



Marco Valbruzzi and Sofia Ventura

Fratelli d'Italia and Lega

What is the recipe for success of Italian populism?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study analyses the ideologies and manifestos of Italy's two main radical right parties: Matteo Salvini's Lega and Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) led by Italy's current prime minister, Giorgia Meloni. In particular, in addition to comparisons with the approaches of the other parties, the stances of these two parties are analysed and generalised using two different research techniques. On one hand, Lega and Fratelli d'Italia's approaches are examined through an evidence-based expert survey which places them on the political spectrum based on their leaders' statements and their principal manifesto policies. On the other hand, a survey performed on a representative sample of the Italian population is used to identify the views of radical right voters, especially on three different analytical dimensions: (i) populist attitude or mindset; (ii) degree of state intervention in the economy; and (iii) preference for a nativist or chauvinist notion of the welfare state.

Cross-referencing this data enabled us to analyse both overlaps between voters' views and those expressed by party leaders and the many similarities between the two Italian radical right parties' voters. First and foremost, what emerged from the analysis was that the party leaders' views on the main elements analysed are more extreme than those of their voters, above all as regards those eligible for welfare state benefits and the use of populist rhetoric. In the second place the data analysed shows a shift to the centre by Lega and Fratelli d'Italia in the economics sphere, with specific reference to the potential for approval of interventionist policies in social terms. However these state intervention policies are not seen as redistributive, or designed to reduce inequality, but rather as a distributive-type policy benefiting specific social categories and whose goal is to reserve welfare state services for natives alone.

In the third place, this analysis shows that this set of policies and preferences, summarisable in the 'statism + nativism' formula, is perceived by the majority of the two parties' voters not as radical or anti-system, but rather as expressing a shared sentiment and, as such, entirely compatible with liberal democracy and conservatism. It is exactly this social and political context which is behind the mainstreaming of the radical right, namely their progressive normalisation within the public debate. And it is perhaps precisely this which enables such parties to win over large swathes of an electorate that refuses to see itself as extremist, including those whose economic orientation is social democratic.

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INTRODUCTION: FRATELLI D'ITALIA (FDL) AND LEGA

Italy's second government with a populist parliamentary majority took office on 22 October 2022. Its first such government was headed by Giuseppe Conte and was in office from June 2018 to August 2019 on the basis of the Movimento 5 Stelle party and Salvini's Lega MPs. The government that came to power after the 25 September elections, on the other hand, is made up of Salvini's Lega and Fratelli d'Italia (Fdl), the latter cofounded by Giorgia Meloni, who is now the prime minister. While the first of these governments was based on an extremely heterogeneous majority in left/right terms, with a right-wing Lega and an M5s which presents itself as neither right nor left, two of the three coalition parties in the second of the two populist governments can, according to Cas Mudde's categories (*The Far Right Today*, Polity Press, 2019), be considered 'radical right', while the third, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, is a centre-right party.

Meloni's party was the real winner of the September 2022 elections, gaining 25 per cent of the vote in contrast to the 4.2 per cent it had achieved in the previous elections in 2018, and confirming what the polls had already made clear, namely that constant, long-term growth since 2019 has made it Italy's primary political party. Fratelli d'Italia is thus the coalition's principal party (and thus chooses its prime minister), while Lega, after its 2018 election success and, above all, the 2019 EU elections, achieved just over 9 per cent and Forza Italia 7.8 per cent. With just over 43 per cent of the vote, partly on the strength of an electoral system which is one-third first-past-the-post, the right-wing coalition won a full majority in both houses of parliament. The opposition was weak and divided: the Partito Democratico (the main centre-left party) led a coalition that, taken together, won only 19.4 per cent; the populist Movimento 5 Stelle, having moved further to the left and led by former prime minister Giuseppe Conte, gained 15.2 per cent; a liberal centre block won 8 per cent; and there were also some small extremist parties on both right and left (see Figure 1).

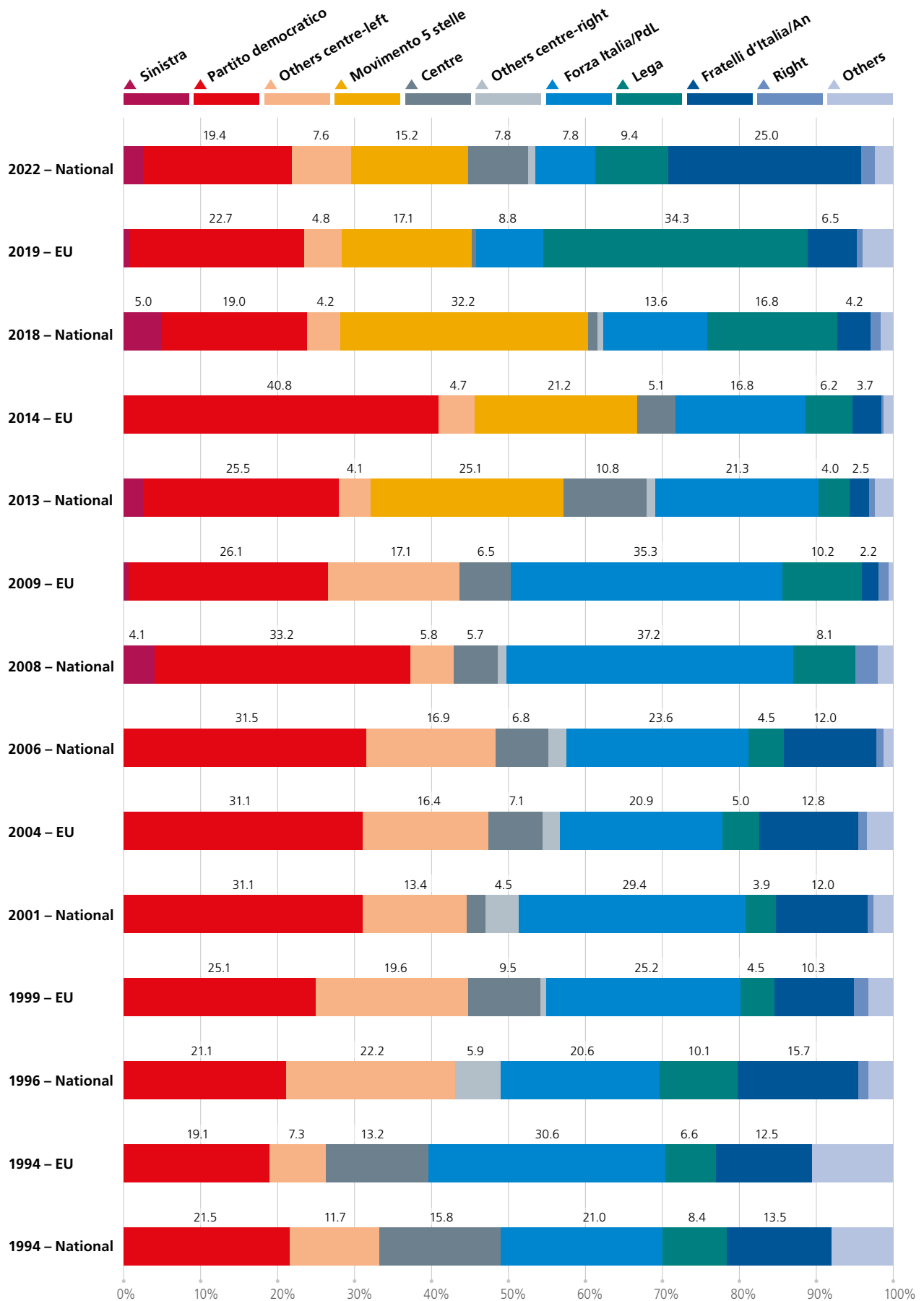
The radical right's percentage of the vote has been around 35–40 per cent since 2019. But what is the electoral 'winning formula' for these parties? How has their social base changed over recent decades? And, in more specifically Italian terms, what are the similarities and differences between the two allies which are, at the same time, competing for the same votes? To respond to these (and other) questions we have conducted research in recent months, primarily in two stages. In the first we used an evidence-based expert survey to identify and analyse the approaches of the Italian radical right parties on three of the different areas in which they are rivals: (i) the traditional economic axis concerning the extent of state action for redistribution purposes; (ii) populist rhetoric based on a moralistic antagonism between a 'pure' people and a corrupt elite; and (iii) the issue of access or otherwise to the welfare state solely for citizens with full residency rights.

