The Far-Right Politics of 'Truth'

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VALERIO ALFONSO BRUNO (ed.)

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Trends in Europe

EDITED BY
VALERIO ALFONSO BRUNO

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POLIDEMOS

Centro per lo studio della democrazia e dei mutamenti politici
Center for the study of democracy and political change

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VALERIO ALFONSO BRUNO[1]

Far-right populism in Europe: given up for dead too many times, too soon

Just a few months into the Covid-19 pandemic which broke out in February 2020, the arena of public debate in many European countries was already defined by the input of a wide range of figures whom we can define, for the sake of brevity, as 'experts' and 'technicians'; in turn, they benefited from unprecedented media exposure (Campati, 2022; Caselli, 2020)[2]. To a certain extent, we can say that experts actively

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[1] Valerio Alfonso Bruno, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Dipartimento di Scienze politiche; Center for European Futures (Italy), Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right – CARR (United Kingdom), valerioalfonso.bruno@unicatt.it.

[2] Antonio Campati has interestingly referred to the possibility that Covid-19 may somehow have led to a phenomenon of 'going back to trusting in the elites' in Italy and Western democracies (Campati, 2022, p. 193-195). For a complete overview of the dynamics related to the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy, see Damiano Palano's (ed.) *State of Emergency. Italian Democracy in Times of Pandemic* (2022), published by Educatt and the recently established Polidemos (Center for the Study of Democracy and Political Change) of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. Davide Caselli (2020) has been developing an innovative approach to 'expertise', in both theoretical and empirical terms. In his view, 'expertise' is conceived as a dynamic network of re-

contributed to the formation and development of policy-making during critical public-health situations, including the lockdowns and vaccination campaigns (Bruno and Campati, 2021; Bruno et al., 2020). In the wake of these events, various media and pundits quickly rushed to announce, the decline of populism tout court, pointing in particular to an alleged fading out of populist radical-right parties (PRRPs).

It is indeed plausible that a well-informed and competence-based approach to political decision-making, particularly during the first waves of the Covid-19 pandemic, may have somewhat crowded out what we might call 'common-sense solutions' to political problems and the practice of appealing to citizens' emotions in political communication (Bruno et al., 2020). Moreover, it is also likely that immigration during the pandemic years has been less salient and received less attention as a policy area than in the recent past, such as during the 2015 European migrant crisis (Downes and Loveless, 2018; Downes et al. 2021). We may add to this specific narrative by *using* Donald Trump's failure to be elected for a second term as President of the United States of America in November 2020 (which may have influenced easy judgements about the supposed demise of right-wing populism). Yet, as there is no strong evidence at present that PRRPs and their leaders, when in government, have been less successful than

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lationships, therefore extending beyond pure, yet static, codified knowledge. Following the insights of a number of recent studies on the role of expertise in social media, and building upon the classic theoretical contributions of sociologists and philosophers, Caselli employs an interesting definition of 'expertise' as an asymmetric relationship between actors recognized as holders of knowledge in a certain field and actors not endowed with this recognized feature or, in others cases, between actors possessing knowledge that is different in quantitative and qualitative terms.

others in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic (with few exceptions), a balanced and cautious approach is nevertheless required. As things stand, we can say that what Wondreys and Mudde (Wondreys and Mudde 2022; Mudde 2021) said about Europe in the first wave of Covid-19 still holds true:

> [...] Despite all the academic and public speculation over the political impact of the pandemic, the electoral consequences so far remain minimal. Except for a modest short-term "rally 'round the flag" effect, which applied to both mainstream and far-right parties in Europe, COVID-19 has had little electoral impact on (far-right) parties. Despite some minor monthly fluctuations, the electoral differences between March and June are minimal for all three categories of far-right parties (i.e. in government, in coalition, and in opposition). More importantly, almost all individual changes were within the margins of error of the polls. In short, the idea that the coronavirus pandemic has proven "a crisis too far for Europe's far-right outsiders" [...] is clearly premature at best. (Wondreys and Mudde, 2020).

In relation to specific countries, such as Italy in the pandemic years (Bruno and Cozzolino, 2022; Palano, 2022), some PRRPs may have lost support, such as Salvini's Lega ('League'), while others, like Fratelli d'Italia ('Brothers of Italy'), have made major gains in terms of electoral support, at least according to polls[3].

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[3] In particular, Valerio Alfonso Bruno and Adriano Cozzolino have observed: '[...] despite an important share of personal support earned by former Prime Minister Conte during the first phase of the emergency, the Movement (especially after its support for the Draghi executive), seems to be in search of a new identity and, above all, finds itself in a prolonged phase of marginalization within the Italian political system (compared to the golden years 2013-2018). For Lega, the situation differs partially. Salvini's party be-

Similar caveats apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to a supposed 'Putin-effect' on PRRPs in Europe, i.e. the alleged possible effect, particularly in terms of electoral support for right-wing populist parties, produced by the war waged by Putin against Ukraine from 24 February 2022. Will PRRPs in Europe be 'victims' of the conflict currently taking place or, on the contrary, will they benefit from it? Another option, perhaps the most likely, is that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine will have no significant influence on European populist parties, including PRRPs. As with Covid-19, the impact may also vary depending on specific countries and party leadership, and the type of relations the leaders of these parties have had with Vladimir Putin in recent decades. Here, Italy is a rather emblematic case, with Lega leader Matteo Salvini having cultivated extremely deep and broad ties with Russia over the years.

In another respect, the recent important electoral performances of PRRPs or far-right parties in countries like Sweden and Italy, is fuelling the already lively debate on the democratic backsliding, including the future of liberal democracy and the role of the liberal world order (for different perspectives see, among others, the arguments provided by: Berman, 2019; Fukuyama, 2022; Gerbaudo, 2022; Ikenberry, 2020;

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nefited from being in the government coalition with the FSM, while even after the breakup it continued its phase of expansion. However, the eruption of the pandemic coupled with the support for the Draghi executive seem to have significantly decreased its share of support. Looking finally at the Brothers of Italy: here, it seems that riding the wave of protests against government measures to counter the spread of the coronavirus (lockdowns in particular), and opposing the Draghi government, have enhanced the party's reputation (and therefore position) in society' (Bruno and Cozzolino, 2022, pp. 166-167).

Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Mounk, 2022; Palano, 2022; Parsi, 2021). As Damiano Palano has recently pointed out:

> [...] It is not too difficult to identify in 2016 a moment of rather radical change in the way of looking at the future of democracy. Events that were partly unexpected or, at the very least, surprising – such as the outcome of the referendum on the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, the conquest of the White House by Donald Trump, the political rise of leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro, Rodrigo Duterte and Narendra Modi, and the success of populist parties in many European countries – have abruptly changed the perception of many observers, fuelling their pessimism and giving form to dark shadows. As a result of the shock caused by unforeseen events, the hypothesis of an authoritarian turnaround in consolidated democracies has once again emerged. Some political scientists have therefore begun to ask themselves radical questions, wondering whether we are not faced with tensions that are eroding the cultural foundations, norms and practices on which Western democracies are founded, rather than mere physiological changes in individual national systems. They have therefore begun to ask themselves whether, together with the aspirations for equality and emancipation cultivated in the twentieth century, the very 'form' of liberal democracy is facing substantial risks. Beginning in 2016, many observers began to suspect that some sensational events – such as the victory of Donald Trump and the result of the Brexit referendum – represented the prelude to a 'decline of liberalism', bound to undermine democratic systems (or sanction the advance of a threatening 'illiberal democracy'). (Palano, 2022, pp. 15-16)

On right-wing and left-wing forms of populism in Europe

After more than two years of Covid-19 pandemic, it is fair to say that PRRPs in Europe, notwithstanding some cases of retrenchment and the usual caveats, are still performing better than their left-wing counterparts and, even more importantly, have been much more successful in going mainstream[4]. Let us consider the three EU countries, France, Italy and Spain, which will be analysed in-depth in this book.

If we take the case of France, even though Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise did relatively well and the (populist) radical right was eventually defeated, the latter still appears capable of mobilizing a larger part of the electorate and becoming increasingly mainstream year on year, with two parties, Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National and Éric Zemmour's Reconquête, belonging to the far-right[5]. In Spain, the Podemos party is currently polling at around 11%[6], well

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[4] On this, see Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter's book *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream,* published by Verso Books in 2020.

[5] On the far right as an umbrella concept covering both the populist radical right and extreme right, see the work of Pirro (2022). Pirro has recently argued that the term 'far right' could be used as an umbrella concept covering both the populist radical-right parties and the extreme-right parties/movements, which share a nativist and authoritarian stance and are differentiated mainly by their stance towards democracy, with the PRRPs most often holding illiberal views and the extreme right harbouring anti-democratic beliefs. An extremely important point raised by Pirro is that the boundaries between the populist radical right and the extreme right are shifting and becoming more blurred, and that 'the complexity of far-right politics questions the long-standing conceptual distinctions internally defining it'.

[6] Politico Poll of Polls (Spain), https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/spain/. Accessed 5 June 2022.

behind its performances in 2016 and 2015 when, in the Spanish general election, the party led at the time by Pablo Iglesias obtained an excellent 20.68% of the popular vote at the Congress of Deputies; meanwhile the far-right populist party Vox, established in late 2013, is polling at around 20% according to latest available polls[7]. In Italy, the Movimento Cinque Stelle or M5S (Five Star Movement), which after having often kept a relatively ambiguous stance ideologically (see on these the arguments advanced by Zulianello, 2020)[8] has positioned itself on the radical-left, and notwithstanding the leadership of a former PM, Giuseppe Conte, who enjoyed great popularity in Italy during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, benefitting from the so called 'rally 'round the flag' effect (Bruno and Cozzolino, 2022; Bruno et al., 2020)[9]. In any case, scholarly debate on the factors behind the supposed greater electoral success of the PRRPs compared to the (populist) radical left in Europe, at least in recent years, as well as the former's greater capacity for going mainstream, remains far from settled and will continue. Again, caution is in order: dynamics that may be considered obvious and analytical tools that are considered established in a given EU country, may not be considered obvious or useful in other circumstances, making

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[7] On Vox, see chapter two of this book by Carmen Aguilera-Carnerero.

[8] According to Zulianello (2020), the M5S falls under the category of valence populism. 'Accordingly, I operate a distinction between 'positional' populists (left-wing and right-wing varieties) and those that I shall define as instances of 'valence' populism – parties that predominantly, if not exclusively, compete by focusing on non-positional issues such as the fight against corruption, increased transparency, democratic reform and moral integrity, while emphasizing anti-establishment motives.'

[9] On the Movimento Cinque Stelle, see chapter four of this book co-authored by Alessio Scopelliti and James F. Downes.

them difficult to apply and apparently encouraging the wide-spread practice of relying on 'country experts' with the relative understandable limitations and caveats[10].

The structure of the book

It was indeed with the goal of navigating this insidious 'mine-field' that the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore organized the international seminars 'Populism and the Far Right in Europe. Trends in Europe' during the first half of the 2022. Rather than outlining constants in Europe, the seminars aimed to recreate, through the expertise and the research conducted by international scholars, a relatively accurate picture of European populism and far-right practices, tools and schemata. As readers will observe, topics such as the following have been addressed: (i) the far right's use in Germany and the UK of media vehicles to channel hate towards official institutions and immigrants through discourses that are socially accepted as 'truth', (ii) the Spanish far-right's spectacularization of politics on social media; (iii) the link between the contemporary mainstreaming of the European far right and the environment, including the debate on ecofascism, right-wing ecology, far-right ecologism and green nationalism; (iv) the role of ideological flexibility in Italy's and France's populist parties and the electoral consequences of ambiguity.

In Chapter 1, Beatriz Buarque and Polina Zavershinskaia use the multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) model to analyse the 'truths' produced by specific actors, often un-

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[10] On this topic, see the arguments outlined by Bruno and Downes in their 2018 blog article (Bruno and Downes, 2018) for the London School of Economics European Politics and Policy (EUROPP).

derestimated and under researched, that play a crucial role in the mainstreaming of the far right, i.e. media outlets and media vehicles. Media outlets, as the two scholars argue with regards to the cases of the UK and Germany, often benefit far-right parties and movements through the online production of 'truths' committed to right-wing populist, nativist and authoritarian ideas: the hallmark of the contemporary radical right. In particular, using the cases of the 'truths' produced by the German partisan media outlet AfD Kompakt and the UK's Patriotic Alternative, Buarque and Zavershinskaia pinpoint how the former reproduces and mainstreams the political agenda of the relative party (Alternative für Deutschland or AfD), while the latter, among the largest and most active fascist movements operating in the UK today, produces its own 'truths' under the form of educational material and news pieces. Interestingly, despite differences in terms of the most recurrent 'truths' and the main constructed enemy, Buarque and Zavershinskaia identify three common elements: the government not serving the interests of the native people; the Covid-19 pandemic being less severe than the government claims; and native people being replaced by racialized Others (see on this also Buarque, 2022).

In Chapter 2, Carmen Aguilera-Carnerero also uses multimodal critical discourse analysis to analyse how the Spanish far-right party Vox has been able to capitalize heavily on social media in order to engage young voters. In particular, Aguilera-Carnerero's chapter brilliantly analyses multimodal material (photos, videos, and reels) posted on the Instagram account of Vox Jóvenes, the youth organization of Vox, from 2018 until December 2021, demonstrating that it 'mostly echoes their senior counterpart's main narrative lines, tropes, and style, while simultaneously building up a solid collective identity through their involvement in sociopolitical activities'.

Aguilera-Carnerero observes that Vox's rhetoric revolves around three main narrative axes: the defence of the rights of the man in the street, who has been utterly abandoned and betrayed by the government, the construction of Spanish identity built on a modern reinterpretation of history and on the symbols that represent the unity of the nation (flag, anthem and crown), and the depiction of the party as a dynamic hierarchical team constantly working to save Spain (see also Aguilera-Carnerero, 2022).

In Chapter 3, Balsa Lubarda and Bernhard Forchtner write an extremely detailed account of the complex intersection between the far right and the environment, and the extent to which the ideological content of this intersection has changed over the last two centuries. Referred to as 'ecofascism', 'right-wing ecology', 'far-right ecologism' or 'green nationalism', the issue, according to the two scholars, has risen to exceptional prominence over the last couple of years on an international scale, leading them to state '[...] the connection between the far right and environment can no longer be relegated to the margins of scholarship and public debate, but has become a matter of wider concern'. Lubarda and Forchtner identify two reasons that since the late 2010s have led to research on various forms of contemporary far-right environmentalism, which focused on non-German contexts: increasing recognition that the climate crisis is a critical contemporary challenge to humanity, urging actors across the political spectrum to position themselves on the issue and suggest solutions; and the rise and mainstreaming of the far right amid the 'fourth wave', to draw on the work of Cas Mudde, especially following the 2008 economic crisis and the refugee crisis circa 2015 (see also Lubarda and Forchtner, 2022).

In Chapter 4, Alessio Scopelliti and James F. Downes propose an ambitious analysis of the development of populist parties' ideologies, using the cases of the Rassemblement National in France and the Lega, Fratelli d'Italia and Movimento Cinque Stelle in Italy. Two core empirical findings emerge from the chapter: firstly, Scopelliti and Downes demonstrate that, over long periods of time, established populist political parties are more flexible than expected. Both country case studies highlight the overall flexibility of the agenda on the EU for the two established populist radical-right parties, Lega and Rassemblement National. Moreover, established populist radical-right parties can employ various ideological elements at the national level by taking stances that include elements from both Euroscepticism and Europeanism. Secondly, focusing on a short timeframe, the two scholars highlights the negative role played by ideologically ambiguous party strategies (issue blurring), specifically on the electoral fortunes of the valence populist M5S party in Italy. In particular, for readers interested in the recent developments in Italian party politics, the results of Scopelliti and Downes' analysis shed light on how the M5S party's lack of 'clarity' on key socio-economic and socio-cultural issues has hindered the party electorally, particularly in the context of the post-2018 Italian general election. In contrast, the M5S party's main electoral competitors, Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, have adopted clear stances on a wide range of socio-economic and socio-cultural issues (see also Bruno, Downes and Scopelliti, 2022).

In Chapter 5, I attempted to trace and apply, so to speak, some of the key lessons delivered by the specialists who spoke at the seminars, and to relate them to the Italian context, the eve of the September 2022 general election. In the last chapter of this book, I focus especially on the label of 'centre right' (*centrodestra*) that the right-wing coalition in Italy con-

tinues to carry, despite the fact that two constituent parties, Fratelli d'Italia and Lega, are to all intents and purposes far-right parties. As will be seen in the chapter, one of the reasons for this, perhaps the most important one, lies in the ability of the Italian radical right to become fully accredited as 'mainstream' in recent years.

Note of the editor – 29 September 2022. While this book was in print, the Italian general election was held on 25 September 2022. The election was characterised by a high level of abstention (lowest turnout ever at under 64%)[11], and saw the victory of the right-wing coalition, with the 43,79% and 44,02% of the preferences obtained respectively in the Chamber of the Deputies and in the Senate of the Republic. The party Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia) led by Giorgia Meloni obtained in both the Houses an excellent performance with around 26%, while Matteo Salvini's League (Lega) emerged very weakened with about 8,8%, followed closely by Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia slightly above 8%[12]. On the other hand, the centre-left coalition, led by the Partito Democratico about the 26% in the two Houses of Parliament, the Movimento Cinque Stelle 15,5% and Azione-Italia Viva about 7,7%. Overall, the victory of the right-wing coalition was less overwhelming than expected, as in the past similar Berlusconi-led coalitions have reached as high as 48%, thus showing a certain continuity (Albertazzi et al. 2021), while it is undeniable there has been an intra-coalition balance shift, con-

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[11] Ansa (Italy) Election: turnout lowest ever at under 64% Nine points lower than in 2018, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2022/09/26/election-turnout-lowest-ever-at-under-64_ffa88f14-dd7f-4299-9861-7d2ba742ac18.html, accessed 29 September 2022.
[12] More precisely, 8,27% at the Chamber of the Deputies and 8,11% at the Senate of the Republic.

tinuing a process that had already begun several years ago (Castelli Gattinara and Froio, 2021). In conclusion, while there has not been the much heralded massive turn of the Italian electorate to the right (or even far-right), the coalition that will be responsible to express an executive for leading Italy is certainly much more rightward-centred than it used to be in the past[13]. And yet, very eloquently, this right-wing coalition in Italy continues to be widely referred to as the centre-right coalition (*coalizione di centrodestra*) within the Italian public debate.

These contributions, the fruit of original and intense research, helped frame vibrant debates during the February-May 2022 seminars hosted by the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, offering lenses through which to interpret phenomena that are current but with distant origins. What emerges is the observation that the European far right, albeit manifested in a rich variety of regional forms, has been capable of going increasingly 'mainstream', and that the phenomenon taking place in Europe is merely part of a much broader global picture (among others: Leidig, 2020; 2021). The impressive online generation of 'truths' by media vehicles, the pervasive and widespread use of social media to mobilize the electorate, the increasingly fundamental association with the environmentalist cause, and the ideological flexibility and opportunism of populism: all of these are contributing factors in a massive sanctioning and normalization of what was once solely associated with the extreme-right fringes of the political spectrum, to such an extent that it has become almost impossible to distinguish what is far right from what is not.

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[13] For a comparison, see chapter five of this book.

In conclusion, we acknowledge those scholars whose extremely important research and dissemination efforts (even more important in times like these) not only made the UCSC international seminars possible, but also this book, which was born out of them and develops the ideas they shared. Heartfelt thanks also go to all the students and scholars whose valuable participation made the debates both challenging and productive. Finally, a special acknowledgment goes to those colleagues at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore who actively contributed to the organization and success of these seminars, Damiano Palano and Antonio Campati, in the hope that this important initiative will continue in the coming years.

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The Far-Right Politics of 'Truth': an exploratory analysis of the 'truths' produced by AfD Kompakt and Patriotic Alternative

BEATRIZ BUARQUE[1] AND POLINA ZAVERSHINSKAIA[2]

Abstract. Even though much has been said about the populist feature of the contemporary radical right and some scholars have focused on the discourses disseminated by independent media outlets committed to a nativist and authoritarian agenda, the hallmark of contemporary radical right, little has been done in terms of the far-right politics of truth. Contrary to conventional approaches that tend to oppose populist practices to news and scientific knowledge as if the latter were exempt from affective investment, this chapter illuminates how the far right has managed to channel hate towards official institutions and immigrants through discourses that are socially accepted as 'truth'. We argue that by producing discriminatory discourses under the guise of truth, far-right media outlets and institutions have managed to legitimise discrimination. Through a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) of news pieces produced by the German AfD Kompakt and the British institution Patriotic Alternative, we explore some of the 'truths' produced by these far-right actors, exposing similarities in

[1] Beatriz Buarque, University of Manchester (United Kingdom), beatriz.buarque@manchester.ac.uk.
[2] Polina Zavershinskaia, Leipzig University (Germany) zavershinskaia@studserv.uni-leipzig.de.

terms of legitimation strategies and discourses. Albeit different in nature and located in different countries, we observed a convergence in terms of 'truths', especially when it comes to the supposed 'replacement' of white/western individuals and the alleged refusal of governments in power to serve the interests of the 'native' people.

Keywords: Truth; far right; news; populism; legitimacy.

Introduction

In recent years, the rise of the populist radical right has captured the attention of a number of scholars. To Mudde (2019) the emergence of the fourth wave of far-right politics coincided with the appearance of digital platforms at the turn of the century, contributing to the mainstreaming of nativist and authoritarian ideas that until then mostly appeared on the margins of the public sphere. Racist, xenophobic, and misogynist discourses have gradually become normalised. 'Tabooed topics, wordings and impolite or shameless behaviour' (Wodak, 2021[2015], p. 6) have somehow become acceptable. To D'Ancona (2017) a sort of shameless politics performed by Donald Trump, for example, through his open sexist and xenophobic speeches is a symptom of the post-truth era – a buzzword that has been embraced by a number of scholars to refer to our present society as a means to indicate that today 'objective facts became less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' (Oxford Dictionaries). Farkas (2020) goes in a similar direction, arguing that truth claims have become highly politicised, facilitating the weaponization of the term fake news. Thus, in this context, whenever someone wants to de-legitimize somebody else's claims, it denounces it as fake news.

Albeit appealing, the aforementioned theoretical framework seems problematic for two main reasons. First, it is root-

ed in the idea that 'truths' conveyed by journalistic discourses are exempt from affect, directly opposing them to discourses imbued with affective investments (Laclau, 2018[2005]). Even though objectivity is one of the key pillars of journalistic practices, it is never fully reached insofar affectivity is an intrinsic part of human nature. Second, while framing populist discourses performed by contemporary politicians as a symptom of the post-truth era, drawing attention to the affects articulated by them, scholars have largely overlooked the role played by supposed objective 'truths' in the legitimation and normalisation of far-right discourses.

Ylä-Anttila (2018) suggests a more nuanced approach to the relationship between 'truth' and contemporary populist radical right. According to the author, this political strand does not question 'truth' claims solely because it prefers to assume an anti-intellectual stance (Wodak, 2021[2015]). Conversely, it is primarily committed to the production of counterknowledge, 'proposing politically charged alternative knowledge authorities in the stead of established ones' (Ylä-Anttila, 2018, p. 356). Ylä-Anttila's (2018) conceptualization of counterknowledge opens new venues for research focused on the knowledge produced by far-right actors insofar it sheds light on how they have managed to constitute themselves as authoritative actors and benefit from this position to make 'truth' claims that operate as a strategic manoeuvre to legitimise discrimination.

As observed by Mondon and Winter (2020), not only political parties but also intellectuals and media outlets have played a crucial role in the mainstreaming of the far right, 'imbuing a particular ideological configuration or system with authority to operate as a given or naturalise itself' (Mondon and Winter 2020, pp. 116). From a power perspective, the In-

ternet seems to have provided new opportunities to produce 'truths' that go against official discourses.

This chapter aims at contributing to existing debates on the legitimation and normalisation of far-right discourses through an exploratory analysis of the 'truths' produced by a German partisan media outlet (AfD Kompakt) and a British institution (Patriotic Alternative). The AfD Kompakt is a media outlet of the German populist radical right party *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)* [Alternative for Germany] that reproduces and mainstreams the political agenda of the party. The Patriotic Alternative is 'the largest and most active fascist movement operating in the UK today' according to Davis and Lawrence (2021, p. 4), holding institutional status and producing its own 'truths' under the form of educational material and news pieces.

By critically examining the 'truths' produced by the aforementioned actors, we aim at exposing how they have benefited from the Internet to produce 'truths' committed to right-wing populist, nativist and authoritarian ideas, the hallmark of contemporary radical right. We argue that by producing discriminatory discourses under the guise of truth, far-right media outlets and institutions have taken a step towards the legitimation of discrimination, justifying hate towards an Other. This chapter is threefold. It starts with a brief description of the methodology, which is followed by the analysis of the two case studies. It is concluded with a reflection on the similarities and differences identified in both analyses.

