

Unknowingly preaching to the choir? The use of Facebook microtargeting during 2022 Italian campaign

Keywords: microtargeting, facebook, political ads, political communication, echo-chambers

Extended Abstract

Among the many advantages that digital political communication offers (or promises to offer) there are proportionally cheaper costs and the ability to target the intended audience of the message with an unprecedented precision. This latter element, the ability to target which groups of potential voters will see which message has often been perceived as key to contemporary data-intensive campaigns (Kreiss 2016). In this presentation we leverage the recently released Facebook's Ad Targeting Dataset to investigate how much Italian political parties adopt the targeting opportunity that contemporary social media platforms offer and, if that is not the case, what kind of audience the parties reach by employing Meta's advertising platform without explicit targets. Understanding and quantifying the adoption of microtargeting strategies in the context of political advertising is key to provide data-based evidences to the debate around concepts such as echo-chambers and filter bubble that, in recent years, have been at the centre of the political and academic debate. In fact if political parties adopt a microtargeting strategy they could either target their existing supporters (maintenance strategy) – thus reinforcing the echo-chamber hypothesis – or target swing voters or supporters of another party (expansion strategy) – thus providing evidences against the echo-chamber hypothesis (Stuckelberg and Koedam 2022). Nevertheless, even if political parties didn't use microtargeting the social media advertising algorithms could still produce either the result of the reinforcement strategy or of the reaching-out strategy unknowingly to the parties.

To contribute to this debate we ask the following research questions:

RQ1) How much do Italian political parties adopt microtargeting strategies when promoting their messages on social media?

RQ2) What are the characteristics of the social media users that are actually exposed to the political Ads produced by the political parties

Data:

The paper combines different data sources. Facebook ads data has been collected using the AD Targeting dataset released by Meta in 2022. From this dataset we extracted all the political ads published by the official Pages of the major Italian political parties and their main leaders in the period between July 21th and September 21st 2022 (General election was hold on September 25th). Each ad is described by 50 attributes including the targeting strategies as well as the characteristics of the users who were actually exposed to the ad. The Facebook data is complemented by survey data collected by ITANES (2018) that monitors the attitudes of Italian citizens towards political parties as well as a pre-post election survey on a representative sample of 2,573 respondents. Given the temporal distance between the 2022 Ad Targeting data and the 2018 ITANES data, we considered only political parties that were present in both datasets.

Results:

Facebook allows for several microtargeting opportunities. In this analysis, following Stuckelberg and Koedam (2022) we will focus mainly on microtargeting that uses demographic variables such as Age, gender and location (region of residence in our case). Before digging into the actual targeting strategies it is worth observing the resources that parties have used for Facebook advertising and noticing that the differences in budget allocation (Figure 1) do not mirror the different size of the various parties.

Figure 2 shows the budget (in Euro) that each party has allocated to the Facebook ads campaign. Since the Ads library does not report the exact spend per ad, but only a range of values within which the spend is within, we estimated the spend per ad as the average of the minimum and maximum value returned by Facebook. Figures 2-4 show to what extent the various parties have adopted micro-targeting strategies for age (Figure 2), Region of residence (Figure 3) and gender (Figure 4). Most of the parties opted for targeting the whole population of potential voters with very few exceptions: Forza Italia that targeted 30% of its ads towards voters to users older than 35 and Più Europa that targeted a similar amount of ads towards the younger voter cohorts.

Given the low level of adoption of microtargeting strategy (RQ1) we now move to investigate the audience that is actually exposed to the political ads (RQ2). We do this by replicating the method proposed by Stuckelberg and Koedam (2022). We measure for age, region and gender the correlation between the party's support in the previous election (derived from the ITANES data) and the share of the corresponding group/region among the Facebook users actually exposed to the Ad. The next group of figures show the standardized average reached by Facebook ads for age (Figure 5), region (Figure 6) and gender (Figure 7). Per each group or region we show on the x-axis the share of facebook audience obtained by the party and, on the y axis, the party's group electoral support as measured in 2018. While the picture for region and gender is largely inconclusive and shows several contradicting signals, the data for Age (Figure 5) shows a positive relation for all the age groups with the exception of 45-54 years old. This suggests that in this case Facebook algorithm produces a maintenance strategy showing where ads from the various political parties are shown to the age group that already support that party. This is aligned with what has been observed by Stuckelberg and Koedam (2022) that reported similar results for young and older voters.

