

# 7 *Italy: The Mainstream Right and its Allies, 1994–2018*

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## 1. Introduction

Italy provides a perfect context to study the relationship between different right-wing parties in democratic politics. There are few (if any) other places in Western Europe that have seen such a symbiosis between the mainstream right, on the one hand, and its centrist and radical right counterparts, on the other (though see Bale 2018). Since the collapse of the Italian party system in 1992 and up until the 2013 parliamentary elections, Italian politics comprised a multi-party system aggregated around two broad left- and right-wing poles (Bartolini, Chiaramonte and D'Alimonte 2004). Throughout most of these years, Silvio Berlusconi's personalistic parties have played an essential role in re-building Italy's fragmented centre right, having constantly been the dominant force of coalitions involving minor partners both on the right and on the centre. With their support, Berlusconi led centre-right coalitions to three general election victories (1994, 2001 and 2008), serving as either prime minister or as leader of the opposition from his first political experience in 1994 until his replacement in the midst of the 2011 financial crisis. The following years, however, radically changed the balance of power between the more moderate and radical components of the political right in Italy. The transformation culminated in the 2018 elections, when Matteo Salvini's *Lega* (formerly *Lega Nord*) obtained more votes than Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*, which in turn got its lowest score at the ballot box in over two decades.

These developments seem to suggest that the Italian mainstream right succumbed to the tension between the challenges posed by the silent revolution, and those embedded in the silent counter-revolution, notably migration. While at the turn of the twentieth century Berlusconi's parties embraced this issue to cement a lasting partnership with radical right allies, this strategy ultimately proved too problematic

for the more moderate components of Italy's centre right. In the long run, the mainstream right could not cope with the need to appeal simultaneously to voters expressing liberal and progressive values associated with post-material value change, and to electorates sympathizing with authoritarian nativist ideals of the populist radical right (Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser, Chapters 1 and 12, this volume). The Italian context, however, offers further insight into the complex relationship between mainstream and radical right politics. The party system collapse in 1992–1994, and the implosion of Italy's main centre-right party *Democrazia Cristiana* (Christian Democrats; DC), ultimately blurred the distinction between the 'liberal', 'conservative' and 'populist' components of the political right. In this scenario, the personalistic parties of Silvio Berlusconi, who dominated the scene following the 1992 juncture, effectively represented the functional equivalent of the mainstream right in Italy. Despite the populist tendency of their leader, the cadres of *Forza Italia* displayed a moderate ideological profile, similar to other liberal–conservative parties in Europe (Raniolo 2006), and their policy platforms mirrored those of 'the mainstream European centre right' (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015; see also Ruzza and Fella 2011).

This chapter examines how the centre right of the Italian political spectrum has evolved over the last twenty-five years, that is, from the general elections that marked the beginning of the 'Second Republic' in 1994 until the contest held in March 2018. We seek to assess how the Italian right coped with the key policy challenges thrown up by the emergence of new lines of conflict in Western Europe, notably European integration, immigration, moral issues and welfare. Looking at the patterns of competition and cooperation among the components of the Italian centre right, the next section offers an overview of the fragmentation and re-composition of parties within this area since the 1990s, and classifies the mainstream, centrist and radical right components covered in this study. We then present the chapter's analytical strategy based on the identification of three main phases of recent centre-right politics in Italy: breakthrough (1994–2001); government (2001–2011); and decay (2011–2018). After a discussion of demand- and supply-side factors across these three phases, we conclude by presenting the implications of our findings for future research on the interaction between mainstream and radical components of the political right in Europe.

## 2. Party System Change and the Centre Right in Italy

To understand mainstream right politics in Italy, we must first deal with the fragmentation of this party family (which calls into question the classification of its various components), and with the issue of its continuity (which calls for the drawing of an analytical distinction between the different phases of recent Italian politics). To address these issues, we go back to the developments of the early 1990s. As noted earlier, in fact, the Italian party system did not collapse due to the advent of new political cleavages but in the wake of corruption scandals that would radically transform the nature of its parties and of party competition over the following decades (Morlino and Tarchi 1996).

Between 1992 and 1994 the disintegration of the DC created a large opening and a considerable fragmentation on the centre right of the Italian political spectrum. Until then, Italy had configured an imperfect two-party system dominated by the DC and the Communists (Galli 1966), with the former occupying a centrist position and being continuously in government as the largest party since 1947 (Sartori 1982). The collapse of the DC thus created a political void, which would be filled by the creation of new centre-right forces (Fella and Ruzza 2013). The early 1990s saw the emergence or breakthrough of, among others: Berlusconi's personalistic party *Forza Italia* (Go Italy; FI) (McDonnell 2013); Gianfranco Fini's post-Fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance; AN) (Ignazi 2003); Umberto Bossi's regionalist populist *Lega Nord* (Northern League; LN) (McDonnell 2006); as well as multiple separate, small Christian democratic parties (Paolucci 2008). While often allied in broad centre-right coalitions, the names, nature and composition of these parties changed quite regularly over the following twenty-five years. The diaspora of the Christian democrats produced the *Centro Cristiano Democratico* (Christian Democratic Centre; CCD) and the *Cristiani Democratici Uniti* (United Christian Democrats; CDU). The two joined forces in 2002 in the *Unione di Centro* (Union of the Centre; UDC), but experienced multiple splinters and changes over the following decade. Furthermore, Berlusconi's federative attempts over the centre right resulted in a merger between FI, AN and other smaller parties in 2009 to form the *Popolo Della Libertà* (People of Freedom; PDL). Over the following years, various components splintered out of the new party, reconfiguring some of the formations that existed before the PDL. Some members left the party in

2011 following former AN secretary Gianfranco Fini. Other AN nostalgics splintered a year later to form *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy; FdI), whereas most of the Christian democrat component quit the party in 2013, with the result that PDL returned to its old denomination of FI.

