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The Pundit Paradox

Exploring the Mismatch between Supply and Demand in Italian Political Talk Show Guests

ABSTRACT

Infotainment programs and political talk shows occupy a relevant portion of Italian television programming, playing a role in shaping and legitimizing political behaviors and social practices. This study evaluates whether the characteristics of pundits on Italian political talk shows align with public preferences, revealing systemic biases in societal representation. Analysis of guests from twelve talk shows aired between September 2023 and March 2024 displays a predominance of middle-aged male journalists and politicians, with notable underrepresentation of women, young people, and academic experts. Conversely, a conjoint survey experiment on a representative sample of Italians indicates a strong preference for younger and female pundits, especially those with economics or law backgrounds. Thus, the study underscores a substantial mismatch between the traits of pundits that audiences trust and those commonly featured on shows, indicating a significant gap in meeting viewer expectations in political discourse.

Keywords: talk shows, experts, women, representation, survey experiment.

1. Introduction

Amongst *infotainment* programs (Baym, 2008), political talk shows (from now on, talk shows) occupy a considerable space in Italian television programming

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and constitute a significant part of the generalist audience's information diet (Bentivegna and Rega, 2023; Nic *et al.*, 2021). Although the effects of these programs on behaviors and attitudes in the political field are still a matter of debate (Novelli, 2012), statistically significant associations have been identified, for example, between exposure to talk shows and voting choices (Campus *et al.*, 2008), trust in journalists (Splendore *et al.*, 2024), in the European Union, populist attitudes and positions on immigration (Bentivegna and Rega, 2023).

This study casts a light on the actors of the public debate broadcasted by Italian television to pursue a twofold goal. On the one hand, we aim to reconstruct the socio-demographic and professional profile of the guests of the main Italian talk shows to understand which categories of subjects have a voice in commenting on the facts of the political and economic life of the country and the international arena and which categories are instead under-represented, highlighting potential gender and generational biases. On the other hand, we aim to understand in which profiles, characteristics, and expertise the public places most trust. In particular, we address two research questions, the first from the supply side and the second from the demand side: 1. Which profiles, characteristics, and *expertise* are most often selected by the hosts and editorial offices of talk shows? 2. Which guest profiles, qualities, and expertise are most trusted by talk show audiences?

In answering these two questions, particular attention is paid to the figure of the pundits. When commenting on current political and economic events, it is typically assumed that professional politicians will participate, either as the main subjects or as colleagues from the government or their party. However, the selection of pundits by the host and editors is a more nuanced decision. Will they opt for insights from a humanities and social sciences expert – preferably an academic – or will they choose to involve another journalist? And in the composite and varied world of the humanities and social sciences, what position do the different disciplines occupy?

The article answers these questions in five sections, followed by conclusions. Section 2 discusses theoretical and empirical contributions on the subject, focusing on gender and generational biases. Section 3 describes the data and the experimental setting. Section 4 looks at the supply side and reconstructs the profile of the guests of more than 650 episodes of 12 talk shows aired from September 2023 to March 2024 in *access prime time* and *prime time*¹, providing information about their age, gender, profession, and *expertise*. The results of the descriptive analysis highlight how political, economic, and social current affairs are almost exclusively discussed by politicians and journalists, mostly middle-aged and male; while women,

¹ Access prime time covers the time slot 20.40-21.15; prime time the time slot 21.15-00.30.

young people, and academic experts are strongly underrepresented. Section 5 looks at the demand side and explores what profiles, characteristics, and areas of expertise earn greater trust from talk show audiences when it comes to talk show commentators through a *conjoint survey experiment* (Hainmueller *et al.*, 2014) conducted on a representative sample of the Italian population. The results reveal a mismatch between supply and demand for guests. In fact, the public seems to place more trust in commentators with younger profiles, female, with economic and legal expertise, and not explicitly aligned with either the right or the left. If aligned, however, the public prefers the commentator more ideologically akin to them. The last section presents the conclusions.

2. Literature review

According to democratic theory, the effective functioning of a mature democracy, such as Italy, relies on citizens being sufficiently informed about key social and political issues at both the national and international levels, especially when there are domestic implications. In this regard, news media are described as a pivotal factor in democratic societies (Coleman, 2012; Van Dalen, 2020) because they «aid citizens in becoming informed» (Holbert, 2005: 511), which is arguably essential for developing preferences and making consistent political decisions.

In this context, «media pluralism» becomes essential, viewed both as a normative need and as an indicator of media quality (McQuail, 1992; 2003). Studies mainly focused on source pluralism (i.e., number of outlets, concentration of ownership, competition between public and private broadcasters: see for example Baker, 2007) and content pluralism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 29); which in turns may refer to the provision of different viewpoints within a single a media outlet (internal pluralism) or by alternative outlets (external pluralism).

These systemic and foundational ideas – that news media are essential for democratic functioning by providing citizens with access to comprehensive information from diverse sources and viewpoints – underpin the normative function of news media in democracy and serve as a benchmark for evaluating empirical reality (Splendore *et al.*, 2024).

The relationship between media and democracy indeed encounters significant challenges. Fragmentation and polarization, for example, undermine social cohesion (Van Aelst *et al.*, 2017), while rising skepticism erodes the credibility of both media and political institutions (Waisbord, 2018). Additionally, increased distrust in media (Splendore *et al.*, 2024) has been associated with news avoidance (Toff and Ka-

logeropoulos, 2020) and selective exposure to sources that reinforce pre-existing attitudes (Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou, 2022), leading to the formation of «information cocoons» (Nguyen, 2020). Together, these factors intensify polarization and disrupt a shared sense of reality. Moreover, it has been observed that even seemingly pluralistic information can contain misleading or partially false content (Giglietto *et al.*, 2019; Tandoc *et al.*, 2018), highlighting the critical need for debunking, fact-checking activities, and research on fake news (Ceron and Carrara, 2023; Righetti, 2021).

Building on these broader systemic theoretical foundations, this study focuses on the selection process of talk show guests, particularly examining their expertise and professional profiles, ideological alignment, and sociodemographic factors – notably gender and age. Additionally, it assesses the extent to which these profiles align with characteristics that foster greater trust among viewers.

Our focus on talk shows is due to their enduring centrality in disseminating political information within the Italian context (Giglietto and Selva, 2014; Iannelli and Giglietto, 2015). During the 2019 European elections, the «TV-news centric» audience was the most prevalent demographic group (Bentivegna and Rega, 2023), underscoring the importance of talk shows in the news diets of Italians. These programs blend entertainment and information, blurring traditional boundaries and effectively engaging audiences (van Zoonen, 2005). Their popularity, alongside their live broadcasts and frequent scheduling across various channels provide viewers with a sense of immediacy and shared experience (Couldry, 2004).

