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Populism and the Effects of Political Attacks on Male and Female Candidates

ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that populism is associated with increased negativity and reliance on simple heuristic criteria, such as gender stereotypes, in processing political information. Research on political communication, however, still has to investigate whether negative messages (e.g., political attacks) have different effects depending on the audience's populist attitudes. In a simulated scenario, we presented participants with a description of a fictional male (versus female) candidate, and later exposed them to a political attack against the candidate. We then examined whether the effect of the attack varied depending on participants' populism, the gender of the candidate attacked, and the attack's focus on morality or competence, controlling for participants' sexism and political orientation. The results showed that participants with high (versus low) levels of populism gave, in general, more negative evaluations of the candidate after the attack. Furthermore, participants with high levels of populism rated the female candidate lower after an attack on morality than after an attack on competence, while the opposite was true for the male candidate. The discussion focuses on how populists refer to the violation of stereotypical norms when evaluating negative information about political candidates.

Keywords: political attacks, political candidate, morality, competence, populism, gender stereotypes.

With the rise of radical and far-right movements in several countries in the recent years, populism has become the subject of intense scholarly interest in several disciplines (Hadiz and Chryssogelos, 2017), which analyze in depth the development and spread of populist attitudes among voters (Forgas and Crano, 2021; Stathi and Guerra, 2021), their antecedents (Bakker *et al.*, 2016) and their interaction with individual and social processes (Obradović *et al.*, 2020). Another equally extensive body of research has examined the communication of populist leaders and parties, analyzing their language, rhetoric, style and prevalent topics (Hameleers *et al.*, 2017; Mariotti,

2022; Maurer and Diehl, 2020). In this context, previous research by Gerstlé and Nai (2019) suggests that populist candidates are characterized by a political style that focuses in particular on the use of attacks. Specifically, populist candidates communicate through 15% more negative campaigns than other candidates. Their campaigns also contain 11% more attacks (Nai, 2021) than those of other candidates. These research findings suggest that political communication with strong negativity and a focus on scandals and political corruption (Caiani and Della Porta, 2011; Fieschi and Heywood, 2006) might effectively appeal to citizens with populist attitudes. The populist electorate may be more accustomed to this type of communication than the rest of the electorate. However, it is not yet clear whether populist citizens are more sensitive than other citizens to negative information per se or whether they are attracted, and persuaded, by certain specific features of negative political communication.

In the present exploratory study, we aimed to test whether populist citizens are differentially affected by negative communication in the form of political attacks. The negative information contained in political attacks is consistent with the pre-existing view of populist citizens that politicians are a corrupt elite (Fieschi and Heywood, 2006; Obradović et al., 2020). Accordingly, our first main hypothesis was that political attacks influence populist citizens' evaluations of the attacked political candidates more than those of other citizens. Our second main hypothesis was that such heightened sensitivity to negative information would be particularly evident when political attacks highlight a candidate's deviation from pre-existing expectations, such as those set by stereotypes (in our case, gender stereotypes). This would be the case because, as previous research suggests, populist voters often rely on simplified and biased forms of information processing when evaluating politicians and political events (Bertolotti et al., 2021; Krueger and Gruning, 2021).

To test our hypotheses, we used an experimental scenario in which we exposed participants to an attack on the morality or competence of a male or female candidate and then measured how the attack affected the overall evaluation of the candidate and the perception of his morality and competence. We expected these evaluations to change according to the degree of participants' populist attitudes, and to its interaction with the stereo typicality of the attack, based on widely held gendered expectations of the morality and competence of male and female political candidates.

1. Populism and perceptions of political leaders

Populism has been defined as «a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups,

«the pure people» versus «the corrupt elite», and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people» (Mudde, 2007: 23). This definition reflects the dualistic view of society, divided into an oppressed but pure and essentially moral people (Mayer *et al.*, 2000), and an evil, scheming and corrupt political elite (Akkerman *et al.*, 2014). This in-group vs. out-group distinction is routinely evoked by populist leaders to provide followers with a distinct identity, reduce trust in institutions, and promote a Manichaean worldview. Populist voters are therefore motivated and mobilized by a strong concern for misconduct and questionable behaviour by elected officials. They are likely to be very sensitive to negative information about political candidates, and to negative information about morality. To date, however, there is only limited empirical evidence of an association between populism and a negativity bias of this kind (Nai and Maier, 2024; Rico *et al.*, 2017).

