

## Italy: Hard Truths

Erik Jones<sup>1</sup>

[This is the final accepted version. The published version is: 'Italy's Hard Truths.' *Journal of Democracy* 34:1 (2023) pp. 21-35.]

The centre-right coalition won Italy's national parliamentary elections on September 25, 2022, with just under 44 percent of the popular vote – enough to provide substantial majorities in both chambers of the Italian parliament. Less than one month later, on October 22, Giorgia Meloni took the oath of office as Italy's first female prime minister. Soon after that, her party gained significantly in the polls even as Meloni and her government climbed in popular confidence. For anyone not following Italian politics, a decisive victory, a quick government formation, a leap forward for gender equality, and a surge in support for both Meloni and her government would all be good signs.

But Meloni comes from the far right. Her Brothers of Italy party has direct ties to the country's fascist past. One of the party's co-founders, Ignazio La Russa, now President of the Senate, collects Mussolini memorabilia. Meloni's allies – Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Salvini – are either making excuses for their close friend Vladimir Putin or pushing back against Western sanctions against Russia. And Meloni has expressed the desire to change the Italian constitution so that it can have a directly elected president like France. Given that Meloni is already close to the governments of Poland and Hungary, both widely accused of democratic backsliding, these other signs are less reassuring. Italy has a strong, democratically elected government, and yet that government's commitment to liberal values is unconvincing.

Then again, Meloni's policy agenda does not seem as frightening as her rhetoric – and the occasional outbursts from her allies – might suggest. Her government responded to a rave-party incident that brought hundreds of partygoers from across Europe to an abandoned warehouse in Modena with a poorly drafted piece of legislation that seemed to threaten the right of assembly, but her newly appointed Minister of Justice quickly backpedalled and even admitted having made a mistake in reacting too quickly. Meloni's response to migration was more bluster than real as well, and when she challenged French President Macron, she quickly backed down in the face of his full-throated response while looking for ways to diffuse the controversy.

Even Meloni's first budget proposal, assembled at record speed, was softer than her campaign rhetoric had suggested – so much so that the main centrist group outside her coalition signalled a willingness to work with her to improve it. On top of that, she managed to get most of the Italian parliament to join in supporting further assistance to Ukraine, including additional armaments. Despite their origins on the far right, Meloni and her government appear both reasonable and accommodating, and while it is still early days, they also appear likely to last longer in office than any of her recent predecessors. The new right wing government is popular, scary, and competent, all at the same time. This is just one of the ways that Italian democracy inspires cognitive dissonance.

### Past as prologue

Resolving the contradiction is not easy. Scratch the surface and previous governments are not obviously superior to the one Meloni currently leads – at least in terms of their democratic potential,

but sometimes also in terms of their liberal ideals. To illustrate, it is enough to go back to the centre-right government led by Silvio Berlusconi that took office in 2008. That is the last government formed in Italy prior to the September 2022 elections by a coherent pre-electoral coalition – which is essentially the same coalition we see today, only with Berlusconi’s party on top. In between you find either grand coalitions, technocratic governments, or unstable (and unpopular) marriages of convenience designed to hold unattractive challenger parties at bay while preventing an early dissolution of parliament. Some of those governments were effective in legislative terms, but their claim to represent the voice of the electorate was weak.

You can see that weakness by rolling back the clock. The government in place before Meloni took office was a coalition of essentially every other political party than the Brothers of Italy led by the former President of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi. For technocrats, journalists, bond traders, and students of central banking, having Draghi as prime minister was unambiguously a good thing.<sup>2</sup> Draghi was the hero of Europe’s sovereign debt crisis who was appointed by the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, to manage Italy’s response to the pandemic and to pass the reforms necessary for future governments to access European funds to pay for the country’s recovery.

For others, however, Draghi’s government of national unity raised important doubts about the health of Italian democracy.<sup>3</sup> Draghi governed with a strong hand – the Draghi method – picking his own ministers and welding his oversized coalition together with more confidence votes than any other government but one used in the last three decades. As soon as that discipline dissolved, and first the Five Star Movement (M5S) then Berlusconi’s Forza Italian and Salvini’s Lega rebelled against the Draghi method, Draghi pulled the plug on his own government even though he retained a parliamentary majority – which is how Italy wound up going to the polls in September 2022 rather than something closer to May of the following year.

