Changing political opportunities and the re-invention of the Italian right

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The transition to a new party system in Italy in the 1990s was characterised by a shift to a new form of bipolar politics in which a rather heterogeneous collection of political formations—some new and some re-invented—generally grouped themselves around either of the two poles (of centre-left and centre-right) that emerged to dispute the new predominantly majoritarian electoral system adopted in 1993. The voluntary self-location of a number of political parties within the centre-right pole was particularly noteworthy given that the right-wing label had been eschewed by mainstream parties during the course of the post-war republic. Indeed, the political force that dominated the period—the Christian Democratic (DC) party—despite occupying the political space generally occupied by centre-right parties in other advanced Western democracies—defined itself as a centrist party. The right-wing label was, for historical reasons, associated with extremism and anti-democratic sentiment and regarded as a ‘taboo’ in Italian politics.

It is noteworthy that the only party that unashamedly adopted the right-wing label was the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI), previously viewed as outside the arc of legitimate constitutional actors, now re-invented as the National Alliance (AN), presenting itself as a democratic party of the right and distancing itself from its fascist antecedents. This re-invented political force sat alongside two new political forces of a more populist bent—Forza Italia and the Lega Nord (Northern League, LN)—as well as conservative offshoots from the former DC, within the centre-right coalition that governed Italy briefly in 1994 and then returned to government in 2001 under Silvio Berlusconi’s leadership.

This paper will examine the ideological development of the LN and AN, highlighting divergences and common trends particularly in relation to the various political and electoral strategies and policy frames utilised by them. An analysis of the programmatic documents of these two parties in various distinct phases since the beginning of the 1990s will illustrate the continuous process of ideological re-invention they have undertaken in the quest to carve out distinct political identities and in order to seek out and occupy differing political...
spaces. We will then seek to explain the changing ideological positions we have documented by outlining the key internal and external political developments and factors that have conditioned the approach taken by these formations over these phases.

**Ideology and political opportunities on the Italian right**

The success of the LN and the AN was made possible by the circumstances of the political crisis in 1992–1994 when the clientelistic rule by parties—the *partitocrazia*—dominated by the DC since the late 1940s was brought tumbling down by the *tangentopoli* corruption scandal. The emergence of the various northern leagues (most notably the Lombard League) at the end of the 1980s—eventually uniting under the Lega Nord in 1991—was itself a contributory factor in bringing down the *partitocrazia*. The LN offered an alternative to voters in the north and north-east disgruntled by the inefficient and corrupt governing system presided over by the DC. It employed a radical anti-establishment discourse which denounced the corrupt *partitocrazia* and linked this with a general attack on the nature of the Italian state and the way in which the backward south acted as a drain on the resources of the productive north (calling for autonomy for the northern regions and decentralisation of government in general). The LN was aided by the ideological vacuum left behind by those subcultures which up to the 1980s dominated the political scene in Italy: Communism and Catholicism, but which had been gradually eroded by the concurrent processes of secularisation and crisis of communist ideology.  

Despite its frequent attacks on the *partitocrazia*, the MSI was at the beginning of the 1990s viewed as an outdated political force, stigmatised as it was by its association with fascism. The party, founded by fascist veterans in the 1940s, had survived on the edge of the political system throughout the post-war period, during which it was viewed as the most successful neo-fascist party in Western Europe, generally polling around 5–6 per cent. Although in 1992 it appeared to be in decline, by 1994 it found itself in government having secured 12 per cent of the vote under the guise of the National Alliance electoral banner, devised by its leader Gianfranco Fini. Its entrance into the government coalition represented a remarkable break from the Italian post-war model, based as it was on an anti-fascist consensus. At the same time, given its attacks on the unity of the Italian state and the radical departure it offered from the form of politics hitherto employed in the post-war republic—characterised by the populist and sometimes demagogic discourse of its leader Umberto Bossi—the LN’s inclusion in the winning centre-right coalition in 1994 was equally remarkable to that of the MSI.

