

Valerio Alfonso Bruno, James F. Downes, Alessio Scopelliti

## **The Rise of the Radical Right in Italy**

A New Balance of Power in the Right-Wing Camp



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Alessio Scopelliti

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## Introductory Note by the Authors

This book stems from research carried out over the past three years by the three authors on the role of the radical right in Italian politics. This study includes a wide range of perspectives to explore the rise of the populist radical-right within the Italian context of the last decade, roughly a ten-year period that ranges from the so-called *crisi dello spread* ('spread crisis') of 2011–2012 to the victory of the right-wing coalition led by Giorgia Meloni's party, Fratelli d'Italia, at the September 2022 general election. We argue that over the last decade, Italy has represented, and continues to represent, a laboratory for a number of political phenomena, such as technocratic governments, different forms of populism, especially those of the radical right or valence populism, alongside the complementary phenomenon of "mainstreaming" the far-right and the radicalization of traditional parties in Italian politics.

Could Italy, whose government is arguably the most right-wing government in the Republican history of the country lead to a new model at the European level? A model that would be based on a complex and gradual transformation between conservative and far-right ideologies, alongside a new political axis between the European People's Party and right-wing radical parties, such as The European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) or Identity and Democracy (ID). On the eve of the election of the European Parliament to be held in early June 2024, we believe that these important and complex questions concerning Italian politics are significant for the future of both European and European Union (EU) politics alike.

The book consists of seven chapters<sup>1</sup> divided into three parts. The first part of the book serves as the backdrop for the entire book, offering a comprehensive examination of the complex Italian political landscape, exploring Italian political dynamics since post-

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 1 is carried out by James F. Downes and Alessio Scopelliti. Chapters 2 and 4 are carried out by Valerio Alfonso Bruno. Chapters 3 and 6 are carried out by Alessio Scopelliti. Chapter 5 is carried out by James F. Downes. Chapter 7 is carried out by Valerio Alfonso Bruno and Alessio Scopelliti.

World War II (Chapter 1) and focusing on the Italian Center-right Coalition (Chapter 2). The second part of the book focuses on actors that played a leading role in contributing to the normalization (or mainstreaming) of the Italian radical right, including the League (Chapter 3), Brothers of Italy (Chapter 4) and the Five Star Movement Party (Chapter 5). Finally, the third part of the book explores new areas that will impact Italian politics in the future via the new transnational cleavage (Chapter 6) alongside the mainstreaming of the Italian radical right (Chapter 7).

*Milan and Hong Kong, October 2023*

# Preface

*Marianna Griffini*

Italy as a political lab is the image that takes shape when reading this highly topical book, which traces the emergence and incipient success of the radical right in Italy within the broader context of party competition both within and without this party family. The book, thanks to solid theoretical bases sophisticatedly corroborated by qualitative analysis of narratives and quantitative exploration of text, takes the reader through an in-depth investigation of the radical right historical background, actors, and dynamics, which have been animating the Italian political arena over the past three decades.

In *The Rise of the Radical Right in Italy: A New Balance of Power in the Right-Wing Camp*, the recurrent metaphor of a lab cogently conjures up Italy as a political field relentlessly experimenting with political phenomena, such as the short-lived technocratic governments led by European Central Bank Presidents Mario Monti (2011–2012) and Mario Draghi (2021–2022), and the normalization of the radical right. Technocratic governments breaking the chain between elected and electors have been deployed vastly in Europe, such as in Greece in 2011 and in Austria in 2019. Nevertheless, Italy was a forerunner. The same applies to the normalization of the radical right, which is made up of the radicalization of mainstream parties, the increasing acceptance of radical right tropes in the mainstream, and the entry into the government by radical right parties. The radical right presence in government is not unique to Italy, but Italy was one of the precursors of this trend that spread across Western, Central and Eastern Europe. Other radical right parties in power since Italy's first Berlusconi government (1994) have been the Austria Freedom Party (FPÖ) in 2000 and 2021; the Swiss People's Party (SVP) from 1959 to the present, with a brief hiatus in 2000; Fidesz in Hungary from 1998 to 2002, and since 2010; Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland from 2005 to 2007, and from 2015 to 2023; the Independent Greeks (ANEL) and SYRIZA in Greece in 2015.

Italy retains two additional roles in the Europe context. Indeed, it was home to the first populist government composed of a populist radical right and a valence populist party: the first Conte government (2018–2019). The Conte I government saw the populist radical right (originated as a regionalist party in 1989) Lega sitting uncomfortably in government with the ‘polyvalent and eclectic’ populist Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), aptly defined in Chapter 5 as the ‘valence populist party’. The populist radical left SYRIZA in Greece had tied governmental knots with the nationalist and conservative ANEL in 2015, thus bringing together parties located far away from each other on the political spectrum; however, neither of those government coalition partners was a valence party transcending the ideological affiliation squarely to the right or left.

Moreover, Italy was home to the first totally populist radical right party in Western Europe, with the current Meloni government headed by Giorgia Meloni, the first woman prime minister in Italian history, leader of Fratelli d’Italia (FdI), and leader of the EU parliamentary group ECR. As illustrated in Chapter 2, the populist radical right Lega and Alleanza Nazionale (AN) had already featured in numerous governments in Italy under the aegis of Forza Italia’s (FI) leader and tycoon Silvio Berlusconi (in 1994, 2001 and 2008). The Lega had also participated in the unusual coalition government Conte I, headed by M5S Giuseppe Conte (2018–2019). Therefore, unbeknownst to its actors, the Italian political scene set the stage for European political experiences of technocratic governments, of the now widespread normalization of the radical right often aided by social media platforms (as argued in Chapter 3), of the first government coalition in Europe between valence populism and radical right populism, as well of the first totally populist radical right government headed by a clearly populist radical right party.

