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The Spiral of Prejudice and the Securitization of Migration: The Complexity of Small Changes in Italian Migration Networked Governance

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Abstract

The post-Cold War world has witnessed increased migratory movements. In many countries, prejudice has entailed negative developments in dealing with the phenomenon, spawning a series of insecurities and resulting in more irregularities that do not benefit either migrants or the established population. Italy is a crucial case study of how even the very definition of migration can be connected to discriminatory policies, such as the one based on the citizenship principle of *jus sanguinis*. A document analysis of how migration policies have evolved in the country and a process-tracing analysis of the role played by different actors in the governance of migration in Italy examine the complexity of small changes in the securitization of migration. The latter, due to its variety of components, can be referred to as a networked governance. Although it is true that the linkage between migration and insecurities in Italy did not suddenly happen in a single act, the idea that changes across governments have not mattered would be entirely misleading. Some of the policies enacted by different governments have actually entailed discriminatory practices, generating a spiralling of the securitization of migration and its related migration-crime nexus. The analysis illustrates that even small changes in migration policies attempting to remove prejudice from the equation can encompass crucial differences for the entire migration governance. Finally, it illustrates that a turning point in reducing insecurities would depend on the adoption of *jus culturae*, which can actually reduce the creation of irregular migration and insecurities.

1. Introduction

Following the end of the Cold War, the world has witnessed an increase in migratory movements. In many countries, prejudice has entailed negative developments in dealing with the phenomenon, spawning a series of insecurities and resulting in more irregularities that do not benefit either migrants or the established population. However, when it comes to analysing migration related phenomena, the dimension of security and insecurities has outclassed all others in recent decades, so much so that we have also seen the emergence of an entire new branch of studies: the securitization of migration. The latter serves the purpose of accounting for the shift in contemplation of the entire process, which has moved from the social, economic and political domains to mainly one of security, and the consequences of such a transformation. An inherent outcome of this outlook change is the increasing tendency to criminalize the act of human mobility across borders (Huysmans 2006; Huysmans and Squire 2010; Panebianco 2021) and to govern it in exceptional ways (Bello 2021; Salter 2008). A large number of analyses have illustrated that similar measures exist everywhere in the world, and not only in the

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West, and have grown mainly since the end of the Cold War (Bello 2020; Bigo 2002; Huysmans 2006; Salter 2008).

While these conservative tendencies have increased, welcoming movements, solidarities and progressive politics have also flourished, as the literature has recently highlighted (Crepaz 2020; Della Porta 2018; Della Porta and Steinhilper 2021; Mitchell and Sparke 2018). Similar countermoves have been interpreted in terms of either desecuritization or countersecuritization (Balzacq 2010; Strizel and Chang 2015; Vuori 2010). The difference between these two approaches is especially useful in considering the effects they encompass: while desecuritization has the final aim of moving migration governance back into the social, economic or political domain to which it initially pertained, countersecuritization results in the spiralling of the phenomenon and the creation of more confrontational situations (Balzacq 2010; Bourbeau and Vuori 2015).

If the concept of countersecuritization certainly explains a key component that enables us to suitably understand how the securitization of migration escalates, it also considers that all accelerations need to start from a growing hostility between two parts. However, other theories (Maguire 2015) have explained that the securitization of migration is self-fulfilling and self-reinforcing and it does not always need an equally powerful opponent to speed up its dynamics (Bello 2020a). The securitization of migration has the power to self-accomplish its own initial prejudice: by declaring something as a threat -the *speech-act* that ontologically identifies the referent object "migration" a danger (Buzan and Waever 2009; Waever 1993)- and regulating it as such through policies (Panebianco 2020), it enables practices (Léonard and Kaunert 2020b) creating a climax of emergency that finally normalizes its treatment in exceptional ways (Salter 2008). The spiralling of the securitization of migration is not only due to the confrontation of two different groups with contrasting interests (Vuori 2010). What Bigo called the 'govern*mentality* of the unease' (Bigo 2002) is not only responding to the interests and mentalities of certain categories such as security professionals. All the actors called to govern or manage migration can enact a securitization of the field if their cognitions are prejudicials (Bello 2020a). If the actors who intervene to regulate human mobility are prejudicial towards migrants and migration, they will create a spiralling progression, which will further criminalize human mobility, propagate hostilities and socially construct it as a threat. As a consequence, prejudice truly matters on how migration is governed and becomes a crucial dynamic in the spiralling of securitization of migration and a crucial part of its way of configuring migration as a threat.

By considering the Italian securitization of migration as a spiralling progression, such an analysis also speaks to those studies that have considered that migration policies in Italy have not completely transformed along with the changing of governments (Strazzari and Grandi 2019; Zotti and Fassi 2020) but that the relation has been far more complex, mainly between 2002 and 2019. Although migration is a matter which is regulated through national policies, its development indeed depends on a variety of actors, external and internal to the country politics; thus it is more correct to speak of a migration networked governance rather than a migration policy, in line with how a *networked governance* has been previously defined (Bee and Bello 2009).

An analysis of Italian migration policies will look for elements pertaining to the spiralling effect of prejudice in the securitization of migration and will explain the outcomes

in the Italian networked governance of human mobility. The study aims to apply the theoretical framework of the spiral of prejudice (Bello 2017; Bello 2020a) and will show that the only way to disentangle the migration-crime nexus is to operate at its root causes, mainly by removing prejudicial cognitions intervening in any of the steps that constitute the regulation of international human mobility in Italy. The current work will consider the role of prejudice in the securitization of migration to prove the complexity of small changes and variations in Italian migration governance. Hence, the article first elucidates the link between discriminations and the very categorization of migration to subsequently understand, in the second section, the usefulness of such a framework in analysing the securitization of migration and the complexity of small changes in Italian migration networked governance. Such a study can illustrate how, in a migration networked governance, nuanced variations in policies (*top-down moves*) are intrinsically connected with important transformations in practices (*horizontal moves*) and narratives[1] (*bottom-up moves*). Paraphrasing this, the goal of this examination is to highlight the role of small changes in migration governance in the securitization of migration and its related migration-crime nexus through both horizontal and vertical countermoves. In particular, the migration-crime nexus is a socially constructed connection between criminality and human mobility that political actors establish through speech acts, policies or practices (Huysmans 2006). By simply coupling migration and crime, or migration and security in speeches or policies, and by treating migrants as criminals in practices, politically relevant actors are able to depict migrants as criminals in the eyes of the general population. The article shows how such a connection was established through a networked governance of migration in Italy from 2002 onwards. It concludes the discussion by identifying the most relevant divergences within all Italian migration policies, from the initial Turco-Napolitano Law and the following Consolidation Act (Testo Unico) of the Discipline of Immigration and the Regulations of the Condition of the Foreigner of 1998 to the current Law 18 December 2020, which consolidates Lamorgese's Decree.

2. Prejudice and the Categorization of Migration: *Jus Sanguinis*, *Jus Soli* and *Jus Culturae*[2]

A vast literature on prejudice has long existed in social and political science (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Meertens 1995; Dovidio 2001) and in its breadth has helped to discern several ways through which the phenomenon impacts everyday political and social life. To make a broad excursus[3], it is usually understood as a set of learnt negative attitudes or dispositions that a person can manifest towards others (Allport 1954), that are based on antipathies that precede actual experience (Pettigrew 1980) and can be associated with specific political

[1] There are several different types of narrative that are relevant to analyse in the field, from grand narratives to meta-narratives to micro narratives (see for example Suganami 1999; Oppermann and Spencer 2018). In this text, when referring to narratives, they are analysed as *bottom-up moves* reflecting the literature of securitization of migration.

[2] After this article was already submitted to the journal, there were crucial developments in the Italian Parliament on the topic, with a discussion about the approval of *jus scholae*, which is substantially very similar to the *jus culturae* discussed here.

[3] It is impossible to do justice to the entirety of the relevant literature on prejudice, and this article only aims to apply the concept to the political analysis of how its spiralling in Italy has impacted the governance of migration.

conservative behaviours (Adorno et al. 1950). It can be expressed in covert or more blatant ways (Pettigrew and Meertens 1995) and can also represent a collective phenomenon that then historically develops in institutional forms of discrimination (Dovidio 2001). If as an individual disposition it can feed political extremism, understanding prejudice in its collective dimension helps disentangle how it mixes with policies in certain foundational ways. Historically it has been linked with the development of extremist politics and the collapse of the nineteenth-century international system (Polanyi 1944), an intellectual operation that has contributed to explaining 'why prejudice is a global security threat' (Bello 2017). Because it obviously refers to the discrimination of alterities, migrants are intrinsically amongst the most affected by the phenomenon.

Taking a step further, it would be possible to even claim that migration itself as a label is both ontologically and epistemologically an effect of prejudice. The term 'international migration' is an act of socio-political engineering, a category invented to identify and consequently regulate a human action that relates to some basic human need, such as the choice of establishing a residence and possible movement somewhere else. In order to track its complexity, it could be useful to first despoil it of all the social constructions introduced by the political organization of life, to then consider the complexity of migration ontological entanglement with discriminatory securitizing moves. If tracked down to basic and constitutive elements, indeed one could ponder that persons have three main strategies at disposal regarding their residence: establishing it in a place that they consider safe and, possibly, to their liking; adapting their residence to new conditions if necessary; and changing it when the place proves to be no longer safe or to their liking. This moving of residency is identified with the term 'international migration' when the relative movement happens to cross another human socio-political invention: national borders. In such a light, the 'international migration' category is *ontologically* related to the creation of foundational boundaries ensuring control over the simple natural course of life on the planet.

Still, in this simplified description, it already becomes clear that the category of migration exists only as a consequence of the intentions to control who accesses certain privileges on a national basis. In fact, even if it is normally taken for granted that, when dealing with international migration, scholars, stakeholders and policymakers are considering the very human phenomenon of crossing physical borders, such an accepted fact is not entirely true. International migration does not always relate to the *physical* crossing of borders, but it does always encompass, instead, a form of human discrimination (Bello 2017). Due to human regulations and cognitive perceptions, the category of international migration goes far beyond the physical act of crossing borders. A clear example of a similar circumstance is that today it is practically impossible to establish a single definition which is valid for all cases everywhere. The same International Organization for Migration had to add a note to its web page 'Who is a Migrant?' to clarify that '[a]t the international level, no universally accepted definition for "migrant" exists'[4]. The status of being a migrant does not only depend on the physical act of, and the reasons for, crossing international borders. In certain countries, like Italy, one can be a migrant also without crossing international borders. A similar situation happens in all those countries where citizenship is based on *jus sanguinis* rather than on *jus soli*. Persons born in Italy of foreign parents will be considered migrants even if they have never crossed any international borders in their entire life. As a consequence, the category

[4] See IOM Webpage 'Who is a Migrant' available at https://www.iom.int/node/102743

of migration extends beyond those persons who have crossed international borders to establish their life somewhere else from their place of origin or citizenship, if they have ever had one[5] in the first place.

In these countries, the institutional incorporation of persons who have never crossed international borders into the category of international migration stretches what is a physical event, 'the crossing of international borders', already ontologically constructed through the invention of the nation to discriminate who possesses certain rights, into an entirely subjective, epistemological, matter. It depends on both how the state and its apparatus understand 'who people are', and how the society perceives and socially (and cognitively) constructs them, rather than 'what they actually do'. In countries where *jus soli* applies, all those born there will be considered citizens. However, persons who were born of foreign parents in countries where *jus sanguinis* is the element that guarantees access to the 'body of the nation', will be considered migrants in such places, as happens in Italy.

In a similar contingency, persons who have never crossed the borders of the state where they were born, can also become 'irregular migrants' once they reach the age of majority, when their visa no longer depends on the family status. For example, visas cannot be granted if the person is unemployed and no longer attends the education system. This case is a very concerning situation for over one million minors in Italy. However, it is to be noted that, yearly, a number of these come of age and are no longer counted among Italian minors without citizenship. Therefore, the number of those affected by this policy is constantly underestimated.

For many years now, a political battle has been fought to guarantee what in Italy is known as *jus culturae*. Differently from the *jus soli*, *jus culturae* intends to connect citizenship not so much to the fact of being born in the country but to the fact of being educated in the culture of the country. Such a criteria would solve the situation not only of those minors who were born in the country (as the *jus soli* would do) but also of those who arrived in the country at a later age. To make a clear example from real-life, *jus culturae* would avoid the possibility of two sisters born of foreign parents, one having arrived in Italy at the age of two and the other born in the country, having different citizenships and different rights. However, despite the changes in governments, and a serious attempt to modify the citizenship law between 2015 and 2017, Parliament has been very resistant to addressing the current unequal treatment of *Italians without citizenship*, due to a tense political climate which the elections of 2018 made evident.

As a result, in Italy, and in many other countries where *jus sanguinis* applies, the phenomenon of migration is not only a real, physical situation entailing the crossing of borders. It is also evidently an institutional category that the state uses to differentiate between human beings; it discriminates unequally against those who come to reside in the country at a later stage and against those born and residing within its territory. In such countries, as in Italy, hence, migration is a discriminatory category *per se*, which denies the enjoyment of certain rights to some persons, and it is not only a definition that describes the crossing of borders: its usage extends far beyond this physical action.

For the state itself, the extension of the category of migration would stop here. However, from a socio-political point of view, it can be stretched further through specific perceptions, as people can perceive certain persons to be migrants even if they are not

[5] The case of 'statelessness' indeed complicates further the definition of the problem.

migrants at all but are actually citizens of the state, with their Italian nationality stated on their passport. Such an occurrence can depend upon physical or cultural discriminatory elements. Citizens who represent a minority in a state can be cognitively placed in the 'migration' vessel by the vast majority of the population. A similar cognition explains why, if asked how numerous migrants are in the country, many would have an exaggerated idea of the state of affairs (Bello 2017; Blangiardo and Ortensi 2020; Diamanti 2019).

This first discussion of the very definition of migration sets out the reasons for which discriminatory acts seep into the core of all those elements that constitute the governance of migration and develop it into an excessively debatable political issue. An awareness of such prejudices, which are evidently at some of the roots of the means used to regulate human mobility, does not necessarily help disentangle the problem. Specific political interpretations actually prosper on discriminations and on marking differences and borders rather than fighting them. There are political beliefs that evidently question the idea that there exist universal human rights and that all persons are entitled to the same rights of a life with dignity. It is of course the case of far-right and sometimes populist parties (Geddes and Petracchin 2020), which, when they do not completely neglect human equality, position the applicability of these rights in specific territories as they come to be determined by national boundaries. In other words, far-right and populist organizations and movements, in the best of cases, would argue that migrants are entitled to certain rights (for example a life with dignity) within their homelands but not in other countries (Ambrosini 2020). This has been a typical discourse in Salvini's Lega, with the well-known slogan 'Salviamoli a casa loro' (Zotti and Fassi 2020).

Nonetheless, even leaving aside the case of extremist political movements and organizations, at the basis of the very idea of who composes the body of the nation there may be more prejudiced or more inclusive approaches (Bello 2017), which are reflected in the point in case of *jus sanguinis* versus *jus soli* citizenship laws, and all the mixture of law principles through which countries fall into mid-range positions. Some scholars have suggested that exclusionary politics is at the core of the formation of nation states (Wimmer 2002). Since the state has been defined as monopolist in the power realm by a variety of actors, and mainly as a consequence of globalization (Castles and Davidson 2000), migration has become an increasingly politicized matter of state and a core part of party politics and campaigns.

Igniting the nucleus of the identitarian machine of us versus them, migration is 'weaponized' (Greenhill 2010) and 'securitized' (Huysmans 2006) and normally dealt with through exceptional measures (Salter 2008). If the political and instrumental use of migrants as weapons was already a well-known fact in international relations, the securitization of migration has instead emerged since the end of the Cold War (Bigo 2002; Huysmans and Squire 2010), and the exception has been normalized particularly in our post-9/11 world (Salter 2008).

Italy in this sense is not any different from other countries and the changes of governments have not, according to some (Strazzari and Grandi 2019; Zotti and Fassi 2020), entailed particularly different politics. However, the relevance that prejudice plays in the governance of migration – understanding 'governance' as a process that leads to decision-making through the contributions of several different types of actors, including both state and non-state actors – is crucial in differentiating how the process can accelerate and create

a negative framework. However, the same can happen in the opposite direction to positively govern the phenomenon of migration. Specific cognitions (Bello 2020) can be at the very core of small changes in migration policies that can either intensify the migration-crime nexus or its deconstruction.

An analysis of Italian migration policies shows how even slightly different changes in migration policies, and more generally in a country's migration governance, can encompass crucial differences for the security of both migrants and the general population. In particular, prejudice can represent a key demarcating line in a country's governance of migration which, if not avoided, can contribute to generating a realm of insecurity that reinforces its own initial discriminatory elements and a securitizing migration-crime nexus. Prejudice can thus entail a spiralling of the securitization of migration, which does not benefit any non-violent part of the process but only strengthens aggressive politics. Both state and non-state actors feel called on to defend their positions, creating more fences and borders, through policies (Huysmans 2006), practices (Léonard and Kaunert 2020), and an array of discursive strategies (Bello 2020a), from speech acts to narratives. This work claims that small changes in Italian migration policies can crucially affect more general Italian migration governance, which happens not only to be exercised through top-down directives, but also through practices and narratives (Bello 2020b; Panebianco 2020; Léonard and Kaunert 2020b), which heighten the initial effects of migration policies.

3. The Methodological Description of How to Analyse a Networked Governance of Migration and the Spiralling of Prejudice

When it enters the gears of the institutional and governmental machine, prejudice can entail a spiralling progression that further boosts stereotypes and engenders new discriminatory attitudes, which end up spreading across societies and self-fulfilling negative expectations (Bello 2020a). That this spiral of prejudice takes place in Italy has been proved both in the analysis of the narratives that originate from the bad management of reception centres (Bello 2020b), and from the accentuation of exceptional measures that recent Italian governments have taken through law decrees, namely Salvini's security decrees in late 2018 and early 2019, which contributed to creating further situations of insecurity (Bello 2021). These decrees have evidently resulted in a series of inhumane practices, but they have also generated reactions from a part of civil society, who reacted strongly to the decisions to close ports to rescued migrants in the Mediterranean Sea (Panebianco 2021). Such studies all relate to how the way migration is governed in Italy can be framed in a broader scenario, too often creating practices that condemn migrants to vulnerabilities (Fontana 2021). Likewise, it has been emphasized how such politics has not happened in a vacuum but builds on already existing international trends (Strazzari and Grandi 2019). Others have instead illustrated the growing interconnection between international and domestic management of migration across different governments (Zotti and Fassi 2020).

This study employs a document analysis of all the migration policies and policy reports issued from 1998 to 2020, so from the Turco-Napolitano Law of 1998 to the most recent law 173 of 18 December 2020. It includes, therefore, an examination of 22 policy documents (see Annex 1) in order to identify relevant changes. For each of the changes introduced in the policies, a consideration of their effects on the networked governance

of migration is taken into account through the method of process tracing. 'Process-tracing might be used to test whether the residual differences between two similar cases were causal or spurious in producing a difference in these cases' outcomes' (George and Bennet: 6-7). Process-tracing is very helpful in identifying causal inference (Checkel and Bennet 2012). Particularly, it is valid in considering causal process observations (CPOs), and in validating hypotheses in multi-method research, such as this one that involves document analysis and outcomes of observed changes in terms of practices. Checkel and Bennet (2012) particularly stress that process-tracing can help identify the causal observation of the independent variables (the effect of changes in policies) and assess the effects on the dependent variable, which in our case is the changes in practices. Process tracing is used in this study's multi-method research in an interpretivist perspective. 'In an interpretivist perspective, process tracing allows the researcher to look for the ways in which this link manifests itself and the context in which it happens. The focus is not only on what happened, but also on how it happened' (Vennesson 2008: 233). Therefore, process tracing is valid in considering the outcomes that small policy changes have had for other actors involved in the process, to account for the effects on the networked governance of migration.

Indeed, although the competences for overseeing migration issues lie within the national policy framework, those concerning asylum are strongly dependent on the common settings established by EU regulations, even if their actual implementation is decided by the countries (Léonard and Kaunert 2020a). Without entering into the specificities of why demarcating a line between the two categories – migration and asylum – in real case scenarios is often impossible, as discussed at length in a different study (Bello 2017), the overcrossing of political responsibilities can often be used as a shield to escape criticism, but also to create opportunities for policy venues and venue shopping, which refer to the abilities and strategies that private actors use to influence the decision-making subdivisions of political institutions (Léonard and Kaunert 2020a).

Evidently, such an intricate process further complicates – and obscures – all the nodes in the network of actors that intervene in the field. Indeed, if on the one hand the decisions are taken by political public actors at the European (asylum) and national levels (migration), these are then implemented by other actors. In Italy crucial roles are played by the prefectures, which are administrative offices that oversee the implementations of migration policies in provinces, and by managers of reception centres, whose activities strongly influence how migration is perceived in local areas (Bello 2020b). Such a situation resembles the networked governance model previously identified for the European public sphere (Bee and Bello 2009), a model that accounts for the intervention of actors at the horizontal level that implement and influence decisions, in addition to those who play a role at the different hierarchical levels (European, national and subnational levels). When it comes to migration networked governance, the EU is the supranational hierarchical level, the Ministry of the Interior is the national level and the prefectures play a role at the subnational level. However, horizontally, at all of these levels (European, national and subnational or local), organized interest lobbyists, civil society, and managers of reception centres all exercise an influence on how migration is governed.

The relevance that these different actors play in the networked governance of migration is also proven by the very fact that, after the notorious term served by Matteo Salvini in the Conte I government, the Ministry of the Interior passed to someone who had been exercising the role of prefect since 2003, Luciana Lamorgese, and since 2017 in the very relevant context of the city of Milan. Recently, it has been advanced that precisely such an appointment of a technocrat as Minister of the Interior was intended to reduce the politicization of the issue (Zotti and Fassi 2020), as also the national newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* reported on 4 September 2019 (Corriere della Sera 2019).

Spawning a series of stereotyping narratives, which contributed to the migration-crime nexus to a greater extent, negative storytelling can be referred to as one of the main means of what in the literature is known as securitization from below (Bello 2020b; Ejdus and Rečević 2021). However, other changes in Italian migration policies have instead definitely affected governance in a different direction. Such shifts, actually, do not happen only towards a securitizing direction, entailing a negative framework for the management of migration, with the further creation of insecurities. The spiralling process can assume different directions, and small changes can also bring about crucial positive dynamics.

4. The Prejudicial Spiralling of Securitization in Italian Migration Policies and the Relevance of Small Changes

The *incipit* of the securitization of migration in Italy and its related migration-crime nexus started with the Bossi-Fini Law in 2002 (Law 189/2002). Law 189, strongly promoted by Gianfranco Fini, leader of the far-right party *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance), and supported by Umberto Bossi, leader of *La Lega Nord* (The Northern League, which has now changed its name to simply The League to project itself at a national and not only at subnational level), introduced for the first time in Italy the criminalization of those who had travelled irregularly to Italy. It indeed entailed prison custody for those who were caught arriving in Italy without the proper documentation. This was evidently in contrast with the Geneva Convention, of which Italy is signatory. The Geneva Convention establishes that a person who declares they are looking for shelter for reasons of discriminations and risks to their own life in their country of origin, has the right to individual case treatment and, consequently, until the case is not solved by the state, cannot be considered an irregular migrant. In addition to this, law 189/2002 also limited the social protection that was initially guaranteed by the Turco Napolitano Law, and only accepted humanitarian protection, applied only for serious and exceptional personal safety reasons. As a consequence of the exclusion of social protection many more migrants who had travelled without the proper documentation could be considered irregular migrants and detained, enlarging the numbers of irregular migration in Italy because those previously considered refugees would become irregular migrants. Indeed, the law was declared illegitimate by the Constitutional Court (Corte Costituzionale), with sentence no. 222 of 15 July 2004.

Despite this, the law evidently worsened with the so-called Berlusconi Security Package in 2009, which protracted the custody of migrants in prison-like conditions to a maximum of 18 months, whereas in the Bossi-Fini Law, custody could be protracted for a maximum of 90 days. Therefore, the Bossi-Fini law and the Berlusconi Security

Package, rather than providing security for the country, created a migration-crime nexus in Italy, and the growing necessity for persons to hide and travel in even more concealed ways, thus substantially providing big profits for criminal organizations and human traffickers and smugglers. In the literature, some authors have highlighted that the 2003 EU Security Strategy did not consider migration as a threat (Ceccorulli and Lucarelli 2017), and others that it actually did so but not in direct ways, rather only as 'an absent presence' (Squire 2015). Whatever the uptake on this, it is possible to consider the Italian creation of a migration-crime nexus as one of the first of its type.

If the Bossi-Fini Law and the Berlusconi Security Decree were responsible for the migration-crime nexus in Italy and the growing insecurity in the country, with the next governments things did not always improve. In 2015, Renzi's reception decree unpacked a series of institutional problematic practices, although mainly in order to respond to the pressures coming from the European Union as a whole and some EU member states in particular. Such requests were mainly due to the need to manage the exceptional peak in arrivals. Although migration is regulated through national policies, its development depends, indeed, on a variety of actors, external and internal to the country politics (Bello 2017; Léonard and Kaunert 2020a; Strazzari and Grandi 2020); it is thus more correct to speak of a migration networked governance rather than a migration policy (Bee and Bello 2015). The most important consequence that Renzi's reception decree had was on the practices it allowed in reception centres (Bello 2021). Indeed, Renzi, with the aim of increasing room in reception centres for migrants, made it possible to convert any for-profit businesses that included allocation services (B&B apartments, hotel, small farms, etc.) into an extraordinary reception centre (CAS).

Before Renzi's reception decree, according to the Turco Napolitano Law and the Consolidated Act, the establishment of reception centres was limited to organizations which could prove adherence to an entire set of criteria. Such requisites slowed down the selection process of the state, but guaranteed that these places would all include the needed best practices to deal with migrants and refugees. Indeed, before the Bossi-Fini Law and Berlusconi's and Renzi's respective decrees, and thanks to the Turco Napolitano Law and the Consolidated Act of 1998, Italy was able to develop an excellent network of receptions centres (SPRARs), as these were already constructed on the basis of well-pondered limitations and practices evinced from other European countries which became net immigrant recipients long before Italy. Therefore, the creation of CAS centres jeopardized the excellent settings of the Italian system of reception created by the Turco Napolitano Law and the Consolidated Act. The idea was to use these extraordinary reception centres only for the peak of arrivals. Nonetheless, the CAS extraordinary reception centres became the rule and not the exception in the system, hosting the vast majority of migrants (Italian Chambers of Deputies, 2019b). The evident mistake in Renzi's decision was to consider that he could increase rooms in the reception system using a cheap measure. Instead of increasing human resources in the state apparatus to deal with the growing exigencies of the receptions system, and providing more funds for the centres already experienced in dealing with integration, Renzi's reception decree lowered the standards of the Italian reception centres.

