

The right-wing alliance at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic: all change?

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ABSTRACT

The growth of populist radical right parties at the expense of Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) has recently reconfigured the right in Italy. Changes in power relations created for the Lega (League), Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) and FI, different competitive pressures, resulting in distinctive – and often conflicting – responses to the pandemic. Based on the analysis of these parties' Twitter accounts and on survey data, this article examines how right-wing actors positioned themselves *vis à vis* the government, and each other, throughout 2020. Eventually, the League became the government's most vocal critic, forcing FdI to follow suit; meanwhile, FI reinvented itself as a moderate, pro-EU party. Despite these *changes*, our analysis also stresses *continuity*, insofar as the alliance continued to craft its message around taxation, the EU, immigration and law/order, as it had done in the past. It also continued to enjoy electoral support similar to that of recent decades.

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Covid-19; populism; League; Brothers of Italy; Forza Italia

Amidst the many changes affecting Italian politics from the mid-1990s onwards, one thing always remained the same, as voters got used to the existence of a right-wing electoral alliance fielding candidates at successive general elections. A break in 1996 notwithstanding, such alliance comprised: the Lega Nord (Northern League, LN); a radical right party rooted in the 'post-fascist' tradition (for a while: Alleanza Nazionale, AN – National Alliance); and one of Berlusconi's parties. Voters were also clear as to where the centre of the right-wing galaxy was to be found: to adopt an astronomical metaphor, it was occupied by 'the Berlusconi sun' (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2009). Hence, the other right-wing parties and leaders revolved around Berlusconi, having been forced to accept his prominence as the price to be paid for being able to take part in successive government coalitions throughout the decades.

Fast forward to 2020 and the right-wing alliance is still in one piece, and, importantly, consists of the same components. There are, however, some notable differences. First, the LN (now: the Lega – League) has changed its ideology and leader (Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone 2018); second, the 'post-fascist' party now comes in the shape of Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) (Tarchi 2018). Third, it is now disputed who represents

the ‘sun’ of the alliance; for, if the League became the largest party within the right in 2018, then FdI started growing at its expense not long afterwards.

This article focuses on the ways right-wing parties have framed events and political developments throughout 2020 and on the fluctuations in their support. The next section briefly introduces the parties under discussion. In the sections after that, we survey a series of key events that took place during the year, considering how parties on the right positioned themselves *vis à vis* the government supported by the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five-star Movement, M5s) and the Partito Democratico (Democratic party, PD), but also each other. We also mention fluctuations in their support, as revealed by the polls. We will see how, after a period of uncertainty just after the Coronavirus started to spread throughout Italy, the League became Prime Minister Conte’s most vocal critic, forcing its FdI ally to follow suit. In the meantime, not to end up being seen as redundant by the electorate, Berlusconi’s Forza Italia (FI) reinvented itself as a moderate, pro-EU party, ready to provide qualified support to Conte’s government at a time of need. While our analysis identifies many elements of *change* within the right at the time of Covid-19, it also stresses important elements of *continuity*. Indeed, issues such as taxation, the EU, immigration and law and order were all relentlessly focused upon by the right during the pandemic, just as they had been in the past. Moreover, the alliance continued to enjoy levels of electoral support that were remarkably stable in comparison with previous decades.

The Italian right before 2020

Despite their differences, the main parties of the Italian right should all be defined as ‘populist’ in Cas Mudde’s (2004, 543) sense. Generally speaking, populist parties conceive politics as a struggle between a virtuous ‘people’ and a set of self-interested, arrogant and shady elites. Claiming that soon ‘it will be too late’ (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, 5), populists offer themselves to the electorate as a vehicle through which the people’s sovereignty (if not their very identity) can be reclaimed.

FI has sometimes been defined as a ‘neoliberal populist party’ because of Berlusconi’s adoption of a populist discourse sprinkled with references to economic liberalism (Mudde 2007). Whatever the merits of such a definition, Berlusconi’s unwillingness to deliver any neoliberal reforms while in government from 2001 and the gradual sidelining of liberal ideas in the party’s rhetoric of recent years mean that FI is much better defined as a ‘centre-right populist party’ (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015, 27) instead. Berlusconi’s electoral appeal has considerably diminished since the end of his last government in 2011. As a result, his once-undisputed role as leader of the right became untenable after the last general election, as FI gained only 14% of the vote versus the League’s 17%. Fast forward to the 2019 European Parliament elections and FI’s vote share had shrunk to 8%. After further fluctuations in the polls, the party has stabilized at around 7% of the national vote, and was overtaken by FdI in 2019.