1. *Methodology*

Drawing upon Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001) model of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) and Van

Leeuwen's (2007) categorization of legitimation strategies, we examined 233 news pieces (161 articles, 31 videos, 4 podcasts produced by AfD Kompakt and 37 articles produced by the Patriotic Alternative) uploaded on both AfD Kompakt and Patriotic Alternative's websites in January 2022. Furthermore, in the case of the Patriotic Alternative, a brief analysis of one of its educational material was made due to its relevance insofar it has served to provide parents with tailored guidance on how to raise their children as pride white nationalists, presenting nativist ideas in a didactic manner and also legitimising conspiracy theories often found in white nationalist circles, such as the white genocide and great replacement.

We believe that MCDA could be useful in the denaturalization of contemporary far-right 'truths' since, along with the textual component, visual components play an important role in the construction of power discourses, especially in digital spaces (Machin and Mayr, 2012). The multimodality of far-right discourses considers the symbiosis of various semiotic resources that transmit political information (e.g., text, image, video).

Each of the news pieces produced by AfD Kompakt and Patriotic Alternative were examined in three of the four 'stratas' of the multimodal framework described by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001): *design* (e.g. website), *production* (representation of discourse through e.g. text, video, imagery), and *discourse* ('truth' in visual or textual form). While examining the discourses performed as 'truth', we relied on Van Leeuwen's (2007) categories of legitimation, paying particular attention to how legitimation was constructed through *authorisation* (when executed through references to intellectuals, institutions, its affiliates, celebrities, influencers and the opinion of the majority), *moral evaluation* (when based on binary value systems – e.g. representation of good/bad; right/wrong), *ra-*

tionalisation (when linked to "socially legitimate" goals and effects, often referring to what is perceived to be 'normal'), and *mythopoesis* (when realised through the storytelling of value-loaded narratives). In this chapter, we shed light on some of the most common 'truths' observed during our analysis.

2. *Results*

2.1. AfD Kompakt (Germany)

The choice of analysing AfD Kompakt can be explained by its direct affiliation[3] to the populist radical right party AfD (e.g., Havertz, 2021; Wodak, 2019) – the single far-right party in the German Bundestag. The content of AfD Kompakt, mostly comprised of political statements of AfDs members, is focused on covering explicitly AfD's political activity and is aimed at popularising and legitimising AfD's political discourses. Hence, AfD Kompakt facilitates the dissemination and naturalisation of AfD's far-right discourses.

AfD Kompakt disseminates the information across different media platforms (besides its official website). The sources from AfD Kompakt are posted in its Facebook account, its iOS and Android application (explicitly for listening podcasts [AfD-Podcast]), and YouTube TV Channel (specifically for videos) as well as on the AfD's official website and social media. In this chapter, we focus our attention on the website of

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[3] Copyright to AfD Kompakt belongs to AfD ('© Alternative für Deutschland'). AfD Kompakt positions itself as a *Mitglieder Magazin* [member magazine] of the AfD. AfD Kompakt is also displayed on the official website of AfD, and the social media of AfD (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Telegram) regularly refer to its content.

AfD Kompakt as the initial source, information from which is disseminated across the aforementioned channels.

Figure 1 – The website of AfD Kompakt

Note. The screenshot dated 9.02.2022 was taken from the AfD Kompakt website (https://afdkompakt.de).

Drawing on Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) stratification of communication and Van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation categories, we identified several multimodal strategies on the website of AfD Kompakt which aimed at its legitimation as a media outlet (see Figure 1). The design of the website is made in the colours of the AfD party (blue, white, and red) and indicates a direct link to 'news source' aimed at legitimising AfD Kompakt as an official media outlet, specifically as a magazine, and multimodal 'truths' represented in the website as allegedly credible 'news':

1. In the background: the blurred image of an open magazine with the word 'AfD' as the headline or logo and a keyboard with a finger pressing a button. This

indicates an explicit reference to a media 'news' outlet – *journalistic authority* (Van Leeuwen, 2007);

2. In front: at the top – the logo of the media outlet – AfD Kompakt to facilitate its recognition and the German flag comprised of a crowd of people. This could refer to the 'authority of conformity' as the '*majority* of *German* people' allegedly support AfD Kompakt. Underneath the flag, the text '*Mitglieder Magazin*', which has a red arrow between *Mitglieder* and *Magazin* – a part of the AfD's official logo, together with the word 'magazine' also drew us to another authorization category of Van Leeuwen (2007) – *legitimation through the institution* – AfD party.

Additionally, the website resembles the standard layout of media outlet with several headers such as 'current' (*Aktuell*), which also unfolds into several interconnected rubrics, and headlines uncovering AfD's current activity in the German federal lands, at the parliamentary and the EU level, and also podcasts and video rubrics.

Lower on the left of the page, the 'relevant topic' and all the aforementioned rubrics are also displayed (lower, out of scope of Figure 1). Under the 'relevant topic', one could observe iconic links to the AfD's official Twitter and Instagram, Facebook of AfD Kompakt, and the AfD TV channel on YouTube. Near the icons, to the right, the newsletter-subscription button, which is characteristic for 'news' outlets, is placed. Further in the right corner, chosen articles', tags' and comments' options are located.

The content in the website of AfD Kompakt was legitimised by references to various authorities, moral evaluation, rationalisation and mythopoesis (Van Leeuwen, 2007) and

encompasses 196 items, including 161 articles with imagery, 31 videos, and four podcasts over January 2022.

Authorisation in the texts of AfD Kompakt was represented through *expert authority*, which was mainly expressed in the appeal to statements of AfD's politicians indicating their 'area of expertise' and academic titles: 'Why all of this Dr. Limer?... You are a doctor yourself'[4] (Der AfD-Wochenendpodcast, 2022). Moreover, in most cases, the 'expert authority' of AfD members was supported by featuring a picture of a member before their article or in an introduction to a video. Another most common category of authorisation – *journalistic authority* was realised through links to popular media outlets (e.g., Zeit, Spiegel, Bild). Finally, *authority of conformity* was represented through reference to the perceived opinion of the majority: 'The whole world relies on CO2-free nuclear energy'[5] (AfD TV, 2022).

Moral evaluation was linked to such negative adjectives or collocations as 'illegal migrant', 'irresponsible politics', 'pointless, destructive politics', 'unscientific political decisions', '*Umfallerpartei*' ['flip-flop' party]. What is more, such negativizations were mainly directed at the German and EU governments as allegedly responsible for Germany's current problems.

Clauses attributed to *rationalisation* were expressed in reference to 'facts' and 'common sense' logic: 'The fact is: compulsory Corona-vaccination cannot be justified either medi-

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[4] Original German: 'Warum das alles, Frau Dr. Limmer?... Sie sind selber Medizinerin'.

[5] Original German: 'Die ganze Welt setzt auf CO2 freie Kernenergie'.

cally, legally or even politically'[6] (AfD Kompakt, 2022a). Another type of rationalisation was referred to statistical data utilised to legitimise the content of AfD Kompakt: 'Inflation keeps rising: 5.3 percent!'[7] (AfD Kompakt, 2022b), or linked to images of charts before articles.

Finally, *mythopoesis* was reflected in the narration about perceived 'heroic' deeds of AfD and 'German people' which were finally 'rewarded' and 'truth prevailed'. For instance, the AfD allegedly won the fight against the government: 'In the legal dispute against the left-wing sexism of the old parties, it is 3-0 for the AfD!'[8] However, more often, storytelling of the AfD was used to anticipate supposed apocalyptical futures to Germany as a consequence of political decisions in Bundestag and Brussels: 'This is how Europe loses its children, its future and its soul'[9] (AfD Kompakt, 2022c).

Over January 2022, the far right antagonism 'us versus them', which was a significant discursive component in the majority of 'truths' on the website of AfD Kompakt, was expressed mainly towards political elites of Germany – German government, especially against *Ampel-Regierung* [the traffic lights government] – the coalition of political parties SPD (red), FDP (yellow) and the Greens. However, the identified 'truths' also expressed antagonism towards the EU government, 'illegal migration', and the LGBTI community.

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[6] Original German: 'Fakt ist: Eine Corona-Impfpflicht ist weder medizinisch noch rechtlich und nicht einmal politisch zu rechtfertigen'.

[7] Original German: 'Inflation steigt immer weiter: 5,3 Prozent!'

[8] Original German: 'In the legal dispute against the left-wing sexism of the old parties, it is 3-0 for the AfD!'

[9] Original German: 'So verliert Europa seine Kinder, seine Zukunft und seine Seele'.

The majority of content on the website of AfD Kompakt in January 2022 was focused on constructing 'social crisis' and 'crisis of democracy' connected to perceived 'authoritarian' Covid-19 restrictions of the German government. Therefore, the frequent 'truths' found on the website were (1) *Governmental measures to combat the Covid-19 pandemic are unnecessary and harmful* and (2) *German government speculates on Covid-19 pandemic.* As a populist party allegedly advocating for the rights of 'German people', the AfD also claimed that (3) *the German government harms the German people,* and positioned itself against (4) *the German government which either panics or behaves irrationally* and (5) *restricts rightful freedoms.* Another set of 'truths' included (6) *'Green' politics of the German government leads to catastrophe,* (7) *the government is corrupt,* (8) *German people do not trust the government,* (9) *AfD supports and protects the people,* (10) *EU harms German national interests* and (11) *the government prioritises 'illegal migrants' over German people.*

Overall, the exclusionist framing of racialized Others (e.g., Mudde, 2007; Wodak, 2015, 2019) and ambivalent representation of LGBTI community as threats for German *Leitkultur* and relativization of German past (Heins and Unrau, 2021; Binder, 2021; Schmalenberger and Hübscher, 2022) common for German far-right actors were rarely observed during the examined time period on the website of AfD Kompakt and shaded mainly by the antagonism against the German state and its perceived 'anti-democratic' measures to combat the Covid-19 pandemic. From 196 pieces on the website of AfD Kompakt, over January 2022, only 13 pieces were devoted to the alleged 'migration problem' and three to the promotion of LGBTI rights perceived by the AfD as 'ideological politics of the German government' and a threat to 'family values'.

2.2. Patriotic Alternative

The Patriotic Alternative is a community building and activism group with institutional status founded in the United Kingdom in September 2019 by Mark Collett – a former head of publicity of the British National Party (BNP), which according to Davis and Lawrence (2021) has expressed sympathy towards the Nazi regime. The mission of Patriotic Alternative is to 'raise awareness on the demographic decline of native Britons in the United Kingdom, the environmental impact of mass immigration and the indoctrination and political bias taking place in British schools' (Patriotic Alternative[10], 2022). In order to do so, it organises grassroots activities (camping and hiking trips) and conferences. Moreover, it distributes educational material through its website and leaflets that are left on people's doors. Its activities are mainly promoted on its website and on its telegram account – the latest one displays dozens of its 'patriots' distributing leaflets and holding posters warning about the 'white genocide' and 'great replacement' in different counties and touristic sites.

The 'white genocide' is a conspiracy theory widely disseminated in white nationalist and white supremacist circles that claims that the white population has been exterminated. It frequently overlaps with another conspiracy theory, the 'great replacement', which states that white/western people have been replaced with non-white/non-western people as part of an supposed orchestrated plan designed by a global liberal elite. Both conspiracy theories are performed as 'scientific truth' on Patriotic Alternative's 'alternative curriculum' avail-

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[10] The link to Patriotic Alternative's website was not included in the text as a means to avoid inducing traffic to it and further increasing its visibility.

able on its website, especially designed to provide some guidance to parents who wish to 'protect' their children from the biased British educational system. Alongside templates of letters to be sent to local authorities justifying the supposed need for home schooling, it provides didactic material for different ages. In one of them, Patriotic Alternative frames a set of conspiracy theories as 'truth' as an attempt to construct a truly grassroots movement, the Black Lives Matter, as a secret society with malicious intents towards white people:

'BLM is an international, Marxist organisation, funded, in part, by Democracy Alliance (which is itself funded by George Soros' Open Society); it is supported by Big Business and endorsed by "celebrities"; its aims are to destroy Western civilisation, the white nuclear family, Christianity and private property' (Patriotic Alternative, 2022)

The following pages emphasise what can be done to allegedly restore the pride of white people, especially among children. A sort of toolkit is offered to parents to supposedly help them teach their children not to be ashamed of their British heritage. While referring to slavery, the document praises the fact that Britain ended the slave trade, casting a shadow on how it profited from its colonies. Overall, the legitimacy of this didactic brochure relies heavily on authorisation and moral evaluation (Van Leeuwen, 2007). It clearly echoes the professional design of reports produced by research centres and think tanks while presenting it as a product designed and distributed by an institution. In terms of moral evaluation, it explicitly encourages white people to do something to protect western civilisation, the traditional family, and Christianity as if they have been under attack.

As an institution with a well-defined white nationalist mission, the Patriotic Alternative not only provides educational material to parents but it also makes various attempts to en-

gage with people from different ages through puzzles and folklore pieces such as tales about dragons and knights. In January 2022, Patriotic Alternative published on its website four weekend puzzles, four folklore pieces, two music reviews, one book review, and one film review. Interestingly, all this content was uploaded on the news section alongside pieces that dialogue with the journalistic genre as described in the table below.

Table 1. Content uploaded in the news section of Patriotic Alternative's website in January 2022

Type of content	Number of pieces
'journalistic' article	22
Article with instructions	5
Insider's opinion	5
Institutional article	3
Guest opinion article	1
Terrorist manifesto review	1
Folklore	4
Weekend puzzle	4
Music review	2
Book review	1
Film review	1

Among the thirty seven articles uploaded in this section during the observed time frame with a clear informative intent,

twenty two mimicked the objectivity attributed to journalistic discourses (Clayman and Heritage, 2002), inducing the reader to consume them as 'objective truth' by using different sources of information while supposedly reporting a 'fact'. Legitimacy claims (Van Leeuwen, 2007) were made in a number of different ways. *Authorisation* was mostly found through references to official institutions, distorting information provided by them as illustrated by a 'journalistic' article in which a survey conducted by the University of Kent is quoted as 'evidence' that teenagers have been educated to 'become more positive towards groups of people different from themselves'. Overall, this mode of legitimation frequently overlapped with *rationalisation* and *moral evaluation* insofar official institutions were blamed for societal trends perceived to be pernicious to white people as exposed by an article in which Patriotic Alternative used official data about the growing number of childless women in the UK released by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to construct the 'fact' that the supposed extermination of white people is the result of 'an anti-natal societal trend, especially prevalent amongst young white women, that has been encouraged for decades by government policies'. Legitimacy through *mythopoesis* was also observed in some 'journalistic pieces' such as the one that reported the extinction of a native British species of squirrel, the red squirrel: 'The diseases it has introduced (chiefly squirrel pox) have continued to debilitate the endangered native red squirrel population'. In this case, it is evident how the animal was used as a metaphor to reflect on the supposed extermination of white people. The fact the red squirrel is featured in numerous memes on Patriotic Alternative's Telegram account further reinforces this analogy in the imaginary of its followers.

It was among other types of informative articles, though, that mythopoesis imposed itself as the predominant legitimacy category. Especially in institutional pieces and articles with instructions. Many of them carefully deployed nouns and pronouns to construct an imagined 'we' that is currently facing an epic battle for its survival. In some cases, the emphasis was on the representation of white people as 'the victims': 'COVID, the mass importing of non-Whites, the two tier legal system, big pharma, LGBTI being pushed in schools, diversity hiring practices, lockdowns, denial of banking services, it is ALL against us'. In others, there was an explicit call for white people to take action to protect themselves as illustrated by this passage from an article with instructions to white people persevere in their struggle:

> Today, small victories might be getting your friend to shop local, to stop paying their TV licence, to find ways to legally stop paying tax into a system that hates us, starting your own business, getting fit and healthy – there's many, many small victories that are open to us. Small victories open the way to the large, decisive victories.

Another article that deserves a few words in this chapter is the one in which Patriotic Alternative examined the manifesto released by the terrorist Theodore Kaczynski, also known as the Unabomber. Clearly evoking a more analytical type of journalism, which provides an analysis of a certain fact, the institution made an attempt to legitimise the terrorist's ideas, inviting the reader to question themselves if Kaczynski was really a terrorist or if he was called as such due to the 'future he foresaw'. Through claims of legitimacy based on expert authority (in this case, emphasizing the terrorist's credential as a 'Harvard scholar') and rationalisation (by claiming that Kaczynski's actions were justified insofar he was trying to warn

society about the demise that would be enacted by the fusion between Modern leftism and 'woke capitalism'), Patriotic Alternative discursively legitimised terrorist acts as supposed valid tactics when the enemy is a particular elite that has benefitted from capitalism to promote its ideology. Furthermore, it also encouraged the reader to open their eyes to supposed discursive strategies used by governmental bodies to delegitimise the plight of some groups. Briefly, the review of the terrorist manifesto constituted a clear attempt to make something widely considered outrageous become acceptable and legitimate.

In terms of 'truths' reported by Patriotic Alternative in the observed time frame, they were mainly centred in five themes: that white people have been exterminated, that white people have been replaced, that white people need to protect themselves, that the Covid-19 pandemic was an excuse for global domination, and that universities are controlled by Marxists (a conspiracy theory known as 'cultural Marxism'). It is evident the conspiratorial background of the Patriotic Alternative and while performing the 'white genocide', the 'great replacement', and 'cultural Marxism' as 'objective truths' through alleged informative articles, the institution makes an explicit attempt to legitimise hate towards the Other who is constructed as the source of the problems faced by the white people.

Whether it be under the form of journalistic pieces ('as the World Economic Forum seems intent on totalitarian domination via the great reset') or opinion articles ('it's said that our demographic decline, to the point of us being a minority, will occur in or around 2066'), there is a sense of urgency that is communicated to the reader. A perception that seems to be further emboldened by its imbued 'truth' value insofar the danger faced by white/western people is not coming from an

ordinary person. Conversely, it has been communicated by an institution that counts on a team of editors and provides educational guidance for individuals who are supposedly worried about the fate of white/western civilisation.

3. *Conclusions*

While examining the 'truths' produced by two prominent far-right actors, the German partisan media outlet AfD Kompakt and the British activism group with institutional status Patriotic Alternative, we aimed at exploring the far-right politics of truth, exposing how widely accepted forms of truth claims (news and educational material) can carry affective investments, contributing to delimitate the imaginary boundaries between an in-group (a victimised 'us') and an out-group (a blameful 'them').

The expected stigmatisation of racialised Others characteristic of nativist discourses found in far-right circles was significantly more pronounced in the news produced by Patriotic Alternative than in the AfD Kompakt. Among the thirty seven examined informative articles uploaded on Patriotic Alternative's website in January 2022, the majority of them constructed a supposed threat faced by the perceived British native people as 'truth', legitimising the antagonism between white British people and racialised Others who are alleged responsible for the lack of job opportunities, for the replacement of white people with non-white people, for the extermination of the white race. Not only racialised Others were constructed as an enemy but also the government and the educational system, which according to Patriotic Alternative, 'serve' a leftist agenda. Even though the alleged 'truths' produced by the Patriotic Alternative displayed many of the semiotic resources

and discursive strategies used by mainstream institutions, inducing the reader to recognize it as a credible source of information, they were mainly comprised of conspiracy theories. Overall, three conspiracy theories could be easily identified in the data set, appearing in the articles with a certain frequency: the 'white genocide', 'great replacement', and 'cultural Marxism'.

Without giving too much emphasis on conspiracy theories, the AfD Kompakt went in a different direction. The news produced by the German media outlet in January 2022 revolved mainly around standard populist antagonisation of the government and the construction of the image of the AfD party as the 'people's' party (e.g., Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Such prevalence of 'truths' connected to anti-governmental topics and only to anti-immigration content as a subtopic during January 2022 can be explained by attempts of AfD to delegitimise the newly elected German government and question the additional Covid-19 restrictions which were implemented in Germany starting from December 2021. Therefore, the majority of 'truths' depicted on the website of AfD Kompakt were focused on accusing the German government of failing the German people and democracy by implementing additional supposedly antidemocratic Covid-19 restrictions, and only secondarily discussing how cultural values of Islam and alleged immigrants are supposedly overprioritised over the 'Europeanness' by the German and EU governments.

Despite the differences in terms of the most recurrent 'truths' and the main constructed enemy, three common 'truths' could be identified during our analysis: (1) the government does not serve the interests of the native people; (2) the Covid-19 pandemic is less severe than the government claim; (3) the native people have been replaced with racial-

ized Others. Albeit emphasised in different degrees, both the AfD Kompakt and Patriotic Alternative expressed an interest in 'informing' the public about the supposed real interests of the government, which, in Germany, 'do not favour' the German people. In the UK, they 'do not favour' the white British people. In this way, both actors have contributed to the further erosion of trust in official institutions while positioning themselves as a credible source of information that has not been 'corrupted'. In a similar vein, measures adopted by the German and the British governments to restrain the spread of the coronavirus were deemed as authoritarian by both AfD Kompakt and Patriotic Alternative, further fuelling suspicion over the government and placing themselves as a sort of 'revolutionary' actors that dared to 'speak the truth'. Finally, it was also noticed a convergence towards conspiracism associated with the 'great replacement' theory insofar both AfD Kompakt and Patriotic Alternative constructed the perception of the replacement of the perceived native people with immigrants as 'truth' – a cultural shift that has been supposedly promoted by the government. The AfD Kompakt's website, for example, openly referred to the alleged prioritisation of foreign cultural values over German *Leitkultur* [leading culture] by the German government.

All in all, albeit located in different countries and displaying different goals, the analysis of the 'truths' produced by AfD Kompakt and Patriotic Alternative indicates a strong commitment to the erosion of trust in official institutions while positioning themselves as credible sources of information. By making use of semiotic resources and discursive strategies to induce the reader to recognize their discourses as 'truth', both far-right actors have made an attempt to legitimise discriminatory discourses. What is even more worrisome, not rarely, they have conveyed harmful conspiracy the-

ories, such as the 'great replacement', under the guise of truth. Further investigation is necessary to assess the impact of such 'truths'. What are the potential impacts of having multiple entities, located in different countries, producing similar discriminatory claims as 'objective truth'? To what extent has the internet contributed to the emergence of a sort of culture of 'alternative truths'? What can be done to restrain the dissemination of false claims that have been constructed as 'truth'? These are a few questions that are yet to be answered.

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The Visual Construction of Senior and Junior Far-Right Populism: the case of Spain

Carmen Aguilera-Carnerero[1]

Abstract. Spanish far-right party Vox embodies the main principles of far-right populism (Mudde 2019, Wodak 2015), in which the spectacularization of politics and their performance on social media is essential. The party led by Santiago Abascal has a remarkable presence online, being the political force with a higher number of followers on Instagram (643,000), a top-rated application for the millennial generation. This paper analyses the multimodal material (photos, videos, and reels) posted on the Instagram account of "Vox jóvenes," the younger organisation of the party, from 2018 until December 2021. Taking Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2021) and Visual Framing (Rodriguez and Dimitrova, 2011) as our theoretical framework, this chapter will unveil 'Vox Jóvenes' mostly echoes their seniors' main narrative lines, tropes, and style while simultaneously build up a new solid collective identity through their involvement in sociopolitical activities.
Keywords: Vox; far-right; social media; Instagram; young voters.

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[1] Carmen Aguilera-Carnerero, University of Granada (Spain), carmacar@ugr.es.

Introduction

A survey carried out by the Centre of Sociological Investigations (CIS)[2] launched on March 17, 2022, showed the rise of three political parties. People's Party (PP) and the Socialist Party (PSOE) have traditionally occupied the moderate area of Spanish Right and Left. Vox, the most prominent far-right Spanish party, was the third political force that has increased their power to attract potential voters. Abascal's party is the unstoppable far-right party in a country that – together with Portugal – was considered by the experts (Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014; González Enríquez, 2017) an exception in a Europe that had witnessed a domino-like reaction, in which country after country succumbed to the charm of populist far-right movements.

The so-called "Spanish exception" started to be challenged in December 2018, when Vox experienced an electoral breakthrough in Andalusia's regional elections. That progression escalated, culminating in the 52 seats they got in the general elections of November 2019. In just 11 months, Abascal's party had passed from having a null presence in official institutions to becoming the key to forming conservative coalition governments in many parts of Spain.

Vox's extraordinary electoral success, a "stunning progression" in LePen's words, triggered a chain of congratulations from the most relevant European far-right politicians[3] such as Salvini or Wilders, somehow recognising an ally in their way

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[2] https://elpais.com/espana/2022-03-17/psoe-pp-y-vox-suben-en-el-barometro-de-marzo-del-cis.html.

[3] https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20191110/471503757346/ extrema-derecha-europa-celebra-Vox-santiago-abascal-elecciones-generales-2019-10n-espana.html.

of understanding politics or using Salvini's own terms "a friend."

Vox's development mirrors what Mudde (2016, p. 2) calls "the fourth wave of postwar far-right politics" in which the previously marginal rhetoric which builds upon authoritarianism and nativism has permeated into the mainstream discourse, becoming normalised with the complicity of mainstream media as well as the so called-moderate parties.

