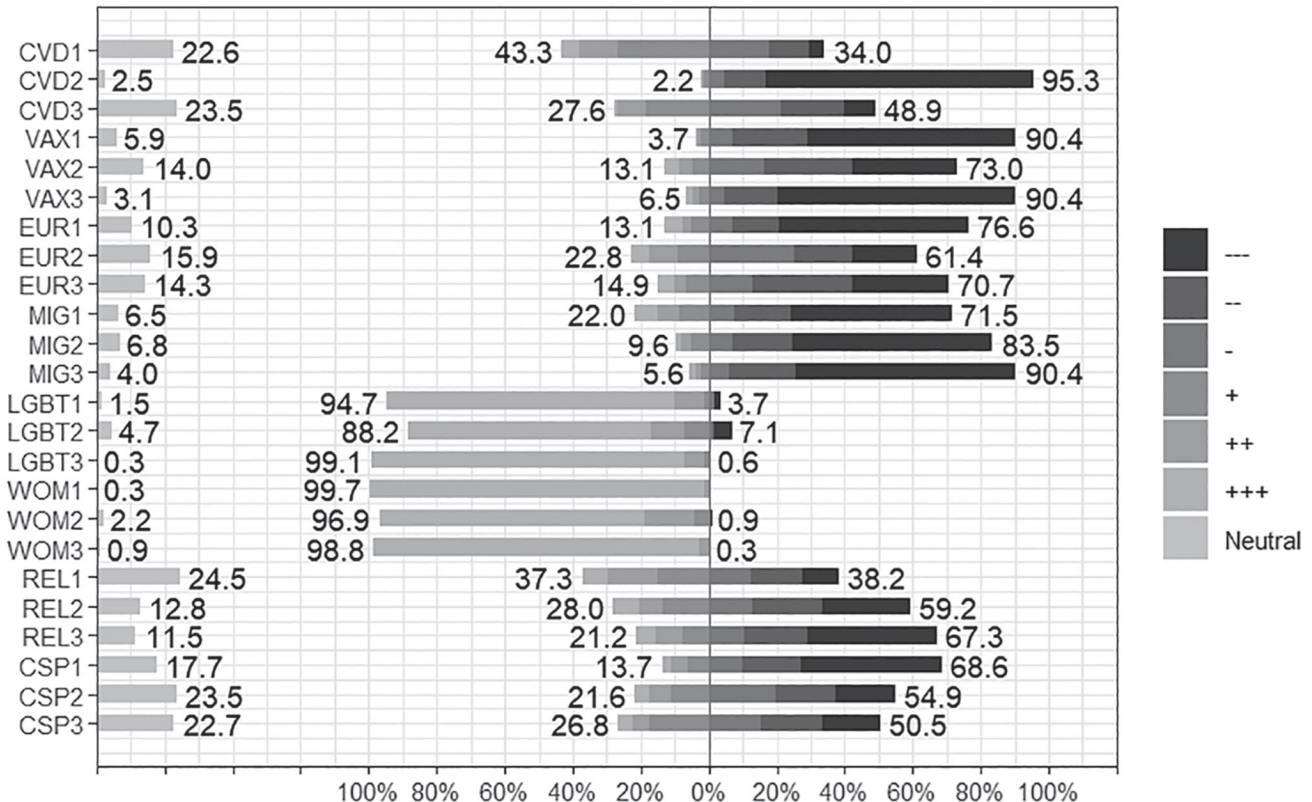
The Shapiro–Wilk test was used to assess violations of normality. Because minor departures from normality can be statistically significant in large samples, if skewness was between ±1 and kurtosis was between ±3 the data were considered “approximately” normal (see Supplementary Analysis, Section 2a). Exploratory Graph Analysis (EGA) was conducted using the *EGAnet* R package (Golino & Christensen, 2022). EGA is well suited for analyzing data that cannot be modeled using traditional latent variable models, such as small sample sizes. The EGA method represents inter-item correlations as a network of interconnected nodes and edges, determining the dimensionality of the data based on coherent item clusters, called communities. In this study, we used Spearman’s correlations as the basis for EGA due to skewed distributions of some items. The Triangulated Maximally Filtered