This first phase of research – which enabled us to place the Italian radical right parties in political terms in accordance with the three dimensions described above – was followed by a second phase focusing on those who voted for the two parties. This involved a survey of a representative sample of the Italian population (1,000 interviewees) in the period immediately after the 25 September 2022 elections. Specifically, the survey was a chance to analyse the opinions of the radical right-wing parties' voters on the three issues described above. This enabled us to compare the parties' stances as seen by the experts with how they are seen by their voters. At the same time it was a chance to compare the voters of the two radical right parties – Lega and Fratelli d'Italia – to identify any overlaps or differences between them.

Before examining the main research outcomes it should be noted that recent decades have seen significant changes in the makeup of the radical right electorates within the European party system and their positioning within political space. In particular, the radical right parties – both those that emerged during what Cas Mudde has called the far right 'third wave' from the 1980s to the end of the twentieth century and the later 'fourth wave' of the noughties – stood out in terms of a left- or at least centre-leaning tendency as regards state intervention in the economy, while adopting more radical approaches to identity or cultural politics. This phenomenon began to take shape in the 1990s. Compared with the radical right parties of the previous era, whose manifestos combined an adherence to laissez faire principles in the economic sphere and conservative or authoritarian policies in the legal context, more recent radical right and populist parties have progressively replaced the 'liberal' economic approach with support for more interventionist economic policies. In other words, the winning formula has changed in the wake of a simultaneous drop in the proportion of voters combining pro-market and authoritarian preferences and an increase in lower and working class voters with socialist and simultaneously authoritarian views (Sarah L. De Lange, 'A New Winning Formula?', *Party Politics*, 13, 4, 2007, pp. 411–435; Eelco Harteveld, 'Winning the 'losers' but losing the 'winners'? The electoral consequences of the radical right moving to the economic left', *Electoral Studies*, 44, 6, 2016, pp. 225–234). On the other hand the third wave identified by Mudde was fed by increased unemployment, as well as mass immigration, while the fourth wave was influenced by the 11 September attack, the recession beginning in 2008, and the 2015 refugee crisis.

The winning formula for the radical right is thus now capable of combining leftist socio-economic approaches and tools with right-wing conservative cultural, identity-based or post-materialist dimensions. As a result of this programmatic shift, scholars have begun talking of a progressive 'proletarianisation' of the radical right parties' social base and their ability to compete directly with socialist or social democratic parties for the more socially and economically marginalised voters. Furthermore, the radical right's shift to the centre, or full-blown leftwards breakthrough, has contributed to blurring the traditional left/right divide. The disappearance or at least serious erosion of the left–right

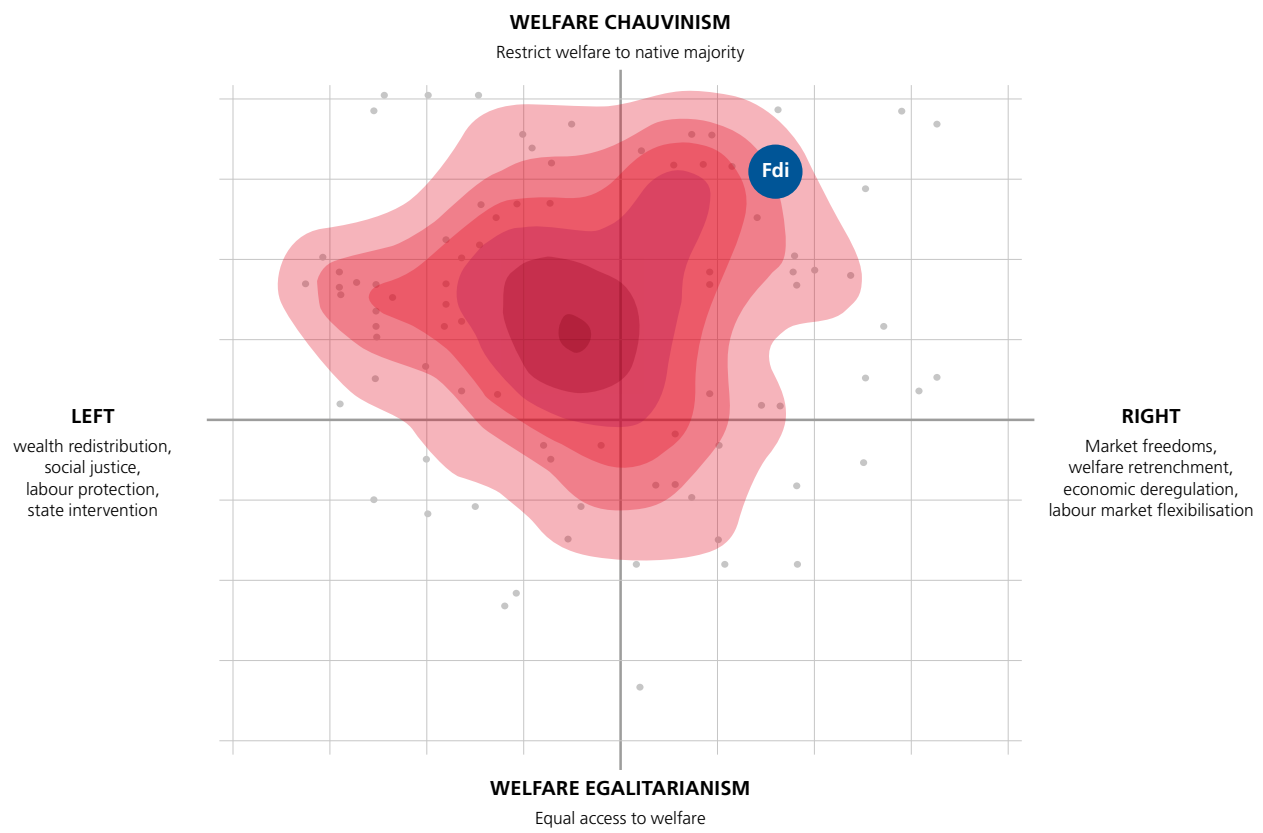
Figure 1
National and European Union elections results in Italy from 1994 to 2022 (%)