The government before Draghi’s was led by Giuseppe Conte and included Conte’s M5S, the Democratic Party (PD), and a group of centrists around former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. Although Conte gained significant popularity due to his early handling of the pandemic, that coalition held together only to avoid early elections. As the most intense phase of the crisis passed, Conte’s popularity faded along with it.<sup>4</sup> Renzi sabotaged Conte’s government in January 2021 when he realized that the President of the Republic could recruit Draghi as a technocratic prime minister. A major reason so many political parties lined up behind Draghi is that Mattarella made it clear that the only alternative would be to face the electorate – and virtually everyone apart from Meloni rejected that option.

Go back even further, and the picture gets worse, not better. The government that emerged after the 2018 parliamentary elections was an unlikely coalition of the M5S and the Lega. That government was embraced by Steve Bannon as a model for Europe’s populist future.<sup>5</sup> It also created significant fear in the bond markets and fights with European institutions. Because of Salvini’s ambition to lead the centre-right to victory, that coalition did not last. Salvini was one of the few Italian politicians eager to face the voters early. His main obstacle was Conte, a lawyer plucked by the M5S out of relative obscurity to be a figurehead prime minister. It turned out that Salvini underestimated Conte’s desire to hold onto power. Salvini also underestimated Renzi’s skill in paving the way for the M5S-PD coalition that the same Matteo Renzi would later collapse. Salvini’s eagerness to face the voters quickly faded once he realized his mistake.

If Renzi seems to play an outsized role in the 2018 parliament, it is largely because of his experience as both hero and villain in the parliament elected in February 2013. That was the parliament where the M5S broke through to win roughly 26 percent of the electorate, forcing the PD to coalesce with

Berlusconi's Forza Italia – after a pronged coalition bargaining process – first under Letta and then under Renzi, to keep the M5S out of power. Letta created that coalition as the least-worst alternative to facing the electorate again, and he held his government together after Berlusconi abandoned the grand coalition. Letta stayed in power because a group of Berlusconi's supporters split from Forza Italia to hold onto their ministerial positions. The party this breakaway group created, called the New Centre Right, lasted only so long as the parliament.

Renzi took over from Letta in 2014 first by becoming secretary general of the PD and then by ousting Letta from office. Renzi's only electoral victory was in the May 2014 contest to send representatives to the European Parliament; his Democratic Party garnered almost 41 percent of the vote. Unfortunately, this broad consensus did not alter Renzi's strength in the Italian parliament. Domestically, Renzi governed over what was left of Letta's grand coalition. He used that majority effectively, but only by setting the record for using confidence votes (that Draghi did not match).

Renzi finally left office after voters rejected his constitutional reform agenda in a popular referendum held in December 2016. Renzi wanted to eliminate Italy's 'perfectly bicameral legislature', which meant getting rid of the requirement for any government to have workable majorities in both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. Renzi also wanted to change the electoral system to look like something closer to the one used in France. The details are complicated, not least because the courts struck down parts of the existing electoral system and the one Renzi proposed. Nevertheless, the intention was clear. Renzi hoped to focus legislative activity on one chamber, and he wanted to ensure that the electorate would be able to deliver clear majorities. Like Meloni today, Renzi sought to use the French-inspired institutional changes to strengthen the Italian executive.

Renzi did not manage to get his electoral reform passed either. That job was left to Paolo Gentiloni, who succeeded Renzi as prime minister. Gentiloni's main tasks were to introduce a new electoral system before going back to the polls and to avoid facing the voters in early elections. That law finally passed in November 2017 and the elections took place at the natural end of the parliament the following March. When the voters went to the polls, they threw their support behind the main parties of the opposition, meaning the M5S and the Lega.<sup>6</sup> That is how Italy ended up with a 'populist' coalition admired by Steve Bannon.

Go back before 2013 and you see a similar pattern. The government in office just prior to the February 2013 elections when the M5S made its major breakthrough was a technocratic administration led by Mario Monti – a two-time former European Commissioner who the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, appointed as life senator just as Berlusconi's coalition was collapsing. Monti's technocratic administration was necessary to hold the parliament together during the economic and financial crisis, a time when no-one in Italy wanted to go to the polls. It was also designed to introduce reforms that no elected government could stomach – and the 'populist' M5S-Lega government would later repudiate. Indeed, the M5S managed to do so well in the 2013 elections because it ran against the kind of unelected technocracy that Monti represented.