Based on the above, populism might play an important, but largely unexplored, role in how voters process negative information about political candidates conveyed by political communication, especially in relation to the morality dimension (Bertolotti and Catellani, 2018). One might therefore expect voters' populism to be associated with harsher reactions to negative communication about political candidates in general, as some research on its association with affective polarization suggests (Nai and Maier, 2024).

A growing body of research has also shown that populist attitudes are associated with several other relevant psychosocial variables, such as the tendency to seek simplicity and certainty when formulating judgments (Krueger and Grüning, 2021; van Proojen and Krouwel, 2020), to engage in conspiracy thinking (van Proojen, 2018), and to incur cognitive biases (Bertolotti *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, social categorization appears to be very important for individuals with populist attitudes as a way of finding self-definition and positive self-esteem (Hogg, 2020), and differentiating one's ingroup from negatively valued outgroups (Hameleers and Fawzi, 2020). There is also evidence of a link between populism and the endorsement of stereotypical views on gender roles (Yildrim and Bulut, 2022).

Populist voters' reliance on simplified and categorical judgements, and stereotype-based expectations may become evident when they are exposed to negative information about politicians, such as in the case of political attacks. Social psychological research has investigated in depth the different evaluative standards applied to males and females in general (Fiske and Glick, 2007), and to male and female politicians in particular (Eagly and Karau 2002; Schneider and Bos, 2014).

2.   Gender stereotypes in the evaluation of political candidates

Past research on gender stereotypes has shown the existence of the so-called mixed or ambivalent stereotypes (Fiske *et al.*, 2002), i.e. the tendency to regard certain personality traits as more typical of men and other personality traits as more typical of women. Men are stereotypically seen as more assertive, dominant and competent than women, and are therefore perceived as stronger on the so-called Agency or Competence dimension (Cuddy *et al.*, 2008). Conversely, women are stereotypically seen as more caring, moral and trustworthy than men and are therefore perceived as stronger on the so-called warmth or morality dimension (Leach *et al.*, 2017). This tendency has been observed also in the political domain (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Sanbonmatsu and Dolan, 2009; Schneider and Bos, 2014). As political positions generally require high levels of leadership, assertiveness and competence, male candidates tend to be seen as more suitable for these positions than female candidates (Holman *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, voters tend to penalize female candidates who deviate from socially expected gender roles, i.e. if they are very dominant, assertive, competent and skilled (Eagly and Karau 2002; Herrnson *et al.*, 2003; Iyengar *et al.*, 1996). Some research has shown that news coverage, political communication (Brooks, 2011; Lee, 2014; Schneider, 2014) and even physical and facial appearance (Sutherland *et al.*, 2015) highlighting counter-stereotypical positive attributes of female candidates can lead to negative evaluations of candidates.

Populism appears to align with or even reinforce these gendered expectations on political leaders. Löffer *et al.* (2020) note that populist leaders are often described as charismatic, which is generally regarded as a stereotypical male attribute (Meret, 2015). Nevertheless, there are some exceptions, as some female politicians managed to climb the ranks of populist parties, as well (see the cases of Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Marine LePen in France, and Pia Kjærsgaard in Denmark; Meret *et al.*, 2017).

What happens when voters are exposed to negative information about a political candidate's competence and/or morality? Previous research has examined the consequences of negative information conveyed through political attacks and criticism against politicians (Bertolotti and Catellani, 2018; Catellani and Bertolotti, 2014; Molders and Van Quaquebeke, 2017; Von Sikorski, 2018). However, few studies have focused on whether negative information has differential effects on the evaluation of male and female candidates, and their findings have been inconsistent. Some studies found that involvement in a political scandal leads to more negative evaluation and voting intention for male candidates than for female candidates (Brenton, 2011; Carlson *et al.*, 2000; Stewart *et al.*, 2013), while other studies found the opposite (Biernat, 2003; Smith *et al.*, 2005).

Further research examined possible differences based on the type of scandal or allegations involving the male or female candidate, and the results suggested that voters' reactions may differ depending on the stereotypicality of the negative behavior that was the focus (Smith *et al.*, 2005). According to expectancy violation theory (Burgoon and Le Poire, 1993), negative behaviors that are inconsistent with prior expectations elicit greater blame (and thus a more negative evaluation of the actor) than negative behaviors that are consistent with expectations. This would be the case because the expectancy violation makes normative rules associated with the target salient, making observers more likely to base their judgements on whether or not the target conforms to these rules (Brenton, 2011). In the case of expectations based on gender stereotypes, moral scandals or attacks should therefore lead voters to evaluate female candidates *worse* than male candidates, as their attention is focused on the female candidate's failure to meet stereotypical expectations of women (i.e., being moral; Capelos and Huddy, 1999; Erichsen *et al.*, 2020; Maule and Goidel, 2003). Conversely, competence-related scandals or attacks should lead voters to rate male candidates *worse* than female candidates, because in this case attention would focus on the male candidate's failure to live up to stereotypical expectations of men (i.e., being competent; Funk, 1996).