While this is clearly an initial result obtained from a single case, we would leverage this to urge caution when interpreting exposure of political ads to specific audiences only to deliberate strategies performed by political actors. Even when not strategically used for microtargeting, social media platforms can still produce effects on how the audience of a political message is selected through the largely unknown decisions taken by their algorithms as well as through the organic composition of their users. This calls for more research into the actual audience exposed to online political advertisement aimed at understanding both political strategies as well as its effects. Luckily the growing availability of tools such as the recently released AD Targeting dataset from Meta will surely help researchers achieve this goal.

References

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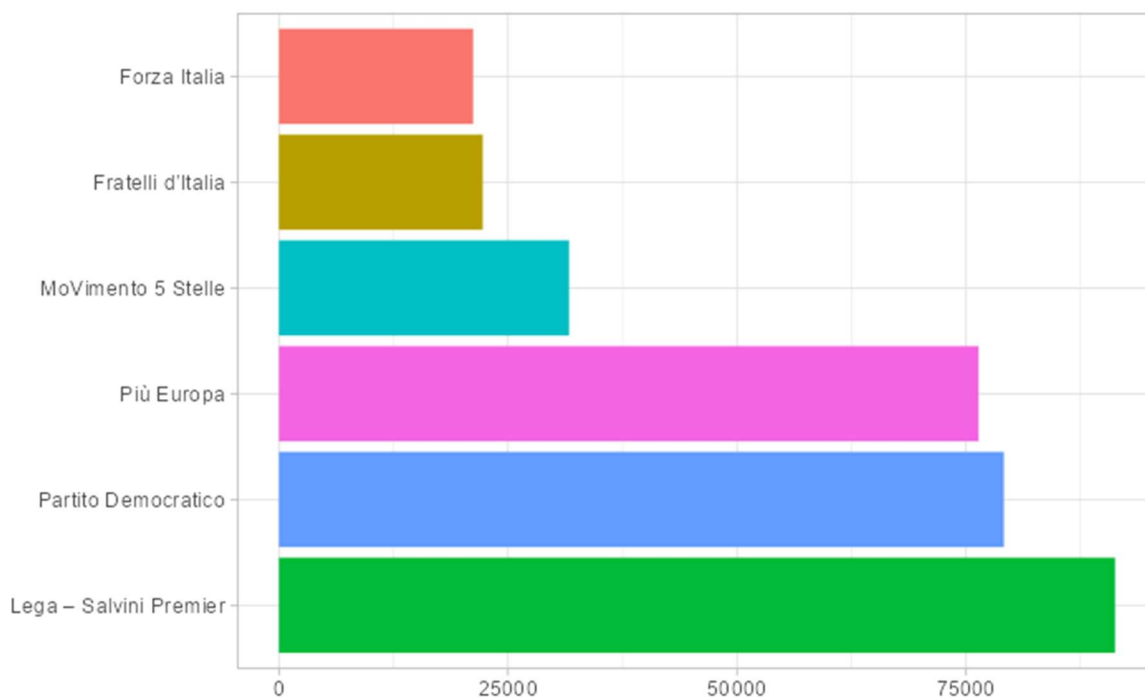


Figure 1: Budget (Euros) invested on Facebook ads.