Before Monti, you find the Berlusconi government that we started with in 2008. Again, that government began with the same coalition that Meloni leads today. Indeed, she was youth minister. Berlusconi led the largest political movement, the People of Liberty, which was a combination of his Forza Italia and the predecessor to Meloni's party, called the National Alliance. The Lega Nord, as it was called before Salvini took over its leadership, was the junior partner. Roughly two years into the life of that government Berlusconi split with Meloni's predecessor, Gianfranco Fini, who took part of his National Alliance out of the People of Liberty, rebranding that new group the 'Future and Liberty

for Italy'. Meloni stayed behind to serve in Berlusconi's government until it finally collapsed in 2011, paving the way for Mario Monti's technocratic administration. As she left office, she vowed to build a right-wing party that would not compromise on its principles in order to hold onto power.<sup>7</sup>

This backward look over Italian governments is helpful because it points to two different 'origins' stories. One is about the centre-right coalition that Berlusconi led in 2008 and Meloni leads today. The other is about the Brothers of Italy that Meloni created to dominate that coalition. The backward look also reveals another form of democratic cognitive dissonance: the principal result of Italian national elections is not to give the voters what they choose, but instead to reset the clock for when the next elections will have to take place – while creating incentives for politicians to do whatever is necessary to avoid facing the voters any earlier. Again, this is not to deny that Italian politicians can achieve significant legislative victories. The Renzi and Gentiloni governments get short shrift in this telling, as do the governments led by Monti and Draghi.<sup>8</sup> Rather the point is to explain why some of the most ambitious politicians, like Renzi and Meloni, look for ways to strengthen the democratic legitimacy and political effectiveness of the executive.

### **Socio-electoral engineering**

What politicians like Renzi and Meloni envy is what they see as the decisiveness of other political systems, like France. Their presumption is that the difference between Italian and French politics is a matter of political institutions. They are not alone that thought. The question is how well anyone really understands the implications of institutional change before the fact. Those implications can be significant. Giorgia Meloni's rise to power is a good illustration.

The origins of the Meloni's centre-right coalition lie in the collapse of Italy's first republic in the early 1990s and the desire of leading politicians and technocrats – including the current President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella – to change the design of the electoral system to reshape the Italian electorate. The politics of the first republic revolved around a large, centrist Christian Democratic (DC) party that competed with a large Italian Communist Party (PCI) in opposition. This politics did not involve alternation in power because the PCI could not be allowed to govern in the context of the Cold War. Instead, it was a politics of creeping coalition building, as the DC made up for votes lost to the PCI or other groups by bringing smaller parties into the government. This was possible because of the proportionality of the electoral system, which made it unlikely if not impossible for the PCI to gain control over the parliament without support from other parties. So long as the DC could find resources – meaning not just ministerial portfolios, but also access to lucrative government programmes, contracts, or kickbacks – to attract coalition partners, it could also keep the PCI in opposition.

The PCI dissolved with the end of the Cold War and the DC collapsed under the weight of its own corruption, including links to organized crime. That is how the first Italian republic ended. In response, the architects of the second republic sought to build a system that would ensure parties in government would experience a cure in opposition. To do so, however, they believed needed to move away from strict proportionality and to create incentives for politicians to find some way to divide the Christian Democratic centre of the political spectrum. The goal was not to encourage Italians to leave the Catholic Church. Instead, it was to exploit divisions within Italian Catholicism between those who are more conservative and those who are more progressive – encouraging more conservative Catholic voters to align with other right-wing interests, while leaving the more progressive Catholics to mingle with radicals, liberals, and former communists on the left.

These new coalitions involved social as well as political compromises. Catholicism, communism, fascism, and regionalism have a cultural significance in Italy that goes beyond their political alignment with left and right.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, finding some way to build stable coalitions that could alternate time in power would involve bringing people together politically who did not have strong social connections or even weak affinities. Indeed, they may share material interests while living in completely different cultural contexts. Realigning these groups would require social as well as electoral engineering.

The solution introduced in 1993 was to replace the proportional electoral system with an electoral law named after Sergio Mattarella that assigned 75 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate to single-member districts on a first-past-the-post basis. The remaining seats were allocated proportionally with a minimum threshold for representation using national districts for the Chamber of Deputies and regional districts for the Senate. This way, the system would encourage political groups to form electoral coalitions while preserving the ability regionally based political parties to win some representation in parliament.