Graph (TMFG) was used to obtain a sparse network in the EGA, which uses significant zero-order correlations as edge weights and identifies the optimal level of sparsity imposing a constraint on the maximum number of edges. TMFG is suitable for handling ordinal data and data not following a normal distribution (Christensen & Golino, 2021). The Walktrap algorithm was used to recover item communities because it proved to be effective, robust, and efficient in previous research (Golino & Epskamp, 2017). Network loadings reflect the contribution of each node to the network communities, with 0.15, 0.25, and 0.35 indicating small, moderate, and large contributions, respectively (Christensen & Golino, 2021). The community detection algorithm is deterministic and does not require apriori assumptions. In cases where some items did not group as expected, they were removed, and the analysis was repeated. The “bootEGA” function in *EGAnet* was used to perform bootstrap network estimation, which provides a measure of the stability and robustness of the results. The structural consistency and item stability indices were obtained from the bootEGA output and used to determine which items which could be dropped (Christensen & Golino, 2021). Details on statistical methods are in the Supplementary Analysis (Section 2c).

**Results**

The Shapiro–Wilk test was significant for all items (all *p*-s < .001) suggesting violations of normality (Supplementary Table S1). Item responses were moderately skewed for most

Fig. 2. Likert scale responses to ASPI items plotted as centered stacked bars.



Legend: --- = completely disagree; -- = disagree; - = somewhat disagree; + = somewhat agree; ++ = agree; +++ completely agree

items (Figure 2). For example, more than 88% to 99.7% of our sample were favorable to LGBTQ+ rights and equal gender opportunities. A very high percentage of respondents were unfavorable to no-vax attitudes, anti-EU sentiments, and hostility toward immigrants. The internal consistency analysis for each domain yielded satisfactory reliability indexes for no-vax attitudes ( $\alpha = .78$ ), anti-EU sentiments ( $\alpha = .78$ ), hostility toward immigrants ( $\alpha = .81$ ), LGBTQ+ rights ( $\alpha = .74$ ), religious beliefs ( $\alpha = .81$ ), and conspiracy beliefs ( $\alpha = .73$ ). COVID-19 and equal gender opportunities were unsatisfactory ( $\alpha$ -s = .37 and .19, respectively). In the former case, content heterogeneity might explain the low internal consistency; in the latter, the extremely skewed distribution of participants' responses might have affected the corresponding Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

The EGA of the entire ASPI item set produced three empirical communities (Supplementary Figure F1). The first included hostility toward immigrants, anti-EU sentiments, conspiracy beliefs, and CVD3. The second contained no-vax attitudes, religious beliefs, and CVD1. The third encompassed LGBTQ+ rights, equal gender opportunities, and CVD2. Because attitudes toward COVID-19 were scattered throughout the communities and the corresponding items had insufficient network loadings (Supplementary Table S2), these were removed and the EGA was repeated.

The second EGA yielded three empirical communities corresponding to: hostility toward immigrants and anti-EU sentiments; LGBTQ+ rights and equal gender opportunities; no-vax attitudes and religious beliefs, respectively (Supplementary Figure F2). The network loadings were moderate to and large for most items (Supplementary Table S3). However, the bootstrap EGA retrieved 3 to 6 communities across 1000 bootstrap replications, with four being the median. Because

three communities were rarely found (30%), the emerging dimension might not be reproduced in other samples or in the general population. Indeed, the structural consistency indices were insufficient (i.e., < 75%) for all communities (64%, 29% and 26% for hostility toward immigrants and anti-EU sentiments, LGBTQ+ rights and equal gender opportunities, and no-vax attitudes and religious beliefs, respectively) suggesting heterogeneous content. The item stability analysis helped clarify this aspect (Supplementary Figure F5). All LGBTQ+ rights and equal gender opportunities items exceeded the required 75% cut-off, with item stability ranging from 80% to 96%. No-vax attitudes (stability range 44%-45%) and conspiracy beliefs (stability range 46%-52%) items could not be consistently ascribed to the corresponding community. By contrast, religious beliefs, hostility toward immigrants, and anti-EU sentiments met the 75% cut-off, except MIG3 (73%) closely approaching to it. The most, unstable items were removed and the EGA was repeated to identify a robust underlying structure.