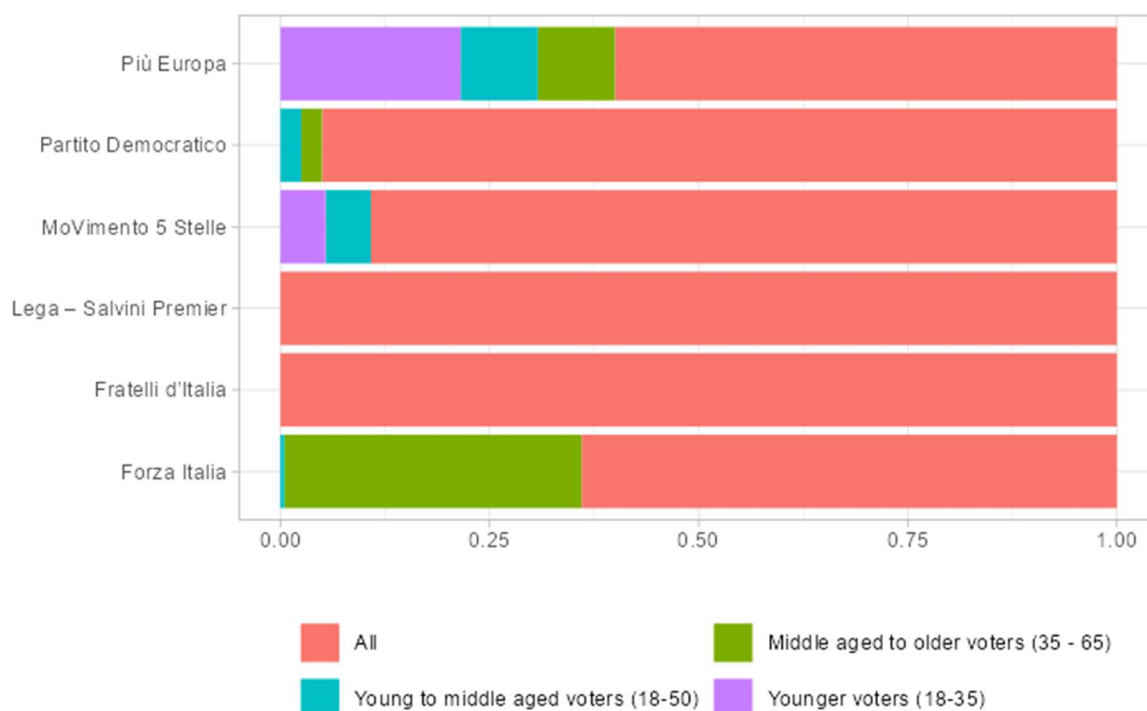


Figure 2: Percentage of ads targeted specific age groups.