The unique political landscape of Spain until Vox's outburst has been explained as a logical conclusion considering that no far-right party had entered the parliament in the past 40 years with the exception of the marginal seat obtained by *Fuerza Nueva* (New Force), an ultra-Catholic and Francoist party (Xidias, 2020). The author also argues far-left party Podemos' success in confronting "the people" against "the establishment" played a central role in delaying the far-right's rise concerning the European context. However, this absence of the far-right parties in the Spanish political arena did not mean, for many scholars and analysts, the absence of such ideological principles in Spanish society but their embedment in other conservative forces. Mudde (2019) explains Vox's unprecedented success as depending on four main factors: a) the fact that most voters had not lived under Franco's dictatorship, b) the Spanish economic crisis (2008-2014) that opened the room for new socio-cultural spaces becoming the breeding ground for populisms, c) the management of such crisis, the policies of conservative president Mariano's Rajoy, and the manifold cases of corruption within PP but, above all, d) the independentist threat of Catalonia.

Two facts seem to be undeniable in Vox's ascension: on the one hand, no other far-right force had such an official status and weight in Spain's political landscape until the outbreak of Abascal's party; on the other hand, although im-

mersed in a global wave or radical right populism, scholars and analysts argue their success is associated to a unique Spanish reality[4]. Spain is no longer a political exception, neither is Portugal who has seen how Vox's counterpart, Chega, is experiencing a similar boost that has made Abascal call for "an alliance against communism in the Iberosphere."[5]

1. *Vox: birth and consolidation*

Vox is a very young party founded in December 2013 by some who had left the most successful conservative party at that time, the People's Party (Partido Popular: PP). They abandoned the political force as, on the one hand, they did not identify with the corruption scandals PP was involved in as well as, on the other hand, felt disappointed with a leadership they considered to be 'too moderate' on critical political issues such as the Catalonian independence. In particular, they accused Rajoy of not altering or even blocking some of the political measures that former President of the Government, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, had adopted, such as Law on the abortion, the express divorce Law, same-sex marriages, or the Critical Historical Memory Law to mention a few.

The Spanish political scene was not very stable in the second decade of the century with the abdication of King Juan Carlos I to his son Philip VI that took place in 2014 and the foundation of the far-left political party *Podemos* (We Can), born in the aftermath of the socio-political movement of 15-M, popularly known as '*Los Indignados*' (the Outraged).

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[4] Los secretos de la estrategia de Vox | Ideas | EL PAÍS (elpais.com).
[5] https://www.Voxespana.es/actualidad/abascal-es-un-honor-sumar-a-andre-ventura-a-esta-alianza-frente-al-comunismo-en-la-iberosfera-20210925.

Two facts were decisive for Vox's launch into the political arena. One was IS terrorist attack in Barcelona in August 2017, and the other was the non-binding vote on the independence of Catalonia. As Ariza (2020, p. 180) states, "the issue of Catalonia's independence meant doubling down on a nationalist discourse and calls to centralise power, including getting rid of all the 17 autonomous communities". Vox's birth was also intricately connected with the Spanish inflammatory socio-political context of the time, when unemployment and youth unemployment rates were 27% and 57 %.[6]

In this setting, Vox named former PP member of the Parliament in the Basque country, Santiago Abascal, as the party leader after the quitting of Aleix Vidal-Quadras, first president and one of the founders of the political organization. Iván Espinosa de Los Monteros – a well-known name among the most prominent socio-economic circles of the country – was appointed as the General Secretary. Abascal and Espinosa de los Monteros embody what Xidias (2020) called "Vox' nexus between authoritarian conservativism and neoliberalism."

Building on its unexpected electoral breakthrough in Andalusia in December 2018, in the April 2019 general elections, Vox increased its national vote by about 2.6 million, winning 24 seats in Parliament. Since the November 2019 general elections had to be held again as the Socialist Party failed to reach a consensus to form a coalition government, it won 3.6 million votes, accounting for 15% of the national popular vote, 52 seats in Parliament, and becoming the third political force in the country. As previously indicated, Spain's far-right voters were rather quietly camouflaged within the

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[6] Tim Allen, Eurostat Press Release 159/2013, October 31, 2013.

People's Party (PP) for four decades but found a voice in Vox's policies and adhered to them.

From the moment it got a voice in the Parliament, Vox's presence has been unstoppable. They have kept a very active opposition, suing the government on many different occasions, requesting the illegality of the imposed lockdown in March 2020, and even putting forward a failed no-confidence vote to oust President Sánchez for his management of the COVID-19 crisis.

Abascal's party keeps on growing, gaining power in the different regional parliaments, and receiving more support from voters, especially meaningful is the boost given by the younger generations of Spaniards.

2. *Vox as the epitome of far-right populism*

The labelling of Vox's ideology has been at the centre of discussion by scholars and journalists regarding how to classify their political agenda, which has been described as "far-right," "radical right," or even "extreme right. Vox continuously rejects to be defined as "far-right,"[7] underlining they are not a party of "extreme right" but of "extreme need."

In line with what we have said above, Mudde (2019) considers that Vox embodies what he calls "radical right populism," a type of ideology based on three main principles: nativism (the rejection of the foreigner), authoritarianism (a solid state to prevent chaos), and populism. However, the author emphasizes the wrongly assumed correlation between

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[7] Los secretos de la estrategia de Vox | Ideas | EL PAÍS (elpais.com).

far-right and populism since the radical far-right is not against the elite but minorities.

Whatever category is chosen to describe Abascal's party, the tag "populism" (from Latin *populus*, the people) seems recurrent. The term itself is also problematic since, as Hidalgo-Tenorio et al. (2019) argue, populism is a global phenomenon characterized by ambiguity. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012, p. 153) highlight its chameleonic character – it can be adopted by both left and right and displays different but sometimes opposing features, e.g., being leader-dependent or leaderless.

The study of populism can adopt many different perspectives, although Hidalgo-Tenorio et al. (2019) underline three main approaches to the phenomenon: strategy, ideology, and discursive style. The last approach best fits this study's methodology and framework since it considers populism a rhetorical style, a linguistic code following Laclau (2005).

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) contend that despite the multiplicity of populist styles that can be found, all of them have in common the moral antagonism, the Manichean distinction between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" or, in other words, the differentiation between "a homogenous and virtuous community" vs. "a homogeneous but pathological entity." They add "the general will" to that inventory of features as primordial (2012, p. 151).

Talking more specifically about right-wing populism, its discursive strategies present have been described by Canovan (1999) and Wodak (2015). The latter (2015, pp. 21-22) enumerates nine tenets that define the phenomenon:

- A generalised claim to represent "THE people" as a homogenised entity based on nativist ideologies, a revisionist view of history that involves a rhetoric of exclusion, the self-construction of both the party and its

leader(s) as the saviours of the country, defending the "man in the street."

- A political style related to diverse ideologies (right-wing and left-wing.)
- It overcomes the traditional opposition left/right and construction of "new social divides" (overcoming the traditional opposition left-right.)
- Success relies on performance strategies in modern media democracies.
- Focus on charismatic leaders because of the personalisation and commodification of politics.
- Front stage performance techniques linked to popular celebrity culture.
- Proud display of anti-intellectualism or "arrogance of ignorance."
- Anti-Muslim rhetoric and a contradictory pseudo-emancipatory gender policy (right-wing feminism) link feminism to traditional family values and active campaigns against pro-choice movements.
- Differences between populist rhetoric and style with politicians in government or the opposition.

3. *Theoretical framework and methodology*

The theoretical framework used to analyse the images of our corpus was a combination of two main models: Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001) and Visual Framing (Rodriguez and Dimitrova, 2011). Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) is firmly based on social semiotics (Hodge and Kress, 1988) as the theoretical approach which studies how sign systems are used to create meaning in a given context. It is built upon core prin-

ciples that focus on human signifying practices in specific social and cultural circumstances, making them more suitable than words to fulfil particular functions and explain meaning-making as a social practice (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; van Leeuwen, 2005). The toolkit used in our work was provided by both Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) (such as information value, salience, and framing), together with aspects such as gaze, posing, distance, angle, or light, taken from Machin and Mayr (2012). Previous studies by Peeples (2013), Rebich-Hespanha et al. (2015), Forchtner and Kølvraa (2017), and Westberg and Årman (2019) were inspiring as practical examples.

3.1. DATA COLLECTION

The corpus analysed in this study comprises the material published in the official Instagram account of @voxjovenes from the first post on May 23rd till the last post published in 2021, on December 31st. Instagram is a photo and video sharing social platform launched in 2010 and preferred by Spanish millennials and members of Generation Z.

The whole corpus consisted of 335 posts, out of which there were 133 videos and 5 reels[8]. The latter is a new video format that allows you to insert different fragments of video clips, unlike stories or videos that require the user to record them as one piece. The distribution of the content posted by @voxjovenes by year can be seen in the table below:

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[8] For more information about reels, check https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/introducing-instagram-reels-announcement.

Table 1: Distribution of posts by the Instagram account of @voxjovenes
from 2018 to 2021

YEAR	NUMBER OF POSTS
2018	84
2019	112
2020	87
2021	52
TOTAL	**335**

The next stage was to classify the images according to the visual content, basically if they were representational or symbolic. Then, in a second stage, a more fine-grained codification was made, which included the presence of the members of the party (even though as part of memes), groups of people, politicians, or remarkable figures (e.g., armed forces, the king, political opponents), and historical symbols and events. For a more detailed analysis, it was essential the use of the UAM Corpus Tool software (http://www.corpustool.com/) as it allows for manual annotation of visual features.

3.2. Research questions:

Based on the aforementioned, this chapter intends to answer the following research questions:
1. Does the junior section of Vox share the same narrative aesthetic lines as their seniors?
2. What are the visual pillars Spanish junior far-right populism is built upon?

4. *Visual narrative lines in Spanish radical right populism*

In this piece of work, radical far-right populism is considered a rhetorical style (Hidalgo-Tenorio et al., 2019), and, in that line, I will analyse the visual language chosen by Vox to spread and shape their political agenda on social media. Following Chilton (2004), political discourse operates indexically as an interaction – different language choices imply political distinctions – and functions to negotiate representations or conceptualisations of the world. In previous work on the visual content posted by the official accounts of Vox on Twitter and Instagram (Aguilera-Carnerero, forthcoming), three main visual discursive axes were found in the corpus: the defense of the average man's rights, the key role of symbols in the construction of a Spanish identity, and the party's ideological commitment through their socio-political activities.

4.1. #theSpainthatwakesupearly (La España que madruga)

The pillar of any populist movement is their defense of "the people." Citizens' disappointment is provoked by the government's inability to solve the socio-economic crisis and populist movements try to provide them with a sense of security and stability (Betz, 1994). This man-in-the-street Vox refers to – abandoned, disappointed, and in danger – is epitomised through the hashtag #theSpainthatwakesupearly (La España que madruga) that Vox recurrently uses. That hashtag sets the division of Spain into two groups of social actors: on the one hand, the ordinary workers whose government totally unprotects (fig. 1), and, on the other hand, what they see as the socio-economic looters of the country, mainly illegal immigrants, independentists, along with the socio-communist government and allies. This polarised discourse offers no al-

ternative to the citizens, forcing them to either belong to the first or the second group and creating the dichotomy of "patriots vs. traitors."

Figure 1 – Vox's solidarity with the Spanish farmers and cattle breeders #laEspañaquemadruga

4.2. The key role of symbols

4.2.1. The flag, the anthem and the Crown

Vox's content is always linked to the backbone of their 100-point political program[9], whose first block is entitled 'Spain, Unity, and Sovereignty.' Point 3 of such subsection refers to the legal protection of the nation's symbols, especially the

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[9] https://www.voxespana.es/biblioteca/espana/2018m/gal_
c2d72e181103013447.pdf.

flag, the anthem, and the Crown. In Vox's eyes, any insult to these national symbols should not be restricted from the full force of the Law. The party feels the country's enemies have continually attacked these emblems that help create a solid and robust nation and reinforce in-group solidarity. The Spanish flag is the predominant sign in all the electoral and propaganda events held by Abascal's party as in fig. 2.

Figure 2 – Tribute to the Spanish Armed Forces and the unity of the nation. Posted on March 18, 2020

4.2.2. *A revisionist view of history*

Wodak (2015, p. 21) argues that far-right populisms precisely construe a revisionist view of history, which involves a "rhetoric of exclusion." This happens to be the case of Vox, which usually enhances past epic narratives in which Spaniards fight "an Other" but, guided by Christian principles (see fig. 3) and western values, always arise triumphantly out of bravery and

loyalty to their country. Historical characters (the Catholic Kings, Hernán Cortés, or Blas de Lezo, to name a few) are portrayed as legendary heroes and role models who accomplished the epic task of saving Spaniards, setting the standard for similar contemporary enterprises.

Undoubtedly, the primary historical episode upon which Vox builds his narrative is "the Reconquista" (The Reconquest), the motto of their 2019 national campaign. In Vox's rhetoric, the Reconquista is again taking place today, implying that the country needs to be "reconquered" from its enemies who, they claim, have again overtaken the country.

Figure 3 – Commemoration of the Immaculate Conception, patroness saint of the Spanish Infantry, on December 8th 2019

4.3. A proactive team with a clear leader

Vox's digital communication strategies mostly revolve around Abascal's mega-leadership, as has been defined by some communication scholars (Aladro and Requeijo, 2020; Castro and Díaz, 2021), but our data analysis offers nuances to that statement. Visually, Vox is not exclusively constructed as a leader-dependent but rather as a hierarchical team-driven force (fig. 4), especially Vox's hardcore nucleus, that is, Santiago Abascal (President), Iván Espinosa de los Monteros (vice-secretary of international relations), Macarena Olona[10] (spokesperson in the Parliament). Javier Ortega-Smith (General Secretary), Rocío Monasterio (MP and president of the party in Madrid), and Jorge Buxadé (spokesperson and member of the European Parliament).

Although Santiago Abascal is the head of the party and has been holding the group's reins through their unstoppable political rise, the idea of being a team is continuously alluded to.

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[10] At the moment of publishing this chapter, Macarena Olona left the party and all political activity out of "medical reasons".

Figure 4 – "We fight in all social media". A proactive team
with a clear leader

5. *Far-right junior populism: Vox jóvenes*

The relationship of Vox with the media, both traditional and
new, has always been a complicated one, alternating love and
hate equally. On social media, where the political force is very
dynamic (mainly on Twitter, Instagram, and Youtube), they
have had several problems, and their account has been
banned[11] (and quickly restored afterwards) several times.

In digital political communication, political parties are
highly aware of mainstream and new media's key role in their
electoral success. Social media are excellent channels for par-
ties to disseminate their political program, recruit new fol-
lowers and reinforce ideological bonds with their supporters.

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[11] https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20210128/twitter-vuelve-suspender-cuenta-
vox-incitar-odio-contra-musulmanes/2070480.shtml.

This is partly a consequence of a change in the communicative paradigm (from verticality to horizontality), underlining bidirectionality and symmetry (Alonso, 2015). In the field of so-called 'cyberpolitics' (Cotarelo, 2013), social media have so much power that political parties use them to put forward their political agenda (agenda setting) (Martín et al., 2020). As such, populism and social media seem to be closely inter-related, and populist politicians have used digital platforms and applications to interact directly with the people through a more personal and informal language (Kreis, 2017).

Social media plays a primordial role in the seduction conservative voters feel for Vox. Abascal's party, way better than any other Spanish political force, skilfully manages the new channels, codes, and language, an aspect that is particularly outstanding in their relationship with youngsters.

Historically, the youngest voters have been attracted by political positions located on the Left. Spain is currently following a slightly different path, and Spanish members of Generation Z seem to be fascinated by the ideological principles of the populist far-right. So, young Spanish voters are more allured to both the extremes Left and Right, than to the classical, more moderate parties, PP and PSOE. The generational gap between voters of PP and Vox is definitely remarkable and might be a relevant factor in future elections. However, the presence of Vox in social media is outstanding[12], specially on Instagram (the social media preferred by millennials and generation Z), where it is the political force with the highest number of followers (641, 000 cf. Podemos: 264, 000) as in March 2022.

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[12] https://www.elplural.com/politica/no-solo-en-las-encuestas-vox-ya-es-el-partido-con-mayor-proyeccion-en-redes-sociales_227143102.

Abascal's party knows how essential for their success juniors are, and not only do they give them a voice in the public space of the party, but they also cherish them, for example, wishing them the best of luck for their A level exams since, as the country's future generations, high expectations as well as great hopes lie on them. The senior section of Vox, including their most prominent figures, frequently attend the events organised by the juniors and they even have periodic encounters such as the ultra-popular '*Cañas por España*' (Beers for Spain), in which the leaders of the political force and the youngest supporters have the opportunity to meet each other in an informal context.

Vox is fully aware that digital strategy is critical to keep on growing. On Instagram, the junior section of the party (@voxjovenes) has 126,000 followers at the moment of writing this chapter (May 2022). As stated in the methodology section, this study focuses on the content shared by the political force from their first publication in 2018 until the last day of 2021. The whole total of posts analysed was 335.

Trying to find an answer to the first research question, let's see first if they replicate the main narrative lines we have distinguished in the senior section of the party.

5.1. Continuity of the main narrative lines of the party

In general terms, the junior section of the far-right populist party follows the discursive style of their seniors. Their rhetoric is filled with straight, uncomplicated messages that persuade to stir the national conscience and pride in the youngest Spaniards. As it happens with the seniors, the visual contraposition of ethical principles and moral values are shared. This can be seen in figure 5, in which two types of women are presented as antithetical: on the left, women attending the

demonstration of March 8, with their faces painted and wearing purple clothes, semiotic symbols of the feminist movement, and, on the right, women in the Spanish national army helping an elderly lady.

Figure 5 – Visual Contraposition of two types of womanhood.
Posted March 8, 2020

5.1.1. *Defense of the average man (#laEspañaquemadruga)*

The cubs of the Spanish far-right act mainly as loudspeakers of the main ideological principles of their political party, Vox, taking the message to potential younger voters to make them get familiar with their ideology.

As they do not have a representative voice in the Parliament, they echo in the streets their political force's measures, as shown in fig. 6, in which a group of the party's youngest supporters in front of the Moroccan consulate, asks for the

defense of our frontiers, the need to build a wall à-la-Trump, and the required support to our national security forces as the ones who risk their lives to protect our integrity on a daily basis.

Figure 6 – Group of Vox jóvenes in front of the Moroccan Consulate protesting against immigration 19/5/2021

5.1.2. *The key role of symbols*

The flag, the anthem and the Crown

Firth (1973) argues flags are primary symbols for conveying attitudes or expressing emotions as simple actions such as waving them arise feelings of loyalty and belonging. In the same line, Smith (1969) legitimises the study of flags as central political symbols at the core of political life, as an instrument of control, and an effective tool for propaganda. Vox jóvenes replicate the lines set up by their seniors, and the flag is the most recurrent symbol in all their pictures. Although the exhibition of the Spanish flag has been associated with the old regime (despite the Spanish flag during Franco's times did not contain the constitutional shield and was slightly different), Vox jóvenes are not afraid of being stigmatised as "fachas" (Spanish slang for 'fascists') and they display huge and plenty of Spanish flags on every occasion.

They also show their explicit support to the national security forces as the vigilantes of Spanish identity and the Spanish Crown (fig. 8) as the glue that agglutinates all the Spaniards. The iconographic representation of this ideology can be seen in fig. 7, which depicts a tribute to the Spanish victims of COVID-19.

Figure 7 – Posted on January 1, 2021. Photo welcoming the new year
with a tribute to the victims of the pandemic

Fig. 8: A supportive photo of the monarchy and Philip VI,
the King of Spain, posted on September 26, 2020

A revisionist view of history

Vox recontextualises past events in present times in order to 'make Spain great again' (#hacerEspañagrandeotravez), a calque of Trump's 'make America great again[13].' In up-to-date mythological recreations, Santiago Abascal is framed as a post-modern populist hero, offering a new historical reinterpretation of Spanish history and the only one capable of being the saviour of a country whose identity and values are fading due to the disastrous administration of former governments. References to the distant (not recent) times in Spanish history are constantly alluded to, along with the tribute to heroes or heroines from the grandiose Spanish Empire. Most of them are also symbols of Christianity as can be seen in figure 9, in which Saint James (Santiago, saint patron of Spain), riding his white horse and wielding his sword and the Saint James Cross flag, defeats the Muslim enemy troops, a sweeping statement of the heroes and the enemy.

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[13] In a similar line, see also Wodak and Forchtner (2014) for the vindication of an imperial past by the Freedom Party of Austria.

Figure 9 – Celebration of Santiago, Saint Patron of Spain, posted on July 25, 2018

5.1.3. *A proactive team organised around a leader*

Wodak (2015, p. 21) mentioned the focus on male charismatic leaders as one of the distinctive features of right-wing populism. It happens to be the case of most radical right populist parties such as Salvini in Lega in Italy, Trump in the

Republican Party in the US, or Modi in the Bharatiya Janata in India, to name a few, although the presence of women leading the radical right is increasing, such as Marine LePen with the National Rally in France. Vox also follows Wodak's leadership principle, but, as we stated in section 3, Abascal is always supported by the hardcore section of the team. This tenet is perpetuated in the junior division of Vox. It's frequent to see members of the party, Ortega Smith, the one more frequently portrayed in the account, and occasionally Rocío Monasterio, Iván Espinosa de los Monteros or even Santiago Abascal attending the events celebrated by and for the junior sections (fig.10).

Figure 10 – Representation of Vox's young supporters from Zaragoza together with Jorge Buxadé and Santiago Abascal (in the centre). Posted on May15, 2019

Within the younger section of the party, there is a clear recognition of their leader, Luis Felipe Ulecia, in institutional acts.

As seen in these sections, Vox jóvenes mostly perpetuate the basic ideological and aesthetic tropes of their seniors. However, the young branch of the party adds some new narrative lines that are not present in the senior accounts, mainly organised around two main areas that will be explained below.

5.1.4. *The building up of a strong community*

Built up upon a strong sense of community, the Instagram account of Vox jóvenes gives the idea of being a solid and cohesive group that recurrently organises outings together to strengthen confidence and reinforce team spirit. Vox jóvenes are always portrayed as a group in which the notion of community prevails over any individuality as can be seen in figure 11. Although the leadership of Luis Felipe Ulecia is admitted, there is no frequent prevalence of him over the rest.

Vox jóvenes partake of a similar sense of aesthetics in which preppy and classical sporty style with jeans, chinos, shirts, polo shirts, and short hair are the most recurrent outfits. The merchandising of products such as Vox's official polo t-shirts and undoubtedly the bracelet with the Spanish flag contributes to the construction of a distinctive outlook. Somehow, Vox is going beyond a political force, almost becoming a brand.

Figure 11 – Vox jóvenes' arrival to the Cathedral of Santiago, after walking
Saint James' Way. Posted July 19, 2021

5.1.5. *Engagement in socio-political activities*

Another key narrative line in Vox jóvenes is their engagement
in social issues. The tasks undertaken by the far-right populist
junior members are of a dual nature:

- Activities supporting their party, that includes, for ex-
  ample, the removal of all the Catalan separatist flags or
  yellow ribbons (symbols of separatism) as in figure 12.
  This kind of gestures corroborates the perpetuation of
  the policy lines set up by their seniors.

Figure 12 – Removal of separatist flags in Tarragona.
Posted September 20, 2020

- Social actions that include delivering food to the needy at Christmas (fig. 13), removing garbage from the beaches, or cleaning nature among others. Vox jóvenes are portrayed as a dynamic, proactive youth that work together for a better world. As they don't have the capacity to fight for the Spain they aspire to in the Parliament, they do social work to contribute to the general philosophy of their party.

Figure 13 – Delivery of food to the needy at Christmas with Javier Ortega Smith, General Secretary, posted on December 30, 2018

2. *Conclusions*

In light of MCDA and visual framing theory, the corpus analysis provided answers to the previously formulated research questions. Regarding the narrative axes found in the discourse, we observed Vox's rhetoric revolves around three main narrative lines: first is the defense of the man of the street's rights as he has been totally abandoned and betrayed by the government, second is the construction of Spanish identity built upon a modern reinterpretation of history as well as on the symbols that represent the unity of the nation (flag, anthem, and Crown), and third, the depiction of the

party as a dynamic hierarchical team constantly working to save Spain.

Concerning the second question, data show how @Voxjovenes' account also reveals other tropes not found in the discourse of their seniors. On the one hand, the image of the juniors is built as a solid and robust community, acting as a supportive force following Vox's policies. On the other hand, their involvement in social activities is related to solidarity and the help to the less favoured sectors of society. Posts with pictures of joint activities such as trips, summer camps, outdoor activities, parties, music festivals, and even walking Saint James' Way are recurrent.

Even the aesthetics of the young members of the political force led by Abascal is quite homogenous and classical: guys usually have short hair, classic jeans or chinos, shirts o polo shirts, girls opt for a feminine preppy style. The average image of the traditional and unproblematic good boy/girl.