The new role of these two right-wing formations was made possible by the emergence of the new centre-right party, Forza Italia (FI), formed by Silvio

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2. For more on Fini’s leadership see S. Fella, ‘From Fiuggi to the Farnesina—Gianfranco Fini’s remarkable journey’, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 14(1), 2006, pp. 11–23.
Berlusconi had formed the new party mainly due to concerns about the lack of a credible force to challenge the new centre-left coalition grouped around the reformed ex-communists in the Democratic Left Party (PDS). While a direct alliance between the AN and LN would have been unthinkable given their radically different political cultures and conceptions of the Italian state, the FI could act as the focal point of a new centre-right pole, forming separate alliances with the LN in the north and the AN in the south (its electoral heartland). The new pole, including also various conservative splinters from the DC, served to legitimise both the new populism of the LN and the post-fascism of the AN. Berlusconi himself realised that under the new majoritarian system—with its bipolar logic—a broad coalition involving both these forces was necessary to ensure the construction of a pole strong enough to compete with the centre-left. Nevertheless, the fragilities and contradictions within this pole were demonstrated at the end of 1994, when the difficulties the LN had in reconciling its populist character with the demands of government led to its exit from the governing coalition, precipitating its collapse. The immediate context for this withdrawal was the corruption investigations launched by the judiciary against Berlusconi. However, the concerns of Bossi that FI was successfully colonising the LN’s anti-state pro-deregulation constituency in the north (not to mention his continued antipathy towards Fini and the AN who he continued to label fascists) was perhaps the major factor in this. The LN’s decision to fight the 1996 general election separately would then be key to the centre-right’s defeat at the hands of the centre-left. The former neo-fascists of the AN on the other hand, particularly grateful for the role played by Berlusconi in paving their exit from the political ghetto, remained largely faithful to this political alliance. Faced with the carrot of devolution promised by Berlusconi, and the stick of continued opposition, impotence and gradual decline, the LN returned to the centre-right coalition as part of Berlusconi’s newly formed Casa della libertà (House of Freedoms, CdL) for the 2001 elections. This was key to the coalition’s return to power and to the formation of a new government which included Fini as deputy prime minister and Bossi (responsible for constitutional reform) and other LN exponents in key ministerial positions.

Thus the invention of FI by Berlusconi was decisive in the emergence of a centre-right pole in Italy capable of winning elections and forming governments at the national level. However, the participation of the new populist right of the LN, and the old, recycled right of the MSI-AN, was also crucial. Aside from the political opportunities offered by the political crisis, the collapse of the old DC and the switch to majoritarianism in the early 1990s, these different rights have also benefited from global factors that have contributed to the success of right-wing and centre-right parties across modern industrialised democracies. The collapse of communism—while helping to precipitate the political crisis in Italy and hastening the transformation of the former Italian Communist Party (PCI) into the more conventionally social democratic PDS—also had a detrimental effect on the centre-left globally, increasing the ideological unattractiveness of

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1Berlusconi’s endorsement of the MSI’s leader Gianfranco Fini in the November 1993 mayoral election in Rome was a major staging post in the legitimization of the AN-MSI, encouraging Fini to pursue the post-fascist strategy and laying the foundations for a new alliance following Berlusconi’s announcement of his intention to form FI shortly after.
socialist models and boosting the appeal of the deregulatory neo-liberal solutions which had formed the staple of centre-right parties across the globe from the 1980s onwards in the wake of Thatcher and Reagan. At the same time processes of globalisation posed challenges to existing models of welfare capitalism which appeared to favour centre-right parties offering the solution of greater deregulation and downsizing of welfare states in order to achieve the higher levels of economic competitiveness that the new global context apparently demanded. Nevertheless, while right-wing populists ranging from the Front National (FN) in France to the Leagues in Italy embraced an apparently neo-liberal platform in the 1980s when the main target was a bloated stated machinery governed by a complacent political elite, in the 1990s the focus in such parties switched to the homogenising and destructive threats posed by globalisation and the need to protect local communities and identities, sometimes through protectionist measures (as we shall see below in discussing the LN’s changing ideology). The populist right has also tended to focus on the threats to community, identity and security posed by migration. This has been a constant in the discourse of parties such as the French FN and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPO) since the 1980s. This was also the case with regard to the Leagues in the 1980s although the focus was on the threat posed by southern Italians who had migrated to the more prosperous north for economic reasons. By the 1990s, the subject of the LN’s concerns in this regard became the non-EU immigrant, particularly so given the huge increase in numbers of EU migrants residing in Italy (either legally or illegally) from the late 1980s onwards. The LN’s sometime need to ally itself with national political forces has also meant it has had to downplay the anti-meridionale (southern Italian) discourse. Centre-right parties throughout Europe have also generally projected tough positions on immigration, since the 1980s in particular. Nevertheless, they have tended to avoid the pattern of ethno-populist rhetoric which characterises radical right-wing populists such as the FN and FPO, whereby the immigrant is demonised and blamed for the country’s economic ills, physical threats to security (such as crime and terrorism) and the destruction of local cultures. Indeed, an analysis of parties’ discourse on the question of immigration can help us to identify and distinguish between parties following a right populist trajectory and those employing a more conventional centre-right platform, as we shall see below in the case of the LN and the AN.