The League was born as a regionalist populist party which pitted a territorially defined ‘people’ (Northern Italians) against the national elites ‘of Rome’ (Albertazzi and Vampa 2021). While positing the existence of a struggle between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’ remains essential to the party’s message today, under the leadership of Matteo Salvini the League’s regionalism has been replaced by attempts to appeal to Italians throughout the

whole country. Moreover, authoritarianism (i.e. support for a strictly ordered society in which crime should be severely punished) and nativism (i.e. the belief that foreign elements are inherently threatening and that the ‘natives’ should have priority in all aspects of life) (see Betz 2019; Mudde 2007) have both come to the fore in the party’s communication of recent years. The party can now be characterized as a fully fledged ‘populist radical right party’ (Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone 2018), ideologically not dissimilar from FdI. This strategy of renewal appeared to have paid off at the 2018 elections, as the League gained 17.4% of the vote and established a foothold in the deep South (Albertazzi and Zulianello 2021) – up from 4.1% at the previous general election. Following the 2018 election, the party governed for a year in coalition with the M5s. Having dominated the government agenda with its signature themes of migration and law and order (Chiaromonte, De Sio, and Emanuele 2020), polls suggested that the League had reached levels of support close to 38% by the spring of 2019. However, following a botched attempt by Salvini to force fresh elections over the summer, its fortunes started rapidly to deteriorate, and by 2020 its support had shrunk to well below 30% again. In addition, the party found itself in opposition from mid-2019 onwards, as the M5s created a new government in alliance with the centre-left PD.

FdI, led by Giorgia Meloni, was founded in 2012, when some parliamentarians broke away from Berlusconi’s party in protest at the latter’s decision to support Mario Monti’s technocratic government and its austerity measures (Di Virgilio and Radaelli 2013). The party’s most high-profile representatives at the time had all been members of AN before the latter merged with Berlusconi’s FI in 2008. Despite FdI’s clear post-fascist ties, the aims of the break-away party were much more ambitious than just scooping up the votes of the nostalgic. Indeed, under Meloni’s leadership, FdI developed a clear ‘populist radical right’ profile (Zulianello 2020) also characterized by populism, nativism and authoritarianism – thus competing head to head with the ‘new’ nation-wide (and nationalist) League. Starting from a low base of 4.4% in 2018, the party reached 6.4% at the 2019 European Parliament elections and 10% at the regional elections held in the same year in Umbria. FdI has enjoyed uninterrupted growth in national polls throughout 2020, effectively side-lining FI and competing with the M5s as the country’s third largest party. To rub salt into Berlusconi’s wounds, towards the end of 2020, Meloni started being mentioned in some polls as the most trusted political leader in the country.¹

Having introduced the three parties making up the Italian right-wing alliance as 2020 started, the next section will discuss how they framed political developments in their communication, while also considering fluctuations in their support. Following this, we will offer some concluding thoughts on how the pandemic has impacted on this alliance, highlighting important elements of continuity alongside signs of change.

Politics at the time of Covid-19

In line with the relevant literature, we define ‘frames’ as ‘interpretative schemata that simplify and condense “the world out there” by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environment’ (Snow and Benford 1992, 137). To explore the similarities and differences between the frames employed by the parties of the right-wing alliance (FdI, FI and the League) to interpret the key events of 2020 and communicate them to their

electorates, we have carried out a qualitative textual analysis of a selection of tweets posted by both their official accounts and their leaders. We focused mainly on Twitter as the features of this platform are now widely recognized as a key arena for political communication (Enli and Skogerbø 2013; see also Jungherr 2017). Hence, looking at this medium allows us to explore the strategic reaction of political actors to salient events (in this case, how Italian right-wing leaders positioned themselves *vis-à-vis* their opponents in government, and their own allies). Focusing on the events mentioned in Table 1 – which we claim represent the key turning points of the year under discussion – we considered what was tweeted on the dates listed in the table itself, and the following two days.² This allowed us to capture the immediate reactions of the parties under analysis to what was happening in the country.

The analysis of frames via Twitter was accompanied by consideration of how support for the selected parties fluctuated throughout the year in the national polls. Here we have relied on data from YouTrend Supermedia, which provides bi-weekly weighted averages of voting intentions data, as collected by the main polling agencies.³ The polling data collected was published around the date of the key events shown in Table 1.

We have no way of assessing the extent to which the adoption of certain frames may have affected the support enjoyed by the selected parties, and/or vice versa, nor do we make any causal claims about this in the text. Hence, the analysis of national polls serves only to reconstruct the evolution of voting intentions throughout the year – also keeping in mind that minor fluctuations are often within the margin of statistical error.

We have structured what follows in this section around these key events, so as to fulfil the already cited objectives with reference to each turning point characterizing the year 2020.