If the 1992 implosion of the Italian party system was not triggered by the emergence of new political cleavages, the ensuing fragmentation of the Italian right was, at least to a certain extent, a response to the tensions linked to the silent revolution and silent counter-revolution outlined in the introduction to this volume. In this respect, we can identify four main political actors: a Christian democratic component; Berlusconi's personalistic parties FI and PDL; the more right-wing National Alliance and its successor Brothers of Italy; and the (Northern) League. In the light of the comparative ambitions of this volume, we consider that the personalistic parties of Silvio Berlusconi (FI, then PDL, then again FI) represent the functional equivalent of mainstream right parties in Italian politics. Previous research suggests that the concept of 'right-wing populism' is not easily applicable in Italy, since Silvio Berlusconi can be considered a 'populist' in terms of style, but his parties are more readily associated with conservative ones in terms of programmes and policies (Raniolo 2006; Verbeek and Zaslove 2015; Tarchi 2016).

As regards the other parties, the configuration of the Christian democratic component, and its relationship with the mainstream right, has varied over time,<sup>1</sup> but small parties such as the CCD, CDU and UDC can safely be located in the centre right of the political spectrum. On the far right, the tension between the values of the silent revolution and silent counter-revolution emerges with respect to AN – the successor of the extreme right *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (Italian Social Movement; MSI). Scholars in fact categorize AN alternatively as radical right (Norris 2005; van der Brug and Fennema 2009) or conservative, recognizing its progressive abandonment of nativism and populism in favour of liberal values (Griffin 1996; Ignazi 2005; Mudde 2007). The drift ultimately led AN to merge into PDL in 2009, completing the shift towards conservatism, but a splinter of the right-wing faction of the new party formed the populist radical right

<sup>1</sup> On the relationship between the mainstream right and the Catholic Church in Italy, see Ozzano and Giorgi (2015).

FdI. Different categorization issues concern the *Lega Nord*. Due to its heterogeneous ideological stances, scholars have long disagreed on whether it configured a far-right party (Zaslave 2004; Norris 2005), an ‘anti-political’ force (Mastropaolo 2005) or a ‘regionalist populist’ actor (McDonnell 2006), even though the recent ideological and organizational developments seem to confirm its transition away from regionalism and towards radical right populism (Giovannini, Albertazzi and Seddone 2018). Since these issues reflect the key challenges presented by the interaction between radical and mainstream components of the political right, we consider that *Alleanza Nazionale* (until its merger with PDL) and FdI, as well as the Northern League (and its rebrand *Lega*) are generally located to the right of the above-mentioned parties, albeit with important variations over time.

This leaves us with four groups of parties active from 1994 to 2018. Figure 7.1 below, reporting each party’s right–left position scores using the RILE index of party manifestos (Budge and Laver 1992), confirms how difficult it is to classify the various components of the Italian centre right. On the one hand, the Northern League does not appear to be more right-wing than the other parties. On the other, party scores tend to converge during government (2001–2008), and disperse in the early and late periods. This opens the question of the continuity of these parties over time, outlined earlier in this section.

To look at the evolution of the Italian mainstream right, we identify three main phases: breakthrough (1994–2001), government (2001–2011) and decline (2011–2018). The first phase corresponds to the foundation of FI, its first electoral success and experience in office

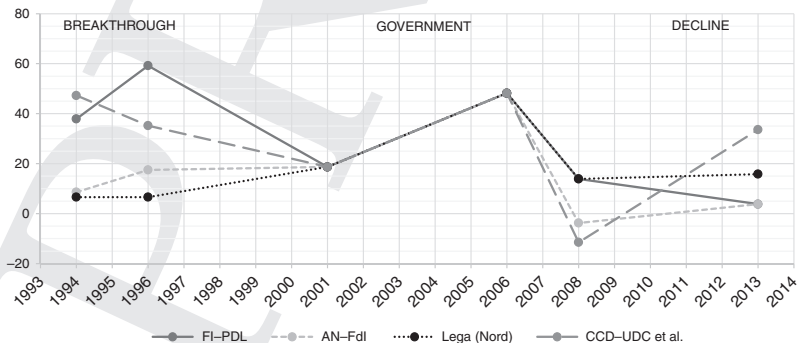
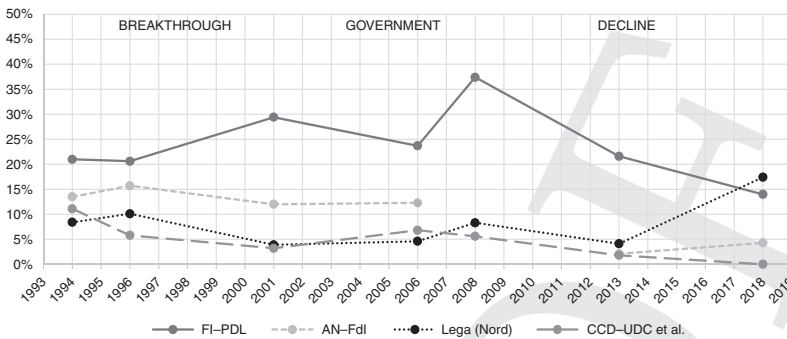


Figure 7.1 Right–left position of right-wing parties in Italy, 1994–2013



**Figure 7.2** Electoral scores of right-wing parties in Italy, 1994–2018

*Source:* Ministry of Internal Affairs, data from the Lower Chamber.

(1994) and its first electoral defeat in a general election (1996). The second phase comprises three elections: two of them saw the victory of the centre right led by Berlusconi's parties (2001 and 2008), whereas the intermediate one marked the short centre-left interregnum (2006). The third phase opens with the replacement of Berlusconi's government by the technocratic government led by Mario Monti, and includes the general elections which marked the decay of FI (2013) and the triumph of the League and the coalition government with the M5S (2018).