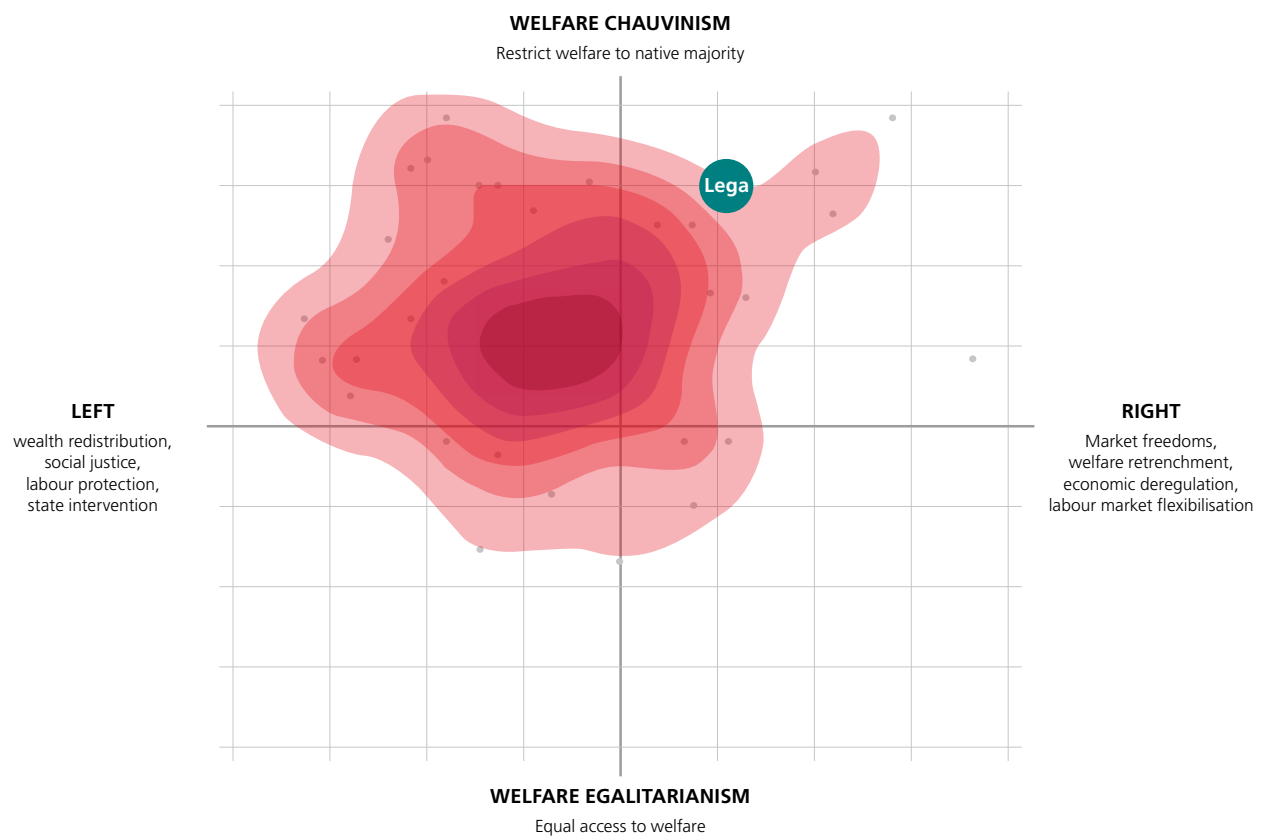
Source: Based on Ministry of the Interior data.

Figure 2
Position and distribution of Fratelli d'Italia and Lega voters across the political spectrum in 2022
 (economic and welfare state dimensions)

Spatial Position and Density of Fdi Voters



Spatial Position and Density of Lega Voters



Source: Kieskompas

difference in the economic sphere has led to political parties, from the starting point of the radical right, shifting their policy or rhetorical focus to other spheres of conflict, first and foremost culture or identity.

ECONOMIC AND WELFARE STATE DIMENSIONS

As we will see, the changes outlined here are tangible in the makeup of the electorates of the two Italian parties examined here, above all their ability to attract voters sharing simultaneously interventionist and distributional economic views and radical nativist or neo-nationalist views on the cultural plane.

Figure 2 shows both expert-opinion-based judgements on party stances (indicated by the symbols of Lega and Fratelli d'Italia) and the voter spectrum on the right-left economic dimension (horizontal axis) and as regards 'welfare chauvinism' concerning the beneficiaries of welfare state services, in other words, native-born or new arrivals (vertical axis). Welfare chauvinism is the idea that welfare benefits/services should, first and foremost though not exclusively, be reserved for 'natives'.

Clearly, both electorates have moved centre-leftwards on the economic plane. Radical right voters' views are certainly heterogeneous, but closer to the interventionist and distributional end of the spectrum. Lega's electorate is slightly more left leaning than Fratelli d'Italia's. The two parties are on the right of the graph – and thus of the right-left continuum – with Lega closer to the centre than Fratelli d'Italia. Both are closer to the centre, however, than to the extremes. It seems likely that the proposed flat tax in its various forms, put forward in particular by Lega, and the determination of Giorgia Meloni's party propaganda to support small and medium-sized businesses and more determined opposition to the citizens' income policy have contributed to a further rightward economic shift. Whatever the budgetary constraints, these policies have been accompanied by public spending in a range of sectors, especially pensions and tax reforms benefiting families. In this way tax reduction promises can coexist with state infrastructure and industrial action, at least on the electoral and propaganda planes.

Where the second dimension (which pits a chauvinist, 'exclusionary' concept of welfare against an egalitarian or universalist one) is concerned Lega and Fratelli d'Italia voters express a clear preference for the reservation of social services primarily for the native born or legally resident. Both electorates thus show a preference for the welfare chauvinism end of the spectrum, with Lega voters slightly further away from the centre. Thus both Fratelli d'Italia and Lega voters have a preference for interventionism and redistribution in economic terms and nativist exclusion as far as social services are concerned.

In this respect it is useful to note that the parties' stances, as identified by the experts, diverge to some extent from the views of their voters. While in economic terms the parties

are further right than their voters, they favour an 'exclusive' welfare state for 'nationals' (or 'patriots') more strongly than their respective electoral bases. Fratelli d'Italia and Lega's more radical views may be the result of the constant emphasis in their rhetoric on immigration policies, refugee management and citizenship rights for permanent immigrant residents. It is precisely the salience of these issues, from the starting point of welfare chauvinism, which has enabled Fratelli d'Italia and Lega to move their economic policies a little leftward. In this way, public spending on social or welfare policies is sometimes promoted but only when the beneficiaries are Italian citizens.