As Marco Tarchi suggests, the right in Italy, as it has globally, has generally been in a better position to adapt to processes of cultural and social change given its tendency to utilise a pragmatic mix of ideological elements which come from a variety of provenances. Historically, the right has been more flexible and adaptable, less hidebound as it is by the ideological dogmas that were prominent amongst the socialist and social democrat European left in the 20th century. In Italy, having not been in government in the post-war period, the right has been

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relatively freer to innovate ideologically and also to renew its organisational structure and leadership. Above all, however, in Italy, the right has benefited from a particular crisis of political culture since the early 1990s and this has given the Italian right a unique character. This was a crisis of the dominant culture of political compromise and the constant search for mediation which characterised the first republic. In the new context, the ideological perspective of the right appeared as a valid response to the crisis of the party system from which the right had been traditionally excluded. Juxtaposed against the compromise and weak executive leadership of the old partitocrazia, the new and re-invented parties of the right appeared to offer more clearly defined political leaderships personifying the policy alternatives on the table. In relation to the two formations focused on here, the role played by their respective leaders—Fini and Bossi—in steering (and sometimes forcing through) the ideological evolution of their parties and responding to changing political circumstances has been critical, both benefiting from the centrality of the leader in the organisational apparatus of their parties.10 Whilst acknowledging the importance of this leadership, the purpose of the paper is not to examine the role of party leaders in guiding this ideological change. Rather its intended focus is on the nature of ideological change undertaken and its relationship to political developments since the beginning of the 1990s.

**Methodology**

The role of ideology is frequently stressed in the academic literature on the right. In particular, the variability and instrumental modifications of ideological contents are emphasised. Like other authors we share the belief that party texts are an important source to document ideological contents and need to be studied accurately.11 Texts are the written traces of complex debates and negotiations over the normative essence of a party, its strategies at any point in time and its definitions of friends and foes. We have thus utilised a semi-formalised text analysis approach to identify the axes of this ideological variability of the two rights. In order to compare the ideology of the two right-wing parties we utilised the research tradition of frame analysis as developed in the field of social movement research and policy analysis.12 Briefly, a small group of analysts selected relevant texts read them carefully and identified key ideological elements. After attributing a label to these elements, texts were scored to quantify their occurrence.13 Computerised analysis allowed quantitative manipulation of the results. The most pertinent findings are represented in the form of bar charts,

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10 The LN reflects the personalized charismatic leadership model of populist parties. The new AN apparatus of 1995 gave the leader enhanced powers with the right to appoint key party officials and representatives. See Ignazi, 2003, op. cit., p. 50.
13 The authors would like to thank Paolo Pasi, Mara Dalmonech and Giulia Bigot for their work in collating and analysing the documents and elaborating the data.
with the bars representing the ratio of occurrences of a particular policy ‘frame’ in relation to the total number of sentences in the document. This addressed the problem of the documents being of different length. This produced a set of proportions which constituted our primary findings as they were an expression of the centrality of ideological frames, and were not sensitive to text lengths. Of course this approach assumes that the more a frame is recurrent the more it is relevant in the ideology which is being analysed.

