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Back to the Post-Fascist Past or Landing in the Populist Radical Right? The Brothers of Italy Between Continuity and Change

Leonardo Puleo  and Gianluca Piccolino 

ABSTRACT

Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) is the new rising star of Italian politics. Scholars and pundits briskly categorised it as a (new) populist radical right (PRR) party. Still, FdI's newness needs to be properly framed. A splinter party of the Popolo della Libertà, it claims a direct lineage with the Alleanza Nazionale – two cases not easily agglutinated into the PRR family. The article analyses the (dis)continuity associated with FdI, examining ideology, organisation, and the continuity of elites. It demonstrates that FdI's organisation and political elites largely overlap with its predecessor parties. However, FdI accomplished a major ideological rebranding, positioning itself as radically different from both the mainstream centre-right and the post-fascist tradition of the Italian right.

KEYWORDS

Populism; Italian politics; Fratelli d'Italia; new parties; party elites; party ideology; party organisation; Giorgia Meloni

In the vast array of contemporary radical right parties in Europe, FdI (Fratelli d'Italia, Brothers of Italy) has quickly become a rising star. Thanks to the solid leadership of Giorgia Meloni, in just a few years FdI moved from the margins to the head of the Italian centre-right, and its leader is now ready to launch her bid to lead the centre-right coalition. This work aims to explore FdI's ideological and organisational features, comparing them with the tradition of the Italian right.

More precisely, we explore the ideological and organisational continuity between FdI and its predecessor organisations. As we discuss below, FdI's attempt to reconnect with this tradition is epitomised by a continuity of political elites and organisational traits. However, a new party is often a complex bundle of new elements mixed with the traditions of its political ancestors (Barnea & Rahat 2011). The newness should thus be explored as a matter of degree, by disentangling the new ideological and organisational features from the old repertoire of the predecessor parties. In the case of FdI, such an analysis is important not only from a theory-testing perspective. Indeed, we assess how much of FdI's repertoire can be ascribed to a post-fascist legacy or a populist radical right Weltanschauung.

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In the next section, we briefly discuss the milestones marking Fdl's short but successful history. In the second section, we specify the dimensions of newness that are explored in the empirical analysis, also presenting our indicators and data sources. The third section compares the ideological location and degree of integration of Fdl with its predecessor parties in the context of the Italian party system. The fourth section discusses Fdl and its ancestors' ideological features. The fifth section looks at organisational and elite continuity by exploring the previous affiliations of Fdl's MPs and MEPs and comparing Fdl's organisational structure with its predecessor parties. Finally, we discuss our contributions to the literature both on new parties and on the process of institutionalisation of challenger parties.

From the margins to the conquest of the centre-right

In the fragmented panorama of Italian politics, the failure of the main attempt to aggregate the centre-right coalition within a single party – the PdL (Popolo della Libertà, People of Freedom) – was not unexpected. This party was born in 2009 as the evolution of a victorious electoral list in the 2008 general election, merging two parties with very different political cultures, Silvio Berlusconi's FI (Forza Italia, Go Italy) and AN (Alleanza Nazionale, National Alliance). The latter was born in 1995 as the successor party of the MSI (Movimento Sociale Italiano, Italian Social Movement), the home of Italian neo-fascism for almost 50 years.

The transformation of the MSI into AN was necessary in the light of the abrupt transformation of the Italian political system at the beginning of the 1990s. The parties that had governed the country after the post-war period collapsed between 1992 and 1994 due to scandals unearthed by the Milan prosecutor's office in the so-called 'mani pulite' (clean hands) investigation. This paved the way for a strong increase in the electoral share of MSI, which, however, lacked the legitimacy to govern the country. Alleanza Nazionale was presented as an electoral list in 1994 and then as a new party at the beginning of 1995, distancing itself from the fascist legacy, albeit the effectiveness and sincerity of this ideological change at its inception have been debated in the literature (Ignazi 1994; Griffin 1996). It is thus hardly surprising that the Fuggi congress (1995), formalising the birth of AN, attempted to reconstruct an alternative ideological genealogy of the Italian right, to facilitate the relationship of the newly born AN to the other centre-right parties after the collapse of the Italian party system.

In its founding document, AN openly declared its unconditional loyalty to liberal democracy (AN 1995a). In this respect, AN presented itself as a new 'democratic right', embodying these rightist values to frame itself as the 'party of Italians' (AN 1995a). Even though during the first congress, more than 60 per cent of AN cadres argued that 'notwithstanding some questionable choices, fascism was a good regime' (Ignazi 2005, p. 339), the subsequent

evolution of AN was marked by a distancing from the fascist heritage. It is indeed correct to affirm that after Fiuggi, AN progressively abandoned the ideological values linking the party to the radical right family (Tarchi 2003, pp. 173–174; see also Ignazi 2005).

For 15 years, AN had been one of the strongest allies of Forza Italia and a pillar of the centre-right coalition. During this period, the leader of the party, Gianfranco Fini, tried to modernise the profile of AN, with cyclical tensions with the rest of the party's leadership. The foundation of the PdL was thus seen as the last step in legitimising the political culture belonging to the MSI-AN tradition, as well as a launchpad for the aspirations of Fini to lead the whole centre-right after Berlusconi.

The life of the PdL was markedly troubled. Even though the party ran the country between 2008 and 2011, in alliance with the LN (Lega Nord, Northern League), Berlusconi's leadership was severely affected by various scandals and the former leader of AN voiced frustration about the overwhelming role of Berlusconi within the new party. Not coincidentally, the disintegration of the PdL started with the exit of several members of AN. The first split happened in 2010, with an ephemeral party founded by Fini and his closest allies, while at the end of 2012 a small group of MPs left the party to found Fratelli d'Italia-Centrodestra Nazionale (Brothers of Italy – National Centre Right), contesting the decision of the PdL not to hold primary elections for the leader of the coalition for the 2013 general election.

The new party was largely composed of former members of AN who did not follow their former leader and who voiced their scepticism about the support given by the PdL to the fully technocratic Monti cabinet,¹ born in 2011 in the face of the dangerous financial situation the country was experiencing and supported also by most of the centre-left. After the first few months, when the Monti cabinet enjoyed a good level of popularity, several of its proposed economic reforms aimed at meeting the commitments undertaken with the EU led to an erosion of support. This context made it possible for Fdl to distance itself from the mainstream centre-right. Meloni's party indeed adopted a more sceptical stance towards the EU compared to its predecessor parties, while voicing its anger about a cabinet perceived as an elitist plot.