The third EGA yielded the expected empirical communities (Figure 3a). Based on network loadings (Supplementary Table S4), the items about the legalization of same-sex marriage, the rights for LGBTQ+ individuals to live according to their sexual orientation and gender identity, and the rights for same-sex couples to adopt children were more prominent ( $\lambda$  range = .43-.51) than items addressing equal opportunities for all genders ( $\lambda$  range = .16-.35). Accordingly, we labeled the first community *equal rights & inclusion*. Hostility toward immigrants and anti-EU sentiments had moderately large to very large network loadings ( $\lambda$  range = .31-.64), with no ostensible distinction based on content. All items described social attitudes that marked the political position of right-wing populist movements. Thus, we proposed the *national populism*

Fig. 3. EGA dimensionality structure of the ASPI after removing CVD, CSP, and VAX items: a) Network plot, and b) Item stability plot)

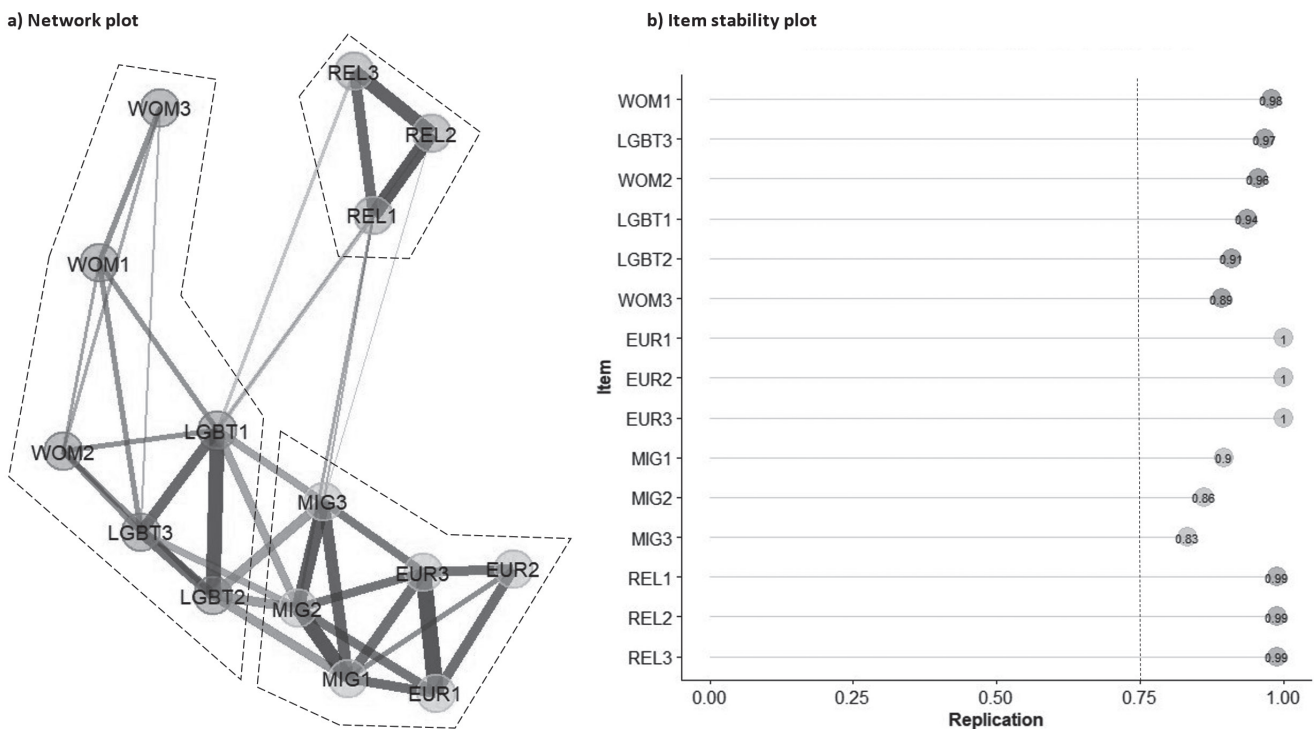
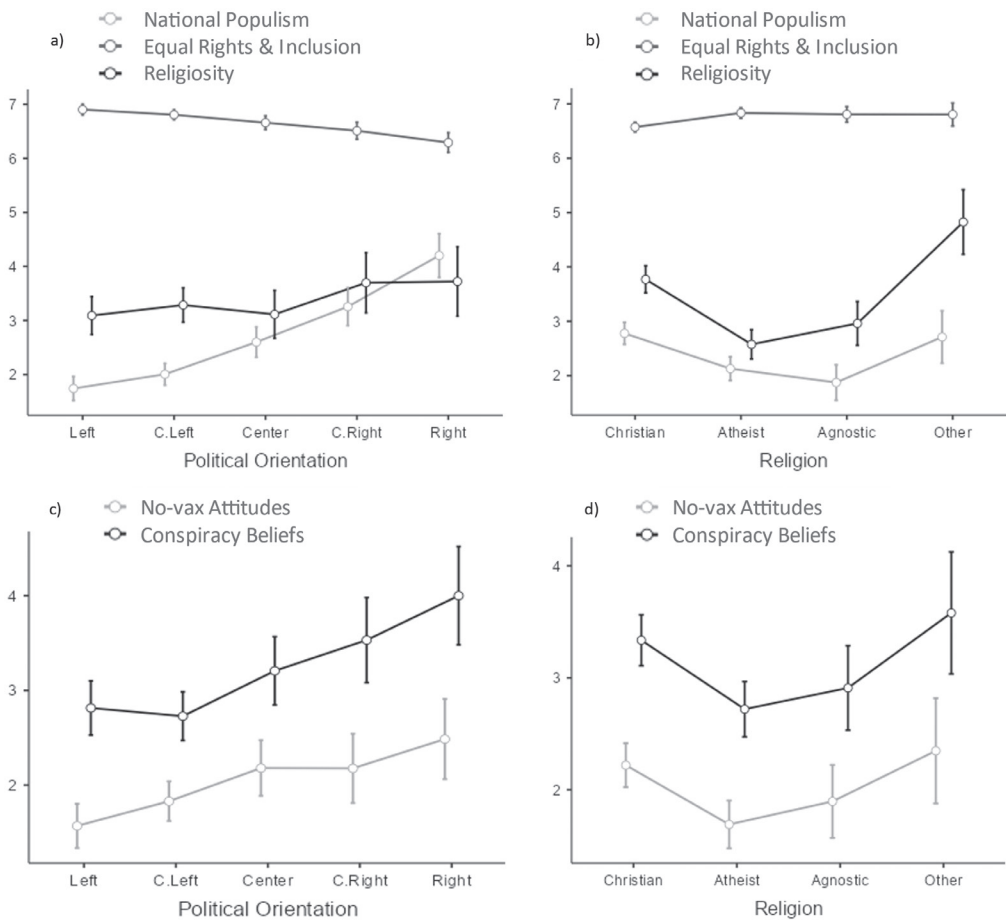


Fig. 4. ASPI main scores and additional scores are plotted as a function of participants' political orientation and religion.



label for this community. The third community included only religious belief items, with very large network loadings ( $\lambda$  range = .53-.60). Therefore, we labeled it *religiosity*. As shown in Figure 3a (and Supplementary Figure F3), national populism collided with the equal rights & inclusion, while religiosity, was farther but entertained positive relations with national populism and negative ones with equal rights & inclusion (Supplementary Table S4). The three communities were reproduced in 92% of the bootstrap replications, and all items were consistently attributed to the community to which they were supposed to belong (Figure 3b). As a result, the structural consistency indices were good to excellent (i.e., 87%, 83%, and 100% for equal rights & inclusion, national populism, and religiosity, respectively).