The regional elections of January 2020

On 26 January elections were held in the regions of Calabria and Emilia-Romagna, before the Coronavirus outbreak (see the article by Davide Vampa in this special issue). For Salvini’s League, the elections were not the harbingers of good news. Having announced that a victory in Emilia-Romagna – where the League fielded a presidential candidate backed by the other right-wing parties – would amount to an ‘eviction notice’ served on the government (Salvini 25 January), the party saw its candidate defeated by the very convincing margin of 7%. The right has never been able to ‘capture’ Emilia-Romagna since regional administrations were introduced in the 1970s, hence a victory here would have had clear national significance. This defeat followed the miscalculation of a few months earlier, when the League was ejected from government after trying to force fresh elections. Hence Salvini’s carefully crafted image as a ‘winner’ took another battering and

Table 1. Key events of the year 2020 included in the analysis.

Event	Date
Regional elections in Calabria and Emilia-Romagna	26 January
Announcement of national lockdown	9 March
EU commission apologizes to Italy over Coronavirus response	1 April
Agreement over Recovery Fund	17–21 July (deal reached on 20 July)
Elections held in seven regions	20–21 September

the party was left arguing that ‘a result of 45% for the centre-right [in reality: 43.6%] could never have been even imagined’ (League 27 January). Trying to link the results of the two regional elections, both Salvini and his party framed the right-wing’s victory in the region of Calabria ‘as the left’s collapse and a historic result for the League’ (Salvini 28 January; see also League 28 January) – conveniently forgetting that the winning candidate for the regional presidency was in fact drawn from the ranks of FI.

Besides commenting on the elections, during this period the League focused on its signature themes of immigration and law and order. Depicting the second Conte government as an illegitimate executive constantly at war with itself (Salvini 27 January), the party attacked it for allegedly allowing sea crossings from Africa into Europe by would-be migrants to increase five-fold, apparently to the delight of ‘arms and drug traffickers’ (League 27 January). In particular, Salvini (27 January) asked Italians to vote for him to stop new arrivals, while complaining that the government was busy ‘hating Salvini’ rather than taking concrete steps to address people’s needs. In addition, and in typical populist fashion, the League leader argued that the M5s’ electoral collapse in the regional elections should now lead to a new general election since ‘the parliament no longer reflects the popular will’ (Salvini 28 January).

At the time of the January elections, FdI too focused on immigration/asylum seekers, adopting a Manichaean language tinted with populism. The party branded the elections as an opportunity to ‘send a strong message to a government which is the enemy of Italians’ (Meloni 26 January), while also denouncing its alleged ‘hypocrisy’ for having allowed foreigners to disembark from the ship ‘Ocean Viking’ only after the elections had taken place (Meloni 28 January). This was a reference to the fact that – as Interior Minister in the first Conte government – Salvini had been harshly criticized by the left, as he had stopped people saved at sea from disembarking on Italian soil (see below). As for the regional elections themselves, not unexpectedly FdI focused on what was one of its best electoral performances to date, having attracted 10.9% of the vote in Calabria. Most notably, Meloni stressed that the right had proven to be ‘compact and competitive’ (FdI 27 January), saying that she expected her allies to remain united in future regional elections, too.

FI used the election held in Calabria (where, after all, its candidate had prevailed) to reaffirm its ‘centrality’ as the ‘heart and spine of the #centre-right’ (Berlusconi 27 January). In other words, the FI leader understandably tried to exploit this positive performance to divert attention from his party’s electoral retreat of recent years. As for attacking the government, FI also questioned the legitimacy of the executive, branding it as ‘a government made up of four left-wing parties’, allegedly attached to the ‘big state, collectivism and communism’ (Berlusconi 28 January). This polarizing language was complemented by a people-centric narrative that pitted citizens – allegedly treated ‘as subjects’ by the state (Berlusconi 28 January) – against the governing left. However, despite sharing a populist message with its allies, FI marked its distance from them by avoiding themes such as immigration and law and order.

Against this reaction of the three selected parties to the regional elections, it is also worth mentioning the levels of support they enjoyed nation-wide during the same period (cfr. [Table 2](#), for an annual overview).⁴ The League had hit 38% in the polls back in July 2019, but had subsequently suffered a steep decline, as already mentioned. Hence, while the party had started the new year at 30.8%, its ally/competitor, FdI, was now

Table 2. Voting intentions: beginning and end of 2020 (percentages).

	Fi	Fdl	League	Aggregated voting intentions
16/1/2020	6.6	10.7	30.8	48.1
03/12/2020	7.3 (+0.7)	16.1 (+5.4)	24.0 (-6.8)	47.4

Source: YouTrend Supermedia (own elaboration).

enjoying steady growth, having risen from 8% in mid-October to almost 11% in January. Finally, at the end of 2019 Berlusconi's FI was oscillating between 6.5 and 7%. This situation did not change during the first three quarters of 2020: the League continued to shrink; Meloni's Fdl kept growing, and FI remained somewhat stable – however enjoying levels of support that were around half those it had enjoyed just a few months earlier.