As illustrated by Figure 7.2, the electoral scores of the mainstream right in the lower house of Parliament varied considerably across the seven general elections that took place during this period. These years were also characterized by major changes in the morphology and dynamics of the Italian party system, because of semi-systematic party and parliamentary group switching, and a seemingly endless process of electoral law reform. After forty years using a proportional electoral system, the 1994, 1996 and 2001 elections were in fact run using a mixed system with single-member constituencies and a compensatory proportional formula (Mattarellum). The law was reformed in 2005 in favour of a proportional system (without preferences) compensated by a majority bonus (Porcellum), which sparked much criticism but remained in place for the following three general elections in 2006, 2008 and 2013. After a first reform of this electoral law was deemed unconstitutional, a new law was ultimately passed prior to the 2018 general elections, reintroducing a mixed system with

part of the seats allocated through a first-past-the-post system and part through a proportional system (Rosatellum).<sup>2</sup>

The distinction of these four group of parties, with FI-PDI playing the role of mainstream right, and three phases of recent Italian politics allow us to map the Italian centre right over the past twenty-five years. The unsuccessful federative attempts of the political right and the decay of its mainstream right component might reflect growing fragmentation triggered by the silent revolution and silent counter-revolution in the Italian centre right. To further elaborate on the key policy challenges associated with this political dynamic, the following sections present information on the demand-<sup>3</sup> and supply-side profile<sup>4</sup> of each group of parties. Based on this data, the next sections trace the main

<sup>2</sup> While for reasons of space these reforms will only be addressed marginally in this chapter, we will nevertheless consider the crucial role they played in structuring the alliance and conflict patterns in the Italian party system. For a detailed analysis of the politics of institutional and electoral reform in Italy, see, for example, Bardi (2007); Bull (2016); Bedock (2017); Regalia (2018).

<sup>3</sup> Demand-side data uses the Italian National Election Study (ITANES) post-electoral survey for all elections from 1994 to 2013. This includes demographic information on age, gender, education and class. Education was measured by means of a three-point scale, using lower education (International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), level 1–2) as a reference, whereas class distinguishes between ‘upper’ and ‘working’ classes, and two intermediate categories for the ‘middle’ and ‘lower middle’ class. Furthermore, we look at the geographic distribution of voters in terms of the urban–rural divide (with rural identifying voters in cities with less than 10,000 inhabitants), and the divide between regions in the north, centre and south of Italy (based on the categories of the Italian National Institute of Statistics, ISTAT). Finally, we account for voters’ left–right self-placement on a ten-point scale, and for the issues they consider as the most pressing problems for their countries at the time of interviews. In line with the premises of this volume, we focus on four issue areas/problems: taxes and welfare; immigration; EU integration; and corruption and justice.

<sup>4</sup> The supply-side of centre-right parties is based on the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP), now MARPOR. The CMP data allows the measurement of the right–left positions of parties presented in Figure 7.1, and the relative salience of different issue areas in their electoral programmes. In this regard, our analysis focuses on seven policy areas. Four correspond to the key policy challenges outlined in the introduction of this volume: welfare, European integration, immigration (see Alonso and da Fonseca 2012) and moral issues (using categories for traditional morality and corruption). The three additional issue areas include decentralization, which has been a key theme for the Italian centre right, and notably for the former regionalist League. We include a category measuring positive incentives for business since this has been a recurring message for Berlusconi’s parties. Finally, we focus on governmental efficiency because the improvement of bureaucratic and administrative procedures in Italy has been at the core of party competition at least since the 1990s.



developments taking place during the phases of breakthrough, government and the decay of Berlusconi's personalistic parties, comparing the profiles of the different components of the centre-right coalition in terms of key demand- and supply-side factors.

### 3. Berlusconi and the Construction of the Italian Centre Right, 1994–2001

The 'foundational phase' of FI (Raniolo 2006: 440) began with Silvio Berlusconi's entry into politics in January 1994 and his first success in a general election. In just two months, the newly born FI capitalized on the transformation of the Italian party system (Morlino and Tarchi 1996) to win a 21 per cent vote share and over 8 million votes. FI managed to set the agenda of the elections through the support of Berlusconi's personal business and television group, intensive campaigning and effective electoral marketing. To cope with the highly volatile electoral context of the early 1990s, Berlusconi was also successful in building an asymmetrical coalition comprising the LN in the north and AN in the south, as well as former Christian Democrats. This unprecedented coalition, however, contained some structural weaknesses, and the first Berlusconi executive soon collapsed amidst disagreements with the League over the financial law in December 1994. The governmental crisis triggered political uncertainty and favoured the electoral success of the centre-left coalition led by Romano Prodi at the 1996 general elections. While FI confirmed its predominance over the Italian right (with more than 20 per cent and over 7.5 million votes) and while AN increased its support at the national level, their coalition crucially lacked the League, which stood as an independent party. The results thus favoured a reconstitution of the alliance with the northern party on the opposition benches, and its confirmation at the following European (1999) and regional elections (2000). Overall the composition of the centre right proved to be relatively stable over these years, as FI strengthened its internal organization and consolidated the alliances on its right and in the centre (Raniolo 2006). This allowed FI, AN and LN to lay down the foundations of an alliance that would last, albeit with some ups and downs, over the following twenty years.