The role of images has proven to be essential as a propaganda tool and the construction of Vox's concept of Spanish identity. The party's visual rhetoric echoes its textual discourse, relying on highly uncomplicated, straightforward lexico-grammar to provoke emotions and reach their target (the average Spaniard). This deliberate simplicity simultaneously distances them from what they see as the sophisticated and convoluted narratives of the elite (Left).

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The Far Right and the Environment: past-present-future

BALSA LUBARDA[1] AND BERNHARD FORCHTNER[2]

Abstract. The incessant climate and environmental crisis paired with the mainstreaming of the far right have, once again, brought ecofascism and far-right ecologism under the public spotlight. Departing from the ideological tenets established in the 19th and the early 20th century, this ideological amalgamation continues to inform far-right agendas worldwide. By reviewing the ample and emerging literature on this ideological intersection between the far right and environment, we identified several points of contention. Some of these points can be related to the definitional ambiguities and core elements, whereas others are differing in the rendition of nature-capital relationship. The relevance of far-right ecologism today is amplified by its intersection with other salient "multi- sectoral" topics. Examples include gender (in)equality and the role of scientific expertise in the post-truth era. These positions inform other policy preferences, such as climate skepticism or anti-immigration attitudes. Building on this overview, we also identified several avenues for future research, including more research on the Global South, methodological and methodical diversification and counter-communication strategies.

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[1] Balsa Lubarda, Institute for the Study of Societal Issues, UC Berkeley (United States), balsalubarda@gmail.com.
[2] Bernhard Forchtner, University of Leicester, Institute for Environmental Futures, School of Media, Communication and Sociology (United Kingdom), bf79@le.ac.uk.

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Introduction

Writing about the intersection between the far right and the environment has come a long way. Accounts exploring this intersection most often depart from an acknowledgement of the significance of the Romantic era, continue with an interest in pre-/ interwar, conservative and fascist organizations, post-war far-right engagement with the environment, its protection and the far right's incursions in the environmental movement since the 1960s before, finally, exploring the position of this linkage amid the contemporary mainstreaming of the far right and the unfolding climate emergency. And yet, it is questionable to what extent the ideological content of this intersection has changed over these circa 200 years. What can be claimed with certainty is that the literature on the far right's concern for the natural environment – discussed as "ecofascism" (Biehl and Staudenmaier, 1995), "right-wing ecology" (Olsen, 1999), "far-right ecologism" (Lubarda 2020a) or "green nationalism" (Malm and The Zetkin Collective, 2021) – has been exceptionally rising over the last couple of years, and has done so internationally. This can be in part explained through the political space the far right has increasingly occupied in most of Europe and beyond, covering not any longer 'only' the domains of "immigration" and "cultural politics" (van Spanje, 2011). Furthermore, climate change has become an ever more central concern for broad parts of the public and, simultaneously, the terrorist attacks in Christchurch and El Paso, and even COVID-19, have been linked with ecofascist beliefs. As such, the connection be-

tween the far right and environment can no longer be relegated to the margins of scholarship and public debate, but has become a matter of wider concern. It is against this background, that this contribution maps existing scholarship on the far right and the environment before canvassing an agenda for future explorations.

1. *Looking (far) back*

While the particular role of place, of the nation's home*land* in (ethno-)nationalism – itself at the core of far-right ideology – has been long noted (Deudney, 1996; Smith, 1999), the widespread fascination with the linkage between the far right and the environment today has much to do with the academic and journalistic performance of 'surprise' and 'novelty'. Such sensationalism reproduces an argument put forward by Anna Bramwell in her biography of the National Socialist Richard Walther Darré, published in 1985 (with an emblematic title, "Blood and Soil"). Indeed, overemphasizing the influence of Darré, Bramwell's account was even rejected in some of what might well be referred to as the four major works published on the topic in the 1990s.

The first one by Jahn and Wehling (1991) considers what they call 'ecology from the right', that is, developments spanning from (right-)conservatives to the extreme right in Germany. In particular, the authors focus on the German New Right and the political party *Die Republikaner*, though they also consider other far-right parties, and argue that ecological themes help to modernize the far right. However, they also argue that there is no uniform, self-contained theoretical-ideological design, but that this 'ecology' consists 'only' of specific right-wing ecological elements which are embedded

in wider apocalyptic doomsday scenarios. These elements include the naturalization of societal/ political dynamics, warnings concerning the loss of a 'natural equilibrium', an attack on materialism, a call for a strong state to deal with environmental crises, and pointing to overpopulation/ 'foreigners' in Germany as an ecological problem (ibid.: 14) and that such arguments become efficacious as they are acceptable to conservatives (ibid.: 16f).

Second, and internationally maybe most influential, comes a selection of essays entitled "Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience", jointly written by social ecologists Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier. The authors define 'ecofascism' as 'the preoccupation of authentically fascist movements with environmentalist concerns.' (ibid.: 14) before tracing the historical antecedents of ecofascism (something which has already been done by Bramwell's 1985 work and her "Ecology in the 20th century"). In doing so, this contribution firmly planted the flag of 'ecofascism' – a notion which is often mobilized when speaking about a wide array of engagements with the natural environment, often but not necessarily 'far-right' in nature. Furthermore, it offers a set of important takeaways for perspective studies of ecofascism, out of which two (interrelated) points deserve a special mention. One is related to the problematic role of mysticism in contemporary ecological thought, which, to Biehl and Staudenmaier, constitutes a slippery slope to fascist esotericism. Bearing in mind the history of many short-lived ecofascist movements and initiatives (such as Greenline Front, see Forchtner and Lubarda, 2021), mysticism indeed is one of the pillars of contemporary ecofascism, contributing to a sense of spiritual and social alienation and foregrounding the nostalgic, Blood-and-Soil'ish reading of rootedness. The second point, building on this mysticism, points to the problems

Deep Ecology presents to contemporary environmental thought. In other words, Deep Ecology's ambivalence towards reason, human beings and their role in a prosperous ecological polity is what renders this strand of thought too close to misanthropic ecofascism.

The third work was Oliver Geden's "Rechte Ökologie. Umweltschutz zwischen Emanzipation und Faschismus" [Right-wing Ecology: Environmental Protection between Emancipation and Fascism]. Aside from providing account of German actors and their positions, what is particularly interesting about Geden's book is that "right-wing ecology" was linked to the concept of holism which has been recognized as central to the ideology of ecologism (see Humphrey, 2013). Moreover, Geden's choice of "right-wing ecology" over "ecofascism" indicates an interest in the broader contribution of the right-wing spectrum to ecologism, visible also in the wide-ranging empirical focus of his contribution. Furthermore, Geden stresses the strategic use of ecological themes (in the quest for cultural hegemony) and rejects the idea that 'ecology from the right' is a coherent ideology. Maybe even more relevant is the fact that Geden's work does not strictly distinguish between right-wing extremism and conservatism (Geden, 1996: 51), something ultimately unhelpful in identifying the nuances in far-right ecologism, particularly with respect to addressing individual arguments.

The fourth major work published in the 1990s addressing the ideological intersection between the far right and the environment was Jonathan Olsen's (1999) monograph "Nature and Nationalism: Right-wing Ecology and the Politics of Identity in Contemporary Germany". Olsen's contribution builds on empirical data compiled in Germany, but goes beyond an empirical study by offering a still-foundational conceptualization of right-wing ecology. Olsen argues that three key elements

constitute this ideology: eco-naturalism (nature as a blueprint for the social order), eco-organicism (the *Volk* as ecosystem), and eco-authoritarianism (a strong leader in charge of the ecological state). It is also important that nature in nationalism has not only been confined to the Right (Olsen, 1999: 89) but also that the third-way politics of early environmentalism unintentionally created fertile soil for the far right, including the New Right/ ethnopluralists (e.g., François 2022).

The first decade of the twenty-first century was characterised by a continuance in focus on the German case, again through historical works looking at different aspects of Nazi ideology (Radkau and Uekötter, 2003; Lekan, 2004, 2005; Bruggemeier et. al, 2005; Blackbourn, 2006; Uekötter, 2006; for a review, see Forchtner and Özvatan, 2019). These debates served to settle the disputes raised by Bramwell's emphasis on the alleged 'environmentalist' nature of the Nazi regime (that is, to reject it's simplifying affirmation of the Nazi's 'green aspects', though acknowledging complexity). There were also other, mostly anthropological accounts dealing with the intersection of environment and nationalism elsewhere (in India, see Cederlof and Sivaramakrishnan, 2005, in Latvia, Schwartz, 2005).

Overall, it was only in the (late) 2010s that research on far-right environmentalism in non-German contexts started to emerge. This has mostly to do with two reasons, which continue to affect the scholarship to this day. One is the increasing recognition that the climate crisis is a crucial contemporary challenge to humanity, urging actors across the political spectrum to position themselves on the issue and suggest solutions. The other one is the rise and mainstreaming of the far right amid the "fourth wave" (Mudde, 2019), especially following the two grand crises (the economic one around 2008 and the refugee crisis around 2015).

Examples of this renewed interest concern Italy (Armiero, 2014), Portugal (Saraiva, 2015), Spain (Del Arco Blanco and Gorostiza, 2021) and the United Kingdom (Stone, 2004; Coupland, 2016; Forchtner, 2016; Richardson, 2017: 162-172), as well as the second edition of Biehl and Staudenmaier's book (republished in 2011), a brief introduction to 'green browns' (Bierl, 2014), the doctoral thesis of Kristian Voss (defended in 2014 at the European University Institute) which covered a vast array of far-right parties in Europe (though focusing on Austria) and presented a valuable discussion of far-right ecologism, and a study by Sharma (2014) on the Indian far right which drew closely on Olsen's work introduced above. Further, conceptually oriented work, included Forchtner and Kølvraa (2015), who propose the study of nature (climate change and 'the land') via the aesthetic, symbolic and material dimension in nationalism, and the ideological morphology of "far-right ecologism" by Lubarda (2020a) who builds on the explorations of Olsen and Voss. Similarly, analyses focusing on the role of far-right parties in relation to environmental policies and climate change have been blooming (e.g. Schaller and Carius, 2019). Moreover, Forchtner's (2019a) edited volume on the contemporary far right and the environment offers studies into 12 cases around the world, marking an increase of interest in the subject. The publishing of Forchtner's book also coincided with the conference on "Political Ecologies of the Far Right" in Lund, Sweden, which led to a mushrooming of research on the far right and environment and was followed by, among other pieces, three monographs and edited volumes published between 2020 and 2022: Andreas Malm and The Zetkin Collective's (2021) *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism*, Stephane Francois' (2021) *La Nouvelle Droite et ses dissidences: Identité, écologie et paganisme* and Sam Moore and Alex Rob-

erts' (2022) *The Rise of Ecofascism: Climate Change and the Far Right.*[3]

Building on some of these works, we will attempt to outline the key findings, contestations and incongruities related to the research on far-right ecologism, as well as avenues for future research.

2. *What is Far-Right Ecologism actually reflecting?*

There seems to be a basic consensus concerning the core elements of far-right ecologism in the scholarship (Manichean division between the good people/nationalists and the evil polluters/elites/insincere greens; naturalist and organicist understanding of land and ethnos). Yet, there are different (and sometimes overlapping) accounts as to what contributes to less salient components of far-right ecologism, its emergence as well as its very definition and conceptualisation.

First, take, for instance, the notion of "overpopulation" which has long been considered the central feature of post-war "ecofascism", especially since the neo-Malthusianism of the 1970s (e.g. Malm and the Zetkin Collective, 2021). This connects to Dyett and Thomas' (2019) critique of ecofascist tendencies as those among "mainstream" environmentalists who (un)consciously promote exclusionary environmental policies, e.g., with regards to neo-colonial overpopulation logic (re)produced in the accounts of Bill Gates. A more recent

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[3] To our knowledge, there are three more, book-long works to be published in 2023: a volume on far-right visual environmental communication (edited by Forchtner), a volume on political ecologies of the far right (edited by Allen, Ekberg, Holgersen and Malm) and a monograph on far-right ecologism in Eastern Europe (authored by Lubarda).

example is the analysis of Macklin (2022), who links arguments about overpopulation and anti-humanism (in relation to climate change) to far-right terrorists, such as Ted Kaczynski and Anders Breivik (similar to the analysis by Staudenmaier 2021). However, in their analysis of far-right communication in the European Parliament, Forchtner and Lubarda (2022) have shown that overpopulation is a rather insignificant theme in the environmental agenda of the far right.

Second, debates over the use and meaning of key concepts, such as "ecofascism", "far-right ecologism", "right-wing ecology" and "green nationalism", have continued. For instance, the notion of "ecofascism" has been defined as an environmental agenda coming from the fascist portion of the far-right spectrum (Biehl and Staudenmaier, 1995/2011; Moore and Roberts, 2022; Hughes et al. 2022). Ecofascism has also been defined more specifically as an ideology which perceives 'ecological despoliation as a threat to the racial integrity of the people' and calls for 'authoritarian, collectivist leadership principle based on masculinist-martial values' (Zimmerman, 1995: 209), an 'extremist sensibility (as opposed to ideology) existing primarily in the register of the imaginary (as opposed to the operational) and expressing itself through cultural artifacts and symbolic gestures of political violence (as opposed to policy or practice)' (Hughes et. al 2022: 1f) and/ or 'a *reactionary* and *revolutionary* ideology that champions the *regeneration* of an *imagined community* through a return to a romanticised, *ethnopluralist* vision of the natural order.' (Campion, 2021: 8) While definitions are welcome as they help pinpoint the phenomena in question, more discussion is needed as, e.g., the emphasis on '*ethnopluralist*' in Campion's definition is not, we believe, essential. While such ecofascism coming from the extreme-right fringe presents a

set of standalone challenges, it is worth stressing that aspects within ecofascism are present across the ideological spectrum, as the case of overpopulation shows (e.g., Dyett and Thomas, 2019; Lubarda, 2020a). In contrast, far-right ecologism (Lubarda, 2020a) is more specifically defined along the aforementioned lines while Moore and Roberts (2022: 13) view it as the reproduction of 'racial hierarchies in and through natural systems.' This focus on the 'racial' might, however, propose a too narrow view on the subject, one rather reminiscent of Malm and The Zetkin Collective's (2021: 154) definition of 'green nationalism' as 'a belief in protection of the white nation as protection of nature.' Other times, scholars aim for broad conceptualisations, such as in the case of Hoerber et. al (2021) and their "ego-ecology", used in reference to 'egoistic, immediate local or domestic demands and interests' by far-right actors but also beyond. In short, and while there appears to be a basic consensus concerning the core elements of the far right-environment nexus, concepts are used in different ways – often with good reasons, but nevertheless pointing to the perpetual need for precision in scholarly engagement with the phenomenon.

Third, recent research has pointed to "ecofascism" as a symptom of capitalist malady, implying its "status-quo" nature. Blumenfeld (2022) suggests that, for one to properly understand ecofascism, it is necessary to relate it to the systemic pressures created in and through capitalism. On the far-right end, this points to Malm and The Zetkin Collective (2021: 37f) which view the far right as "objectively" working "as the defensive shield of fossil capital" (a claim which, however, might not only be wrong in its totalizing ambition, but also hardly specific to the far right).

In a similar manner, Rueda (2020) posits the ambivalence of "free market environmentalism" and eco-modernization to,

fourth, reject the "hijacking" thesis, where the far right appears as an outsider to the ecological cause which aims to strategically appropriate the issue for electoral/ propagandistic reasons (also argued by Forchtner, 2019a). Instead, far-right ecologism is part of the mosaic of far-right ideas, one which might well lure people into far-right organizations, but one, more importantly, which complements the fullness potentially experienced by far-right subjects. As seen in many cases of ecofascism or neo-Nazi environmentalism (e.g. Szenes, 2021), and although these groupuscules may be short lived and geographically scattered, there is indeed a pervasive ideological link between nation and nature. It is this link, in a context of heightened significance attached to environmental issues, which is important to understand as it illuminates far-right attempts to provide ontological security so aptly analyzed with regards to their, e.g., well-known stances on immigration. In short: the allure of purity and stability (Forchtner, 2019b), so central to the far right's identity project, cannot be fully grasped without also considering far-right readings of the natural environment.

Fifth, a research focus on gender, more specifically, on "threatened masculinities", has emerged since the 2010s. For example, Agius et. al (2020) do so in their study on climate and COVID-19 while Hultman et al. (2019) speak of 'industrial/breadwinner masculinities' as causing opposition to a transformation away from fossil fuels. Similarly, Daggett (2018) points to fossil fuels as securing (male) working-class jobs as well as white patriarchal rule in her conceptualisation of 'petro-masculinity'. Drawing on both Hultman et al. and Daggett, Malm and The Zetkin Collective (2021: 394) introduce the term "fossilised masculinities", while Spierings and Glas (2022) direct our attention to the link between nativism, anti-feminism and anti-environmentalism. More specifically,

Allen (2022), in her study of Polish miners, discusses coal as a way of life. Similarly relevant in this context is a study on mining in the United States which stresses 'class, race, and gender dynamics of place-based identities and moral economies tied to mining' as being 'a key part of the micropolitics of right-wing populism' (Kojola, 2019: 377). Considering media representations, Vowles and Hultman (2022) highlight the gendered hostility to Greta Thunberg. Beyond climate change, Darwish (2021) distinguishes the particular type of masculinity enacted in the broader, ecofascist context.

Sixth, it is unsurprising that a significant number of works are looking at both theoretical and empirical overlaps between the proponents of far-right ecologism and environmentalists. Some of the early works have indicated the intersection between far-right and green understandings of bioregionalism (Olsen 2000), and especially the link between environmentalism and authoritarianism (Hay 2002). More recent explorations have indicated how the ideological lines become blurred in grassroots activism and local environmental issues (Lubarda, 2021; see also Staudenmaier 2021 for a broader collection of essays).[4] Interestingly, these debates have increasingly coalesced around large-scale mobilizations against extractivist projects and the concept of eco-populism (Middledorp and Le Billon, 2019; Beeson, 2019; Kojola, 2019; Bosworth, 2020; Buzogany and Klotzbach, 2021). We say 'interesting' as populism is often reduced to the regressive poli-

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[4] Further contributions (in the German context) which cover the far right and the environment, doing so with the 'pedagogical' intention to warn against such overlaps include: Dittfurth (1995), oekom e.V. (2012), HBS (2012), Heinrich et al. (2015), Heinrich et al. (2015), Röpke and Speit (2019).

tics of the far right or viewed as a mechanism to explain climate change obstruction (see below), while research on such eco-populism focuses on the intersection between grassroots environmentalism and global climate justice.

Seventh, the issue of expertise is yet another direction in which recent research on far-right ecologism is pointing to: be it the rejection of/ ignorance towards science, as the case with climate change (Roberts and Moore, 2022) and the pandemic (Wondreys and Mudde, 2020; Pirro and Taggart, 2022; Forchtner and Özvatan, 2022) or research on idiosyncrasies and tensions arising as a consequence of "alternative" science and the relationship with scientific authority (see Forchtner et al., 2018; Lubarda, forthcoming). At the same time, research on the far right's environmental positioning has moved beyond anti-environmentalism (Gemenis et. al 2012), as the far right has started to recognize the scientific evidence in relation to anthropogenic climate change (Forchtner and Lubarda, 2022). Whatever the future brings with respect to the far right's positioning towards science and anthropogenic climate change, none of the ideological grounds of far-right ecologism (including ethnonationalist *Blood and Soil*) is necessarily a hindrance to acceptance of anthropological climate change. After all, if 'the land' has to be cared for, e.g. by avoiding pesticides (e.g. Tosun and Debus, 2020; Lubarda, 2020b), why should climate change, which will undoubtedly harm this land, be necessarily ignored? In other words, the far right's rejection of climate change and environmental sciences is more likely to be a consequence of other factors, including other far-right ideological aspects being prioritized, the role of lobbies (Moreno et al. 2022) or contextual circumstances (e.g., the carbon-based economy of Poland). Beyond gender (see above), an ideological aspect which has been investigated in particular is populism (see survey research by

Huber, 2020; see also Lockwood, 2018). However, while Huber highlights anti-establishment attitudes, work on far-right communication (which admittedly cannot conclusively answer the question, but see Forchtner and Kølvraa, 2015; Forchtner et al., 2018; Huber et al., 2021; Küppers, 2022) and even other survey research (Krange et al. 2019; Kulin et al. 2021; Jylhä and Hellmer, 2020) stresses the relevance of nationalist and far-right attitudes and/ or cannot confirm the relevance of anti-establishment ones.

Finally, the "so what" question of future relevance is a difficult task for the scholarship on far-right environmentalism. Recent research indicates that far right engagement with the environment may be increasing (Dean and Lubarda, 2022), but it is still far from being a major topic of interest for (ethno)nationalists. What is even more unlikely is future far-right progressivism vis-à-vis anthropogenic climate change: timid acceptance paired with process and response skepticism or generic statements scorning the elites and big (foreign) polluters (Lubarda, 2017; Forchtner, 2019b; Marguiles, 2021; Turner and Bailey, 2021; Malm and the Zetkin Collective, 2021: 472-474) seem to be the limits of far-right's engagement. Hence, the question of relevance has often been answered through an evaluation of the potential for ecofascist violence (Anson et al. 2021). The attacks in Christchurch and El Paso mentioned at the beginning of the chapter certainly signal the potential for ecofascist ideas to be used as a motivation for terrorist attacks. Interestingly, many works on the topic published since 2019 have referred to these attacks as a hook to the topic. The number of ecofascist organizations that threatened with or resorted to violence is increasing and should not be ignored (Moore and Roberts, 2022), but it is difficult to argue for a clear "environmentalist" motivation behind these abhorrent acts. More often than not, ecofascism

and far-right ecologism might simply be "yet another", motive for carrying out acts of terrorism.

3. *Avenues for future research*

With the increasing interest in the intersection between the far right and the natural environment, future research should, first, not simply explore new "avenues", but revisit old ones. That is, there is still a need for more case studies, coming, importantly, from various disciplines and geographical areas, to provide a stronger foundation for comprehensive understanding and responses. Indeed, more conversation is needed between those focusing on European (the area most research seems to focus on currently) and non-European contexts. The latter include, of course, the Global South, but also countries of the Global North about which, still, surprisingly little is known (from the United States to Japan). This becomes important amid the mainstreaming and the "global" nature of the far right, with variations of far-right regimes spanning from Brazil to India. Although global studies of far-right ecologism are most welcome in evaluating the disruptive potential of its proponents, studies focusing on contextual comparisons, e.g., the developments in a single region or country, could be more useful in understanding what drives particular forms of ecological activism and engagement.

Second, the study of the far right and the environment has still a few doors to kick wide open; of which we only mention two, both for pragmatic reasons and because these two are clearly within scholarly reach. The first one has to do with methods: in addition to analysis of written text and even interviews with far-right activists, focus groups (to understand the dynamic formation of *far-right* 'public' opinion) and

quantitative studies of far-right voters should help us to understand in which settings far-right individuals are (un)likely to support progressive environmental/ climate policies. This could also allow us to explain what conditions the far-right appeal in the environmental domain. For example, is support for environmental policies by the far-right electorate associated with populist antagonism towards the elites or with the place-based attachment and nostalgia towards the heritage bestowed by the forefathers. Furthermore, multimodal analysis could be a useful addendum to future examinations of far-right ecologism. Most importantly, this points to the focus on the visual mode, that is, a mode which is highly persuasive and able to play a crucial role in propagating, maintaining and bolstering far-right ideologies (their problem definitions, interpretations and solutions). Indeed, images not only convey knowledge and articulate (ideal, far-right) subjectivities, but construct emotions too as Joffe (2008) argues. Such research can, more specifically, consider similar/ different functions of the visual mode (do visuals support or even drive the written mode – or do visual point in a different direction compared with the written mode). In any way, in light of the simplification of complexity (Ross and Bevensee 2020) via far-right ecologism and given the omnipresence of the visual today, a focus on the latter is needed. This also includes the analysis of moving images which, due to smartphones, access options and social media platforms already replace (or at least complement) the circulation of still images is a necessity and points to the next step, that is, the analysis of moving images which, due to smartphones, access options and social media platforms already replace (or at least complement) the circulation of still images.

The second point is related to counter-communication strategies. Such communication, as in the case of science

communication more generally, should not simply assume that the far right lacks information or is "uneducated", but depart from an understanding that it is existing identities/ relationships, values and worldviews which matter when hoping to cause change (e.g. Boykoff 2019). This is not to say that such communication should 'buy into' and, thus, replicate far-right premises and narratives when hoping to instigate change nor that such communication on its own would sway actors/ voters away from the far right/ towards environmental/ climate policies in line with the scientific consensus. Instead, and although such communication might indeed persuade far-right individuals to look more favorably on, for example, climate mitigation, such investigations should, ultimately, be considered more comprehensively. That is, such communication has to be envisaged as responding to one manifestation of far-right ideology, besides much more common ones such as anti-immigrations stances. Such counter-communication should be envisaged (only) as one avenue amongst many and intertwined with other thematic areas of counter-communication. However, thinking about such counter-communication would furthermore serve the purpose of engaging from new perspectives with far-right environmental communication. Methodically, thinking about such counter-communication can depart from written texts and knowledge generated within the field of science communication more broadly. This also constitutes intriguing avenues for research as such tactics would be ultimately also in need of empirical testing. For instance, the role of particular (far-right) narratives on attitudinal shifts towards renewables or biodiversity opens up a plethora of opportunities for experimental research.