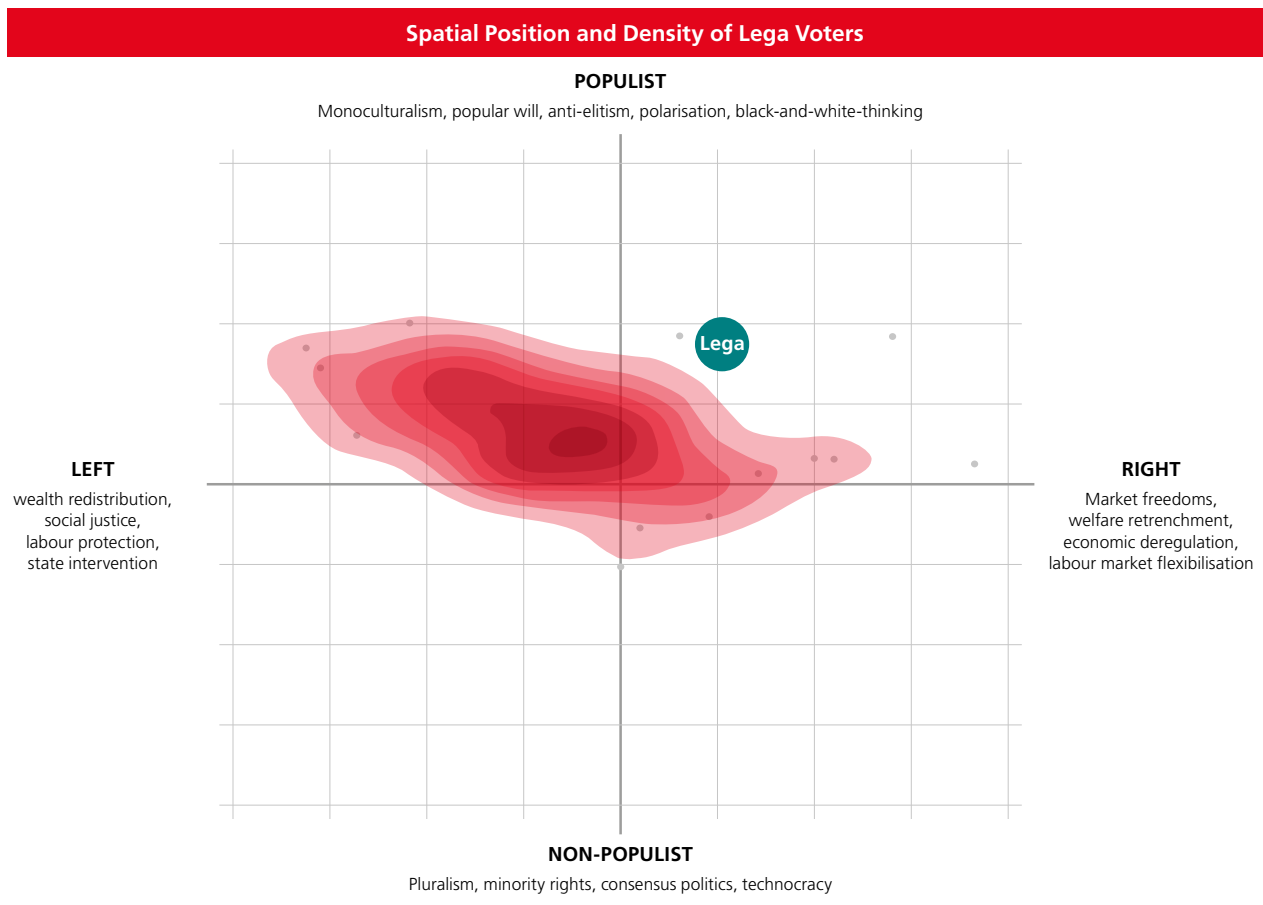
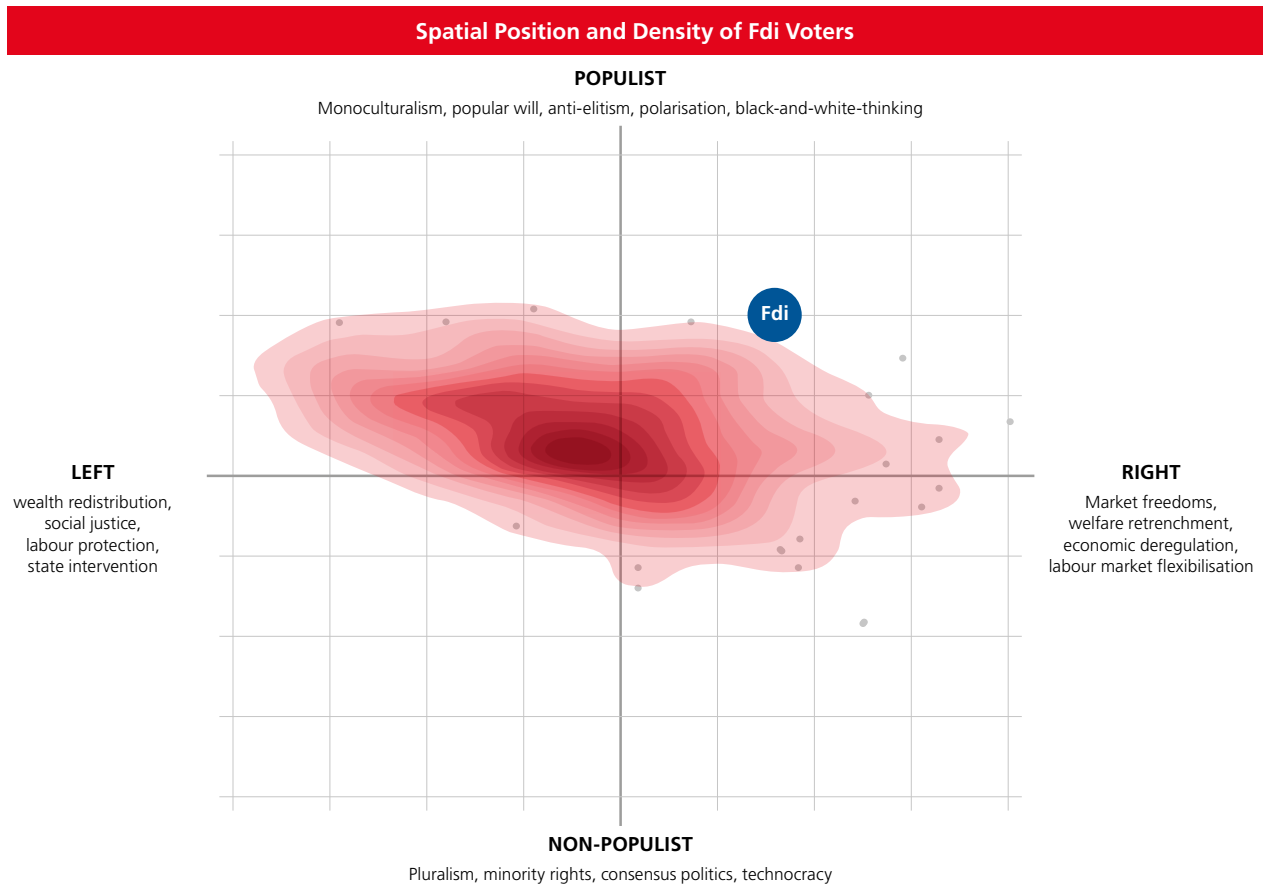
ECONOMIC AND POPULISM DIMENSIONS

In addition to an analysis of the political spectrum which takes account of welfare policies, our analysis also focused on populist rhetoric, which has often accompanied the growth of the radical right parties. As Cas Mudde has observed, while non-populism is a feasible option for radical right parties today's right-wing parties have mainly adopted populist rhetoric.

In the case of Matteo Salvini's Lega the presence of populist attitudes, messages and orientations has been confirmed by the academic literature. However, his participation in Mario Draghi's technocratic government in 2021 and 2022 inevitably tempered his more extreme language and Salvini had to conform to governmental logics and constraints, especially in the pandemic emergency management phase and the international tensions arising from the Russia-Ukraine war. This form of populism toned down by the emergency context and participation in the Draghi government is visible in Figure 3, showing Lega's stance (as seen by the experts) both economically and rhetorically. From this perspective Salvini's party is certainly populist, but in a less marked way than in the past, especially in its periods of opposition. What we might call the 'Draghi effect' ultimately acted as a brake on the excesses of populism characteristic of Salvini's language.

In contrast with Lega, Fratelli d'Italia has never been unanimously classified as populist. A not always explicit heir first to Movimento Sociale Italiano (Msi) and then Alleanza Nazionale (An), Giorgia Meloni's party has built its electoral success on neither anti-political nor anti-party messages. The target of its admittedly populist rhetoric has primarily been the supranational institutional elites, first and foremost the European Union, and subsequently the international economic and cultural elites as bearers of a multiculturalism considered detrimental to national identity. Given the above, and the party's history, it is not surprising that the experts view Fratelli d'Italia as an 'averagely populist' party. This is even more relevant if it is borne in mind that Giorgia Meloni's party, from its inception in 2012 to the recent events which have taken it into government, has always remained stubbornly and combatively in opposition. This had the potential to favour greater adherence to populist canons, but this has been partly restrained by the bonds the new party sought to revitalise with post-Fascist party politics (Movi-

Figure 3
Position and distribution of Fratelli d'Italia and Lega voters across the political spectrum in 2022
 (economic and populism dimensions)



Source: Kieskompas

mento Sociale Italiano and Alleanza Nazionale) on both the cultural plane and the level of politicians and organisations themselves.

Whatever the positioning of the radical right parties on the political spectrum, it is also interesting in this case to observe voter distribution on the rivalry dimensions. The first aspect worthy of note is once again a certain discrepancy between the stances of the two parties and those of their electorates. Fratelli d'Italia and Lega voters are less populist in their attitudes than the two parties themselves. With a few exceptions, then, the Fratelli d'Italia and Lega leaderships are more populist than most of their supporters.

Given this it seems reasonable to suppose that populism is used strategically by radical right parties as a rhetorical device for the purpose of appealing to an electorate, both right and left, which generally favours an interventionist approach. It is thus on the strength of a populist orientation and a restrictive or nativist notion of the welfare state that the radical right in Italy and elsewhere has succeeded in eroding the support of the centre-left parties whose traditionally social democratic approaches no longer mark them out from their competitors and have in any case become less clear cut as they have attempted to combine these with neoliberal stances, such as policies that favour labour-market flexibility.