In this political phase, the centre-right alliance was primarily motivated by the backlash against the pre-existing Italian political system. Yet each party in the coalition defined this in its own terms: FI focused



on Italy’s statism and promised a ‘liberal revolution’, the LN opposed the country’s centralism, whereas the AN challenged the post-1948 constitutional regime. The supply-side programmatic profile of the four components of the centre right is thus clearly distinguishable, as illustrated in Figure 7.3. In terms of the four key policy challenges, while *Lega* and FI focused more attention on welfare issues than AN and the Christian Democrats, they also supported less state intervention in the economy than their allies, who instead tried to strike a balance between support for the free market and calls for social justice. All parties devoted considerable importance to migration, generally in negative terms; indeed, this is the policy area in which the four centre-right actors score the lowest mean difference. Yet, while AN and, to a lesser extent, LN were very critical of migration and minority rights in the years in which Italy was turning into a destination country for international migrants, FI and the Christian Democrats backed some mildly pro-immigration proposals. While only the Christian Democrats invested in advocating traditional moral values, only AN campaigned against the EU, all other parties being generally favourable to integration. Finally, decentralization was the core issue of LN, reflecting the importance attributed by this party to regional autonomy in the early years – whereas the agenda of FI focused on business support and on governmental efficiency.

Overall, the analysis of the supply side suggests that the basis of the centre-right alliance over these years had to do with its (mild) opposition to immigration and state interventionism. This is partly confirmed

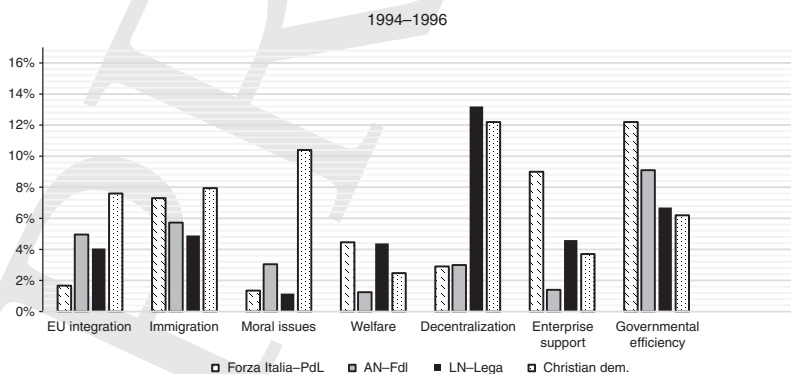


Figure 7.3 The supply side of right-wing politics in Italy, 1994-1996

Table 7.1 *The demand side of right-wing politics in Italy, 1994–1996*

		Parties				Mean diff.
		FI– PdL	AN– FdI	LN– Lega	Christian democrats	
1994–1996						
<i>Demographics</i>	Gender (f)	52.9	44.4	42.5	41.3	6.1
	Education (low)	50.1	38.4	51.8	29.2	13.2
	Class (work)	43.0	37.1	48.0	25.8	12.1
	Age (>50)	57.4	28.2	27.1	43.6	17.7
<i>Geography</i>	U–R divide (rural)	30.5	31.8	42.8	40.8	7.6
	N–S divide (north)	51.0	35.0	97.2	49.1	31.4
	N–S divide (south)	34.3	41.2	0.5	34.5	20.3
<i>Attitudes (MIP)</i>	Taxes & welfare	34.5	32.4	27.6	19.3	8.4
	Immigration	12.1	15.9	25.0	6.5	9.9
	EU integration	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	Corruption & Justice	43.8	43.9	48.1	53.2	5.4
<i>Self-placement</i>	Right-wing	61.0	83.5	37.5	36.5	27.4
	Centre	20.0	6.5	26.5	41.5	18.6

if we look at the demand side of centre-right politics, reported in Table 7.1. While the electorates of the four actors present some sociodemographic differences, notably in terms of age, class and territorial distribution, the attitudinal profile is coherent across the centre-right alliance. Corruption and justice stand out as the most important problem for about half of all respondents, which is not surprising considering the corruption scandals that tore apart the Italian political system over those years. Similarly, about one-third of the electorate of FI, AN and LN, like a fifth of the Christian democratic electorate, are concerned with taxes and welfare issues. Migration is most important for the LN voters (25 per cent), less so for FI and AN (12 and 15 per cent, respectively), and quite marginal for the Christian democrats

(6 per cent). Meanwhile, the EU does not appear to be a concern for any right-wing voter. Partisan ideological differences also emerge if we look at the left–right orientation of voters. With over 85 per cent of the AN voters identifying as right-wing, there is no doubt about the location of this party on the spectrum. FI follows with 60 per cent of its voters identifying as right-wing and 20 per cent as centrists. While the majority of the Christian democratic electorate identifies as centrist (40 per cent), the LN stands out as a hybrid with a split electorate out of which about a third does not identify as either centrist (26 per cent) or right-wing (37 per cent).

Overall, during the breakthrough, then, parties in the right-wing coalition shared concerns about immigration and a mildly liberal economic agenda. Their electorates recognize these issues as priorities despite important ideological variation across parties.

#### 4. The ‘Short’ Decade of Centre-Right Government, 2001–2011

The second phase comprises three general elections (2001, 2006 and 2008) and constitutes a ‘short’ decade during which centre-right coalitions were in office for more than eight out of ten years (2001–2006 and 2008–2011). The phase opened with the success of Berlusconi’s centre-right coalition *Casa delle Libertà* (House of Freedoms) at the May 2001 elections. FI alone won more than 29 per cent or 11 million votes, thirteen percentage points ahead of the main centre-left party, the second largest in the country. Berlusconi’s second cabinet would become the longest serving in Republican history, but was also challenged by growing popular unrest and had to cope with multiple conflicts between FI and its partners (Andrews 2006) that undermined governmental popularity and its stability. The House of Freedom suffered a severe vote loss at the European and regional elections in 2004, and the tensions within the government led to the formation of a new Berlusconi cabinet in 2005. Yet, in the 2006 general election, apart from the addition of some small lists from the centre and minor extreme-right formations, the main members of the coalition did not change. The strategy involved differentiating what was on offer so that each actor could catalyse the support of its own electorate (Tarchi 2018). Furthermore, Berlusconi took on the leadership of the campaign himself, with a series of last-minute promises, controversial statements

and attacks on the opposition of which his allies were given little (if any) prior notice. The electioneering outcome of this strategy was partly successful: the centre right managed to stem any loss of votes and obtained 49 per cent of the vote, suffering only the narrowest of defeats in the closest election in Italian history. Yet this strategy also exacerbated the conflict between FI and the rest of the centre right, as coalition partners became increasingly dissatisfied with Berlusconi's leadership style.