However, it was only in late 2018 and early 2019, with Salvini's decrees, that the situation deteriorated, producing important insecurities, as a consequence of his evident

prejudicial approach towards migrants and diversity more generally. The problem of Salvini's decrees was not only the closure of ports to those boats which had rescued persons seeking refuge but, most crucially, also the decision to cut funds for SPRARs and to suspend the integration services for those whose refugee status was already recognized. Such a decision entailed very negative practices: many refugees with their status already recognized (and so not individuals in irregular situations) were obliged to leave SPRAR centres and were left to wander the streets. Entire families became homeless after the closure of some important SPRARs. A decision of this sort evidently created a lot of insecurities for both those refugees left unprotected all of a sudden and for citizens, who had to witness an increase in squatting in their districts (Bello 2021; La Repubblica 14 June 2019).

Insecurity in the field of migration has willingly been used as a seed in an attempt to generate an electoral yield for the party *La Lega* (The League). However, the political strategy has not been so advantageous to *La Lega* itself as it was for its direct competitor, the even more far-right Italian politician, Giorgia Meloni. It has actually polarized the debate to an extent that has only created more resonance for the even more extremist far-right politics of Fratelli d'Italia, which is now, according to opinion polls, the most popular Italian party, with over 20% of the vote share (Demos 2021).

When she took charge, Luciana Lamorgese gradually removed all those elements that have entailed the creation of a nexus between migration, insecurities and crime. In October 2020, she issued a new decree which encompassed migration and other domestic issues, thus strategically removing it from the 'security domain' where first Bossi and Fini, then Berlusconi and then Salvini had placed it. The decree was then converted into law by Parliament on 18 December 2020 (Law 18 December 2020 n. 173). In addition to this, the website of the Ministry of the Interior now refers only to the Consolidation Act (Testo Unico) of the Discipline of Immigration and the Regulations of the Condition of the Foreigner of 1998, which followed the Turco Napolitano Law in 1998, and to Gentiloni's Inter-Ministerial Decree of 21 July 2017. Therefore, it does not make any reference to any of the decrees that were previously identified as problematic for the positive development of migration, particularly because they included discriminatory elements (Bello 2021). To consider that these political decisions played a minor role is very misleading, because they can be key to stopping the migration-crime nexus and the scapegoating of refugees and migrants by part of unscrupulous far-right leaders. The consequences in practices and attitudes are already visible: Demos' data show that prejudice diminished from 46% in September 2017 to 27% in September 2021 and the favourable position towards receiving immigrants in Italy has also importantly increased (Demos 2021). Indicative of how the general feeling of Italians has depended also on the policy decisions is the fact that in 2015 and 2016, 72% and 73% of those interviewed were favourable to *jus soli*. This went down to 59% in 2017 and has now returned to a very high level: 75% of those responding to the surveys.

5. Conclusions: The Complexity of Small Changes in Italian Migration Governance

An analysis of the spiralling effect of prejudice in Italian migration policy and the networked governance of migration shows that the only way to disentangle the migration-

crime nexus is to operate at its root causes by ensuring that discriminatory cognitions do not intervene in any of the steps that constitute the regulation of human mobility. As this paper has shown through a document analysis of policies and a process-tracing analysis, the politicization and consequent criminalization of migration in the country have happened through the role of an array of actors, both internal to the state and external to it, acting at different levels (supranational, national and subnational) in dealing with migration. Although it is true that in the past it was possible to discern that the link between migration and insecurities in Italy did not suddenly happen in a single act, the idea that changes across governments have not mattered would be entirely misleading.

An attentive analysis of Italian migration policies and their consequences for practices in the broader governance of human mobility in the country, illustrates that small changes have had a huge impact on daily life and the creation or the dissolution of social tensions. For this reason, it is claimed that in Italy it is possible to identify a networked governance of migration, which connects the development of policies with certain practices in reception centre management and the development of prejudicial ideas that spread through narratives, thus heightening and reinforcing the process of securitization. Such a networked governance of migration has contributed to spiralling prejudicial dynamics and thus reinforcing the migration-crime nexus, for which the analysis presented in the previous section was able to identify an increasing securitization of migration for the years 2002-2018 in Italy. Some of these policies have actually entailed discriminatory practices that have generated a spiralling of the securitization of migration and its related migration-crime nexus. The aggravation of the nexus between migration and crime has been *in crescendo* in Italian migration policies, being orchestrated initially through the Bossi-Fini law, escalating through Berlusconi's security decree, being mismanaged through Renzi's reception decree, and finally spiralling as a consequence of the intended securitizing moves of Salvini's two Security Decrees.

As a consequence, the spiralling of prejudice in Italy has had its exaltation in the populistic rule of the domain enacted by Matteo Salvini when he was Minister of the Interior during the Conti I government. Such a twist was particularly achieved through a series of acts serving the purpose of generating more insecurities for both migrants and the rest of the population and self-fulfilling the 'threat of migration'. Salvini's security decrees were therefore an unscrupulous means to contributing to insecurities for everyone in order to capitalize this in a general feeling of unease that would boost votes for the League party, which made the scapegoating of migrants the core of its campaign. However, if the aim was to politically profit from such aversion in terms of votes, Salvini miscalculated its effects, which were much more beneficial to the most extremist far-right party, Fratelli d'Italia, which has evidently gained political power, than for La Lega. The consequences of this technique of governing the issue were crucial in the development of more hostile attitudes in the general population.

As elucidated through the process-tracing analysis and the document analysis presented in this article, the Conte II government appointed a prefect, Luciana Lamorgese, and not a political leader as Minister of the Interior, possibly to counteract such political use of the migration issue. This appointment was then renewed in Mario Draghi's government. The dismantling of the migration-crime nexus by Luciana Lamorgese through the decree then adopted by Law 173 of 18 December 2020 is already playing an important

role in the entire governance of migration in Italy, as shown by its effects on practices. As highlighted in the previous section, prejudice has decreased importantly in the country from 2017 according to recent data, lowering from 46% in September 2017 to 27% in September 2021. However, the volume of irregular migration and the migration crime nexus which is constructed through legal dispositions would decrease further if *jus culturae* became a reality.

Such evidence proves that small changes in migration policies become very relevant in more general networked migration governance and can create a spiralling process either in a negative securitizing direction or in a positive one, as claimed by the framework of the spiralling of the securitization of migration (Bello 2020).

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Women's substantive representation in the pandemic: assessing the parliamentary debates on the Italian Recovery Plan

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Abstract

During the Covid-19 emergency, women have been largely under-represented in decision-making concerning the health crisis and the recovery effort. This dynamic complements growing pressure from women's interest groups against the scarce attention to issues relevant to the achievement of gender parity in the pandemic. As a result, the outbreak and its response raise the question of the importance of women's representation for the saliency of policies directly supporting their empowerment. The parliamentary debate on the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) offers a well-defined case for assessing the relevance of substantive representation in Italy within the Covid-19 recovery. Position papers and proposals from women's interest groups vocally campaigning for parity offer the benchmark against which we code over 200 parliamentary speeches for their gender parity-relevant content. The analysis compares the different prevalence of parity-relevant issues across women and men Members of Parliament (MPs), accounting for ideological differences. We argue that representation matters for women's empowerment policies, as women policymakers within the Parliament, are those primarily raising such concerns in parliamentary debates over the Italian NRRP. The paper contributes to the extant literature on women's representation by evidencing a stark gender gap in the saliency of parity-related issues.

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has posed an abrupt halt to, if not reversal of, the improvement of gender parity in many domains of our society. Extensive evidence has emerged of the detrimental effect of the outbreak and prolonged lockdown on women, who have endured increased episodes of violence and additional overwhelming care responsibilities deriving from school closures and work-from-home arrangements (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; Boca et al., 2020; Mongey & Weinberg, 2020; Alon et al., 2020). From this perspective, Covid-19 has been claimed to represent a tale of two pandemics from a gendered perspective (Ceron and Zarra, 2021). By the same token, women have been scarcely represented in the management of the health crisis and the subsequent reconstruction phase. Henceforth, the pandemic provides a critical case to assess the contribution of women in putting forward parity-relevant issues in the policy debate.

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The topic of substantive representation of women, through analysing to what extent the involvement of women leads to more equal policies, is particularly salient because of the unique opportunity offered by the National Recovery and Reconstruction Plans (NRRPs). On the one hand, gender parity and its mainstreaming are among the mandated guidelines Member States are committed to in the drafting of national plans within the scope of Next Generation EU (NGEU),[1] with the explicit acknowledgement of the additional toll the pandemic has imposed on women. On the other, the national implementation of Next Generation EU through the NRRPs, mobilizes an unprecedented magnitude of investments, especially in a country like Italy. As a result, the NRRP is well-suited to deliver substantial progress toward gender parity, raising the question both of whether such an opportunity was fully capitalised on in national choices over the plan, and the role of women in pushing towards such an objective. Additionally, the discussion on the NRRP is a well-delimited policy-debate in comparison, for example, to the Covid-19 response measures. Nevertheless, the policy process in Italy saw substantial changes in key actors with the end of the Conte government and the inception of the Draghi premiership, under which auspices the final version of the plan was submitted to the European Commission. The parliamentary debate over the plan, while not *per se* fully reflecting the policy outcomes, presents a stable and distinct arena in which to assess the saliency of equality and its gender divide.

Against this background, our work considers the prevalence of parity-relevant issues among parliamentary debates on the key document preceding the official presentation of the Italian NRRP. By manually coding 226 parliamentary speeches from four plenary debates between October 2020 and April 2021, we conduct a text analysis to study women's substantive representation. The work scrutinises the main parliamentary debates relating to the three key documents reflecting the evolution of the NRRP, from the initial guidelines submitted to Parliament by the Government to the Conte and Draghi iteration of the NRRP. We derive the key parity-relevant issues from the position papers and hearings of women's interest groups, proceeding then to code accordingly over 200 parliamentary speeches. The focus on parliamentary debates, in line with a stream of the literature on substantive representation (e.g. Wängnerud, 2006), does not contemplate the impact of the gender of Members of Parliament (MPs) on policy outcomes, but rather it measures gender gaps in issues relevant to parity raised in MPs' speeches. We then compare the saliency of equality measured by the prevalence of parity-relevant issues across the gender divide overall and within parties. On such premises, we provide descriptive statistics and run a logistic regression to assess whether the gender of MPs and their political group membership play a role on the extent to which their speeches include any parity-relevant issue. Specifically, we test whether gender differences arise in the prevalence of equality concerns and whether they remain robust at the party level. Our hypothesis is that parity-related issues are more prevalent among the speeches of women MPs, in line with the expectation that descriptive representation matters substantively. We choose not to refer to our dependent variable as 'women's issues' but rather 'parity-relevant issues', as it includes all policies with implications for gender equality (e.g. school

[1] Next Generation EU, the common post-pandemic reconstruction initiative, is an umbrella term for measures and funding sources, whose main component is the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) which finances nationally drafted NRRPs subject to their approval at the EU level.

and early childcare intervention). In the same vein, in our analysis we refer to 'women's empowerment' as 'the process by which women gain power and control over their own lives and acquire the ability to make strategic choices' and to 'gender mainstreaming' as 'a strategic approach to policy-making that aims to achieve equality of opportunity between women and men in all spheres of society and to integrate a gender perspective into policy-making activities'.[2]

The analysis shows that women play a central role in advocating for gender mainstreaming within the Italian parliamentary debate in the NRRP, corroborating the argument that their under-representation negatively affects progress on gender parity within the policy agenda. Results confirm that the limited overall saliency of gender parity is driven predominantly by women MPs, with a gender divide that extends to most political parties regardless of their different overall sensitivity to equality. The contribution of the analysis to the extant literature on women's representation is twofold. First, it pinpoints the relevance of substantive representation in the parliamentary debate over the Italian NRRP. Second, it indicates whether and to what extent women's representation (under-representation) may foster (hinder) the inclusion of parity-relevant issues within the parliamentary debate on the NRRP, supporting further analysis of the broader implications for the prospects of prioritisation of gender equality in the overall policy-making process outside Parliament, as well as the post-pandemic reconstruction at large. Our in-depth assessment of the Italian case stresses how women's politicians and descriptive representation within Parliament may be crucial for advocating more equal policies. The derived implication is that women's empowerment in the aftermath of the health emergency heavily hinges on women's voices and their representation. The work is in line with cross-country studies of gender equality in the NRRPs indicating that against the objective of gender mainstreaming mandated by NGEU, parity plays a marginal role (Zarra and Ceron, 2021). Such dynamics raise particular concerns for countries relatively lagging behind in terms of gender parity, such as Italy within the EU27.

2. Substantive representation: expectations for parity-relevant issues

The representation of women in parliaments and other decision-making bodies is increasing worldwide (Wängnerud, 2009). In the last elections, for a few seats, Iceland missed the chance to become the first European country with a majority of women in the parliamentary seats ('Iceland Misses out on Europe's First Female-Majority Parliament after Recount', 2021). On average, as of October 2021, the proportion of women in national parliaments is 25.8% globally, with an increase of more than 6 percentage points in 10 years (IPU, 2021). This upward trend can be attributed to several factors, including (i) the transition to proportional electoral systems (Rule, 1994), (ii) the inclusion of gender quotas in constituencies, and (iii) the early empowerment of women (McAllister & Studlar, 2002). More broadly, the upward trend in welfare state spending as a percentage of GDP recorded in the past half-century also plays a role in achieving a more balanced political

[2] Both definitions are retrieved from the taxonomy provided by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). See: https://eige.europa.eu/taxonomy/term/1185 and https://eige.europa.eu/taxonomy/term/1102 .

representation: more welfare spending leads to a better socio-economic status for women, which enhances their chances of getting elected (Krook, 2010; McDonagh, 2010; Rosenbluth et al., 2006; Siaroff, 2000; Thames & Williams, 2010). A last relevant driver can be traced to changing social and gender norms which, along with increasing pressure from women's interest groups, have been contributing to the more meaningful participation of women in politics (Wängnerud, 2009).

When it comes to the theorisation of women's representation, the literature traditionally distinguishes between descriptive and substantive representation, where the former concentrates on the proportion of women elected and the latter on the effects of more balanced parliaments, investigating to what extent the involvement of women in the war room leads to more equal policies and better democracies. Wängnerud (2009) argues that the renowned theory of the politics of presence by Phillips (1995), which suggests that women politicians are better equipped to represent women's interests as they – at least to some extent – share the experiences of other women, constitutes the link between the two types of representation. To provide an example of such a connection, countries' and parties' implementation of quotas contributes to the enhancement of 'the quality of decision making on a substantive level' (Celis, 2006). While the research on descriptive representation enjoys a longer and richer tradition, it is only recently, thanks to a greater number of seats held by women MPs, that the scholarship on substantive representation has flourished, producing extensive empirical evidence.

However, it is worth emphasising that the study of substantive representation is strictly intertwined with key concepts such as 'gender equality' and 'women's interests' and their definition and meaning; hence any related study should also be evaluated in light of the connotation of such terms given by the authors (Wängnerud, 2009). For instance, the very concept of women's interests is questioned by some scholars, who argue that their definition should not be provided in a top-down fashion, but rather subjectively determined by women themselves (Celis, 2006). All in all, however, any attempt to catalogue what women's interests are and how gender equality should be understood results in overlapping lists of topics, ranging from the division of paid and unpaid labour, women's exclusion from political and economic leadership, sexual harassment and gender-based violence, and family and social policies (Phillips, 1995). Because of such a context, the approach we follow in our analysis consists in inferring key themes of relevance to gender parity from women's interest groups which, as further elaborated in the section to follow, contributed to the debate over post-pandemic management.

When it comes to the evidence on the extent to which the number of women elected affects their interests, existing empirical works suggest that, despite a wide variation across regions of the world, there is a positive correlation between countries' overall performance in gender equality and their increased proportion of women in decision-making bodies. A stream of the literature suggests that more elected women lead to significant advancements in policies that specifically concern them (Schwindt-Bayer, 2006; Thomas, 1991), such as family policies (Wilensky, 1990) or abortion legislation (Berkman & O'Connor, 1993). Also, higher proportions of women in parliaments translate into more laws that benefit children (Besley & Case, 2003; Lijphart, 1991). Wängnerud (2006) investigated MPs' priorities in Sweden across a 20-year timeframe and found that women politicians were more likely to prioritise issues belonging to domains of social policy, family policy and care for the elderly

compared to men politicians. Observational studies from several EU countries show that the introduction of gender quotas was associated with measures supporting maternal employment and work-family policies (Weeks, 2019). In the same vein, elected women are more likely to interact and have contact with women's organisations outside Parliament.

Looking at quasi-experimental settings that allow for the identification of causal relationships between women elected and policy outcomes, the evidence is still limited in terms of geographical coverage and does not follow clear patterns (Hessami & da Fonseca, 2020). The randomized assignment of gender quotas in India allowed scholars to identify the effect of women's leadership in shaping policies in areas such as health and education (Beaman et al., 2006; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). At the local level, research on municipalities in Italy (Baltrunaite et al., 2019), Spain (Bagues & Campa, 2021) and Norway (Geys & Sørensen, 2019) found no significant effect of women's representation on public spending. Two recent contributions, however, showed that instead of focusing on public expenditure, the impact of substantive representation can be demonstrated by uncovering dynamics within the policy process and looking at women politicians' behaviour. In France, women politicians were more likely to draft amendments on parity-relevant topics than men (Lippmann, 2020). At the regional level, in Germany, a study analysing council meetings found that the presence of women led to increased discussions on childcare and the increased participation of other elected women (Hessami & Baskaran, 2019).

Conversely, however, opposite results from another stream of scholarship have stressed that more women in parliaments can lead to detrimental effects on their substantive representation. Hawkesworth (2003) found that the increased number of women MPs negatively affected the behaviour of men MPs, who act as bottlenecks for the access of women to positions of power within the assembly as well as for policies favourable to women. In the same vein, Carroll (2001) argues that more women enhance heterogeneity in the parliamentary forum, thus pushing other women MPs to focus on other (not gendered) policy subjects, thinking that others will take care of women's issues. Kathlene (1994) found that as the number of women increased, men MPs became more aggressive and obstructive towards legislative proposals by women. Crowley (2004) pointed out that fewer women in parliaments can be more effective in representing women's issues since they look less threatening. Finally, other research highlights that women politicians may be more prone to work on women's issues because men MPs tend to dominate the other topics (Heath et al., 2005; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006).

Hence, particularly in a delicate moment such as the Covid-19 crisis, it is of sheer interest to assess to what extent women's participation in the policy process is key to advocating for parity-relevant issues and gender mainstreaming.

3. Covid-19 and its decision-making through gendered lenses

The Covid-19 crisis has negatively impacted progress toward gender equality by disproportionately affecting women, who have suffered the harshest consequences of the recession in areas that go far beyond the labour market. The pandemic has caused a reduction in women's employment rates in many advanced economies, including Italy, where a real 'she-cession' is taking place, with 72.9% of the jobs lost in the country in 2020 being women's (Lippmann, 2020). Moreover, being the main caregiver of the household in a country where stereotypical gender norms are still predominant, women

experienced increased care duties due to the closure of schools and childcare institutions. A survey carried out during the first wave of the outbreak confirmed that in Italy work from home arrangements and housework responsibilities fell mainly to women, although men enjoyed more time with children to the benefit of more gratifying family work (Del Boca et al, 2020). In addition, by forcing millions of individuals to stay at home, the Covid-19 emergency contributed to more domestic abuse, with a drastic increase in the number of reports to the police authorities and helplines: calls reporting abuses increased by 72% in March and April 2020 compared to 2019 according to the Italian National Statistics Institute (ISTAT).

Against the context of such detrimental dynamics, the scarce representation of women in the decision-making bodies ruling on the measures to contain the contagion and provide economic relief to the population, particularly in the early months of the pandemic, revamped the debate on women's leadership and its substantive effects on policies. Though compared to men they tend to perceive the pandemic as a serious problem (Galasso et al., 2020), and although they have been lauded for their collaborative and collective managerial style (Hong Fincher, 2020; Zednik, 2020), their inclusion in the strategic management of the pandemic was relatively limited. Thus, similarly to previous crises such as the Great Recession (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017), the scarce representation of women at leadership levels may have impinged on the presence of recovery policies that could directly cater to their needs.

In the Italian case, women have been excluded from decision-making bodies established specifically for Covid-19. During the spring of 2020, the former government chaired by Conte established two main strategic bodies in charge of containing the contagion while designing post-pandemic measures. On the one hand, the Scientific Technical Committee (Comitato Tecnico Scientifico) advises the head of the Civil Protection Department on the adoption of prevention measures necessary to cope with the spread of the virus. On the other hand, the Committee of Experts in Economic and Social Issues (Comitato di esperti in materia economica e sociale, hereinafter Colao Task Force) was established in the spring of 2020 to lead the post-Covid reconstruction. The former body was made up exclusively of men while the latter included 17 members, of which only four were women.

The striking gender imbalance within the task forces led to protests from women's interest groups and politicians and the creation of petitions and the organisation of flash mobs such as 'Dateci Voce', with which women from civil society asked the government to restore gender parity in the composition of advisory bodies. After the movement's appeal, the former head of government intervened by supplementing the groups with 11 women. The initial severe imbalance may suggest that gender parity and women's representation in crisis management were not a priority for the Italian leaders given the highly men-dominated 16 task forces convened. The only exception was the task force 'Women for the Renaissance' chaired by the Minister for Gender Parity Elena Bonetti, launched by the Italian Department for Equal Opportunities, composed by a team of women entrusted with proposals for enhancing gender equality. These proposals put at the forefront women's representation across all domains within the workforce – including in STEM – with a pillar devoted to women's leadership and its monitoring through an Observatory on Gender Equality tasked with gender impact assessments and the

extension of gender quotas in a broad array of bodies (Dipartimento per le Pari Opportunità, 2020). Specifically, the task force report proposed five areas of intervention to promote women's leadership, enhance women's participation in the workforce, empower women's skills in STEM, eradicate gender stereotypes and promote financial independence. While these actions cover a wide range of areas where the gender gap is significant, the related areas reflected in the NRRP formulation predominantly concern women's participation in the workforce and the promotion of female entrepreneurship.

The entry of more women in the task forces contributed to flagging gender equality as one of the three axes of the Colao Task Force Plan 'Initiatives for the relaunch of Italy 2020-2022'. In parallel, at the European level, while the MEP Alexandra Geese launched 'Half of It', a petition calling for half of the funds of NGEU to be devoted to women, the European Commission announced that national plans would be assessed through gendered lenses: '[...] Member States should demonstrate that the objectives of gender equality and equal opportunities for all are mainstreamed into the plan' (European Commission, 2021). These factors contributed to the saliency of gender equality within the public debate, suggesting there may still be a fundamental role played by women in voicing parity-relevant issues, which may extend to parliamentary policy-makers.

4. Gender parity in NGEU and the Italian NRRP

Against the backdrop of the gendered implications of the pandemic, the EU response offers a well-defined case for the evaluation of equality concerns in the recovery phase. Following an initial period in which the Member States were left entirely on their own to sustain their economy through the crisis and fuel reconstruction, and after months of divisive negotiation, a common recovery instrument (i.e. NGEU) found political agreement in July 2020. The programme, and more specifically its financing instrument (i.e. the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RFF)), underwent a lengthy legislative process requiring not only the green light of the EU institutions but also the ratification of the national parliaments. Its complex form, however, is of value given that priorities – including the transversal one of gender equality – should generally direct those of all EU Member States.

Gender mainstreaming has long been within EU policy priorities. Currently, the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 drives EU policy on the matter, complementing mainstreaming with intersectionality as horizontal principles guiding its implementation (European Commission, 2020). Its objectives are five-fold. The first three – (1) being free from violence and stereotypes; (2) thriving in a gender-equal economy; (3) leading equally throughout society – reflect specific areas of policy intervention which can be summarized respectively as dedicated to the area of gender-based violence, economic empowerment and political representation. Two further points – (4) gender mainstreaming and an intersectional perspective in EU policies and (5) funding actions to make progress in gender equality in the EU – reflect its implementation stage which, beyond the financing of the strategy, stresses indeed the two above-mentioned horizontal principles. Such an approach has been included within NGEU. In this context, the commonly defined priorities within the NGEU regulatory framework foresee the mainstreaming of gender equality. The RRF Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2021/241) refers to gender in Recital 28 which, acknowledging the uneven burden of the pandemic on

women, calls for gender-mainstreaming within the plans. Recital 39 likewise calls for the detailing of expected contributions to gender equality within the NRRP, which is also recalled in article 4 among the elements for the Member States to include for the plan to be 'duly reasoned and substantiated'.

The Italian NRRP, which was approved on 13 July 2021, requires the country to implement reforms and investments in response to the pandemic crisis. The plan is envisioned for the 2021-2026 timeframe and it is part of a broader set of measures, including *inter alia* NGEU and the European Cohesion Policy funding for 2021-2027. The Plan revolves around three intervention areas, namely digitalization and innovation, ecological transition and social inclusion. According to the Italian government's forecasts, the NRRP will lead to a 3.6% increase in GDP and a 3.2% increase in employment. More in detail, the NRRP develops along 16 Components. These components are grouped into six core missions. Each mission indicates the reforms necessary to more effectively implement the measures. The plan includes 63 reforms in total, which can be divided into:

- Horizontal reforms, namely structural innovations of the system aimed at improving equity, efficiency, competitiveness and the country's economic framework;
- Enabling reforms, functional to ensure the implementation of the Plan and to remove administrative, regulatory and procedural obstacles that affect economic activities and the quality of services provided;
- Sectoral reforms (included in the individual Missions), namely regulatory innovations in specific areas of intervention or economic activities, designed to introduce more efficient regulatory and procedural regimes in the respective sectoral areas;
- Competing reforms, i.e. measures not directly included in the Plan, but necessary for the achievement of its general objectives.

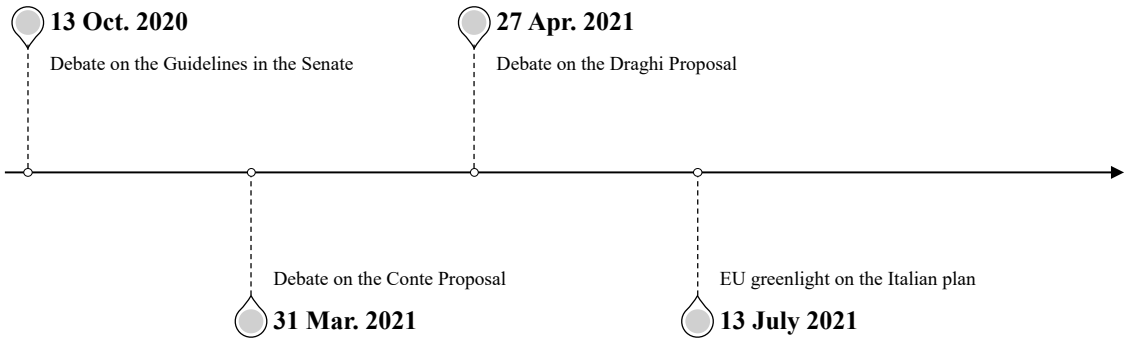
Against this backdrop, the Italian NRRP considers gender as a cross-cutting priority within the broad category of 'social inclusion'. Such a role for gender equality was introduced in the last iteration of the plan, under the auspices of the Draghi government in April 2021. In the final stage, the saliency of parity increased in terms of financial commitments. The first version of the plan presented by the Conte government devoted only 4.52 billion euros to gender equality out of the 209 billion, which were deemed insufficient to address the gap. The draft was received with sharp criticism from women's interest groups, denouncing insufficient funding and prioritisation of parity-relevant measures, especially in light of the detrimental effect and additional burden of the pandemic. The final version of the plan increased parity-relevant funding to 7 billion. Specifically, it contains two mechanisms to reduce gender gaps. On the one hand, it envisages direct investments to stimulate women's employment – for instance through a fund for women's entrepreneurship. On the other, it allocates funds to sectors that are particularly relevant for women's empowerment, such as 4.6 billion for childcare facilities. Nevertheless, the evolution of the plan, which especially in the early stages was negatively evaluated by women's interest groups, begs the question of the centrality of women actors in raising concerns for parity-relevant issues. Indeed, such activism was widely present within civil society. While assessment of the impact of women's interest

groups on the overall policy process is beyond the scope of the analysis, gender-based dynamics within the parliamentary arena offer a first well-defined step in assessing the gender divide over parity-relevant issues. As such, it offers the opportunity to evidence the relevance of substantive representation in the specific case of the Italian NRRP parliamentary debate, with broader implications for the policy process and pandemic reconstruction at large.