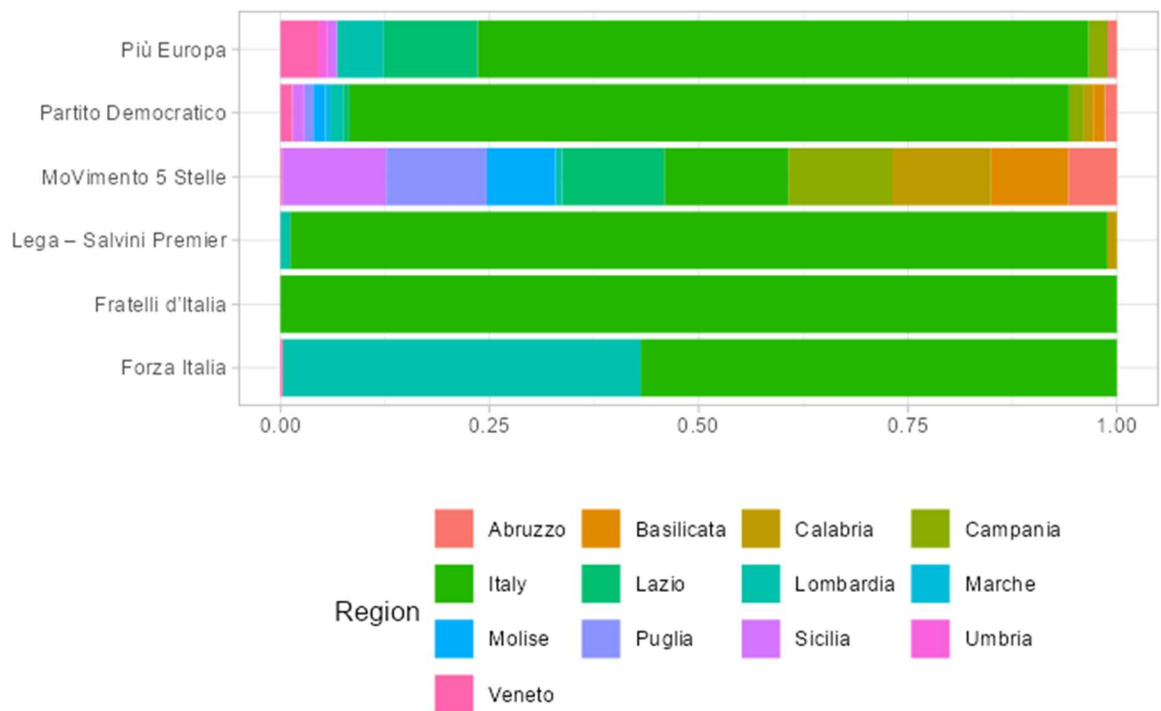


Figure 3: Percentage of Ads targeting specific geographic regions

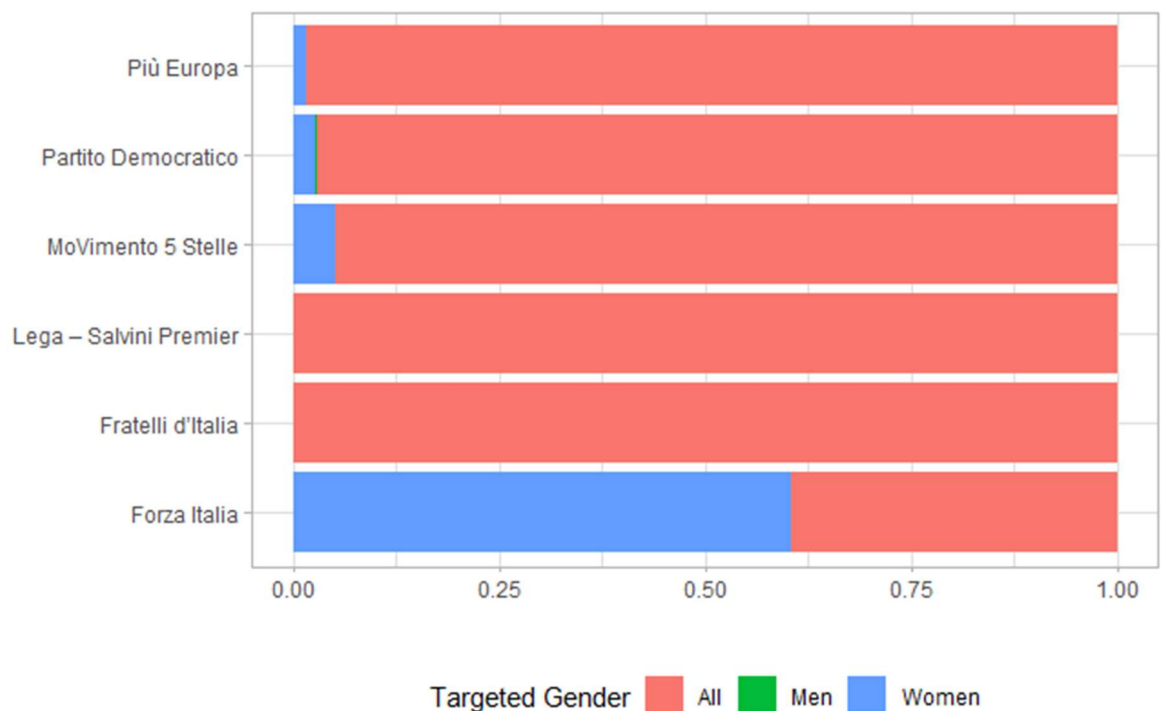