3.   Research overview and hypotheses

To assess whether individuals with different levels of populism differentially evaluate politicians after gender stereotypical vs. counter-stereotypical attacks, we employed a pre-post experimental design, in which participants were asked to evaluate a fictional *male* versus *female* candidate before and after a political attack, focused on the *morality* versus *competence* of the candidate. Participants first read a short positive description of a local government official (male vs female) running for re-election, and give an overall evaluation of him or her, rating also the competence and morality of the candidate. Participants were then presented with a short excerpt from a local newspaper attacking the same candidate with allegations regarding either the competence or the morality dimension. Participants' perception of the candidate's competence and morality, and their overall evaluation of the candidate, were then assessed again. This pre-post design allowed us to isolate the effect of negative stereotypical or counter-stereotypical information about the candidate from participants' initial evaluations, although it obviously reproduced only a simplified version of political communication, ignoring several other elements of the communication environment.

Based on previous literature on the effects of political attacks, and on the social and cognitive processes associated with populism, we expected populist par-

ticipants to be generally more sensitive than other voters to negative communication (Rico *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, we formulated our first hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** After a political attack, participants with a high level of populism would rate the candidate worse than participants with a low level of populism, regardless of the candidate gender and the attacked dimension.

As for the effects of gender-based stereotypes, we expected them to have a greater impact on populist participants' evaluation of the candidate after reading the attack than on non-populist participants' evaluation. More precisely, we formulated the following hypotheses:

> **Hypothesis 2 (H2):** After a morality attack, participants with a high level of populism rate a female candidate worse than participants with a low level of populism (H2a). Conversely, after a competence attack, participants with a high level of populism rate a male candidate worse than participants with a low level of populism (H2b).

This would be the case because populist voters would be more sensitive than other voters to stereotype-based expectancy violations, and they would consequently react more negatively to counter-stereotypical negative information, namely, a female candidate being accused of a lack of morality and, conversely, a male candidate being accused of a lack of competence. Taken together, these two hypotheses predicted that the enhanced negativity effect among populist participants exposed to a political attack would be conditional on the negative information conveyed by the attack being inconsistent with stereotypical expectations (Brenton, 2011; Eagly and Karau, 2002).

We then formulated some hypotheses on the impact of populism and of the attacks on participants' perception of the two key dimensions of the evaluation of candidates, namely morality and competence. First, and more generally:

> **Hypothesis 3 (H3):** After a political attack, participants with a high level of populism would rate both the candidate's morality (H3a) and the candidate's competence (H3b) worse than participants with a low level of populism, regardless of the candidate gender and the attacked dimension.

> **Hypothesis 4 (H4):** A morality attack would specifically worsen the perception of the candidate's morality more than a competence attack (H4a), whereas a competence attack would worsen the perception of the candidate's competence more than a morality attack (H4b).

Finally, and more specifically, we expected that participants' perception of each dimension of the candidate would be differentially influenced not only by

attacks on the respective dimension, but also by the candidate's gender and participants' level of populism, along the lines of H2 above. In particular,

> **Hypothesis 5 (H5):** After a morality attack, participants with a high level of populism rate a female candidate's morality as lower than participants with a low level of populism (H5a). Conversely, after a competence attack, participants with a high level of populism rate a male candidate's competence as lower than participants with a low level of populism (H5b).

We tested these hypotheses while controlling for ambivalent sexism (Glick and Fiske, 2007) and its interactions with the manipulated variables, as participants' endorsement of sexist standards would be obviously a potential confounding variable in case of positive findings. If our hypotheses were corroborated, they would provide a first, exploratory, empirical evidence of populist voters' tendency to weight negative information about a political candidate according to its adherence to gender-stereotypical expectations.