The documents analysed were the congressional documents approved by the AN in 1995, 1998 and 2001, and the electoral programmes of the LN from 1994, 1996 and 2001. A different type of document was examined for each party: that is, congressional theses for the AN and electoral programmes for the LN. This discrepancy was necessary because no strictly comparable documents appear to exist. The AN’s congressional thesis appeared the broadest available documents in terms of explaining the party’s political ideology. However, in the case of the LN, being an unconventional and non-traditional political formation, the only documents available for party congresses were the texts of speeches by the leader and other party exponents. Electoral programmes better fulfilled the function of presenting the ideology of the LN, consisting as they do of lengthy and wide-ranging discussion of the party’s position on a wide range of issues, and generally being lengthier than the electoral programmes of the conventional parties (including the AN) and indeed of other unconventional parties such as FI whose electoral programmes were generally very short. The AN on the other hand, did not always produce separate electoral programmes, given its alliance with FI which sometimes led to adoption of joint platforms.

After we completed the identification of key and secondary elements of party ideologies we could identify constant and changing elements within and across the two parties, and relate these to political developments in Italy. The documents selected reflect three distinct phases in which the varying shifts and counter-shifts undertaken by these political actors in order to respond to changing political circumstances can be broadly identified: (i) the political crisis and the rise and fall of the first Berlusconi government 1990–1995; (ii) the right in opposition, consolidation and radicalisation 1995–1999; (iii) the reconstitution of the right-wing coalition and the return to government 2000–2005. The documentary analysis constituted just one empirical source. However, this was used to support a broad historical analysis, also based on participant observation of party events, interviews with activists and monitoring of coverage and statements made in the media. Following an initial examination of the diverse ideological positioning illustrated by the analysis of documents, the paper will seek to provide deeper explanations by exploring in greater detail the key developments within the parties and across the party system as a whole in the three phases outlined. The comparative assessment of the respective positions of the parties will also incorporate a particular focus on the increasingly salient issue of immigration in Italy, illustrative as it is of the way in which these parties seek to frame their identity. On this issue, an analysis of the two parties’ respective programmes for the 2004 European elections was also undertaken.

1 In 2001, the LN did not present a formal programme—endorsing as it did the Piano di Governo (Plan of Government) of the CdL. However, it did publish a ‘guide for candidates’ which read like an electoral programme.
Comparing the changing ideologies of the AN and LN

The figures presented here illustrate some of the key ideological differences between the AN and the LN as well as shedding light on the changes made by the two formations over the three phases identified. The figures focus on a number of issues which are key to the identity of these formations, notably attitudes to the preferred form of state in Italy (Figures 1(a) and (b)), the role of the state as regards the economy and law and order policies (Figure 2(a) and (b)) and the approach taken towards immigration (Figure 3(a) and (b)). Quantitative analysis of the frequencies in which certain frames are used provides some useful pointers as regards the differing and evolving positions adopted on these issues. On certain issues such as attitudes to globalisation, the EU and positions on catholic and family morality, quantitative analysis was less conclusive and observations based on a qualitative reading of the data gathered—indicating the changing nature of the frames employed on these themes—were more useful.

The data sheds light on the extent to which the re-invention of the right has been an ongoing dynamic process in the decade or so since the fall of the old party system of the post-war republic. This period has been marked by various phases in the development of the LN and the AN—with shifts in policy and

![Figure 1. Form of state: (a) LN; (b) AN.](image-url)
Figure 2. The state, the economy and law and order: (a) LN; (b) AN.

discourse on the part of one party often coinciding with a parallel shift on the part of the other and often also reflecting a changing relationship with FI. Thus the LN and AN have engaged in a continuous search for political space and attempts to seize new opportunities offered by changing political circumstances. The emergence and continuing presence of FI as a nationwide political party positioned to attract mainstream centre-right and conservative voters itself represents a variable which shapes and affects the positioning of the other two. This process of re-invention and ideological repositioning can to a great extent be explained by political developments within the Italian party system since 1990. Thus Figures 1(a)–2(b) show strong variations within the parties due to the changing opportunity structure provided by the Italian political system. In particular, they illustrate the experimental strategies adopted in opposition. Thus for example, we see the AN cautiously embracing markets in 1995 as it seeks to entrench its new found status as a legitimate centre-right party, and then moving to a more pronounced neo-liberal position in 1998 as it sought to capitalise on Berlusconi’s problems with the judiciary before shifting back to a more mixed social market position in 2001 when its leader realised the political market for a neo-liberal centre-right party was too crowded (given the surprising resilience shown by Berlusconi and his party). Moreover, 2001 saw a return to an emphasis on traditional themes such as the need for a strong executive and tough
law and order policies, which had been downplayed in 1998. The LN for its part sought compromise in 1994 and then shifted to an uncompromising secessionist position in 1996 in order to distinguish itself from Berlusconi’s more convincingly neo-liberal FI and from the general bipartisan consensus on the