It is worth underlining, however, that both parties and their respective electorates have more extreme views on welfare chauvinism and less extreme views as regards populism. If

we examine the approaches of the other parties to these same issues, however, the divergence is clear between Fratelli d'Italia and Lega voters and the Italian electoral average precisely on the welfare chauvinism issue. For example, as regards an indicator that typically brings out populist views, namely 'The will of the people should be the guiding light in the country's politics', the electorate generally strongly agrees, or 67 per cent of it does, while 81 per cent of Lega voters and 84 per cent of Fratelli d'Italia voters agree. As regards an equally typical indicator of welfare chauvinism – 'People born in Italy should take precedence for work over immigrants' – 50 per cent of the sample agreed or strongly agreed (Fratelli d'Italia 72 per cent and Lega 74 per cent).

OVERLAPPING ELECTORATES AND VOTER PRIORITIES

The strong overlap and similarities between the voters of Italy's two radical right parties in all three areas of rivalry examined here also emerge from this study. While their historical trajectories and voting geographies differ, Fratelli d'Italia and Lega get their votes from a social catchment area whose views on the themes at the heart of the public debate are similar.

The overlap of the electorates of the two radical right parties is also visible in analyses of voting patterns at the 2018 and 25 September 2022 elections. The data shown in Table 1, from our survey of a sample of the Italian population,

Table 1
Voting patterns from the 2018 to the 2022 elections
 (out of every 100 voters for each party at the 2022, 'where did they come from?' as regards the 2018 elections)

		2022 election vote									
		Total	Fdi	Lega	Forza Italia	Azione/ Iv	Pd	Sin.Ita/ Verdi	+Eu	M5s	Non voting
2018 election vote	Fdi	3.6	5.9	1.7	1.7	3.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.0	6.0
	Lega	12.3	32.9	46.7	15.5	5.7	0.8	5.3	10.0	1.0	4.1
	Forza Italia	9.6	8.8	5.0	65.5	1.9	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.6
	Pd	13.9	2.9	3.3	5.2	39.6	58.6	10.5	20.0	10.1	23.6
	Leu	2.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.9	7.0	31.6	0.0	2.0	4.4
	M5s	23.5	14.1	6.7	5.2	15.1	14.8	15.8	20.0	75.8	1.1
	Others	7.9	3.6	3.3	3.5	13.1	8.6	15.7	40.0	1.0	8.6
	Non voting	26.9	31.8	33.3	3.4	18.9	9.4	21.1	10.0	7.1	42.6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	

Source: Based on Euromedia Research data for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

shows individual party voting composition (vertical column) in the September 2022 elections on the basis of votes at the 2018 elections. As far as Fratelli d'Italia and Lega are concerned it can be observed that around one-third (32.9 per cent) of 2018 Lega voters shifted to Giorgia Meloni's party in 2022, confirming the broad area of overlap and interchange between the two electorates. Moreover, as other studies on the 2022 elections have shown, this massive transfer of Lega voters to Fratelli d'Italia took place in what were once the heartlands of Lega (Nord) support, namely northern Italy. It was, in fact, in this geographical area that a considerable part of Lega's social base – made up in particular of artisans, private sector workers, small business people and the self-employed – preferred the change represented in the radical right context by Giorgia Meloni and her party, who also stood out, as we have seen, because of their special rhetorical attention to small and medium-sized business interests, combining free enterprise values with 'protecting' Italian manufacturing.

Once again as regards 2018 to 2022 voting patterns it should be noted that, beyond the non-voting universe it is precisely the two radical right parties which have proved most capable of winning back abstainers. Fratelli d'Italia's percentage of former abstainers who voted this time was 31.8 per cent of its electorate, while Lega's was over 33 per cent (though dropping).

In political sociology terms the resemblance between Lega and Fratelli d'Italia voters is also visible, with a few exceptions, in an analysis of the priority agendas of the interviewees in our sample. The data are shown in Figure 3 and also indicate that Italians' primary concerns are increased living costs (energy and inflation) and (un)employment. Nearly 75 per cent of Fratelli d'Italia voters expressed worries about inflation, an even higher figure than the sample average (65.4 per cent), while Lega voters were fully aligned with the overall figure on this issue (65 per cent). A similar trend is visible on the second theme cited as a priority, namely employment: 44.7 per cent of those voting for Meloni cited generating new jobs as a priority, while only 38.3 per cent of Lega voters did so.

In this sense Fratelli d'Italia voters would seem to be more worried about the state of the Italian economy and the repercussions for the labour market and family wellbeing than Lega's, and then the Italian electorate as a whole. Fratelli d'Italia's greater radical right 'social' inclination than Lega's comes through here. One area of agreement between the two parties and their electorates is safety and criminality (frequently aligned with immigration). As can be seen, these issues are considered a priority by around a quarter of Italians (25.9 per cent), but Fratelli d'Italia and Lega voters rank safety and criminality concerns third, at 41.2 per cent and 38.3 per cent, respectively, of interviewees choosing these. If we consider that these issues are frequently presented by the radical right as a consequence of immigration, it is clear that this emphasis on economic difficulties, on one hand, and on social law and order support measures, on the other, is the basis for party manifestos capable of integrating state action and an exclusivist or nativist notion of welfare.

ITALIAN PRIORITIES

The contradictions potentially inherent in manifestos such as these – which might be summed up as 'statism + nativism' and which were the cornerstones of the winning electoral formula referred to above – are related in particular to where public spending goes. For Fratelli d'Italia and Lega voters, in fact, the spending priority should not be reducing socio-economic inequality. Once again, as Figure 4 shows, while Italians cite the issue of social disparities as a priority for 25.9 per cent of interviewees, Fratelli d'Italia and Lega voters accord it much lower priority, at 15.3 per cent and 16.7 per cent, respectively. This means that state intervention in the economy is seen as useful if it protects or safeguards specific social categories in distributional rather than redistributive terms. There is thus nothing random about the fact that the greatest differences between these voters and those voting for centre-left parties is to be found precisely on the issue of reducing inequalities, held to be a priority for 32 per cent of PD voters and 50 per cent of Sinistra Italiana/Verdi voters.

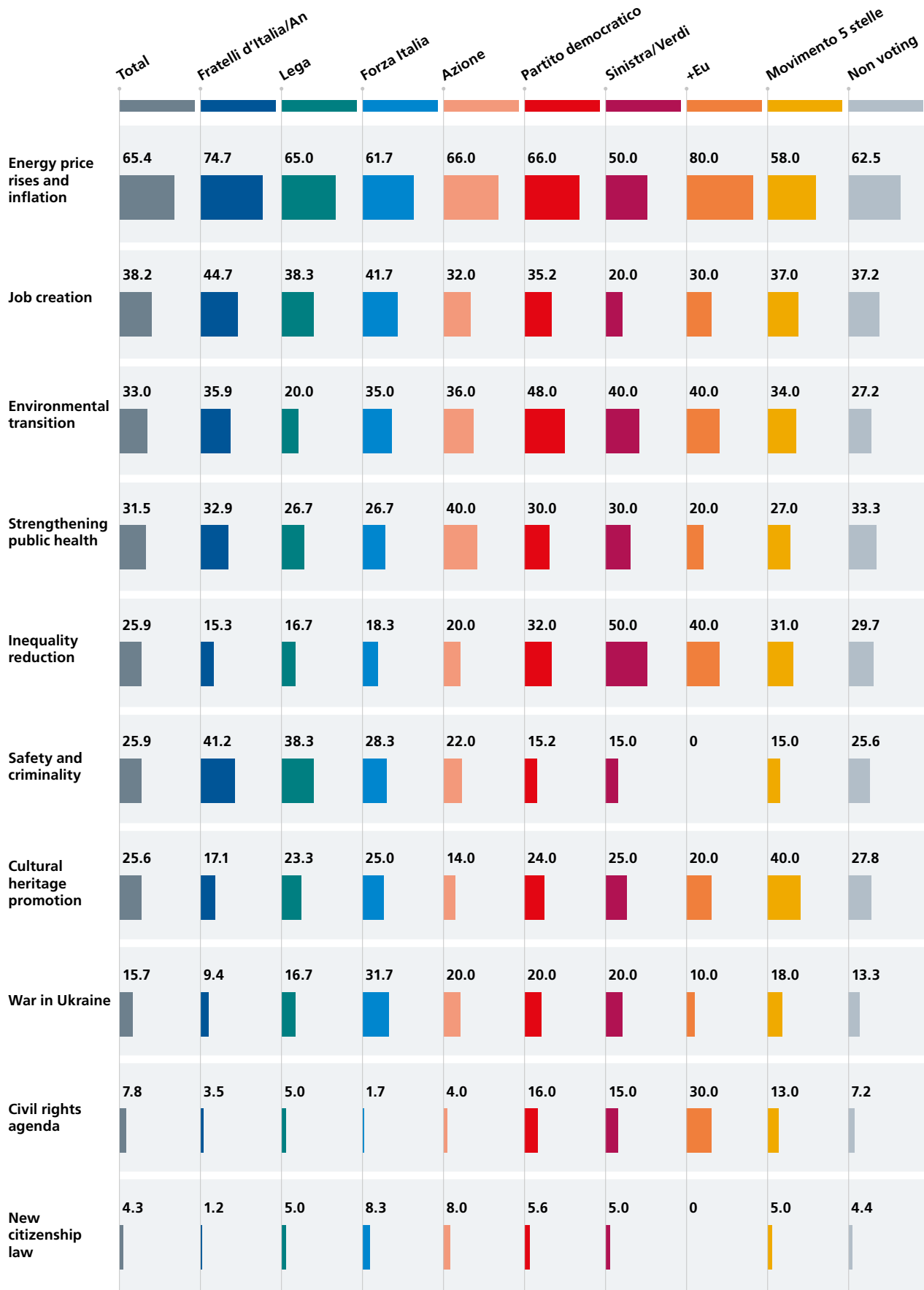
Analysing Italian priorities and those of the two Italian radical right parties highlights the ability of Fratelli d'Italia and Lega to combine a form of state interventionism of a conservative type with a traditionalist or nationalist view of civil rights. This combination can be analysed by intersecting two different dimensions: on one hand, voter self-identification on the left/right spectrum (here taken literally as well as in exclusively economic terms) and, on the other, the cultural or identity dimension related to post-materialist and self-expression issues and values.