4.   Method

4.1.   Participants

We conducted a power analysis with G*Power, version 3.1 (Faul *et al.*, 2007), to determine the required sample size needed to detect the hypothesized main and interaction effects, assuming a small effect-size, $f^2 = .05$, with a significance level of $\alpha = .05$ and .80 power. The minimum sample size needed was $N = 309$. Based on this calculation, we tasked students with the recruitment of at least 350 participants, as part of a research project on political communication. Students were given instruction to contact prospective participants among their friends, relatives, and acquaintances, and to balance them in terms of gender and age (based on three broad age groups, 18-30 years old, 31-53 years old, and 54-76 years old). As a result, 354 Italian individuals were recruited and asked to complete an online questionnaire, answering a series of questions regarding a fictional political figure. A total of 40 participants were later excluded from the analyses for not correctly answering an attention check within the questionnaire, reducing the final number of participants to $N = 314$. Participants in the final sample were 52.1% males and 47.3% females (0.1% other, $N = 20$ did not report their gender), prevalently from northern Italy (62%), and aged between 17 to 75 years old, $M = 40.72$; $SD = 16.20$. The majority of participants were highly educated (36.8% had a high school degree, 28.4 a bachelor's degree, 24.3% a master degree).

4.2.   Procedure

Participants were initially presented with a short text introducing a fictional political candidate. The candidate's gender was manipulated by simply switching their name and pronouns in the following text:

> Michelle/Michael Sacchini began her/his political militancy at an early age. After graduating from law school in 2002 and practicing law in a prestigious firm, she/he embarked on a political career, later becoming mayor of her/his hometown in 2016. As mayor, she/he was appreciated for her/his actions on several occasions. She/he always managed to get her/his proposals approved in the city council, despite a slim majority. She/he made the city administration more responsive to the requests of individual citizens and civic associations. She/he used her/his experiences as a lawyer to write new building regulations, which were judged to be very functional by the city's engineers. She/he also remained loyal to her/his side even when an opposing party offered her/him a regional candidacy. When her/his first term as mayor ended, Michelle/Michael Sacchini announced her/his intention to run again in the next election.

After reading the description above, participants first evaluated the candidate, by answering a series of questions (see the Measures section below).

In the second part of the experiment, participants were randomly assigned to one of two political attack conditions. In one condition, they were asked to read an excerpt from an article published in the local newspaper, criticizing the candidate

Table 1. Text of the competence and morality attacks

Competence Attack
«[...] Despite the overall record of Michelle/Michael Sacchini's first term is positive, these five years have also been marked by some negative episodes. For instance, during a television interview, Michelle/Michael Sacchini appeared unprepared and was unable to answer questions about her own administration's initiatives. If Michelle/Michael Sacchini had not answered the reporter's questions in a vague and imprecise way, she/he would have provided a better service as mayor. Had she/he been able to quote more precise data and information, her/his renomination would certainly be more solid today.»

Morality Attack
«[...] Despite the overall record of Michelle/Michael Sacchini's first term is positive, these five years have also been marked by some negative episodes. For instance, when appointing the new head of the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, Michelle/Michael Sacchini appeared deceitful and circumvented the rules on the hiring of collaborators in municipal offices. If Michelle/Michael Sacchini had not chosen a loyalist of her party for that office, she would have provided a better service as mayor. Had she/he chosen a more experienced municipal executive, her/his renomination would certainly be more solid today.»

for his or her behaviour in terms of competence. In particular, the text mentioned a specific episode and stated that his or her candidacy would have been stronger if it weren't for that occurrence. In the other experimental condition, the same text was manipulated to contain criticism on the candidate's morality. The attacks were formulated in counterfactual terms («If... then...»), based on previous research indicating that this format is less likely to be discounted as biased (Catellani and Bertolotti, 2014). The full texts of the two attacks are reported in Table 1.

After reading the attack, participants again evaluated the candidate, using the same measures.

Finally, a third section of the questionnaire included some general questions on participants' political and social attitudes, including measures of political orientation, populism, and sexism.

5.   Measures

5.1.   Evaluation of the candidate

After reading the initial description of the candidate, participants were asked to evaluate him or her by answering four items. The first item focused on the evaluation of the candidate's job in office («Based on what you read above, how would you rate Michael/Michelle Sacchini's performance as mayor?»), using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (very negatively) to 7 (very positively). Participants were then asked to provide a general evaluation of the candidate («Generally speaking, what is your evaluation of Michael/Michelle Sacchini?»), on the same 7-point scale. They were then asked to indicate whether they would vote for the candidate at the upcoming election («If you were a citizen of the city where Michael/Michelle Sacchini is running for re-election, how likely would you vote for him/her?»), using a scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely). Finally, they were asked to rate the candidate's likelihood of re-election («How likely do you think Michael/Michelle Sacchini is to be re-elected?»), on the same scale.