Given the centrality of talk shows, we explore the selection of guests in terms of professional roles, ideological stance, gender, and age to assess how effectively they uphold the previously outlined democratic ideals of pluralism and inclusiveness by providing access to diverse societal groups or, alternatively, whether guest selection is primarily shaped by stereotypical expectations or audience preferences and characteristics. This investigation allows us to identify which groups are represented or underrepresented, highlighting potential gender and generational biases, as well as the influence of stereotyping on guest selection, audience perception, and ultimately, public trust.

In what follows, we examine each of these specific factors, drawing on insights from political communication, representation and legislative studies and gender politics.

Starting from expertise and professional profiles, guests on talk shows can be reconducted to the following categories. Firstly, professional politicians: men and women who participate in talk shows as protagonists in the first person or as spokespersons for the party and/or government to which they belong. Secondly, political journalists and columnists, sometimes called upon as pretend-neutral commentators

on the facts, and sometimes as actual counterparts of the politicians. Then, there are intellectual and non-intellectual experts. Intellectual experts – the large majority – are individuals whose expertise is rooted in academic study, typically obtained through traditional higher education institutions and usually certified by an academic position. Non-intellectual experts, instead, have gained their expertise through life experiences and usually constitute a residual category.

The role of intellectual experts in talk shows is a matter of debate. Sometimes they are used to lend credibility to the program by answering questions made by the host and providing simple and concise explanations. In doing so, however, they are sometimes forced to trivialize methodological and theoretical complexities due to time constraints. When the expert's intervention is presented without the possibility of dialogue with the other guests, their presence seems functional to provide a facade of seriousness, redeeming context to the real entertainment. Other times they are used in opposition to ordinary men, to visually and dialectically create the people-elite dichotomy characteristic of populist rhetoric (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). In this case, the expert often encounters disagreements or challenges from «ordinary men» and is depicted as too «professorial» to understand the «real world» or as simply providing «her own opinion» (Holderman, 2003).

That professional politicians are the largest category of guests on talk shows seems obvious. However, assessing the incidence of this category in relation to the others, particularly journalists, is of interest in order to get a measure, albeit a crude one, of the dominant argumentative style on talk shows and the role carved out for journalists, which may be more oriented towards commentary or partisan position-taking.

Moving to guests' ideological alignment, the impact of revealing their political leanings on perceived trustworthiness is complex, especially when the guest is not a politician. Some studies suggest that viewers value impartiality, which is associated with higher trust (Ojala, 2021). However, other studies indicate the opposite. For example, trust in academic experts and scientists appears politically polarized, with conservatives generally expressing less trust in these groups than liberals (Azevedo and Jost, 2021; Li and Qian, 2022). Further research in the U.S. and Germany shows that people often hold stereotypical beliefs about experts' political orientations – typically perceiving them as predominantly liberal – which influences trust: conservatives tend to trust experts they perceive as liberal less than those they perceive as conservative, while the reverse is true for liberals (Altenmüller *et al.*, 2024).

A similar dynamic seems to apply to trust in journalists. Drawing on the spatial proximity model of voter utility (Downs, 1957), Splendore and Curini (2020) demonstrate that in Italy – traditionally marked by high political parallelism and, more

recently, an increase in negative media coverage by various political actors (Splendore *et al.*, 2024) – ideological proximity between citizens and journalists significantly affects media trust. This finding has been further substantiated by expanding the analysis to 17 Western countries with diverse media systems (Curini *et al.*, 2023).

Lastly, as for guests' gender and age, studies in the fields of descriptive and substantive representation, legislative studies, and gender politics highlighted how certain social groups – notably women and ethnic minorities – tend to be under-represented in several institutions and deliberative contexts, with significant implications for policy agendas and the policymaking process (e.g., Chaqués-Bonafont and Cristancho, 2022; Curini *et al.*, 2023).

The main reference on the gender dimension goes to the «social role theory of sex differences and similarities» (Eagly 1987; Eagly and Wood, 2011), which underlines how gender stereotypes – which arise from people seeing each sex perform contingent social roles and inferring inherent traits – continue to influence behaviors and – crucially for the present study – expectations, often acting as self-fulfilling prophecies by penalizing deviations from «the norm». Notably, men are thought to be «agentic» – i.e., masterful, assertive, competitive, and capable of leadership – and are positively evaluated for behaving in accordance with such stereotypical traits; women, are thought to be «communal» – i.e., friendly, concerned with others, and emotionally expressive – and, again, are positively evaluated if they behave following these perceived-as-innate traits (Decadri and Negri, 2024). The labels «agentic» and «communal» are commonly used in gender politics literature, with alternatives like «masculine» vs. «feminine» or «hard» vs. «soft» (e.g., Fernandes *et al.*, 2021; Greene and O'Brien, 2016). We will, however, use «agentic» vs. «communal» here for consistency.

Being a guest on a talk show requires the individual to speak from a position of (supposed) qualified authority, which is associated with agentic traits. Consequently, in selecting their guests – whether politicians, journalists, or experts – presenters and their editorial teams might penalize women and, for similar reasons, younger individuals. This adverse selection process could occur consciously, as presenters and editorial offices might anticipate the less favorable average approval and trust that audiences typically show towards female or young guests. However, it could also occur unconsciously. Previous studies on US political media found that women experts are numerically underrepresented and evaluated less positively than equally qualified men across a range of expertises (Ozer, 2023). Similar results have been found in the case of Israeli talk shows, where male experts outnumbered female experts, were significantly older, and tended to have a higher academic rank (Hetsroni and Lowenstein, 2014).

Drawing from research on both the descriptive and substantive representation of women in legislative settings – and expanding it to include younger

generations – we argue that increasing the visibility of women and young people on talk shows is meaningful for both practical and symbolic reasons. Practically, studies show that women and young people often emphasize different issues or interpret shared issues in unique ways, even when they are not consciously advocating for their demographic group. This difference in perspective can broaden the range of topics discussed and bring new dimensions to public debates, enriching the overall agenda (Greene and O'Brien, 2016; Decadri and Negri, 2024).

Symbolically, the active participation of women and young people on talk shows challenges traditional stereotypes by showcasing their expertise and capabilities. By being visible in these roles, they may act as role models for viewers from similar backgrounds, especially for younger audiences, inspiring others to envision themselves in similar positions of influence. This visibility also helps to break down barriers associated with gender and age, promoting a more inclusive environment that values diversity and supports both gender and generational equality (Fernandes *et al.*, 2021).

As a final note, we highlight that the proximity dynamics discussed regarding guests' ideological alignment may also apply to their sociodemographic characteristics. Viewers may, in fact, perceive a guest of the same gender, age, or geographic background as closer to themselves and, consequently, more trustworthy. This aspect, introduced here as an exploratory consideration, will be addressed in the result section.