Figure 3. Immigration: (a) LN; (b) AN.
need for political reform and some form of decentralisation. The failure of secession led to a reappraisal by Bossi and a new strategy for gaining devolution through compromise within Berlusconi’s new centre-right coalition in 2001. Popular mobilisation of the LN’s constituency would be retained by a focus on themes relating to the identity and (economic and physical) security of local communities such as immigration and globalisation. This would also involve a shift to a more protectionist position which was made easier by the LN’s ideological uncertainty and flexibility, particularly on economic issues where it had retained an ambiguity as regards the relationship between the state and the economy since the 1990s despite observers earlier categorising it as a neo-liberal force.

Considering more generally this analysis, one has to stress that it would be incorrect to see party ideology as a coherent construct. In effect, one often finds glaring contradictions. This is seen on economic issues, not only in relation to the LN but also in the AN’s documents where one finds both an emphasis on the need to assist weak social groups and suggestions that the state must withdraw from a socially interventionist approach. This perhaps reflects tensions among the different internal factions in AN. The shifts in position could thus be interpreted as the result of a changing equilibrium within the party, with the ‘liberal’ current (favouring a more neo-liberal economic perspective) having been in the ascendancy in 1998, and the destra sociale (‘social right’) current (favouring a more solidaristic approach) becoming more influential after 2000. The changing equilibrium itself could be attributed to the decisions of Fini to move towards one or other current, decisions which themselves related to his perceived need to locate the AN according to developments external to the party. Nevertheless, for both the AN and the LN certain core themes remain constant, for example, in the case of the AN references to national identity, and in the case of the LN references to northern or Padanian identity and some form of decentralisation or autonomous government. However, the form of autonomy emphasised has oscillated between federalism, independence and devolution. It is also interesting to note that for both parties over time the emphasis on family values has grown. One can speculate that for the AN state authoritarianism has come to be replaced by a communitarian enforcement of traditional values while for the LN, the communitarian element in its discourse has always been notable but the shift to emphasising family values could be representative of a general shift towards a conservative constituency.

Phase I: 1994–1995—the rise and fall of the first Berlusconi government

By the time of the 1994 general election, a new emphasis on ‘clean politics’ and on the need for a more effective decentralised political system had been rapidly diffused throughout the discourse of all political formations, old and new. Effectively, the traditional LN themes had been incorporated by an entire political system with a set of credible rivals emerging who were not handicapped by the territorial constraints which limited the LN’s appeal. The analysis of the LN’s 1994 electoral programme shows an emphasis on neo-liberal themes: markets and competitiveness were referred to frequently, and state assistentialism and welfarism attacked (Figure 2(a)). However, competing on similar grounds, but
without the hindrance of ethno-nationalist activists it appeared that Berlusconi and FI were better poised to appeal to this constituency. The departure from government and the adoption of a secessionist stance in 1996 can thus be attributed to the need to distinguish the LN from FI on economic issues and from the new political consensus on the form of the state. Moreover, this ensured that the impressive levels of popular mobilisation that the LN enjoyed prior to 1994 would be retained and built upon and its anti-establishment image reinforced. At the same time, this allowed Bossi to re-establish his supremacy over his party, given the popularity of the secessionist idea among activists. 15