5. Research design: delimiting the corpus and the codebook

The research question of the substantive representation of women in the parliamentary debates on the Italian NRRP is assessed through a manual content analysis. The research design hinges on three key aspects in relation to the data and methods: delimiting the corpus of speeches on the NRRP, selecting the codebook of parity-relevant issues and identifying how to assess the gender gap in the prevalence of the latter. In the first account, the debate over NGEU and the Italian plan within Parliament is composite, spanning across the different phases in the process of delineating the NRRP and arenas, ranging from floor debates, a multitude of committee meetings, formal and informal hearings, to Q&A with Ministers and communications of the Prime Minister. For the research question at hand, it is of value to be widely inclusive in terms of the timeframe of the debate across the various iterations of the plan, presented in Figure 1, especially given the changes in governing coalition. Conversely, minimising heterogeneity of the fora and procedures yields a more consistent corpus in which to minimise potential bias linked, for example, to the specific policy domain and (gender) composition of a committee or actor in the case of hearings and Q&A.

Figure 1. Timeline of the phases in the delineation of the Italian NRRP



Accordingly, debates are selected – with the reference document as an object – to cover all three phases across the Senate and Chamber of Deputies considering:

- Debate on the Guidelines in the Senate: Relazione delle Commissioni riunite 5ª e 14ª sulla proposta di «Linee guida per la definizione del Piano nazionale di ripresa e resilienza» (Doc. XVI n. 3)
- Debate on the Conti proposal in the Chamber of Deputies: Discussione della Relazione della V Commissione sulla proposta di Piano nazionale di ripresa e resilienza (Doc. XXVII n. 18-A)

- Debate on the Draghi proposal in the Chamber of Deputies: Comunicazioni del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri in vista della trasmissione alla Commissione europea del Piano nazionale di ripresa e resilienza ai sensi dell'articolo 18 del regolamento RRF (UE) 2021/241.
- Debate on the Draghi proposal in the Senate: Comunicazioni del Presidente del Consiglio dei ministri in vista della trasmissione alla Commissione europea del Piano nazionale di ripresa e resilienza e conseguente discussione

The resulting sample of 226 speeches does not allow us to overtly assess differences across the drafting phases or Prime Ministerships and related majorities. However, the potentially evolving cleavages imply that it is of great importance to capture within the analysis both the early and the late phases of drafting. The first allows for a broader emergence of parity-relevant themes that may have initially been given low priority in the recovery. The latter captures MPs' prioritising within their speech, either welcoming the gender parity-relevant content of the final plan or signalling insufficient progress. Concomitantly, the life-cycle of the NRRP approval provides for comprehensive coverage of gender and party differences concerning the saliency of equality. Against this background, the selection of the documents within the corpus includes the three phases in the delineation of the NRRP, namely the early guidelines communicated by the government to Parliament, the first plan presented under the auspices of the Conte government and its final iteration presented by Draghi.

The second step in the analysis is the selection of the codebook through which the dependent variable of the analysis is constructed, capturing whether each speech refers to parity-relevant issues. The codebook is generated on the basis of two levels of sources. Firstly, the parliamentary dossier on the final plan provides an overview of how the transversal priority of equality is translated into practice within the NRRP (Documentation Services of the Chamber of Deputies, 2021). The document offers the classification of which measures are considered parity-relevant within the plan, as summarised in the previous section. The policy content of the plan itself offers guidance on the overarching classification of parity-relevant measures to guide the measurement strategy in coding speeches. We derive a complementary source for parity-relevant concerns by considering the priorities of the main advocates for equality: women's interest groups. Arguably, their position offers a hard test of parity-relevant priorities regarding the NRRP overall, as well as the least consensual components of a recovery catering equality, hence included in their platform for gender mainstreaming within the plan. Additionally, going beyond the final policy outcome in the NRRP allows us to include within the coding strategy also parity-relevant issues which were not successfully included in the plan.

The complementary approach is facilitated by the saliency of parity-relevant concerns within the policy and public debate surrounding the Italian NRRP. Indeed, women's interest groups active in the arena of gender parity have participated in parliamentary hearings on the NRRP. Besides, ad-hoc associations and petitions emerged. Specifically, two key associations founded during the Covid-19 crisis – Il Giusto Mezzo and Half of It – put forward a joint petition #UnaVoceNonBasta (Il Giusto Mezzo, 2021a) endorsed by a multitude of women's interest groups. Beyond such text, Half of It (2021) put forward a Manifesto. Il Giusto Mezzo (2021b) developed proposals on the NRRP together with a technical (gendered) analysis of how to mainstream parity across all pillars

within NGEU. On this account, Il Giusto Mezzo mobilised other women's interest groups through a jointly undersigned letter to the government voicing those concerns and proposals, along with the parallel request of equal representation in committees dedicated to the pandemic and recovery effort. As mentioned, the lack of women representation in task forces for crisis management led to a petition endorsed by 86 organisations (Dateci voce, 2020). In addition to the petitions and policy proposals, three women's interest groups took part in the parliamentary hearings, also supplying written documentation to the committees, namely Il Giusto Mezzo (2021c), Ladynomics (2021) and Ingenere (2021). Because of such widespread endorsement of the key petitions emerging from women's interest groups, their policy documents are representative not only of the position of the specific organisation but rather of a broader constellation of organisations promoting gender parity.

The documents mentioned above and presented systematically in Table A1 in the appendix offer the reference for outlining parity-relevant concerns against which parliamentary speeches can be classified. The mapping exercise delineates the primary parity-relevant elements within the plan along with concerns and policy proposals advanced by key civil society organisations. Themes include:

- employment, firms with references to sectors and the crisis;
- services and infrastructures;
- social policies, assistance and instruments;
- investments and evaluation;
- youth and education.

More specifically, certain terms related to the categories above are highly recurrent within the policy documents referring to the above-mentioned categories. The most relevant examples within the employment arena are women's entrepreneurship/ employment and maternity, especially in connection to leave. Another cluster refers to children, childcare and early education services, referring both to kindergartens and facilities for the 0-3 age group. A further arena is that of stereotypes, completed by terms relating to gender-based violence. On such a basis, we selected a coding strategy which delineates the near-automatic positive coding as parity-relevant of speeches containing the following terms, presented in alphabetical order in the original language: *asilo/i (kindergarten/s); bambino/i (child/ren); cura (care); donna/e (woman/en); famiglia/e (family/ies); femminile/i (feminine); femminicidi (feminicide); figlie/i/o/a (offspring); genere (gender); lavoratrice/i (female worker/s); maternità (maternity); nido/i (nursery/ies); parità (parity); scuola/e (school/s); stereotipo/i (stereotype/s); violenza/e (violence)*.

A broad classification which may be derived can distinguish across: (i) interventions aimed at supporting employment, both directed at workers and employers (ii) policies aimed at supporting care responsibilities, lessening a burden predominantly falling on women's shoulders and (iii) gender-based violence, which remains, however, only a secondary focus within the position papers of the key interest groups and the plan. These themes and terms constitute the benchmark against which we code the parliamentary speeches as raising parity-relevant issues. All speeches are coded manually and independently by the two authors over their parity-relevant content to account for inter-

coder reliability, leading to an agreement of over 95%.[3] It should be noted that the approach followed by the authors gives priority to the parity-relevant implications of the speeches rather than the mere presence of the terms potentially associated with equality. A glaring example is the use of a generally parity-relevant term without any specific concerns for equality. School, a particularly divisive element in pandemic management, is at times not mentioned in connection with the highly parity-relevant policy choices of closures. Rather, for example, schools may be mentioned in contesting infrastructural and procurement choices such as the provision of ad-hoc desks to facilitate distancing. The choice of the authors – which always aligned empirically in the coding – was that of giving primacy to the substantive content of the speech, hence not classifying as parity-relevant those speeches merely using some of the above-highlighted terms in ways unrelated to equality.

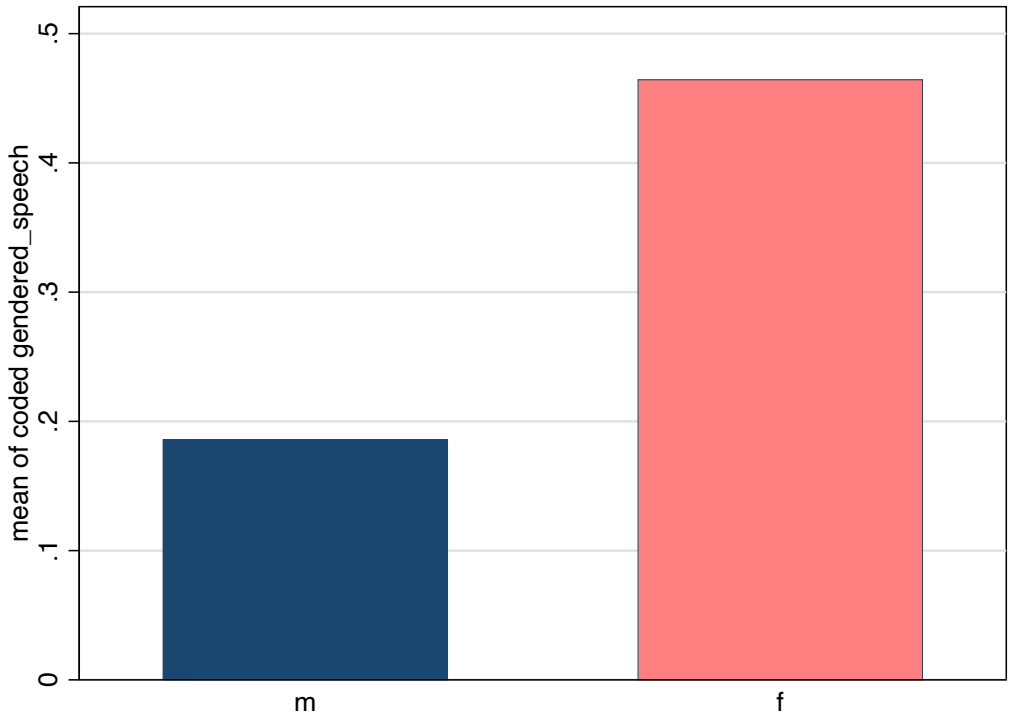
The final step concerns the operationalisation of the independent variable and controls. For each speech we account for speaker gender and party. Excluding the two speeches by members of the government, Table A2 shows the gender distribution of the MP who took the floor in those debates. Overall, women MPs within the sample amount to 37.5%, spanning at the party level from the lowest proportion of Lega of 25% to the highest of 58% for IV. Accordingly, the proportion of women MPs within Parliament overall and in each party is not necessarily reflected in the corpus considered for the analysis. Nevertheless, the analysis does not consider the absolute number of parity-relevant speeches among women and men MPs or in each party. Rather, it considers its relative proportion comparing the percentage of women and men overall or in a specific party mentioning parity-relevant issues. Accordingly, we analysis the data through descriptive statistics of the prevalence of parity-relevant issues across women and men MPs overall and within each party. Additionally, we employ a logistic regression assessing whether the emerging gender gap remains when controlling for the party of the MPs.

6. Results: the gender gap in parity-relevant issues

The analysis reveals substantial differences across gender and party of the actors voicing parity relevant concerns. As shown by Figure 2, the overall gender divide is stark and significant when considering a t-test comparing, overall, the proportion of parity-relevant speeches across men and women. Indeed, nearly half of speeches by women mention parity-relevant concerns, while the proportion falls under 20% for men.

[3] In one instance, a discrepancy between the two independent coding exercises was found. The term 'school' was classified as gendered by only one author, but then it was decided to remove it from the gendered speeches as the term was used in the context of architectural barriers.

Figure 2. Proportion of parity-relevant MPs' speeches by gender

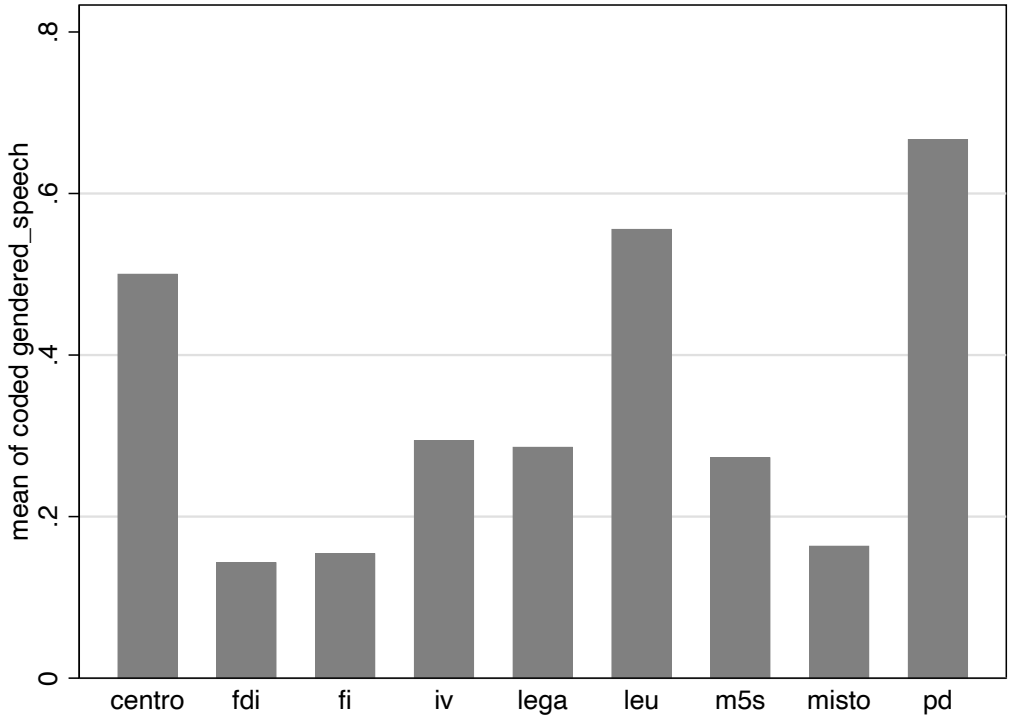


Note: On the left the proportion of men (m) mentioning themes related to gender equality, on the right the proportion across women (f).

The overall gender divide over equality speeches may, however, derive from cross-party differences in the makeup of women and men MPs as Table A2 shows heterogeneous gender balances within the corpus across political groups. Indeed, the most balanced representation of speakers in the corpus clusters at the centre, with *Italia Viva (IV)* reaching nearly 60%, followed by *Forza Italia (FI)* with nearly 45%. Conversely, the right has among the lowest scores of women MPs within the speakers considered, notably, only 25% for *Lega* and 32% for *Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)*, respectively holding the two bottom rankings. As a result, the pool of women and men MPs is ideologically heterogeneous, potentially contributing to the overall divide shown in Figure 2. Indeed, more women belong to the centre to the centre-left side of the spectrum, while less represented among speeches by Lega and FdI, hence implying that the ideological heterogeneity in the saliency of equality may be at play rather than substantive representation *per se*.

Figure 3 reinforces such a concern, highlighting substantial differences in parity-relevant speeches across party lines. The highest proportion (above 60 per cent) of speeches calling for gender equality is associated with the MPs of the Democratic Party (PD), closely followed by the left (LEU) and centre. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the far (FdI) and centre-right (FI) obtain the lowest score for mentioning parity-relevant issues. Against this backdrop, robust evidence pointing towards the importance of substantial representation in the making of the NRRP would be represented by a gender divide at the party level in the saliency of equality within the parliamentary debate.

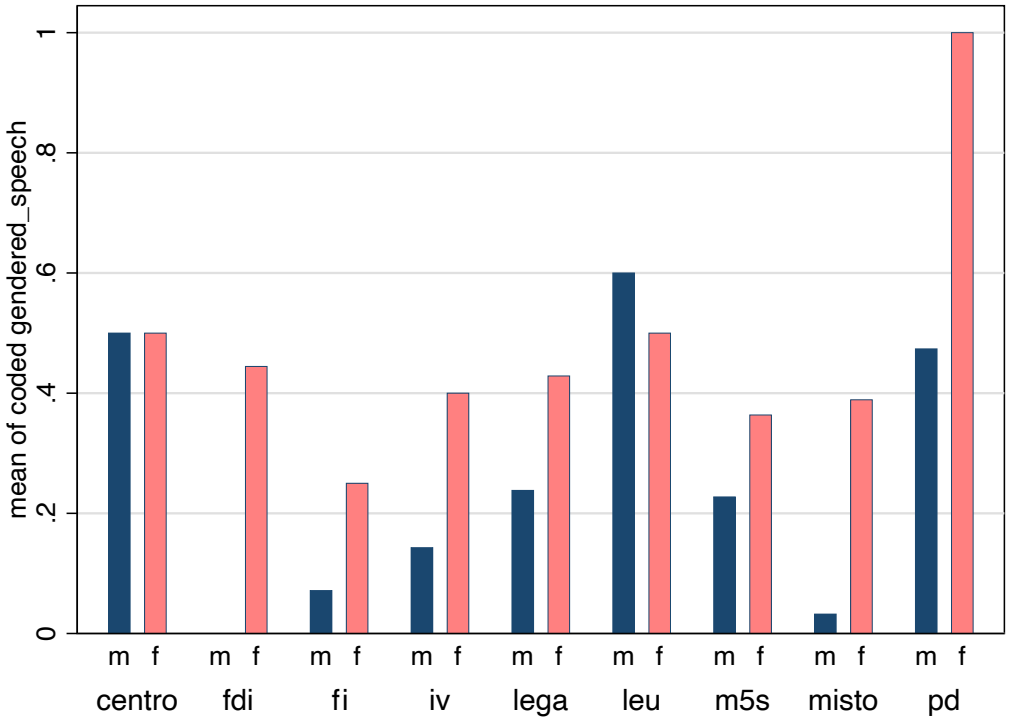
Figure 3. Proportion of gendered speeches by the party of the MPs



Note: proportion of MPs mentioning themes related to gender equality across political party.

Figure 4 below shows there is indeed such a gender divide also across parties. With the sole exception of LEU and the centre, consisting, in both instances, of a very limited number of speeches (9 and 4 respectively), all parties show a gap in the saliency of equality across women and men MPs in favour of the former. Moreover, the effect is robust to differences in overall sensitivity across parties. On one side, we have the party shown in Figure 2 as the one with the lowest proportion of equality speeches overall (FdI) for which any parity-relevant issue is driven entirely by women. On the other, we have the party marked by Figure 2 as the most sensitive to equality (PD) where all women MPs mention parity-relevant issues in their speeches on the NRRP while that is the case for only half of the men. Similarly, only 7% of speeches by men MPs from FI concern parity-relevant issues compared to 25% of those by women within the same party. Lega displays a divide that is somewhat narrower, amounting to nearly 24% for men which almost doubles for women MPs at nearly 43%. Moving towards the centre, the IV gap is more marked, with men scoring substantially below 14% while women reach 40%. Conversely, the M5S is among those with the smallest gender gap with a proportion of 22% for men and only 36% for women. The emerging picture is that while cross-party differences are substantial, they do not alone drive the gender divide in the saliency of equality as gaps in parity-relevant speeches remain across women and men MPs of the same party.

Figure 4. Proportion of gender parity-relevant speeches across party and gender of MPs



Source: own elaboration.

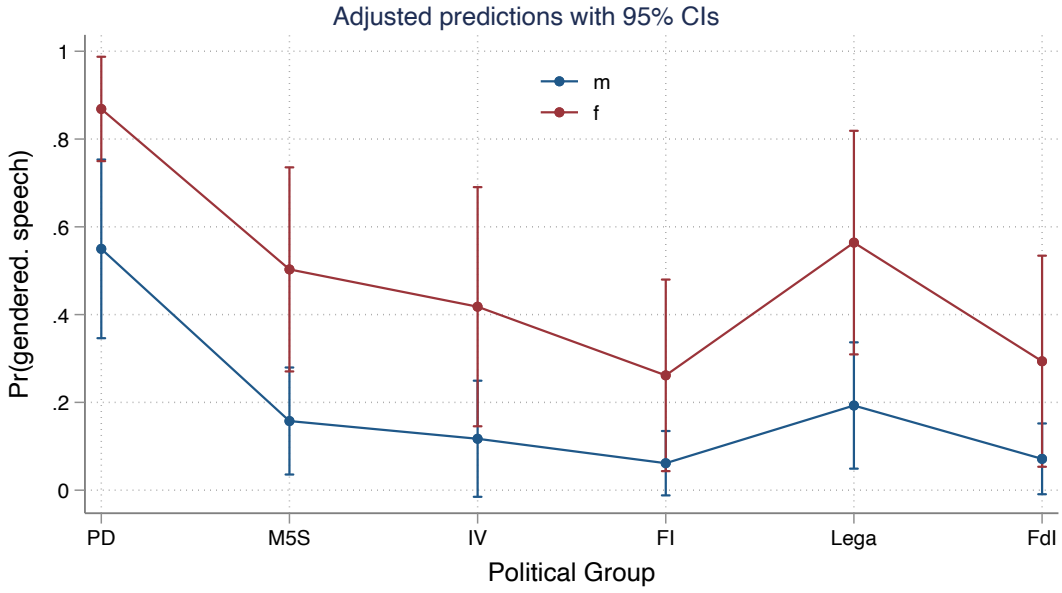
Results show that the substantive representation of gender equality in the context of the Italian NRRP is overwhelmingly driven by women. At the same time, this is not to discount the remaining relevance of heterogeneous saliency across parties: men from the party with the highest prevalence overall of parity-relevant concerns (PD) – which, overall, mentions equality 67% of the times – display sensitivity for such themes more often than women in all other parties other than LEU and the centre. Nevertheless, the more worrying dynamic is that even within the context of a party that does display a sensitivity to equality, the gender divide remains well-marked and even larger than in some instances in which saliency is lower overall.

In this context, it may be likewise of value to briefly go beyond the numerical comparison of the frequency with which women and men mention parity-relevant issues across party lines. That is, the themes themselves that are most common may likewise translate into substantive differences in which types of concerns are raised and the extent to which those are translated into support for policies fostering gender equality. Specifically, certain themes, such as families, a generic reference to children and the call for support for increased natality is prominent within right-wing parties (FdI, LEGA), yet also in this instance carried predominantly if not exclusively (e.g. FdI) by women. In this context, references to parity-relevant terms – which do often result in coding within the equality camp – may at times align with policy concerns voiced by women's interest groups (e.g. supporting families with children) while displaying rhetoric that may not be fully consistent with the promotion of women's empowerment (e.g. focusing on improving birth rates rather than, for example, the expansion of care services or women's

employment opportunities). As a result, assessed through the lenses of concerns of women's interest groups, the contribution of some parity-relevant speeches to advocating women's empowerment within the NRRP may be minimal. Nevertheless, against the research question at hand, the gender divide between MPs in voicing such concerns, even in a weak form, remains. Findings, hence, evidence substantive representation even in the context of low overall saliency of equality. Moving to the opposite end of the spectrum, in the centre-left party (PD) more frequent reference to equality is paired with greater alignment with the policy proposals and concerns raised by women's interest groups overall. An overt reference to gender parity, and its mainstreaming within the NRRP and women's empowerment, is more prominent within the discourse of PD MPs. Once again, however, not only is the proportion of women MPs raising such concerns greater, but also the scope of their support for empowerment policies is more extensive. Women MPs within such parties are more prone to referring to specific policies in support of equality, especially as regards the strengthening of care services and parental leave, as well as highlighting the impact of the pandemic on equality and the related need for intervention in the prevention of gender-based violence. As a result, men and women MPs not only display a different saliency overall for equality, persistent when considering ideology, but the associated narrative and level of alignment with women's interest groups also differ, providing robust support for substantive representation within the parliamentary debates relating to the Italian NRRP.

The characteristics and structure of the datasets offer a warning against deriving conclusions on the size of the gender gap. In line with the hypothesis under consideration, the key element of interest is, however, directional: namely, whether women MPs display higher saliency of parity-relevant themes. In such a context, going beyond the significant differences in the proportion of parity-relevant speeches overall and at the party level reported above, controlling for gender and party concomitantly allows for robust conclusions of whether indeed such a trend is pervasive across party lines. Figure 5 reports the marginal effect by gender and party of a logit model with the dummy reflecting whether each speech is parity-relevant as a dependent variable, and as independent variables a dummy distinguishing between women and men MPs and a categorical variable capturing political group membership. Marginal effects only by gender overall and by parties without distinguishing between men and women MPs are reported in the appendix in Figure A1 and Figure A2 respectively. A significant gender difference is confirmed, as shown by Figure A1 and Table A3 in the appendix. The Democratic Party is confirmed as the party with the most sensitivity to the themes, with all other parties displaying significantly lower saliencies. When pitted against the PD all parties indeed perform worse. Figure 5 highlights that the left-right gradient is not fully reflected in terms of sensitivity to parity. Indeed, considering FI as a reference, the League displays a significantly higher saliency of gender. Additionally, a gender gap emerges across party lines, albeit more markedly in some instances rather than others: at a 10 percent level differences are not significant only for IV, FI and FdI.

Figure 5. Proportion of parity-relevant speeches by gender and party of the MPs



Note: marginal effects for women (f) and men (m) MPs of the parties for which a sufficient number of speeches across gender is available.

Additionally, a brief comparison of the nature of parity-relevant themes which are more pervasive across different political parties shows that saliency of equality may not reflect the same priorities across political groups. An in-depth analysis of what we include within parity-relevant discourse may further discount the scoring of some parties overall and the contribution of men in more equality-oriented parties. As a result, further research is warranted comparing at a more granular level the specific keywords emerging across speeches. Nevertheless, the hypothesis of a gender gap within the parliamentary debate on the NRRP is indeed supported: across party lines a higher proportion of women MPs included within the corpus speak in support of gender parity compared to the proportion of men.

7. Final remarks: the equality cost of women's under-representation

In Italy, the pandemic has profoundly impacted women, who bore the cost of forced lockdowns and the closure of schools and childcare facilities with an increased level of domestic violence and unemployment. At the same time, while the race for gender parity has been halted by the outbreak, it regained centre stage in the public debate, with women's interest groups fiercely contesting the lack of women's representation in decision-making. Initially, the country scored the highest with regard to the restrictiveness of its Covid-19 management, putting forward measures that heavily penalise women, such as school closures (Hale et al., 2020). Down the line of crisis management and in the recovery effort, the prioritisation of gender equality in the Italian NRRP has similarly been deemed insufficient by women's interest groups, especially in its early iterations.