3. Data and experimental setting

3.1. The observational data

We collected the guests appearing in all the episodes of twelve talk shows aired from early September 2023 to the end of March 2024 in *access prime time* and *prime time*. The shows were selected based on their popularity while simultaneously ensuring heterogeneity in the ideological placement of the broadcast. Moreover, our selection encompasses both talk shows categorized primarily as «political-informative talks» and those classified as «outrageous talks» (Bentivegna and Rega, 2023), primarily aimed at entertaining and galvanizing audiences by presenting politics through binary frameworks, antagonistic tones, and the dynamics of opposition and confrontation (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014). The shows selected, their main features, and the number of guests collected from each show are reported in Table 1.

927 unique guests participated in 653 episodes of the talk shows listed in Table 1. However, since some were regular/recurring guests on the same or different

Table 1. The selected talk shows and their characteristics

Title (Italian)	Title (English)	Airtime	Host	TV Channel	Ownership of the channel	N of episodes	N of (unique) guests	N of (total) guests
<i>Avanti Popolo</i>	<i>Forward, People</i>	Weekly, primetime	Nunzia De Girolamo	Rai3	Rai	11	58	82
<i>DiMartedì</i>	<i>OnTuesday</i>	Weekly, primetime	Giovanni Floris	La7	RCS Medi- agroup	26	160	486
<i>Dritto e Rovescio</i>	<i>Forehand and Back- hand</i>	Biweekly, primetime	Paolo Del Debbio	Rete 4	Mediaset	39	83	238
<i>È sempre Carta Bianca</i>	<i>It's Always Carta Bianca</i>	Weekly, primetime	Bianca Berlinguer	Rete 4	Mediaset	29	129	409
<i>In Onda</i>	<i>On Air</i>	Weekend, access primetime	Marianna Aprile, Luca Telese	La7	RCS Medi- agroup	21	80	146
<i>Otto e mezzo</i>	<i>Half Past Eight</i>	Weekday, access primetime	Lilli Gruber	La7	RCS Medi- agroup	105	106	399
<i>Piazzapu- lita</i>	<i>Levelfield</i>	Weekly, primetime	Corrado Formigli	La7	RCS Medi- agroup	25	120	278
<i>Prima di domani</i>	<i>Before Tomorrow</i>	Weekday, access primetime	Bianca Berlinguer	Rete 4	Mediaset	54	94	261
<i>Quarta Repubblica</i>	<i>Fourth Republic</i>	Weekly, primetime	Nicola Porro	Rete 4	Mediaset	28	107	209
<i>Stasera Italia</i>	<i>Italy Tonight</i>	Weekdays, access primetime	Various hosts	Rete 4	Mediaset	117	218	534
<i>Stasera Italia Weekend</i>	<i>Italy Tonight Weekend</i>	Weekend, access primetime	Various hosts	Rete 4	Mediaset	35	97	178
<i>Tg2 Post</i>	<i>Tg2 Post</i>	Weekdays + Saturday, access primetime	Various hosts	Rai2	Rai	163	290	583
Total						653	927*	3803

* The total number of unique guests taking part in the selected talk shows is 927 because the same person can appear several times on the same talk show or on different talk shows.

talk shows, we collected a total of 3803 observations, namely the appearances of a guest in a single talk show episode. The analyses hosted in section 4 are conducted on the latter collection, allowing us to naturally weigh our observations on the number of appearances of recurring guests.

Three coders classified the gender, age, and profession of each guest. Information, where available, was collected from Wikipedia pages, personal websites, or social media profile pages. The profession was coded into four categories: «journalist», «politician», «social scientist/humanities professor», and «other». Among the «social scientist/humanities professor» category, we further distinguished the specific discipline of expertise into six categories: «economists», «jurists», «political scientist», «sociologist», «philosopher», and «historian». Among the «other» category, the coders further annotated the specific area of expertise.

3.2. The survey data and the experimental setting

To investigate the public's preferences for pundits on political, economic, and social issues, we conducted a forced-choice *conjoint survey experiment* (Hainmueller *et al.*, 2014; Martini and Olmastroni, 2021) on a representative sample of the Italian population in January 2024². This technique involves asking participants to express their preference between two profiles with different characteristics. The characteristics of the two profiles are independently and randomly assigned, without any restriction, allowing us to isolate the effect of each specific characteristic (e.g.: being young, female, from northern Italy, or a journalist) on respondents' preferences.

In our case, we asked the participants the following question: «Think of a political talk show, e.g. *Porta a Porta* (hosted by Bruno Vespa), *Otto e Mezzo* (hosted by Lilli Gruber), *DiMartedì* (hosted by Giovanni Floris) or *Quarta Repubblica* (hosted by Paolo Del Debbio). Below you will be shown a choice between possible guests. Based on the characteristics listed in the table, which of these two guests do you consider more trustworthy?». The question was followed by displaying two profiles like those shown in Figure 1.

² The questionnaire was designed on Limesurvey (<https://www.limesurvey.org>). The questionnaire was pretested by 10 social and political scientists in December 2023. In addition, a pilot study was conducted on 50 university students. The final questionnaire was administered via CAWI to the Pollstar *opt-in* panel (<https://www.pollstar.it/home>). Quotas were applied to achieve representativeness of the Italian population in terms of gender, age and geographical area of residence. The data collection was GDPR compliant. Participants were offered a small reward for their participation. The full text of the questionnaire is available in the online Appendix.

Figure 1. An example of the conjoint tables shown to the respondents

***Basandoti sulle caratteristiche che ti vengono mostrate, quale fra questi due ospiti ti ispira più fiducia?**

	Ospite 1	Ospite 2
Professione	Filosofo	Economista
Sesso	Femmina	Maschio
Età	67	67
Area italiana di provenienza	Centro	Sud
Preferenze politiche	Tendenzialmente di centro	Non note

❓ Scegliere solo una delle seguenti voci

☐ Ospite 1

☐ Ospite 2

The full list of attributes is available in Table 2. In particular, alongside socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and geographical area of origin, the profiles vary by profession and ideological stance. We excluded professional politicians because they are not invited exclusively as commentators but often as first-hand agents in the political, economic, and social events discussed in talk shows. As far as ideological positioning is concerned, we distance ourselves from the stereotypical image of journalists and experts as neutral in favor of a setting in which the ideological position of the commentator is either known (mostly leftist/rightist/centrist) or unknown.

The attributes listed in Table 2 could randomly combine into 360 different profiles, which could be shown to the respondents, each with the same probability of appearing. Every participant was asked to repeat this choice task eight times, thus visualizing a total of sixteen hypothetical different guests³.