The same questions were repeated in the second part of the questionnaire, after participants had read the attack against the candidate. The scores of the four items were averaged into a single candidate evaluation score for each phase of the study, before the attack (Cronbach's α = .856) and after the attack (α = .899). A differential index, measuring the change in the evaluation of the candidate following the attack was then computed.

5.2.   Perception of the candidate's morality and competence

Both before and after the attack, participants were also asked to rate the candidate's competence and morality, answering the question «To what extent do you think Michael/Michelle Sacchini is...», followed by three traits for the morality dimension (honest, loyal, sincere; taken from Abele *et al.*, 2008), and three traits for the competence dimension (competent, knowledgeable, intelligent; again from Abele *et al.*, 2008). Ratings were collected using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very much). The scores from the two sets of morality items were then used to compute mean indexes measuring participants' perception of the candidate's morality before (α = .848) and after the attack (α = .900). The scores from the two sets of competence items were similarly used to compute indexes of competence perception before (α = .852) and after the attack (α = .850). These were in turn used to compute differential indexes measuring the change in perceived and morality competence following the attack.

5.3.   Populism

Participants' populism was measured using 11 items, 8 taken from an Italian adaptation of the Akkerman et al.'s (2014) populist attitudes scale (see Bertolotti *et al.*, 2021 for a discussion of the Italian version of the scale and its dimensionality), and 3 additional ones adapted from Elchardus and Spruyt (2016). The items asked participants to rate their agreement with a series of statements (e.g., «Politicians in Parliament need to follow the will of the people»; «Elected officials talk too much and take too little action»; «Lobbies and interest groups have too much influence on political decision») on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). A single populism index was then computed.

5.4.   Political orientation

Participants' political orientation was measured by a single item asking them to indicate their political orientation using a 11-point scale ranging from Left (0) to Right (10). In addition, there was a «none of the above» (11) option. Participants choosing this latter option (*n* = 38) were later excluded from the analyses including political orientation as a variable.

5.5. Benevolent sexism

Participants' sexist attitudes were measured using 11 items from the benevolent sexism subscale of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick and Fiske, 1997; see also Manganelli *et al.*, 2008 for the Italian language validation used in this study). The items asked participants to report their agreement with statements like the following: «Women should be cherished and protected by men», «A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man», and «Women, compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility», using a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). A single average sexism score was computed (α = .905).

5.6. Sociodemographic information

Finally, participants' age, gender, and education degree were recorded.

6. Results

6.1. Preliminary analyses

We first investigated the correlation between populism participants' main individual characteristics (Table 2). Populism was positively correlated with participants' (right-wing) political orientation, $r(274)$ = .237, p < .001, and age, $r(312)$ =

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and correlations of participants' individual characteristics

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Populism	4.21 (1.04)	–	.401**	.237**	.296**	−.217**
2. Benevolent Sexism	2.73 (1.15)		–	.333**	.306**	−.230*
3. Political Orientation	4.99 (2.46)			–	.217*	−.084
4. Age	40.72 (16.20)				–	−.110
5. Education	3.77 (1.34)					–

.296, $p < .001$, and negatively correlated with education level $r(312) = -.217$, $p < .001$. Populism and sexism were also moderately and positively correlated with each other, $r(312) = .401$, $p < .001$. No differences in populism scores were found between male and female participants, $t(311) = 1.46$, $p = .145$, whereas male participants were on average more sexist ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.10$) than female participants ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.17$), $t(311) = 2.01$, $p = .045$.

Finally, we checked whether participants' populism and sexism were correlated with the initial candidate evaluation, but no significant association emerged, $rs < .100$, $ps > .120$. We also checked for gender differences in the initial evaluation of the candidates, and their competence and morality scores. No differences emerged in the initial evaluation of the candidates, $t(313) = 1.30$, $p = .193$.

6.2. Effects of attacked dimension, candidate gender, and populism on the differential evaluation of the candidate

To test our main hypotheses we ran a regression model with the variation in participants' evaluation of the candidate as the dependent variable, candidate's gender and attacked dimension as predictors, and populism as a moderator, with benevolent sexism and political orientation as covariates (using PROCESS, Model 3; Hayes, 2018). We report significance levels corrected with the Holm-Bonferroni method (Gaetano, 2013), in order to account for multiple-hypothesis testing (H1 & H2).