Against such a benchmark, our text analysis shows that women played an important role in advocating for parity-relevant issues in the parliamentary debate on the formulation of the NRRP. Parity-relevant issues are mentioned in nearly half of the speeches by women MPs while only less than 20% in those by men parliamentarians, proving that parity-relevant concerns are highly women-driven. Although men MPs are nearly twice as numerous as women within the corpus of NRRP speeches, they account for only 28 parity-relevant speeches out of 226. Conversely, the sparser women MPs account for 39 out of the 67 parity-relevant speeches. Such an overall gender difference has been assessed in the analysis across party lines, indicating that it is not entirely driven by the heterogeneous ideological composition of the MPs pool. At the institutional level, women MPs were, overall, those contributing the most to the advancement of themes relating to women's empowerment within parliamentary debates. Albeit sensitivity to equality varies substantially across parties, the gender gap in concerns over parity and women's empowerment remains and is robust to accounting concomitantly for gender and party of MPs.

Our analysis based on manual coding of the corpus of over 200 speeches allowed us to account for irrelevant or biased uses of terms associated with potentially parity-relevant issues. Nevertheless, our findings provide only a limited overview of differences in the content and priorities within gender parity-relevant speeches across men and women MPs as well as party lines. Further exploration of the corpus of NRRP speeches may be warranted to better delineate such differences. At the same time, in broad terms, the analysis already highlighted the predominance of women MPs, especially within the centre-left, in raising concerns which more closely align with the petitions and hearing contributions of women's interest groups, in particular concerning childcare and employment. The implication is that within the parliamentary debate on the NRRP, women played a key role in raising parity-relevant concerns, pointing especially in the direction of mitigating the most detrimental legacies of the pandemic for equality.

The broader policymaking process – albeit beyond the focus of the research question at hand – further reinforces the centrality of women in promoting gender mainstreaming in the NRRP. Campaigns of women's interest groups over gender equality in the NRRP may indeed further compound the contribution of women policy actors to advocating for parity within parliamentary debates. A broader analysis of the whole policy cycle may indeed uncover further arenas in which gender gaps emerge over the saliency of equality. The parliamentary scope of our preliminary analysis is a limitation which, however, reinforces the need for further research to verify whether throughout the policy network women remain central in flooring concerns over equality.

Our findings of gender differences in advocating women's empowerment should be read against a broader policy outcome within the NRRP. The overview of the evolution of the plan through gendered lenses suggests a substantial progress from the early stages of the Italian NRRP. The improvement from the Conte to the Draghi plan is undeniable in terms of funding, growing from 4.5 to 7 billion, an amount that from the perspective of the interest groups nevertheless pales against the scale of the overall plan worth 204.5 billion. The resulting allocations for parity remain indeed far below the 'half of it' demanded by women's interest groups. Given the gender divide in advocating for gender mainstreaming in the parliamentary debate, the improvement of funding throughout

the policy cycle raises two further key questions. On one hand is the extent to which such progress saw the contribution of women policy actors and women's interest groups; on the other, the extent to which the under-representation of women in the policy network – evident, for example, in the context of task forces – contributed to a prioritisation of parity-relevant issues deemed unsatisfactory by women's interest groups.

The contribution of this work is twofold. Firstly, it confirms the peril of women under-representation for gender parity (Hessami & da Fonseca, 2020), with implications that may well expand beyond the NRRP and post-Covid reconstruction. Additionally, the analysis paves the way for further in-depth assessment not only of the saliency of concerns raised by women's interest groups in the parliamentary chamber but also, more broadly, of actors within the policy network, of particular relevance given the governmental nature of the NRRP. In this respect, future research on the social media debate around the NRRP may help better identify policy-makers and interest groups raising concerns on parity-relevant issues, outlining their contribution to shaping the plan. Additionally, further research may likewise expand the institutional analysis in scale – considering pandemic decision-making beyond the NRRP – and scope – providing a richer understanding of gender and party differences in the discourse surrounding equality. As a result, the analysis not only opens further avenues of research in gender equality in the context of the Covid-19 crisis but also points towards the substantive implications of women's under-representation in decision-making as pushing for equality largely remains a women's task.

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Appendix

Table A1. Corpus of official and interest groups' documents used for the generation of parity-relevant issues

Organisation	Document type
datecivoce	letter
camera dossier pnrr	gender parity in the NRRP
giustomezzo	analysis
giustomezzo	hearing
giustomezzo	letter
giustomezzo	manifesto
giustomezzo	proposals
halfofit	manifesto
Ingenere	hearing
ladynomics	hearing

Table A2. Gender of MPs by group and overall number of speeches in the corpus

Group	Proportion of women MPs	Total speeches
centro	0.5	4
fdi	0.3214286	28
fi	0.4615385	26
iv	0.5882353	17
lega	0.25	28
leu	0.4444444	9
m5s	0.3333333	33
misto	0.3673469	49
pd	0.3666667	30
Total	0.375	224

Figure A1. Marginal effects on whether a speech mentions equality across gender of the MPs within the corpus

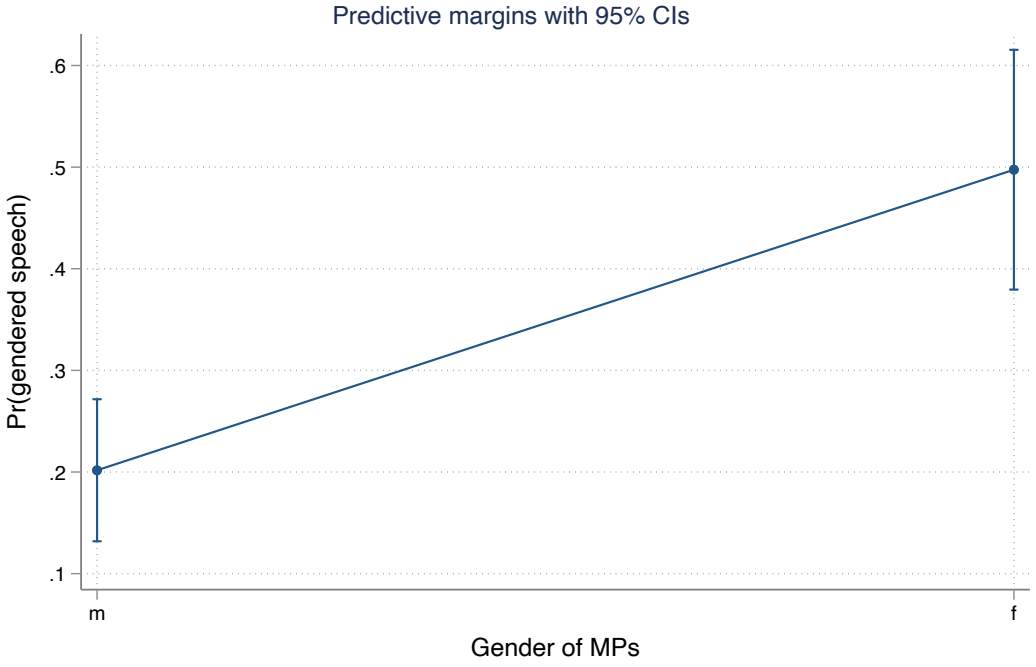

Figure A2. Marginal effects on whether a speech mentions equality across the political group of the MPs within the corpus

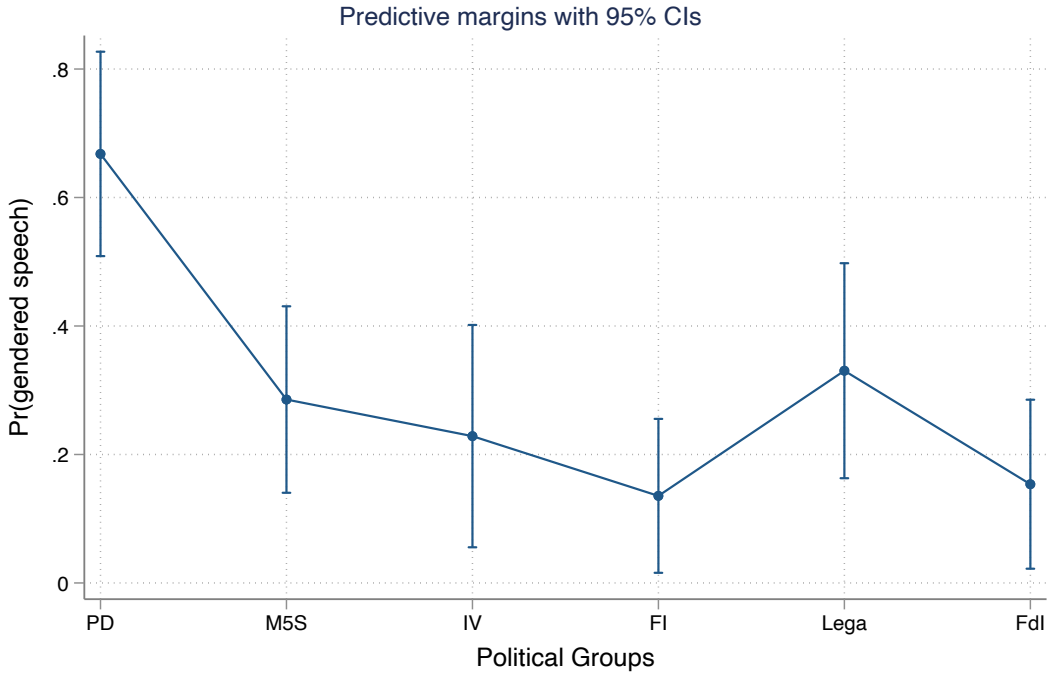

Table A3. Gender of MPs by group and overall number of speeches in the corpus

	(1)		(2)		(3)
	reference: FdI		**reference: FI**		**reference: PD**
	Parity-relevant speech		**Parity-relevant speech**		**Parity-relevant speech**
f	1.689***	f	1.689***	f	1.689***
	(0.429)		(0.429)		(0.429)
PD	2.766***	PD	2.926***	M5S	-1.876***
	(0.718)		(0.735)		(0.598)
M5S	0.889	M5S	1.050	IV	-2.219***
	(0.706)		(0.713)		(0.736)
IV	0.546	IV	0.706	FI	-2.926***
	(0.801)		(0.798)		(0.735)
FI	-0.160	Lega	1.295*	Lega	-1.631***
	(0.802)		(0.741)		(0.609)
Lega	1.135	FdI	0.160	FdI	-2.766***
	(0.729)		(0.802)		(0.718)
Constant	-2.566***	Constant	-2.726***	Constant	0.200
	(0.621)		(0.649)		(0.420)
Observations	*162*	*Observations*	*162*	*Observations*	*162*

Notes: standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Logistic regression including parties with non-negligible number of speeches.

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Beyond welfare chauvinism? Populist radical right parties' social policies and the exclusion of migrants from national welfare in Italy

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Abstract

The present article contributes to the advancement of the understanding of the social policies of populist radical right parties (PRRPs) by focusing on the case of Italy during the Conte I government (June 2018-September 2019). By taking the Italian PRRP, the League, as an example, it investigates the *ideological* and *rhetorical* frames exploited by PRRPs to promote and legitimize cuts in welfare generosity toward migrants when they hold governmental positions. The specific welfare benefit under observation is the 2019 means-tested Citizenship Income (*Reddito di Cittadinanza*, RdC). The article relies on the theoretical framework by Abs (2021), showing that PRRPs exploit two different frames to promote restrictive social measures against migrants during national elections and in their manifestos, i.e., the welfare chauvinism (WC) and the welfare producerism (WP) frames. The article assesses whether, and to what extent, PRRPs transpose these frames into their governmental action. Furthermore, it also examines which of these frames ruling PRRPs are most likely to exploit. The findings show that, when in a ruling position, the League supports exclusive solidarity (i.e., the exclusion of TCNs from access to RdC) by exploiting the very same ideological and rhetorical frames exploited during the electoral campaign, i.e., both the WC and WP. It does not try to frame welfare cutbacks in more morally and politically acceptable terms in light of Western European democratic standards. This article confirms that PRRPs tend to de-emphasize social issues in their discourses and hold a clear-cut position only with regard to migrants' entitlement to the benefit, adopting a clear nativist approach. Moreover, the analysis points out that the overused concept of *welfare chauvinism* is *not* fully adequate to illustrate the PRRPs' social policy formula.

1. Introduction

The present article contributes to the advancement of the understanding of the social policies of populist radical right parties (PRRPs henceforth) by focusing on the case of Italy during the Conte I government (June 2018-September 2019). Over the past 15 years, welfare state research has focused more and more on the "multidimensionality" (Rovny 2013; Abs et al., 2021) of PRRPs' welfare preferences. The concept of *multidimensionality* refers to the fact that PRRPs may have different preferences with regard to two distinct dimensions of welfare politics. These are: 1) the level of generosity (spending effort, amount of social benefits and resources) the welfare state should pursue and 2) the recalibration of welfare expenditure, i.e., which social policy domain should be financed and which should not (investing in human skills or substitute income). This work is mainly interested in the first dimension. Namely, it considers PRRPs'

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preferences about whether welfare generosity should be extended to a specific group, i.e., migrants.

More precisely, the article investigates how PRRPs promote and legitimize cuts in welfare generosity toward migrants when they hold governmental positions. When asking *how*, the article refers to the *ideological* and *rhetorical frames* exploited by PRRPs, i.e., the social construction of migrants' deservingness and un-deservingness of their host country's national welfare. The article builds on former research about PRRPs and social policies. In particular, it refers to a recent contribution by Abs (Abs et al., 2021) which argues that three interrelated frames inform the welfare agenda of PRRPs, especially during national elections. Namely, these parties advocate for social closure on the basis of the deservingness criterion of identity (welfare chauvinism), on the criteria of control, attitude and reciprocity (welfare producerism), and on an antagonism between the people and the establishment (welfare populism). This latter frame is not relevant to the article's purposes, since it does not deal with the topic of migrants' entitlement and disentitlement to national welfare.[1] Thus, it is not considered by the article's analysis. Conversely, the welfare chauvinism (WC) and the welfare producerism (WP) frames are relevant since PRRPs exploit these in their electoral manifestos in order to promote and legitimize restrictive social measures (cutting welfare benefits or even excluding from them) against some groups in society, among which, migrants.[2]

Nevertheless, this study deals primarily with PRRPs' electoral strategies. However, the fact that they rely on these frames in their electoral manifestos does not automatically imply that they transpose one or both frames (WP, WC) into their governmental action. For example, they may eventually abandon the identity-based WC frame, since it openly clashes with the "sense of duty and moral responsibility" (Mair 2014, p.587) arising from parties' governmental positions (cfr, paragraph 2).

Against this backdrop, the present article addresses the following research question:

> **RQ.** *Do PRRPs exploit the ideological frames underlying their welfare agenda (WC, WP) to promote migrants' disentitlement to national welfare when they hold governmental positions? And if so, which of these frames are they most likely to exploit?*

Italy is a relevant example since, during the Conte I government, the League (one of the government coalition members and commonly classified as a PRRP) pushed for the introduction of some restrictive measures targeting non-EU migrants within the framework of the newly approved Citizenship Income (*Reddito di Cittadinanza*, RdC hereafter), a means-tested minimum income scheme introduced in 2019 as a replacement of the previous minimum income scheme, the *Reddito di Inclusione* (Jessoula and Natili, 2020).

Theoretically speaking, this work makes a twofold contribution. First, it assesses whether and to what extent the theoretical framework by Abs (2021), distinguishing between WC and WP, can be a useful tool to understand PRRPs' governmental action,

[1] Welfare populism pertains to the attribution of blame to elites for the sub-optimal implementation of welfare arrangements

[2] It is important to remember that native citizens are not exempted from this logic. In several cases, PRRPs exploit welfare producerism also in regard to natives who do not fulfill the deservingness criteria of control, attitude and reciprocity. In this article, I only consider welfare producerism to the extent it is applied to migrants.

beyond their electoral strategies. Moreover, the analysis identifies which of these frames ruling PRRPs are most likely to exploit. Secondly, the article complements former research specifically focused on the League's imprint on Italian welfare policy. A recent study has shown that the party's input was visible in specific areas like pensions and family social policies (Meardi and Guardiancich, 2022), but it has not yet investigated its influence on the anti-poverty policy. Another contribution has argued instead that the League accepted the introduction of the RdC in exchange for tightened eligibility conditions for non-EU migrants (Jessoula and Natili, 2020). However, this work does not go deeper in examining how exactly the League promoted the introduction of these restrictive measures, i.e., the ideological and rhetorical frames it exploits.

The article is organized as follows. To begin with, I illustrate the most relevant contributions in the literature about PRRPs and social policy. Secondly, I illustrate the article's hypotheses and methodological approach. Thereafter, I carry out the analysis of the selected case-study. To conclude, I move to illustrate the article's main findings and implications against the backdrop of the literature about PRRPs and social policies.

2. PRRPs and social policy

2.1. From the new winning formula to a more multifaceted scenario

Historically, radical right parties have tended to promote a specific type of "winning formula" (Kitschelt, 1995), made up of the combination of neoliberal views on economic issues – free trade and minimal state intervention in economy – and authoritarian views on socio-cultural issues – law and order, morality and authority, national way of life and opposition to immigration, with special attention to Muslim immigration. Some scholars have argued that since the mid-1990s, several PRRPs have started revising their electoral agendas and have made a real "programmatic shift" (Kitschelt and McGann 1997, p.115). Namely, they have started to pay increased attention to welfare state issues and policies for welfare redistribution, positioning themselves very close to left-wing socio-democratic parties, which traditionally own this issue (Kitschelt and McGann, 1997). Hence, for some of them, the new winning formula (NWF) is a combination of conservative and authoritarian stances on cultural and (relatively) left-wing positions on socio-economic issues; i.e., they support expansionary welfare proposals (Ibid).

However, in the wake of a growing academic interest in RRPs' economic and welfare stances in the last decades, scholars have challenged the NWF argument as well. Some of the most recent studies have shown that, against the expectations of the NWF, RRPs do not adopt a clear position on the socio-economic dimension in their political agenda. Conversely, they engage in position-blurring by deliberately avoiding precise social and economic placement (Rovny 2013; Rovny and Polk 2020). Namely, they either de-emphasize social issues altogether or present "vague, contradictory, or ambiguous positions" (Rovny 2013).

Finally, some additional contributions have argued that RRPs' welfare state stances are to be seen in light of the multidimensionality of the political conflict about welfare politics (Enggist and Pingerra 2021; Rathgeb 2021; Busemayer et al., 2021). Such conflict is defined as *multidimensional* since it hinges on two main dimensions. The first one concerns the level of generosity the welfare state should pursue, i.e., the spending effort

(amount of social benefits and resources) to be made. The second dimension concerns the recalibration of welfare expenditure, i.e., which social policy domain should be financed, and which should not (investing in human skills or substitute income). In such a scenario, political parties can adopt different preferences in regard to both dimensions.

PRRPs typically present blurry or moderate stances on the first dimension, whilst they express clear preferences and provide unambiguous, clearly discernible stances on the second. Namely, they explicitly support consumptive policies (such as pensions) while cutting social rights for the unemployed and opposing a progressive welfare recalibration that would cover the new social risks of non-standard workers – typically women, the young and the low-skilled (Enggist and Pingerra 2021; Rathgeb 2021; Busemayer et al., 2021). As Enggist and Pingerra point out, these features "do not come out of nowhere" (Enggist and Pingerra 2021, p.119) but they correspond to the attitudes and preferences of PRRPs voters, as Busemayer has shown (Busemayer et al., 2021).

This work is focused on the first dimension, i.e., the level of generosity of welfare policies. Scholars agree that, while PRRPs tend overall to de-emphasize this aspect, they only present clear social policy positions with regard to a nativist, exclusionary stance towards immigrants. This is commonly defined as "welfare chauvinism" (Ennser-Jedenastik 2018, 2020; Otjes et al. 2018; Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016). In simple terms, RRPs explicitly aim to reduce the national spending effort made for migrants, by limiting their access to national welfare benefits and programs. By contrast, they argue that these should be reserved to national citizens (and, some times, permanent residents).[3]

Most of this research is focused on PRRPs' electoral manifestos and welfare agenda when they are in political opposition. In recent times, several PRRPs obtained electoral gains, and thus managed to increase their bargaining power in the policy-making process (Afonso, 2015). This occurred, for example, in Denmark (Agersnap et al., 2019; Careja et al., 2016; Jorgensen and Thomsen 2016), Austria (Pelinka 2002; Kriesi et al., 2014; Ennser-Jedenastik 2020) and the Netherlands (Chueri, 2019). As a result, scholars have started examining if this increased power is also leading to alterations in social policies in a welfare chauvinistic direction.

The overall assessment so far seems to provide a positive answer. Studies on PRRPs by Akkerman and De Lange (2012) and, most recently, Chueri (2019) have shown that the role of PRRPs, as members of government coalitions, in the adoption of restrictive social policies affecting migrants, cannot be ignored (Akkerman and De Lange 2012; Chueri 2019). Moreover, Careja (2016) distinguishes between direct and indirect welfare chauvinism in policy reforms and frameworks in the Danish social and labor market-related policies. They have been promoted by the Danish People's Party (DPP), one of the most successful PRRPs in Europe (Careja et al. 2016). The former explicitly limits access to welfare for migrants. The latter instead envisages cutbacks or limitations directed to larger target groups, but where migrants are over-represented among benefit claimants (Ibid). Careja shows that most of the chauvinist laws promoted by the DPP between 2001 and 2011 contain measures which indirectly target some migrant groups (at least in the Danish case). In addition, the party promoted several instances of direct chauvinist welfare policy reforms, although these are still a minority compared to the indirect ones (Careja, 2016).

[3] As this research highlights, it is sometimes unclear whether PRRPs refer to national citizenship, ethnicity, or residence as the identity criterion for accessing social benefits and services

2.2. Welfare chauvinism and welfare producerism

A recent contribution by Rathgeb (2021) highlights that both PRRPs'[4] preferences for consumption policies and for welfare chauvinism (in manifestos and as government partners) fit into a broader *producerism* ideology. He argues that hard-working and tax-paying "makers" (employees, employers, constituting the core male workforce) need to be liberated from the economic burden imposed by self-serving "takers" (immigrants, "corrupt elite"). More precisely, this model distinguishes between "takers from above" and "takers from below". The former are the corrupt elites and the "party cartels" among mainstream parties and organized interests, who abuse tax money for corrupt practices at the expense of national workers. The latter are immigrants (especially those from outside the EU) who are portrayed as abusers and "lazy free riders" (p.642): i.e., they exploit national public welfare without contributing to it.

According to this view, the PRRPs' preference for consumptive policies (such as pensions) is justified as necessary to protect the social rights of the core male workforce. Moreover (and most relevant to our purpose) restrictive proposals and policy reforms against migrants (the "takers form below") are justified and legitimized precisely to avoid such (supposed) welfare abuses by migrants. According to the makers-takers framework, therefore, migrants' exclusion is primarily based on their economic (lack of) contributions, not so much on their citizenship or residency status. In simple terms, the line between WC and WP is fairly blurred.

On the contrary, Abs argues that welfare chauvinism is not part of a broader policy of producerism, but WP and WC are rather two distinct frames informing the PRRPs' welfare agenda – especially during national elections (Abs et al., 2021). His work builds on the so-called deservingness logic (van Oorschot 2000, 2006). Such a logic deems different population subgroups worthy or unworthy of receiving social help from the welfare state (welfare benefits) to different extents according to five criteria of deservingness: control, attitude, reciprocity, identity, need (usually referred to by the acronym CARIN).

The first deservingness criterion is control. It looks at whether and to what extent the situation of need of benefit claimants is beyond their control and/or to what extent they can be held responsible for such a situation. The guiding logic is that the less control, the more they are deserving. The second criterion is attitude. It is focused on claimants' behaviors which have to comply with socially accepted "good morals" (for example they should not cheat on their need status to obtain social support and, once obtained, they should show they are grateful for it). The more they are compliant, the more they are deserving. The third criterion, reciprocity, looks instead at the degree of reciprocation by the benefit claimants. This is generally intended in economic and monetary terms. It primarily looks at the extent to which welfare claimants have contributed to the host society group in the past, i.e., before making their claims for social benefits. Past contributions are typically measured by looking at one's previous working activity and/or taxes paid and/or insurance contributions into the system (the "earned" support) (van Oorschot 2000, 2006).

[4] His analysis is especially focused on the case of the PRRP FPO in Austria.

The fourth criterion is identity, addressing the (extent of) proximity and distance of benefit claimants to/from the perceived ethno-majoritarian group in society. From survey research, it emerges that this criterion is usually conceived in terms of either formal citizenship status or ethnic-based identity (and sometimes both). The closer to "us" in terms of citizenship, residence (i.e., the acquisition of formal citizenship or permanent residency) or ethno-cultural characteristics, the more deserving. Finally, the need criterion simply looks at claimants' actual condition of need, generally measured through low income and earnings. The greater the level of need, the more they are deserving (van Oorschot 2000, 2006).

Both the WC and the WP frames point back to the deservingness logic; they differ exactly in terms of the deservingness criteria on which they are based. WC is based on the identity criterion, opposing national citizens and/or residents against non-citizen migrants in access to national welfare (in line with the previous definition of welfare chauvinism). Conversely, WP is based on the principles of reciprocity, control and attitudes (a mix or only just one of these). Through an analysis of electoral parties' manifestos of four different PRRPs (among which is the League), Abs shows that exclusionary social policy reforms against migrants in PRRP manifestos are usually based on both WP and WC, as two distinct strategies. Namely, migrants are excluded both because they are not formal citizens (or residents) and because of their supposed dishonest behaviors, unwillingness to search for a job and lack of economic contributions to the system (Abs et al., 2021).

3. Hypotheses

This article shifts the focus from PRRPs' electoral strategies to their governmental action. When in government, PRRPs (like their mainstream counterparts) are subject to responsibility constraints. Responsibility requires parties to act "from a sense of duty and moral responsibility" (Mair 2014, p.587), i.e., within the bounds of accepted practices and following known legal and procedural rules and conventions. These can be, for example, those laid down in the Constitution, or in treaties of international organizations to which a country belongs (Mair 2014). Accordingly, restrictive social reforms excluding or limiting migrants' access to national welfare are clearly at odds with PRRPs' responsibility function. Namely, they explicitly challenge fundamental Western democratic rules, and notably the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of nationality and ethnicity. Indeed, this is embedded in both national Constitutions and Article 21 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Nevertheless, the aforementioned studies on PRRPs' governmental action with regard to migrants and welfare have shown that they are usually indifferent to responsibility constraints.[5] Namely, they continue to advocate for exclusionary social reforms targeting immigrants, either directly or indirectly (Careja et al., 2016). In several cases, they even manage to implement these reforms (Careja et al., 2016; Akkerman and De Lange 2012; Chueri 2019). Building on this, the article is interested in understanding *how* (i.e., the rhetorical and ideological frames by which) *ruling* PRRPs legitimize and

[5] To be sure, they are indifferent to such constraints in other policy fields as well (Akkerman and De Lange 2012).

promote these welfare restrictions, with respect to national and European public opinion and democratic institutions. As mentioned in the introduction, I investigate whether the theoretical framework by Abs (2021), distinguishing between the WC and WP frames, can be a useful tool for understanding PRRPs' governmental action too. I argue that three views are possible.