Along with political experimentations, another trait characterizing the image of the Italian political lab shaped by this book is the fine balance between change and continuity. First, as Chapter 1 details, electoral volatility and political instability have triggered the changes that have punctuated Italian politics since 2000, which arose from the rubble of the political earthquake set off by the first of many political crises in Italian politics since 1992: *Tangentopoli*. The corruption scandal of *Tangentopoli* brought to an end the First

Republic party system dominated by the hegemony of the Socialist Party and the Christian Democrats, hanging in a fine but stable balance of power with an array of other parties, including the Italian Communist Party. Since the end of the First Republic, several political crises have seen governments being brought down before the end of their terms by contending parties. Indeed, political crises have curiously been a sign of continuity in the mercurial Italian political system.

A further essential and more unambiguous element of continuity in Italian politics since the 1990s is the constant presence of the radical right. The latter affirmed itself as a novel political actor at the beginning of the Second Republic by seizing the window of opportunity offered by potent discontent with the First Republic party system plagued by rampant corruption. The radical right, at that time constituted by the embryonic form of the Lega, AN, and FI, hailed itself as a game changer. The current radical right government led by FdI (the heir to the well-entrenched AN) is inevitably proving the unwavering presence of the radical right and portending the further changes the Meloni government may bring about. While Meloni has so far softened the most radical traits of her party, her radical positions on immigration, gender rights, law and order, and economic *souverainisme* may open up the possibility of a radical drift. The current fickle balance of power between the dominating FdI and its (reluctantly) junior coalition parties, Lega and FI, may also point in the direction of a reshuffled balance of power, relegating Lega and FI to the margins of the coalition and dwindling electoral fortunes. Only time will tell.

Italy as a lab is the fil rouge of the chapters unfolding in *The Rise of the Radical Right in Italy: A New Balance of Power in the Right-Wing Camp*. The core argument of this book is that the radical right in Italy has been undergoing an upward trajectory since 1992, which has seen the rise of new parties, such as FdI, the competition between radical right populism and valence populism (such as in the Conte I government), and within the radical right itself (i.e., the friend-and-foe competition between FdI, the FI, and the originally ethno-regionalist Lega). This variegated picture made up of chameleonic (but not meteoric) parties forms the balance of power of the

radical right in Italian politics, which is methodically dissected by Bruno, Downes, and Scopelliti.

The purpose this book superbly achieves is to vividly trace the physiognomy of the radical right over *la longue durée*, as well as to deeply excavate the workings of its most crucial processes, including its normalization that has been built up across the past three decades and has peaked with the current Meloni government. Scholarly interest in these dynamics can depart from the case study of Italy (which served as the prototype of different radical right trends) before generalizing to relevant European radical right parties. Therefore, *The Rise of the Radical Right in Italy: A New Balance of Power in the Right-Wing Camp* offers a much-needed addition to the essential literature on party politics because it is of interest to the wider scholarly community studying radical right parties across Europe.

Recent developments in 2023 make the importance and significance of this book even more important. The radical right has hit the headlines for its (rare) lack of success, for instance, the recent dethronement of the PiS government after the October 2023 elections in Poland, but especially for its (relentless) success, exemplified by the rescuing of the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) Geert Wilders from the *cordon sanitaire* imposed since 2012. Wilders won the November 2023 elections and is set to enter negotiations for the formation of a coalition government. On the other side of the Ocean, Donald Trump, representing an unambiguously radical strain of Republicanism, announced his candidacy for the 2024 elections after having been acquitted from his second impeachment initiated on the grounds of incitement of insurrection in the attack on Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021. Trump's possible election carries the risk of democratic backsliding, which has already been initiated by Trump's Argentinian counterpart Javier Milei, who won the November 2023 elections at the helm of La Libertad Avanza. Curiously, the wildness of Wilders's, Trump's, and Milei's hirsute hairdos is matched by the brashness of their political style.

Returning to the European political milieu, the EU parliamentary elections have elicited a flurry of attention concerning EU right-wing parliamentary group alliances. There is trepidation about a possible instability in the balance of power within the

Italian radical right as a repercussion of its fragmentation at the EU level. Indeed, the radical right party ECR, which flaunts vigorous commitment to Euroskepticism, is getting closer to the European Popular Party (EPP), to which FI firmly belongs. The ECR, curiously, is spearheaded by Meloni, who took the party reins in 2020. With the advent of her institutional role as prime minister of Italy and her consequent attempt to maintain solid diplomatic relationships with the EU, Meloni reportedly toyed with the idea of edging closer to the EPP, which is, ironically, the EU parliament party she dragged FdI out of in 2019.

The precarious balance of power of the Meloni government could be thrown out of kilter also by Salvini's staged efforts at consolidating the EU parliament party ID, encompassing, among others, Le Pen's Rassemblement National in France, the PiS, the Austrian FPÖ, and the Dutch PVV. The EU elections will be a testing ground for the cohesion of the Meloni government, not just because of different EU parliamentary party affiliations of the government components but also because the EU parliament elections catalyze attention on the different party positioning within the radical right (recounted in Chapter 4) on the war in Ukraine. In fact, Salvini, heading the Lega and allegedly representing business people, expressed skepticism regarding sanctions on Russia. Instead, Meloni and Tajani (FI leader in the post-Berlusconi era) have been steadfast supporters of Ukraine and staunch opposers of Putin's Russia. Not only are the EU parliamentary elections concentrating pundits' attention on the radical right in Italy for their repercussions on the Italian government's balance of power, but they also highlight the pivotal role the radical right is playing well beyond Italian confines: the inter-party dynamics at play at a national level are taking an interesting turn at EU level. This makes the scholarly investigation carried out by Bruno, Downes, and Scopelliti even more urgent.