Our initial sample comprised 897 Italian respondents above 18 years old. To improve the quality of our data, we eliminated participants not completing the full survey, *speeders* – i.e. the fastest 5% of participants in completing the questionnaire –, *laggards* – the slowest 5% –, and participants who answered incorrectly to one of two attention checks. Our final sample counts 688 participants. Since every respon-

³ Notice that we prevented the same profile from appearing twice to the same respondent.

Table 2. List of possible conjoint attributes

Profession	Economist, Philosopher, Journalist, Jurist, Politologist*
Gender	Male, Female
Age	37, 52, 67
Area of origin	North, Center, South
Political preferences	Unknown, Mostly left-wing, Mostly centrist, Mostly right-wing

The Italian word for politologist (*politologo*) is the more used among the public than «political scientist» to indicate the scholarly figure specialized in political science, therefore we opted to include this term instead of *scienziato politico* (political scientist), more frequently adopted among academics.

dent was shown 16 profiles, we have a total of 11,008 individual data points. The average speed to complete the questionnaire was 6'49".

In addition to being representative of the Italian population in terms of gender, age, and geographical area of residence, the sample presents useful characteristics for our analysis. In particular, 48% of the sample has a high school diploma (4–5 years), 8.7% has a Bachelor's degree, 20.5% has a Master's degree or equivalent, 5% possesses some kind of post-graduate specialization and 2% has a PhD. Therefore, this is a slightly more educated sample than the Italian population, a common downside of CAWI surveys (Grimaccia *et al.*, 2023). The higher schooling, however, is not accompanied by a higher perceived standard of living: when asked about their perceived position in the social hierarchy on a scale from 0 to 10, the average answer was 6.5.

The sample is ideologically balanced. When asked to place themselves on a spectrum ranging from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right), 34.5% of the participants placed themselves on the left (0–4) of the spectrum; 13.4% on the center (5), and 34.6% on the right. (6–10) The remaining 17.5% refused to place themselves or are unable to do so.

In sum, our sample is balanced in terms of gender, age, geographical area of residence, and perceived socio-economic status, but is somewhat more educated and progressive than the general population. Moreover, 53% of the sample reported being interested or very interested in politics. Consistently, 57% declared to spend at least half an hour a day watching, reading, or listening to news about politics and current affairs in different media.

To validate the respondents' knowledge about the field of expertise of each academic expert mentioned in the experiment, we asked some questions after the experimental stimuli. On average, over 60% of the questions were correctly answered (see Figure A1 in the online Appendix), showing that our respondents possess a fairly defined picture of these scholars.

4. Talk the talk, walk the walk: the profile of the Italian talk show guests

What kind of profiles were selected by the talk show hosts – and their editorial offices – to discuss current Italian and international political, economic, and social events? How often did they consider involving academic experts?

Figure 2. Political talk show guests' profession by talk show

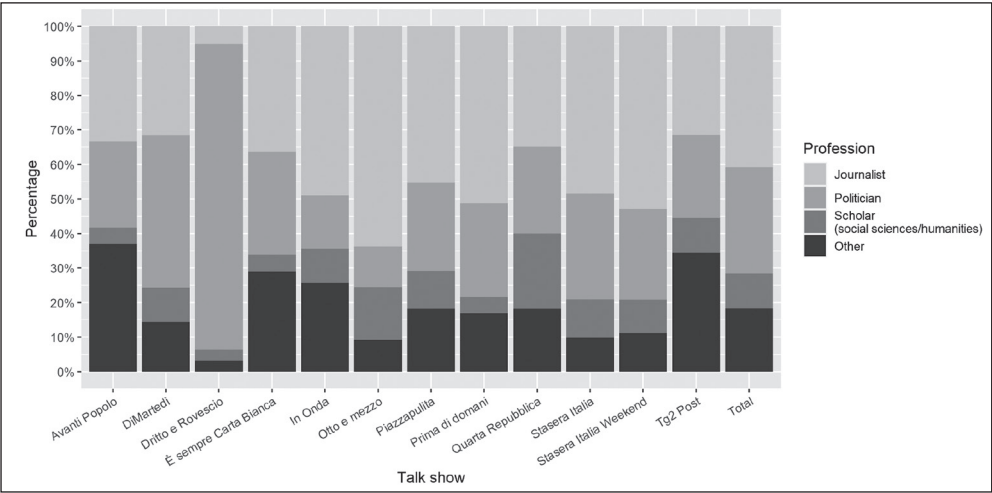


Figure 3. Social scientists and humanists by talk show and discipline

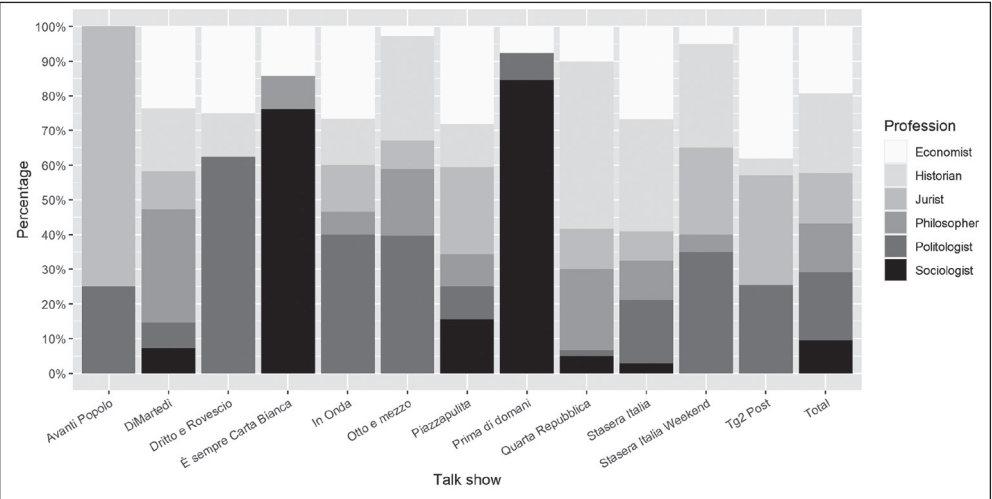
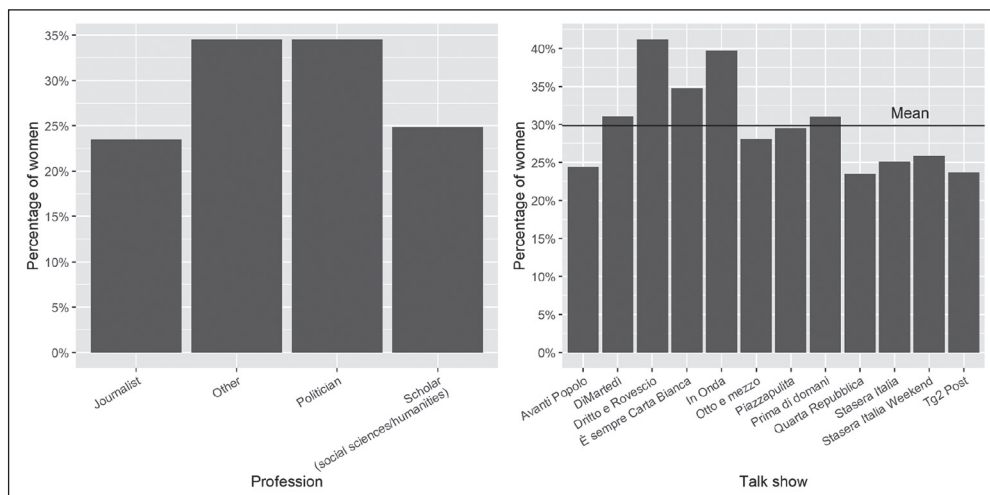