The first view argues that, once in government, PRRPs are not likely to use either one of the two frames used during elections – neither WP nor WC. This view is based on two factors. Firstly, both frames already emerge very clearly in the political manifestos of almost all PRRPs, especially during electoral campaign (Abs et al., 2021). Accordingly, national and EU public opinion and institutions in most cases already know very well to what extent WC and WP inform PRRP social policy agendas. Secondly, we have just mentioned that ruling PRRPs are typically indifferent towards the duties and moral responsibility characterizing governmental parties (Mair 2014; Akkerman and De Lange 2012; Chueri 2019). Based on this, they may not feel the need to further explain and legitimize their exclusionary view towards migrants, which they already did in their manifestos. Building on these considerations, I derive my first hypothesis:

> **H1:** when holding a governmental position, PRRPs do not exploit the ideological frames underlying their welfare agenda (WC, WP) to promote migrants' disentitlement.

The second and third views claim instead that ruling PRRPs do exploit these ideological frames, consistently with their social policy agenda during elections. However, the second view argues that they only exploit the WP frame, i.e., promoting migrants' exclusion based on the reciprocity, attitude and control deservingness criteria. As seen, these criteria differentiate solidarity according to what one has done or can do for society, the types of behaviors adopted and the extent to which one can be blamed for one's neediness respectively. Since they do not point back to citizenship and/or ethnicity, one may argue that none of these criteria explicitly clash with the democratic anti-discrimination principle (although they finally lead to migrants' exclusion from welfare benefits). Thus, when relying on them, PRRPs may argue that restrictive reforms are not even really discriminatory, but they are rather a way to protect hard-working national citizens (in Rathgeb's words, the "makers", 2021) from welfare and economic abuses by free riders, lazy migrants (the "takers form below", cfr. Rathgeb 2021). Moreover, this frame does not apply to migrants exclusively. Conversely, PRRPs use it also to limit welfare access for native citizens who get welfare benefits without making any contributions, do not make efforts to look for a job and/or behave in an improper way (cheating on their incomes or not showing gratefulness for the social help received). In light of this, while far from being unquestioned, this frame may eventually make restrictive social policies against migrants overall more morally and political acceptable, in light of considerations of economic and social necessity and fairness.

By contrast, the WC frame, based on the identity criterion of deservingness, prompts an explicit nativist differentiation of solidarity, excluding migrants only because of their citizenship and/or residence status. This is explicitly and unequivocally at odds with the democratic anti-discrimination principle. In addition, given its focus on national identity, this frame cannot apply to native citizens, but it only refers to non-citizens migrants. Based on these considerations, I build my second hypothesis:

> **H2:** when holding a governmental position, PRRPs prefer to exploit the WP frame (rather than WC) to promote restrictive social policy measures against immigrants.

Nevertheless, PRRPs may also apply a third, different reasoning. Given their typical indifference to "duty and moral responsibility" (Mair 2014, p.587) as governing parties (Akkerman and De Lange 2012; Chueri 2019), they may choose to employ the identity criterion of deservingness, i.e., the WC frame, irrespective of rules of moral and political acceptability. The WC and the WP frame are not mutually exclusive. PRRPs may exploit both or just one of them to promote restrictive social measures against migrants, as they do during national electoral campaigns. The third and last hypothesis therefore claims that:

> **H3:** when holding a governmental position, PRRPs rely on the WC and the WP frames (both or just one of them) to promote restrictive social policy measures against immigrants.

4. Methodology and data

4.1. Italy as a case-study

I test my hypotheses in a specific case-study, i.e., Italy, during the Conte I government. It was the 65th Cabinet of the Italian Republic, supported by a coalition composed of the left-wing populist party *Movimento Cinque Stelle*, Five Stars Movement (MS5) and the PRRP, the League (previously Northern League). A few months after its establishment, this government introduced the RdC scheme, one of the warhorses of the M5S. The League pushed for the introduction within it of some restrictive measures targeting a specific category of migrants, i.e., those from outside the EU, also defined as third-country nationals, TCNs (Jessoula and Natili, 2020).

More precisely, the party put forward an amendment to Article 2.1. of the Decree Law (establishing the beneficiaries of the RdC and the entitlement rules). The amendment imposed a temporary ban to access to the RdC for non-EU migrants, until they fulfill 2 additional requirements (beyond ISEE[6] certification): 1) showing evidence of 10 years' uninterrupted residency in Italy (rather than 5 years, as before) and 2) presenting, as a proof of their income status, a certification attesting to the absence of movable property and real estate abroad, in their home countries. This certification does not substitute the ISEE, but constitutes an additional requirement for extra-EU migrants only. Both 1 and 2 were embedded in the final law and precisely in Art. 2.

In light of the above, this case provides an ideal setting for studying how PRRPs frame and promote restrictive measures against migrants. Indeed, I argue that this case provides leverage for the generalization of the results to other countries and PRRPs. Namely, in spite of some specific peculiarities, the League is a good representative of the PRRP family in (Western) Europe. Previous studies have pointed out that the League's ideological profile with regard to social policy and the migration-welfare nexus is very

[6] ISEE (Indicatore Situazione Economica Equivalente, Indicator of the equivalent Economic Condition) is the certification showing the actual economic condition of families (based on earnings, wealth and properties).

similar to that of other PRRPs across Europe. That is, like other PRRPs, it claimed for welfare restrictions for migrants during past electoral campaigns, relying on both the WC and the WP ideological frames (Abs et al., 2021). Moreover, the League is a member of the *Europe of Nations and Freedom* group in the European Parliament, alongside the French *Rassemblement National*, the Belgian *Vlaams Belang*, the Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid*, and the Austrian FPO. Given all the above, there are reasons to believe that the League's governmental action is not so different from that of other PRRPs.

4.2. The Italian context: an overall summary and differences from previous research

Italy was originally the only Southern-European country included within Esping-Andersen's sample of countries and it was assigned to the Conservative-corporativist cluster (Ferrera, 2010). With the conceptualization of a fourth welfare regime, the Southern or Mediterranean welfare state regime (Ferrera 1996, 2010), Italy is typically considered a member of the new cluster, together with Spain, Portugal, and Greece (Ferrera 1996, 2010; Sciortino 2004).

Like other Southern European countries, Italy has an overall lower social expenditure and a much larger expenditure for pensions (both old age and survivor), as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), than the EU average (Ferrera 1996, 2010). In addition, the Italian welfare system traditionally makes very limited use of means-tested benefits and programs – less than half the European average (Ibid). This is paired to the significant role of the compulsory social insurance program in providing social provisions (Ferrera 1996, 2010; Sciortino 2004; Natili 2018; Jessoula and Natili 2020). However, these traditional mechanisms have recently begun to be brought into question. Social assistance minimum income protection schemes have acquired a new importance, at both citizens' and politicians' level (Natili 2018; Jessoula and Natili 2020). This has marked the end of "Italian exceptionalism" (Jessoula and Natili, 2020).

Since 2017, two welfare schemes have been approved. The first one is the Inclusion Income, *Reddito di inclusione sociale*, approved in 2017 by the center-left Gentiloni government. It was designed as an in-cash means-tested monetary benefit conditional on claimants' income, aiming at promoting active inclusion through individualized plans and service provision. However, due to severe budgetary constraints, it was one of the least financed, generous and inclusive minimum income schemes in Europe and only a limited number of poor individuals could receive it (Jessoula and Natili, 2020). The second is the RdC. Like its antecedent, it is an in-cash, means-tested type of program, based on applicants' income and especially the family income. Only families whose income is below a given threshold can apply and legitimately obtain the benefit. Accordingly, applicants have to present ISEE certification.

The RdC was initially drafted as a Decree-Law (num.4/28 January 2019) and then turned into final law (num. 26 of 28 March 2019) between February and March 2019. It dealt with two major topics: the introduction of the new minimum income scheme, the CI, and a new pension reform (*Quota 100*), overhauling the former 2011 Fornero pension scheme. Quota 100 consisted of an early retirement scheme for people aged at least 62 and having contributed for at least 38 years (the quota refers to the sum of the two minimum thresholds). Jessoula and Natili (2020) highlight that the League accepted the

introduction of the RdC in exchange for the tightened eligibility conditions for non-EU migrants as well as the approval of the reform pension. The latter, indeed, was designed by Lega deputy labor minister Durigon and it matches the League's (and PRRPs' overall) emphasis on old age and retirement and the defense of generous state pensions for people who have contributed all their lives.

Beyond the study by Jessoula and Natili, some other scholars have dealt with the most recent Italian social policy reforms and the League's role in them (Giannetti at al, 2020; Meardi and Guardiancich 2022). These studies have argued that the League influenced the policy priorities of the Government more than the M5S did, being able to "reap the fruits of governing" (Giannetti at al, 2020, p.15) thanks to its increasing popularity over time. They claim that the League's input was more visible in the specific areas of pensions and family social policies than in that of the RdC, with the exception of the introduction of the restrictive measures toward migrants (Meardi and Guardiancich, 2022), being thus in line with what Jessoula and Natili say (2020). However, these previous studies have touched the topic of the RdC, and especially the restrictive measures by the League, only marginally, without going deeper into an examination of how, exactly, the League promoted the introduction of these measures. By contrast, the present article specifically addresses this topic, delving into the League's rhetorical and ideological discourse so as to better clarify its social policy formula and notably how it frames the migrant-welfare nexus.

4.3. Method and data

As for the specific method used, I test the hypotheses by means of an in-depth qualitative content analysis of the speeches made by politicians and deputies of the League. I select those speeches where they discuss and illustrate their views of the RdC and notably the restrictive measures against non-EU migrants put forward by the League. The specific text's passages under examination are those where they speak in support of such measures and explain their reasons for doing this. By focusing on them, I examine the specific rhetorical and ideological frames politicians use to legitimize these restrictive measures and whether they exploit such frames as expected in the article. With regard to the types of speeches selected, I focus on official speeches first (on the topic of RdC and in particular the restrictive measures by the League), made by Matteo Salvini, the Federal Secretary of the League since 2013 and Minister of the Interior during the Conte I government, through the League's primary communication channels: declarations on social networks, interviews in TV or newspapers. It goes without saying that Salvini is continually active on social networks and television, and he made several relevant speeches. This analysis is focused on those speeches he made in the period he was Minister of the Interior (June 2018-September 2019), both before starting the negotiations with the M5S for the introduction of the RdC and during negotiations. Given its role in the government, we can presumably expect that in this period Salvini speaks in behalf and highlights the ideological view of the League as a governing party. All the relevant speeches were collected by a key word search on Salvini's official webpage, *Lega per Salvini Premier*, where all the most important declarations by the politician and the events he takes part in are uploaded. I have manually transcribed his oral speeches (e.g., on TV) in written form. Secondly, I focus on parliamentary speeches (by Salvini or other

deputies of the League) held at the Italian Chamber of Deputies and Senate, during which the Decree-Law was translated into final Law. These took place between February and March 2019. I focus merely on the debates where the design and approval of the RDC is discussed, while neglecting those which touch on other topics (especially the pension reform). From a preliminary analysis, it emerges that the RDC issue is discussed during the Chamber's 145th and 146th sessions (20 and 21 March respectively). I took the written transcripts of these debates from the official website of the Italian Chamber of Deputies.[7]

Parliamentary speeches are a more valid exploratory tool to examine the frames employed by politicians than social policies and laws (Keskinen, 2016). The latter are indeed usually very vague, putting forward general rules and norms, without clearly specifying the logic and justifications behind them. On the contrary, during parliamentary debates, politicians often have to provide longer and more well-developed explanations for their policy preferences, also to respond to the criticism of the opposition (Ibid). Moreover, given the continuous confrontation and the need for articulating quick counterarguments, parliamentary speeches are generally more dynamic, also envisaging the re-formulation of politicians' arguments and frames. Thus, they are likely to offer wider material for investigating the ideological and rhetorical frames employed, eventually also capturing different facets of them.

The article explores the relevant frames in politicians' speeches by assigning to the text passages in set 1 a number of "categories" (or "codes"), i.e., several conceptual labels that foster the understanding of the data (Ibid). Five main categories are used: four of them correspond to the deservingness criteria underlying the WC and WP frames: identity (WC), control, attitude and reciprocity (WP). The last one is an additional residual category, ("others"), corresponding to other criteria and frames not conceptualized in the literature, which may eventually emerge from the analysis.

By assigning to the relevant text passages one or more of these categories, I extract from politicians' speeches the specific deservingness criteria and corresponding frames they use to legitimize the chauvinist welfare measures targeting the RdC. A more detailed illustration of the types of categories, coding frame and procedure is provided in Appendix A. To make the reading smoother, in the analysis I only quote some short sections and specific words from the passages analyzed, as examples of the frames exploited by politicians. I present a more detailed overview of politicians' speeches in Appendix B. In order to improve the efficiency of the research, I rely on MAXQDA, an advanced piece of software for qualitative data analysis, to code the qualitative data and analyze them (Kuckartz, 2019).

5. Analysis

Overall, both Salvini and other deputies of the League deliberately avoid taking a clear position on the topic of the RdC. Every time journalists or other deputies ask for their views, they tend to answer in a vague way, saying that this question should rather be put to the deputies of the M5S. They hold a clear-cut position only with regard to migrants' entitlement to the benefit, adopting an explicit nativist view, which emerges clearly in the amendment they put forward to the original RdC Law text. This finding is in line

[7] See: https://www.camera.it/leg18/1.

with previous studies about PRRPS, showing that they tend to de-emphasize social issues and, in particular, present blurry stances on the first dimension of welfare (i.e., the level of generosity of welfare policies) with the only exception of nativist stances against migrants (Rovny 2013; Rovny and Polk 2020; Rathgeb 2021).

A more thorough review of the data selected reveals that Salvini addresses the specific topic of migrants' entitlement/disentitlement to the RdC in two cases only (at least, during the period under analysis). The first time is during an interview conducted in September 2018 by journalists of *La Repubblica*,[8] an Italian daily general-interest newspaper. The interview does not specifically deal with the topic of migrants' entitlement/disentitlement to the RdC, but the journalist also asks him about his position (and that of the League) in that regard. On this occasion, Salvini clearly states that such a measure should be reserved exclusively to Italian citizens. He justifies and promotes such a view by relying on both the WC and the WP frames, thus complying with H3. He declares that the League is working on an amendment introducing restrictions for non-Italian citizens. The party wants the introduction of these restrictions, he says, in order not to "give away money for free" to migrants who "are not Italian citizens" (i.e., the WC frame) and "wander the country without working or making any effort to get employment" (WP). From this speech, it emerges that *national citizenship* is the main identity criterion informing the WC frame. Thus, migrants[9] are considered as less deserving of social support through the RdC (and therefore they should not get access to it) because formally they are not Italian citizens. As for the WP frame, this is articulated around the deservingness criterion of *control*. The reference to migrants "wandering around" and their unwillingness to search for a job reminds us of such a criterion.

The second time Matteo Salvini directly and explicitly deals with this topic is when he is invited on the Italian TV broadcast *Non è l'arena*, in February 2019.[10] In this case, he relies mainly on the WP frame to promote the restrictive measures. At the time, the amendment to Article 2.1 (temporarily banning migrants' access to the RdC) had already been presented and the approval of the final version of the RdC was under discussion. When asked how the League managed to compromise with the M5S on the subject of the RdC, he answered that it was possible thanks to the introduction of some "controls" within the text of the D-L. These aim to prevent both nationals and migrants (TCNs) from cheating the system by making false declarations about their income and residence to obtain the RdC. He then adds that that many of these cheaters are migrants. In this case, WP against non-EU migrants hinges especially on one of the three deservingness criteria, i.e., *attitude*. That is, politicians argue that migrants should be temporarily banned from the RdC because they are fundamentally dishonest people, ready to cheat in order to obtain more economic advantages for themselves, at the expense of Italian people living in extreme poverty. However, the WP frame is exploited also against national citizens, in that Salvini explicitly states that also many Italian citizens tend to adopt these dishonest behaviors.

During the parliamentary debates preceding the approval of the final law envisaging both the RdC scheme and Quota 100, Matteo Salvini does not directly address the topic

[8] I found the relevant video on the Facebook webpage Lega-Salvini Premier.
[9] Here, he refers generically to "immigrants" without specifying any groups (ex., EU, not EU).
[10] I found the relevant video on the Facebook webpage Lega-Salvini Premier.

of migrants' entitlement to the RdC. He rather leaves the floor to other deputies who promote the restrictive measures by relying, again, on both the WC and WP frames (H3). With regard to the WC frame, it remains somewhat unclear whether politicians of the League refer to national citizenship or residence as the main identity criterion for accessing the RdC. Since they introduce the 10 years-residence requirements, one may expect that residence is the criterion used.

On the other hand, during the parliamentary sessions analyzed, they explicitly state that the government (and the League in particular) aims at defending the (social and economic) interests of *Italian* citizens against those of non citizens "coming from the other side of the world" (20 March, Column 145, Pos. 198). Accordingly, the measures put forward by the League aim exactly to favor citizens over non citizens in access to the RdC. Besides this explicit statement, all through the sessions, the deputies of the League repeatedly stress that both the Quota 100 and the RdC are measures in support of *Italian* citizens, to meet the needs of that part of the *Italian* population (people who used to be employed or self-employed but lost their jobs and currently live below the line of economic and social poverty). These statements seem to suggest that *national citizenship* is the main identity criterion for the entitlement or disentitlement of migrants, more than (or to a larger extent than) residence. That is, migrants are considered as less deserving of social support through the RdC because formally they are not Italian citizens.

> "With the two measures that we, the League, have introduced [...] we want to make sure, we are sure, that this benefit [i.e., the Citizenship Income] will go primarily to Italian citizens and not to immigrants! Our government was elected by Italian citizens and it pursues the interests of Italian citizens, not those of non-Italian citizens coming from the other side of the world".
>
> (Deputy Edoardo Ziello, the League, 20 March, C.145, Pos. 198).

As far as the WP frame is concerned, it especially hinges on the *attitude* criterion of deservingness (similar to what is observed in the speech by Salvini on TV). Once again, migrants are blamed for their (supposed) dishonest and usurping behaviors (in Italian, they are called *furbetti*). More specifically, politicians argue that, in the previous years, most migrants declared less property and income than they actually had, in order to be entitled to the former minimum income schemes (21 March, C.146, Pos. 1072). This way, migrants took away several social and economic resources, that may otherwise have been spent to improve the welfare services for Italians living below the poverty line (Ibid). Some of them even left Italy to spend the money received abroad, in their home country (20 March, C.145, Pos. 200). In the politicians' view, this phenomenon was especially made possible by the fact that administrative controls by frontline social workers were too light in previous years, and were therefore unable to assess the real estate and income situation of people claiming the benefit (Ibid).

In light of this, the League politicians argue that the new restrictive measures are necessary in order to ensure that Italian citizens will be given priority in the allocation of the new RdC measure, contrary to what occurred for the ReI (20 March, C.145, Pos. 200). Accordingly, the 10-year requirement is intended to make it a longer and more difficult procedure for migrants to apply for the RdC. In the politicians' view, this should discourage them from applying, finally ensuring that more resources are left for Italian citizens. Furthermore, the second requirement (the additional certification from migrants) aims

at preventing migrants from doing the same for the RDC as well. By asking migrants to present additional certification, the government will be able to strengthen control over migrants and make it more difficult to declare less property, earnings, and income than they actually have (21 March, C.146, Pos. 1072). As a result, this second measure will prevent and reduce the possibility of cheating at the expense of Italians. In simple terms, this may be a strategy "to cut the problem out at its root" (20 March, C.145, Pos. 200).

> "Because, Mr. President, that was what happened with the previous minimum income scheme: the majority of migrants who took the Inclusion Income played dumb and did not declare all their real properties, in order to get the benefit. Some of them even went to spend it in their country of origin rather than here in Italy! This situation was also likely to create economic damage to our country and a fiscal loss for our citizens who lost a lot of resources we wish the Government could rather have spent to help them. We, on the other hand, said: more barriers to the access to benefits for migrants, to cut the problem out at its root and prevent cheating practices, so as to make sure that more resources are left for Italians".
>
> (Deputy Edoardo Ziello, the League, 20 March, C.145, Pos. 200).

> "It is required, for those who present an ISEE declaration, given that there are patrimonial requirements to be respected, that the embassy of the state of origin certifies that the foreigner who applies to obtain the Citizenship Income, is not cheating us, is not trying to fool us again, as happened with the inclusion income, for which many foreigners did not declare all their actual properties and real estate and stole money from Italians citizens".
>
> (Deputy Riccardo Molinari, the League, 21 March, C.146, Pos. 1072).

From the speeches analyzed, it seems that the League[11] mobilize the WC and WP frames to promote non-EU migrants' exclusion. Namely, non-EU migrants are to be temporary banned from the new RdC *both* because they are not Italian citizens (i.e., the *identity* criterion) *and* because they violate some good morals by cheating on their properties and incomes (i.e., the *attitude* criterion). Based on this, we can conclude that the League's ideological and rhetorical frames (WC and WP) reflect the party' s welfare agenda during elections.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The present article has applied the theoretical and analytical framework by Abs (Abs et al., 2021) to PRRPs' governmental action. It has investigated whether PRRPs transpose the ideological and rhetorical frames underlying their welfare agenda during elections (WC, WP) into governmental action. In addition, it has examined which of these frames ruling PRRPs are most likely to be exploited. To answer these questions, the analysis has tested three different views. The first states that ruling PRRPs do not exploit any of these frames. The second view claims instead that they only exploit the WP frame. Indeed, it may eventually make restrictive social policies against migrants overall more morally and politically acceptable in light of the rules of moral and political acceptability within

[11] In the person of its leader and Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini but also some other deputies defending the amendments during the parliamentary sessions.

Western democracies, especially the nondiscrimination principle. Conversely, the third view argues that PRRPs may choose to exploit also the identity criterion of deservingness, i.e., the WC frame (either together with the WP frame or not), coherently with their electoral rhetoric and irrespective of rules of moral and political acceptability.

The analysis has focused in particular on the case of the League and the introduction of the RdC during the Conte I government (2018-2019). The results bring empirical evidence to the third hypothesis. That is, when in a ruling position, the League supports exclusive solidarity (i.e., the exclusion of TCNs from access to RdC) by exploiting the very same ideological and rhetorical frames exploited during the electoral campaign (differently from what is expected in H1). Moreover, the party relies on both the WC and WP (H3); it does not try to frame welfare cutbacks in more morally and politically acceptable terms in light of Western European democratic standards (in contrast to H2).

As previously mentioned, some studies on the League and its imprint on Italian social policy already exist. In particular, the work by Meardi and Guardiancich (2022) has shown that the party's input was visible in some specific areas like pensions and family social policies. In addition, Jessoula and Natili (2020) have showed that the introduction of the restrictive measures towards TCNs within the RdC was the result of a compromise between the League and the M5S; namely, the League accepted the introduction of the RdC only in exchange for these measures. However, none of these studies has examined how exactly the League promoted the introduction of these restrictive measures, i.e., the ideological and rhetorical frames exploited. By delving into this specific aspect, this work therefore complements former research on the Italian case.

Beyond the specificities of the Italian case, the article relies on this case to contribute to the advancement of the understanding of PRRPs' social policies. As argued in 4.1., the findings observed for the League can be quite extensively generalized to other PRRPs across European countries too. When examined from a wider perspective, these findings have two major theoretical implications in the literature about PRRPs and social policies.

First, they confirm some trends already highlighted by some previous studies (Rovny 2013; Rovny and Polk 2020; Rathgeb 2021; Enggist and Pingerra). Except for some cases, Salvini and other deputies of the League tend to de-emphasize social issues and specifically the RdC, in their official and parliamentary speeches. They hold a clear-cut position only with regard to migrants' entitlement to the benefit, adopting a clear nativist approach, emerging in the amendment they put forward to the original RdC Law text (Ibid).

Secondly, by showing that the League exploits both WC and WP, the article's findings point out that the overused concept of *welfare chauvinism* is *not* fully adequate to illustrate the PRRPs' social policy formula, in particular with regard to migrants. While the identity criterion (formal citizens, residence and eventually ethno-cultural characteristics) remains undisputedly a key element of PRRPs' social policy reforms and rhetoric targeting migrants, it is complemented by other deservingness criteria looking at migrants' behaviors, attitudes and willingness to (economically) integrate in the host country. In light of this, this work aligns to some previous studies (Abs et al., 2021; Rathgeb 2021; Enggist and Pingerra 2021) in saying that research on PRRPs must go beyond the welfare chauvinism concept to better understand these parties' social policy formula.

I am aware of the limitations of the present study. The analysis has voluntarily neglected some factors that may have an impact on PRRPs' action in the social policy field. Among others, countries' specificities may matter. For example, as suggested by Abs (Abs et al., 2020), the different types of national welfare regimes may moderate the emphasis of PRRPs (also when in office) on particular deservingness criteria to be applied to migrants (and possibly also to national citizens). Another factor may be the different types of policy areas, i.e., whether PRRPs promote and implement social reforms in the means tested (like the RdC), or rather universal policy field. Future research can incorporate the present findings to further investigate these matters, including new countires in the analysis and adequately comparing them.

Finally, this study has focused exclusively on the first dimension of the political conflict about welfare politics, i.e., about the level of generosity of national welfare expenditure (Enggist and Pingerra 2021; Rathgeb 2021; Busemayer et al., 2021). By contrast, it has not considered the second dimension, namely the recalibration of welfare expenditure (which social policy domain should be given priority). While both dimensions are undoubtedly relevant in the Italian political panorama, I decided to focus especially on the first one for two reasons. Firstly, the topic of TCNs' disentitlement to the RdC acquired great relevance and visibility during the period under observation, by both politicians and public opinion, including NGOs, legal groups and associations, etc. Accordingly, I argue that a deeper analysis of how the League promoted disentitlement was necessary to shed light on this whole matter. Secondly, focusing on a single specific dimension has allowed me to carry out a deeper and more detailed analysis. Further studies can complement the present analysis, by delving into the debate around the recalibration of welfare expenditure in Italy (second dimension).

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Parliamentary debates analyzed:

Session No. 145, 20 March 2019, available at: https://www.camera.it/leg18/410?idSeduta=0145&tipo=stenografico#sed0145.stenografico.tit00030

Session No. 146, 21 March 2019, available at: https://www.camera.it/leg18/410?idSeduta=0146&tipo=stenografico#sed0146.stenografico.tit00020

Appendix A.
The coding procedure and coding frame

Qualitative content analysis is a more appropriate method for testing the article's hypotheses than its counterpart, quantitative content analysis (Keskinen, 2016). The quantitative method counts words and occurrences within the texts. Conversely, the qualitative one systematically examines themes and patterns and the overall sentiments within the selected texts. Thus, it is suitable to the article's research question since it allows for an in-depth and systematic examination of politicians' rhetoric with regard to migrants, namely the ideological and rhetorical frames they use to legitimate and promote migrants' exclusion from the RdC. Furthermore, qualitative content analysis allows the researcher to simultaneously capture both politicians' explicit and implicit references to the ideological and rhetorical frames under investigation (Schreier, 2014). Indeed, it may sometimes be the case that politicians do not explicitly refer to any of the existing frames, but they rather develop the discourses in such a way that they point back to one or both of them, or eventually to additional and still unexplored frames. By contrast, a purely quantitative analysis of the texts fails to capture these latent meanings since it only focuses on the explicit meanings (Ibid).