Whereas the LN’s actions in government reflected concerns about its identity being compromised in government and a fear that FI was stealing its populist clothes and its northern middle-class electorate, the MSI-AN was content to consolidate its new found legitimacy and centrality to the new centre-right pole. In many ways, its entrance into government could be interpreted as the culmination of its historic strategy of inserimento (insertion) according to which it sought to conclude alliances with conservative forces and participate in day-to-day democratic politics. Thus in practice it had generally adopted policy positions that one would associate with the conservative right, despite its anti-systemic rhetoric and fascist nostalgia. Its entry into government therefore required that it dropped the anti-systemic discourse whilst retaining a continuity in terms of past policy positions and the general alignment with the conservative right that had been cultivated by Fini. This worked well provided discussions of the past—and perceptions of the fascist regime—were avoided. Previous proposals, such as that for a corporatist parliament were now deemed unnecessary in the new political context, that is, the collapse of the old partitocrazia which the MSI had previously railed strongly against. Moreover, more direct forms of democracy to involve the Italian people in government, for example, through the increasing use of referendums—as seen in the early 1990s—were now embraced as an alternative to the corporatist system previously seen as necessary to ensure the representation of key social actors in the political system. The fall of the first republic meant that it could now abandon its previous anti-systemic stance—thus its previous attacks on the liberal democratic system were retrospectively recast as an opposition to the rule by parties which characterised the first republic. These positions were all notably prominent in the document adopted by the new AN party at the Fiuggi congress in January 1995, shortly after the fall of the first Berlusconi government.

Up to this point the AN was a mere electoral front for the neo-fascist MSI. At Fiuggi Fini engineered the official dissolution of the MSI into the new post-fascist AN party which declared its fidelity to the tenets of liberal democracy. Apart from tenuous attempts to present the AN as guardian of a national culture which encompassed Gramsci and Croce, as well as Evola and Gentile, the Fiuggi document read pretty much like a document of the mainstream European centre-right. As Figures 1(b) and 2(b) show, while there were frequent references to the importance of a unitary central state and strong executive role, the Fiuggi document also embraced the pro-federalism frame of the LN. Moreover, traditionally statist positions on the economy were balanced with several

acknowledgements of the importance of markets and competitiveness. There was also frequent recourse to the traditional themes of law and order and of the role of church and family. Gaullist overtones were notable in the invocation of a Europe des patries, and a presidential system modelled on that of the French fifth republic.

Phase II: 1996–1999—the right in opposition—consolidation or radicalisation?

In 1995–1996 the emergence of a new phase became evident with the LN moving to a more radical separatist position while the AN sought to consolidate its new found legitimacy and modify its positions further in order to present itself as a modern European centre-right party. It is notable from Figure 1(a) that attacks by the LN on the Italian central state reached a high in this period with the programme for the 1996 general elections (which the LN fought separately from the other centre-right parties). As Figure 2(a) shows, attacks on Italian statism vis-à-vis the economy also appeared to reach a high with this programme, although traditional conservative issues such as law and order appeared to take a back seat.

Nevertheless by pleasing its radical activists and its small town electorate with the new secessionist stance, the LN put off its urban moderate electorate. In this period a significant exodus took place, of people who had previously thought that the LN would become ‘respectable’ and could be used for personal and social advancement. By the end of 1998, it was clear to the LN that secession was a controversial slogan with only limited support in the population, and after much internal debate the issue was left unresolved and gradually dropped. Other issues became more important. After years of fervent Europeanist stands, Bossi began to introduce Euro-sceptical notes in his speeches, causing some confusion among party supporters. The EU was now portrayed as a homogenising force threatening to destroy cherished local identities.16 The shift to a Euro-sceptic position related to the centre-left government’s success in ensuring that Italy would take part in the launch of the single currency in 1999, which once adopted would be blamed for the Italian economy’s problems (as would the centre-left’s role in securing this). In the mid-1990s, it had been assumed that the weakness of the Italian economy would have prevented its participation in the single currency. It was thus believed within the LN leadership that only an independent Padania would be strong enough economically to join the euro, and that this would be a trump card to play in winning popular support for independence.17 The new anti-European stance was linked to the emphasis on a more general anti-globalisation stance which also manifested itself in anti-American statements on the part of Bossi and other leading party exponents. This also involved a pro-Serb stance in the Kosovo conflict. In this period, the development of anti-European and anti-American attitudes—combined with an increasing focus on anti-immigration rhetoric—were illustrative of attempts to pander to popular anti-cosmopolitan sentiments whilst finding common ground to unite the LN’s radical activists.