Figure 4: Percentage of ads targeting a specific gender

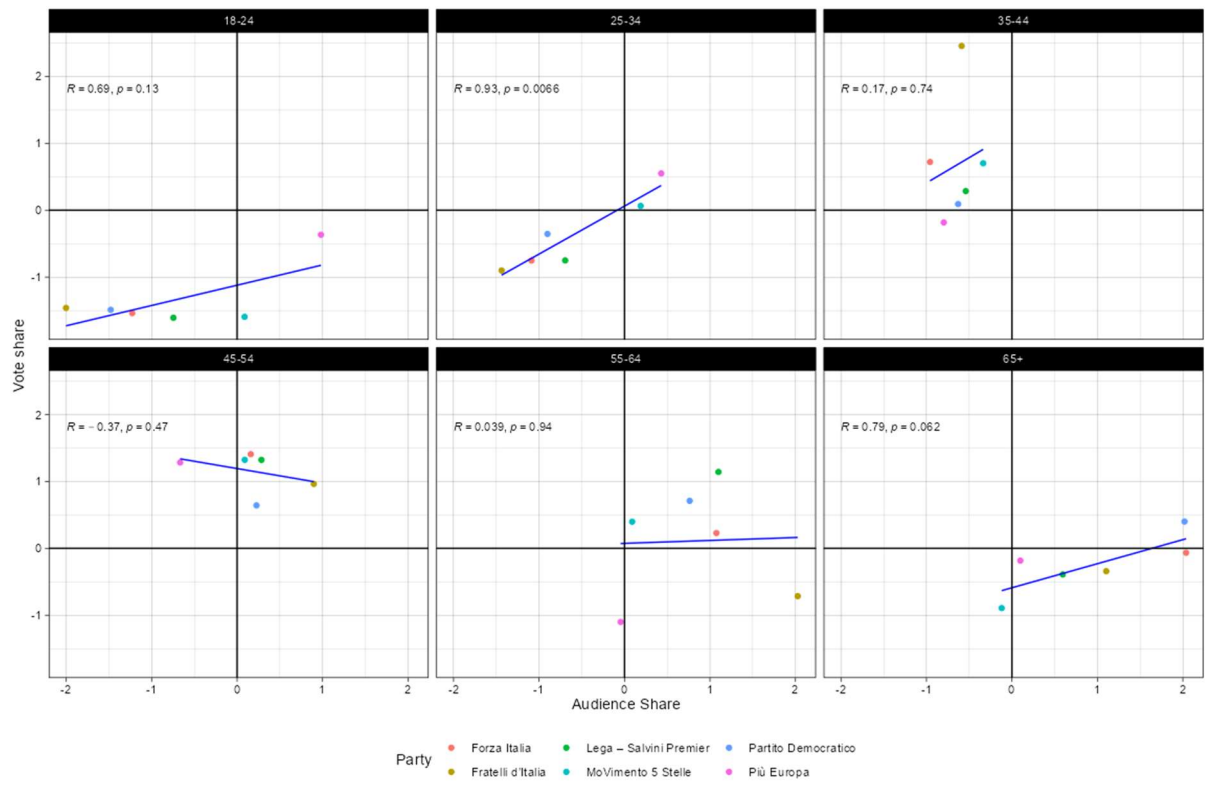


Figure 5: Party support and share of audience (Age)