However, at its inception Fdl could not be entirely characterised as a hardline split. First of all, the main promoters of Fdl could not be considered hardline members of AN and no right-wing extremist groupuscule – such as La Destra (The Right), a splinter party that had split from AN a few years before – joined Fdl. A key role in the foundation of the new party was played by one group in particular, the so-called 'gabbiani' (the seagulls), a group that joined the new party as a whole and to which Meloni belongs. This group, essentially an informal faction within AN and mainly rooted in Rome, gained a certain relevance within the party and particularly within its youth branch, remaining closely allied to the most important faction within AN (Destra Protagonista,

Protagonist Right), albeit with a greater emphasis on welfarist and ecological issues. Second, while they were a small minority compared to the former members of AN, an important role was played in the leadership of Fdl by some members who had never belonged to AN. Not coincidentally, the first statutes of the party (Fratelli d'Italia 2013b) indicated three key founders: Meloni, Ignazio La Russa (former minister and previously one of the leaders of *Destra Protagonista*) and Guido Crosetto, an MP previously belonging to Berlusconi's FI and widely perceived as the moderate face of the new party at its beginning.

Fdl obtained slightly less than two per cent of the vote in the 2013 election, enough to elect a handful of MPs. In the following years, with Meloni solidly in command of the party, Fdl bluntly hardened its agenda by progressively adopting many issues of the European radical right. The explanations for this transformation are manifold. The irreversible crisis of Berlusconi's leadership and the parallel rise of Salvini's Lega pushed Fdl to exploit more radical stances on immigration and Europe. This was made possible also by the growing euro-scepticism in the country, once one of the most europhile member states, a disaffection fuelled by both the austerity policies and the management of the refugee crisis. Although the party did not explicitly reverse the process of separation from the fascist legacy, at the same time the normalisation of Eurosceptic and nativist stances in the country created less pressure for it to legitimise itself as a national conservative party compared to AN. Furthermore, the general crisis of some European centre-right parties – such as the French ones, once a source of inspiration for AN – made being associated with this family less attractive. This process was also evident from a symbolic point of view. Fratelli d'Italia soon eliminated the term 'Centrodestra Nazionale' from its name and, thanks to the victory in the battle for control of the name of AN against other groups of former party members, changed its name to 'Fratelli d'Italia-Alleanza Nazionale' (later simplified in just Fratelli d'Italia) and started using the tricolour flame belonging to the history of MSI and AN in its logo.

This strategy slowly but steadily paid off in electoral terms. The party rose to slightly less than 4 per cent in the 2014 European election and 4.4 per cent of votes in the 2018 general election. This growth saw the entry to Fdl of several members of AN, who had previously remained loyal to Berlusconi or who had joined other ephemeral splinter parties, in addition to a more limited intake of minor leaders from other political cultures. The party did not participate in the first cabinet of the 2018 legislature, which was formed by the Lega and the M5S (Movimento 5 Stelle, Five Star Movement). In 2019, the party obtained its best electoral result to date, with 6.4 per cent of the vote and the election of its first MEPs in the second-order Euroelection. In the European Parliament, Fdl joined the group of the European Conservatives and Reformists, a European party whose current president is Meloni. This move can be seen as another discontinuity from AN. Alleanza Nazionale was indeed part of the national-conservative

Union for Europe of the Nations, a group that no longer exists, but in the last years of its history Fini made clear the aspiration to enter the mainstream centre-right European People's Party, a goal never shared by Fdl.²

The Draghi cabinet, a national unity government formed in February 2021 after the collapse of the second Conte cabinet, represented a major turning point for the party. Fratelli d'Italia was the only parliamentary group to oppose the new cabinet and, more generally, the only major Italian party to have never supported a government thus far. This choice paid off in terms of support measured through opinion polls, which in December 2021 reported that Fdl represented close to 20 per cent of voting intentions (SWG 2021). Considering the profound decline of Forza Italia and several difficulties experienced by Salvini within his party, on the eve of the 2022 general election Meloni seemed fully ready to contend the leadership of the centre-right coalition.

Between continuity and change: a framework accounting for Fdl's newness

In order to assess the degree of discontinuity between Fdl and its predecessor parties, we build on the literature on the definitional features of a new party (Sikk 2005; Barnea & Rahat 2011; see also Emanuele & Chiaramonte 2018). The crafting of a definition accounting for the newness of a political party is far from a sterile debate. The assessment of the real newness of a political party involves important consequences, both in terms of party-level analyses investigating a party's chances of success and persistence (Bolleyer 2013; Beyens et al. 2017) and in aggregate research on party system change (Emanuele & Chiaramonte 2018).

The scope of our analysis is thus twofold. We aim to explore Fdl's patterns of continuity and change compared with the previous traditions of the Italian right (AN and PdL) and to what extent this party has approached the profile of a populist radical right (PRR) party. This approach is motivated by two factors. First, even though Fdl's predecessor parties have not generally been classified as PRR parties, nevertheless, they could have passed on to the new party some elements of the ideology of this family, for example in the form of nativist or populist traits, the latter mediated by Berlusconi's communication style. Studying Fdl and its predecessor parties through the lens of the characteristics associated with the PRR parties is thus critical to ascertain its real newness. Second, these elements are even more relevant if we consider that the classification of AN has somehow puzzled the literature (e.g. Zaslove 2004, p. 79). The authors who have worked the most on this party recognise that, despite several ambiguities and uncertainties, over time AN gained the profile of a national-conservative party distinct from the radical right (Tarchi 2003; Ignazi 2005), yet other authors have been classifying it as part of this family (e.g. Minkenberg 2001).

A parsimonious dichotomous operationalisation of a new party represents an asset for comparative research. However, political parties are ‘adaptive creatures’ (Barnea & Rahat 2011, p. 305) and the extent of their transformation can be diverse in terms of both the magnitude of change and the specific dimensions in which such changes occur. Barnea and Rahat (2011) provide a useful theoretical framework to disentangle the newness of a political party based on a bundle of distinct features. The authors build on Key’s seminal work on the faces of a party organisation (1942; see also Katz & Mair 1995), and they identify a set of indicators to capture the degree of change (i.e. newness) occurring within the party-in-the-electorate, party-as-organisation and party-in-government (Barnea & Rahat 2011).

The goal of our analysis, however, is not only to identify the degree of newness of Fdl but also – and most importantly – to identify the crucial innovations that Fdl and its leadership brought to its core ideological features. In this respect, we propose an adapted version of Barnea and Rahat’s framework that also includes an assessment of Fdl’s distinctiveness when observed in the context of the Italian party system (Table 1).

Referring to the party-in-the-electorate, we explore both Fdl’s relational location within the Italian party system and its core ideological features.