In response, Berlusconi upped the stakes and launched a campaign to federate the centre right within a new unitary party *Popolo della Libertà* (People of Freedom; PDL). If the project was initially met with diffidence, the collapse of the second Prodi government accelerated the merger of FI and AN, albeit amidst tension among sections of the latter, personal disputes and disagreement over policy directions (Tarchi 2018). The 2008 elections rewarded this strategy: the PDL won over 37 per cent of the vote and its allies LN about 8 per cent, seizing a solid parliamentary majority even without the support of the Christian democrats, who had left the coalition ahead of the elections. The new Berlusconi government, however, suffered new a new set of problems. First, different components of PDL argued over the management of the party, its territorial organization, and its programmatic profile on crucial economic issues and civil rights. Second, the LN backed an increasingly radical agenda on migration and security, escalating tensions with the moderate wing of the government. Third, a series of sex scandals involving Berlusconi leaked into the media, exacerbating the conflict between the government, the media and the judiciary. The overall effect of these tensions was the progressive loss of parliamentary support for the government, especially after the formation of a splinter parliamentary group by former AN members. Ultimately, the outbreak of the economic crisis and the pressures by the European Commission to reduce public debt left Berlusconi with no parliamentary majority. His resignation in November 2011 paved the way for Mario Monti's technocratic executive, effectively ending the 'short' decade of Italy's centre-right governments.

This phase is thus characterized by the consolidation of the centre-right alliance in its various configurations but also by persistent turbulence. This is partly reflected in Figure 7.4 below, reporting the supply side of centre-right politics during 2001–2008. The issue attention profiles of the four parties are very similar, as a result of their running

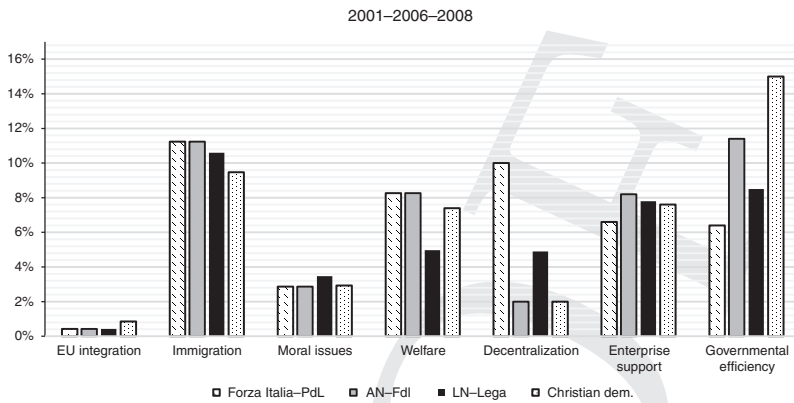


Figure 7.4 The supply side of right-wing politics in Italy, 2001-2008

consistently on joint electoral programmes, with a few exceptions concerning the enhanced importance attributed by FI to decentralization, and by the Christian democrats and AN to government efficiency. The four parties campaigned predominantly on welfare and, even more so, on immigration. Consistent with the findings outlined above, moral and EU integration issues did not play a major role in the political platforms of the Italian centre right, which generally expressed support for traditional values and mildly pro-European tones. Welfare issues included provisions aimed at families and younger people, accompanied by economic incentives and the expected benefits of a sharp decline in taxation on specific economic sectors and housing. Once more, therefore, the various parties combined a neoliberal economic view with mild pro-welfare provisions, mainly focused on taxation. Similarly, migration tops the agenda of the four parties. Under the initiative of AN and the LN, the coalition found common ground on an illiberal approach, framing immigrant settlement as corrosive of social order, and successfully reforming migration law with the ambition of creating a guest worker-style of recruitment. Over time, this approach was progressively softened in response to calls from the Christian democrats and the increasingly permissive approach of AN, which allowed for profession-specific and generalized regularizations of illegal migrants (Geddes 2008). In short, while migration is at the core of centre-right politics, its treatment is linked to coalition dynamics, so that the illiberal rhetoric and restrictive policies promoted by the

radical wing of the coalition were repeatedly watered down by the more moderate components of the centre right.

The idea that compromises on the migration agenda kept the centre-right coalition together over these years is confirmed by demand-side data reported in Table 7.2. Concerns about migration, in fact, topped the agenda of most centre-right voters. About half of the LN electorate (46 per cent), more than a third of those who voted FN and AN, and 28 per cent of Christian democrats saw immigration as the most urgent problem facing Italy during these years. In general, notwithstanding substantial sociodemographic and territorial differences in the composition of the vote for the centre right, the four parties' voters display considerable attitudinal coherence. Akin to what we noted in the previous political phase, the ranking of the most important problems