The national lockdown

After the first cases of Covid-19 infection were confirmed in Italy at the end of January, the situation quickly precipitated, leading to the announcement of a full lockdown on 9 March. During the early phases of the pandemic, Salvini had again framed the crisis with reference to his signature themes of law and order and immigration, by accusing both migrants crossing the Mediterranean from Africa, and Chinese nationals, of spreading the virus.⁵ In the meantime, Meloni demanded that the Chinese authorities provide reliable information about the virus (Meloni 31 January), and later insisted that those arriving from China should quarantine (Meloni 21 February), while avoiding Salvini's radical tones.

The announcement of the lockdown ushered in substantial changes in how the parties of the right communicated the crisis. Hence, for a brief period, even the League moderated its tone *vis-à-vis* the government, taking a path first embarked upon by its allies. Aware that the executive was enjoying widespread support among voters at a very critical moment for the country's health system, Salvini (11 March) announced that 'in this period there is neither right nor left, neither government nor opposition'. Moreover, he even advocated tougher restrictions than those put in place by Conte, demanding that the government immediately close down all activities rather than engaging in 'half-hearted measures' (Salvini 10 March). To avoid being accused of exploiting a major tragedy to its advantage, in this period the League concentrated its criticism on the European Union (EU) rather than Conte, arguing that Europe was not focusing on fighting the virus, and hence remained distant from the concerns of ordinary Italians (Salvini 10 March). Furthermore, according to Salvini (11 March), the whole continent should have been turned into a 'red zone'. In addition, the League leader went as far as to insinuate that there was a hidden agenda at EU level to start a 'trade war against goods made in Italy' (Salvini 11 March). This narrative sought to address the widespread concerns of the population at a time of crisis, via a powerful dose of anti-elitism against supranational bodies, spiced up with conspiracy theories, further confirming the discursive shift in focus from 'Rome' to 'Brussels' highlighted by Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone (2018).

Similarly to Salvini, Meloni also moderated her tone for a brief period, by positioning herself as a 'responsible' leader the government could do business with. Drawing on an interpretation of 'people-centrism' whereby 'the nation' must come 'before factional

interests' (Meloni 11 March), Meloni and her party too embraced a tough approach to containing the virus, and also backed calls to close everything down for two weeks. This, however, was advocated on the basis of the expectation that the state would invest very large sums of money to provide a safety net for companies and businesses (FdI 10 March), while the public was invited to buy Italian products (FdI 11 March). Moreover, like Salvini, Meloni took a few shots at the EU, especially when rejecting suggestions that Italy should consider drawing funds from the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) – an intergovernmental financial organization set up to help euro-area countries in financial distress which has always been seen by the League and FdI as potentially posing a threat to Italy's sovereignty. Warning against European leaders trying to 'exploit the Coronavirus to force Italy to swallow the bitter pill of the ESM' (Meloni 10 March), the party and its leader said that the EU and the European Central Bank (ECB) should get on with doing what was needed to support Italy, 'without wasting any time discussing European parameters' (FdI 10 March).

Interestingly, although Berlusconi's party went along with the idea of turning the EU into a major focus of debate, it framed the discussion in very different terms. Berlusconi (9 March) welcomed the efforts of the European Council to help Italy, as well as making unfounded claims about having played a part in convincing other European governments to act (FI 11 March). Ultimately, if in this period all right-wing parties accepted the need to rein in criticism of the government and be seen as responsible, FI was the only one among them to frame the reaction of EU institutions to the pandemic in a positive light. The Europhile approach adopted by FI was complemented by its leader's avoidance of populist rhetoric when talking about the governing majority. This is a pattern that would become a *leitmotif* of 2020, as FI strived to distinguish itself from its allies as the year progressed. Like the League and FdI, however, Berlusconi urged the government to offer prompt financial support to small businesses (and families) (10 March) – something that was entirely consistent with the right's focus on the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the past, too.

The EU Commission says 'Sorry!'

A third salient event concerns the head of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, apologizing to Italy in an open letter published by *la Repubblica*.⁶ In it, von der Leyen recognized that the EU had been too slow in supporting Italy at a time of crisis, thus signalling a new approach that would eventually lead to member states agreeing an unprecedented package of support to help alleviate the impact of the pandemic: the 'Recovery Fund'.