This electoral system had three unintended consequences. First, it created an opportunity for the far right in Italian politics – called the Italian Social Movement (MSI) – to escape political isolation.<sup>10</sup> The MSI started in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, when a group of former fascists sought representation in the Italian parliament. It remained active throughout the Cold War, but never entered government. Indeed, other parties generally avoided associating with it. With the end of Cold War and the redesign of the electoral system, however, the leader of the MSI, Gianfranco Fini, saw an opportunity to rebrand his movement as a National Alliance to play a role in pushing back against any coalition of the left. He distanced the new entity from its fascist past and sought allies on the centre-right of the Italian political spectrum.

Second, the new system added strength to those regional movements like the Lega Nord that could gain a plurality of the votes in single member districts in those parts of the country where they are predominant while at the same time winning seats in proportional contests at the regional level in the Senate. Because of their identity-based political appeals, those regional groups tended to gravitate to the right of the spectrum. This did not make them attractive to the National Alliance, which abhorred separatism, and it did not make the National Alliance attractive to Lega Nord either, but it did make the Lega Nord available for coalition with anyone claiming to represent the business community.

Third, the new system encouraged the personalization of politics while at the same time placing a strain on party finances. This created an unexpected opportunity for a media mogul like Silvio Berlusconi, who built his fortune by sewing together a national network of regional television stations and who strengthened his personal brand by using that fortune to purchase one of the most successful football clubs in the country. Berlusconi had good reasons to enter politics at the fall of the first republic; he was only able to create his media empire through close political connections that made it possible for him to challenge the state television monopoly. Those connections vanished in the corruption investigations that brought down the first republic. Berlusconi needed political power to protect his personal interests and so promised to use his new political movement, Forza Italia, to fight for the rights of business and against the communists (who technically no longer existed, but who offered a compelling rhetorical villain).<sup>11</sup>

Berlusconi's success lay in forging a coalition with the Lega Nord and the National Alliance – called the Pole of Liberty with the Lega Nord in the north of the country and the Pole of Good Governance with the National Alliance everywhere else. They were not easy political partners, but in electoral

terms, they were successful. Together, the three parties captured enough seats to command a majority in both parliamentary chambers. Given the design of the electoral system, the Lega Nord did particularly well. Although polling just 8 percent nationwide, the Lega Nord won the largest number of seats in both chambers, followed by the National Alliance (in the Senate) and Forza Italia (in the Chamber of Deputies).

Berlusconi brought the National Alliance and the Lega Nord into national government, thus legitimating both the post-fascists and regional separatists as partners in leading the country. That government was short lived. Lega Nord leader Umberto Bossi fought with Berlusconi and pulled his representatives from the coalition. What followed was a short technocratic administration, and an early dissolution of parliament. When elections took place in 1996, the centre left managed to form a coalition strong enough to keep the centre right from returning to power. The alternation that the electoral system was designed to achieve appeared to work.<sup>12</sup>

The centre-left coalition proved almost as difficult to manage as the centre-right coalition that preceded it. The architect of the centre-left coalition, Romano Prodi, lost his premiership in 1998 due to infighting between his centre-left Christian Democrats and competing factions among the former communists. The different cultural groups on the centre left were at least as hard to reconcile as those on the centre right. Massimo D'Alema, a former communist, took over as prime minister until the centre-left coalition finally lost its cohesion and that parliament also ended in a technocratic government. Again, the system prepared for political alternation.

### **Opportunistic manipulation**

This time was different. Politicians on the centre right quickly learned how to return to power and stay there – Berlusconi first and foremost.<sup>13</sup> When Italy went back to the polls in 2001, Berlusconi convinced the Lega Nord and the National Alliance to stand together in a House of Liberty coalition across the country. The regionalist Lega Nord and the post-fascist National Alliance were no closer socially in 2001 than they had been seven years earlier, but they were able to work together more cohesively with Forza Italia than the parties of the centre left could manage. The result was impressive in terms of votes and seats. The House of Liberty won almost 50 percent of the vote for the Chamber of Deputies and 43 percent for the Senate. Berlusconi's Forza Italia was the largest component of this coalition, followed by the National Alliance. The third largest was a group of centrist Christian Democrats. The Lega Nord was a distant fourth in both chambers.