Table 7.2 *The demand side of right-wing politics in Italy, 2001–2008*

		Parties				Mean diff.
		FI- PdL	AN- FdI	LN- Lega	Christian democrats	
2001–2006–2008						
<i>Demographics</i>	Gender (f)	53.3	42.9	45.1	46.6	5.4
	Education (low)	55.2	44.0	55.2	38.0	10.5
	Class (work.)	46.0	22.4	48.2	36.5	14.5
	Age (>50)	48.0	37.9	43.9	51.8	7.7
<i>Geography</i>	U–R divide (rural)	37.6	34.4	49.0	45.3	8.6
	N–S divide (north)	43.4	36.6	97.9	40.5	31.1
	N–S divide (south)	39.8	39.7	0.4	44.3	22.0
<i>Attitudes (MIP)</i>	Taxes & welfare	16.1	18.6	21.9	14.7	4.0
	Immigration	35.6	35.2	46.0	27.6	9.2
	EU integration	0.4	0.6	0.0	0.5	0.3
	Corruption & Justice	10.7	11.1	12.1	9.2	1.5
<i>Self-placement</i>	Right-wing	67.3	79.0	69.0	33.8	22.9
	Centre	18.7	12.7	20.0	54.3	21.1

in the country is the same across the coalition, although migration replaces corruption and justice as the most pressing issue, followed by taxes and welfare (again, especially so among voters of LN and least so for the Christian democrats). Demand-side data also illustrate the progressive transformation of the four centre-right actors along the left–right continuum. Despite the evolution of AN towards mainstream conservative politics, its electorate remains the most right-wing of the coalition, with 79 per cent identifying with this category. Similarly, the Christian democrats display a moderate profile, counting on over 50 per cent of centrist and 33 per cent of right-wing voters. Compared with the previous political phase, however, the electorate of FI and in particular of LN shifts considerably to the right. If for FI the change over time change is moderate (from 60 to 67 per cent of right-wing voters), the tendency is significant for the LN, which now counts on an overwhelmingly right-wing electorate (69 per cent).

In sum, this phase during which centre-right governments loomed large marked important developments for the coalition. All parties improved their electoral support and experienced organizational and ideological change. FI started consolidating its party organization and kept the balance in the coalition; the LN moved further to the right, progressively detaching itself from regionalism; and AN pursued its transition towards conservatism. In this period, the coalition was kept together by a primary focus on migration issues. While this renewed political agenda arguably matched the preferences of an increasingly right-wing electorate, it also required compromise with societal actors (the Church and business interests) that were close to the moderate wing of the centre-right coalition.

## **5. Mainstream Right Decline, 2011–2018**

The year 2011 marked a juncture in the coalition politics of the Italian centre right for a number of reasons. The first disturbance concerned whether or not to support Monti's technocratic government. While the former AN and the PDL were willing, albeit with some hesitation, to do so, the LN strongly opposed the idea and moved to the opposition. Second, a serious scandal involving electoral reimbursement fraud hit LN and its founder Umberto Bossi, eventually leading to the moderate wing of Roberto Maroni taking over the party in 2012. Third, the leadership of PDL and the centre-



right coalition came under pressure due to Berlusconi's ongoing legal problems and to the tensions between supporters and opponents of the Monti government. In the light of the 2013 elections, conflicts intensified over the choice of the candidate for prime minister, with Berlusconi first agreeing to hold primary consultations and then suddenly changing his mind and imposing himself as leader. This prompted the departure of a group of MPs originating from the AN, who founded the new radical right party *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) led by former minister Giorgia Meloni.

Despite disagreements on many issues, including government participation, PDL, LN and FdI eventually established a formal alliance for the 2013 general election – primarily in order to cope with the prevailing electoral law, which provided a majority bonus to coalitions rather than parties. With the breakthrough of Beppe Grillo's *Movimento 5 Stelle* (Five Star Movement, M5S), the elections marked the parliamentary downsizing of the centre right, but confirmed its internal power distribution, with the PDL being the main party, the LN suffering a steep electoral decline, and FdI scoring less than 2 per cent of the vote. As shown in Figure 7.5, the political supply of the coalition partners reflected this pattern of forced alliance: PDL and LN ran with a common electoral platform emphasizing decentralization, efficiency and mild support for welfare provision. If the coalition's positions on immigration were largely negative, the issue received considerably less attention than in previous years. The same applies to moral issues, although PDL and LN proposed family-oriented welfare benefits as well as the protection of life and the heterosexual family. On the right, FdI ran an aggressive campaign on migration, which stands out as the most important issue in an election programme strongly focused on security, border control, and the cultural and religious assimilation of migrant residents.

In showing that the attitudes of Christian democrat voters differ from those of people who voted for the other three parties, demand-side data reported in Table 7.3 illustrates the breakaway of the moderates from the centre-right coalition in 2013. For the first time, the ranking of perceived problems differs markedly across parties. In a context deeply affected by the consequences of the global recession, voters of all parties prioritized taxes and welfare, even if issues of corruption and justice (45 per cent) were the primary concern of the Christian democratic electorate. Unlike previous years, only the

Table 7.3 *The demand side of right-wing politics in Italy, 2013*

		Parties				
		FI- PdL	AN- FdI	LN- Lega	Christian democrat	Mean diff.
2013						
<i>Demographics</i>	Gender (f)	57.6	45.3	48.3	66.7	12.2
	Education (low)	13.4	3.8	10.9	3.0	6.4
	Class (work.)	7.6	8.0	10.2	6.1	2.1
	Age (>50)	59.5	54.6	47.8	45.4	8.1
<i>Geography</i>	U-R divide (rural)	20.4	26.4	23.9	30.3	5.4
	N-S divide (north)	46.7	47.6	92.3	54.5	23.9
	N-S divide (south)	36.4	37.7	2.2	30.3	18.7
<i>Attitudes (MIP)</i>	Taxes & welfare	48.9	35.8	41.3	30.3	10.2
	Immigration	11.5	11.3	21.7	18.2	6.3
	EU integration	10.5	11.9	7.5	3.0	4.9
	Corruption & Justice	33.4	32.1	33.7	45.4	6.7
<i>Self-placement</i>	Right-wing	80.2	67.8	70.6	15.1	33.0
	Centre	11.0	22.6	9.8	57.6	25.8