A main effect of populism was found, $B = -.16$, $t = 2.08$, $p = .038$, 95% CI [−.30; −.01], indicating that more populist participants reported more negative evaluations of the candidate after reading the attack, as compared to the less populist participants. This was in line with our H1. A main effect of the attacked dimension also emerged, $B = -.17$, $t = 2.26$, $p = .024$, 95% CI [−.32; −.02] indicating that participants' evaluation became significantly more negative after a morality attack than after a competence attack. No effect of gender or of the gender by attacked dimension emerged, $Bs < 0.90$, $ts < 1.00$, $ps > .41$. The hypothesized three-way interaction effect, namely the candidate gender by attacked dimension by populism effect, was instead significant, $B = .35$, $t = 3.18$, $p = .004$, 95% CI [.13; .56]. A follow-up analysis of the conditional effects of populist attitudes in each experimental condition showed that higher levels of populist attitudes were associated with a more negative evaluation of the female candidate after a morality attack, $B = -.32$, $t = 3.12$, $p = .002$, 95% C. I. [−.52; −.12], but not after a competence attack, $B = -.01$, $t = 0.11$, $p = .915$, 95% C. I. [−.21; .19]. The opposite pattern was found in the case of the male candidate, for whom populist attitudes were associated with a more negative evaluation after a

competence attack, $B = -.24$, $t = 1.75$, $p = .082$, 95% C. I. [$-.50$; $.03$], but not after a morality attack, $B = .17$, $t = 1.63$, $p = .104$, 95% C. I. [$-.03$; $.37$]. This finding was in line with our expectation of populist voters being particularly sensitive to negative counter-stereotypical information about candidates, in this case a female candidate being portrayed as immoral (H2a) and a male candidate being portrayed as incompetent (H2b, although only marginally significantly).

No other significant effect emerged from the analysis, including no effect of benevolent sexism or political orientation. The full results of the regression model are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Full regression model of the change in participants' evaluation of the candidate

	B	SE	t	p	95% C.I.	
					LL	UL
(Constant)	−0.960	0.179	5.37	.000	−1.31	−0.61
Candidate Gender	−0.090	0.110	0.82	.415	−0.31	0.13
Attacked Dimension	−0.171	0.076	2.26	.024	−0.32	−0.02
Cand. Gender × Attacked Dim	−0.061	0.110	0.56	.578	−0.28	0.15
Populism	−0.156	0.075	2.08	.038	−0.30	−0.01
Cand. Gender × Populism	0.137	0.109	1.25	.211	−0.08	0.35
Attacked Dim × Populism	−0.154	0.070	2.20	.029	−0.29	−0.02
Cand. Gender × Attack. Dim. × Populism	0.348	0.109	3.18	.002	0.13	0.56
Benevolent Sexism	0.046	0.054	0.85	.396	−0.06	0.15
Political Orientation	−0.027	0.019	1.39	.165	−0.06	0.01

Model $R^2 = .097$, $F(9, 304) = 3.63$, $p < .001$

6.3. Effects of the attack on the perception of the (male vs female) candidate's morality and competence

We then proceeded to test our hypotheses H3 to H5, running a regression model with participants' differential evaluation of the candidate's morality and competence as the dependent variables, and participants' populism and benevolent sexism, and the respective interaction terms with the attacked dimension and candidate gender as predictors. Again, significance levels were corrected to account for simultaneous testing of the three hypotheses on each dependent variable.