POLITICAL SPACES AND ITALIAN PARTY POSITIONING

In Figure 5 these two dimensions form a political space within which the positions of those voting for the main Italian parties are shown. As can be seen, Fratelli d'Italia and Lega voters self-identify as right-wing with conservative orientations in the field of civil rights (citizenship, sexual identity, immigration and so on). It is worth noting that there is no contradiction between the above arguments and the right-wing positioning of the voters of the two parties considered. In the previous analysis the position of the parties and their voters on the political spectrum was related to the role to be played by, and the weight of, the state in defining public policy. From this viewpoint, the support of the majority of Lega and Fdl voters for public spending policies was centre-left in orientation. By contrast, when these same voters were asked about their left–right ideologies (as shown in Figure 4) a clear rightward shift was visible.

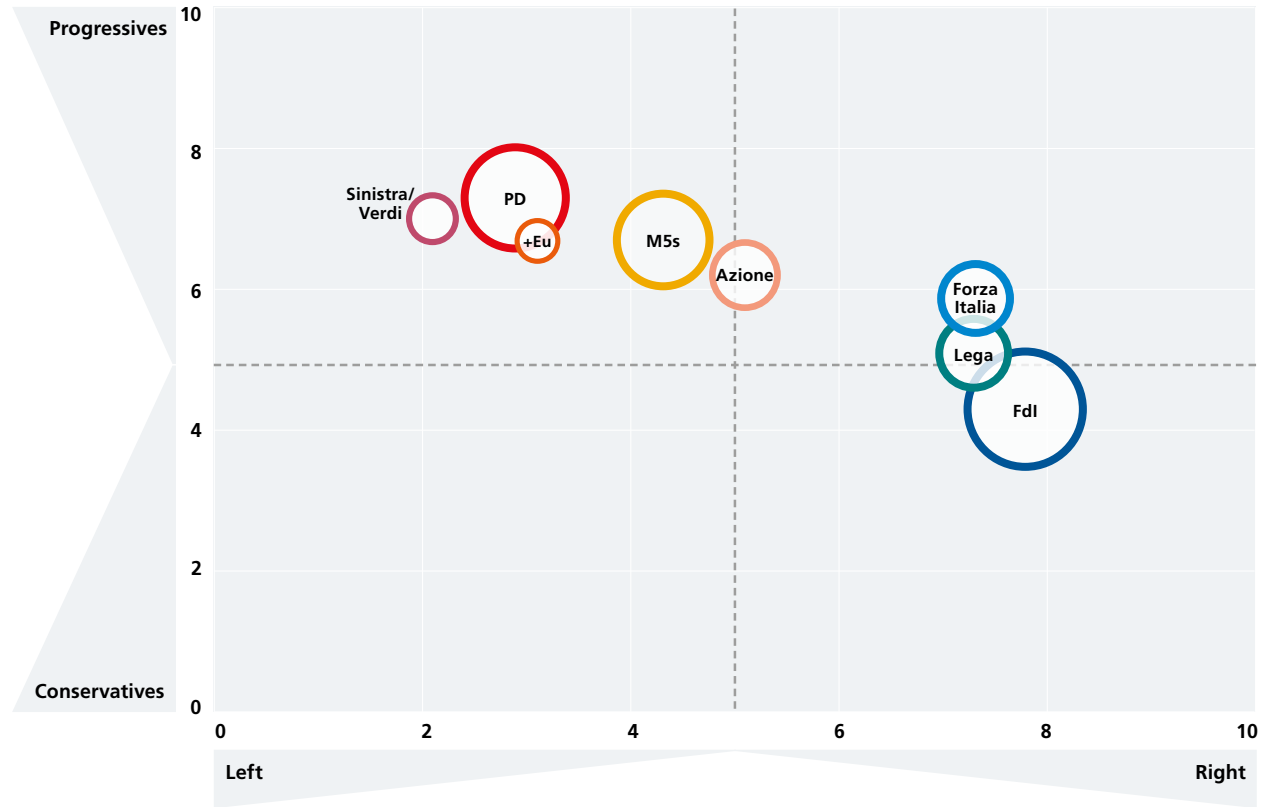
Of the two Italian right-wing parties the most radical in terms of electoral makeup is Fratelli d'Italia, although the difference between its and Lega voters is minimal. The same trend can be observed in the second dimension examined, namely culture. While the difference is not huge, slightly more Fratelli d'Italia voters than Lega voters self-identify as conservative. This snapshot of the Italian

Figure 4
Public agenda priorities for Italians by votes at the 2022 elections
 (in percentage terms with multiple answers, max. 3)