The result was also impressive in terms of longevity. Berlusconi's second government lasted from June 2001 to April 2005, longer than any other government in the history of post-Second World War Italy. That government only fell when it became clear in the regional elections of April 2005 that the centre right was losing ground to another centre-left coalition led by Romano Prodi. Berlusconi reconstituted his coalition, but quickly sought a solution to the threat that Prodi and the centre left would recapture power in national elections to be held when the five-year parliamentary mandate ended in 2006.

Berlusconi's strategy was to reshape the electoral law to work on a strictly proportional basis but offering a majority bonus at the national level for the Chamber of Deputies and at the regional level for the Senate. His bet was that the regional strength of his coalition in the north and south of the country would counterbalance the strength of the centre left in the central regions. By awarding a majority bonus at the regional level in the Senate, he could deny Prodi the majority in that upper chamber necessary to form a government.

Berlusconi's gambit nearly succeeded. Prodi was able to form a government after the 2006 elections, but his majority in the Senate was tenuous and relied on smaller parties in his coalition to pass legislation. With the constant threat that individual parliamentarians would change allegiance between elections, it was difficult for Prodi and the centre left to govern effectively. Prodi tried to strengthen his position by founding the Democratic Party to bring together Christian Democrats and former communists in one political organization, but his majority in the Senate dissolved when a small centrist group abandoned his coalition in 2008.

There were few options for Prodi to replace the votes he lost in the Senate. And with the centre left having won the majority bonus in the Chamber of Deputies under the new electoral law, there was no way the centre right could form an alternative government. The only option was for the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, to dissolve parliament. Berlusconi used the preparation for new elections to bring together his Forza Italia with the National Alliance and two smaller parties to create the People of Liberty. This federation of parties became the core of the centre right coalition, with the Lega Nord as ally. Together they defeated the new Democratic Party and its allies on the centre left, capturing 47 percent of the votes in both the Chamber and the Senate.

The centre right looked set to govern the country with a commanding majority. Within less than four years, however, its control over parliament collapsed amidst scandal, infighting, and economic crisis. The details of the story are both salacious and complicated. The important point is that by the time Berlusconi stepped down in November 2011 all three of the main elements of his coalition were damaged. His own leadership was tarnished, and he would be barred from office by the courts. The National Alliance was dissolved, and Gianfranco Fini quickly disappeared from politics. And the Lega Nord became mired in corruption scandals that disgraced its leader, Umberto Bossi, and wrecked the party's finances.

What this meant in practical terms is that Italy retained an electoral system designed to reward a centre-right coalition that no longer existed. Berlusconi maintained control over Forza Italia, but he could not stand for public office until he completed his house arrest and public service, and the judicial ban could be lifted. Matteo Salvini became leader of a Lega Nord that needed to be rebuilt both organizationally and in the eyes of the electorate. And Giorgia Meloni had to create a new political group to carry the torch (literally) for the post-fascist community.<sup>14</sup> This is the backdrop against which Mario Monti managed his technocratic government – and Mario Draghi saved the euro – in 2012, and it is the context within which the Five Star Movement rose to national prominence in 2013.

#### **Four projects**

The next decade of Italian politics revolved around four different attempts to adapt to the socio-electoral engineering that started in the early 1990s and was amended by Berlusconi's centre-right government in the early 2000s. Matteo Renzi's project was to replace the generation of post-communist and left-leaning former Christian Democratic elites he held responsible for the dysfunction of the Democratic Party as a centre of gravity for coalition building on the centre left. Beppe Grillo's project was to establish the Five Star Movement as the home for the disaffected in a new sort of post-ideological hegemonic centre. Matteo Salvini's project was to rebuild the Lega Nord as a national political movement on the centre right. And Giorgia Meloni's project was to build a right-wing political party attractive enough to lead the Italian government.

Renzi's project almost succeeded. When he took over the premiership from Enrico Letta in February 2014, he brought significant new energy into the coalition of the centre left that raised his stature both at home and abroad. His electoral victory in the European Parliament elections may not have strengthened his parliamentary majority, but it did signal popular enthusiasm for his political project.

Unfortunately for Renzi, that enthusiasm was a wasting asset. His efforts to reform Italian labour markets offended the trade unions and those former communists who support them. The ties linking key allies, like reform minister Elena Boschi, to bank failures in Tuscany alienated many of his core constituents. And Renzi's personalization of the constitutional referendum campaign worked against him. When the constitutional referendum failed and Renzi resigned as prime minister, he retained control over the Democratic Party until the 2018 elections, but he was never able to rekindle popular support.