Figure 1. Change in the perceived morality of the female versus male candidate, as a function of populism and attacked dimension
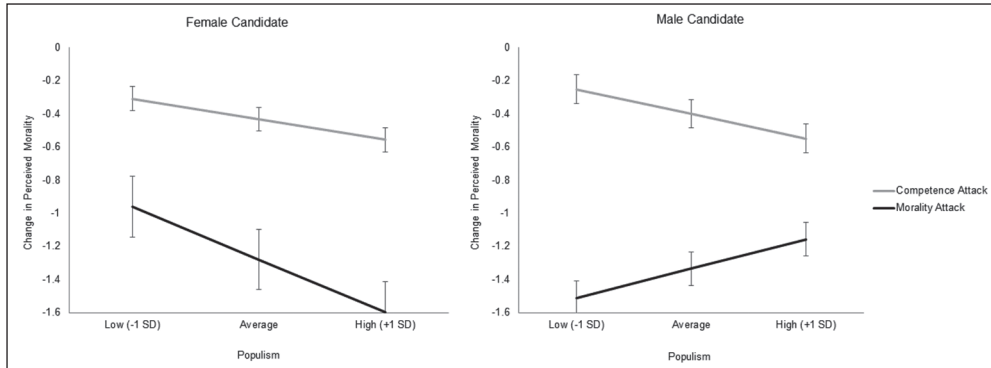
As for the change in morality perception (Figure 1), results showed a weak but significant main effect of populism, $B = -.19$, $t = 2.41$, $p = .034$, 95% C. I. [−.34; .03], thus corroborating our H3a that more populist participants would rate the candidate's morality as lower than less populist participants. The expected main effect of the attacked dimension also emerged, $B = -.1$ $t = 5.19$, $p = .003$, 95% C. I. [−.57; −.26], indicating that the morality attack predictably affected the morality perception significantly more than the competence attack ($M = -1.30$, $SD = 1.22$ and $M = -0.43$, $SD = 0.79$, respectively), thus supporting our H4a. The three-way interaction between populist attitudes, attacked dimension, and candidate gender was again significant, $B = .23$, $t = 2.00$, $p = .046$, 95% C. I. [.01; .45]. The follow-up analyses of the conditional effects of populist attitudes in the different experimental conditions showed the predicted (H5a) negative effect of the morality attack in the case of the female candidate, $B = -.30$, $t = 2.80$, $p = .005$, 95% C. I. [−.52; −.09], indicating that the higher was participants' level of populism, the more negatively a morality attack affected their perception of the female candidate's morality. The other conditional effects were not significant, Bs < .17, ts < 1.58, ps > .115.

As for the change in competence perception (Figure 2), results supported our H3b, as populism had, once again, a negative independent effect on the change in competence perception, $B = -.15$, $t = 2.06$, $p = .040$, 95% C. I. [−.29; −.01]. Furthermore, a main effect of the attacked dimension, $B = .28$, $t = 3.93$, $p = .003$, 95% C. I. [.14; .34], indicated a greater negative effect of the competence attack ($M = -.98$, $SD = .96$) as compared to the morality attack ($M = -.48$, $SD = .93$), as per our H4b. The three-way interaction between populist attitudes, attacked dimension, and candidate gender was also significant, $B = .29$, $t = 2.80$, $p = .010$, 95% C. I. [.09; .49]. When we

Figure 2. Change in the perceived competence of the female versus male candidate, as a function of populism and attacked dimension
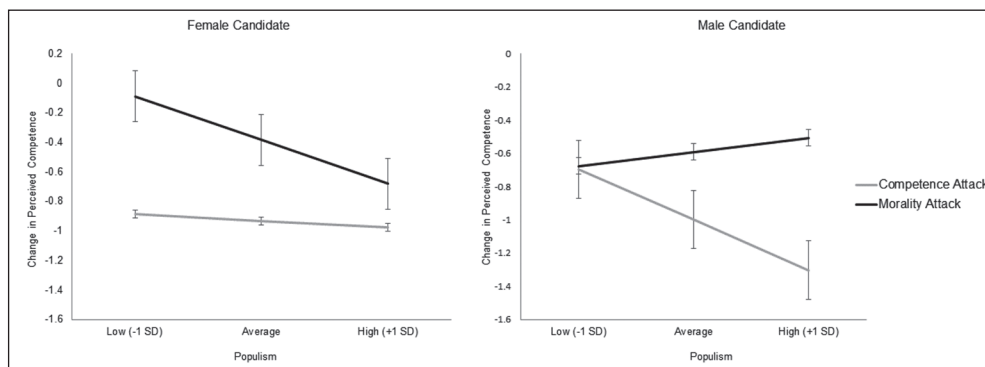
analysed the conditional effects of populist attitudes in the different experimental conditions, we found the predicted (H5b) negative effect of the competence attack in the case of the male candidate, $B = -.29$, $t = 2.24$, $p = .026$, 95% C. I. [−.55; −.04], indicating that the higher participants' level of populism was, the more negatively a competence attack affected perception of the male candidate's competence. This was not the case with competence attack against the female candidate, $B = -.04$, $t = 0.45$, $p = .651$, 95% C. I. [−.24; .15]. The other conditional effects were not significant, Bs < .17, ts < 1.58, ps > .115.