In this respect, we explore whether Fdl’s position on the main axis of political competition within the Italian party system is different from its predecessor parties (i.e. AN and PdL). The ideological (dis)continuity between Fdl and its predecessor parties is explored by focusing on four ideological features: i) nativism, ii) authoritarianism, iii) populism and iv) euroscepticism. The first three ideological features are the core attributes of the PRR family (Mudde 2007), to which Fdl has been associated by the existing literature (Rooduijn et al. 2019). Euroscepticism does not play the same role as the other three aforementioned attributes of the PRR family. Still, euroscepticism is nowadays shared by all PRR parties and – most importantly – also involves other non-radical parties, and it might constitute a possible path for continuity between Fdl and its predecessor parties.

Referring to the party-as-organisation, we compare the structure envisaged by Fdl and its predecessor parties, focusing particularly on the relationship

Table 1. Analytical framework for the measurement of Fdl’s degree of continuity and change.

Dimension	Criterion	Operational definition
Party-in-the-electorate	Relational location	How different is Fdl’s position <i>vis-à-vis</i> those of its competitors and predecessor parties?
	Ideology	How different is Fdl’s party platform compared to those of the predecessor parties?
Party-as-organisation	Organizational Structure	How different is Fdl’s structure compared to those of the predecessor parties?
Party-in-government	Representative	How many of Fdl’s representatives come from the predecessor parties?

Source: Authors’ re-elaboration from Barnea and Rahat (2011, p. 306).

between the party elites and the leader. Even though it is difficult to outline an invariable model of the organisation of PRR parties, the literature has highlighted as core elements the presence of a highly personalistic (or even charismatic) leadership, combined with a less structured organisation compared to traditional parties (Taggart 1995; Zaslove 2008). The latter was seen as an instrument to create distance from the pervasiveness of old mainstream parties within society through ‘at best a moderately elaborated party organisation, compared to the older, established parties’ (Mudde 2007, p. 268).

In more recent times, these assumptions have been somehow revised. In particular, the ability of some relevant PRR parties to replace their founders with equally effective leadership has questioned the original organisational model ascribed to these parties, highlighting the aptness of PRR parties in perpetuating routinised organisational practices. More recent literature has indeed shown how PRR parties have encapsulated in their structure many traits traditionally ascribed to the mass party, a model considered in crisis and abandoned by mainstream parties, usually combining a marked centralisation, structured local organs and the aspiration to create relevant grassroots activism (Heinisch & Mazzoleni 2016; van Kessel & Albertazzi 2021). This transformation would indeed have clear ideological foundations. The recovery of several traits of the mass party model at a time when it was abandoned by mainstream parties signals the will of PRR parties to show themselves as an active presence available to citizens, even though this transformation in several cases ‘remains partial and half-hearted, and largely driven by a desire to signal a “closeness to the people”’ (van Kessel & Albertazzi 2021, p. 366).

Finally, the (dis)continuity of the party-in-government is explored by analysing the previous political experience of Fdl’s elites.

Data and methods

Referring to the party-in-the-electorate, this work measures Fdl’s location within the Italian party system by employing expert surveys. In order to account for the alleged bidimensional structure of the Italian political space (Di Virgilio et al. 2015), we measure party location by taking into account both party location on the economic left–right (L–R) spectrum and the GAL/TAN³ dimensions using Chapel Hill Expert Surveys from 1999 to 2019 (CHES; Jolly et al. 2022). The analysis of Fdl’s location in the context of the increasingly deinstitutionalised Italian party system is expected to provide answers regarding Fdl’s distinctiveness both within the centre-right camp and - broadly—in comparison with the equilibria of the system.

The ideological features of AN, PdL and Fdl are explored using qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is a method for the interpretation of texts through a systematic and objective process of coding. In this article, we follow a direct approach to content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). This means

that we constructed a theory-driven codebook (see Appendix 1 in the online Appendix available online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2022.2126247>) based on the literature on populism, nativism, authoritarianism and euroscepticism discussed above. Qualitative content analysis based on political documents constitutes one of the main methodological tools to explore political party ideologies (Gerring 1998). Furthermore, it has been largely employed in studying the ideological features of the PRR parties (Mudde 2007; Rooduijn, de Lange & van der Brug 2014). For these reasons, qualitative content analysis represents the most suitable method to trace the ideological trend of Fdl and its ancestors.

We apply qualitative content analysis to a set of electoral manifestos and manifesto-like documents. Electoral manifestos are commonly employed to infer ideological and policy positions (Budge 2001). Still, in our case the analysis of the manifestos could be biased by the presence of coalition manifestos that were employed by the Italian centre-right parties from 1994 to the 2008 elections. In order to overcome this potential source of bias, we extend our corpus by including also the final documents issued at the end of each party congress and programmatic conference (see Table A1 in the online Appendix for the full list).

Compared to other available sources of party ideology (e.g. interviews, speeches), official party documents are more easily comparable. Indeed, speeches and interviews might be biased by time- and context-specific factors, blurring a general assessment of a party's ideological stance when dealing with a longitudinal research design. Furthermore, manifesto-like documents are comprehensive of the party's overall ideological positioning, rather than being issue-specific, and they allow a differentiation of ideological position from communicative style, which is often influenced by specific circumstances. For the sake of completeness, we also include in our analysis the main findings of the previous literature analysing AN and PdL.

In this study, we employ the entire document as the unit of analysis to ascertain the degree of presence of four core ideological features. Previous studies have already suggested that due to their narrowness, sentences (or quasi-sentences) are not an adequate level through which to explore populist ideological features (Rooduijn, de Lange & van der Brug 2014). In this respect, we argue that in comparing heterogeneous documents (manifestos, programmatic conferences, congressional theses) with a distinct length and structure – ranging from five (Fdl 2018) to 459 pages (AN 2006a) – the entire document is the most convenient unit of analysis. In our content analysis, we assign an ordinal score to each of the documents analysed. More specifically, we consider whether each of our ideological features is i) absent, ii) present (when they are employed as complementary framing) or iii) core (when they occupy an entire paragraph or a relevant portion of the document).

In order to verify the congruence between the organisational structure of Fdl and those of its predecessor parties – the dimension of party-as-organisation – we explore the statutes of such parties (see Table A2 in the online Appendix). In particular, the distribution of power between the leaders and the national organs is explored through a modified version of the ‘index of leadership power’ (Poguntke et al. 2016; Poguntke, Scarrow & Webb 2020).

Finally, the party-in-government dimension is studied through the analysis of the previous party affiliation of party members in the Italian and European parliaments (MPs and MEPs) elected in the general and European elections.

Putting the right in place: ideological location and integration within the party system

Figure 1 plots the positions of Italian political parties both in terms of their economic position on the L-R spectrum and the GAL/TAN dimension. The economic L-R spectrum indicates as leftist those in favour of economic redistribution and the welfare state, while the rightist position suggests support for tax reduction and deregulation. The GAL/TAN dimension can also be read as a proxy of position regarding the cultural dimension of political competition.