Exploiting the opportunity to take shots at the international elites allegedly staffing EU institutions, the League and FdI framed the latter as being ineffective, if not explicitly malicious, in its dealings with the Italian people. Hence, Salvini said that the EU was likely to produce a lot of words but no substance (2 April) and that the apology risked turning into 'a pretext to do things that have nothing to do with the virus' (3 April). Apparently, the risk was that Italy would be forced to draw funds from the ESM (*ibidem*), so that the EU would not need to devise a new package of support. In particular, the idea of drawing from the ESM was branded as 'a crime against Italians' (League 3 April), one that would end up mortgaging their future (Salvini 2 April). For good measure, Salvini also commented that – once the virus had been defeated – 're-discussing Europe and

Italy's role within it will be inevitable' (*ibidem*). Beyond the attacks on the EU (and the governing PD), one of the proposals consistently advocated by Salvini's party in this period was a deferment of tax bills for the whole of 2020 – again in line with the pro-business credentials of the right-wing alliance.

In a similar vein, von der Leyen's apology was met with sarcasm by Meloni, as the party's brief truce with the government was also coming to an end. Hence, the FdI leader criticized specific passages in von der Leyen's letter (such as the claim that EU member states had finally sent 'millions of masks to Italy and Spain') (Meloni 3 April). Furthermore, and similarly to Salvini, the FdI leader suggested that von der Leyen's warm words hid something sinister – the fact that the EU wanted to attach harsh conditions to whatever aid it sent to Italy (*ibidem*). This time, the party also attacked Prime Minister Conte for allegedly rejecting its own proposals to resolve the crisis: they 'thank us in private' but 'attack us in public for propaganda purposes' (Meloni 2 April). According to Meloni, the 'nation' which was 'carrying on a hard struggle' (*ibidem*) needed a national reconstruction plan also in light of Germany's attempt to exploit the Covid-19 crisis 'to assault our economy' (Meloni 1 April).

Importantly, Europe remained a key source of division within the right, as Berlusconi eyed another chance to differentiate his party from its more radical allies. Therefore, the FI leader broke the taboo about Italy drawing funds from the ESM, calling for this to happen without delay.⁷ Moreover, he reiterated calls for the government to accept his party's help to resolve the crisis (Berlusconi 2 April). Despite the fact that establishing forms of collaboration between government forces and FI would have been unrealistic at this stage (since the idea would have fallen foul of M5s' party members), the mere act of calling for such collaboration supported the party's strategy of attempting to appear reasonable and constructive at a time of crisis.

Polling data published on 30 April 2020⁸ showed that the dynamics observed at the start of the year were continuing unabated, with the League still shrinking (now down to 27%). While we have no hard evidence to link this to Salvini's hardening stance *vis-à-vis* the government, we notice that Prime Minister Conte's own approvals ratings were very high in the same period (well above 60%), while Salvini's own ratings had rapidly decreased (–8 points, compared to March).⁹ Berlusconi's party started to bounce back in this period – if only moderately – by reaching 7%, again possibly suggesting that its moderate approach was finding an echo among some voters within the right. FdI's rise also continued uninterrupted, breaking the 13% ceiling for the first time at national level, and approaching the maximum levels of support ever enjoyed by its predecessor party (AN).

Another factor that worked against the League in this period was that its 'heartland' region of Lombardy, whose governor was from this party, emerged early on as the epicentre of the pandemic, accounting for a very large percentage of total national deaths. In polls conducted at the end of May, citizens of the North-West (Lombardy, Piedmont, Liguria and Valle d'Aosta) rated the crisis management of their regions as the lowest in the country.¹⁰ Moreover, the lack of effectiveness of Lombardy's regional administration in handling this crisis was matched by the apparent inability of the League leader to put forward a convincing narrative about these events. Suffice to say that – having initially criticized the decision to lock down northern municipalities on 26 February,¹¹ by

stressing its disastrous economic consequences for businesses and the tourist industry – Salvini had performed a U-turn in March, as we have seen, and urged the country to adopt *stricter* measures instead.

The agreement on the 'Recovery Fund'

In July, EU leaders agreed on an unprecedented €750 billion plan of debt mutualization by EU members, called the 'Recovery Fund', which was meant to help member states address the economic and social impact of the pandemic. Once again, right-wing parties positioned themselves across a continuum, with Berlusconi celebrating the 'good news for Italy' (Berlusconi 21 July), Meloni taking a generally sceptical, but cautious, stance, and Salvini accusing the government of having 'surrendered without conditions to decisions made by the Commission' (Salvini 21 July). In addition, the League leader also criticized the EU for being too slow in allocating financial resources to its members, and the Italian government for their alleged mismanagement of immigration matters (*ibidem*). In his words, Italy had once again become 'Europe's refugee camp' (League 21 July). Framing management of the pandemic as an issue having to do with migration, Salvini lamented that, while native Italians had had to 'quarantine for months', 'illegal immigrants carrying the virus' were 'free to reach the country' (Salvini 21 July). Clearly, nativist frames coupled with anti-elitism directed at the EU remained crucial to the League also in this period.