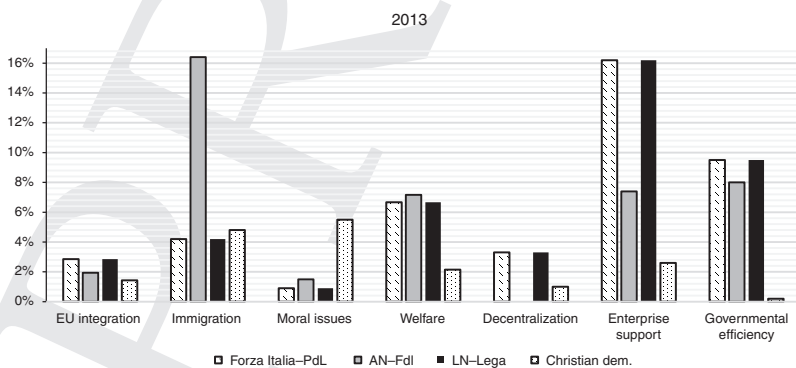


Figure 7.5 *The supply side of right-wing politics in Italy, 2013*

electorate of LN (and to a lesser extent the moderates) attributed substantial importance to immigration (over 20 per cent). However, EU integration now is addressed as a problem by about 10 per cent of the electorate of both FI and FdI. The loosening of the centre-right alliance is further confirmed by voters' self-placement on the left-right scale. On the one hand, while a majority of right-wing voters supported the new FdI (68 per cent), this is considerably less than FI voters (80 per cent). On the other hand, while the LN carried on its journey to the right (over 70 per cent of voters identifying as right-wing), the right-wing base of the Christian democrats was now down to just 15 per cent – or 50 per cent lower than in the previous phase. Overall, the mean differences for the electorates of the four parties of Italy's centre right are higher in 2013 than ever before, whether we are looking at the perception of most important problems or voters' self-placement on the left-right scale.

Divisions within the centre right, however, did not end with the 2013 elections and the electoral alliance proved to be short-lived once the contest had taken place. In the new parliament, the LN and FdI joined the opposition, whereas the PDL initially opted to participate in a grand coalition government with the mainstream left and the moderates. Over the following months, partly because of this, the PDL experienced a new split: a group of MPs led by Angelino Alfano adopted the name *Nuovo Centrodestra* (New Centre Right; NCD) with the goal of establishing a more durable relationship with the mainstream left, whereas the rest of Berlusconi's PDL moved to the opposition and started calling themselves *Forza Italia* once again. Meanwhile the LN had begun the process that would lead to a change in the party leadership, ultimately resulting in the election, in December 2013, of Matteo Salvini as new federal secretary.

The divisions within the centre right continued in the months preceding the 2014 European Parliament elections. Berlusconi showed some sympathy towards the constitutional reforms proposed by the centre left, especially under the new leadership of Matteo Renzi. The former AN engaged in a legal battle with FdI over the use of the old party's symbols. The LN set out to stretch its reach beyond northern regions, putting aside its traditional focus on federalism to emphasize anti-establishment rhetoric, restless anti-immigrant campaigning, and opposition to the EU and the banking system. FI's ambiguous position towards the government and the weakness of its leadership were

severely sanctioned at the 2014 elections (at which it took only 16 per cent). While FdI failed to pass the threshold, the vote showed some small progress for the LN (6 per cent), indicating that Salvini's strategy had the potential to reverse the party's vote losses and to reconstruct its identity within the centre right. In the new EU Parliament, FI seated itself with the European People's Party group, holding to pro-EU positions alongside the EMPs of NCD and other centrist parties who had left the centre-right alliance. Despite the formal alliance with FI at home, the LN seated itself in Brussels and Strasbourg with the Eurosceptic group of Europe of Nations and Freedom, alongside the French Front National.

The marginalization of FI, the intensification of the conflict between PD and M5S, and the clouding of the political leadership of Berlusconi further allowed the LN to take charge of the opposition in the years that followed. The leader of LN upped its media profile, focusing primarily on criticizing the government's economic agenda and its policy on immigration. It set up short-lived electoral alliances with the extreme right *CasaPound Italia*,<sup>5</sup> as well as FdI to campaign on these issues, showing its willingness to move the centre of gravity of the centre right towards the right. Finally, it created the electoral list '*Noi con Salvini*' ('We with Salvini') to take advantage of the party's increasing popularity in the south, thus challenging FI's leadership role in that region. That decision was rewarded at regional elections in 2015, as LN did better than FI in most of the regions that held elections. Even though the rift between the mainstream right (represented by FI) and the radical right (LN and FdI) continued, the defeat of the December 2016 Constitutional referendum, offered a new opportunity to re-launch the project of a unified centre right, which was confirmed by the success of the centre-right coalition at the 2017 local elections.

To sum up, the last few years have witnessed the effective collapse of the mainstream right in Italy. This resulted notably from the weakening of *Forza Italia* and the rise of the LN that is today the dominant party of the centre right. After the 2018 parliamentary elections, the LN pursued a new strategy of 'asymmetric' coalitions. In fact, while the *Legha* formed a coalition government with the M5S at the national level, at

<sup>5</sup> On the relationship between the LN and the extreme right in Italy, see Froio et al. (2020).

the local level it maintains the alliances with *Forza Italia*. At the European level today, the *Lega* is close to the *French Rassemblement National* (previously Front National).