Figure 2 shows that 72% of talk show guests are either journalists (41%) or politicians (31%). Social scientists and humanities scholars make up 10% of the guests. The remaining 18% – the «other» category – consists of writers, entertainment and sports personalities, doctors, physical and mental health professionals, members of the armed forces and security professionals, victims and/or witnesses of violence and crime events, clergymen, trade unionists, activists, entrepreneurs, digital professionals, STEM scholars, and natural science disseminators. Therefore, presenters and producers rarely invite scholars to their shows. When they do, as we will show, they invite males (67% of the category) and older people (64% above 60), perhaps more aligned with the stereotype of the scholar.

Figure 3 shows the specific disciplines of expertise of the academics invited to talk shows. Net of the differences between talk shows, the distribution of the disciplines is fairly balanced: historians (23%), political scientists (20%), and economists (19%) seem slightly more in demand than philosophers (14%), jurists (14%) and sociologists (9%)⁴. Overall, academics are far from holding their ground against journalists as commentators on current political events.

As illustrated by Figure 4, there is a strong male majority among talk show guests (70%), but there are differences between professional categories and

Figure 4. Political talk show guests' gender by talk show



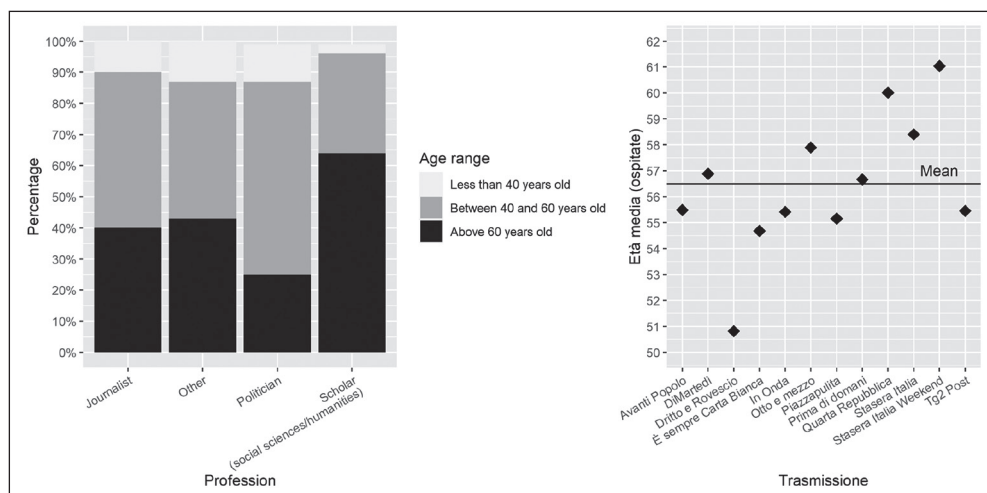
⁴ Noticeably, only six sociologists have been called as guests in the 7 months we analyzed, with one of them being a recurrent guest in *È sempre Carta Bianca* and *Prima di domani* (both hosted by Bianca Berlinguer).

talk shows. The female presence is very low among journalists (23%) and social science/humanities scholars (25%), while it reaches 35% among politicians and those categorized as «others». Notice that, while the percentage of women among politicians is roughly comparable to the share of female MPs in the Italian parliament (Ceron and Splendore, 2018), among journalists it is much lower than their incidence in the professional category, which stands at 42% in 2020 (AGCOM, 2020).

There is a strong variance in the presence of women among talk shows too, with *Dritto e Rovescio*, and *In Onda* exceeding the mean percentage of women by 10 points (41% and 40% of female guests respectively). Yet, while the latter invites predominantly journalists, the former's guest pool is almost exclusively composed of politicians. Therefore, the overrepresentation of women in *Dritto e Rovescio* is the product of the choice of inviting politicians, the category among which women are most often fairly represented. The «black shirt» in equal gender representation goes to *Quarta Repubblica* (24% of women), followed by the two talk shows aired in the public broadcasting company Rai, namely *Avanti Popolo* and *Tg2 Post*, both at 24%. It is important to notice that shows conducted by female hosts are not associated with a higher percentage of women among guests. On the contrary, the female presenter may be counted among the gender quotas, discouraging producers from inviting other women as guests.

The average (and median) age of talk show guests is 56, almost 8 years higher than the median Italian age in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024). 38% are over 60 (25% are over 67); 51% are between 40 and 60 years old; only 11% are under 40 (only 4%

Figure 5. Political talk show guests' age by profession and show



are under 36). The over-60s are particularly numerous in the category of social scientists and humanists (64%). As far as differences between talk shows are concerned, only *Dritto e Rovescio*, with an average age of 51, shows a markedly younger guest pool, while *Stasera Italia*, *Stasera Italia Weekend*, and *Quarta Repubblica* tend to have noticeably older guests than the average.

Summing up, young people, women, and academics are a minority among Italian talk show guests. The survey experiment described in the next section serves us to understand whether this strong supply of journalists and politicians, usually also male and senior, responds to a greater trust placed in these profiles by the public or whether it is the result of conscious and unconscious stereotypes and biases, including gender ones, on the part of hosts and editorial offices.

5. Do you trust the talking heads? A survey experiment on the public's perception of talk show guests

Which individual characteristics increase the audience's trust in a talk show guest? Figure 6 answers this question by showing marginal means, which allows to compare respondents' preferences among all potential guest characteristics without setting a reference category (Leeper *et al.*, 2020). Marginal means represent the probability that a profile is chosen when it possesses a certain characteristic, independently of the others.

Ideologically, a guest is preferred when their position is presented as moderate (54%) or unknown (53%), rather than mostly left- (47%) or right-wing (45%). When it comes to trustworthiness as a talk show guest in charge of commenting on Italian and international socio-political events, the political scientist is not only the least selected among the professions (although not significantly less than journalists and philosophers) but the attribute level «politologist» is also associated with the lowest marginal mean among all the attribute levels included in the conjoint (43%). In short, the survey participants tell us that they do not really trust journalists, philosophers, and particularly political scientists. Instead, jurists and especially economists are deemed very trustworthy.