On immigration matters, FdI's reaction was not dissimilar to the League's, with Meloni calling for sea crossings to be stopped via a naval blockade. Just like Salvini, Meloni also contrasted the situation of Italian citizens locked at home for months with that of illegal immigrants allegedly able to move freely throughout Italy (Meloni 20 July; FdI 20 July). Unlike Salvini, FdI's leader conceded that Conte had left July's European Council 'still standing' (Meloni 21 July). However, she criticized the conditions attached to the Recovery Fund, and specifically the fact that Italy may find itself having to 'convince the Germans or the Dutch' before being able to spend any money (Meloni 22 July).

Once again, FI did not pay much attention to the sea crossings and stuck to the (now well-rehearsed) line that it was ready to support government initiatives, provided it were meaningfully consulted in advance (Berlusconi 21 July). As for the Recovery Fund, Berlusconi claimed he had played a part in pushing for its approval, describing it as 'a compromise, however a positive compromise, which has overcome the resistance of some northern [European] countries' (*ibidem*). Interestingly, he added that the fund deprived 'the enemies of Europe of [valid] arguments' (*ibidem*), a clear reference to his own allies. Once again, the only clear commonality with the other two parties on the right was the call for a suspension, or at least a postponement, of payments of taxes owed to the state by companies and businesses (FI 21 July; cf. Salvini 20 July; Meloni 20 July).

The post-lockdown period provided confirmation, not only of the different frames adopted by right-wing parties to interpret the pandemic, but also of recent shifts in electoral support. Hence, polls published on 30 July 2020¹² show Salvini's party stabilizing at around 25% (still considerably higher than the 17% it had achieved at the last general election, however down almost 10% from the peak of 34% achieved in the European elections), and FdI at a very healthy 15%. Notably, this was almost *four*

times the percentage the party had achieved at the general election of 2018, and more than double the support it had won at the European election of 2019. Finally, FI remained stable, somewhere around 7%. It is also important to note that by mid-July, FdI had almost managed to become the nation's third largest party. It broke the 15% ceiling for the first time, very nearly reaching the levels of support enjoyed by the M5s (16%). Counterbalancing FdI's success, however, the gap between Salvini's party and the mainstream centre-left PD was also narrowing, but in ways that the right could not welcome. While at the peak of the League's performance in July 2019, the distance between the two parties had been a whopping 14.5 points, in July 2020 the League was attracting about 25% of the vote against the PD's 20%.

Overall, therefore, it appears that the summer brought about a consolidation of how the parties of the right were positioning themselves *vis-à-vis* the government, the EU and each other, and also a confirmation of electoral trends already seen in previous months. This continued as the summer came to an end.

The regional elections of autumn 2020

At the time of the autumn regional elections, right-wing parties continued to frame political events in ways consistent with the previous months. As shown by Vampa in this special issue, the regional elections saw the centre-left holding on to the regions of Campania, Puglia and Tuscany, while the right-wing coalition secured victories in the Marche, Liguria and Veneto regions. The results consolidated existing trends at the national level, namely the shrinking of both the M5s and FI, the seemingly unstoppable growth of FdI, and the race between the League and the PD to emerge as the largest party in the country.

As soon as the autumn elections were over, Salvini (22 September) declared victory, stressing that the right now governed in 15 out of 20 regions (League 23 September), and emphasizing that the PD and the M5s had failed to prevail even in the only region where they had created a common front (Salvini 22 September): Liguria. To rub it in, the League leader also reminded his followers that the M5s had now disappeared altogether from five regions (Salvini 23 September).

During this period, the most interesting developments for the League were represented by two issues. The first was the increasing focus on Salvini's own trial due to start on 3 October in Catania, which allowed him to talk about his signature themes again.¹³ Arguing that, by stopping would-be migrants from disembarking in Italian ports, he had only done his duty 'as an Italian and a minister' (Salvini 23 September), Salvini framed this issue as one having to do exclusively with the need to defend the country's borders. Moreover, he pointed out how, with the League in government, sea crossings from Africa had been reduced 'by 90%', while in the previous year they had allegedly gone back up fourfold (*ibidem*). The second issue Salvini and his party focused on in this period was the relationship between the parties of the right. Here, the League leader maintained that in the south the mistake had been to have chosen candidates of '30 years ago' rather than supporting 'new' faces (Salvini 23 September), implicitly criticizing the choices made by his allies (when, in fact, the League had failed to secure a victory in Emilia-Romagna just a few months earlier, as we have seen).