Grillo's project almost succeeded as well. The M5S breakout in 2013 gave him an opportunity to humiliate the Democratic Party and push the PD into a mutually destructive embrace with Forza Italia. Grillo then used the next five years to rail against successive centrist PD-led coalitions. The M5S went from 26 percent in 2013 to almost 33 percent in 2018. This support came from both the right and the left.

The problem for Grillo was that gathering discontent is very different from exercising responsibility. Once the M5S went into coalition with Salvini's Lega, however, its ability to hold onto right-wing voters diminished because in terms of expressing right-wing attitudes the Lega was more authentic. The more Salvini railed about migration or against Europe, the more right-leaning M5S supporters gravitated into his orbit. The left-leaning M5S supporters also started drifting away because of their distaste in being associated with the Lega and their disillusionment over what the M5S-Lega coalition could accomplish in terms of M5S priorities.

The M5S lost almost half its popular support between the March 2018 national parliamentary elections and the moment when Salvini tried to collapse the M5S-Lega government in July 2019. The number recovered slightly when Conte negotiated a new governing coalition with the PD the following September, but it remained stuck at around 15 percent in the polls through the end of that second Conte government, and it declined throughout Draghi's time as prime minister to something just over 11 percent. Conte was able to improve that number in the runup to the 2022 elections, but only by transforming the M5S from a party of the disaffected to a more coherent party of the left.

Salvini's project was more transitory. Salvini rebranded the Lega Nord to become the Lega in the runup to the 2018 national parliamentary elections to reforge the party as a national political movement. To underscore the point, he made sure to campaign in parts of Central and Southern Italy where a Lega Nord politician would not be welcome. He also worked hard to build local alliances, particularly among the more conservative southern Christian Democrats but also – allegedly – with southern powerbrokers connected with organized crime. The initial results were impressive, primarily in the central regions that used to be centre-left strongholds.<sup>15</sup>

The highpoint came in the May 2019 elections to the European Parliament. Salvini's Lega emerged as the largest Italian political party with just over 34 percent of the electorate, compared to 17 percent for its coalition partners, the M5S, and just under 23 percent for the PD. Importantly, these results revealed that the Lega was making important inroads in the rural communities of Emilia Romagna and Tuscany.<sup>16</sup> What was less clear was how permanent those inroads might be.



After Salvini tried and failed to bring down the first Conte government, his popularity fell precipitously, losing seven percentage points between July 2019 and January 2020. Salvini tried and failed to challenge the PD for control over Emilia Romagna in January 2020. Then the pandemic struck, and Salvini's hold over his supporters weakened further – particularly in the south. The situation worsened after Salvini joined the Draghi government in 2021. By the time Italy went to the polls in September 2022, Salvini's Lega was down to just under 9 percent and there was little evidence that it drew support much beyond its traditional northern constituencies.

The fourth project, by Meloni, was the slowest to develop in terms of popular support. Her Brothers of Italy polled below 5 percent from 2013 until the European elections in 2019. When the Salvini's Lega peaked at just under 38 percent in July 2019, Meloni's Brothers of Italy were up to 7.3 percent. Thereafter the Salvini's losses fed Meloni's gains. The crossover took place in the middle of Draghi's tenure in July 2021 with Salvini government and Meloni in opposition – both polling just over 20 percent. Meloni's attraction came from her consistency: she was the main voice of opposition to Draghi's coalition of national unity and the only voice who could celebrate the end of Draghi's government without being blamed for having caused it. That is how she won in September 2022 – not because of her ideas, but because she remained untainted by cynicism or compromise.

### **Meloni's project**

The content of Meloni's project was already assembled long before she rose to popularity. From the beginning, she advocated political positions that sound reasonable. In their 2013 party programme, the Brothers of Italy set out sixteen challenges that Italians would have to face.<sup>17</sup> The first was to reconcile Italy to Europe by strengthening Italian national identity and political institutions in order to push back against unnecessary austerity. The elimination of 'perfect bicameralism' (later promoted by Renzi) was prominent in the list, as was the reduction in the number of parliamentarians (eventually achieved by Conte M5S-PD coalition). The document also talks about the need to achieve equity across generations, the need to end patronage and institutionalized privilege in the civil service, to consolidate public finances, lower the tax burden, restore public investment, and enhance competitiveness.