In this figure, the triangles indicate parties belonging to the centre-right coalitions. The rhombuses identify Fdl and its predecessor parties. Centre-right parties consistently occupy the top-right quadrant of the Italian political space. Looking at 1999–2006 data, on the economic axis Lega Nord and Forza Italia are the most rightist parties in the system. Compared with these allies, AN occupies a more centrist position, coherent with the socially oriented tendencies of the post-fascist milieu. However, on the cultural dimension, AN emerges as the most TAN party in the system.

The 2008 elections were characterised by the electoral appearance of the Partito Democratico (PD, Democratic Party) and the PdL, two parties explicitly aiming to strengthen bipolar patterns of competition. Thus, in 2010 the centre-right camp was composed of PdL and LN taking a very similar position on the economic L-R spectrum and an identical placement in terms of GAL/TAN. In this respect, the PdL positions conflated AN’s GAL/TAN position in 2006 with FI placement on the economic L-R spectrum.

The 2013 election followed the Monti cabinet (Pasquino & Valbruzzi 2012). As discussed above, the unwillingness of some sectors of the PdL to continue to support the technocratic government was one of the main reasons for the creation of Fdl in 2012. Thus, looking at 2014 data, Fdl’s ideological location resembles a blast from the past. In terms of the economic L-R spectrum and TAN, the party indeed occupies a position that reframes AN’s location in its last electoral participation in 2006. Its location within the centre-right camp also appears quite similar to the pre-PdL period. Indeed, Fdl is more TAN than FI and almost equivalent with LN (9.14). While on the economic

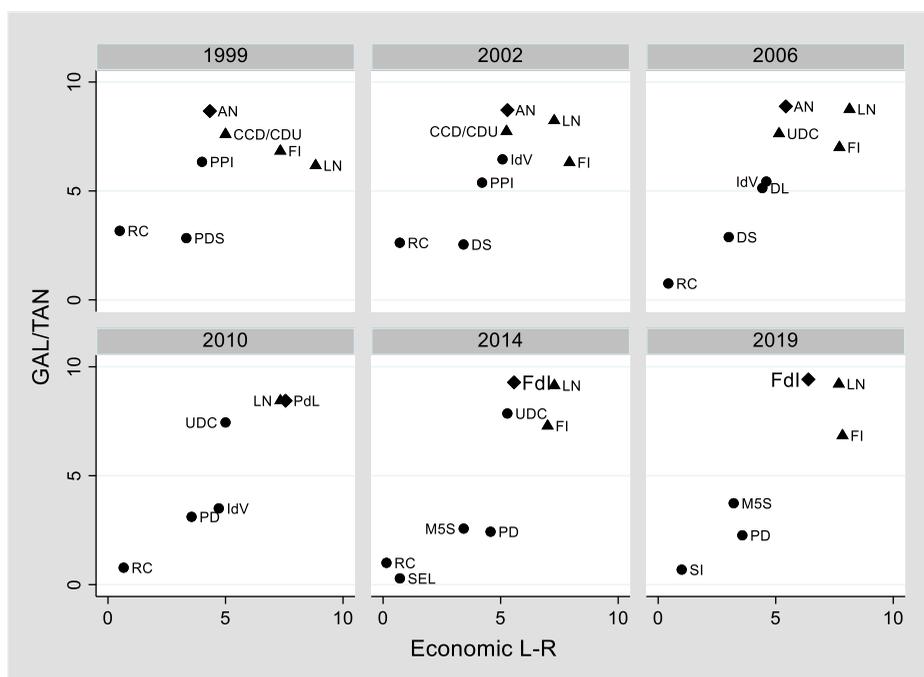


Figure 1. Location of Italian parties in a bi-dimensional space, 2006 – 2018. Source: Authors' re-elaboration based on CHES 1999–2019 (Jolly et al. 2022).

(1) The triangles indicate parties belonging to the centre-right coalitions. The rhombuses identify FdI and its predecessor parties. (2) Code to party acronyms: AN (Alleanza Nazionale - National Alliance); CCD/CDU (Centro Cristiano Democratico/Cristiano Democratici Uniti - Christian Democratic Centre/United Christian Democrats); FI (Forza Italia - Go Italy!); LN (Lega Nord - Northern League); PPI (Partito Popolare Italiano - Italian People's Party); RC (Partito della Rifondazione Comunista - Party of the Communist Refoundation); PDS/DS (Partito Democratico della Sinistra/Democratici di Sinistra - Democratic Party of the Left/Democrats of the Left); IdV (Italia dei Valori - Italy of the Values); DL (Democrazia e Libertà-La Margherita - Democracy and Freedom - The Daisy); UDC (Unione di Centro - Union of the Centre); PdL (Popolo della Libertà - People of Freedom); PD (Partito Democratico - Democratic Party); M5S (Movimento 5 Stelle - Five Star Movement); FdI (Fratelli d'Italia - Brothers of Italy); SI (Sinistra Italiana - Italian Left).

L-R spectrum, both FI and LN are characterised by a more rightist profile than FdI.

The 2018 election in Italy was marked by the victory of the populist forces (D'Alimonte 2019). In terms of systemic equilibria, the 2018 election marked a shift towards the right for the Italian party system in both the economic and cultural dimensions of political competition (Tronconi & Valbruzzi 2020). Looking at 2019 data, the whole centre-right confirmed this trend. More specifically, FdI strengthened its location as the most TAN party in the system. In terms of economic L-R location, the party shifted towards the right; however, it remained less rightist than FI and the League.

FdI's position in the bi-dimensional political space of the Italian party system appears quite similar to that of AN. In terms of systemic integration within the

Italian party system (Zulianello 2018), both AN and Fdl have always been rooted in the centre-right camp and have never played a pariah role within the Italian party system. In a nutshell, AN represented a stable house for the normalisation of post-fascist Italian voters, firmly embedded within Berlusconi's coalitions. Fdl might develop an analogous function for the contemporary radical and euro-sceptic camp. In this respect, the next section specifically explores their distinctiveness in terms of a set of core ideological features.