FdI again focused on the party's electoral growth, as it had done in the aftermath of the January regional elections. Hence Meloni (21 September) stressed that FdI was 'the only party to have grown, from north to south, in each region where a vote was held', and that no-one could have predicted that a candidate from FdI would win in the Marche region (FdI 23 September). Like the League, the party highlighted the debacle of the M5s (Meloni 22 September). However, it implicitly criticized Salvini's previous decision to govern with this party by tweeting that 'Italians acknowledge the seriousness and coherence of those who have never betrayed their promises' [i.e. have never governed alongside the left or the M5s] (*ibidem*). Furthermore, in this period the party reiterated its Eurosceptic and anti-immigration credentials by attacking the government for allegedly failing to get other EU countries to help resolve the issue of sea crossings due to 'the pro-immigration folly of the Italian left' (Meloni 23 September).

Finally, FI was virtually absent from Twitter during this period, except for an invitation to turn out and vote (FI 21 September), while Berlusconi (23 September) confined himself to mentioning his participation in the summit of the European People's Party (EPP) and again praised the Recovery Fund.

As far as electoral support is concerned, the last trimester of 2020 saw the League fighting on two fronts (cfr. Table 2, annual overview). Continuing its slide in the polls (now down to 24%), the party had to face a growing PD (polling at around 21%), which had been energized by its positive results in the regions of Tuscany, Campania and Apulia. At the same time, Salvini's party had to witness the continuing ascent of its FdI rival-ally, which now reached 16.1%.¹⁴ While no one can predict at this stage whether this will lead to Meloni bidding for the leadership of the right-wing alliance in the near future, at the time of writing, towards the end of 2020, this was certainly starting to look like a realistic possibility.

Discussion and conclusion

The Italian right-wing alliance has witnessed significant change in recent years, most notably the shrinking of FI, the League's stunning success at elections held in 2018 and 2019, and the growth of FdI throughout 2020. While Salvini's League still enjoys levels of support that would have been unimaginable under the party's previous leader, Umberto Bossi, the novel balance of forces within the right that we have explored in this article gives a growing FdI considerable leverage today. Ultimately, FdI is proving to Salvini that his attempts to turn the League into the dominant party of the right in the centre and south of the country can be held in check by a well-led, more traditional force rooted in 'post-fascism' and old-style nationalism.

It is against this backdrop that we can make sense of these parties' narrative frames throughout a year dominated by the Coronavirus pandemic. Berlusconi's decision to rebrand himself as a moderate, pro-European leader should be interpreted as an attempt to survive politically by someone who hopes still to play the part of king-maker if the right-wing alliance prevails at the next general election. Read in this light, the recent 'conversion' of the leader who used to blame 'Prodi's Euro' for all the ills of the Italian economy,¹⁵ makes a lot of sense. FI's reinvention had already started before the European Elections of May 2019. However, in 2020 we have witnessed the acceleration and

consolidation of this process, so that the party can now fill a vacant ‘Europhile’ space within the right. Meanwhile, as we have seen, Berlusconi’s more radical allies, the League and FdI, have kept focusing on the issues they have always fully owned: immigration, the EU and – in the League’s case – constant calls for tax cuts and tax breaks.

In terms of the fluctuations in these parties’ support throughout 2020, a crystallization of dynamics that had been set in motion during the previous year seems to have emerged. Hence, both the League’s steep descent and FdI’s growth, which became notable trends in the last quarter of 2019, continued to characterize the parties’ performances in 2020, according to polling figures (cfr. [Table 2](#)), while FI remained more or less stable at around 6–7% – albeit possibly recovering slightly throughout the year.

While in some respects the Italian right has changed throughout 2020, as we have seen in this chapter, we should not lose sight of the important elements of continuity, too, both in terms of the support this alliance appears to be enjoying among voters, and its message to them.

The elements of continuity are easier to grasp when one considers the right as a whole rather than its individual components – most of which have changed leader and name in recent years. Let us start from electoral support. Ultimately, the percentage of votes that the right-wing coalition appeared to be attracting at the end of 2020 remained perfectly in line with what it had gained throughout its history since it was created in 1994, and throughout the 2000s (cfr. [Table 3](#)). This suggests that the right has now been able to ‘claw back’ the support it had lost to the M5s at the 2013 and 2018 elections, when the latter managed temporarily to unsettle Italy’s bi-polar system. In other words, in 2020 the right could again aspire to represent that half of the Italian electorate that did not want to be governed by the left, given that the M5s had lost its ‘aura’ as a party ‘beyond left and right’, and had been forced to ally itself with the PD (sometimes also at local level).