These and further avenues will unfold in a context characterized by a mainstreamed far right. Indeed, it is highly un-

likely that far-right ideas will be "unmainstreamed" or returned to the fringes. Simultaneously, and as stated at the beginning of this overview, future research on far-right ecologism and its diverse aspects must not exacerbate the far-right ecologist threat. While there has been an attempt to discursively engage with the environment globally, this engagement has not led to substantive environmental policies. However, far-right ecologism has also not retreated, and is unlikely to do so in the years to come. As the climate crisis is becoming ever more evident, so will research on the far right and environment have to "follow the actors" and trace the developments in far-right politics vis-a-vis the environment. What is more, this research will have to take into account performances of other crises, such as the pandemic, the war against Ukraine and subsequent economic challenges. Articulations of these factors, as symptoms of far-right ideas, in conjunction are likely to impact the ways in which the far right values the natural environment, motivating and reframing the grievances which arise from the ways in which our societies handle these crises.

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A Comparative Analysis of Populisms in Europe: exploring populist parties' ideological flexibility and ambiguity

ALESSIO SCOPELLITI[1] AND JAMES F. DOWNES[2]

Abstract. Despite the recent academic literature widely focused on populism research, the development of populist parties' ideologies remains one of the least explored factors. As such, this chapter provides two different approaches in examining populist parties' ideologies in Western Europe. More specifically, it namely investigates: (a) the causes behind their ideological flexibility in the long-term and (b) the electoral consequences of their ideological ambiguity (or issue blurring) in the short-term. The first topic will be explored comparing the ideological flexibility of The League and the National Rally with regards to the new transnational cleavage. While the second topic will be analyzed comparing the impact of the ideological ambiguity of Italian populist parties (M5S Party, The League and Brothers of Italy) to their electoral performance at the national and subnational levels. Through the deploy of multiple quantitative methods, including secondary data analysis (from the CMP and CHES databases) and manual content analysis, the central finding of the first case study is that both The League and the National Rally have been ideologically flexible – whilst in different ways – with regards to the new transnational cleav-

[1] Alessio Scopelliti, University of Bristol and Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (United Kingdom), alessio.scopelliti@bristol.ac.uk.
[2] James F. Downes, Hong Kong Metropolitan University (HKSAR) and Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (United Kingdom), jfdownes@hkmu.edu.hk.

age regardless of their party reputation on the European (EU) issue. For the second case study, the core finding is that the M5S Party has suffered a severe electoral decline since the 2018 domestic election. The main factor behind this electoral performance is due to its ideological ambiguity. By contrast, The League and Brothers of Italy Parties have adopted clear positional stances. The results from both case studies are important as they demonstrate the development of populist parties' ideology, alongside underlying as the research has much to debate about both the nature and impact of populist parties' ideologies[3].

Keywords: Populism; Ideology; Flexibility/Ambiguity; Transnational cleavage; Electoral performance.

1. *Introduction*

This chapter provides a comparative approach in examining populist parties in Western Europe. More specifically, we explore two key themes that provide different empirical insights when investigating the ideology of populist parties in Europe, namely: (a) the causes behind their ideological flexibility in the long-term and (b) the electoral consequences of their ideological ambiguity (or issue blurring) in the short-term. For the first theme, we will compare the ideological flexibility of two 'established' populist political parties with regards to the European (EU) issue which constitutes a new transnational cleavage structure. Therefore, two countries in Western Europe (France and Italy) are selected as both country cases

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[3] Alessio Scopelliti's part of the chapter draws on his ongoing research which explores the ideological flexibility of populist parties in both France and Italy. James F. Downes examine the negative electoral consequences of ideological flexibility for the valence populist M5S Party in Italy, drawing on his co-authored work with Nicola Palma (University of Bologna).

share similar political, economic, and cultural experiences of the European integration process and witnessed the recent pivotal role of populist parties (such as the National Rally and The League) within their national party systems.

While, in exploring the second theme, we will explore the electoral consequences of ideological ambiguity within one country case (Italy) as it offers the possibility to compare different 'types' of populist parties (The League, Brothers of Italy, and Five Star Movement) within the same national and sub-national level party systems. Therefore, the chapter draws on a 'supply-side' approach in investigating the implications of the ongoing ideological transformations of populist parties in contemporary European politics.

Two core empirical findings are found in the chapter. Firstly, the chapter demonstrates that, over long periods of time, established populist political parties are more flexible than we thought. Both country cases highlight the overall agenda flexibility on the EU issue for these two established populist *radical right* parties: The League and National Rally. Moreover, the main findings of the chapter highlight how established populist radical right parties can employ diverse ideological elements at the national level via employing stances that include both elements from Euroscepticism and Europeanism.

Secondly, focusing on a short timeframe, the chapter highlights the negative role played by ideological ambiguous party strategies (issue blurring) specifically on the electoral fortunes of the valence populist M5S Party in Italy. The main findings for the M5S Party shows how a lack of 'clarity' (clear positions) on key socio-economic and socio-cultural issues has hindered the party electorally, particularly in the post-2018 Italian General Election context. In contrast, the M5S's main electoral competitors, The League and Brothers of Italy Par-

ties have adopted clear positional stances on a wide range of socio-economic and socio-cultural issues. Therefore, the main findings in the M5S case study highlight the widespread anti-incumbency effects for the valence populist M5S Party, with a lack of clear policy direction (ambiguity) hindering the party electorally and contributing to the party's ongoing systematic electoral decline post-2018 Italian political landscape.

2. *Defining Populism and Parties' Ideological Flexibility and Ambiguity*

2.1. The Ideational Approach of Populism: The Case of the Five Star Movement

A wealth of academic literature has been conducted on the concept of populism in recent years. There are numerous key features of populism; the antagonistic struggle between the "pure people" and the corrupt elite as well as a harsh criticism of the institutions of representative democracy (see Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2007). These elements have characterized the political rise and the electoral success of the populist M5S Party in Italy. From the initial refusal to forge alliances with traditional political parties considered as belonging to a corrupt caste (see Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013) to the emphasis attributed to the tools of direct democracy, capable of involving citizens in the decision-making process (Manucci et al, 2018); alongside post-ideological approaches capable of guaranteeing the electoral support of voters now disillusioned by the crisis of the political system (Russo et al., 2017).

We build on the existing literature in party politics which argues that the M5S party should be defined as neither a left-wing political party, nor a right one, due to its capacity of adopting contingent stances located at different points in the

ideological left-right spectrum. This approach is consistent with recent contributions to the study of populism, such as the *valence* populist classification (see Zulianello, 2020). Building on the so-called ideational approach on populism (Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2017; Mudde, 2007) this categorization enriches the traditional distinction between left-wing and right-wing populist parties by adding a new variant to which valence populist parties belong. Instead of being ideologically positioned along the various dimensions of the party system, valence populist parties emphasize non-positional policy domains, such as anti-corruption and anti-political establishment rhetoric.

Furthermore, the pairing of populist rhetoric and a diversified ideological background operates also in the definitions of other scholars who identify as *polyvalent* or *eclectic* the tendency of M5S to adopt left-wing positions on economic issues whilst adopting conservative positions on socio-cultural policy issues, such as the party's vague and nativist position on immigration and European integration (see Mosca and Tronconi, 2019; Pirro, 2018; Pirro and Taggart, 2018; Zulianello, 2020).

The party's diverse ideology also reflects the ideological and political positioning of its voters (see Isernia et al, 2018). The electoral success of M5S, especially its exceptional result achieved in the 2018 Italian General Election, occurred in a political context of increasing dissatisfaction amongst voters with existing political parties on the mainstream of Italian politics, alongside socio-economic events like the long-term effects of multiple crises in Europe, such as the 2008-13 economic crisis (Downes and Loveless, 2018) and the 2015-2018 EU refugee crisis (Downes et al., 2021).

Since M5S was founded in 2009 by the comedian and blogger Beppe Grillo, the M5S has focused on anti-establishment

positions, on the merit of direct democracy alongside the need for redistributive and environmental policies. In particular, by means of emphasizing welfare and social protection policies, the party acted as issue-entrepreneurs to secure electoral consensus, exploiting the low emphasis attributed by mainstream parties to policy issues related to the provision of social welfare schemes (De Vries and Hobolt, 2014). Thus, prior to the 2018 Italian General Election, the M5S centered its electoral propaganda on its anti-establishment rhetoric alongside the support of redistributive policies to reduce poverty and enhance social security schemes to unemployed persons.

2.2. The Political-Strategic Approach of Populism: The Cases of The League and The National Rally

Alongside the ideational approach, the second most used theory to study populism in the academic literature is the political-strategic approach. Academic scholarship often refers to populism as a core founding feature for certain political parties, especially those belonging to the far-right party family (see e.g., Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2007; Betz and Meret, 2012). Nonetheless, scholars such as Weyland (2017) are skeptical with the ideational approach because it is arguably limited for a deeper understanding on the implications and operationalization of such phenomenon.

The main argument in favor of the political-strategic approach is the chameleon effect of such features, although the ideational approach has become the most dominant in the political science literature (Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2017), it remains ambiguous. The main issue is that the identification of 'the pure people' and the 'corrupted elite' can have different meanings according to the different types of both (a)

populist parties that can be generated from the (b) left vs. right ideological spectrum.

For instance, Bugaric (2019) speaks of populist *radical left* parties as those political forces that change the current status quo through the reduction of income inequality and slightly retreating from the economic consequences of globalization (see Huber and Schimpf, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). On the other hand, populist *radical right* parties are more focused in overcoming the corrupted elite in the defense of the interests of the 'pure (native) people', which purity is, therefore, determined by one's ethnic belonging to the majority group in the country (Rydgren, 2007). For the latter, the fight against the 'establishment' is meant to protect the ethnic and cultural homogeneity of the native majority population.

Moreover, some recent studies confirm that the feature of populism is not unique of fringe parties, but it can also be employed by mainstream parties such as La Republique En Marche! in France (see Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Perottino, and Guasti, 2020) or the Democratic Party in Italy between 2016 and 2018 (Salvati, 2016; Castaldo and Verzichelli, 2020). Scholars often refer to these cases as constituting centrist populism or technocratic populism. Furthermore, a different kind of populism is one which emphasizes technocrat competences in response to the 'incompetence' of populist radical parties.

On this basis, populism is more recognized as a political strategy that can be easily employed by a multitude of ideologies. In Jagers and Walgrave's (2007: 323) words:

> Populism, thinly defined, has no political color; it is colorless and can be of the left and of the right. It is a normal political style adopted by all kinds of politicians from all times. Populism is simply a strategy to mobilize support, it is a standard communication technique to reach out to the constituency.

In line with the above literature, we argue that both The League and the National Rally best represented the political-strategic approach of populism. The core ideologies of these two parties are not derived from the 'moral' conflict between the elites and the people, but they are rather the ultimate consequence of three main constitutive features that best reflect contemporary radical right ideology: nativism, authoritarianism, and hostility toward liberal democracy. To deliver these three different strands, The League and the National Rally strategically employ populist features, which includes: offering simplistic solution over complex issues (often through deploying plain and emotional use of language) and framing themselves as the saviors of their countries thorough the extraordinary capacities of their charismatic leaders.

2.3. Defining the Ideological Flexibility and Ambiguity of Political Parties

Drawing on ideas of rational choice institutionalism, political parties are conceptualized in this chapter as actors that behave instrumentally according to their goal, which is gathering the maximum number of votes (Downs, 1957). Drawing from Harmel and Janda (1994: 275), parties' ideological flexibility and ambiguity coincides with their definition of party change which occurs as *"any variation, alteration or modification* in how parties are organized, what human and material resources they can draw upon, *what they stand for* and what they do" (*our emphasis*). In its broadest sense, this definition encompasses a variety of elements that can determine party flexibility, stretching beyond the scope of this contribution (e.g., parties' organizational theory).

   This definition provides useful insights to implement rational choice theory when exploring party ideological flexibil-

ity and ambiguity. The key point proposed by Harmel and Janda is that of including not only contextual/external (or demand side) factors as the driving forces that shape parties' behavior, but there are also internal (or supply-side) factors which also play an important role in exploring party's ideological change (Hornig, 2010: 26-27). To quote Sartori (1990: 169), using as an example the Italian Communist Party:

> It is not the 'objective' class (class conditions) that creates the party, but the party that creates the 'subjective' class (class consciousness). [...] The party is not a 'consequence' of the class. Rather, and before, it is the class that receives its identity from the party.

To sum up, the ideological flexibility and ambiguity of political parties is theoretically conceptualized as "any variation, alteration, or modification [...] [on] what they stand for" (Harmel and Janda, 1994: 275) and it is empirically operationalized by observing changes within the supply- side of political parties (see Hornig, 2010: 26-27).

3. *Ideological Flexibility: Changes of the European Issue within the Established Populist Radical Right Agenda*

Having discussed parties' ideological flexibility and explored the instrumental behavior assumptions of rational choice institutionalism, in this section we will explore the core findings on the first thematic focus of this chapter: the ideological flexibility of established populist radical right parties with regards to the European issue in the long-term. Firstly, while briefly introducing the rationale why comparing the ideological flexibility of The League and the National Rally with regards to the new transnational cleavage, we construct a causal argument, that the flexibility of a political party is bounded

(but not limited) by the nature of its founding cleavage. Subsequently, we explore the main features of these ideological changes within their party agenda from one domestic election to another in the last four decades by exploring the multidimensionality of the European issue: the institutional dimension (Federalism vs. Souverainisme), the economic dimension (Marketism vs. Welfare Chauvinism) and the cultural dimension (Multiculturalism vs. Nativism).

3.1. Combining Historical and Rational Choice Institutionalism

Based on historical institutionalist ideas, political parties are often portrayed as ideologically inflexible by nature. This inflexibility is mainly assumed from a tactical point of view. Indeed, the ideological flexibility of parties can be very harmful for party reputation and, thus voters would not trust a party that changes position too many times (Bouteca and Devos, 2016: 4-5). In fact, established political parties are constrained by their history and societal backgrounds, and they cannot ignore it (Meyer, 2013; Dalton and McAllister, 2015). In this sense, there is the implicit assumption that when a political party belongs "to a given side of the cleavage [, it] does not change over time by definition" (Emanuele et al., 2020: 7).

However, drawing on Katznelson and Weingast's contribution (2005), we argue that it is possible to combine elements from historical institutionalism – e.g., notions of path dependency – with the wider processes of rational choice institutionalism – e.g., the agency factor of political parties – to explore party ideological flexibility (Weingast, 2005). As such, when looking at parties through rational choice institutionalist eyes, parties have goals, and they want to accomplish them, but relying on the assumption of "bounded rationality" from

the neo-institutionalism theory, it might be more problematic for a party to change its founding cleavage as it is closely connected with the reasons that the party was politically mobilized (regardless of the salience of that topic in the public debate).

For instance, Volkens and Klingemann (2002: 145) provide the following example. It would be unusual for a communist party to shift from proposing policies to defend fair wages and being voted for by people belonging to the working class, to policies that propose a free-market regime and then, being voted for by employers. For that reason, although we consider political parties as votes-oriented entities, we argue that we shall consider the bounded nature of their founding cleavage. As outlinedabove, this is what is called the assumption of *bounded rationality*: the claim that a political party is constrained (but not limited) by its founding cleavage.

Furthermore, the selection of The League and the National Rally as case studies for this comparative analysis is driven by two main reasons. The first one is because both parties are particularly similar. As described above, they belong to the same radical right party family and, for that reason, they are both considered as EU issue owners (in line with the issue ownership theory) who are historically antagonistic towards the European integration process (see e.g. Leruth et al., 2018; Vasilopoulou 2018a, 2018b) and "just as the religious cleavage and the class cleavage were raised by Catholic and socialist parties on one side of the divide" (Hooghe and Marks, 2018: 111), in the current Western European party competition, the new transnational cleavage structure is primarily mobilized by radical right parties. Secondly, these parties are not identical. In fact, the second reason to select these parties is due to their different founding cleavage. On the one hand, (a) the League has a long independentist history being founded on

the classical regional cleavage (Mannheimer, 1991). On the other hand, the (b) National Rally is a party that was founded on the new transnational cleavage as, from the origins of the party, the firm belief to pursue and maintain national self-determination forms the bedrock of its natural antagonization of the European integration process (see Goodliffe, 2015; Ivaldi, 2018).

3.2. The Restructuring of the European Issue: Changes in Terms of Emphasis and Position

In this chapter, political parties' agenda is defined as a product of an interaction between (a) political offers and (b) political narratives. The political offer indicates, in a more practical way, what is a party's budgetary plan for those policies that it wants to accomplish once joining the government. While the political narrative has the role to reinforce voters' support from previous elections or to appeal new voters. Both elements are fundamental to have a clear picture of what political parties say during a domestic election campaign since voters do not only rely on single sources when they must inform themselves on what are the political alternatives during an electoral campaign. Through deploying quantitative methods, such as secondary data analysis and manual content analysis of primary data, we coded multiple sources of partisan literature with the same codebook that included both parties' manifestos and official press/social media releases[4]. Subsequently, we computed the mean between the political offer

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[4] See Appendix 1 for the data sources.

and the political narrative to have a complete overview of parties' agenda[5].

Moreover, to graphically represent the ideological flexibility of the case studies, we combined two measures to plot how issue emphasis and position have changed within parties' political agenda in the long-term. The first one is the standard deviation to measure the extent to which the emphasis or position of parties tend to be close or distant from one year to another. The second one is the measurement of trend lines coefficient for each ideological conflict in order to observe in which direction the party tends to move after long periods of time. With this methodological strategy, we can then observe and, therefore, compare how the classical cleavages[6] (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), the transnational cleavage (Hooghe and Marks, 2018) and the dimensions of the transnational cleavage have changed over the years.

3.2.1 *The Ideological flexibility of The League in terms of Emphasis and Position*

Figure 1 plots The League's ideological flexibility in terms of issue emphasis in all (a) cleavage structures and (b) dimensions of the new transnational cleavage. It is important to note that some cleavages are less flexible than others. In particular, the community cleavage, the religious cleavage and the class cleavage did not significantly change when com-

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[5] See Appendix 2 the overall supply side of The League and the National Rally in both terms of emphasis and position.

[6] The classical cleavages mentioned above refer to the four classical ideological conflicts identified by Lipset and Rokkan (1967): 'State vs. Church' (religious cleavage), 'Center vs. Periphery' (regional cleavage), 'Urban vs. Rural' (community cleavage) and 'Employers vs. Workers' (class cleavage).

pared with the other two cleavages (transnational and regional). When focusing on the new transnational cleavage, from 1983 to 2018, The League has constantly increased the level of emphasis of this new ideological conflict in every national election. This result suggests that, over the years, the transnational cleavage has become an issue that has increased in terms of priority within The League's supply- side in increasing its ownership of the European issue.

Furthermore, the second part (b) of Figure 1 shows that within the new transnational cleavage, the institutional and economic dimensions are less flexible when compared to the cultural dimension. These results suggest that the institutional dimension and economic dimension did not substantially change in the last ten domestic electoral campaigns. On the other hand, among the three dimensions constituting the new transnational cleavage, the cultural dimension is the one that mostly influenced the ideological flexibility of The League within its political agenda by increasing its European issue ownership. This result is pretty much in line with our expectations since radical right parties often deliver most of their messages towards their electorate on cultural-related issues such as the discourse to favor nativist policies to the detriment of multicultural policies.

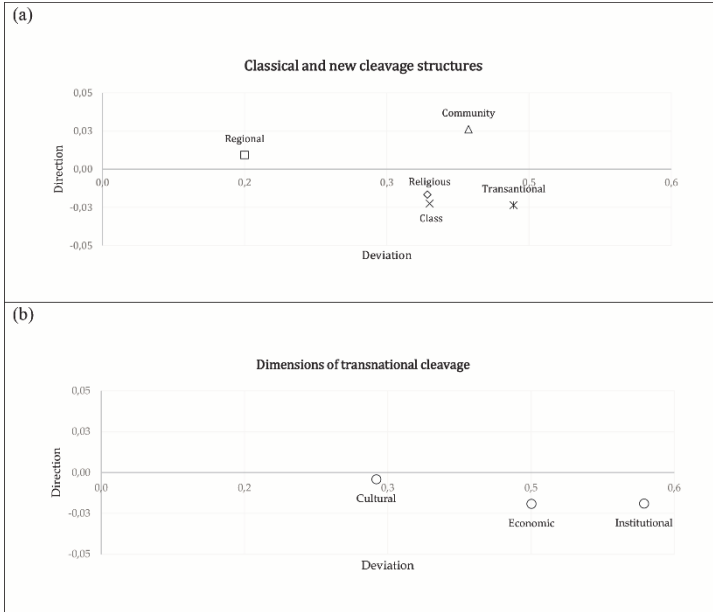Figure 1 – Ideological Flexibility of The League in terms of emphasis:
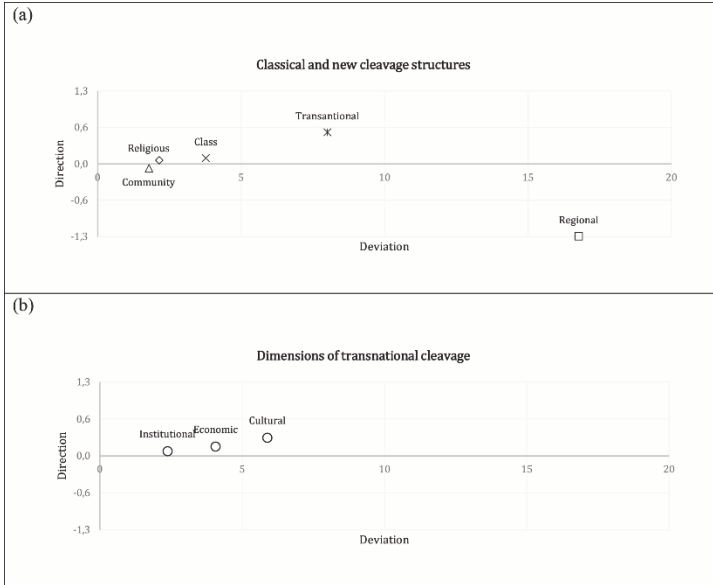
Source: Authors' Own Elaboration

Figure 2 below plots the ideological flexibility of The League in terms of issue position. The first part (*a*) is dedicated to the flexibility of both classical and new cleavages. This part shows that the regional cleavage is least flexible when compared with the other cleavages. By contrast, the other classical cleavages (religious, class and community) are moderately flexible. Ultimately, the transnational cleavage looks to be the most flexible ideological conflict, especially in terms of deviation. This means that The League tends to shift position on the European issue more often than the other cleavages from one election to another. Particularly, The League tends to shift position towards the anti-EU dichotomy. Therefore, the next stage is to observe which dimension

mostly influence this positional shift of The League with re-gards to the transnational cleavage. Thus, moving to the second part (b) of Figure 2, we can notice that amongst these dimensions, the cultural dimension is the least flexible issue. It is almost frozen (in terms of direction). While the economic and the institutional dimensions are, on in con-trast, the most flexible ones within the new transnational cleavage. Moreover, they both tend towards the dichotomies that constitute an anti-EU position, which are welfare chau-vinism and souvrenism. These results are important as they demonstrate that The League actively changed its supply-side with regards to the new transnational cleavage, particu-larly with the economic and institutional dimensions to co-herently align its political agenda on the EU towards all po-sitions that antagonize the European integration process (Souverainisme, Welfare Chauvinism and Nativism).

Figure 2 – Ideological Flexibility of The League in terms of Position:

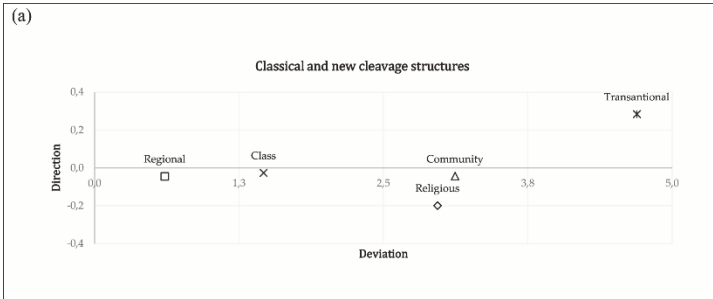*Source*: Authors' Own Elaboration

3.2.2 *The Ideological Flexibility of the National Rally in terms of Emphasis and Position*
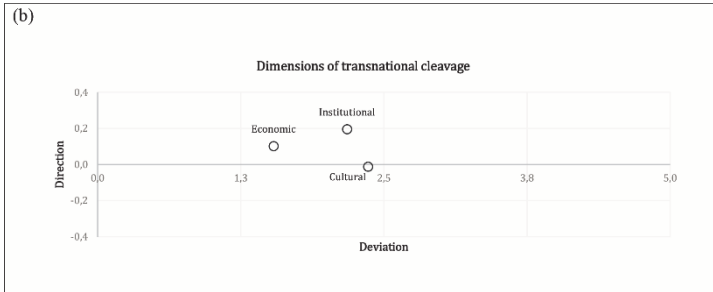
In this section, we focus on the ideological flexibility of the National Rally with regards to the new transnational cleavage. Starting with the ideological flexibility of the National Rally in terms of emphasis, the first part (1) of Figure 3 shows that all classical cleavages are less flexible than the new transnational cleavage. In fact, the new transnational cleavage is the most flexible when compared with the other classical cleavages both in terms of variation and direction. These results clearly demonstrate how the National Rally increased its 'issue own-

ership' over the new transnational cleavage from 1981 to 2017.