The article extracts the relevant frames from the texts' passages under examination by relying on a number of "categories" (or "codes"), i.e., several conceptual labels that foster an understanding of the data (Ibid). Empirically speaking, categories are "those aspects of the material about which researchers would like more information" (Schreier, 2014, p. 75), namely the deservingness criteria (and the corresponding frames, either WC or WP or both) in this article. Categories can be created before or while analyzing the content (Kuckartz, 2019).

Ex ante categories are called deductive because they originate from previous knowledge of the researcher, from the research question or from the existing literature. They are concepts that exist and have been formulated before reading the text and independently of it (Kuckartz, 2019). *In vivo* categories are created from the text itself, during the analysis: they are inductive (Ibid).

This work deals with deductive categories, built starting from the literature. They correspond to the specific deservingness/undeservingness criteria highlighted in the relevant literature: identity, control, attitude, reciprocity. By assigning the relevant text passages (i.e., those in which politicians speak in support of the restrictive measures introduced in the RdC and explain their reason for doing so) one or more of these categories, I extract from politicians' speeches the specific deservingness criteria and corresponding frames they use to legitimate the welfare chauvinist measures targeting the RdC. Based on Abs' (Abs et al., 2021) analytical framework I know that when the identity category applies then the WC frame is at play. Instead, when the other three categories/criteria apply (one or even all), then politicians are using the WP frame. In line with the traditional qualitative content analysis, each category is marked by one or several indicators. These are words, sentences, and broader considerations in the texts which enable me to immediately recognize the category at play (Schreier 2014; Kuckartz 2019). Here below, I show a summary scheme of the article's coding system.

- Identity
  - Indicators: words related to the identity semantic sphere ("citizens", "residents", "Italians" and "not Italians" and/or other similar ones); reasoning and considerations that explicitly give formal citizens (or residents) priority over non-citizen migrants in access to the RdC;
- Control
  - Indicators: words related to the control semantic sphere ("control", "held responsible", and/or other similar ones); reasoning and considerations that blame non-EU migrants for their own situation of need and low-income (for example, because they are unwilling to actively look for a job so to increase their income);
- Attitude
  - Indicators: words related to the attitude semantic sphere ("ungrateful", "dishonest", and/or other similar ones); reasoning and considerations that portray non-EU migrants as ungrateful and/or dishonest or in some other negative manner (from a moral and behavioral point of view);
- Reciprocity
  - Indicators: words related to the reciprocity semantic sphere ("contribute", "awarding", "actively engaging", and/or other similar ones); reasoning and considerations that stress that non-EU migrants have not contributed enough to the Italian social and economic growth through their past working activities.

Relying on well-defined indicators is useful for making clear where one code ends and another one begins. In fact, each category is applied to one or more sentences and textual passages only when words and discourses are consistent with that category's indicators. This in turn allows for the assessment of which deservingness criteria are used to justify the restrictive measures targeting the new RdC and whether these criteria correspond to those hypothesized in the article.

Besides, indicators are useful for applying the same categories to all the material in a consistent manner, i.e., always applying the same category when the same indicator is observed. The consistency of the coding frame increases, in turn, the reliability and replication of the overall analysis. In order to improve the efficiency of the research, I rely on MAXQDA, an advanced piece of software for qualitative data analysis, to code the qualitative data and analyze them (Kuckartz, 2019).

Appendix B.
Text excerpts analyzed[12]

Speeches by Matteo Salvini (Ministry of the Interior, the League), posted on the official Facebook webpage Lega-Salvini Premier:

> *When asked about the RdC:*
>
> "So, are you asking me what I think about the Citizenship Income? The Citizenship Income is a measure promoted by our coalition partner, the M5S. [...] The League is working on an amendment to reserve such schemes to Italian citizens only. I will accept the Citizenship Income, as long as it is a measure to help Italian citizens. The League does not want to give away money for free to those people who are not Italian citizens, wander the country without working or making any effort to get employment in Italy".
>
> (Interview by La Repubblica, September 2018)

> "We agree on this measure, but we are negotiating to introduce more controls (the ones proposed by the League). Luigi [i.e., the Ministry of Labor Luigi di Maio] and I will discuss this point further in the next few weeks. The League does not want to undermine the efforts made to support 5 million Italians living under the poverty line, so we are trying to find a compromise between helping people in need and avoiding cheating by dishonest people and abusers. [...] All those people who declare false properties and lower incomes just to obtain entitlement to the Citizenship Income, if caught, have to go to prison – no ifs, not buts! I refer especially to migrants from outside the EU. I know that many of them are behaving this way and I want to stop them!
>
> (TV interview during the TV broadcast *Non è l'arena*, February 2019)

Parliamentary speeches

Speeches by Deputy Edoardo Ziello (The League) during the 45th parliamentary session of the Chamber of Deputies, on 20 March 2019:

> "I move now to talk about the Citizenship Income. It is clear that we, as a party, had not thought of introducing a Citizenship Income during the election campaign for the general election of 4 March. However, we have always said one thing, namely that the 5 million poor Italians who are in our country because of the wrong and wicked policies of the Democratic Party, these Italians were and are a priority for us" (20 March, Column 145, Pos. 193-194).
>
> "Citizenship Income is not a purely poverty-alleviation, welfare measure, it is also and above all a measure that is linked to reintegration into the labor market. With this measure, we guarantee that all the beneficiaries of the Citizenship Income will be people who are totally obliged to follow a path, who will not sit on their sofa and live merely on the money received, as some deputies of the Democratic Party do" (20 March, Column 145, Pos. 195-197).

[12] Translation from Italian by the author.

> "This new law represents a new pact for social inclusion. Surely, thanks to this pact for social inclusion, a lot of Italian citizens will be included in a path of inclusion that will also guarantee them the right to return to be or feel protagonists of their community [...]. Then, with the two measures that we, the League, have introduced, namely residence for ten years for all non-EU citizens and the additional certification attesting to the absence of property abroad, we want to make sure, we are sure that this benefit [i.e., the Citizenship Income] will go primarily to Italian citizens and not to immigrants! Our government was elected by Italian citizens, and it purses the interests of Italian citizens, not those of people coming from the other side of the world. [...] Because, Mr. President, that was what happened with the previous minimum income scheme: the majority of migrants who took the Inclusion Income played dumb and did not declare all their real properties, in order to get the benefit. Some of them even went to spend it in their country of origin rather than here in Italy! This situation was also likely to create economic damage to our country and a fiscal loss for our citizens who lost a lot of resources we wish the Government could have rather spent to help them. We, on the other hand, said: more barriers to access to benefits for migrants, to cut the problem out at its root and prevent the cheating practices, so as to make sure that more resources are left for Italians" (20 March, Column 45, Pos. 198).

Speeches by Deputy Riccardo Molinari (The League) during the 46th parliamentary session of the Chamber of Deputies, on the 21 March 2019:

> "A few months ago, the League and the Five Stars Movement, alone against everyone, against all the opposition, against all the national and international commentators, engaged in a tug-of-war with the European Commission. This occurred because the Commission had a clear objective regarding our financial law: not to make us apply these two social measures, the Citizenship Income and the revision of the Fornero pension system. Because the idea of Brussels was that the wrong recipes, which have led our country to have one third of Italian families at risk of poverty and 5 million living under the poverty line, those recipes should not be questioned. Therefore, this government and this majority are a government and a majority that are subversive with respect to those dogmas. Namely, we are demonstrating that, if you want to do battle for Italian citizens, if you want to do battle for social justice, nothing can hold: Italian citizens are right when they vote well and when they have leaders who do the things they promise. Well, these two measures are measures which, as I was saying, respond to the demand for social rights and social protection and meet the needs of a significant part of the Italian population, which is the part that has become poorer in recent years" (21 March, Column 146, Pos. 1068).

> "The measures we proposed are to be seen as a way to make the Citizenship Income even more effective. It is required, for those who present an ISEE declaration, given that there are patrimonial requirements to be respected, that the embassy of the State of origin certifies that the foreigner, who applies to obtain the Citizenship Income, is not cheating us, is not trying to fool us again, as happened with the inclusion income, for which many foreigners did not declare all their actual properties and real estates and stole money from Italians citizens" (21 March, Column 146, Pos. 1072).

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"In conspiracies we trust": interpersonal/institutional trust and beliefs in conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Academic research has shown that believing in conspiracy theories is common in contemporary democracies and that believing in such theories is particularly common in moments of crisis (such as wars, terrorist attacks, or pandemics). Scholars have attempted to understand the psychological and attitudinal elements that trigger conspiracism among the citizenry, finding that both interpersonal and institutional trust negatively correlate with conspiracism. If, however, it is straightforward to expect that people who present low levels of institutional trust might present high levels of conspiracism (due to the consistency of the narratives that drive the two attitudes), no research has so far investigated the mechanism behind the relationship between interpersonal trust and beliefs in conspiracy theories. Using survey data collected in Italy at the beginning of June 2020, after the first pandemic wave in the country, the present contribution aims to identify a plausible socio-psychological mechanism that triggers this latter association. Using fixed-effect regression models, we show negative associations between institutional/interpersonal trust and conspiracism – with the former coefficient being bigger than the latter. We also show that pandemic stress, measured as one's perceived likelihood of being infected by the new Coronavirus, moderates both associations. In particular, at higher levels of pandemic stress, the correlation between interpersonal trust and conspiracy is larger, while the opposite is true for the relationship with institutional trust. This is consistent with theories that see conspiracism as a simple explanation of a complex world, namely, a tool that people (especially low-interpersonal-trust individuals) employ to reduce stress and anxiety produced by an uncertain situation.

1. Introduction

In recent years, scholarly and public opinion interest in conspiracy theory beliefs has grown. Conspiracy theories, in their most basic definition, are explanations of social facts by means of "secret arrangement[s] between a small group of actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hide vital secrets or illicitly cause

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widespread harm" (Uscinski et al. 2016, p. 58). The growing interest in the determinants of conspiracism might be explained in two ways. First, the diffusion of conspiracist beliefs seems in contrast to the spread of higher education, scientific knowledge, and the relative ease with which rigorous and reliable information can be accessed by the general public. Rather than explanations of social facts put forward by experts, people seem to be more fascinated by alternative epistemologies, which are usually consistent with their previous beliefs (Plencner, 2014). Partially related to this first argument, the increased diffusion of conspiracy theories also seems to be associated with the support of populist parties (Mancosu et al., 2017; Castanho Silva et al., 2017), which have recently made heavy use of conspiratorial language.

The academic literature has shown that conspiracy theories emerge during crises, such as wars (Olmsted, 2019; Byford and Billig, 2001) or terrorist attacks (Kreis, 2020); i.e., moments in which the feelings of threat and panic are at their peak in the citizenry (Oleksy et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, thus, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has crucially contributed to the emergence of a large number of theories related to the origins of the virus and the possible benefits that evil and powerful conspirators might obtain by lockdown measures, the circulation of the virus, or vaccination campaigns (Miller, 2020; Oleksy et al., 2021, Vezzoni et al., 2021). These positions can lead to negative consequences, such as vaccine hesitancy (Hornsey et al., 2020) or scarce compliance with public health measures (Constantinou et al., 2021).

Scholars have made relevant efforts to understand the psychological and attitudinal elements that trigger conspiracism among the citizenry, focusing, among other elements, on the relevance that trust in institutions might have on the likelihood of accepting conspiracy theories. It should not surprise, indeed, that people holding scarce trust in political institutions are more fascinated by theories that place in an extremely negative light these same institutions, deemed as plotting conspiracies to the detriment of regular citizens. Much less investigated is the connection between interpersonal trust and conspiracism. Although some research has been dedicated to this latter relationship, showing a negative correlation between the two concepts (Goertzel, 1994; Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999), the mechanism that should drive this empirical evidence is far from being assessed.

The aim of this contribution is twofold. First, we aim to systematically compare the strength of the relationship between interpersonal/institutional trust and conspiracism. Second, we aim to identify a socio-psychological mechanism that is able to explain the under-theorized correlation between interpersonal trust and conspiracism. We will argue that the relationship between conspiracism and horizontal trust might be due to the cognitive and social tools that interpersonal trust guarantees. We rely on socio-psychological theories that see interpersonal trust as an indicator of the extent to which people can deal with complexity and can solve cognitive and social problems through a trustworthy network. When an individual lacks social/interpersonal trust, it means that they are alone in solving those problems and dealing with complex, stressful situations. Believing in conspiracy theories is, after all, very similar to producing simple answers to complex problems. This leads us to hypothesize that, at lower levels of social trust, we will witness a higher likelihood of relying on coping mechanisms that produce higher levels of conspiracist ideation. This mechanism can be further refined by exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic, which has unevenly increased levels of stress and uncertainty in the population. On the one hand, if the

mechanism we are hypothesizing is correct, at heightened levels of stress and uncertainty (produced by the COVID-19 crisis) we will see stronger associations between conspiracism and interpersonal trust. On the other hand, we will not see the same picture with regard to the association between institutional trust and conspiracism, which is mainly due to a narrative consistency between the two concepts.

We test our hypotheses by means of survey data collected in Italy at the beginning of June 2020, after the first pandemic wave in the country. Using fixed-effects regression models, we show the negative associations between institutional/interpersonal trust and conspiracism – with the former being about 4.5 times bigger than the latter. In addition, we show that pandemic stress, measured as one's perceived likelihood of being infected by the new Coronavirus, moderates both associations. In particular, at higher levels of pandemic stress, the correlation between interpersonal trust and conspiracy is greater, while the opposite is true for the relationship with institutional trust.

The paper is designed as follows. Section 2 aims to outline the argument, define the basic concepts that we will take into account, and clarify the hypotheses. Section 3 presents the data and methods employed to test our expectations. Section 4 will present the results of the regression analyses, and Section 5 will draw some conclusions on the results and present the limitations of the research.

2. Background

2.1 Conspiracies theories and people who believe them

Academic research has shown that believing in conspiracy theories is common in contemporary democracies. According to Oliver and Wood (2014), about 50% of Americans believe in at least one conspiracy theory among those most widespread in the US. The percentage of believers is similar in other samples collected in other countries (see, as regards Italy, Mancosu et al., 2017). As a matter of fact, conspiracism seems not to be a marginal phenomenon.

The academic literature has tried to identify the factors that explain the individual likelihood of endorsing these theories. In particular, it is possible to identify two research lines. The first relies on psychological and psychopathological studies, which argue that believing in conspiracies is a more or less severe form of mental disease (Darwin et al., 2011; Barron et al., 2014). Conspiracism seems to be related to a paranoid style of thinking, a psychological condition in which an individual "sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed [...] against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate does not affect himself alone but millions of others." (Hofstadter, 1956, p. 4). In addition, people believing in conspiracy theories are more likely to show Manichean attitudes of the social and political environment in which they live, depicting a society in which a few conspirators are identified with Evil and millions of individuals with Good. Moreover, social psychology literature finds that conspiracism is correlated with lower levels of self-esteem, agreeableness, high levels of powerlessness, and authoritarianism (Abalakina et al., 1999; Swami et al., 2011).

A second line of research, on the other hand, investigates conspiracy beliefs by employing a socio-political perspective, aimed at finding associations between conspiracism and other attitudinal or socio-demographic variables (Oliver and Wood, 2014; van Proojien,

2017; Mancosu and Vegetti, 2020). For instance, it is shown that education is negatively related to conspiracism, with more educated people being more likely to engage in rational thinking, to avoid an obscure interpretation of facts, and to be less likely to present the need for closure attitudes (Oliver and Wood, 2014, Van Proojien, 2017, Mancosu et al., 2017). The literature also shows positive correlations between conspiracism and religiosity (see Oliver and Wood, 2014; Mancosu et al., 2017; Ladini, 2021), and political engagement (Jolley and Douglas, 2014). As regards the relationship between electoral attitudes and conspiracism, the literature shows different patterns, diversified by the national contexts in which the empirical evidence is collected. In the US, generic conspiracy theories (i.e., theories that do not see a major role in the conspiracy of a Democrat/Republican) seem not to asymmetrically affect liberal/conservative citizens (Oliver and Woods, 2014). On the other hand, right- and left-wing extremists seem to believe more in conspiracy theories in the Netherlands (see van Prooijen et al., 2015). Italy is characterized by a strong left-right cleavage, with extreme right-wing people believing significantly more even in generic theories (Mancosu et al., 2021). Previous research has also dealt with the relationship between different forms of trust and conspiracy theory beliefs.

2.2 Interpersonal, institutional trust, and conspiracism

Overall, the investigation of interpersonal and institutional trust, as well as their consequences, is extremely prolific in sociology and political science. Trust in institutions (also known as "vertical trust" or "trust in authorities") is generally labeled as the level of confidence that one has in political institutions (such as the government, the police, the parliament of one's country, etc., see Yang, 2006; Twenge et al., 2014). Similarly, interpersonal trust is the level of trust that people have in others during their everyday activities. On the other hand, the horizontal trust concept is usually connected to the concept of social capital (Hooghe & Stolle, 2003; Prakash & Selle, 2004; Putnam, 2002), which conceptualizes the levels to which one is embedded in interpersonal networking activities, knows other people in one's community and is willing to trust them.

Although apparently similar (after all, both deal with the act of trusting), in the literature the two concepts present enormous differences, both in terms of the mechanism explaining the determinants of different levels of interpersonal/institutional trust, and in terms of their theorized consequences. When dealing with institutional trust, for instance, scholars tend to explain different degrees of it by means of one's position in society (Campbell, 2004), or the characteristics of the political/institutional system to which individuals are exposed. For instance, political contexts in which people witness low levels of accountability of the political systems are those in which a lack of trust in those suboptimal institutions is more likely (e.g. Edlund and Lindh, 2013, Hakhverdian and Mayne, 2012, Welch et al., 2005).

On the other hand, asymmetries in the levels of horizontal trust are more likely to be explained by micro-sociological or psychological elements, such as the intensity of relationships in formal/informal groups (Li et al., 2005), or the degree of structuredness and clarity of the social norms in one's environment (Welch et al., 2005). Especially regarding this latter construct, it is easy to imagine that in a social environment in which the individual can efficiently predict the actions of other individuals surrounding them, the level of social trust will be higher. As far as the consequences of different social and

institutional levels are concerned, it is possible to say that, if institutional trust is more a matter of the *opinions* of people about the political and social system in which they live, interpersonal trust tackles one's everyday *social life*.

The literature stresses that interpersonal and institutional trust presents strong (and negative) associations with conspiracism. For instance, Einstein and Glick (2015) show that high levels of conspiracism are correlated with low levels of trust in institutions. The same relationship is shown by Mari and colleagues (2021). The social-psychological literature presents similar results concerning the relationship between interpersonal trust and believing in conspiracy theories. Evidence of this association can be found in Goertzel (1994), as well as in Abalakina-Paap and colleagues (1999). However, in this latter case, the relationship is always presented as plain empirical evidence, rarely associated with an explanatory mechanism.

2.3 Trust and conspiracism: what about the mechanisms?

The explanation of the relationship between different types of trust and conspiracism is the main aim of the paper. As regards institutional trust, the mechanism that drives the relationship is pretty straightforward. If people, for a variety of reasons, tend to trust less in institutions, it means that they believe that these are at best inefficient, and at worst flawed (Hakhverdian and Mayne, 2012; Mari et al., 2021). If political and economic institutions are perceived in this way, it becomes easier to believe that a corrupt elite, not attentive to the public interest, might plot in secret to the detriment of the large majority of the unaware population (for a more in-depth analysis of the consistency of distrust and conspiracist narratives, see Jamison et al., 2020). As shown above, previous literature has shown a negative relationship between conspiracism and institutional trust, and we have no elements to believe that the pandemic would undermine this association. Our first hypothesis will thus read as follows:

H_1. *At lower levels of institutional trust, the level of conspiracism increases*

Much less clear is the mechanism that drives the relationship between social trust and conspiracism – as stressed above, previous literature, mainly based on correlational analyses in social psychology, did not provide a social mechanism that can provide a compelling theoretical explanation of the association between the two concepts.

In order to provide an attempt to solve this puzzle, we must start with defining conspiracism in a slightly different way. For citizens who believe in these theories, conspiracism has been defined as a simple explanation to a complex problem (see Marchlewska et al., 2018). Believing in conspiracy theories shifts the responsibility of dramatic events or unequal distributions of resources to a super-powerful, unrecognizable, and unbeatable group of people – the conspirators (Marchlewska et al., 2018; Uscinski, 2018). We also stressed in the previous paragraph that low levels of interpersonal trust are related to anomy – i.e., social structures in which social norms are undermined or almost absent (see Welch, 2005; Falcone and Castelfranchi, 2001). As stressed in previous studies, people with low interpersonal trust are alone in coping with complexity – namely, they have to cognitively deal with complex issues in (almost) complete solitude. This interpretation is compatible with the evidence brought by Grace and Schill (1984), who show that people presenting high levels of social trust are more likely

to cope with situations of stress better than people with low levels (see also Wang et al., 2020). It is thus easier for those people to rely on simple explanations of social and political facts to cope with complexity. Hypothesis 2 will thus read as follows.

H_2. *At lower levels of interpersonal trust the level of conspiracism increases*

2.4 The role of uncertainty and the COVID-19 crisis in Italy

The COVID-19 crisis in Italy, especially during and after the so-called first wave (between March and July 2020), provides a unique occasion to test this mechanism. The Coronavirus pandemic hit Italy before other countries and, especially during the first wave of the pandemic, in a particularly strong way (with an excess death rate – as of 15 June 2020 – of more than 34,345 units, see Blangiardo et al., 2020). The first wave, with the strong lockdown measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus, produced dramatic changes in Italians' everyday lives. For our interests, this wave of the pandemic presents two relevant characteristics. First of all, it enhanced stress and uncertainty in the population from the economic, social, and existential points of view. The pandemic, in addition to producing a disastrous economic crisis, reduced the network of social relationships of a large quota of the population, forced to stay at home because of the lockdown measures. The second element of interest is the variance of those stress levels in the population. Since the beginning of the pandemic, it was clear that some subjects (the elderly, people with pre-existing pathologies) were more likely to be seriously endangered by the virus. Also, Italy has seen a very uneven distribution of the prevalence of infected people (and consequently, different death tolls), with outbreaks in some provinces of Northern Italy. For these reasons, the measured levels of stress and the perceptions of existential threat during and after the pandemic were largely different among Italians.

In this contribution, we will employ the perception of the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic (the so-called pandemic stress, see Kujawa et al., 2020) as a moderator to better understand the relationships between interpersonal/institutional trust and conspiracism.

Perceiving high levels of pandemic stress brings, inevitably, a burden of anxiety and uncertainty that people must cope with. If what we argued in H2 is true, i.e., that the relationship between interpersonal trust and conspiracism is driven by a form of anxiety reduction, in which people cope with uncertainty by relying on simple, Manichean theories that explain almost everything with simple arguments, it is plausible to infer that this same relationship should be stronger in subjects that experience more of this type of anxiety. In other words, we expect that, if the mechanism we are theorizing is correct, COVID-related stress will moderate the relationship between interpersonal trust and conspiracism. Hypothesis 3 thus reads as follows:

H_3. *The negative relationship between interpersonal trust and conspiracism will be stronger among people experiencing more pandemic stress.*

On the other hand, we have stressed that trust in institutions is only marginally associated with the levels of anxiety that one experiences, and it is mainly a matter of opinion, which deals more with the consistency of conspiracist narratives with respect to anxiety management. Institutional trust is mainly based on perceived perceptions of

institutional performance, or political partisanship, but the literature so far has not provided any possible theoretical link between institutional trust, conspiracism, *and* uncertainty/pandemic stress. In this case, we might expect that the moderation effect would be absent, because of the very fact that the two mechanisms that drive people's reactions are different. We do not see any reason why pandemic stress is expected to moderate the relationship between institutional trust and conspiracism. Our H4 will thus read as follows:

> **H_4.** *The negative relationship between institutional trust and conspiracism will not be moderated by pandemic stress.*

3. Data and methods

Our hypotheses are tested through an online survey of the over-18 Italian population (n=2,267). Data collection is managed by the Italian polling company SWG. The sample is drawn from a pool of 60,000 panelists. Respondents are randomly drawn from this pool, with the sampling procedure stratified by a set of socio-demographic indicators (gender, age, and area of residence). The questionnaire was administered after the first pandemic wave (more specifically, between June 26 and July 3, 2020).

Our dependent variable is the result of a scale asking our respondents to evaluate the likelihood of four conspiracy theories about the nature and diffusion of COVID-19 that were particularly widespread in July 2020. More specifically, we asked them to evaluate – from 0 (meaning "not plausible at all") to 10 (meaning "completely plausible") – the following statements:

- The new Coronavirus has been created to breed fear and impose mass vaccinations
- COVID-19 was created in a Chinese lab and escaped, causing the pandemic[1]
- New 5G antennas harm the immune system and makes the diffusion of Covid-19 easier
- The COVID-19 emergency and lockdown measures have been a rehearsal for a dictatorship

The four items, although covering largely different aspects of the conspiracy theories about the pandemic, present an extremely satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.92). We can thus argue that they tackle a concept that might be very similar to that of conspiracist ideation (Bruder et al., 2013). After summing the four items, we rescaled them to obtain a 0-10 scale, in which 0 is equal to 0 "Evaluating every conspiracy theory as not plausible at all" and 10 means "Evaluating every conspiracy theory as totally plausible".

The main independent variables are represented by two scales tackling interpersonal and institutional trust. The first scale, which covers interpersonal trust, is composed of two items, asking people to evaluate, on a 1-4 scale from 1 ("No trust at all") to 4 ("A lot of trust") how much they trust 1) their colleagues/coworkers and 2) friends and acquaintances. The second scale measures trust in political and public institutions, asking them to evaluate, on the same 4-point scale outlined above, their trust in the

[1] We are aware of the fact that the "leak" hypothesis is now more plausible, being evaluated as a possible origin of the new Coronavirus also by official sources. Still, in July 2020 this was definitely a conspiracy theory.

following institutions: the President of the Republic, the Italian Parliament, Italian law enforcement, the President of the respondent's region, the mayor of respondent's city, the government, and the National Healthcare System. Both the scales provide a more than sufficient internal consistency (respectively, the Cronbach alphas of the two scales are equal to .83 and .86). To make them comparable in the models that test our hypotheses, and to provide positive coefficients in the models, after summing the items, we rescaled them to a 0-1 scale, inverted the polarity of the scale, and produced two *distrust* scales, in which 0 means "no distrust at all in any item" and 1 means "complete distrust in all items". This will help the readability of predictions/average marginal effects in the following paragraph. It must be noted that the first-order correlation between the two types of trust is not particularly high (r=.40). We can thus conclude that the two concepts, as stressed repeatedly in the literature (see Spadaro et al., 2020, Kim et al., 2020), tackle two different concepts.