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with its more institutional face evident in its prominent role in local government in the north. Thus there was in the LN’s programme a mixture of radicalism in the few areas that characterised its identity—migration, culture—and a good dose of mainstream conservative policies elsewhere. On this common ground the two ‘souls’ collaborated, for example, on campaigns against the allegedly lax immigration law.\textsuperscript{18}

While the LN found itself isolated from 1995 onwards, Fini used the period of renewed opposition to consolidate the AN’s new democratic credentials further, for example, through participation in the failed bicameral parliamentary commission of constitutional reform (\textit{Bicamerale}) and adhesion to the neo-Gaullist UPE grouping in the European Parliament.\textsuperscript{19} In this period, the AN was also re-emphasising its traditional role as a guardian of national identity—a logical reaction to the antics of the LN at the time—organising counter-demonstrations in defence of the Italian nation. Growing discontent within the AN regarding its subordination to the FI, and dislike and distrust of Berlusconi within the party led to calls for a clearer differentiation from FI, and led Fini to make renewed overtures to the catholic centre and centre-right. In this period, the AN sought to challenge the ascendancy of FI within the centre-right pole, hoping that by stealing its neo-liberal pro-market clothes it could win over some of its supporters. This was notable particularly at the AN’s first programmatic conference in Verona in early 1998, where it presented itself as a party of modernisation, making further enthusiastic strides in its embrace of the free market and attempting to shake off its reputation for having an old-fashioned statist approach to the management of the economy. The document produced for the Verona conference called for more flexibility in the labour market, further privatisation and a general liberalisation of the economic system and criticised the distorting interference of the state in the economic sphere.\textsuperscript{20} As Figure 1(a) and (b) shows, traditional themes such as law and order and the need for strong executive rule and a strong Italian state were infrequently mentioned in this document. Rather the emphasis was on economic issues and presenting the AN as a modern liberal force in this aspect. Nevertheless, the 1999 European elections represented a significant defeat for this strategy. The AN stood on a joint list with the Patto Segni—with which it had also allied itself in the failed referendum campaign to eliminate the remaining proportional quotient of the electoral law.\textsuperscript{21} The joint list polled 10.3 per cent (as opposed to the AN’s share of 15.7 per cent in the 1996 general elections). The LN performed equally badly, polling 4.5 per cent (having polled 10.1 per cent in 1996).\textsuperscript{22}


\textsuperscript{20}Tarchi, 2003, op. cit., p. 163.

\textsuperscript{21}This was led by the former Christian Democrat Mario Segni, who had previously campaigned against the corruption of the first republic and had been the prime mover behind the referendums to reform the electoral system in the early 1990s.

In 1999–2000 a new phase was evident, with both the AN and LN leadership reappraising their previous strategies in the wake of poor performances in 1999. For the AN, this meant a shift back towards more traditional positions. Themes such as identity, law and order and security were emphasised, and the free market euphoria of Verona dropped. Thus the AN turned to attacking the excesses of economic deregulation and argued that the effects of globalisation needed to be ameliorated in order to safeguard social and community solidarity and national identity. In order to distinguish itself from its competitor-allies, Fini opted for marketing the AN as ‘the socially advanced wing of the centre-right’ placing a renewed emphasis on the concept of the social market economy. Thus the analysis of the document adopted at the Naples congress in the run-up to the election in 2001 showed a renewed and frequent emphasis on traditional themes such as the importance of strong executive rule and law and order. Nevertheless, although its discourse on markets became more critical, the number of approving references to markets and competition remained high.

Bossi for his part engineered a fundamental transformation of the LN’s approach, declaring that the epoch of uncompromising separatism had to end. This marked the end of yet another phase in the LN’s history. According to its leader, a new more strategically adept LN had to emerge. Alliances had to be accepted, even if unpalatable to base militants. The new approach led the LN to join the right-wing coalition that competed in the election of 2001 led once again by Berlusconi. Nevertheless, as the huge number of references to the issues of devolution and or federalism in its 2001 electoral programme appeared to reflect (see Figure 1(a)), the LN’s stance on this issue would be uncompromising. Any failure to deliver devolution would lead to its exit once again from the coalition.