Based on internal consistency results and EGA outcomes, we proposed that ASPI can provide three main composite scores (i.e., national populism, equal rights & inclusion, and religiosity) that produce a robust dimensional structure, and two reliable additional scores (conspiracy beliefs and no-vax attitudes) that enrich the set of attitudes measured in this research. Figure 4 shows the profiles of research participants who self-categorized into Left-to-Right political groups and religion. In this analysis, extreme political orientations in Figure 1 were reclassified into the closest category.

The national populism score ( $\alpha = .81$ ) was significantly different by political orientation, ( $F[4, 279] = 37.60, p < .001$ ) and religion ( $F[3, 313] = 10.40, p < .001$ ). From left to right, national populism rose monotonically (Figure 4a). Except

for left vs. center-left and right vs. center-right comparisons, all Games-Howell post-hoc tests were statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ). Christian participants scored higher in national populism than atheist and agnostic participants (all  $p$ -values  $< .01$ ) (Figure 4b).

The equal rights & inclusion score ( $\alpha = .62$ ) was significantly different based on political orientation ( $F[4, 279] = 11.2, p < .001$ ) and religion ( $F[3, 316] = 6.44, p < .001$ ). Left participants were significantly higher in equal rights & inclusion than center, center-right, and right participants (Figure 4a). Center-left participants outperformed center-right and right participants (Figure 4a). Right, center-right, and center participants were equivalent in equal rights & inclusion (Figure 4a). Christian participants scored lower than atheist and agnostic participants in equal rights & inclusion (all  $p$ -values  $< .01$ ) and tended to score lower than other religious groups ( $p = .09$ ) (Figure 4b).

Differences in religiosity ( $\alpha = .81$ ) were statistically significant when comparing religion groups ( $F[3, 314] = 23.40, p < .001$ ), but not political orientation ( $F[4, 279] = 1.43, p = .226$ ). Atheists and agnostics scored significantly lower than Christians and participants with other spiritual orientations (all  $p$ -values  $< .001$ , except Christian vs. Agnostic with  $p < .01$ ) (Figure 5b).

Political and religion groups had statistically significant no-vax scores ( $F[4, 278] = 5.34, p < .001$ , and  $F[3, 315] = 5.15, p < .001$ , respectively). In particular, the left group was higher than the center group ( $p = .006$ ) and tended to differ from

the center-right ( $p = .105$ ) and right ( $p = .082$ ) groups (Figure 5c). Christians had a higher no-vax score than atheists ( $p < .01$ , Figure 5d). Lastly, conspiracy beliefs were significantly different by religion ( $F[3, 312] = 5.72, p = .226$ ) and political orientation ( $F[4, 279] = 6.73, p < .001$ ). Left, center-left, and center participants did not differ in conspiracy beliefs, but these groups, except centrists, reported significantly less conspiracy beliefs than center-right and right participants (Figure 5c), who did not differ. Atheists reported less conspiracy beliefs than Christians ( $p = .090$ ).

## Discussion

Our study discovered three interrelated attitude communities. The first community, equal rights & inclusion, reflected supportive attitudes towards the rights of the LGBTQ+ community and equal opportunities for individuals of all genders. Our sample, primarily consisting of individuals with left-leaning perspectives, demonstrated a strong sensitivity towards these contents. Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, the League political party stressed its stance on LGBTQ+ rights, which generated substantial controversy and made gender identity a prominent social and political topic (Donà, 2021a, 2022; Righetti, 2021). In the aftermath of the repeal of the Zan law, LGBTQ+ communities, policymakers, and advocacy groups mobilized extensively throughout the country, viewing this event as the conclusion of their expectations for increased safety and security (de Blasio et al., 2022; Rucco et al., 2022).