As for sociodemographics, age, and geographical origin play a marginal role, with a slight disadvantage of older guests (49%) and a slight preference for guests from central Italy (51%), reflecting a distrust of southern respondents towards northern guests and vice versa (see Figure 7 and Figure A4 in the online Appendix). Noteworthy, being a female, compared with being a male, is associated with a 6% higher probability of being perceived as trustworthy.

Figure 6. Effect of guest characteristics on perceived trustworthiness

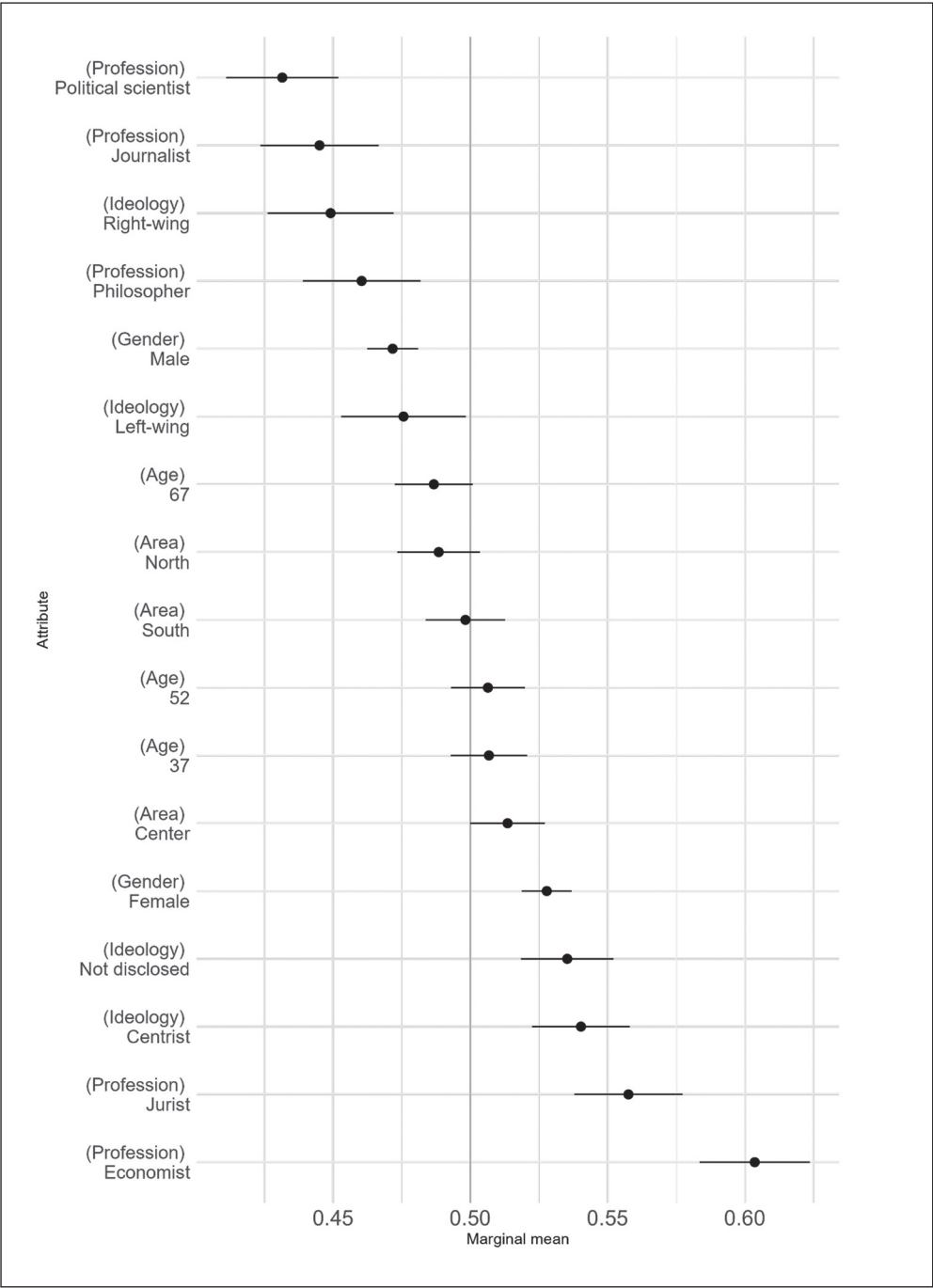


Figure 7. Effect of match between guest's and respondent's characteristics on perceived trustworthiness