5.   Discussion

The results of our study showed that, after exposure to a political attack, populism can be associated with a differential evaluation of political candidates, depending on whether the attacked dimension is stereotypical of the candidate's gender. When the negative information provided by the attack deviated from gender-stereotypical expectations, namely, of a male candidate being competent and of a female candidate being moral, participants with a higher level of populism gave a more negative evaluation of the candidate than participants with a lower level of populism. The same tendency was observed in the perception of the candidate's morality and competence. After a morality attack, participants with a higher level of populism perceived the candidate as less moral when the candidate was female rather than male. Conversely, after a competence attack the same participants perceived the candidate as less competent when the candidate was a male rather than a female. These results

were independent of participants' sexism, indicating that the differential evaluation of male and female candidates observed among the more populist participants could not be attributed to their greater endorsement of gender roles and stereotypes.

To our knowledge, this is the among the first pieces of empirical evidence of the influence of populism on voters' judgments about political candidates in response to an attack (see Nai and Maier, 2024, for another study conducted in the American context). In the following paragraphs, we discuss the relevance of these findings to the existing literature on the effects of political attacks and on the relationship between populism and the evaluation of political candidates.

In our study, we found a main effect of the attacked dimension, with the morality attack damaging the evaluation of the candidate more than the competence attack. This is in line with past research indicating that negative information about morality has a stronger effect on social judgments both in general (Brambilla *et al.*, 2019) and in the case of political candidates (Bertolotti and Catellani, 2018; Catellani and Bertolotti, 2014; Cislak and Wojciszke, 2006). This effect was found in the case of both the male and the female candidate, indicating that, overall, the impact of a morality attack was strong regardless of stereotypical gender-related expectations.

As to the role played by populism, our findings partially corroborated the idea of a greater sensitivity of populist voters to negative information about political candidates (Nai and Maier, 2024; Rico *et al.*, 2017). In addition to this, it was the consistency between the attack and stereotypical gender-related expectations that particularly mattered for populist participants, a phenomenon which had been only hinted by previous research (see Bernhard, 2022, for example). As we hypothesized, the more populist participants were, the more harshly they evaluated the female candidate attacked on the morality dimension and, albeit to a lesser extent, the male candidate attacked on the competence dimension. Thus, populism moderated the emergence of a gender bias consistent with ambivalent gender stereotypes (Fiske and Glick, 2007). These findings corroborate the idea that populism enhances voters' sensitivity to certain types of expectancy violation (Brenton, 2011), as well as their reliance on simple, general rules (such as gender stereotypes) in defining these expectations. This is in line with previous research showing that populist voters resort to simplified reasoning strategies when formulating political judgements (van Proojen and Krouwel, 2020). Evidently, gender-based categories and the associated stereotypes are easily accessible heuristic criteria populist voters' resort to when evaluating political targets (Yildrim and Bulut, 2022).

Being a first, exploratory investigation of this phenomenon, our study is not devoid of limitations. First, our study was conducted in a single national context and with a non-representative sample of participants, which may limit the general-

izability of our results. In particular, the high average education level of our participants certainly differentiates them from the general population. As for the limited geographical and temporal scope of our study, we should consider that the prevalence and centrality of female political figures in current Italian politics might have interfered with the very gender norms voters (and populist voters in particular) consider when evaluating political candidates (Cavazza and Roccato, 2023).

Other limitations of our study pertain to the fact that our experiment used a simplified and artificial setting, in which we could not consider some further individual and contextual factors that are known to influence the way voters process information about political candidates. We considered gender stereotypes as relatively simple and binary shared representations of gender roles (Bernhard, 2022; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Glick and Fiske, 2007), but there is evidence of increasing diversification in these representations (Cerbara *et al.*, 2022), and of their intersection with other forms of identity-based polarization (Martella and Pavan, 2023). Moreover, the amount of information available (Vonnahme, 2019) or voters' degree of political knowledge and sophistication (Dolan, 2011) are a relevant factor in voters' tendency to formulate simplified, categorical, and stereotyped judgments, in addition or in interaction with populism. Future research might expand on our experimental design, for example introducing different degrees of complexity in the scenario, to moderate participants' tendency to resort to gender stereotypes and other heuristic strategies. Another key factor that should be usefully taken into account is partisanship, which appears extremely relevant in populist voters' judgements (Melendez and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019). Future research might test whether populist voters' sensitivity to political attacks (and their gendered differential effects) also depends on whether the target candidate belongs to a rival or friendly party.

To conclude, our study provides some new insight on the psychological background of populist voters' sensitivity to political attacks, and in particular on whether they are influenced by the interplay between the information provided by such attacks and their existing beliefs and expectations, namely regarding gender-based stereotypes.

Data Availability Statement
The data supporting the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at http://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/RFGXV.

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