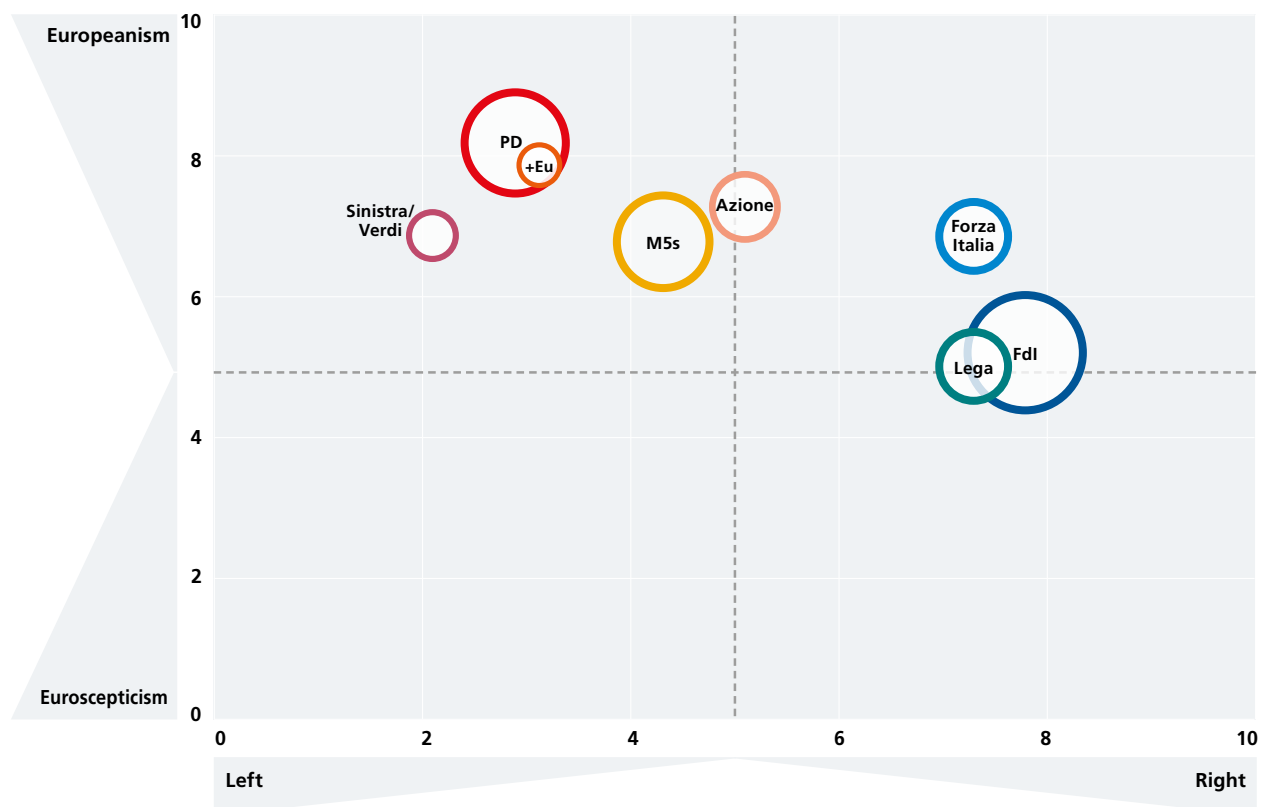
Source: Based on Euromedia Research data for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Figure 5
The Italian political spectrum and where the various parties' voters are located on the left–right and cultural dimensions
 (size of circles proportionate to votes won by the parties at the 2022 elections)



Source: Based on Euromedia Research data for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Figure 6
The Italian political spectrum and where the various parties' voters are located on the left–right and cultural dimensions
 (size of circles proportionate to votes won by the parties at the 2022 elections)



Source: Based on Euromedia Research data for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

radical right is further confirmation of the social and ideological similarities between Salvini's and Meloni's parties. It is an electoral base made up of ideologically right-wing voters with interventionist economic tendencies and nativist or nationalist attitudes on civil and social rights.

THE IDEOLOGICAL CHARACTER OF THE ITALIAN RADICAL RIGHT AND PERCEPTIONS OF FRATELLI D'ITALIA AND LEGA

The radical right's nationalist or sovereigntist approach emerges clearly if we examine the political dimension of European Union's functions and powers. In Figure 5 this dimension, which juxtaposes voters favourable to the European integration process with more Eurosceptic ones, intersects with the usual left–right ideological scale. In this case the greater Euroscepticism of the radical right than that of the other parties, including its centre-right ally Forza Italia, is evident. However, compared with the past, the opposition to European integration has diminished, with measured, though critical support for the European Union visible.

On this issue two aspects need underlining, however. The first concerns the type of data analysed in this context. The political space shown in figures 5 and 6 shows *the views of party voters*, not those of party leaders. This is an important distinction, because radical right party voters generally hold more moderate (or more pro-Europe in this case) views than their party representatives. In other words, the Euroscepticism shown over time by Fratelli d'Italia and Lega has been supported by voters who are only partially critical of Europe and sometimes even show lukewarm pro-European Union views.

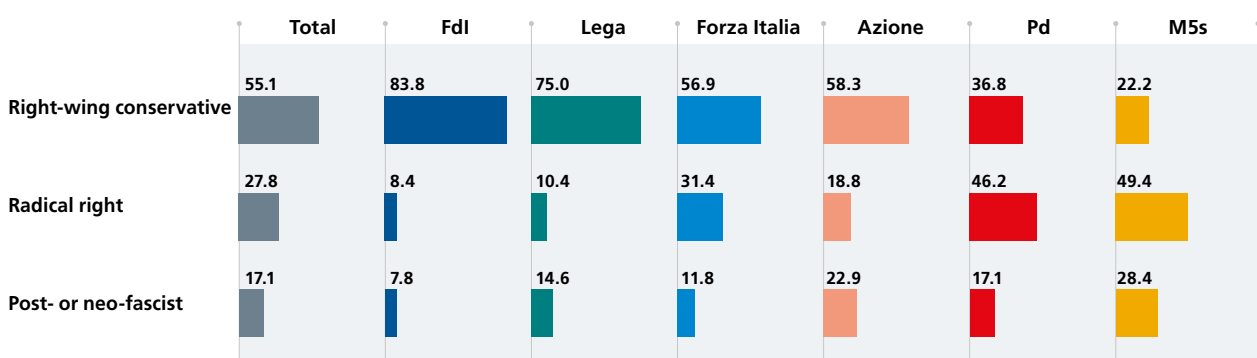
On the other hand the second aspect to highlight is the gradual weakening of the Euroscepticism shown by the leaders of Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, for various reasons. In the case of Lega, its participation in the government of former ECB President Mario Draghi inevitably tempered its criticism of the European Union, above all at a time of public investments sponsored precisely by the primary suprana-

tional institutions (*Next Generation EU*, *Sure*, *NRRP* and so on). In the case of Fratelli d'Italia, it was primarily its prospective electoral victory that prompted Giorgia Meloni to temper her clear opposition to European integration and ultimately to espouse a Eurosceptic line that did not contemplate 'Italexit', either directly or indirectly.

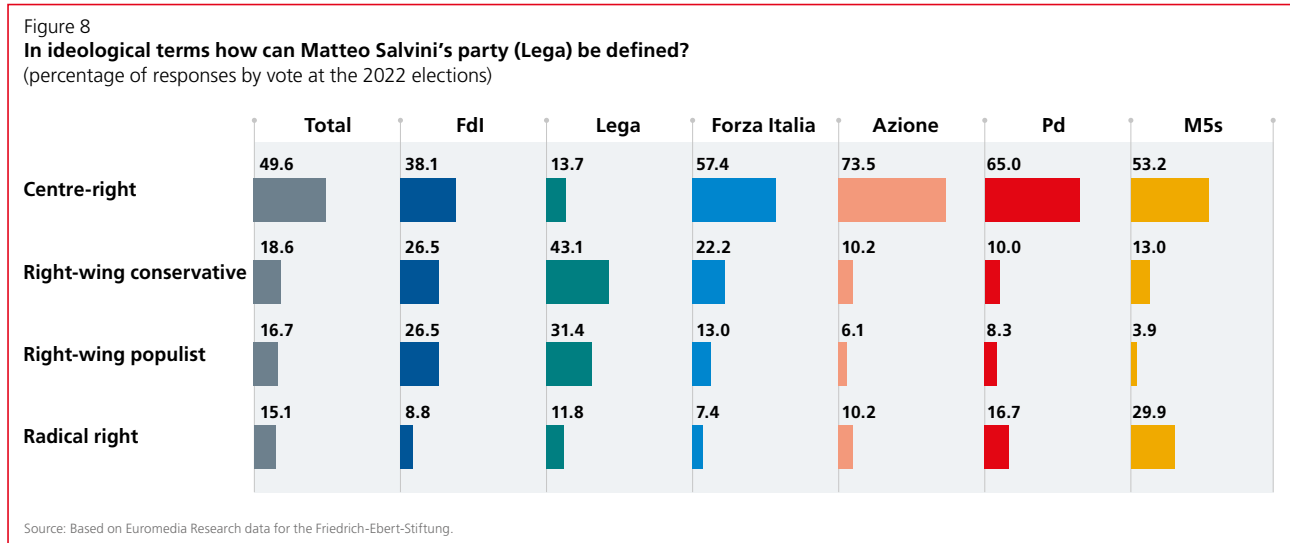
As far as the ideological nature of the two parties examined here is concerned, what remains to be analysed is the judgements on the issue made by voters themselves. As mentioned earlier the populism category also applies to Fratelli d'Italia, albeit with many limitations. It is the very 'radical right' category which is frequently rejected by the party leaders themselves, who prefer other labels, such as conservatism or nationalism (in the form of patriotism) as their benchmarks. In this respect voters were asked directly how they would define the two parties examined here. Figure 7 shows answers for Giorgia Meloni's party, with the majority of interviewees (55.1 per cent) agreeing with the definition of Fratelli d'Italia as a 'right-wing conservative' party, while 27.8 per cent of the sample preferred a post- or neo-Fascist label. Only 17.1 per cent considered Fratelli d'Italia to be a radical right party.