From AN quest for legitimacy to Fdl radicalism: the analysis of party documents

Nativism

As can be easily inferred from AN's lineage since its inception, the nation represents the core value of the reconstruction of an ideological space for its project of the 'democratic right' (AN 1995a). However, AN documents neither display exclusionary and xenophobic features nor argue that all those individuals that are external to the nation should come after natives in the provision of public goods. In the Theses for the first Congress, the explicit distancing from an anti-Semitic and racist stance also reflects a rejection of any kind of xenophobia (Tarchi 2003). In subsequent official documents, AN preserved this ideological direction: on the one hand, the nation is portrayed as the core value of the Italian (centre) right identity; on the other hand, this nationalist stance does not escalate into xenophobic or intolerant positions (AN 1998, 2001, 2002, 2006a). After winning the 2001 election, the centre-right coalition exploited the politicisation of the immigration issue. In 2002, the centre-right government introduced a restrictive immigration law named after its two proponents: LN and AN's leaders Umberto Bossi and Gianfranco Fini. However, after the approval of the law, Fini repositioned AN by voicing his support for the civic and political integration of migrants (Massetti 2015, p. 495). Furthermore, AN also supported both profession-specific and generalised regularisations for irregular migrants (Castelli di Gattinara & Froio 2021, p. 182).

The lack of a nativist stance is confirmed by looking at the manifesto of the centre-right coalition, Casa delle Libertà (Cdl, House of Freedoms), and that of the PdL presented in the 2006 and 2008 elections. Similarly, both the last AN programmatic conference in 2008 and the AN motion at the founding PdL congress in 2009 does not reveal a xenophobic turn, except for general claims against irregular migration that always accompany remarks on the potential integration of regular migrants. In this respect, the first Fdl electoral manifesto appears in continuity with this a-nativist tradition, dedicating an entire paragraph entitled 'The new Italians' to migrant integration (Fdl 2013a).

The evidence of a nativist turn began to be pervasive during the first Fdl congress in 2014, symbolically held in Fiuggi, previously the site of the official

founding conference of AN. Here, in her concluding speech the party's leader recalled the centrality of the nation as the founding value of the new party. However, the stance against migration assumes harsher tones. On the one hand, migration is explicitly associated with an erosion of security for Italians. On the other hand, Meloni develops a fully fledged chauvinistic welfare agenda, maintaining that welfare benefits should be accorded to Italians first (Fdl 2014a).

The second Fdl congress held in Trieste in 2017 provided further strength to the nativist discourse. Interestingly, the document refers to the 'great replacement' conspiracy theory, arguing that the EU is attempting to encourage a plan to fill the European demographic depression with migrants that will cancel out the Christian roots of the European continent. Furthermore, this culturalist approach in discussing migration is also reflected in the proposal to select arriving migrants based on their cultural background, favouring migrants with a more proximate cultural background and hindering the arrival of Muslims (Fdl 2017). The same nativist stance permeates the Fdl's 2018 election manifesto, which was formulated as a list of 15 simple bullet points: with among them 'First Italy and the Italians', 'Abolition of the Italian anomaly conceding everyone's humanitarian protection', and 'Protecting our identity from the Islamisation process' (Fdl 2018).

In a nutshell, more than 20 years after Fiuggi, Fdl seems to have replaced the abstract nationalism of AN with full-fledged and exclusionary nativism. However, this turn did not occur immediately after the birth of the new party, which in its 2013 manifesto largely followed the old AN stance on the nation and the migration issue. Only after its first congress in 2014 Fdl develops a full-fledged nativist discourse, which has since been deepened in all subsequent official documents.

Authoritarianism

The MSI tradition involved a strong and repressive concept of the state, permeated by the centrality of traditionalist values. In this respect, AN's foundational document directly problematises its authoritarian lineage in an obscure paragraph entitled 'Authority and Liberty' (AN 1995a). The principle of authority is framed as an antidote against the threats of liberty degeneration in caprice and individualism (AN 1995a).

In terms of policies, the law and order issue is mainly oriented in the struggle against the mafia. Minor attention is spent on discussing what the *Theses* consider citizen security concerns (e.g. prostitution, drugs and migration) (AN 1995a). The issue of law and order seems to disappear in the final document of AN's first programmatic conference held in Verona, however (AN 1998). Still, the issue reacquired centrality and relevance in the works of the second programmatic conference in Naples (AN 2001) and the second national congress in Bologna (AN 2002). Law and order issues serve to strengthen AN's profile as

a ‘tranquil force’ constructing a citizens’ alleged ‘right to security’ (Tarchi 2003, p. 152). In this respect, the 2006 AN programmatic conference exalts with pride the party’s focus on security and law and order (AN 2006a).

However, the centre-right coalition agreement in 2006 and the electoral manifesto of the PdL in 2008 do not reveal any authoritarian traces other than general references against illegal migration and regarding increasing ‘citizens’ security’ (Cdl 2006; PdL 2008). The authoritarian discourse is absent also in the first Fdl electoral manifesto, where the issue of security is developed exclusively focusing on the reform of the Italian judicial system, required to speed up trials and assure the certainty of punishment (Fdl 2013a). Meloni’s speech at the first Fdl congress (2014a) does not expand the contents of the authoritarian discourse, but it deepens its tones in a populist and anti-establishment fashion by blaming the rest of the political class and the left for increasing social disorder. The Trieste Congress (2017) combines harsh tones with more severe authoritarian measures. The produced document envisages installing a naval blockade to stop migration from Northern African coasts. Furthermore, it suggests that all of the migrants waiting for humanitarian protection should be considered ‘illegal migrants’ and detained until the official concession of the protection. Finally, Fdl affirms that Italy should revise the law on torture that ‘ties the hands of the police’ (Fdl 2017). The same issues are also mentioned in the 2018 electoral manifesto, confirming the growing authoritarianism in animating the Fdl platform.

Populism

In the context of the dissolution of the Italian party system, following the *mani pulite* scandal, the MSI was one of the few Italian parties not affected. In this respect, in the transition from MSI culminating in the 1995 Congress of Fiuggi, AN displayed some features of the party of ‘civil society, alternative to the establishment’ (Tarchi 2013, p. 701). However, AN quickly showed a preference for the themes of the moderate and European right, incorporating the liberal values of the market and individual economic initiative. Already in the Fiuggi theses, anti-establishment aspirations are balanced by the willingness to become a new moderate – and pacifier – political force able to push Italy far from the ruins of the First Republic (AN 1995a). Indeed, the claims about the strengthening of popular sovereignty are articulated neither through a monistic opposition between the people and the elites nor by employing an anti-establishment discourse, and in this respect, they do not qualify as populist claims.