However, expanding the analysis to observe which dimension is behind the increase of the National Rally's European issue ownership, when looking at the second part (b) of Figure 3, the institutional dimension is the most flexible dimension when compared to the economic and cultural dimensions. One would expect that the cultural dimension (which is at the core of the nativist discourses produced by far-right movements) would have been increasing over the years. Alternatively, the National Rally appeared to have increased its issue ownership on the EU especially through the institutional dimension by increasing the urgency to reclaim national sovereignty from the transnational to the national level.

Figure 3 – Ideological Flexibility of the National Rally in terms of Emphasis:

Finally, when exploring the ideological flexibility of the new transnational cleavage within the National Rally's political agenda in terms of position, we can observe from Figure 4, in the first part (a), that the new transnational cleavage is particularly frozen when compared with the other classical cleavages. The National Rally never ideologically changed in terms of position over the years, but it kept a strong polarized position towards the dichotomy 'anti-EU'. Therefore, considering these results, it is necessary to expand the analysis within the new transnational cleavage to observe which dimension (or dimensions) caused this ideological "rigidity" of the National Rally with regards to the European issue. Thus, when looking in the second part (b) of Figure 4, one can observe that the cultural dimension is the one that substantially anchored the ideological flexibility of the National Rally as the French radical right party did not substantially change in both terms of deviation and direction over the years. By contrast, the economic and the institutional dimensions demonstrated significant level of ideological flexibility, and in both cases, the National Rally Party shifted position towards the dichotomies of welfare chauvinism and souvrenism. However, the cultural dimension is "frozen" and therefore ameliorates the effect of

the other two dimensions in influencing the ideological flexi-
bility of the new transnational cleavage.

Figure 4 – Ideological Flexibility of the National Rally in terms of Position:
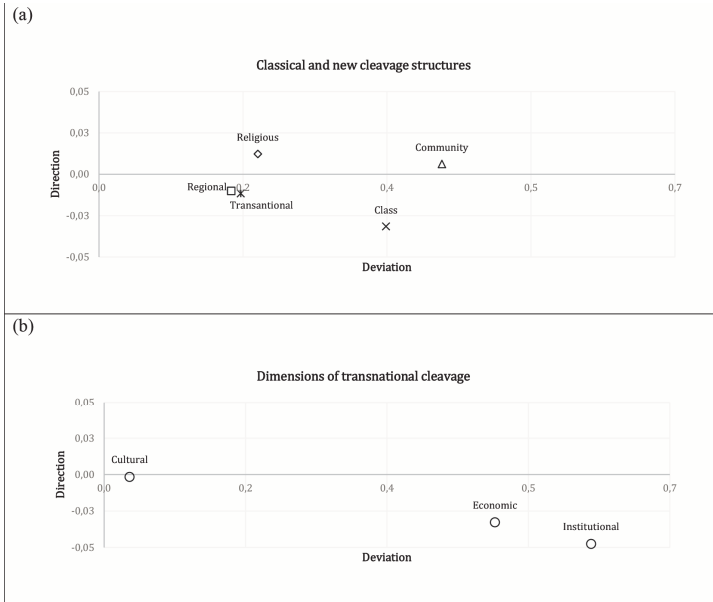
Source: Authors' Own Elaboration

3.2.3 *Core Findings*

Based on the empirical results, when looking at the changes
within the political parties' agenda, this section makes two key
findings. The first one is that established populist radical
right parties, such as The League and the National Rally,
demonstrate ideological flexibility with regards to the new
transnational cleavage (in the long-term) regardless of their
consolidated brand reputation or their funding cleavage.
However, there are few differences between the case studies.

It emerges from this analysis that The League has been ideologically flexible with the new transnational cleavage in terms of both emphasis and position. In contrast, the transnational cleavage (its founding cleavage) appears to constrain the flexibility of the National Rally Party. Therefore, these results confirm our theoretical expectations that political parties can be ideologically flexible. More specifically, in line with the bounding assumption, the National Rally had more difficulties than The League to be ideologically flexible. Yet, regardless of its founding cleavage, the National Rally Party still found enough space to change its European issue ownership.

The second major finding relies on the differences amongst the two case studies with regards to their ideological flexibility towards the dimensions constituting the new transnational cleavage. In fact, when deepening the analysis on the dimensions of the new transnational cleavage for each case study, the empirical analysis reveals that their ideological flexibility on new transnational cleavage has been shaped by different dimensions within the supply-side of The League and the National Rally. Starting with the institutional and economic dimensions, within the supply-side of the League, the economic dimension is the one that mostly shaped League's attitude towards the EU.

Since the 1980s, The League has particularly favored the European integration process from an economic perspective, such as the implementation of the European Monetary Union because the Italian party considered the Northern Italian regions as ready to handle this economic process (Quaglia, 2008: 69). In this sense, the economic dimensions of the new transnational cleavage were historically perceived by the League as an instrument to advantage the northern regions to the detriment of the Central and Southern regions of Italy. For instance, in 1992, the newspaper *Lombardia Autonomista*

used to run the headline "farther from Rome, closer to Europe" (Lombarida Autonomista, 5 March 1992). While, moving to the National Rally, both the institutional and the economic dimensions had a decisive role in shaping the new transnational cleavage, but mostly in terms of emphasis.

Indeed, the French National Rally Party under the guise of its former alias (The National Front) accelerated its coverage on the EU issue since the early 1980s to compete as a political alternative, at the national level, against the ultra-liberal agenda promoted by the EU. In terms of issue position, the institutional dimension was mostly flexible. Although it is important to note that the ambiguous pro-Europeanism of the National Rally was primarily motivated by geo-political interests against the Soviet threat (Shields, 2007: 240). For instance, in the electoral manifesto of 1981 one of the main program points was "ensuring peace and national independence through loyalty to our European and Atlantic alliances" (National Rally manifesto, 1981) and Jean-Marie Le Pen would also repeatedly declare that "Europe needs France, the world needs Europe. A strong France within a strong Europe" (National Hebdo, 26 February 1986).

Finally, the cultural dimension has impacted differently the overall ideological flexibility of both The League and the National Rally. Within the supply-side of The League, the cultural dimension has highly influenced its flexibility on the new transnational cleavage in terms of issue emphasis. Under Matteo Salvini's leadership of The League Party, a large proportion of The League's electoral campaign are focused on the nativist rhetoric and the promises to implement policies to disadvantage immigration and multiculturalism in Italy. In contrast, the cultural dimension has been a counterweight to the National Rally's ideological flexibility regarding the new transnational cleavage. Simply put, the "Nativist" dichotomy is

what anchored the National Rally to the "anti-EU" dichotomy over the period observed.

4. *Ideological Ambiguity: The Electoral Decline of the Five Star Movement in Italy*

In the next section we examine the key empirical findings on the second key theme of this chapter. We then investigate how intra-party and organizational features such as the degree of internal dissent and parties' ideological ambiguous features have an impact in explaining political parties' electoral failure, via the case of the M5S party in the post-2018 Italian General Election political landscape.

4.1. The M5S's Electoral Performance: Post-2018 Italian Landscape:

The regional elections held after the 2018 national parliamentary election took place whilst the Five Star Movement was actively involved as a Coalition partner of two consecutive and highly heterogeneous coalition governments. The first government (Conte I, 2018-2019) took office after a coalition agreement with the radical right League party. By virtue of the overall number of parliamentary seats acquired after the 2018 Italian General Election, the Five Star Movement played a central role in the process of government formation by proposing Giuseppe Conte as the leader of the coalition government with the League. The second M5S led coalition government (Conte II, 2019-2021) was sworn in, with the center-left Democratic Party, after the League party leader's (i.e., Matteo Salvini) motion of no confidence against the prime

minister alongside Salvini's failed attempt to call for early elections in 2019.

Nonetheless, national alliances are only partially reflected in the electoral dynamics at a subnational level (see Vampa, 2021). Indeed, the M5S leadership led the party to refuse any coalition agreement in nearly each regional election without replicating the national government alliances at the regional level. Only in the regions of Umbria and Liguria did M5S form an alliance with the then government ally, the Democratic Party with both parties supporting the same political candidate.

The reasons for the M5S's regional electoral strategy are multifaceted. On the one hand, the party risks losing its status as an 'outsider' now that it has served in separate coalition governments at the national level and is perceived as being part of the ruling political establishment. On the other hand, the electoral system of the Italian regions with the head of the regional executives being directly elected according to a presidential style system, increases the role of the candidates, and thus makes the subnational party competition less liable to national political parties' dynamics (see Grimaldi and Vercesi, 2017). This trend is confirmed by the electoral strategy of incumbent regional presidents aspiring to hold office, right-wing and left-wing alike, to participate in regional elections with the joint support of both personal and candidate-centered lists alongside traditional political parties' endorsement.

In some regions, such as Campania, Liguria and Veneto, the lists centered on the candidate's figures exceeded those of the mainstream political parties, thereby effectively guaranteeing the re-election of incumbent heads in regional executives (i.e., Vincenzo De Luca in Campania, Giovanni Toti in Liguria, alongside Luca Zaia in Veneto). In this political con-

text, the Five Star Movement, which did not have any incumbent regional presidents among its ranks, supported its candidates only through the list attributed to the party at the national level. Therefore, the M5S party faced difficulties in both setting up their electoral campaign exclusively on subnational issues and at the same time in exploiting the electoral strength of local candidates.

The explanations for M5S's electoral decline at the regional level are multifaceted. These explanations range from the lack of a clear organizational structure at the subnational level to the attitude of the M5S leadership, struggling with different internal factions and political currents, alongside the resignation of Luigi Di Maio as the leader of the party in early 2020.

Furthermore, the M5S party and its leadership hierarchy must increasingly come to terms with the increasing perception that the party is no longer an insurgent anti-establishment 'challenger' party, but instead is now part of the political establishment as a 'governing' party, having served in the last three coalition governments. In addition, it can be argued that some of M5S's voters did not vehemently oppose a governing alliance with the radical right League, whilst other M5S voters expected the former government agreement with the Democratic Party to become structural and long-term oriented, under the leadership of the former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.

4.2. Ambiguity and Blurring (M5S) v. Clarity (Lega and Fratelli d'Italia) Party Positions:

Drawing on the internationally renowned Chapel Hill Expert Survey Data (CHES) from the 2014, 2017 and 2019 waves, we make four important observations regarding the party posi-

tions and stances of the ideologically 'ambiguous' M5S, alongside the populist radical right Lega and its electoral competitor, Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy). We argue that the ambiguity of the Five Star Movement is one of the main causes of its recent electoral decline.

(1) EU Integration:

Figure 5 below depicts party positions on EU Integration on a 1-7 scale in 2014, 2017 and 2019. A score of 7 implies positive EU attitudes, whereas a score of 1 indicates a strong opposition to EU Integration and the wider EU project. Figure 5 shows how the Populist Italian Five Star Movement (M5S) has shifted from being anti-EU, towards a more 'neutral' and ideologically ambiguous position on EU Integration. The populist radical right Lega and Fratelli d'Italia both resemble and adopt clear anti-EU stances on this dimension.

Figure 5 – Changes in Party Positions on EU Integration
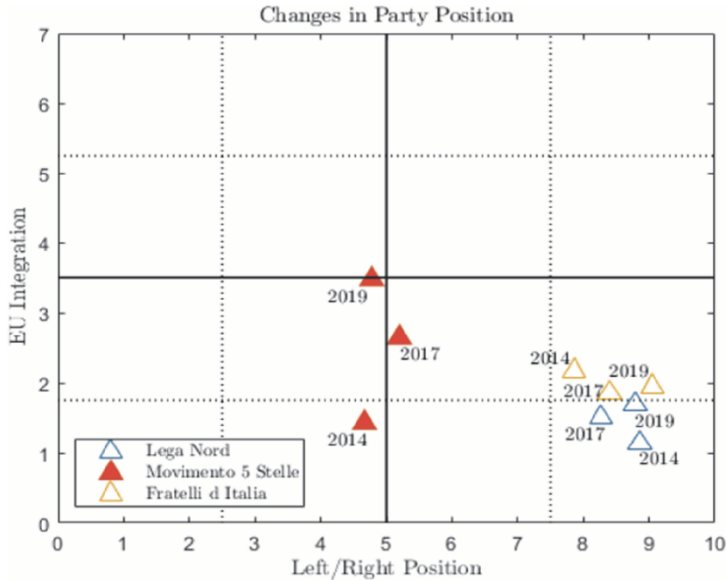
(2) Immigration:

Figure 6 below depicts party positions on Immigration on a 0-10 scale in 2014, 2017 and 2019. A score of 10 indicates more restrictionist and anti-immigration attitudes, whereas a score of 0 implies much more positive attitudes towards immigration. Figure 8 below outlines how M5S has also become more right-wing on the Immigration issue (particularly from 2014). However, the Populist Radical Right *Lega* is much more anti-immigrant and its positions on Immigration have largely remained 'static'.

The PRR League's nearest electoral competitor *Fratelli d'Italia* has adopted a near 'identical' anti-immigrant stance, an increase from (a) 2014 to (b) 2017 and (c) 2019. Though

not presented in the first two charts, the 'mainstream' center left Democratic Party (PD) and center right Forza Italia (FI) parties in Italy are much pro-EU Integration, in comparison to the three 'main' populist parties in Italy. Interestingly, for each of the three time points (i.e., 2014, 2017 and 2019) *Forza Italia* (FI) maintained a more anti-immigrant position than the Five Star Movement did during this period.

Figure 6 – Changes in Party Positions on Immigration
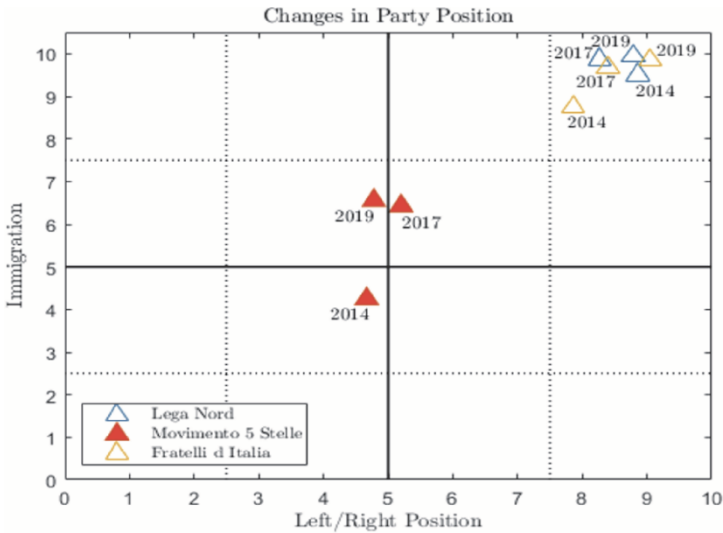
(3) Economics:

Figure 7 measures party positions on redistribution via a 0-10 scale in 2014 and 2019. A score of 0 implies that a political party favors redistribution, whereas a score of 10 implies a party strongly opposes redistribution. Figure 7 outlines how party positioning on "Redistribution" is particularly noteworthy. It seems to confirm M5S's attempt to set the political

agenda on different issues from the ones at the center of the League's political campaign, such as Immigration and Internal Security. According to the CHES 2019 latest wave, the issue salience attributed by the League to immigration policy in 2019 was around its maximum value (i.e., 9.9 out of 10) against the 6.5 points attributed by the M5S. In contrast, the Five Star Movement's salience on redistribution was nearly 8, in comparison to the League's score of 5 on the same issue.

Figure 8 also provides an additional measure that includes improving public services versus reducing taxes and demonstrates how M5S has become more left wing (from 2014) in 2019 and favors improving public services.

During the recent Coalition Government (2018-2019) between M5S and LN, the Five Star Movement launched the Citizenship Income which is a redistribution of wealth measure. The positioning of the government allies in 2019 are almost opposite on this issue. It is important to note that the Figures show that M5S's positions on socio-economic issues correspond more to the left-wing dimension, rather than a clear story about 'ambiguity.'

Figure 7 – Changes in Party Positions on Redistribution of Wealth

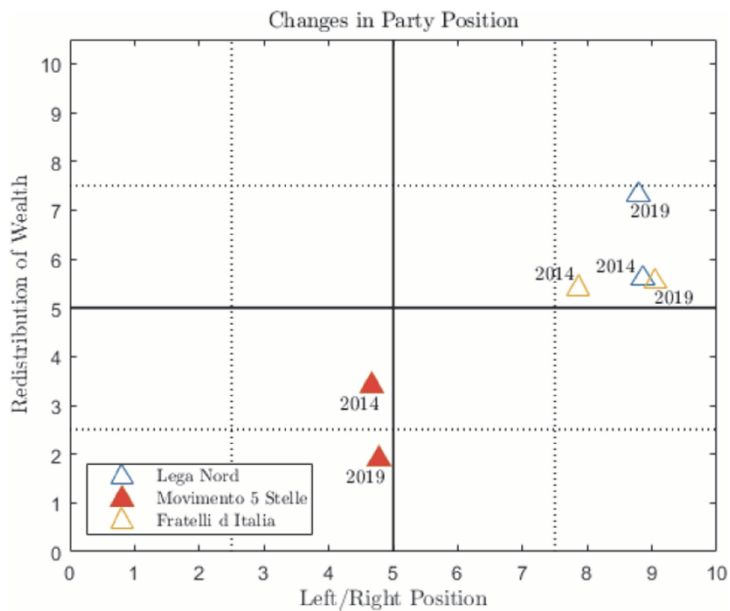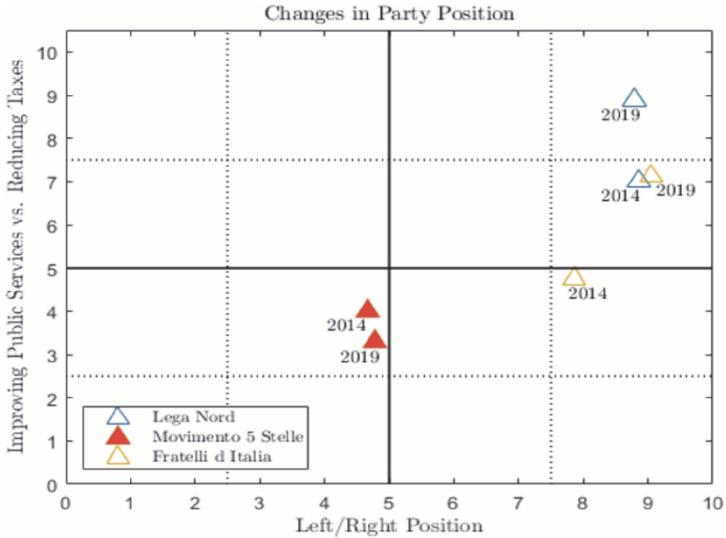Figure 8 – Changes in Improving public services versus reducing taxes

Table 1: Main Political Parties in Italy and Issue Blurring (CHES, 2019)

Political Party	Party Family	EU Integration: Blurry (2019)	GALTAN: Blurry (2019)	Left-Right Economic Position: Blurry (2019)
Five Star Movement (M5S)	Ambiguous	6.3	4.9	6.1
Lega (LN)	Radical Right	3.1	0.8	3.6

Political Party	Party Family	EU Integration: Blurry (2019)	GALTAN: Blurry (2019)	Left-Right Economic Position: Blurry (2019)
Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)	Radical Right	1.5	0.5	4.4
Democratic Party (PD)	Center Left	1.9	3.1	3.2
Forza Italia (FI)	Center Right	5	4	2.3
	CHES AVERAGE (2019)	3.4	2.9	3.6

Source: CHES (2019); *Note*: Figures rounded up or down to 1 decimal place.

4.3. M5S Internal Party Dissent and Issue Blurring

The CHES 2019 wave includes variables that measure (a) the degree to which political parties 'blur' issues and (b) 'dissent' within political parties (see Table 1). Both measures are drawn on in the Italian political context and show the issue 'blurring' of M5S compared to other political parties in Italy, alongside internal party dissent of M5S on EU Integration, immigration, and left-right economic positions. Compared to all the other main political parties in Italy, M5S has the highest level of issue blurring and at the same time, the highest level of party dissent.

We can also examine the mean change in party dissent on EU integration and immigration. Table 2 shows that internal party dissent within M5S has increased substantially on immigration (0.6) and European integration (+1.4). These are important findings and demonstrate the ideologically 'ambiguous' nature of M5S and a party that has high levels of internal party dissent in 2019.[7]

Table 2: Main Political Parties in Italy and Issue Dissent
(CHES, 2019 and 2017)

Political Party	Party Family	EU Dissent (2019 and 2017)	Immigration Dissent (2019 and 2017)	Left-Right Economic Position: Dissent (2019)
Five Star Movement (M5S)	Am- biguous	2019: 5.5 2017: 4.1	2019: 5.4 2017: 4.8	6.9
Lega (LN)	Radical Right	2019: 2.8 2017: 1.2	2019: 0.2 2017: 0.1	2.9

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[7] It is also important to underline that these findings do not capture the context or the timeframe of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. The CHES data that we draw on does not extend to this time period and it is also important to supplement the party position data with individual level survey data, such as voters' perceptions data of the three different populist parties. However, early indications show that M5S is continuing its 'downward' trend in 2022.

Political Party	Party Family	EU Dissent (2019 and 2017)	Immigration Dissent (2019 and 2017)	Left-Right Economic Position: Dissent (2019)
Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)	Radical Right	2019: 0.6 2017: 0.3	2019: 0.3 2017: 0.8	2.8
Democratic Party (PD)	Center Left	2019: 1.6 2017: 3	2019: 3.6 2017: 4.1	5.4
Forza Italia (FI)	Center Right	2019: 4.1 2017: 4.8	2019: 3.8 2017: 3.1	4
	CHES AVERAGE (2019)	2.6	2.7	2.9

Source: CHES (2019 and 2017); *Note*: Figures rounded up or down to 1 decimal place.

4.4. Implications for the Future of M5S

The main argument in this section of the chapter is that the valence populist M5S Party has harmed itself electorally due to its ideological ambiguity. In essence, M5S has self-sabotaged (i.e., internal factors) its electoral prospects, due to its (a) 'issue blurring' and (b) ideologically ambiguous positions on key issues such as EU Integration (adopting more 'neutral' positions) alongside immigration (adopting more

right-wing positions) and a wider range of left-wing stances on socio-economic issues.

This has arguably made it difficult for M5S's policies to resonate clearly amongst Italian voters. In contrast, the PRR *Lega* alongside its right-wing electoral competitor, *Fratelli d'Italia* have adopted clearer positions (i.e., external factors) on a wide range of socio-cultural issues, namely on immigration and EU Integration.

Though M5S has been in Coalition Government and served in three successive Coalition Governments, the ideological future of M5S looks increasingly uncertain, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and a declining macro-economic situation in Italy that has continued into 2022. This wider pattern of electoral volatility and party fragmentation is likely to continue in the coming future for the M5S Party, particularly with the upcoming 2023 Italian General Election looming ever closer on the horizon.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored two key themes of (a) the causes behind parties' ideological flexibility in the long-term and (b) the electoral consequences of parties' ideological ambiguity (or issue blurring) in the short-term within the context of contemporary populism in Western European party politics via a 'supply-side' approach. The first case study in Italy and France highlighted the overall agenda flexibility on the EU issue for established populist radical right parties in Italy and France. Therefore, this case study provided two important implications for the academic literature. Firstly, this chapter improves our understanding on political parties' ideology and its flexibility. In fact, whilst previous research argued about

the ideological rigidity of parties arguing that political parties "do not reinvent themselves with each electoral cycle [as they] have long-standing agendas" (Marks et al., 2002: 586), in contrast, we argue that populist political parties change ideologically because they lack a *Weltanschauung* (worldview), like empty vessels whose ideology blows in response to their electoral interests. Furthermore, this study has contributed to extending the current literature on Euroscepticism, in exposing how established populist radical right parties employ ideological ambiguities that allows them to adopt elements from both Europeanism and Euroscepticism. Such ideological ambiguity may conceivably be an advantage for established populist radical right parties to distinguish themselves as a valid political alternative in their national party systems to the mainstream parties, which historically tends to favor the European integration process in all its dimensions (Brack and Startin, 2015).