We stressed above the importance of the moderator of the effect, the individual level of pandemic stress. Since we do not have a measure in our questionnaire that tackles this concept exactly, we rely on a proxy of the concept, namely, the perceived likelihood of getting infected in the future by the new Coronavirus (a 0-10 scale going from 0 "Impossible" to 10 "Sure"). The question was asked of those who did not get infected with COVID-19 (in our sample, we had 29 people who declared they had been infected and we thus expunged them from the analysis). In this case, at higher levels of perceived likelihood of being infected, we are assuming that feelings of anxiety and pandemic stress will increase.[2]

To control for possible composition effects, we added to our models several confounders, namely gender, age (continuous), educational level (subdivided in "Primary", "Secondary" and "Tertiary"), and vote intentions (subdivided in "Majority", "Right-wing opposition", "Other parties/Abstention").[3]

3.1 Models

We stressed above that the pandemic hit the country in very different ways. It is thus important to take into account that different subnational pandemic situations might alter the correlation of our attitudes. The hypotheses will thus be tested using two fixed-effect linear regression models, with the level-2 variable being the region of residence of the respondents.

The first model, aimed at testing H_1 and H_2, in addition to the control variables, fits the coefficients for the two types of trust. The second fits two two-way interactions between the two types of trust separately and the perceived likelihood of getting infected by COVID-19. This latter model will test H_3 and H_4.

4. Results

Table 1 reports the coefficients for the two models presented above.

[2] Of course, this choice, similarly to the working employed for the trust scale, is a suboptimal solution. This drawback of the empirical design will be dealt with in the last section of the paper.
[3] See Appendix 1 for descriptive statistics of the variables employed in the models.

Table 1. Two fixed-effect models to study conspiracism

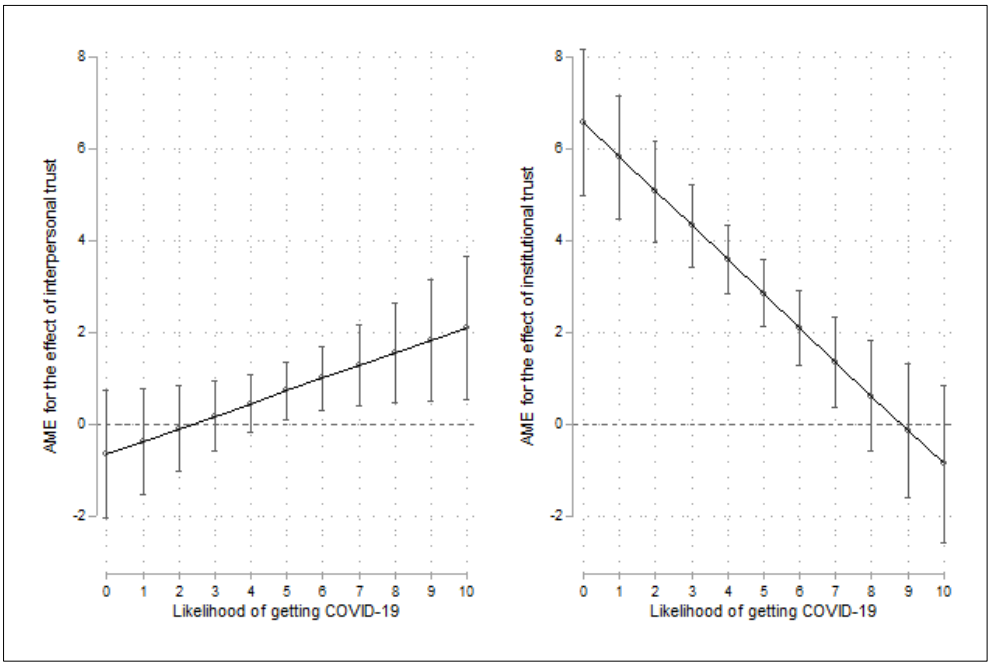
	Model 1		Model 2	
Independent variables	**Coef.**	**S.E.**	**Coef.**	**S.E.**
Institutional distrust	3.018***	(0.371)	6.558***	(0.814)
Interpersonal distrust	0.670**	(0.310)	-0.640	(0.711)
Likelihood of getting COVID-19	0.0452	(0.0305)	0.338***	(0.0795)
Instit. distrust * Getting COVID-19			-0.742***	(0.152)
Interp. distrust * Getting COVID-19			0.274**	(0.138)
Gender: Female (ref. Male)	0.613***	(0.124)	0.596***	(0.124)
Age	-0.004	(0.004)	-0.004	(0.004)
Vote: Government (ref. Others)	0.152	(0.152)	0.166	(0.151)
Vote: Right-wing opposition	1.303***	(0.166)	1.260***	(0.165)
Education lvl: Secondary (ref. Primary)	-0.858***	(0.226)	-0.806***	(0.225)
Education lvl: Tertiary	-1.360***	(0.232)	-1.336***	(0.230)
Constant	1.099***	(0.415)	-0.396	(0.554)
Observations	1,668		1,668	
Number of lvl-2 units	20		20	
Lvl-2 variance	2.489		2.474	

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

As it is possible to see in model 1, both vertical and horizontal distrust variables correlate positively with conspiracism, as correctly predicted in H_1 and H_2. Since the two variables are rescaled in the same way, it is also possible to investigate the magnitude of these two effects. As we can note, the difference between the coefficients of vertical and horizontal distrust is important, with the institutional distrust coefficient being about 4.5 times greater than that of interpersonal distrust (a three-point coefficient for the institutional trust variable and a 0.7 coefficient for the interpersonal trust variable).

Although few studies in the literature have investigated the relevance of the differences between interpersonal and institutional trust in explaining conspiracism, the corroboration of H_1 and H_2 does not come as a surprise. The interaction terms, presented in Model 2, show a more interesting pattern. We argued in H_3 that, if the relationship between different types of trust and conspiracism is actually driven by different mechanisms (fear and anxiety on one hand, narrative consistency on the other), the moderation effect of perceived stress caused by the COVID-19 crisis should impact interpersonal trust in a very precise way, namely, increasing the effect of distrust at increasing levels of pandemic stress. On the other hand, in H_4 the sign of the moderating effect of stress was expected *not* to be significant. As is possible to see from Table 1 (Model 2), the interaction terms between pandemic stress and the two variables present opposite signs. In other words, the more a person is persuaded that he/she will get COVID-19, the greater the correlation between interpersonal distrust and conspiracism. Similarly, at increasing levels of our pandemic stress variable, we see a decreasing correlation between institutional distrust and conspiracism. Figure 1 shows these two relationships graphically.

Figure 1. Average Marginal Effects of the coefficient of institutional and interpersonal distrust on conspiracism, by perceived likelihood of getting COVID-19



Source: own elaboration.

As is possible to see from the left panel of Figure 1, the Average Marginal Effects show also the magnitude of the two opposed moderation effects. We can see that the AME of interpersonal distrust is non-significant at low levels of perceived likelihood of getting infected (and it becomes significant when the perceived likelihood is higher than 5). On the other hand, we can see the opposite figure for institutional distrust (right panel of Figure 1). Here, at high levels of pandemic stress, we have non-significant marginal effects of interpersonal distrust. Summarizing, we can say that H_3 is corroborated, while the empirical test of H_4 reveals unexpected evidence that must be carefully taken into account. Although we expected that the moderation of pandemic stress would not have been significant, we realize that the effect is significant, and goes in the opposite direction with respect to the effect that moderates the correlation between interpersonal trust and conspiracism. This moderation effect is particularly large, with people with low levels of pandemic stress presenting a strong and positive association between institutional trust and conspiracism, and citizens presenting high levels of pandemic stress presenting a non-significant correlation between institutional trust and conspiracism. This result challenges our H_4 and calls for possible alternative explanations of the relationship between trust (and, in particular, institutional trust) and conspiracism during the pandemic.

5. Discussion

Believing in conspiracy theories is usually seen as being related to one's levels of trust. Lower levels of institutional trust might make people more likely to believe in plots orchestrated by powerful and evil elites. At the same time, even if the mechanism is not

explicitly posited, the literature found a negative association between interpersonal trust and believing in conspiracy theories (Goertzel, 1994; Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999).

The present contribution aimed to systematically compare the effects that different types of trust might have on conspiracism. In addition, the paper aimed to understand the mechanisms underlying the relationship between conspiracism and interpersonal/institutional trust, by exploiting, as a moderator variable, the role of pandemic stress after the first COVID-19 wave. We argued that people with low levels of interpersonal trust are more likely to employ conspiracy theories as coping mechanisms to deal with complexity, especially when presenting high levels of pandemic stress. Believing in such theories, thus, might be a way of reducing the stress related to uncertain situations (Grace and Schill, 1984; Wang et al., 2020). On the other hand, people with high levels of interpersonal trust are more equipped to deal with uncertainty and thus are less likely to be forced to rely on these simple explanations of reality.

At the same time, we expected that the moderating effect of pandemic stress would not be significant as regards the correlation between institutional trust and our dependent variable. Surprisingly, we found that the moderation effect in this latter case is opposite with respect to the former type of trust. This is particularly interesting since it might suggest that a situation of pandemic distress leads to a reduction in the correlation between believing in conspiracies and trust in institutions. The relationship between institutional trust and conspiracism seems to be affordable only if one feels relatively safe with respect to the pandemic. Being afraid of the possible consequences of the pandemic, on the other hand, reduces the correlation between trust and conspiracism. This latter result might be explainable as some form of side effect of high levels of fear of the pandemic, which, as we know from previous literature, increases the average level of institutional trust (Kritzinger et al., 2021). As a result, if institutional trust increases also for generally conspiracist people, this might lead to the weaker correlations that we see in the results.

The study presents several limitations, both as concerns the data employed and the design. Concerning the former, we have seen that the variables employed to measure both interpersonal trust and pandemic stress are non-standard variables that are usually employed in the literature. In particular, interpersonal trust and pandemic stress are generally measured in different ways. Also, because of data limitations, several socioeconomic variables (such as economic vulnerability and income losses, which might represent relevant indicators fostering respondents' feeling of anxiety) were kept out of our analyses. Future research will aim to test whether those relationships hold with standard variables, as well as with more confounders. The second limitation relates to the non-causal design employed. The results present correlational evidence, and the causal mechanisms argued are corroborated only in an indirect way. In other words, we do not have the "smoking gun" that our argument is correct.

Notwithstanding these issues, we think that these results shed light on the connections between two fundamental concepts employed in social science and a new, interesting element of public opinion that is becoming extremely relevant in contemporary societies.

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Appendix

Descriptive statistics:

Variable	Min	Max	S.D.	Mean
Conspiracism scale	0	10	2.72	2.55
Institutional distrust	0	1	.20	.52
Interpersonal distrust	0	1	.22	.39
Likelihood of getting COVID-19	0	10	2.06	4.64
Gender: Female (ref. Male)	1	2	.50	1.47
Age	18	90	15.73	48.80
Vote: Others	0	1	.48	.37
Vote: Government	0	1	.48	.38
Vote: Right-wing opposition	0	1	.43	.25
Education lvl: Primary	0	1	.30	.10
Education lvl: Secondary	0	1	.50	.52
Education lvl: Tertiary	0	1	.49	.38

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Migrants, religion, and politics: an imperfect combination.
The strange case of Italians in times of migration

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Abstract

How do Italians perceive immigrants? Over the last twenty years, the issue of immigration has become increasingly relevant. With the intensification of landings, the issues connected to immigration have become elements of conflict and confrontation both in civil society and in politics. Among the various determinants that explain attitudes towards immigration, religion appears to play a very important role in orienting public opinion. Using some information collected by the European Values survey (2012; 2016-2018) and adopting different regression models, it emerges that among Catholics, a closed attitude towards immigrants prevails. Nevertheless, something seems to have changed over time because when the religious practice of Catholics intensifies, the anti-immigrant sentiment declines. A contraction of anti-immigrant sentiment is found also when practising Catholics vote for a populist party.

1. Introduction

The issue of immigration, as Hollifield (1997) argued at the end of the last millennium, is seen to be of great importance in many countries and occupies a central role in the agenda of the governments of EU member states (Scheepers et al. 2002). Since 2015, when massive flows of immigrants arrived in Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea, public concern has increased, and immigration has become one of the two most important issues facing the EU (Welsch and Kuhling 2017). Although immigration has been a central issue in many national elections, facilitating the rise of nationalist parties which gained support from those who saw immigrants as one of the principal problems in their country (Harteveld 2017), voters remain misinformed about the issue (Blinder 2015). Even today, many citizens believe that the number of immigrants is higher than in reality and the fracture between reality and perception of migratory phenomena appears to have widened over the years. Among Italians, in 2018 the difference between the perceived and true share of immigrants was equal to 16 percentage points (26% perceived and 10% true; see Alesina et al. 2018), while in 2019 the gap increased by another 5 percentage points (31 perceived and 9% true; Ipsos 2019).

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The anti-immigrant attitude taking root among European countries is not new. More than a decade ago, Reed (2006) showed that Western democracies were becoming increasingly inhospitable and that voters were not convinced by government choices based on humanitarian principles. Since then, few governments have tried to attenuate popular prejudice against immigrants, while the political class has tended to be reluctant toward reception measures. This is evident in countries such as Denmark, Finland, Hungary, and Slovenia, which have restricted their immigration policies, as well as in some host countries, where immigrants are seen as a problem for national culture (Semyonov et al. 2008). Only countries with more inclusive integration policies, such as Sweden, have a lower perception of ethnic threat (see Callens and Meuleman 2017).

Religion is known to be a long-standing factor in politics and its impact on social and political processes has grown lately, especially where rigid migration policies have closed borders even to those fleeing conflicts (Hatton 2011). In the last two decades, when the influx of immigrants and the complex social and political consequences thereof have been affecting Europe's 'cultural, religious and humanist inheritance' (The Economist 2019), studies on the influence of religion have increased numerically.

Religions have many points in common, with charity, benevolence, and a long tradition of love for humanity shared by the Islamic (Rahaei 2012; Elmadmad 2008), Christian (Groody 2009), and Jewish (Schulman and Barkouki-Winter 2000) religions, and the defence of refugees and those seeking asylum is at the basis of the principles that characterise both Catholics and Lutherans (see Handlin 1951). In Europe, churches provide the social structure to support ethnic communities, promoting the structural assimilation of immigrants and their children, showing a broad competence in interreligious dialogue, and easing the religious and cultural tensions surrounding immigrants in Europe (see Permoser et al. 2010). However, the debate continues as to whether religion is a source of intolerance and exclusion (Brewer et al. 2010), a means to achieving peace and unity (Little 2007) or a two-sided Janus (Appleby 1999). How does religious belief affect anti-immigrant sentiment in Italy?

Immigration is not a stable phenomenon, and it changes over time. Studies examining the connection between religion and sentiment towards immigrants adopt different measures of religiosity and use them separately to test specific hypotheses. In this study, we investigate the attitudes of those who practise religion, because religious practice is something that could favour the capacity to address social problems and concerns (Fagan 2006), such as that of immigration. To this end, we use religious membership and aggregate different measures of religiosity (attendance at Mass, prayer, and grade of religiosity) in a single dimension. Although these religious measures are not exhaustive, the synthesis of religious involvement at the individual level and the religious community to which one belongs are factors that allow us to look more precisely at how religiosity, even in an age of secularisation, causes different attitudes towards immigrants among Italian citizens.

In recent years, the rhetoric of populist parties, especially in Italy, has made the relationship between the public and immigrants more fragile. An example is given by the Lega which, in the last national administrative elections, exploited religion and its contents (see Gnagni 2018; Re 2019), and tried to win over the Catholic electorate. In this work, distinguishing practising Catholics from non-practising Catholics, we will shed

light also on the effects that populist ideology, expressed through the vote, produces on the perception that Catholics have of immigrants.

The paper is organised as follows. The next two sections will highlight theoretical aspects relating to both the European immigration process and religion which define the hypotheses. Subsequently, in section three, we define the research methods adopted, the dependent and independent variables, and describe the phenomenon analysed. In the fourth section, we show the principal results and the final, fifth, section presents our conclusions.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1. Immigrants and Europe

Immigration has transformed Europe's southern borders into a death trap (Fargues 2015). In 2015, over one million people arrived in Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea, compared with 250,000 in 2014 and 60,000 in 2013. This increase appears clear in Italy especially with respect to asylum seekers. Specifically, as reported by Fiore and Ialongo (2018), in southern Europe between 2014 and 2017, the total number of migrants was 1,766,186, peaking at just over one million in 2015 alone. In Italy, in the same period, 624,747 migrants arrived. Although these arrivals made up only about 1% of the Italian population of 59 million, the perception of the threat of immigrants has increased in the country, also in terms of insecurity (see Steiner et al. 2013). Over time, the perception of insecurity has turned into distrust and lack of social cohesion because migrants are often forced to rely on the informal economy to cope with daily survival. It is no coincidence that where there have been more arrivals and more refugee assistance, the resident population has appeared more hostile and more inclined to support a restrictive, asylum-centred approach (Hangartner et al. 2019). In these contexts, immigrants are still seen as a burden, and represent a problem for the culture of the host country (Semyonov et al. 2008).

The predominant theoretical framework used by scholars to explain the relations between citizens and immigrants falls into the category of threat theories. According to the Intergroup Threat Theory (Stephan, Ybarra and Rios 2016), negative attitudes towards outlying groups are a defensive reaction to the threat of competition. In this perspective, perceived threats from outgroups can be categorized into *realistic threats* (referring to resources or wellbeing) and *symbolic threats* (values, culture). Although an individual's perception of the immigrant is shaped by the social context in which he or she lives, for some scholars whose explanations rely on economic motivations, the defensive attitudes on the part of the internal group are a reaction to a real threat related to immigration (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2009; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010). As the number of immigrants (external group) increases, competition for scarce economic resources also increases, giving rise to concern in the internal group for their own interests (see Blalock 1967). Furthermore, competition and fears tend to increase when there are sudden changes (Newman and Velez 2014), such as the intensification of an economic or migration crisis. For other scholars, who instead adopt an explanatory identity key, concerns towards immigrants have a symbolic matrix. For them, the perception of immigrants is connected to cultural threats, that is to the norms, beliefs and values of the group which may be at risk (see Sides and Citrin 2007). Although the economic and

cultural aspects of immigration are both correlated to attitudes towards immigrants (Ruedin 2020), studies that took into account both measures found that perceived cultural threats largely outperform measures of material and economic threat (Schmuck and Matthes 2017; Vallejo-Martin et al. 2021; Davidov and Meuleman 2012; Semyonov et al. 2004) and they dwarf the effects of economic threat measures (see Ha 2008; Sniderman et al. 2004; Sides and Citrin 2007).

Considering that in Italy almost 90% of the population claim to belong to the Catholic faith (Vezzoni and Biolcati 2015) and that in Italy Catholicism is a specific religion and cultural expression of the core national heritage (Ferrari and Ferrari 2010), in this paper we adopt cultural threats as a measure of anti-immigration sentiment.

2.2. Hypotheses

Religion can be defined as an institutionalised system-based set of beliefs and practices relating to the supernatural realm and personal belief. It is an important source of social identity (Ben-Nun Bloom et al. 2015) and social world (Saroglou 2013) as well as an instrument of aggregation of people in moral communities (Graham and Haidt 2010). However, this is not always the case, especially when we compare the behaviour of religious people of the Catholic faith with those belonging to other religions. Catholics, as well as Protestants, compared to those who profess other religions, tend to score higher in the different dimensions of nationalism and ethnic exclusion (Coenders and Scheepers 2003). At least in Italy, this attitude is also found to be valid towards foreigners of Catholic faith. Ambrosini and Bonizzoni (2021, 828), analysing the Christian migrant churches in Italy, claim that 'for Catholic immigrants, the establishment of new communities involves a negotiation with local Catholic hierarchies, a sometimes-complex process and not without resistance'. Although the Catholic Church in Italy has 'evolved as a religion of a predominantly solidaristic, tolerant and inclusive character' (Maraffi and Vignati 2019, 349), it does not always appear so benevolent even when the proponents are Catholic foreigners.

By shaping social and political attitudes, religion tends to delineate those who are part of the group, distinguishing them from others (Geertz 1993), thus feeding low levels of tolerance towards those outside the group (Grant and Brown 1995), a phenomenon that may enhance anti-immigration attitudes (Creighton and Jamal 2015). In past research, Christians appear more in favour of the ethnic exclusion of legal immigrants than non-believers and non-Christians (Scheepers et al. 2002) and are more likely to express concerns about immigration (Storm 2018). Seventy years ago, Adorno and colleagues (1950) in their study on the authoritarian personality, reflected on the idea that subjects with some religious affiliations are more prejudiced than those without affiliation. When analysing religious anti-Semitism in 28 countries, Tausch (2018), notes that together with some other religions, such as Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist, Catholicism seems to be characterized by anti-Semitic attitudes. While analysing the Catholic Church, Kertzer (2014) shows how it represented Jews as an existential threat in the eyes of European Catholics. This peculiarity is certainly not new and it is likely affected by a not-so-distant past when some Catholic circles were permeable to anti-Semitic and racial prejudices (Valbosquet 2018). Finally, considering that for Catholics migrants could

represent a perfect target for their fears, we hypothesise that Catholics have a more negative attitude towards immigrants (H_1).

Like religious membership, participation in religious activities is relevant in explaining anti-immigrant sentiments. Participation in religious services 'consists in elevating the importance of [some] values in the decision-making process of the members of the [congregation]' (Djupe and Calfano 2013, 644). It indirectly recalls the concept of 'moral communities' (Ruiter and De Graaf 2006), according to which a higher average attendance of religious services indicates greater exposure to religious culture and a greater probability of including religious people in one's social network.

However, being part of a congregation or a large religious network does not always imply a propensity to open up to others with confidence. When analysing the United Kingdom, Paterson (2018, 26–27) observes that "the messages of the elite to which those of high religiosity are exposed (in terms of ecclesial presences) could act as a bulwark against potential intolerances that induce the effects of the religious affiliation ('Membership')". In the same vein, Knoll (2009) suggests that taking part in religious activities increases empathy or induces universal values and, thus, leads to supporting immigration. Conversely, by analysing forty-four countries, Doebler (2014) found that religious practice and religious affiliation have less impact than citizens' predispositions against immigrants and Muslims, while McDaniel et al. (2011) found that attendance at religious services is negatively correlated with anti-immigrant attitudes on cultural grounds, but it has no effect in relation to economic motivations. At this point, given that the theoretical positions on the link between religious practice and attitude towards immigrants appear to be opposed, we generate the alternative hypothesis that practising believers show more positive attitudes towards immigrants (H_2). Furthermore, considering that being religious is very different from being religious and actively participating in religious services, it is possible to hypothesize that among Catholics, the intensification of religious activism has a positive effect on their perception of immigrants (H_3).

Closely connected to the relationship between religion and immigration is politics. In the past few decades, the increase in populist parties in numerous European countries has made the relationship between the public and immigrants increasingly fragile: relying on topics also linked to religion (Marzouki et al. 2016), they have further exacerbated the vision that the public has of immigrants. The Lega party in Italy does not seem to want to be outdone (see Ozzano 2021). Since its inception, the League has tried to capitalize on the lines of national identity based on traditions by combining them with migration and security issues. At the same time, it has identified the main enemy in the illegal Muslim immigrant who threatens Italy's ethnic-cultural and religious homogeneity and Europe's Christian character (see Martino and Papastathis 2016, 115). With the intensification of the landings on the Italian coast, the League has further shifted its rhetoric towards Catholic religious symbols. On several occasions, speeches have made references to the Virgin Mary, without hesitating to attack the positions of the Pope on the immigration theme (see Gnagni 2018; Re 2019). The use of religious symbols during the rallies of the League has not escaped the Church, which has lamented their exploitation for the sole purpose of enchanting voters, who are morally attracted to those symbols. Although the League has strong ties with the conservative wing of the Catholic world, it is possible to hypothesize that the League's populist rhetoric could affect the

anti-immigrant sentiment of non-practising Catholics who, sharing the programmatic contents of the League party and voting for it, could perceive immigrants negatively (H_{4a}). On the contrary, the anti-immigrant attitude should contract among those who, despite voting for Lega, are practising Catholics because they are probably affected by the principles of benevolence and love expressed by the Catholic Church (H_{4b}).

3. Methods, dependent and independent variables

The hypotheses discussed in the previous section have been tested through three European Social Survey datasets round 6 (2012), 8 (2016), and round 9 (2018).

The dependent variable is represented by the item in the survey that reads as follows 'And, using this card, would you say that [country]'s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?', with response options running from 'Cultural life undermined' (0) to 'Cultural life enriched' (10).[1] The main independent variables of our research are represented by four items. The first item refers to membership of a religious congregation, [2] while the second one is an additive index[3] – the frequency of attendance of religious services,[4] praying,[5] and the overall grade of religiosity[6] – that synthetises religious practices and personal religiosity level (see Driezen, Verschraegen, Clycq 2020). These two variables allow us to test the first three hypotheses.

To test the last two hypotheses (H4a and H4b) we have created two new variables. The first one has been obtained by aggregating religious membership (only Catholics) with a religious activism index,[7] while the second one is represented by a dichotomous variable (0=other parties, 1=Lega) that synthesizes the vote expressed by the respondents to the last national administrative election.[8]

---

[1] For interpretative convenience we have inverted the order of the modality so that (0) Cultural life enriched, (10) Cultural life undermined.

[2]The question runs as follows: Have you ever considered yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination? – Which one? We have recoded the variable as follow: (0) No one, (1) Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, Other Christian denomination, Jews, Islamic, Eastern religions, Other non-Christian religions, (2) Catholics. 'Do not know' answers have been coded as missing values.

[3] The index ranges from 0 (low level) to 14 (high level); its reliability, measured through Cronbach's alpha, is equal to 0,853.

[4] The question runs as follows: Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services nowadays? For interpretative convenience we have inverted the order of the modality in the following way: (0) Never, (1) Less often, (2) Only on special holy days, (3) At least once a month (4) Once a week, (5) More than once a week, (6) Every day. 'Do not know' answers have been coded as missing values.

[5] The question runs as follows: Apart from when you are at religious services, how often, if at all, do you pray? For interpretative convenience we have inverted the order of the modality in the following way: (0) Never, (1) Less often, (2) Only on special holy days, (3) At least once a month (4) Once a week, (5) More than once a week, (6) Every day. 'Do not know' answers have been coded as missing values.

[6] The question runs as follows: Regardless of whether you belong to a particular religion, how religious would you say you are? The variable runs from (0) Not at all religious, (10) Very religious. 'Do not know' answers have been coded as missing values.

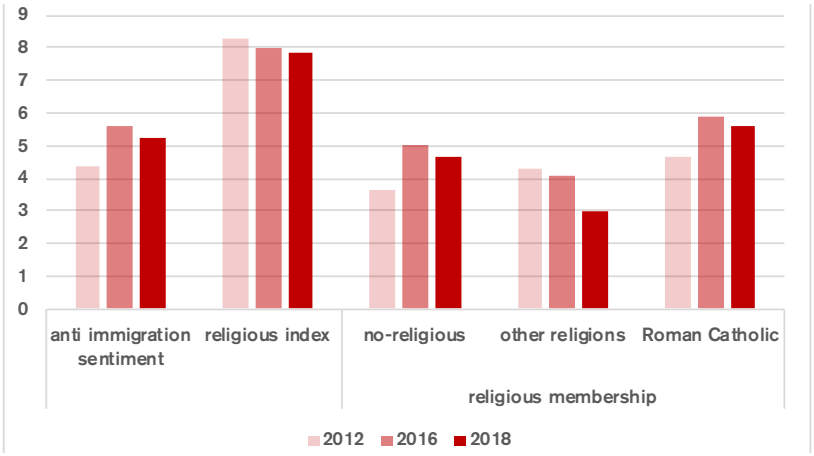
[7] The new variable (Catholic activism) runs as follows: (0) No religious, (1) No practising Catholic, and (2) Practising Catholic.