These stances markedly change in the first electoral manifesto published by Fdl in 2013. Indeed, starting in its preamble the manifesto launches a harsh critique of the role of the political class during the Monti cabinet experience (see

above). According to Fdl (2013a), Italian political elites failed and ‘it is time to retire them’. This frontal attack on the political class is even tougher in the case of Prime Minister Mario Monti, whose appointment by the President of the Republic is accused of suspending the people’s sovereignty. These populist tendencies are re-affirmed in the first Fdl congress (2014a), which is precisely titled ‘In the name of the sovereign people’. Here, following the 2013 manifesto, the Monti cabinet is portrayed as an authentic expropriation of the people’s sovereignty accomplished by the EU and the financial markets, with the complicity of the political class. In her speech, Meloni proudly vindicates the populist label, affirming that ‘Some will call us populists, but we don’t care. Better populists than slaves’ (Fdl 2014a).

The Trieste theses not only confirm the rootedness of Fdl populism but also reconnect Fdl to the other populist parties in Europe, openly denouncing the expropriation of the people’s sovereignty allegedly committed by the EU:

There is a wind that blows on Europe, the wind of the patriots that is increasing its support in several European nations. The mainstream media label it “populism”. [...] this wind marks the defeat of the traditional parties that are stuck in the Europeanist and globalist political view. (Fdl 2017)

The 2018 electoral manifesto supports this tendency. Its concise form prevents a full-fledged elaboration of a populist Weltanschauung; still, the nativist construction of the pure Italian people oppressed by the EU institutions and threatened by immigrant inflows articulates the populist identity of Fdl (2018). This confirms those discursive interpretations of the populist radical right asserting that populism might constitute a conditional qualifier of party nationalism and nativism (Rodi, Karavasilis & Puleo 2021). Despite the fact that the borders of ‘the people’ are clearly subordinate to its nativist ideological traits, we argue that Fdl’s populism is not confined to a stylistic dimension; indeed, the juxtaposition of the virtuous people – portrayed as the only source of political legitimacy – against the delegitimised elites represents a crucial ideational feature. However, any definitive assessment of the ‘stability’ of such populist ideational traits would need further landmarks in the party life cycle (e.g. government participation).

Eurosepticism

AN’s foundational Fiuggi theses are a declaration of Atlanticism and Europeanism. The idea of Europe is served with a Gaullist sauce; the ‘Europe of the fatherlands’ is supposed to preserve the ‘historic unity of the nations’, calling for a union that ‘should respect the national identities of the member states’ (AN 1995a). However, this does not jeopardise the seminal inception of AN’s europhilia, which wishes for a ‘deepening European project beyond the

economic and monetary union, anchoring the EU project to the ideals of its founding fathers Adenauer, De Gasperi, Monnet and Schuman' (AN 1995a). The trust in the process of EU integration comes with an appreciation for the economic globalisation process, which after the end of the Cold War was supposed to increase the world's prosperity through the deregulation of international commerce (AN 1995a). Alleanza Nazionale acknowledges that globalisation altered the boundaries of national sovereignty and, in this respect, argues the need to strengthen international cooperation and European integration (AN 1998, 2001, 2002)

After the rejection of the draft EU Constitution by referendum in France and the Netherlands in 2005, AN spoke up for the process of European integration. Still, the defence of national interests and a seminal critique of the risks of bureaucratisation of the EU architecture began to resonate in the documents of the 2006 programmatic conference, and the 2008 programmatic conference pushed a soft critique against 'an ungoverned globalisation' (AN 2008). Still, no sign of latent euroscepticism is registered either in the centre-right coalition or in the PdL electoral manifestos drafted for the 2006 and 2008 general elections (see also Quaglia 2008). Similarly, the AN motion at the PdL founding congress stressed the centrality of the EU project, stating that 'Italian foreign policy must always adhere to a European path' (AN 2009). During the second Berlusconi cabinet, grievances against the euro arise. Overall, EU issues played a marginal role for the Italian centre right, which expressed 'mildly pro-European tones' (Castelli di Gattinara & Froio 2021, p. 182).

This europhile tradition was all but abruptly interrupted by Fdl. Indeed, its first electoral manifesto not only reasserted its support for EU integration but also supported the architecture of the common currency. Still, Fdl introduced an anti-establishment motive, signalling a cleavage between supporters of a 'Europe of the people' and the proponents of a 'Europe of finance and oligarchy'. This kind of dichotomic and monist distinction fuels the inception of a populist discourse (see above); however, it does not push the party away from its self-proclaimed Europeanism (Fdl 2013a).

After just one year, the party manifested an escalation of grievance against EU architecture, and especially against the other EU member states. The relationship between Italy and the European partners started to be depicted as 'humiliating', with the euro considered an obstacle to Italian recovery and European partners accused of 'stealing' resources from Italy (Fdl 2014a). This stance is further deepened at the Trieste Congress in 2017, where the EU was accused of erasing national identity. Here, the idea of a 'Europe of the people' that also rhetorically permeated AN's documents assumes concrete traits, pushing to alter European integration towards a confederation formula, where member states cooperate on hot issues of European relevance. The same critical stance is addressed to the common currency, which is blamed for increased inequality among member states. These positions are also reaffirmed in the brief

Table 2. Nativist, authoritarian, populist and eurosceptic features in AN, PdL and Fdl.

Year	Document Type	Authoritarianism	Nativism	Anti-Elitism	People-Centrism	Euroscepticism
1995	AN Congress Final Document	Present	Absent	Absent	Absent	Present
1998	AN First Programmatic Conference Final Document	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
2001	AN Second Programmatic Conference Final Document	Present	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
2002	AN Congress Final Document	Present	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
2006	AN Third Programmatic Conference Final Document	Present	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
2006	CdL General Election Coalition Manifesto	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
2008	AN Fourth Programmatic Conference Final Document	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
2008	PdL General Election Manifesto	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
2009	AN motion at the first PdL Congress	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
2013	Fdl General Election Manifesto	Absent	Absent	Core	Core	Absent
2014	Fdl Giorgia Meloni's concluding speech at the first Fdl Congress	Present	Present	Core	Core	Present
2017	Fdl Congress Final Document	Core	Core	Core	Core	Core
2018	Fdl General Election Manifesto	Core	Core	Present	Present	Core

Source: authors' elaboration based on AN, PdL and Fdl official documents.

2018 electoral manifesto, which synthesises most of the current discussion in a couple of succinct sentences: 'Defence of our national sovereignty. Rediscuss all the EU treaties starting from the euro and fiscal compact' (Fdl 2018).

Comparative results

Table 2 shows the presence of nativist, eurosceptic, authoritarian and populist values in the documents analysed. As other studies have already confirmed (Tarchi 2003; Ignazi 2005), after its foundation AN did not exhibit the features of a PRR party and this ideological character has been maintained throughout its history. The short parenthesis of the PdL did not present any relevant ideological innovations. In this respect, the PdL has been a political creature more proximate to FI than to AN, qualifying in multiple respects as Berlusconi's personal party (McDonnell 2013). Conversely, since its first electoral manifesto in 2013, Fdl presented a clear populist dichotomisation of society between the corrupted elites – responsible for Italian decline – and a pure people. Still, the policy content and the ideological value in terms of nativism, authoritarianism and euroscepticism are more coherent with a moderate right tradition rather than a PRR profile. The first Fdl congress represented a crucial step for the rebranding of the party, which radicalised in terms of all ideological indicators and started to present itself as a PRR party.