The second case study in Italy highlights the multifaceted electoral decline of the valence populist M5S Party and how in the post-2018 Italian General Election context, the M5S Party has suffered a severe electoral decline. The valence populist M5S Party has experienced a high degree of internal party disunity alongside lacking clear positional stances on both socio-cultural and socio-economic issues. In direct contrast, the M5S's main electoral competitors, The League and Brothers of Italy Parties have adopted clear positional stances on a wide range of socio-economic and socio-cultural issues. Thus, the main findings in the M5S case highlight the widespread anti-incumbency effects for the valence populist M5S Party, with a lack of clear policy direction (ambiguity) hindering the party electorally and contributing to the party's ongoing systematic electoral decline post-2018 Italian political landscape.

Therefore, both case studies are important as they demonstrate the evolving strategies of different 'types' of populist parties in twenty-first century European politics, alongside developing a wider thought-provoking debate about both the nature and impact of populist parties' ideologies.

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Appendix 1:

League's political offer: selected electoral manifestos

Election Year	Source	Type of data
1983	Lombardia Autonomista	Primary
1987	Piemont Autonomista	Primary
1992	CMP	Secondary
1994	CMP	Secondary
1996	CMP	Secondary
2001	CMP	Secondary
2006	CMP	Secondary
2008	CMP	Secondary
2013	CMP	Secondary
2018	CMP	Secondary

League's political narrative: selected newspapers and tweets

Election Day	Period covered	Newspaper/Twitter account	Type of data
27 June 1983	October-November 1982* September 1983	Lombardia Autonomista	Primary
15 June 1987	April 1987 May 1987	Piemont Autonomista	Primary
06 April 1992	January 1992 31 January 1992 24 February 1992 25 February 2992 March 1992	Lombardia Autonomista and Piemont Autonomista	Primary

Election Day	Period covered	Newspaper/Twitter account	Type of data
	05 March 1992 10 March 1992 30 March 1992		
28 March 1994	04 November 1993 17 December 1993 19 January 1994 26 January 1994 02 February 1994 09 February 1994 16 February 1994 28 February 1994 09 March 1994	Lega Nord: Italia federale	Primary
21 April 1996	22 January 1996 29 January 1996 05 February 1996 12 February 1996 19 February 1996 26 February 1996 04 March 1996 11 March 1996 18 March 1996 25 March 1996	Lega Nord: Italia federale	Primary
13 May 2001	All days from 13 April 2001 to 12 May 2001	La Padania	Primary
10 April 2006	All days from 10 March 2006 to 09 April 2006	La Padania	Primary
14 April 2008	All days from 14 March 2008 to 14 April 2008	La Padania	Primary

Election Day	Period covered	Newspaper/Twitter account	Type of data
25 February 2013	All days from 25 January 2013 to 25 February 2013	La Padania	Primary
04 March 2018	All days from 04 February 2018 to 04 March 2018	@LegaSalvini	Primary

Notes: * we included also the number published in 1982 as it was the absolute 1st umber of the newspaper and September 1983 is the second absolute number.

National rally's political offer: selected electoral manifestos

Election Year	Source	Type of data
1981	SciencesPo et les Archives électorales du CEVIPOF	Primary
1986	CMP	Secondary
1988	CMP	Secondary
1993	CMP	Secondary
1997	CMP	Secondary
2002	CMP	Secondary
2007	CMP	Secondary
2012	CMP	Secondary
2017	CMP	Secondary

French National Elections (Newspapers)

Election Day	Period covered	Newspaper/Twitter account	Type of data
12 March 1978	February/March 1978	Le National	Primary
14 June 1981	May 1981	Le National	Primary
16 March 1986	All days from 13 February 1986 to 20 March 1986	National Hebdo	Primary
05 June 1988	All days from 05 May 1988 to 09 June 1988	National Hebdo	Primary
21 March 1993	All days from 18 February 1993 to 25 March 1993	National Hebdo	Primary
25 May 1997	All days from 24 April 1997 to 29 May 1997	National Hebdo	Primary
09 June 2002	All days from 09 May 2002 to 13 June 2002	National Hebdo	Primary
10 June 2007	All days from 10 May 2007 to 14 June 2007	National Hebdo	Primary
10 June 2012	All days from 10 May 2012 to 10 June 2012	@RNational_off	Primary
11 June 2017	All days from 11 May 2017 to 11 June 2017	@RNational_off	Primary

Appendix 2:

Operationalization and results of parties' emphasis and position on cleavage structures

EMPHASIS = DICHOTOMY 1 + DICHOTOMY 2

Ideological Flexibility of The League in terms of emphasis

	Religious cleavage	Regional cleavage	Community cleavage	Class cleavage	Transnational cleavage	Cultural dimension	Economic dimension	Institutional dimension
1983	0	58	5	2	5	5	0	0
1987	1	27	9	9	3	1	0	3
1992	1	34	5	10	11	4	3	4
1994	2	22	5	11	10	1	7	1
1996	0	25	4	11	10	1	5	4
2001	4	12	2	8	7	4	2	1
2006	7	3	2	11	12	8	2	1
2008	3	20	4	3	18	4	14	0
2013	2	8	5	17	10	2	6	3
2018	1	3	4	7	32	20	3	8

Ideological Flexibility of the National Rally in terms of emphasis

	Religious cleavage	Regional cleavage	Community cleavage	Class cleavage	Transnational cleavage	Cultural dimension	Economic dimension	Institutional dimension
1983	9	2	13	9	19	13	6	0
1987	6	1	4	7	19	13	4	2
1992	8	1	3	5	17	12	4	1
1994	8	1	4	5	16	10	4	2
1996	9	0	4	4	28	17	6	5
2001	7	1	3	5	18	9	6	3
2006	9	0	8	6	23	12	7	5
2008	2	0	6	7	23	12	6	6
2013	2	0	6	6	29	14	9	6

$$POSITION = \frac{DICHOTOMY\ 1 - DICHOTOMY\ 2}{DICHOTOMY\ 1 + DICHOTOMY\ 2}$$

Ideological Flexibility of The League in terms of Position

	Religious cleavage	Regional cleavage	Community cleavage	Class cleavage	Transnational cleavage	Cultural dimension	Economic dimension	Institutional dimension
1983	0.0	-1.0	0.0	0.5	-0.5	-0.5	0.0	0.0
1987	-1.0	-1.0	-0.4	0.5	0.4	-0.5	0.0	0.6
1992	-0.5	-1.0	-0.4	0.8	-0.3	-1.0	-1.0	0.8
1994	-1.0	-1.0	-0.3	0.8	-0.1	-1.0	-0.2	0.0
1996	-0.4	-1.0	-0.3	0.8	0.0	-0.5	-0.9	0.9
2001	-0.6	-0.9	0.0	0.1	0.0	-0.5	0.0	0.8
2006	-1.0	-1.0	0.0	0.4	-0.6	-1.0	-0.2	0.6
2008	-0.9	-1.0	0.7	0.2	-0.9	-0.9	-1.0	0.7
2013	-0.8	-0.8	0.4	0.1	-0.4	-0.3	-0.6	0.2
2018	-1.0	-0.5	0.5	-0.1	-1.0	-1.0	-1.0	-1.0

Ideological Flexibility of the National Rally in terms of Position

	Religious cleavage	Regional cleavage	Community cleavage	Class cleavage	Transnational cleavage	Cultural dimension	Economic dimension	Institutional dimension
1983	-1.0	0.2	0.0	1.0	-0.8	-1.0	-0.5	0.0
1987	-1.0	-0.3	0.1	0.9	-0.4	-0.9	0.5	0.7
1992	-1.0	-0.3	-0.6	0.9	-0.7	-1.0	0.1	-0.5
1994	-1.0	-0.3	-0.5	1.0	-0.7	-1.0	-0.4	-0.5
1996	-1.0	-0.3	-0.6	1.0	-0.9	-1.0	-0.7	-1.0
2001	-1.0	-0.1	-0.9	0.8	-0.9	-1.0	-0.8	-1.0
2006	-0.5	-0.3	-0.4	0.7	-0.8	-1.0	-0.4	-1.0
2008	-1.0	-0.3	-0.3	0.2	-1.0	-1.0	-1.0	-1.0
2013	-0.6	-0.3	0.5	0.2	-1.0	-1.0	-0.9	-1.0

Appendix 3:

CHES Variables:

EU_BLUR = how blurry was each party's position on European integration in 2019.
0 = Not at all blurred.
10 = Extremely blurred.
GALTAN_BLUR = how blurry was each party's position on libertarian/traditional issues in 2019.
0 = Not at all blurred.
10 = Extremely blurred.
LRECON_BLUR = how blurry was each party's position on economic issues in 2019.
0 = Not at all blurred.
10 = Extremely blurred.
EU_DISSENT = degree of dissent on European integration in 2017 and 2019.
0 = Party was completely united.
10 = Party was extremely divided.
IMMIGRATE_DISSENT = degree of dissent on immigration policy in 2017 and 2019.
0 = Party was completely united.
10 = Party was extremely divided.
LRECON_DISSENT = degree of dissent on economic issues in 2019.
0 = Party was completely united.
10 = Party was extremely divided.
LRGEN = POSITION of the party in 2019 in terms of its overall ideological stance.
0 = Extreme Left.
5 = Center.
10 = Extreme Right.

'Centre right? What centre right?' Italy's right-wing coalition: Forza Italia's political 'heritage' and the mainstreaming of the far right

VALERIO ALFONSO BRUNO[1]

Abstract The coalition between Fratelli d'Italia, Lega, Forza Italia and some minor allies is expected to win the Italian general election on 25 September 2022 by a considerable margin, at least according to all the opinion polls. Rather surprisingly, much of the public debate in Italy, including the media, politicians and polling institutes, still refers to the right-wing bloc as a centre-right coalition despite the presence of two fully-fledged far-right parties. In this chapter, we will a) introduce the main political players competing in the September 2022 general election, i.e. the right-wing coalition, the centre-left coalition, the M5S and the 'third pole' (*terzo polo*) composed of Azione and Italia Viva; we will then b) consider the ways in which Fratelli d'Italia and Lega are competing on the same far-right platform and which characteristics may give FdI a competitive edge over Lega; and lastly we will c) reflect on the factors that may have enabled Italy's far-right coalition to be considered moderate centre-right, a label used since 1994 to describe coalitions led by Berlusconi and which no longer seem fit-

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[1] Valerio Alfonso Bruno, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Dipartimento di Scienze politiche; Center for European Futures (Italy), Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right – CARR (United Kingdom), valerioalfonso.bruno@unicatt.it.

ting given the presence of the two far-right parties. In conclusion, we will identify at least two elements, in fact two sides of the same coin, supporting the persistence of the centre-right definition: a) the ambiguous and controversial role within the coalition of Forza Italia, whose alleged moderation has been cleverlty sold to grant a sort of continuity to the use of the centrodestra label as opposed to 'right wing' or 'far right'; and b) the skilful way in which the Italian far-right has managed to normalize itself and enter the mainstream over the last decade.

Keywords: 2022 Italian general election; centre-right coalition; far right; Fratelli d'Italia; Lega; Forza Italia; mainstreaming.

Introduction

In the last chapter of this book, we provide an example of the mainstreaming of the far right in Europe. The focus will be on Italy's right-wing coalition and most likely winner of the Italian general election on 25th September 2022. In particular, following the reasoning already explored in several chapters of the book on the mainstreaming of the far-right, the Italian right-wing coalition, which includes two fully-fledged far-right parties, namely Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia or FdI (Brothers of Italy) and Matteo Salvini's Lega (League), is a perfect example of the gradual normalizing and, to some extent, institutionalizing of radical-right and extreme-right trends. Indeed, we could go as far as to say that this far-right coalition has been normalized and mainstreamed to such an extent that it barely seems recognizable as such, at least to a significant proportion of Italy's public opinion, including the media, politicians, opinion-makers, analysts and even polling institutes.

The chapter is organized as follows: we will first (i) provide a general overview of the competitors in the next general

election taking place on 25th September 2022, i.e. the right-wing coalition, the centre-left coalition, the M5S and the third pole (Azione and Italia Viva); we will then (ii) compare the two players in the right-wing coalition, FdI and Lega, against the backdrop of the fully-fledged far-right platform they share and including an assessment of which party may have a competitive advantage on the same ideological and political platform; next we will (iii) try to identify the factors at play in Italy that have enabled a far-right coalition to be regarded as moderate centre-right. The chapter will focus especially on the mainstreaming of the far-right in Italy.

1. *Italy's general political election and its key players*

After the controversial resignation of Italy's PM Mario Draghi in July 2022, the *Belpaese* will go to the polls on 25th September, approximately half a year before the natural conclusion of the legislature[2]. All recent polls point to a very significant

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[2] The current Italian electoral law, known as *Rosatellum* after Ettore Rosato, was introduced in 2017. It provides for a mixed electoral system, partly majority and partly proportional. Thirty-seven per cent of the seats in the two chambers of parliament (147 in the lower house and 74 in the senate) are allocated on the basis of a single-round majority system, in as many single-member constituencies. In practice, the candidate with the most votes is elected in each constituency. The other two-thirds (245 seats in the Chamber and 122 in the Senate) are instead distributed according to a proportional system, i.e. divided among the parties according to the respective percentages of the vote obtained at the ballot box. In practice, the seats are divided proportionally between coalitions and individual actors that have passed the national thresholds: 3% for individual actors, 10% for coalitions. The latter do not receive the votes of allied parties that do not reach 1%, but those of actors between 1% and 3% do (the remaining 2% of the seats, eight deputies and four senators, are finally reserved for the vote of Italians

lead for the coalition led by Fratelli d'Italia[3]. With about a month to go before the vote and an extremely short window for the political campaigns, this is a four horse race[4]:

- the centre-left coalition, led by the Partito Democratico or PD (Democratic Party) also includes the Verdi/Sinistra Italiana (Green/Italian Left), +Europa (More Europe) and Impegno Civico (Civic Commitment);
- Movimento Cinque Stelle or M5S (Five-Star Movement);
- the so called '*terzo polo*' (third pole) composed of the parties Azione (Action) and Italia Viva (IV);

living abroad, under a proportional system that provides for preference voting). The majority of seats are attributed by the proportional system, according to the principle of 'one head, one vote', and the political weight of the law is shifted mainly to the majority part: it is therefore the result in the uninominal constituencies that will determine the victory of a coalition which is unique throughout the country, but does not have a symbol, a manifesto or a leader but only common uninominal candidates, while each of the allied parties presents its own distinct manifesto and declares who its political leader is. See also https://www.adnkronos.com/elezioni-2022-al-voto-con-il-rosatellum-ecco-come-funziona_4Er2QIYkb1cAdxHvYEC6Cs.

[3] In this chapter, we will refer to the Supermedia YouTrend/AGI polls (2 September 2022) available at: https://www.youtrend.it/2022/09/02/supermedia-youtrend-agi-dei-sondaggi-centrodestra-a-183-sul-centrosinistra/. The opinion polls used by YouTrend were the following: Demopolis (24 August), EMG (31 August), Euromedia (31 August), Ipsos (1 September), Noto (19, 24 and 31 August), Piepoli (25 August), Quorum (29 August), SWG (29 August) and Tecnè (25 August).

[4] In addition to these four political actors, we have (according to the polls) the following below the 3% threshold: *ItalExit*, *Unione Popolare* led by De Magistris, a newly born radical-left movement led by the former mayor of Naples, and Alternativa per l'Italia. See: https://tg24.sky.it/politica/2022/09/02/elezioni-sondaggi-politici.

- the right-wing coalition, composed of FdI, Lega, Forza
  Italia and the centrists Noi Moderati (We Moderates)

(i) The centre-left coalition

The centre-left coalition is polling at around 28-30%, with the
PD led by Enrico Letta at 21-23%, the Verdi and Sinistra Ital-
iana at 3.5%, +Europa 2% and Impegno Civico at 1.1%. This
coalition had originally attempted an agreement with the cen-
trist party Azione, led by Carlo Calenda; however, within a few
days the agreement collapsed[5] as Letta, according to Calenda,
wanted to include radical left-wing parties in the coalition
and, for the leader of Azione, these were parties that would
not be able to carry out what had been called the 'Draghi
agenda', i.e. the points of the political manifesto implement-
ed by Mario Draghi until a few weeks ago[6]. Following these
controversies, the party +Europa preferred to split from
Azione to remain in the coalition led by the PD[7], while Ver-
di/Sinistra Italiana and Impegno Civico (recently founded by
Luigi Di Maio[8] formerly of the M5S), were incorporated. In
particular, with the inclusion of the Verdi and Sinistra Ital-

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[5] See: https://www.rainews.it/maratona/2022/08/conto-alla-rovescia-verso-il-
voto-il-diario-del-7-agosto-05960a1d-c6da-4339-aec4-f4ebb3d14015.html.

[6] Including key reforms on policy areas such as energy, competition, procu-
rement, renewal of the administration, justice, support for Ukraine and
NATO, and of course, the implementation of the PNRR or National Reco-
very and Resilience Plan.

[7] See: https://www.dire.it/08-08-2022/773381-piu-europa-rompe-azione-calenda-
incoerente-patto-pd/.

[8] See: https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2022/08/01/di-maio-lasciamo-
i-veti-agli-estremisti-noi-per-lunita_b9236b04-ae8b-442c-802f-
89ee2c678b48.html.

iana, the coalition led by Letta has likely shifted its political centre of gravity towards the left of the political spectrum, particularly compared to its positioning had the alliance with Azione remained in place.

(ii) Movimento Cinque Stelle

The M5S will run alone, with the latest polls estimating around 10-13% of the vote. Until the resignation of Mario Draghi in July 2022, the party led by former PM Giuseppe Conte had, since September 2019, been in an alliance with the PD that saw the two parties form a government (Conte cabinet II), govern together in some regions and provinces, and later support the Draghi executive. In this period, the ideological stance of the M5S had seemingly shifted from ideologically ambiguous populist positions to pro-EU, moderate and liberal positioning (Bruno and Cozzolino, 2022). In particular, this shift, strongly supported by foreign minister Luigi Di Maio, seemed to hold firm until the debate on arming Ukraine following Russia's invasion in late February 2022. In fact, the political willingness of the executive branch to arm Ukraine inflamed discussions over defence investments and increases to the country's defence budget. On 21 June, Di Maio quit the M5S: the casus belli was indeed the supply of arms to Ukraine and, more generally, Italy's international positioning, namely its support for NATO and recent EU decisions which had, according to Di Maio, been insufficiently supported by the M5S, currently led by Giuseppe Conte (Fazio and Bruno, 2022). Earlier this spring a heated debate among the political forces supporting the technocratic government led by Draghi took place. Draghi appeared rather appalled (going as far as to inform Italian President Sergio Mattarella) by the remarks made by Conte, who argued against increasing the Italian defence budget at a point

when the country was still grappling with the COVID-19 health crisis and its socio-economic fall-out[9]. Subsequently, for various reasons, related both to local situations and Italy's international positioning, a government crisis was triggered, first by the M5S' hesitations and then by Lega and Forza Italia's lack of confidence in the Draghi executive (Bruno and Parsi, 2022).

(iii) Azione and Italia Viva (the third pole)

The newly formed 'third pole' is made up of two parties, Azione and Italia Viva, led by former PD members Carlo Calenda and Matteo Renzi respectively. Most polls estimate their combined share of the vote at 5-7%. Alongside Enrico Letta and Luigi Di Maio, Calenda and Renzi were among the most enthusiastic supporters of Mario Draghi's government and its political action, particularly but not exclusively at the level of

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[9] More precisely, on July 14th, Italy's prime minister, Mario Draghi, tendered his resignation after the populist Five Star Movement (M5S) abstained in the Senate from a vote of confidence on a decree containing, among other things, a regulation on the construction of a much-debated waste-to-energy plant in Rome. According to Draghi, an executive such as the one in place since February 2021, if no longer supported by a broad coalition of parties – as things stood, all except the far-right Fratelli d'Italia – would make little sense and lose its momentum. The decree, ostensibly the bone of contention, was passed, even with the abstention of the movement founded by the comic Beppe Grillo, currently led by the former prime minister, Giuseppe Conte. The former president of the European Central Bank nevertheless offered his resignation to the president, Sergio Mattarella. Mattarella however rejected Draghi's bid as a desperate attempt to exit the crisis when the Italian parliament convened the day after. Eventually, when the M5S opened up to the possibility of continuing to support the government, Lega and Forza Italia required Draghi to choose between them and the M5S or dissolve the coalition (see Bruno and Parsi, 2022; Ignazi 2022).

foreign policy (strong alignment with the EU and NATO vis-à-vis the Russian invasion of Ukraine). In this sense, the 'Draghi agenda' would allegedly represent the core of the third pole, with Azione not only absorbing ministers of the Draghi executive into its ranks, such as Mariastella Gelmini (currently serving as minister of Regional Affairs and Autonomies) and Mara Carfagna (current Minister for the South and Territorial Cohesion), who no longer felt comfortable with Forza Italia, but even aiming to see Draghi reinstated as Italy's Prime Minister. In a recent press interview, Calenda said that he was confident that, as a Meloni government would not last long, the return of Draghi to Palazzo Chigi would be the best possible outcome[10].
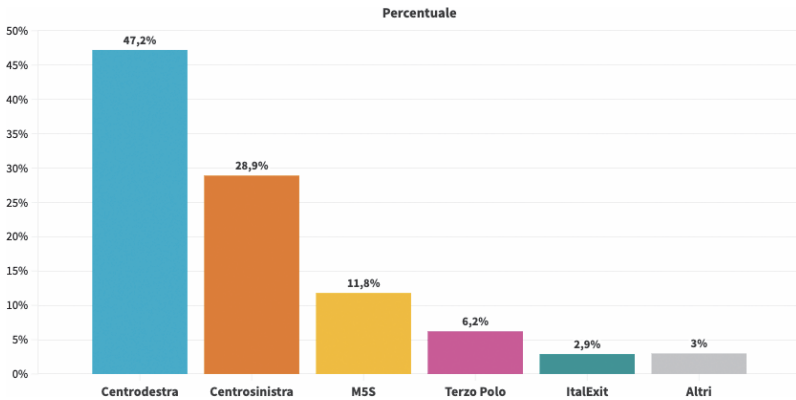
(iv) The right-wing coalition

The right-wing coalition is composed of Fratelli d'Italia, currently polling at around 24-25%, Lega (12-13%), Forza Italia (7-8%) and some small centrist parties, Noi Moderati (1-2%). The coalition as a whole is thus polling at around 46-48% (depending on the poll), with an impressive lead on the other three contenders and up to +18% over the centre left. Even if Berlusconi's Forza Italia loses some public favour and ground to Azione-Italia Viva and draws less than 10% of the vote, as predicted, the coalition will still win comfortably. It is also important to note that, unlike the centre-left coalition and notwithstanding different preferences, the right-wing coalition drafted and adopted a single, rather vague and concise pro-

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[10] https://www.iltempo.it/politica/2022/08/31/news/carlo-calenda-azione-profezia-mario-draghi-torna-governo-controcorrente-veronica-gentili-32901027/.

gramma politico, the most important points of which one might consider to be those relating to Italy's international stance (pro-EU, strongly supportive of NATO), certain economic measures (a much-debated flat tax and support for Italy's small and medium-sized enterprises), support for the family (including policies to tackle population decline), and the removal of the *reddito di cittadinanza* ('citizenship income', a minimum income guaranteed by the state)[11]. In conclusion, table 1 visually represents the gulf currently separating the right-wing coalition from the other three political actors, which make up 46.9% combined.

Table 1 – Vote percentages that may be won by the coalitions that will present joint candidates in the uninominal constituencies under the Rosatellum (Source Supermedia YouTrend/Agi)[12]

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[11] https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/centrodestra-c-e-programma-dall-aumento-tetto-contante-conferma-bonus-edilizi-AEU8PlsB.

[12] The table used can be found at the following link: https://www.youtrend.it/2022/09/02/supermedia-youtrend-agi-dei-sondaggi-centrodestra-a-183-sul-centrosinistra/.