Beyond these overall opinions, the most interesting observations concern the answers of voters of the individual parties, with marked differences between centre-left and centre-right. In fact, it is above all Fratelli d'Italia's supporters who mostly (83.8 per cent) agree that their party should be defined as a right-wing conservative party. Only a minority (8.4 per cent) consider the post- or neo-Fascist category to be the most appropriate, despite the party's historical roots in earlier post-Fascist bodies. Lega's voters and, to a lesser extent, those of Forza Italia, consider Meloni's party a right-wing conservative party. The true watershed as regards judgements on Fratelli d'Italia's identity comes from PD and M5s voters, for whom Meloni's party does not have conservative connotations, has to some extent disowned its historical roots and is linked directly to the Fascist experience, in these voters' opinion. Specifically, 46.2 per cent of PD voters and 49.4 per cent of M5s voters consider Fratelli d'Italia a neo- or post-Fascist party. The right-wing conservatism category is preferred by 36.8 per cent of PD supporters and by only 22.2 per cent of M5s voters.

Figure 7
In ideological terms, how can Giorgia Meloni's party (Fratelli d'Italia) be defined?
(percentage of responses by vote at the 2022 elections)



Source: Based on Euromedia Research data for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.



Turning to the definition of Salvini's Lega (Figure 8), the first figure that emerges is the prevalence of those who consider Lega a right-wing populist party – nearly half of voters (49.6 per cent) define it in this way. Next come those who consider Lega a right-wing conservative (18.6 per cent) or centre-right (16.7 per cent) party and lastly those who consider it a radical right party (15.1 per cent). In the case of Lega the difference between the views of Fratelli d'Italia and Lega voters is interesting. Lega voters see the party led by Salvini, like Meloni's, as a right-wing conservative party (43.1 per cent) and, as we saw above, the two compete for the same votes. By contrast, Fratelli d'Italia voters prefer to define Lega as a right-wing populist party (38.1 per cent). From Fratelli d'Italia voters' point of view it is precisely its populism which marks out Lega and differentiates it from Giorgia Meloni's party. The coalition's other ally, Forza Italia, shares this view, with 57.4 per cent considering Lega a right-wing populist party.

In contrast to our earlier description of Fratelli d'Italia's ideological character, in Lega's case centre-left party voters agree with Fratelli d'Italia and Forza Italia voters in defining Lega's ideological profile: 73.5 per cent of Azione/Italia Viva voters, 65 per cent of PD voters and 53.2 per cent of M5s voters define Lega as a right-wing populist party, potentially with a radical connotation. But while for Giorgia Meloni's supporters attributing a populist connotation to Salvini's party is designed to differentiate it from the conservative space occupied by Fratelli d'Italia itself, in the case of the centre-left it takes on critical connotations of political irresponsibility.

Perceptions of the two radical right parties among the various parties' voters are thus bound up with party rivalries and a desire to take their distance (left-wing and centre voters in particular) from parties considered culturally reprehensible. However, it can also be observed that voters for parties considered reprehensible by others see the parties they vote for as conservative, not radical or far right. Given that such voters accounted for 35 per cent of Italian voters at the last elections on 25 September 2022, this means that a significant proportion of the electorate increasingly see the

populist right as normal. In other words, what Cas Mudde has called the 'mainstreaming' of the radical right – that is, its progressive normalisation – is under way, and it is perhaps precisely this that enables such parties to win over such large swathes of an electorate that refuses to see itself as extremist.

In conclusion, then, Fratelli d'Italia and Lega voters would seem to be attracted to these parties above all on the basis of their promises to reserve a privileged space in the national community for natives, limit the negative repercussions of immigrants and drastically reduce their numbers. These preferences would also seem to be flanked by lukewarm or negative attitudes to the European Union and extremely conservative cultural and civil rights views, preferences which are shored up by the rhetoric of the two populist parties. In the second place these same voters seem to be susceptible to the populist appeal, to the central importance accorded in party speeches and by radical right leaders to the rights and sacrosanct expectations of the 'sovereign' people, an indistinct group made up of 'ordinary people' as distinct from the 'elite'. These same ordinary people, it should not be forgotten, find their spokespersons in leaders, namely Matteo Salvini and then Giorgia Meloni, who are the very epitome of highly mediatised populist leaders. The majority of voters of these two parties do not perceive all this as radical or anti-system, but as expressing a shared sentiment and thus 'normal', and thus as entirely compatible with liberal democracy and conservatism.

At the same time, the two parties' voters do not have a clear left-right axis position, although they have a tendency to demand protection from a state which they simultaneously want to ask less of them. This stance is echoed by the rhetoric and promises of two populist parties that are now such formidable rivals of a centre-left and left in electoral crisis because of their ability to appeal to a working- and middle-class electorate that is fearful of loss of status (in both financial and lifestyle terms) and regards openness to new arrivals as dangerous and the behaviour of the elite and the mainstream political class as harmful. This is the winning formula we spoke of at the outset.

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Dr Tobias Mörschel

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AUTHORS

Sofia Ventura is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Bologna, where she teaches courses in comparative politics (leadership and political communication, media and public opinion).

Marco Valbruzzi teaches Political Science at the University of Naples Federico II and is Associate Professor at the Gonzaga University of Florence.

FRATELLI D'ITALIA AND LEGA: WHAT IS THE RECIPE FOR SUCCESS OF ITALIAN POPULISM?

This study analyses the ideologies and manifestos of Italy's two main radical right parties: Matteo Salvini's Lega and Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) led by Italy's current prime minister, Giorgia Meloni. In particular, in addition to comparisons with the approaches of the other parties, the stances of these two parties are analysed and generalised using two different research techniques. On one hand, Lega and Fratelli d'Italia's approaches are examined through an evidence-based expert survey which places them on the political spectrum based on their leaders' statements and their principal manifesto policies. On the other hand, a survey performed on a representative sample of the Italian population is used to identify the views of radical right voters, especially on three different analytical dimensions: (i) populist attitude or mindset; (ii) degree of state intervention in the economy; and (iii) preference for a nativist or chauvinist notion of the welfare state.

Cross-referencing this data enabled us to analyse both overlaps between voters' views and those expressed by party leaders and the many similarities between the two Italian radical right parties' voters. First and foremost, what emerged from the analysis was that the party leaders' views on the main elements analysed are more extreme than those of their voters, above all as regards those eligible for welfare state benefits and the use of populist rhetoric. In the second place the data analysed shows a shift to the centre by Lega and Fratelli d'Italia in the economics sphere, with specific reference to the potential for approval of interventionist policies in social terms. However these state intervention policies are not seen as redistributive, or designed to reduce inequality, but rather as a distributive-type policy benefiting specific social categories and whose goal is to reserve welfare state services for natives alone.

In the third place, this analysis shows that this set of policies and preferences, summarisable in the 'statism + nativism' formula, is perceived by the majority of the two parties' voters not as radical or anti-system, but rather as expressing a shared sentiment and, as such, entirely compatible with liberal democracy and conservatism. It is exactly this social and political context which is behind the mainstreaming of the radical right, namely their progressive normalisation within the public debate. And it is perhaps precisely this which enables such parties to win over large swathes of an electorate that refuses to see itself as extremist, including those whose economic orientation is social democratic.