## 6. Comparative Findings and Concluding Remarks

The chapter offered an account of the transformation of the Italian centre right over the past twenty-five years. In line with the premises of this volume, it examined how the dominant mainstream right actor, that is, Berlusconi's personalistic parties, coped with the tensions associated with the silent revolution and silent counter-revolution. While the reasons behind the collapse of the Italian party system in the early 1990s had little to do with the emergence of new political cleavages, the following decades were largely shaped by the interaction between mainstream right parties and the populist radical right. Notably, migration stands out as the key policy challenge shaping mainstream right politics in Italy. Triggering discussions over security, welfare and cultural protectionism, this policy field cemented the centre-right alliance that would dominate Italian politics for most of the early 2000s (Fella and Ruzza 2013; Castelli Gattinara 2016). Yet the subsequent migration 'emergencies' that culminated in the 2015 asylum policy crisis, which tapped into the crisis of political legitimacy at the national and EU level (Castelli Gattinara 2017), progressively spooked government parties of the mainstream right – much to the advantage of their populist radical competitors. With the relevant exception of migration policy, Berlusconi's personalist parties can be categorized as vote-seeking and/or office-seeking, but not as policy-seeking. This absence of emphasis on the policy-seeking dimension helps to explain the decay of these parties. In this regard, our analysis allows us to draw general conclusions on four aspects of right-wing politics in Italy: the structure of the coalitions between the mainstream and radical component; the electoral strength of the mainstream right; and both the programmatic positions (political supply) and the sociological profile of its voters (political demand).

In the last twenty-five years, the composition of the centre right displays considerable discontinuity in terms of party organization and labelling, but a substantial stability in terms of coalition-building. With few exceptions, all four components of the centre right have been involved in broad centre-right coalitions for most of the period under

observation. In this respect, Italy's fragmented bipolarism (D'Alimonte 2005) does not display the signs of polarization and fragmentation triggered by the contrasting forces of the silent revolution and silent counter-revolution. This owes a great deal to the federative efforts of Berlusconi and to electoral systems that, despite changing over time, have generally favoured the formation of broad alliances at the national level. Yet the concentration of most decision-making power in the hands of Berlusconi has had negative consequences on the stability of the centre right, too. On the one hand, it hampered the institutionalization of the mainstream right parties, which remained organizationally weak and overly dependent on their charismatic leaderships. On the other, it favoured the emergence of factionalism due to the presence of scarcely coordinated local potentates and, lacking a shared worldview, the development of currents and party fractions both within the mainstream and far-right components.

Organizational instability and coalition continuity have consequences for the supply side of right-wing politics. We observed substantial over-time change. While all parties pay sporadic attention to moral issues and EU integration, the relative importance accorded to welfare and, in particular, to immigration, increases. Furthermore, the results show that the difference in the programmatic profiles of the four components of the centre right were lowest during the years 2001–2008. The four actors focused on similar issues in the period in which they held office jointly, as compared with earlier years and the post-2011 phase, when their policy preferences tended to diverge more conspicuously. It is difficult to tell from this data whether the mainstream right radicalized its programmatic positions, although it appears that the joint government experience fostered adaption in centre-right policy preferences. As for the sociodemographic profile of centre-right voters, this displayed both stability and change over time. While the level of education increased and the working-class vote decreased, the figures for gender, geography and age remained relatively stable. Additionally, the findings point at attitudinal changes for voters of the centre right, with increasing importance put on immigration, taxes and welfare. In this regard, voters of mainstream right parties stand out because their average level of education decreased over time and because they accorded more importance to European integration. In sum, even if more fine-grained data is needed to further examine demand-side factors, our study suggests that the sociological

profile of mainstream right electorates in Italy did not change substantively, whereas voters' issue priorities did.

As for electoral strength, power relations remained relatively stable within the centre-right coalition, despite changes to the electoral system. From the 1994 until the 2008 general election, right-wing parties could together count on about half of the active electorate. The mainstream right took the lion's share obtaining 20 per cent to almost 30 per cent of the votes, whereas AN scored systematically above 10 per cent. The LN was generally below this threshold, and the Christian democrats played the role of minor partners. In this period, all parties and fractions that departed from Berlusconi's coalition suffered tremendous electoral defeats and rapidly fell into political irrelevance. But things changed considerably after the failure of PDL (2009–2013) and the dramatic 2011 change of government. While this was partly due to Berlusconi's weakening leadership, the increasing salience of issues like immigration, law and order, and EU integration seem to suggest that the political right has increasingly turned towards electorates sympathizing with authoritarian and nativist ideals associated with the silent counter-revolution. Similarly, the transformation of the League under Salvini means that the party now pursues a radical right populist agenda.

In the aftermath of the Great Recession, Salvini turned the League in a credible radical right party at the national level. Salvini's hegemony, which effectively ended Berlusconi's dominance over the centre right, means that the League may become not just the voice of the radical right but of the most conservative parts of the mainstream right, too. In 2018, the League obtained its best result ever in a general election, becoming the primary party of the centre right with 17 per cent of the votes. In the following months, the League defeated FI again, striking a government deal with the M5S without officially disrupting the centre-right alliance at the local level. From a position of strength, the League could drain votes from its government allies M5S as well as from the minor partners in the right-wing block, as confirmed by the 2019 European Parliament elections where the League obtained a stunning 34 per cent share of vote (an increase of 28 per cent from 2014). While enduring disputes led to the collapse of the government and the formation of a new (and unlikely) coalition cabinet between the 5-Star Movement and PD, by 2019 the League was not only the main party in the right-wing bloc but also the largest party in Italy.



With the return of the League to the opposition, however, centre-right parties found themselves once more in a situation of forced coalition. And with immigration losing importance in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, the dormant conflict between the mainstream and radical components of the Italian political right became manifest again. On the one hand, the new scenario gave the survivors of *Forza Italia* the opportunity to break away from Salvini's hard-line strategy, attempting to appeal to moderate voters and potential allies in parliament. On the other, it marked the increasing popularity of Giorgia Meloni, exposing the double nature of Brothers of Italy as both an experienced government ally for the League and a radical competitor for Salvini's leadership.

The transformations within Italy's right are thus far from settled. The permanent state of emergency associated with migration in Italy will soon restore the issue to centre-stage in national public debate. And as the Eurozone economy heads towards more financial trouble, the legitimacy crisis of national and EU institutions might further strengthen the predominance of radical parties over the Italian mainstream right, posing some serious challenges over the fundamentals of liberal democracy in Italy.