The second community, national populism, which at first combined conspiracy beliefs with hostility toward immigrants and opposition to the EU, was later centered on right-wing populist attitudes, based on empirical evidence that conspiracy items tended to cluster with anti-immigrant and anti-EU items only in a minority of bootstrap replications of the analysis. Thus, in keeping with previous research, our study suggests that conspiracy beliefs, as motivated narrative processes, cannot always be equated with the right-wing populist attitudes (Pellegrini, 2023; Pellegrini et al., 2022). Conspiracy narratives hold that a secret or powerful group determines social and political events to pursue evil goals (Douglas et al., 2019). In this sense, although anti-establishment ethos is not always associated with conspiratorial thinking, opposition to immigrants may be motivated by convictions that a “malevolent EU elite” is ready to eradicate Italian culture and identity. However, more realistic fears may also be behind opposition to migration (e.g., fear that immigrants take jobs and resources away from Italian citizens or are responsible for crime and social problems). Similarly, conspiracy theories about the EU imply that the EU is working to control Italian society and politics. However, not all EU skeptics believe in a conspiracy. Rather, dissatisfaction with EU policies and economic austerity have caused a constant decline in EU trust among Italian citizens during the past decades (Conti et al., 2020).

The third community, religiosity, was obtained from a larger cluster after removing anti-vaccination beliefs, whose items failed to meet stability standards. Despite this separation,

religious beliefs and anti-vaccination attitudes can still be thought as linked, given that previous research has demonstrated that religious beliefs contributed to vaccine hesitancy (Garcia & Yap, 2021). Eventually, religiosity was an autonomous cluster, entertaining negative relations with equal rights & inclusion and positive ones with national populism. Indeed, some traditionalist catholic groups are protesting recent changes related to morality, gender, and sexuality (Donà, 2021a). As an example, the anti-gender movement is strongly opposing the rights of sexual minorities and promotes a traditional view of gender roles and identities issue (Donà, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Righetti, 2021). This catholic-based movement found allies in right-wing political parties that oppose the libertarian and egalitarian vision of society promoted by the Italian left (Lavizzari & Siročić, 2022). The same authors proposed the term “contentious gender politics” to describe the many conflicts between opposing political movements regarding gender issues, including the fight for gender equality in the workplace or the debate over laws and policies related to reproductive rights. Thus, our results align with this intricate social and political landscape, in which religiosity influence the political attitudes of those who support conservative parties, as opposed to those who advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality.

Relatedly, we also investigated whether ASPI scores were sensitive to differences in political orientation and religion. The study discovered that as one moves from left to right on the political spectrum, there is an increase in national populism, no-vax attitudes, and beliefs in conspiracy theories, and a corresponding decrease in support for LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality. These results were in line with the theoretical expectations that concerned the identity elements of Italian politics during the Draghi government, which redefined the political space in terms of new dimensions of political division other than traditional left-right ideologies (Russo & Valbruzzi, 2022). Thus, left wing parties identified with progressive social policies and European integration (Bobba & Seddone, 2021), while right-wing parties identified with the defense of national sovereignty and the protection of Italian traditions and values (Combei & Giannetti, 2020).

Before concluding, one major study limitation should be noted. Our non-probabilistic sample overrepresented women and leftists compared to the Italian census and political segmentation. Although we used robust methods to contain effects related to sampling and the resulting distributional skewness more balanced and heterogeneous samples are needed to generalize ASPI's structure. Some attitudes, like those about vaccines and COVID-19, may become less important to Italians in the future, while others, like those about green policies or Ukraine war, may become more important. The core module of the ASPI questionnaire, on the other hand, seems to cover the most central issues in Italian politics in recent years.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization: M.L. and R.M. were responsible for developing the initial idea for the study and defining the research questions. Methodology: M.L. designed the methodology for the study. Formal analysis: M.L. conducted the formal analysis of the data. Data collection: R.M., A.N.,

M.D.T. collected the data used in the study. Data curation: A.R. was responsible for curating the data used in the study. Writing—original draft preparation: G.D.C., M.L., R.M., and A.R. were responsible for writing the original draft of the manuscript. Writing—review and editing: R.M., A.R., A.N., and M.D.T. reviewed and edited the manuscript. Supervision: R.M. provided supervision for the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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### Ethical Approval

The research complies with the Ethical Code of the Italian Association of Psychology and has been approved by the Ethical Committee of the Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology and Health Studies of the Sapienza University of Rome's Faculty of Medicine.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary Material may be retrieved at the following link: <https://osf.io/dhc9f/>

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