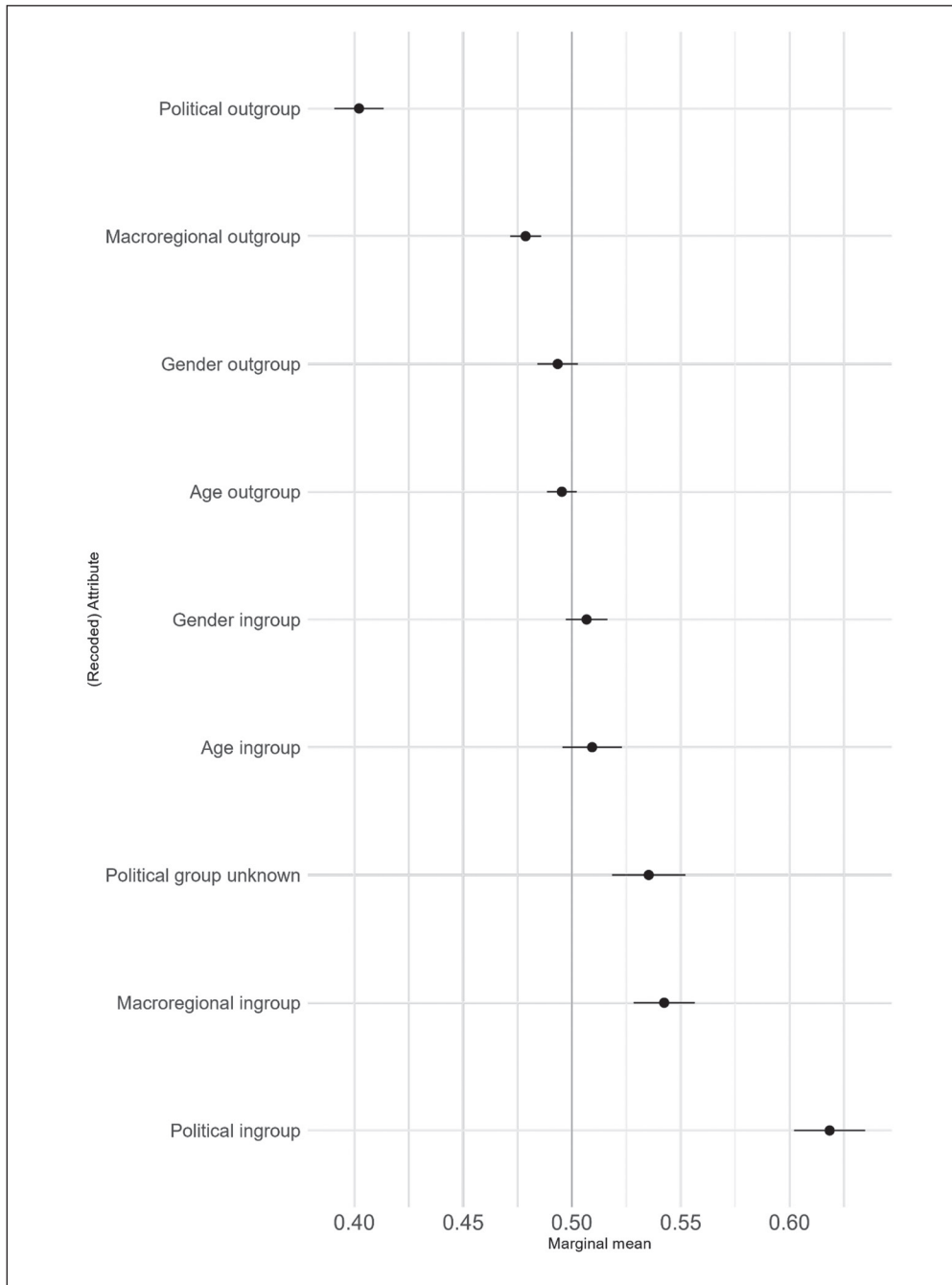
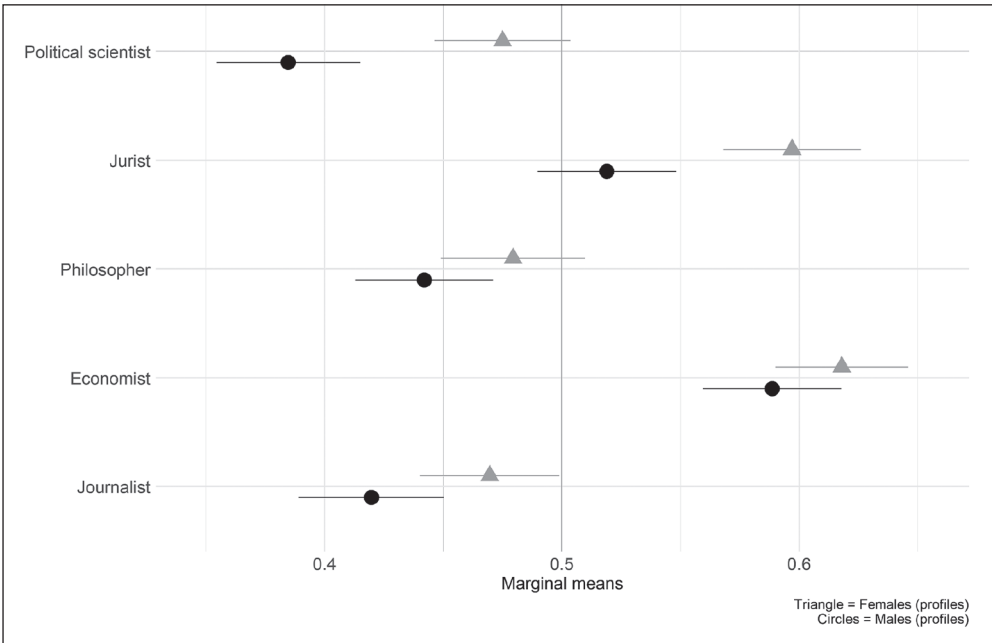


Figure 8. Average effect of the profession on perceived trustworthiness conditional on the gender of the guest

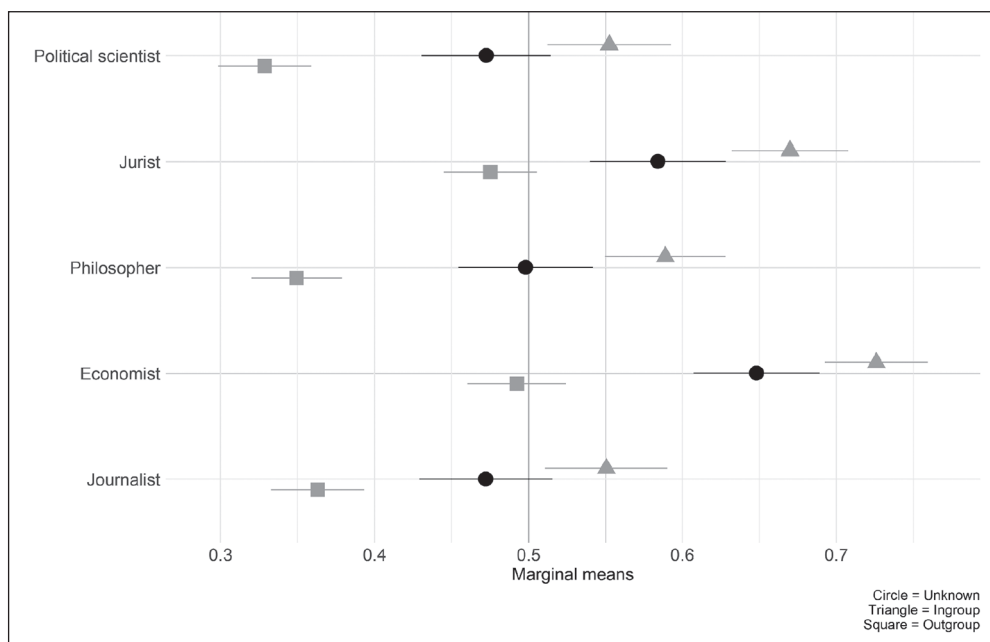


In Figure 7, we show how these results change when recoding the attribute of the profile as a function of the respondents' characteristics. We recoded each respondent's viewing attributes – age, gender, Italian macroregion, and political ideology – as «ingroup» if they matched the respondent's reported characteristics, and «outgroup» otherwise⁵.

While a match between respondents' and guests' gender and age has no significant effect on perceived trustworthiness, a geographical match corresponds to a 54% chance of perceiving a profile as more trustworthy, while a mismatch corresponds to a 48% chance of selecting the profile. Noticeably, both probabilities are significantly different from the indifference (50%), suggesting that geographical polarization may be an underexplored explanatory variable to explain trust in political pundits in Italy.

⁵ For political ideology, the recoding is slightly less straightforward. We define the guest as belonging to the respondent's ingroup when the latter's ideological self-placement matches the former's declared political preferences. Conversely, we defined as «outgroup» an ideological mismatch (i.e., a right-wing respondent and a left-wing profile, or a centrist respondent and a right-wing profile) and as «unknown» the case when the guests' ideology is reported to be unknown, regardless of the respondent's ideology.