2. *Fratelli d'Italia and Lega: two players, same platform?*

As we have already seen, the debate is ongoing on the exact nature of the Italian right-wing coalition that looks likely to win the 2022 general election. Before we examine this in the next paragraph, let us focus more closely on two parties in the coalition, FdI and Lega. The literature covering the two parties mostly defines them as populist radical-right parties (PRRPs) (Albertazzi et al. 2021; Donà, 2022) and/or far-right parties, with both definitions in wide use. In this regard, Pirro (2022) has recently argued that the term 'far right' could be used to signify an umbrella concept covering both the populist radical-right parties and the extreme-right parties/movements, which share a nativist and authoritarian leaning and are differentiated mainly by their stance on democracy (with the PRRPs most frequently holding illiberal views and the extreme right harbouring anti-democratic beliefs). An extremely important point raised by Pirro is that the boundaries between the populist radical right and the extreme right are shifting and becoming more blurred, and that 'the complexity of far-right politics questions the long-standing conceptual distinctions internally defining it' (Pirro, 2022). According to Pirro, both FdI and Lega could be labelled as far-right parties, with some distinctions[13]. Yet,

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[13] As argued by Bruno and Downes (2023), four key features define Salvini's Lega: (i) firstly, a feature embodied by the 'historical' Lega, the ideological core includes deeply entrenched roots in Northern Italy, which was for many years the key bastion of support for both Umberto Bossi and Roberto Maroni. This component, although currently latent, should not be underestimated; (ii) a second feature that can be considered part of the contemporary Lega is the party's support for the current executive/technocratic populist government led by Mario Draghi. Ironically, this component is

FdI could qualify more closely as a quintessential 'far-right' party. In fact, unlike Salvini's Lega, who in 2013 created a brand new nationalist party from a formerly federalist party (see figure 1) anchored to Northern Italy (Albertazzi et al. 2018)[14], FdI has completely different ideological and histori-

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perfectly embodied by the current Italian minister for economic development Giancarlo Giorgetti, who represents the most pro-European and business-friendly part of Lega. This is exemplified by the support of important European funds, around €220 billion, that Italy is currently using under the name of the PNRR or Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) or by the fact that Giorgetti has suggested the possibility of a 'de facto Semi-Presidentialism' under Mario Draghi (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 2021). This political shift is even more ironic, considering that the populist radical-right party, Lega, has historically adopted a 'hard' Eurosceptic stance (i.e., outright rejection of the EU) and now bears much more ideological resemblance to that of a 'soft' Eurosceptic party (i.e., seeking to reform the EU from within or via the mechanisms of the European Parliament); (iii) a third feature of Lega relates to the extreme right-wing element of the party. In essence, this ideological element consists of creating structured links with the extreme right, not only neo-fascist, but also neo-Nazi style links and connections. This dynamic has been discussed in a very interesting investigation by the online newspaper *Fanpage* (YouTube/Fanpage 2021), as well as in the investigations by Paolo Berizzi (2021) which emphasize, for example, the fundamental role of the extreme right-wing group founded in 2010 in Lombardy, Lealtà Azione, in supporting Lega with thousands of votes in return for the promise of party jobs for its members; (iv) finally, the fourth feature is a certain ideological complexity, with the more properly pragmatic and populist core represented by the leader Salvini himself, who although has on several occasions de jure or de facto disavowed the above-mentioned components, has struck a delicate balance that enables these ideologically disparate groups to coexist.

[14] As Salvini's Lega is a relatively recent project/party, deriving from the Lega Nord, which was a party with very different characteristics, deeply rooted in Northern Italy (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005, 2009, 2010).

cal roots which place it in the somewhat grey area between the populist radical right and the extreme right.

Figure 2 – On the left, the old logo of the Lega Nord used from 1991 to 2017. On the right, the logo of Lega per Salvini Premier, introduced in December 2017. As we can see, the words 'Lega Nord' and the reference to 'Padania' have been completely removed

FdI, unlike Lega per Salvini Premier, has a much older and deeper historical and ideological tradition (MSI, AN). The MSI or Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement) was the Italian neo-fascist party *par excellence*, a movement founded in 1946 by veterans of the Italian Social Republic, including Giorgio Almirante (1914-1988) and Pino Rauti (1926-2012), at least up to the '*svolta di Fiuggi*' of 1995[15], when the

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[15] Strictly speaking, neo-fascism refers to the fascist-inspired ideology that developed in Italy after the end of the Second World War when fascism was defeated. Under the Italian constitution, particularly the Scelba and Mancino laws, any such movement or organisation is liable to prosecution for the crime of '*Apologia del fascismo*' ('defending fascism'). However, sentences often tend to be 'soft' in implementing these laws and only prosecute fascism/neo-fascism when movements and groups intend to revive a fully-

MSI allegedly found its way under the *'arco costituzionale'* (constitutional arch), i.e. it became a political actor fully accepted and operating within the Italian rule of law and Constitution. A brand new name was subsequently chosen: Alleanza Nazionale or AN (National Alliance)[16]. However, the symbol of the tricolour flame migrated to AN's logo, until Gianfranco Fini in March 2008 accepted federation into Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà or PDL (People of Freedom)[17]. In 2014 the flame reappeared in the FdI logo after a six-year absence (figure 1).

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fledged fascist party. According to a widespread narrative, the event that has gone down in history as the *svolta di Fiuggi* ('Fiuggi turning point') of 1995 is said to have sanctioned the definitive transition of a certain right-wing party from neo-fascism to post-fascism. On that occasion, the Movimento Sociale Italiano had finally found its place under the so-called 'constitutional arch', i.e. it had become a political party fully acceptable to the rule of law and the Italian Constitution, with a new name: Alleanza Nazionale ('National Alliance').

[16] In particular, three manifesto points emerged from Fiuggi: (a) Abandonment of corporatism and revolutionary tones in opposition to liberal capitalism; (b) Rejection of anti-Americanism with the consequent definitive acceptance of pro-EU and pro-NATO positions; (c) Promotion of a democratic and modern right wing committed to the preservation of Italy's cultural and religious roots.

[17] On the complex dynamic that suddenly brought AN into the PDL federation under Silvio Berlusconi, see the account provided by Giorgia Meloni (Meloni 2021, 86-87).

Figure 3 – MSI logo, the *fiamma tricolore* or tricolour flame (top).
The logo of the Alleanza Nazionale party, and the logos of Fratelli d'Italia
over the years up to the present (down, from left to right).
It is interesting to note that between 2012 and 2014, the MSI/AN tricolour
flame disappeared, only to reappear later, first inside the old AN logo and
then standing alone

The question of post-fascism, and conversely of neo-fascism in Italian politics, is controversial and still subject to debate. An important number of scholars consider FdI to be a post-fascist party, with largely direct roots in the right-wing alliance tradition of the '*seconda repubblica*' (see, among others, Albertazzi et al. 2021). Yet, the question of FdI's own ideology remains open (Bruno et al. 2021) and is likely to be debated for a very long time, especially if the party obtains the results currently indicated by the polls and Giorgia Meloni becomes President of the Council of Ministers, a step which, incidentally, would

not be automatic and is highly delicate[18]. In her recent auto-biography, Meloni, while not speaking openly of fascism or neo-fascism, refers on almost every page to her militancy in the MSI and to what that experience meant for her, being ideologically opposed to what she defines as a '*destra moderna*' ('modern right wing'), that is a right wing lacking in tradition and which accepts compromises (2021:192). Once again, we can say that (a) the question of neo-fascism and post-fascism in the recent development of Italian politics remains open; (b) given the complexity of the topic, it cannot be examined solely from a symbolic point of view but should be considered in light of policies, statements and manifestos. Yet, why would FdI keep a symbol such as the *fiamma tricolore*, so strongly as-sociated with the MSI and fascism/neofascism, in its logo if the party no longer wants to be associated with fascism? (*The Economist*, 2022)?[19]. After all, the *fiamma tricolore* has already been omitted once from the party's logo, between 2012 and 2014 (see figure 2), a move that could easily be repeated in future. Again, while it would not make much sense to focus discourse exclusively on the value of a symbol, it is equally true that a good deal of ambiguity at the level of the party and its ideology persists, facilitating the emergence of doubt re-garding whether such ideological ambiguity may suit a party

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[18] The passage involves not only the allies of the right-wing coalition but al-so the President of the Italian Republic, who is in charge of forming the new government.

[19] Mattia Zulianello has recently expressed an interesting position in relation to FdI and the thorny question of fascism and neo-fascism. Zulianello stated in an interview that he considers Fratelli d'Italia to be a populist radical-right party taking advantage of the vague nostalgia for fascism allegedly shared by a proportion of Italian citizens. See the interview in the article available at the link: https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20220826_97737281.

which, on the one hand credits itself as being institutional and 'normal', while on the other maintaining important ties with a certain ideological tradition and political heritage.

Regarding the political programme for the general election of 25 September 2022 (Fratelli d'Italia, 2022)[20], we can now focus briefly on some key points[21]. The first point of the manifesto concerns 'support for birth and family', with the introduction, among other things, of 'communication and information campaigns of a medical nature on the subject of fertility'. The entire first point of the manifesto deals with the theme of family, starting with the birth rate (Fratelli d'Italia, 2022, pp. 5-6). Subsequent points (2, 3, 4 and 5) speak respectively of allocating PNRR funds differently in light of 'new circumstances', 'a new relationship between the tax authorities and taxpayers' and 'support for the Italian entrepreneurial system', with point five entitled 'Made in Italy and Italian Pride'. Point 9 mentions the abolition of the *reddito di cittadinanza* state-guaranteed minimum income and an extraordinary public-private housing plan, while point 12 mentions that 'the laws on civil unions will be maintained' while 'the ban on same-sex adoptions and the fight against surrogate motherhood, in the supreme interest of the child, is reiterated'. Point 13 (p. 22) is very interesting, referring to the 'creation of a new Italian consciousness by promoting, particularly in schools, the history of Italy's greats and historical re-enactments' and 'countering cancel culture and the iconoclasm that threaten the symbols of our identity'. Points 14, 15 and 16 deal respectively with the value of tourism and the

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[20] https://www.fratelli-italia.it/programma/.
[21] For a comparison with Lega's political manifesto, see: https://static. legaonline.it/files/Programma_Lega_2022.pdf.

agri-food sector, and the protection of the environment and nature[22]. Points 17, 18 and 19 deal with investments in affordable clean energy, and in infrastructure and transport. Point 21, on the other hand, speaks of 'stopping illegal immigration' and of 'an increasingly insecure Italy', with the consequent need for 'the defence of national and European borders, as envisaged by the Schengen Treaty and the EU, with border control and a blockade of landings to stop, in agreement with the North African authorities, the trafficking of human beings; the creation of hot-spots in non-European territories, managed by the EU, to assess asylum requests, and the fair distribution only of those with rights in the 27 member countries (naval blockade)'. The last two points are also of particular interest, referring to the reform (the dynamics are not well specified) in a presidential sense of the State (point 24) to achieve greater stability of government and greater economic growth, and a new leading role for Italy in Europe and the world (point 25), with full respect for international alliances, 'including by adapting the appropriations for Defence to the parameters agreed in the Atlantic Alliance'.

Having considered all these arguments, we can finally move on to our original point, i.e. comparing FdI and Lega, against the backdrop of their similar platform and 'political offering', and the reasons we believe Meloni's party to have a competitive advantage over Lega on the same populist radical-right and/or far-right platform. FdI is a relatively young party, founded in December 2012, however it has a long ideological and historical tradition, unlike Lega which has distanced itself from its former manifestation, the Lega Nord.

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[22] On this, see the chapter in this book by Lubarda and Forchtner.

The question is this: which of these two parties, FdI or Lega, which are competing on a very similar political platform (as we have seen from the political manifesto of FdI), will an electorate which is seemingly sympathetic to far-right ideologies or, as has recently been said (Standard, 2022), harbouring a vague nostalgia for fascism, choose to vote for? We believe most will favour FdI over Lega. After all, to put it very bluntly, why would a certain type of voter vote for a 'copy' when they can have the 'original'?

A second point that could give FdI the upper hand in the race for the right-wing coalition's leadership concerns narratives. FdI remained in opposition throughout the entire legislature (2018-2022), particularly against the yellow-green government (M5S and Lega in 2018-2019) and during Mario Draghi's executive (2021-2022), two executives that included Lega. It should not be underestimated that, albeit more moderately than its coalition ally, FdI has presented this narrative (*Il Giornale*, 2018, 2020; *La Repubblica*, 2018) to Italian citizens as an example of its consistency and coherence with its own principles and history (Bruno, 2021)[23]. On a different but closely related point, the leadership of Giorgia Meloni, particularly her tenacity, consistency, and to some extent her *sui generis* idealism, may be good ingredients for building a narrative to help differentiate her from the much more chamele-

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[23] We recognize that this second point is controversial. Indeed, it could be argued that votes for Salvini's Lega would have been transferred to Fratelli d'Italia in any case, as per point one, mentioned above. However, we believe that the party led by Giorgia Meloni, having remained in opposition to the government throughout the legislature, and in particular to the Conte I and Draghi governments, can more easily use the narrative of a party that is consistent in terms of values, transparent and makes no compromises, as it is in fact doing during the election campaign.

onic and pragmatic attitude of her colleague, Matteo Salvini (Bruno and Parsi, 2021). We can now move to the last argument of this chapter, i.e. offer some tentative preliminary considerations on the factors which may have enabled Italy's far-right coalition to still be regarded as moderate centre-right.

3. *Why is the Italian right-wing coalition still being referred to as centre right?*

In the past few months, a video appeared on various social media platforms (Twitter, 2022)[24] of Giorgia Meloni, a few years ago, accusing the Italian state of deliberately pursuing a policy of 'ethnic substitution' ('*disegno di sostituzione etnica*'), forcing '100,000 Italians to flee abroad in one year, while bringing in 500,000 asylum seekers over three years'. The fact that Meloni was referring to the great replacement theory, defined by Obaidi, Kunst, Ozer and Kimel as '[...] one of the most potent conspiracy theories evoked by right-wing extremists, politicians, and commentators [...] the 'Great Replacement' – the conspiracy arguing that there is an attempt to replace the White autochthonous population with non-Western immigrants. [...] an apocalyptic discourse of 'White genocide' and invasion of Europe by non-Western immigrants has far-reaching policy implications. When faulty or distorted beliefs about immigrants replacing the majority population are taken as fact, they become the basis for generating hostile public opinion towards immigrants. This may result in threat per-

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[24] The video is available on Twitter at: https://twitter.com/AlekosPrete/status/1542808648921092098.

ception and fear of immigrants, which in turn can result in discriminatory public policies and actions leading to greater polarization and intergroup conflict.' (Obaidi et al. 2021). Yet, in Italy, this kind of speech and rhetoric, by far-right parties, often echoed on the front pages of newspapers, on television or in social media, continues to be tolerated with no problem whatsoever; it is justified and normalised or, at most, framed as having slightly excessive patriotic overtones.

The very fact that parties such as Lega and FdI continue to be referred to as 'centre-right' parties in Italy is a case in point. As we have seen, both FdI and Lega are considered to fall into the category of populist radical-right parties (PRRPs), which, following the suggestions advanced by Pirro (2022), we can consider sitting under the far-right umbrella together with the extreme right. In fact, the boundaries between the (populist) radical right and the extreme right have become increasingly blurred (Leidig 2020; Mondon and Winter, 2020, 2020b; Mudde, 2019; Pirro, 2022). Accordingly, nowadays the Italian 'mainstream' right has become radicalized to the point that it is extremely difficult to even define what 'radical right' means or identify which parties belong in that family.

Let's now try to analyse the weight of these parties within the coalition since 1994. Albertazzi, Bonansinga and Zulianello (2021) have remarked on the strong thread of continuity running through the right-wing alliance, within which the only change has been the party occupying the pre-eminent role: 'Amidst the many changes affecting Italian politics from the mid-1990s onwards, one thing always remained the same, as voters got used to the existence of a right-wing electoral alliance fielding candidates at successive general elections. A break in 1996 notwithstanding, the alliance comprised: the Lega Nord; a radical right party rooted in the 'post-fascist' tradition (for a while: Alleanza Nazionale, AN); and one of

Berlusconi's parties. Voters were also clear as to where the centre of the right-wing galaxy was to be found: to adopt an astronomical metaphor, it was occupied by 'the Berlusconi sun'. (Albertazzi et al., 2021, p. 181). Castelli Gattinara and Froio (2021) offer a slightly different analysis which stresses more the dynamic of radicalization of the mainstream: 'following the failure of the PDL and the 2011 dramatic change of government, the political right has increasingly turned towards electorates sympathizing with authoritarian and nativist ideals associated with the silent counter-revolution' (2021, p. 22), with the '[...] predominance of radical parties over the Italian mainstream right posing some serious challenges over the fundamentals of liberal democracy in Italy' (2021, p. 23).

As we can see in table 2, over the past few years the centrality and weight of Forza Italia in the centre-right alliance has been waning. In particular, in the last general election of 2018 Forza Italia was overtaken by Salvini's Lega (14% and 17.4% respectively, in the Chamber of Deputies), with FdI at 4.4%. It is very interesting to observe that the MSI (AN from 1995 onwards), the political 'ancestor' of FdI, achieved significant electoral results between 1994 and 2006, winning 12 – 15.7% of the vote, before being absorbed into the PDL under Silvio Berlusconi. We do not know whether in the election to come, on 25 September 2022, the right-wing coalition will reach the levels of 1994 or, even more so, those of 2001 and 2006, or even exceed them. However, while it is unlikely to think that Italy is voting more and more for the right than in the (recent) past, it is plausible to say that the right is increasingly moving towards the extreme end of the political spectrum.

Table 2 – Electoral results of the centre-right coalition (main parties) between 1994 and 2018, general elections (% vote), with added opinion polls for the 2022 general election (2 September 2022)*. Camera dei Deputati (The Chamber of Deputies). The opinion polls considered for the 2022 general election are available at this link: https://www.youtrend.it/2022/09/02/supermedia-youtrend-agi-dei-sondaggi-centrodestra-a-183-sul-centrosinistra/

Year	Forza Italia	MSI – AN – FdI	Lega Nord/Lega	Centre-right coalition (combined)
1994	21	MSI 13.5	8.4	42.9
1996	20.6	AN 15.7	10.7 *not part of the coalition*	42.1
2001	29.4	AN 12	3.9	49.6
2006	23.7	AN 12.3	4.6	49.7
2008	PDL 37.4		8.3	46.8
2013	PDL 21.6	FdI 1.9	4.1	29.2
2018	14	FdI 4.4	Lega 17.4	37
2022*	[8.1]	[24.1]	[13.2]	[47.2% including NCI/IC]

Could the presence of Forza Italia within the coalition justify or at least provide a possible justification for the application of the label '*centrodestra*' (centre right) to the current coalition? The issue undoubtedly has to do with the perception of a political party and its leader who wants to appear more and more as moderate and liberal when in reality this was never the case. The fact that the term has always been associated with Forza Italia led coalitions, from 1994 to 2013 (and be-

yond), by Berlusconi, who has increasingly portrayed himself as liberal, moderate and pro-EU over the years, could be a contributing factor to the tendency across almost the entire media spectrum to perceive and refer to the coalition as centre right[25]. Being unprecedented, the fact that Forza Italia included the words 'Partito Popolare Europeo' (European Popular Party, EPP) in its logo in 2022 says a great deal (figure 2)[26]. On this, Forza Italia MP Mauro D'Attis said, 'Forza Italia is a genuinely pro-European party and the reference to the European People's Party in its election campaign logo underlines our firm commitment to the values of the largest political family in the EU. This is our home, that of the moderates, of which in Italy, thanks to the leadership of President Berlusconi, we are an authoritative and inimitable expression. Be wary of imitations' [author's translation][27].

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[25] Literature on the political figure of Berlusconi, the nature of his party and his personal and populist leadership is endless, and the topic is clearly beyond the scope of this article.

[26] On Forza Italia's newest logo, see: https://www.rainews.it/articoli/ 2022/08/forza-italia-presenta-il-simbolo-con-berlusconi-presidente-e-riferimento-al-ppe-0327f693-ffad-4f8f-b041-a0a0784aa887.html.

[27] D'Attis original statement can be found at the link: https://www.istituzioni24. it/2022/08/09/elezioni-dattis-fi-ppe-in-simbolo-rimarca-nostro-ancoraggio-a-valori-prima-famiglia-politica-in-unione-europea/.

Figure 3 – On the left, the Forza Italia logo in the 2018 general election.
On the right, the new Forza Italia logo (2022) including the words 'Partito
Popolare Europeo' at the top

Interestingly, definition of the coalition as centre right almost
only applies within Italy. Abroad, major press and media out-
lets use the expression 'right wing' to define the coalition
('far right' in some cases), and, in most cases, 'far right' to de-
fine the two main parties, FdI and Lega (examples include:
The Economist, 2022; *The Daily Telegraph*, 2022; *L'Humanité*,
2022; *Folha de S. Paulo*, 2022). In Italy, however, as we have
said, newspapers, TV news, polling institutes and, tellingly,
Italian politicians and MPs themselves, including those out-
side the right wing arena, continue to use the term *cen-
trodestra*.

On one hand, the skilful use of the 'heritage' of past alli-
ances led by Forza Italia (increasingly sold as moderate and
liberal), together with the fact that the Italian far right has
very masterfully managed to go so completely mainstream,
may partially explain the failure to switch from one definition
to another. In particular, the process of 'normalization' of the
Italian far right has become so established that it is difficult to
identify. As we have seen, in Italy it is currently difficult to dis-

tinguish between centre right and radical right. The problem, which on the surface might seem trivial or merely academic, is also linguistic. The Italian far right is identified in several ways: (i) '*la Destra*' (the Right)[28] can be used, which is in some ways misleading or, (ii) increasingly frequently, '*destra sovranista/sovranisti*' (sovereignist right)[29], or, (iii) less successfully, '*conservatori*' (conservative), while '*destra radicale*' (radical right) is not common at all and '*estrema-destra*' (extreme right) is reserved for movements such as Forza Nuova and Casa-Pound. It is understandable that far-right political subjects are comfortable with and enjoy the label *centrodestra*[30].

Conclusions

In this chapter, we showed the ways in which two Italian far-right parties, FdI and Lega, belonging to the same coalition, are sharing the same populist radical-right/far-right platform. Leaving aside the thorny question of post-fascism and neofascism in FdI and Italian politics, and having recognized that the issue needs to be addressed not only as a debate over symbols (such as the *fiamma tricolore*) but also in regard to policies, statements and party manifestos, there is little doubt that FdI has a strong competitive advantage over Lega in rela-

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[28] It is also more common than one might think to come across the expression *'destra-destra'* (right-right) applied to FdI and Lega.

[29] In particular, '*sovranista*' (sovereignist) is used by Lega to self-describe. Curiously, CasaPound's newspaper, *Il Primato Nazionale*, also uses the word to define itself: '*Il Primato Nazionale* is the only independent Italian sovereignist newspaper'. On the other hand, FdI prefers '*conservatore*' (conservative) to self-describe. On this, see *L'Humanité* (26 July 2022).

[30] The linguistic debate goes hand in hand with the debate on the wide band of the political spectrum between *centrodestra* and *estrema destra*.

tion to appealing to the radical-right electorate, in light of its deep-rooted historical and ideological tradition traced back to the MSI and AN; conversely, Lega per Salvini Premier is a relatively young populist radical-right party with different characteristics from the original Lega Nord party founded in 1991. For its part, the third party in the coalition, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, very eloquently wasted no time in including 'Partito Popolare Europeo' (EPP) in its logo for the September 2022 elections in order to increasingly establish itself as moderate, pro-EU, and liberal and court certain voters who may be tempted by Calenda and Renzi's 'third pole', and to reassure domestic and international interlocutors. In terms of explaining why the label 'center right' continues to be applied to the coalition, we can in conclusion say (a) the controversial 'heritage' of Silvio Berlusconi's party, which is perceived as maintaining some sense of reassuring continuity with the past and (b) the Italian far right's skilful handling of the 'normalization' process are two sides of the same coin.

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This book contains important contributions alongside original research that took place during vibrant debates that was held between February-May 2022 at the international research seminars hosted by the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. The primary goal of the book and its authors is to offer a lens through which to interpret a complex set of interrelated contemporary political phenomena, sometimes with distant origins that relate to both populism and the far-right in contemporary European Politics. What emerges is the disturbing observation that the European far-right, although in a rich variety of forms, has been capable of increasingly going "mainstream", in effect normalizing and increasingly integrating into both public debates and political systems alike. This is part of a broader trend that is not just taking place in Europe, but refers to a much broader and worrying picture at the global level. In this important book volume readers will find the online generation of "truths" by media organizations, the pervasive use of social media to mobilize electorates, the association with environmentalist causes alongside the ideological flexibility and opportunism of populist political leaders. Most significantly, all of these elements have contributed to the normalization of features once solely associated with the extreme-right fringes of the political spectrum. This pattern is particularly striking in modern Italian politics at the 2022 Italian General Election, with the increasingly blurred ideological lines between the far-right and the extreme-right playing out in real time, allowing a rightwing coalition bloc, composed by two fully-fledged far-right parties, to be labeled as *centrodestra*.

Valerio Alfonso Bruno is research fellow at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, where he collaborates with Polidemos (Centre for the Study of Democracy and Political Change), also a fellow at Far-Right Analysis Network (FRAN) and member of the Center for European Futures (CEF). He works on European and Italian politics, with a focus on populist and radical right-wing parties. He has recently contributed to the *The Routledge Handbook of Far-Right Extremism in Europe* and *The Routledge Handbook of Non-Violent Extremism* and is currently working on the books *The rise of the Radical-Right in Italy* (Ibidem/Columbia University Press) with J.F. Downes and A. Scopelliti and *Brothers of Italy: Organisation, Leadership and Ideology* (Springer) with M. Morini. His analyses and interviews have appeared, among others, in The Financial Times, The Economist, Al Jazeera, The Sunday Times, and The Telegraph.

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