[8] The question runs as follows: Which party did you vote for in that election (last country's national election)?

The hypotheses reported above were tested, controlling their effects for a set of variables commonly used in the literature, including gender, age, education (see van Der Brug and Harteveld 2021), ideology,[9] insecurity,[10] social trust[11] (see Di Mauro and Memoli 2021), the area in which the respondent lives,[12] and time.[13] The analyses were carried out using linear regression models. In this respect, many studies have examined the relationship between anti-immigrant sentiments and some individual and structural factors. To explore the impact of these factors on anti-immigration sentiments we adopt rounds 6 (2012), 8 (2016) and 9 (2018) of the European Social Survey.

From 2012 to 2018, anti-immigrant attitudes expressed by Italians increased, with an inverted U trend. The highest peak is in 2016, when the landings on the Italian coasts were numerous, and overcrowding of the infrastructures of the national reception system was consistent. In 2018, the fears of the public towards immigrants decline, albeit to levels far higher than those of 2012. (Figure 1). Over time, anti-immigrant sentiment seems to have subsided among those who believe in other religions and participate in religious activities. Among Catholics and the non-religious, anti-immigrant sentiment does not fade after the migration wave.

Figure 1. Anti-immigrant sentiment and religion



Source: own elaboration on European Social Survey (2012, 2016, 2018).

[9] The question runs as follows: In politics people sometimes talk of 'left' and 'right'. Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right? We have recoded the variable in the following way: (0) centre (values 4-6), (1) left (values 0-3), (2) right (7-10). 'Do not know' answers have been coded as missing values.

[10] The question runs as follows: How safe do you – or would you – feel walking alone in this area after dark? Do – or would – you feel... The variable has been recoded as follow (0) very safe+safe, (1) unsafe+very unsafe. 'Do not know' answers have been coded as missing values.

[11] The question runs as follows: using this card, generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? Please tell me on a score of 0 to 10, where 0 means you can't be too careful and 10 means that most people can be trusted. The variable is coded as follow: (0) no trust, (10) trust. 'Do not know' answers have been coded as missing values.

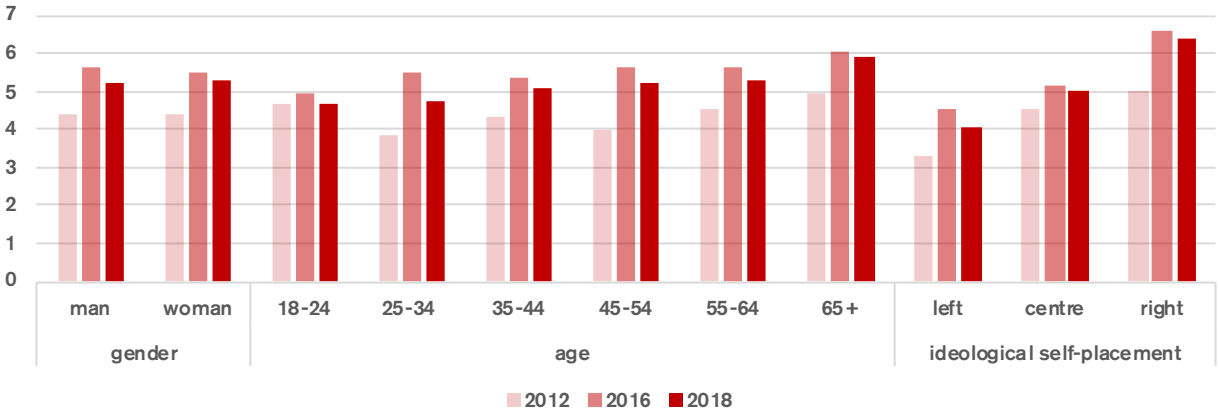
[12] The question runs as follows: Which phrase on this card best describes the area where you live? We have recoded the variable in the following way: (0) a farm or home in countryside, (1) a country village, (2) a town or a small city, (3) the suburbs or outskirts of a big city, (4) a big city. 'Do not know' answers have been coded as missing values.

[13] The descriptive statistics of the variables are reported in Appendix, Table A.

The shock suffered by public opinion with the increase in landings (2016) seems to persist also in 2018. This trend characterizes both the non-religious and those belonging to the Roman Catholic faith, while those who profess other religions seem to perceive immigrants positively. The anti-immigration sentiment level is high among those who take part in religious activities. Nevertheless, the negative perception of immigrants expressed by this specific group towards foreigners remains high even when, in 2018, the landings on the coasts of the *Bel Paese* decline.

On connecting the anti-immigrant sentiment with some socio-demographic indicators, while we find, as stated in previous research (see Eger et al. 2021; Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2018), clear distinctions between the age groups of the interviewees (Figure 2a), we do not find differences in terms of gender. The youngest (18-24 years) appear more likely to welcome immigrants than other age groups, probably because they have had the opportunity to know and accept the cultural traits of different models. On the contrary, the elderly (65+) tend to be less benevolent towards immigrants. The evaluation expressed by the elderly could be dictated by a sense of insecurity generated by the presence of immigrants.

Figure 2a. Anti-immigrant sentiment and socio demographic aspects

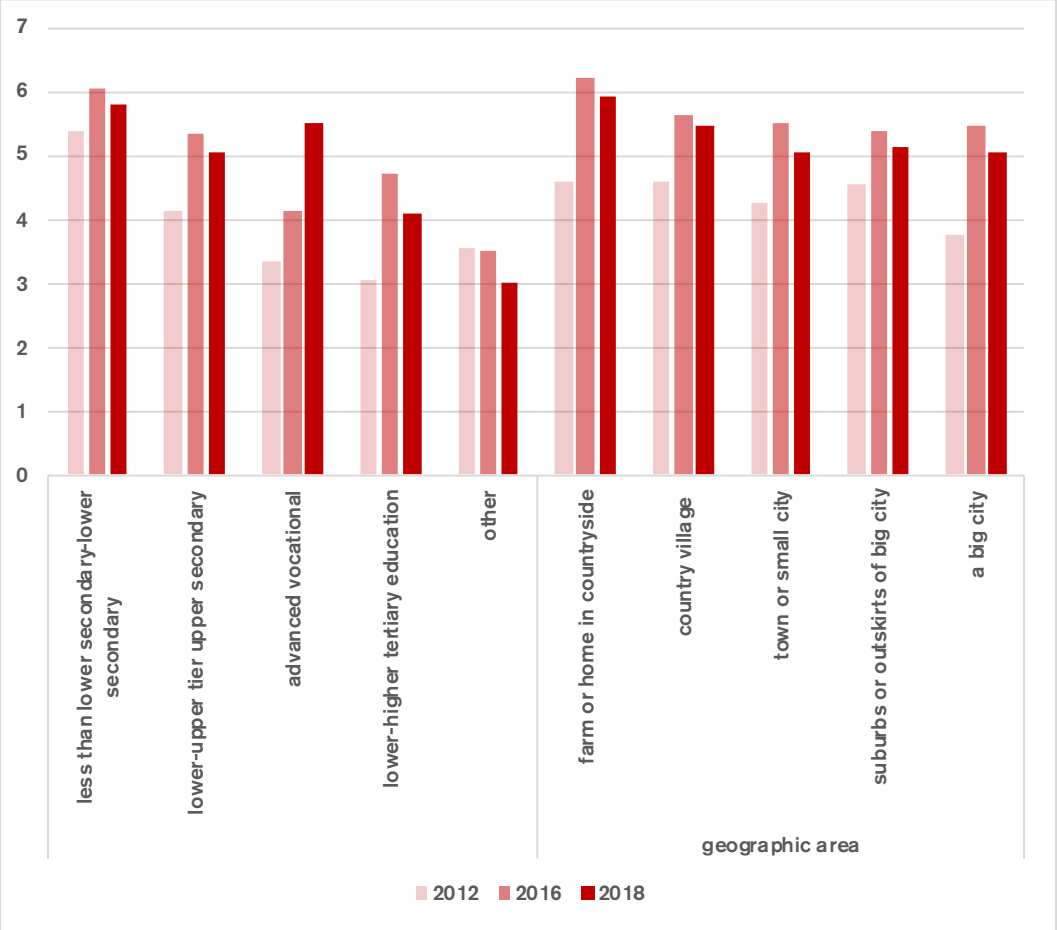


Source: own elaboration on European Social Survey (2012, 2016, 2018)

As was expected, ideology plays a decisive role in defining the anti-immigrant attitude of respondents. Among Italians, the attitude of the 'centrists' is less intense than those who place themselves on the right side of the scale. This trend appears to persist over time, even when arrivals on the Italian coasts have reduced in number. Even if the less educated appear more reluctant towards immigrants, it is among those with a medium-high qualification (advanced vocational) that anti-immigrant sentiment intensifies over time. This attitude could probably be dictated by uncertainties regarding the future, by the weaknesses of the labour market, which has never been particularly prosperous, and by the presence of immigrants. Finally, fears related to immigrants are also found among those who live in a 'farm or country house', where social relations are consolidated over time, and the arrival of foreigners can be perceived as a threat (Figure 2b). Comparing the rural area (farm or country house) with the urban area (a big city), negative attitudes towards immigrants decline in the latter. However, this result must be considered with caution, since immigration attitudes are also related to other aspects,

such as the demographic characteristics of geographic areas (Maxwell 2019) and to the socio-cultural and socioeconomic changes that characterize these areas (Huijsmans et al. 2021), which are not considered in this article.

Figure 2b. Anti-immigrant sentiment and socio demographic aspects



Source: own elaboration on European Social Survey (2012, 2016, 2018).

4. Results and discussion

Following the hypotheses reported above, the effects of religion on anti-immigrant sentiments were estimated using the ESS waves of 2012, 2016 and 2018.

As hypothesized, not all those who are religious perceive immigrants positively. In 2012 (Table 1, model 1), Catholics express a negative perception of immigrants (beta = 0.085; H1 confirmed). This result is certainly not new. As known, cultural outgroups pose a symbolic cultural threat to dominant groups (Fetzer 2000). The negative attitude expressed by Catholics towards immigrants may have been conditioned, at least in part, by the migrations dictated by the 'Arab Spring', which in 2011 generated a short but intense shock within Italian society (see Labanca 2012).

Contrary to what we assumed, religious activism correlates positively with the dependent variable, and it is not statistically significant (H2 not confirmed), while those characterized by a sense of insecurity (beta = 0.124), and those on the right of the political

space (beta = 0.078) have a negative perception of immigrants. Compared to men, women, who trust others more, are more trustful of immigrants. The same can be said about those who are between 45 and 54 years old.

In 2016 (model 2), the empirical results are very similar to those found previously. Catholics continue to perceive immigrants negatively, but with greater intensity than in 2012. The intensification of the phenomenon appears connected with the high numbers of landings on the coasts of the Bel Paese, which have probably strengthened a negative perception of immigrants among the public. Young people appear to perceive immigrants negatively (beta = 0.073) to a lesser extent than those on the right of the political space (beta = 0.194) and those who perceive a sense of general insecurity (beta = 0.113). Women appear more sensitive to immigrants in the same way as those who express trust in others in general.

If 2016 is recorded as the year of the peak of landings on the Italian coast and of a net overcrowding of the national reception system infrastructures, in 2018 the immigration numbers changed (see Ministry of the Interior and UNHCR), but not public perception. In 2017, with the 'Minniti Decrees' and the Italy-Libya memorandum, between the then Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni and the Libyan leader Fayez al Serraj, migratory flows to Italy were reduced by a third compared to the previous year. In 2018, even if the migration trend towards the coasts of Southern Italy tended to thin further (-80% compared to 2017), Catholics did not seem to notice a change: their perception of immigrants remained negative (model 3). On the contrary, members of other religions are more sensitive to foreigners (beta = -0.097). The role played by social trust was confirmed, but among Italians the overall negative perception of immigrants remained unchanged. The anti-immigrant sentiment, which cuts across different age groups and different levels of education, mainly characterizes the elderly (55+; beta = 0.120) - and the less educated (lower secondary school children; professional upper secondary school). A similar trend is found among those who place themselves on the right side of the political space and live in a town or small city.

In general, looking at the entire 2012-2018 period (model 4), the differences between Catholics and non-Catholics emerge more clearly and highlight the differences inherent in each religious confession. As previously anticipated, taking part in religious activities appears as a two-faced Janus since it can be beneficial (see Knoll 2009) or deleterious (Doebler 2014) for the relationships that exist between 'us' and 'them'. Religious activism, although not statistically significant, appears to nourish the negative perception of immigrants. When the level of Catholic religious activities increases, their negative perception of immigrants contracts, while the opposite is found when instead we look at those who belong to other religions (Figure 3). Nevertheless, the negative attitudes of Catholics towards immigrants appear to hold (H3 confirmed). An opposite scenario is found among those who profess other religions, who appear more open towards immigrants. However, with the intensification of religious activism, their attitude tends to contract in terms of intensity.

Part of the results relating to Catholics are in line with the study conducted by Landini and colleagues (2021, 401) which, analysing only 2018 and 2019 through diversified data sources, argue that 'irregular and non-practicing Catholics exhibit the most negative attitudes toward immigration. In contrast, non-religious people – namely those who

neither attend religious services nor describe themselves as Catholics – show the most positive attitudes toward immigration'. Despite some differences from the work realised by Landini et al (2021),[14] our results confirm how religious membership and religious activism are two key dimensions for understanding the anti-immigrant attitude in Italy, both for Catholics and for those who belong to other religions.

Table 1. Religion and religiosity

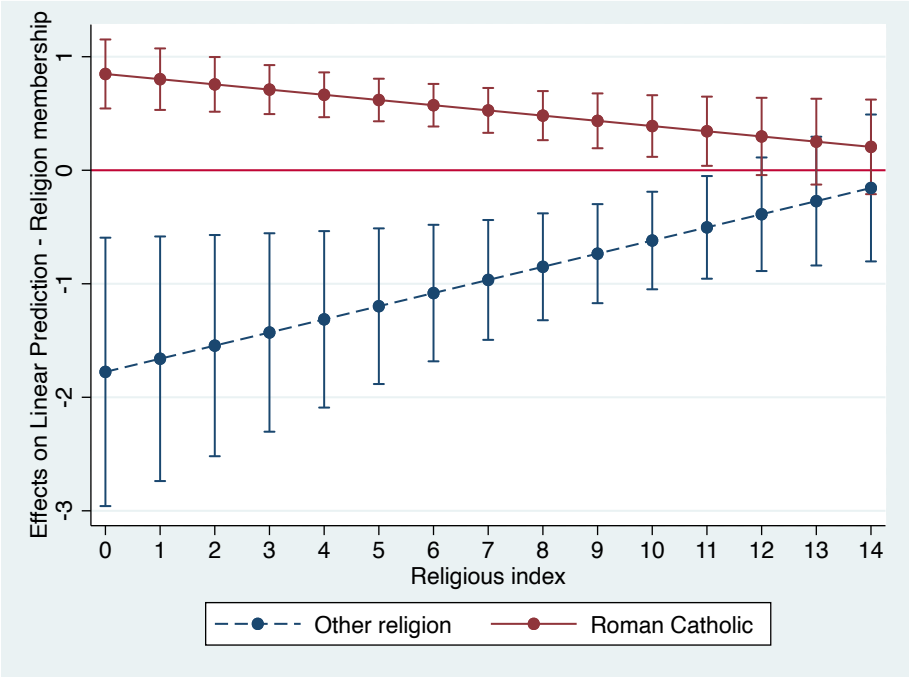
	Model 1 (2016)		Model 2 (2016)		Model 3 (2018)		Model 4 (2012-2018)	
	Beta	**Std. Err.**	**Beta**	**Std. Err.**	**Beta**	**Std. Err.**	**Beta**	**Std. Err.**
Religious membership (no religion)								
Other religions	0.050	0.545	-0.000	0.396	-0.097****	0.355	-0.117**	0.719
Roman Catholic	0.085*	0.304	0.114****	0.183	0.059**	0.162	0.136****	0.185
Religious index	0.012	0.034	-0.038	0.022	-0.038	0.018	0.003	0.022
Religious membership (no religious)								
Other religions* Religious index							0.083*	0.069
Roman Catholic* Religious index							-0.079*	0.027
Social Trust	-0.301****	0.041	-0.246****	0.029	-0.218****	0.025	-0.242****	0.017
Insecurity perception	0.124****	0.222	0.114	0.147	0.055**	0.128	0.087****	0.088
Sex (male)	-0.102***	0.193	-0.052**	0.136	-0.003	0.114	-0.039***	0.080
Age (18-24)								
25-34	-0.072	0.370	0.073**	0.275	0.085***	0.247	0.049**	0.164
35-44	-0.063	0.350	0.056	0.271	0.089***	0.233	0.047**	0.158
45-54	-0.101**	0.342	0.057	0.259	0.087***	0.223	0.038*	0.152
55-64	-0.053	0.360	0.013	0.271	0.060*	0.224	0.020	0.156
65+	0.061	0.353	0.021	0.271	0.120***	0.217	0.046*	0.154
Education (other)								
less than lower secondary-lower secondary	-0.116	1.448	0.358	2.547	0.354*	1.071	0.231	0.822
lower-upper tier upper secondary	-0.242	1.438	0.276	2.549	0.268	1.072	0.142	0.822
advanced vocational	-0.119	1.527	0.013	2.614	0.135*	1.104	0.042	0.851
lower-higher tertiary education	-0.266	1.440	0.147	2.553	0.047	1.077	0.008	0.825
Left-right scale placement (centre)								
left	-0.123***	0.224	-0.077***	0.163	-0.143****	0.143	-0.112****	0.097
right	0.078**	0.236	0.194****	0.156	0.173****	0.131	0.166****	0.092
Geographic area (Farm or home in countryside)								
Country village	0.004	0.457	-0.028	0.353	-0.069	0.308	-0.040	0.207
Town or small city	-0.012	0.472	-0.015	0.356	-0.101*	0.311	-0.046	0.210
Suburbs or outskirts of big city	-0.011	0.618	-0.021	0.430	-0.052	0.368	-0.031	0.254
A big city	-0.077	0.526	-0.046	0.393	-0.064	0.336	-0.060**	0.229

[14] In this study, both dependent and independent variables are different and differently operationalized from those used in our work.

Time (2012)								
	2018						0.163****	0.112
	2019						0.137****	0.110
Constant		7.467****	1.595	4.458*	2.593	4.700****	1.112	0.453****	0.864
R_square		0.256		0.204		0.233		0.231	
Adjust R_square		0.234		0.193		0.224		0.226	
F (sig.)		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000	
N. observ.		716		1,530		1,842		4,088	

Note: *p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01, ****p<0.001.
Source: own elaboration on European Social Survey (2012-2018).

Figure 3. The marginal effects on the anti-immigration sentiments of religious membership as Religious Index change 90% cls



Source: own elaboration on European Social Survey (2012-2018).

In Table 2, we analyse the relationship between practicing Catholics / non-practicing Catholics and their vote expressed for the League in the last administrative elections of 2018. As expected, the non-practising Catholics who voted for the League appear to perceive immigrants negatively. Even if the sign of the relationship is as expected, the effect is statistically insignificant (H4a partially confirmed). As for practising Catholics, we found that although they voted for the League, they still tend to look at immigrants with greater benevolence and love, as probably taught by the Catholic Church (beta=0.160; H4b confirmed).

In the last national administrative elections, Salvini tried to consolidate his electoral consensus by leveraging the Catholic electorate. However, the result was not particularly relevant, as evidenced by the electoral results obtained by his party (see Ipsos 2018). 'Fetishist sovereignty' has certainly made its way into the Catholic world,

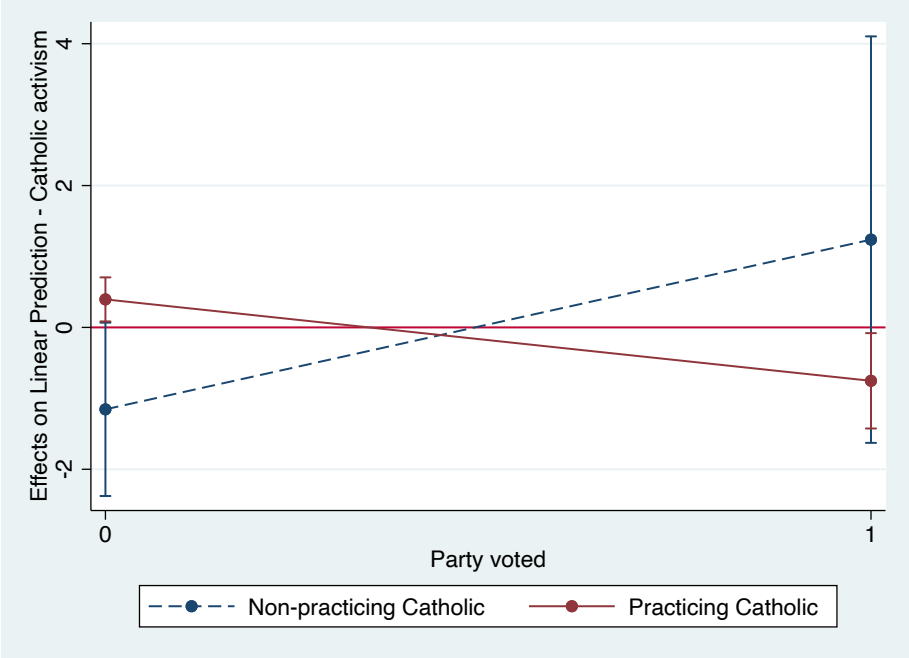
gathering the vote of those who weekly participate in religious services (15.7%; see Ipsos 2018). Nevertheless, it does not seem to have affected their Catholic principles, as they continue to express strong sentiments of benevolence and solidarity towards immigrants (Fig. 4). By checking the empirical results through a series of indicators, we find that less-educated individuals (less than lower secondary/lower secondary; advanced vocational) reveal an undoubted closure towards immigrants. A more positive perception towards immigrants, on the other hand, is found among those who tend to trust others (beta = -0.263).

Table 2. Religion and politics

	Beta	Std. Err.
Catholic activism (non religious)		
non-practising Catholics	-0.000	0.742
practising Catholics	0.062**	0.189
Vote for League (no)	0.370****	0.403
Catholic membership activism *Vote for League		
non-practising Catholics * vote	0.036	1.892
practising Catholics * vote	-0.160**	0.446
Social Trust	**-0.263****	**0.031**
Insecurity perception	**0.038**	**0.164**
Sex (male)	**-0.019**	**0.141**
Age (18-24)		
25-34	-0.005	0.327
35-44	0.003	0.318
45-54	-0.001	0.308
55-64	-0.051	0.307
65+	-0.039	0.302
Education (other)		
less than lower secondary/lower secondary	0.530	1.720
lower-upper tier upper secondary	0.466	1.718
advanced vocational	0.260	1.742
lower-higher tertiary education	0.223	1.722
Geographic area (Farm or home in countryside)		
Country village	-0.024	0.353
Town or small city	-0.063	0.356
Suburbs or outskirts of big city	-0.003	0.430
A big city	0.014	0.393
Constant	**3.988**	**1.746**
R_square	0.213	
Adjust R_square	0.199	
F (sig.)	0.000	
N. observ.	1,216	

Note: *p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01, ****p<0.001
Source: own elaboration on European Social Survey (2018).

Figure 4. The marginal effects on the anti-immigration sentiments of religious membership as vote change 90%



Source: own elaboration on European Social Survey (2018).

5. Conclusions

Since the early years of the new millennium, Italy has experienced a high level of immigration. With a fluctuating trend, landings on the coast of Southern Italy have intensified over time. This increase in foreigners in the last twenty years has exacerbated the attitude of Italians (see Molteni 2020) who, overestimating the actual numbers involved, often see immigrants as a problem.

Religion exerts distinct and even contrasting effects on immigration attitudes in Italy, playing a determining role in the cultural separation between 'we' and 'them'. It shapes social and political attitudes, exacerbating the differences between those who are part of the majority group and those who are not.

Catholics tend to have a negative perception of immigrants and perceive them as a problem for their culture in general. This attitude is also found among Italian Catholics. One explanation could lie in the various migratory waves that have begun to worry the public since the early years of the last two decades. On the contrary, a positive attitude towards foreigners is found among those who profess another religion.

Participation in religious activities (Mass and prayer) and recognising oneself in Catholicism also appear relevant in explaining anti-immigrant sentiment, especially when connected to religious membership. According to Wuthnow (2002), religious activism tends to generate and feed bridging social capital, through which it is possible, as Putnam (2000) has pointed out, to generate wider reciprocity. We find a similar trend among Italians: as religious activism increases, Catholics appear more inclined to express a positive opinion towards immigrants. Nevertheless, their perception of immigrants remains negative.

In the last twenty years, an increase in support for populist parties in Italy has made the Italian case very important (see Vercesi 2021), as confirmed by the results of the last administrative (2018) and European (2019) elections. The cultural populism that distinguishes the League (see Caiani and Carvalho 2021) has influenced Catholic voters but does not seem to have been particularly incisive for a portion of them. Non-practising Catholics who voted for the Lega in the last national administrative elections appear characterized by a negative perception of immigrants. Practising Catholics, on the contrary, appear more inclined to accept immigrants. It would have been interesting to consider how the Church and the Catholic elite have contributed to the formation of the attitudes of the faithful towards immigrants and the consequent choice of vote. The data in our possession are limited and do not allow this level of detail. Future research could shed light on larger temporal dynamics, taking into account these factors and expanding the number of cases.

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Appendix

Table A. Descriptive Statistics

		Mean / %	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Anti-immigration sentiment		5.255	2.82	0	10
Religion membership					
	no religious	23.4			
	other religions	5.8			
	Roman Catholic	70.8			
Religious index		**7.979**	**3.920**	**0**	**14**
Catholic activism					
	no religious	23.4			
	non-practising Catholics	5.8			
	practising Catholics	70.8			
Vote for League					
	no	87.2			
	yes	12.8			
Social Trust		**4.698**	**2.378**	**0**	**10**
Insecurity perception					
	safe	68.3			
	unsafe	31.7			
Gender					
	male	48.1			
	female	51.9			
Age					
	18-24	9.9			
	25-34	13.1			
	35-44	15.7			
	45-54	19.0			
	55-64	16.3			
	65+	26.0			
Education					
	other	0.3			
	less than lower secondary/lower secondary	43.6			
	lower-upper tier upper secondary	38.9			
	advanced vocational	2.6			
	lower-higher tertiary education	13.6			
Left-right scale placement					
	left	29.8			
	centre	30.9			
	right	39.3			
Geographic area					
	Farm or home in countryside	3.7			
	Country village	44.1			
	Town or small city	34.5			
	Suburbs or outskirts of big city	5.9			
	A big city	11.8			
Time					
2012		15.2			
2018		41.5			
2019		43.3			

Source: European Social Survey - round 8 (2016) and round 9 (2018).

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