The wish list of goals the Brothers of Italy promised to work to achieve is a long one, and included an impartial judiciary, a central bank that can stabilize both financial institutions and government finances, an active industrial policy, a strengthened educational system, and closer links between universities and industry. There is a section on migration, but it dealt mostly with the need to strengthen relations with other countries to prevent illegal cross-border flows, which at the same time devoting resources to better integration of those who make it into the country legally. The programme finished with a plea for a more sustainable energy economy that uses technological innovation and digital technology to do less harm to the environment.

What the 2013 document does not reveal is the ideology that wraps around this policy agenda. That came out most prominently in the 'theses of Trieste' that the Brothers of Italy released in 2017.<sup>18</sup> That document builds on the moment at the country's historic defeat in the First World War at Caporetto, when an elite theory of Italian nationalism suddenly became a rallying point for popular awareness in the face of an external threat to Italian sovereignty. According to the thesis, that is when Italy truly started. It is also a strong indicator of what makes 'Italians' – their shared religion, values, culture, institutions, and history. Take these things away and you threaten the essence of Italian identity. According to the theses, that is why members of the LGBTQ+ community should not

be allowed to adopt children, why women should be discouraged from seeking abortions, why 'gender politics' and 'political correctness' should be rejected, and why immigration should be restricted. The problem is not that Italians do not like immigration, it is that many immigrants 'hate' those things that make Italians distinctive.

The ideas set out in the 'theses of Trieste' are what make observers inside and outside Italy worry about Giorgia Meloni and her 'Brothers'. Those ideas do not just sit alongside the otherwise reasonable-sounding policy agenda; they are tightly woven throughout its long and wonkish list of goals and instruments. They tell us what 'merit' means in educational policy and what 'culture' means in terms of heritage. They explain what 'equity' means across generations, the kind of goals that will underpin tax incentives, the measure of success for industrial policy, and the relationship Italy will seek with its neighbours and with European institutions. If Meloni were to ally herself with Viktor Orbán in Hungary, for example, it is because they share an appreciation for national sovereignty and they also perceive the same threats to national identity.

The success of Meloni's project is hard to judge. In many senses this is a third way Italy's democracy creates cognitive dissonance. It is not a good idea to normalize the political right that Meloni represents in narrative terms. As Timothy Garton Ash said in the *Financial Times* of November 13, it is dangerous to adopt or tolerate the language of right-wing extremists. It is even more dangerous when 'the very workings of democracy can contribute to undermining democratic norms.'<sup>19</sup> Then again, it is hard to recognize when a right-wing politician like Giorgia Meloni is moving toward the mainstream – both internationally and domestically – in terms of her behaviour in government. 'Normalization' can be transformative as well as narrative.

The nature of the project speaks against the idea of transformation. Meloni created the Brothers of Italy to be uncompromising in its representation of the Italian political right. She named it the Brothers of Italy after the first line of the national anthem. The implication is straightforward: Italy first. And she has imbued the party program with nationalist and conservative values that she sets out as conservative ideal types.

Then again, there are and always have been ambiguities. Meloni rejects traditional gender stereotypes, for example. She self-identifies as a woman and yet the kind of woman she represents rebels against institutionalized sexism even in the gender assignment given to the word 'president' – which she insists should be masculine when it applies to herself. Meloni does not come from a traditional family, and she does not live in one either, but her party seeks to defend the traditional family as an ideal. Her non-traditional background and lifestyle are at odds with Catholic doctrine and yet she promotes a very traditional form of Catholicism as well.

These apparent contradictions are only part of the mosaic. Meloni is staunchly anti-immigrant and yet, unlike Matteo Salvini when he was Minister of the Interior, she has allowed rescue boats chartered by non-governmental organizations to offload children, women, the elderly, and the sick (which means just about everyone) before telling them to move onto another port of call. She has also accepted at the Italian Coast Guard, which intercepts the majority of migrants afloat in the Mediterranean, will bring those people to Italy for processing. So, while she projects a strongly xenophobic view of Italy, her actions suggest something less rigid and unyielding.