Organisation and elites

Keeping in mind the findings of the literature on the organisational traits of the populist radical right discussed above, we can argue that the organisational structure of Fdl largely mirrors the current streams among PRR parties, i.e. the desire to incorporate several traits of the mass party model. However, the core elements of the organisation adopted by Fratelli d'Italia seem related first and foremost to the persistence of the organisational tradition of MSI and AN. Apart from the first interim statutes (2013b), which designed a rather light structure, the organisation outlined by the statutes of 2014 and following modifications (2018) reflect the aspiration to mirror AN, generally described as a cadre party (Tarchi 1997, p. 218; Morlino 2006, p. 136). Even though the overall framework is generally less articulated, several provisions of the statutes of Fdl are almost identical to some passages of the old party's statutes (AN 2006b).

At least two core features can be highlighted by analysing these documents and the effective life of the party, which are in line with the traditions of MSI and AN (Tarchi 1997; Ignazi 1998). First, a classical structure is envisaged, with a plurality of offices and collegial organs on several local levels. The preference for a 'heavy' party structure can be seen also in the number of national departments or 'thematic laboratories', branches that should outline the party strategy in specific policy areas. Currently (2021), the party lists on its website almost fifty departments, some of which are redundant for a party of a (still) limited size, such as three departments dealing with foreign policy and at least five departments dealing with the economy.⁴ It is doubtful how many of these departments actually determine the party's line, but they nevertheless demonstrate the will to have a large national organisation by remunerating several members with symbolic offices.

Second, the distribution of powers within the party sees a prevalence of the national leaders over the national collective organs and the national level over the local ones, with provisions very similar to those present in the statutes of AN (2006b). The findings on internal democracy within the party are mixed. This issue was rather problematic within AN, where several tensions among factions erupted cyclically and the provisions to hold a national congress every three years were largely ignored, since after its foundation the party held only two further congresses (2002 and 2009).

Fratelli d'Italia respected a similar provision, having held a congress in 2017 after the first one in 2014. No formal opposition to Meloni was presented and she was elected leader of the party by acclamation. In 2020 and 2021, no congress took place, but this could have been due to the ongoing pandemic. Interestingly, one of the few provisions in discontinuity with its predecessor parties – i. e. the involvement of non-party members in the election of the leader – cannot be considered a real transformation. Such a possibility has indeed varied in terms of openness among the different statutes of the

Table 3. Distribution of powers in the statutes of AN, PdL and Fdl.

The leader ...	AN 1995b	AN 2006b	PdL 2011	Fdl 2013b	Fdl 2014b	Fdl 2019
... is the external representative of the party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
... is personally accountable to the party congress for its political line	No	No	No	NP	No	No
... may select his/her deputies	NP	NP	NP	NP	NP	NP
... may summon party congress without counterbalances	Yes	Yes	No	NP	No	No
... may summon party officials	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
... may attend the party congress	Yes	Yes	Yes	NP	No	Yes
... may attend the party executive	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
... has the right to approve/veto coalition agreements or candidatures for the election	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
... has statutory right to appoint one or more members of the party executive	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
... has the right to dissolve local organs without counterbalances	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
... has the right to apply definitive or interim disciplinary action against party members	Yes	Yes	No	NP	Yes	Yes
Formal procedures to remove the party leader	No	No	No	No	No	No
Overall score	0.91	0.91	0.63	0.57	0.72	0.81

Source: authors' elaboration based on a modification of Poguntke et al. (2016); Poguntke, Scarrow and Webb (2020).

(1) NP= Not present. (2) For each dimension, we assigned "1" to the provisions that gave powers to the leader over collective bodies/other party members and, conversely, "0" to the provisions that gave powers to the collective bodies/other party members over the leader. The overall score was obtained through a simple average of the various dimensions present in the statutes.

party – that of 2014 even envisaged the (non-mandatory) option to held primary elections – but has found scarce practical effects so far, since Meloni was the only candidate for the leadership both in 2014 and 2017. Also the provisions to have primary elections for candidates to electoral offices at the local and national levels appear to have been largely not applied.

Table 3 summarises these findings. We slightly modified some items from the 'index of leadership power' and added three dimensions to explore the power of the leaders in certain areas, such as disciplinary power and the relationship with local organs that were already crucial in the history of MSI and AN. We thus calculated a score by averaging 12 items, assigning the value of 1 to provisions that give the leader power over the collective organs and 0 when this power was not assigned to the leader. From this index, we can see how the values obtained by the last statutes of Fdl are very much in line with the statutes of AN. In contrast to the first interim statutes – which were rather provisional and did not have a proper national leader but rather a bureau led by Crosetto, La Russa and Meloni – the later statutes of Fdl show values not so far from those of the statutes of AN. A comparison between the provisions of the statutes of Fdl currently in force and those of AN reveals an almost identical distribution of power. Thus, Fdl can be described as a leader-centred party, where the leadership of Meloni never faced any relevant competition over time and with a statute that assigns to the leader a wide range of powers.

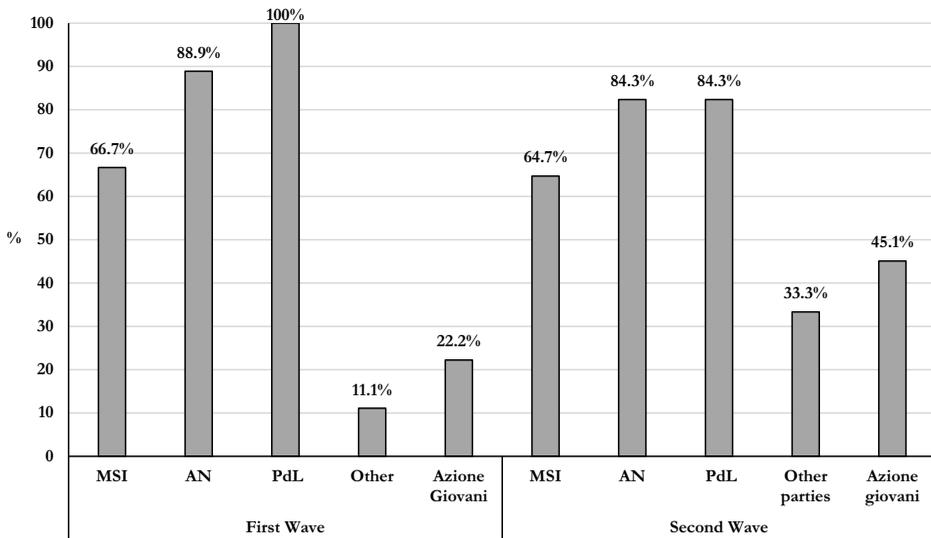


Figure 2. Previous known party memberships of Fratelli d'Italia elected MPs/MEPs (First wave: MPs elected in 2013; Second wave: MPs elected in 2018 and MEPs elected in 2019). Source: authors' elaboration based on newspapers, institutional websites, official biographies and direct contact with MPs' offices. First Wave MSI= 6; AN= 8; PdL=9; Other parties=1; Azione Giovani=2 First Wave Total Number=9. Second Wave MSI= 33; PdL= 42; AN=42; Other parties=17; Azione Giovani= 23. Second Wave Total Number = 51 (2 missing cases).