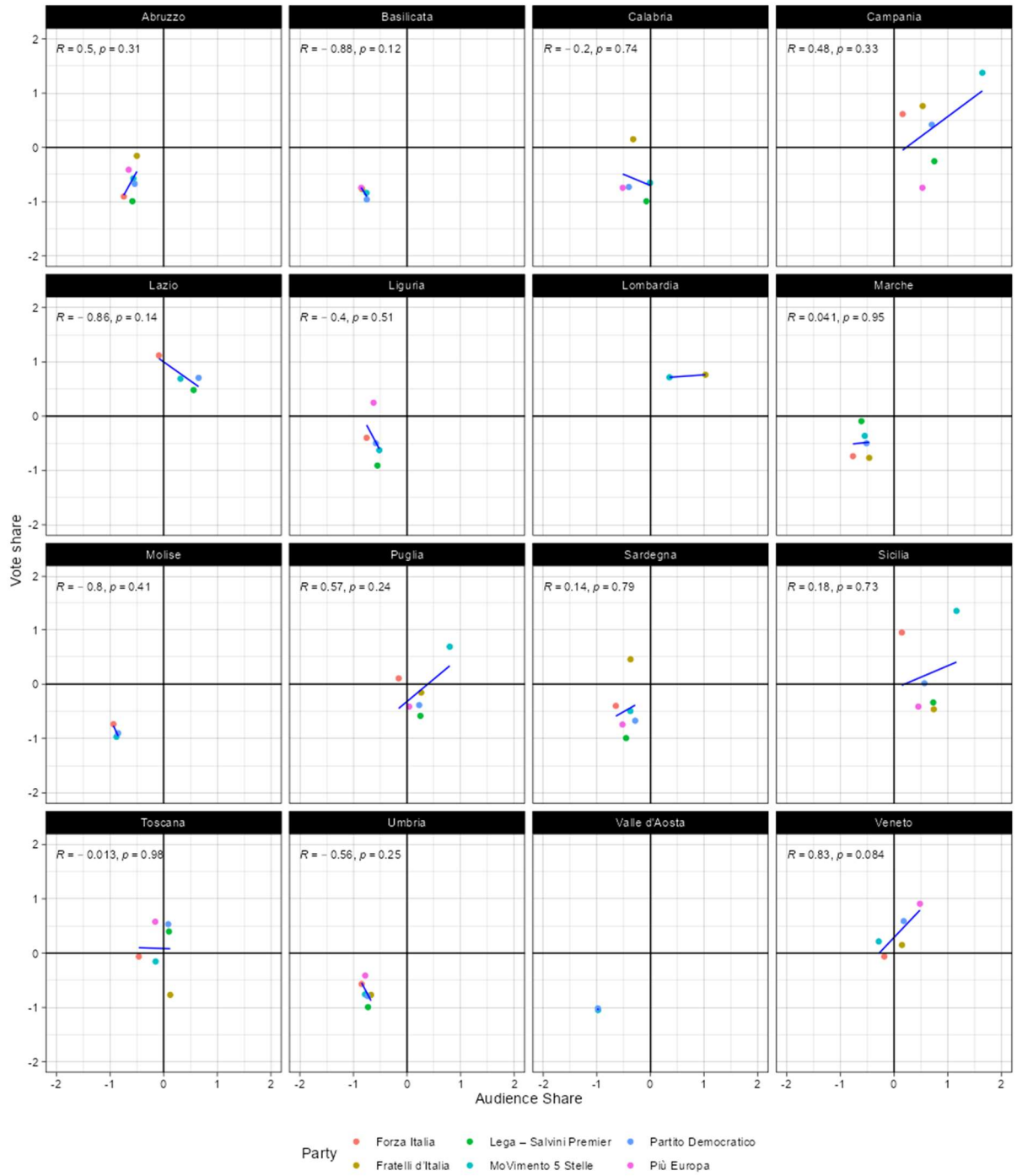


Figure 6: Party support and share of audience (Region)

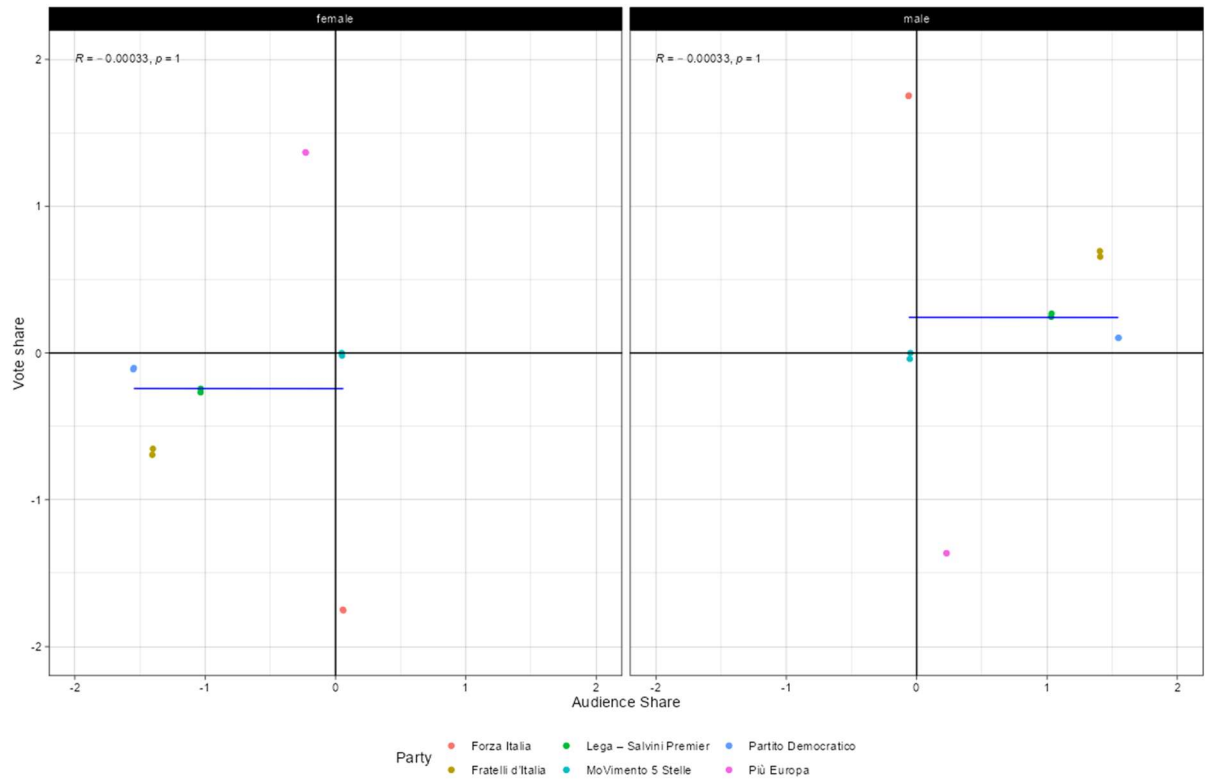


Figure 7: Party support and share of audience (Gender)