The fiscal dimension is even more complicated. Meloni's new government constructed a budget in record time, using material left behind by Mario Draghi and his team. That budget includes elements that are bound to cause controversy, like a phase out of the subsidy for home renovations, a progressive elimination of the basic minimum income, or a gradual prolongation of time before

retirement. But these elements are incremental more than revolutionary, particularly when you see how they might evolve in the face of pushback. More important, they are guided by the need to achieve an overall fiscal target in line with European recommendations. This means both the reform and the pushback are bounded by requirements that have little to do with the ideology of the party in government. No wonder centrists outside Meloni's coalition see this is a place for cooperation.

### **Right and wrong, left and right**

Again, it is difficult to distinguish between the narrative of converging on the mainstream for these policy domains and the actual process of convergence on European norms no matter who is responsible for that taking place. Indeed, this is true within the right-wing coalition and across the electorate. Those tensions come from the same source. The alternation Italy's political leaders sought at the end of the first republic is ill suited to the many cleavages present in Italian society. The choice Italians face is not between right and left, one coalition or another. It is more complex. And that complexity cannot fit easily into any binary combination. As a result, institutions designed to divide society into opposing and alternating camps have ceased to function – assuming, of course, they ever functioned adequately.

This is not to say there is no right and wrong in Italy's democratic outcomes. Government policies toward LGBTQ+ families, women's reproductive rights, migration, and multiculturalism touch on fundamental concerns where people may disagree, but few will regard those issues with relativistic indifference. The point is that it has always been dangerous to assume that there is a coherent right and left in the Italian electorate. An effort to insist on that division only succeeded in creating multiple forms of cognitive dissonance. Democratically successful parties appear to be illiberal; elections serve primarily to delay confrontations between politicians and voters; and principled politicians are judged more by what they say than what they accomplish. Italians trying to understand their new government are struggling with those considerations. The only question is whether democracy elsewhere is any different.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper would not have been possible without excellent research support from Pilar Bolognesi. The usual disclaimer applies.

<sup>2</sup> That reference to researchers who work on central banks is a personal disclaimer, having written a number of pieces lionizing Draghi's performance both while he was President of the ECB and after he took up his role as prime minister. In preparation for writing this essay, I sought out more critical work – which turned out to be a challenging but rewarding endeavour.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Tomaso Motanari, *Eclissi di costituzione: il governo Draghi e la democrazia* (Milan: Chiarelettere editore srl, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Erik Jones, 'Italy and Europe: From Competence to Solidarity to Competence,' *Contemporary Italian Politics* 13:2 (2021) pp. 196-209.

<sup>5</sup> Antonello Guerrera, 'Steve Bannon: "Consiglio Lega e anche i 5 Stelle, adesso Roma è il centro del mondo,' *La Repubblica* (2 June 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Gianluca Passarelli and Dario Tuorto, *La Lega di Salvini: estrema destra di governo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018) chapter 5.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgia Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia: le mie radici, le mie idee* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2021) pp. 172-173.

<sup>8</sup> This is another personal disclaimer, having written very favourably about all four governments.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini and the Eclipse of Italian Fascism: From Dictatorship to Populism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Patrick McCarthy, *The Crisis of the Italian State: From the Origins of the Cold War to the Fall of Berlusconi and Beyond* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) pp. 161-162.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents, 1980-2001* (London: Penguin, 2001) pp. 284-299.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Hopkin, 'Bipolarity (And After),' in Erik Jones and Gianfranco Pasquino, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Italian Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) pp.325-340.

<sup>13</sup> Giovanni Orsina, *Berlusconism and Italy: An Historical Interpretation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) pp. 116-124.

<sup>14</sup> The symbol of the Brothers of Italy is a three-color torch that was also promoted by Mussolini's Fascists.

<sup>15</sup> Passarelli and Tuorto, *La Lega di Salvini*, chapter 3.

<sup>16</sup> Erik Jones and Matthias Matthijs, 'Italy and the European Elections of 2019,' *Journal of Common Market Studies: Annual Review* 58 (2020) pp. 69-79.

<sup>17</sup> 'Le sfide per l'Italia' was published in February 2013 and can be found online at: <https://www.fratelli-italia.it/le-sfide-per-l-italia-9-gennaio-pomeriggio/>.

<sup>18</sup> 'Le tesi di Trieste' were published in December 2017 and can be found online at: <https://www.giorgiameloni.it/tesitrieste/>.

<sup>19</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, 'Beware the Creeping Normalisation of the Hard Right,' *Financial Times* (13 November 2022).