Moving on to the analysis of the party's elected officials, [Figure 2](#) illustrates the known past party memberships of the MPs of Fratelli d'Italia, differentiated in two waves (MPs elected in 2013 and MPs and MEPs elected in 2018/2019). It was obtained through the analysis of several sources, such as the party's and personal websites, newspapers, local authority websites and direct contact with MPs' offices. Even though it may underestimate some past affiliations not publicly known, it nevertheless gives us a good measure of the political roots of the MPs of Fratelli d'Italia. In both groups, we can observe a strong persistence of members previously affiliated with PdL and AN (over 80 per cent). A strong presence of past members of the MSI is observable as well. To sum up, these data outline the strong prevalence of a particular political lineage, a line of continuity between MSI, AN and PdL.

We also looked at past affiliation with AN's youth organisation, Azione Giovani (Youth Action). This is an interesting dimension to explore, as Meloni enjoyed a long and stable leadership within this organisation, which served as her launchpad for higher national offices ([Piccolino 2012](#)). Our data outline an important role of this organisation in the cursus honorum of the party's MPs (22.2 per cent in the first wave and 45.1 per cent in the second one). These data clearly show the importance for the party leader of being able to count on reliable allies with whom she shared part of her political experience. At the same time, they also highlight another line of continuity, as MSI placed a strong emphasis on the formation of MPs through its youth organisations ([Recchi 1997](#), pp. 82–90).

Conclusions

The analysis of Fdl's continuity with its predecessor organisations reveals that the party's newness is a composite concept. Indeed, when analysed across its different facets, Fdl presents a mix of new and old features. In terms of relational continuity, we registered that the Fdl's location within the Italian political space is very similar to that displayed by AN and the PdL. Furthermore, focusing on coalition dynamics, the reciprocal position of the Fdl-FI-LN triad in 2018 also coincides quite neatly with the one displayed by AN-FI-LN in 2006, and in terms of integration, Fdl also remains a stable partner of the centre-right coalition.

However, a huge distance between Fdl and its ancestors emerges when we look at party ideology. Populism and nativism cannot be included among the toolkit of the Fdl's predecessor parties. The party showed a marked ideological difference from the PdL, a party that did not share eurosceptic or authoritarian traits and that can be considered a brief yet relevant parenthesis in the history of the Italian Right. The differences with AN are deep as well. Authoritarianism and Euroscepticism, albeit never at the core of the ideology of this party, were present in the infancy of AN; however, the latter already disappears in the documents of AN's first programmatic conference (1998), while since the 2006 electoral manifesto the former is no longer emphasised (Cdl 2006). Thus, in ideological terms, Fdl belongs to a totally different genus than AN and PdL. In the last years, Fdl displayed indeed all the ideological features ascribable to the populist radical right at the core of its ideology. While AN, and its leader in particular, tried to pursue an often bumpy path to become a national conservative party and be accepted by the mainstream European centre-right, Fdl went through a completely different journey. The leadership of the party gave up very early any intention to be assimilated within the European mainstream centre-right. In ideological terms, Meloni's party was clearly much more inspired than AN by the contemporary PRR European parties. As a result, Fdl can be rightly considered one of the most prominent members of this party family today.

Is it thus correct to affirm that discontinuity dominates over continuity? Not exactly. In the analysis of Fdl's organisational features, we traced similarities with the current trends in the PRR parties, but the overall structure appears to reflect first and foremost the heritage of the MSI-AN tradition. Even more striking continuity is registered in terms of political elites. Understandably, in 2013 all of Fdl's MPs came from PdL ranks. However, what is remarkable is the high degree of continuity that we register with both AN and MSI. Fdl's political elites are indissolubly linked with the previous stages of the Italian right. Still, the 2013 electoral earthquake opened new windows of opportunity for an ideological re-branding. On the one hand, Fdl exploited the growing Eurosceptic and anti-establishment sentiment of Italian voters, and on the other hand, the party built a strategic distinctiveness separating it from the rest of its competitors, who have all cyclically occupied governmental positions.

If we would like to apply to Fdl a dichotomous indicator to decide whether it is a new or an old party, we would inevitably choose the former (Barnea & Rahat 2011). However, this choice underscores the important ideological differences existing between Fdl and its predecessor organisations. In this respect, we confirm the conclusions formulated by Beyens and her colleagues (2017) supporting the multidimensional nature of party newness. This conclusion is relevant both in empirical and theoretical terms because it provides new lenses through which to explore the success of new parties. Along these lines, we claim that Fdl's success might be explained by the combination of a strong organisational and elite continuity with a radical ideological re-branding.

Fdl – and Meloni – are motivated to contend the centre-right leadership. Fdl's refusal to participate in the Draghi cabinet signals how Fdl intends to overcome the League's anti-establishment credentials, winning back all the consensus that the League recently conquered in the southern Italian regions. In this respect, an important limitation of our analysis refers to its exclusive focus on the supply side of Fdl. Further analyses – and reliable data with an adequate number of observations – are indeed needed to investigate whether Fdl's distinctiveness can be confirmed when also looking at its supporters.

Notes

1. It should be remembered that in the context of the investiture vote, all the MPs who later founded Fdl voted in favour of the Monti cabinet.
2. The MEPs of the party, elected in 2009 with the PdL, remained however within the European People's Party group until 2014.
3. GAL/TAN is an acronym for *Green, Alternative, Liberal/Traditional, Authoritarian, Nationalist*. It was introduced in the framework of CHES in order to measure party positions on the cultural dimension of political competition (Hooghe, Marks & Wilson 2002).
4. *Dipartimenti e Laboratori Tematici*, available at <https://www.fratelli-italia.it/dipartimenti-e-laboratori-tematici/> (last accessed August 18, 2021).

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