Figure 9. Average effect of the profession on perceived trustworthiness conditional on the ideological position



However, the biggest effect on the perceived trustworthiness of the guest is by far observed in the ideological similarity. Pundits belonging to the ideological ingroup have a 62% chance of being considered more trustworthy. The probability goes down to 54% for those whose ideological position is unknown, while the members of the ideological outgroup are considered the most trustworthy of the pair only in 40% of the cases.

Besides marginal means, this experimental design allows us to assess how much each characteristic of the hypothetical guest influences the participants' degree of trust when presented in interaction with other traits through the Average Conditional Interaction Effects (ACIEs) and their differences. It is of particular interest to investigate whether respondents' preferences concerning the different pundits' expertise vary according to the pundits' gender and ideology.

In line with previous results, being male significantly reduces the probability of being selected as a guest for political scientists, jurists, and journalists; instead, the guest's gender has no significant effect on the probability of being selected for philosophers and economists (Figure 8). In short, economists, whether male or female, still stand as the professional category onto which the public places the most trust.

As for the conditional effect of an ideological match, the respondents confirm a strong preference for their political ingroup, followed by those whose political preferences are unknown. This trend holds for all fields of expertise (Figure 9). This evidence, some of which is difficult to reconcile with the idealized profile of experts being above ideological stances, seems in line with the choice by some newsrooms to select commentators whose ideological placements are explicit and match the views of the specific talk show's audience.

Finally, it is possible to conduct subgroup analyses by calculating marginal means and their differences conditional on respondents' characteristics (Leeper *et al.*, 2020). The results discussed so far do not vary significantly in almost any subgroup of respondents. We only point out that participants with a university degree show a stronger preference for female and left-wing guests compared with participants without a university degree (see Figure A3 in the online Appendix) and that male participants tend to prefer male guests and economists and to penalize philosophers more than women (see Figure A2 in the online Appendix).

6. Conclusions

This study explores the degree of alignment between guest profiles on Italian talk shows and the characteristics that inspire the greatest trust among viewers, unveiling notable discrepancies that question the inclusivity and representativeness of these platforms. The investigation into over 650 episodes across twelve prominent talk shows from September 2023 to March 2024 reveals a pronounced homogeneity among the guests, predominantly middle-aged male journalists and politicians. This demographic starkly contrasts with the results of a survey experiment conducted on a representative sample of the Italian population. The audience places greater trust in pundits who are not only younger and female, but also those who possess specialized knowledge in economics or legal matters. This preference extends to those who are perceived as moderate or whose political orientations are undisclosed, indicating fatigue toward overt partisanship in political discourse. However, when the commentator's partisanship is known, the audience expresses a clear preference for the ideological ingroup and penalizes the outgroup. As for the similarity between guest and viewer on sociodemographic variables, the only factor that appears to play a role – and warrants further investigation – is geographic origin. Here too, similarity is rewarded with increased trust.

Interestingly, the analysis exposes a critical oversight in the selection processes of talk show hosts and editorial teams, who often default to familiar faces and demographics stereotypically linked to agentic traits such as older males. This may

not only perpetuate existing biases – especially gender and generational ones – but also alienate a segment of the audience seeking diverse viewpoints that resonate more closely with their own experiences and expectations.

Moreover, the study reveals that while the audience has a nuanced appreciation for expertise, there remains a notable underrepresentation of academic experts on these talk shows. When experts do appear, they are often older males, suggesting a persistence of traditional stereotypes about who constitutes an authority and possesses expertise.

Crudely put, our findings reveal a paradox: respondents trust female and young guests with economic or legal expertise the most, yet talk shows tend to feature older male journalists. This discrepancy prompts the question: are networks failing to meet viewer preferences, or are they intentionally prioritizing entertainment, which audiences find uniquely on their platforms, while bypassing informative content available elsewhere?

We cannot answer this «why» question directly with empirical evidence, but we can propose possible explanations. To start with, organizational costs are high. According to an experienced Italian producer, the search for «prestigious guests» is fierce, with multiple shows competing daily, leading some to pay recurring guests to secure their presence. However, *Il Post* (2022) reports no lasting correlation between sensational content and ratings, even if specific episodes benefit from confrontations or polarizing opinions. Still, certain guests are better at drawing audiences, making them highly desirable.

A more troubling explanation is the deliberate preference for entertainment over information. In our experiment, we asked respondents to select the guest they most trusted – not the most entertaining. The cases of Vittorio Emanuele Parsi, Professor of International Relations at the Catholic University of Milan, and Andrea Gori, Director of the Infectious Diseases Department at Policlinico di Milano, illustrate this. Parsi left a show to avoid legitimizing «outlandish theories» about Ukraine, while Gori avoided talk shows throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, opposing their reduction of science to spectacle.

This preference for entertainment over information may explain the favoring of guests with disruptive views over those offering analytical depth, or those fitting the «venerable professor» stereotype, seemingly detached from everyday realities. Future studies might explore these selection dynamics further, using interviews and qualitative inspections to clarify the rationale behind editorial decisions and the constraints shaping them.

This study has limitations. Our analysis of guest offerings focuses solely on their sociodemographic characteristics and professions, without considering the specific topics they are invited to discuss. It is highly likely that women and young people are overrepresented in discussions on so-called «communal», «soft», and «women's is-

sues», as well as generational issues, while being underrepresented in other themes. If these expectations about the thematic specialization of guests were to be confirmed empirically, the lower numerical presence of these social groups would be compounded by their marginalization to a small number of themes. This is a crucial aspect that deserves further investigation. Moreover, as this research is a case study confined to Italy, it needs to be replicated in other national contexts to test its generalizability.

The implications of our findings underscore a need for producers and hosts to elicit and arguably reconsider their guest selection criteria, embracing a more inclusive approach that reflects the diverse fabric of Italian society. Such changes are not merely cosmetic but are essential for the sustenance of a democratic discourse that values and represents all voices equally.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study, along with replication files for the figures and Appendix figures, are openly available on GitHub at https://github.com/gaetanoscaduto/Pundit_Paradox_Rep_Files.

Contribution Statement

F.N. conceived the idea, structured the theoretical framework, and wrote the first draft of the paper, with input and help in reviewing the literature by G.S. Specifically, she wrote section 1, 2, and 5 of the paper, and contributed in writing section 3 and 4.

G.S. led the observational data collection, with critical input by F.N. He collected the observational data, informatized the questionnaire, conducted the analyses on the datasets, drew the graphs, and contributed to writing section 3 and 4 of the paper. The questionnaire was jointly designed by F.N. and G.S.

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