Leaving polling data aside, our analysis of Twitter has revealed continuity in terms of the messages this alliance sends to its electorate, too. Despite Berlusconi’s claims to the contrary, FI has always been populist at heart (Zulianello 2020), and happened to be one of two parties (with the Northern League) attacking ‘the European elites’ already some fifteen years ago. Back then, Berlusconi started identifying the Euro as a threat to the Italian economy, as we have mentioned, while later on he went as far as to accuse German and French leaders of having staged a ‘coup’ against his duly elected government in 2011 – a very serious allegation, which he repeated several times.¹⁶ Hence, while it is true that in recent years Berlusconi has sub-contracted populism and Euroscepticism to his

Table 3. Main parties within the right-wing alliance: aggregated election results 1994–2018 (Chamber of deputies) and aggregated voting intentions at the end of 2020 (Chamber of deputies) (percentages).

	FI/PdL	AN/FdI	NL/League	Aggregated electoral results
1994	21.0	13.5	8.4	42.8
1996	20.6	15.7	10.1	46.3
2001	29.4	12	3.9	45.4
2006	23.7	12.3	4.6	40.7
2008	37.4		8.3	45.7
2013	21.6	2.0	4.1	27.7
2018	14.0	4.4	17.4	35.7
3/12/2020				47.4

Source: Ministry of the Interior (1994–2018); YouTrend Supermedia (2020).

vociferous allies for tactical reasons, the fact remains that these had been essential ideological features characterizing the right-wing coalition for many years – no less so when Berlusconi himself was its undisputed leader.

A similar assessment is reached when looking at the League's, and FdI's, focus on foreigners, and law and order. While these issues may have been deployed differently in 2020 (see the discourse concerning Chinese nationals, for instance), the bottom line is that – in their previous incarnations as the Northern League and AN – these parties had always owned these themes, repeatedly passing legislation directly relevant to them while serving in various governments led by one Silvio Berlusconi (e.g. in 2002 and 2009). In short, the right-wing coalition has dominated Italian politics during the last twenty-five years by adopting a formula focusing on immigration, law and order, Euroscepticism and promises to cut taxes – a strategy to which the founder of FI and long-time leader of the right, Berlusconi, himself much contributed after 'taking to the pitch' of politics in 1994. Whatever the changes of leadership and the internal shifts in support affecting these parties in recent years, the right-wing alliance is clearly hoping that its message may turn out to provide a 'winning formula' at the next elections, too.

Notes

1. 'Sondaggi, Meloni scavalca Conte: è la leader preferita dagli italiani. Crescono Zaia e Bonaccini. Cala la fiducia nel governo: -1%', <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it>, 12 November 2020, accessed on the same day.
2. For the sake of simplicity and due to space limitations, we cite tweets in the following format: author, day, month. In some cases, the selected tweets include incomplete sentences and links re-directing the reader to other social media platforms, most notably Facebook.
3. YouTrend Supermedia, Archivio Settimanale: www.youtrend.it. YouTrend Supermedia includes the following polling agencies (in alphabetical order): Demos, EMG, Euromedia, Ipsos, Ixè, Quorum, SWG and Tecnè. The weighted average takes into account differences in methodologies, samples and data collection date across polling agencies. It was considered the most suitable source of data because, by averaging different polls, it can provide more realistic indications than can a single snapshot.
4. YouTrend Supermedia 16 January 2020.
5. Tondo (2020).
6. 'Ursula von der Leyen: "Scusateci, ora la Ue è con voi"', www.repubblica.it, 1 April 2020, accessed 4 November 2020.
7. 'Mes, Berlusconi: "Soldi praticamente gratis. Occorre accettare"', www.repubblica.it, 22 May 2020, accessed 25 September 2020.
8. YouTrend Supermedia 30 April 2020.
9. 'Sondaggio.La Lega perde consensi: 25,4%, Pd a 4 punti. Conte, gradimento a quota 66, Salvini a 31', www.corriere.it, 26 April 2020, accessed 7 November 2020.
10. 'Il sondaggio politico di lunedì 25 maggio 2020', www.tg.la7.it, 25 May 2020, accessed 8 November 2020.
11. 'Il Coronavirus non placa le polemiche. Salvini chiede incontro a Mattarella', www.ansa.it, 26 February 2020, accessed 6 November 2020.
12. YouTrend Supermedia 30 July 2020.
13. At the time of writing, in December 2020, Salvini was being tried for kidnapping, illegal arrest and abuse of office. In July 2019, as the Interior Minister in the first Conte government, he prevented over a hundred people rescued at sea by the Italian navy from disembarking in Italy until other EU countries agreed to take them.

14. YouTrend Supermedia 3 December 2020.
15. ‘Berlusconi torna e attacca l’euro e la “sinistra bugiarda”’, www.repubblica.it, 23 January 2004.
16. ‘Berlusconi: “Nel 2011 la Merkel mi disse “non mi saluterai più”’, www.ilgiornale.it, 14 May 2014.

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