In this phase Bossi initially tried to combine several aspects of the LN’s previous history, recognising that there was a problem internal to the movement, where its traditional identity was increasingly diluted. His solution was to re-awaken the passion, ‘to raise the big flag of the North’ against Roma Ladrona (thieving Rome), but at the same time he acknowledged that the LN’s votes must be made to feel that they count. Protracted isolation was not politically viable. The entire baggage of rituals was emphasised again, but it was proposed no longer in isolation as the distinctive marker of an ethnic group. Rituals of ethnic and cultural belonging were proposed as representative of all local cultures against the evil impact of globalisation. The new anti-European character of the LN was linked to a growing anti-capitalist, anti-globalisation component—that is, a rejection of big capitalism in favour of diffused small entrepreneurship. Indeed, whereas the LN had in the early 1990s been portrayed as a neo-liberal party, by 2001 it appeared to have moved to a decidedly protectionist position. This is clearly evident by examining Figure 2(a) which shows a stark increase in pro-welfare and state assistentialist positions in 2001. Nevertheless, the shift towards protectionism proves less surprising if one compares the 2001 positions to those of 1994 and 1996. The figure clearly shows that protectionist positions were also frequent in 1994—although they dipped

\[^{23}\text{Tarchi, 2003, op. cit., pp. 163–165.}\]
considerably in 1996 (perhaps because the LN was engulfed in a secessionist euphoria in this period). Protectionist and pro-market positions have thus sat uneasily together in the LN’s platform since the early 1990s, indicating a degree of ideological uncertainty. This apparent contradiction is perhaps best explained by an enthusiasm for neo-liberal rhetoric when attacking the Italian state assistance for the south and other sectors not part of the LN’s constituency but an eagerness to propose protectionist solutions when the subject being protected is the LN’s northern small town constituency, a form of welfare chauvinism which is even more pronounced in relation to the immigration question (see below).

The LN’s growing protectionist and anti-globalisation stance combined both cultural concerns and economic concerns—the need to protect small entrepreneurs in the north is reflected, for example, in the campaign against cheap Chinese imports (the LN called for the imposition of tariffs) which also spills over into xenophobia. Globalisation, as with the EU, was also viewed as a vehicle for an undesirable multiculturalism. Thus immigration was vehemently opposed as threatening both security and identity. Nevertheless, there was a certain broadening of the LN’s point of reference when referring to identity—that is, it was a broader European Christian identity that needed to be protected—not just a Padanian identity or an Italian identity. This was seen not just in the LN’s anti-immigration position but also in the campaign to prevent Turkish accession to the EU.

The AN on the other hand has pursued familiar themes since 2001. This involved strong support for an interventionist social market economy, strong defence of the integrity of the Italian nation and respect for its institutions, guardianship of the nation’s catholic values and promotion of traditional family life. In pursuing these themes Fini sought to distinguish the AN from the populism and neo-liberalism of the LN and FI (and the divisive regionalist identity of the former), presenting itself as the social conscience of the right and (paradoxically given previous perceptions of the MSI-AN) as the moderate component of a right-wing populist government. In taking this approach, it however found itself occupying similar political ground to the fourth coalition partner in the second Berlusconi government, the UDC (a union of the CCD and CDU—two centre-right splinters of the ex-Christian Democrats). This common ground was also evident on the European question, where the AN adopted a Europhile stance reminiscent of the post-war DC governments. This was illustrated by Fini’s constructive role as the government representative on the convention which devised the proposed EU constitution in 2002–2003. The international rehabilitation that this role afforded Fini paved the way for his eventual appointment as foreign minister in late 2004.24

The persistence of certain conservative authoritarian positions assumed by the AN in government remained notable however, despite Fini’s drive to the centre ground. These were reflective of the political culture in which the AN leadership was schooled, yet also appealing to broader conservative opinion. For example, Fini backed the heavy-handed tactics of the police at the G8 summit in July 2001 and sponsored a proposal for a new law on drugs (eventually adopted in January 2006), eliminating the distinction between soft and hard drugs and introducing tougher punishments for the use of both. The latter came within the

frame of attacks on the moral degeneracy of aspects of Italian popular culture. The traditional authoritarianism was also combined with a continuing exultation of the role of the Italian military (although the stress is on the important role it undertakes in peacekeeping and delivering aid) and scathing attacks on the peace movement. Fini strongly supported Italian participation in the post-war occupation of Iraq. Some rather symbolic positions, with particular appeal to party militants, were also taken, for example, the AN’s successful campaign for a national day of commemoration of the foibe (when ethnic Italians living in the former Italian territories ceded to Yugoslavia at the end of World War II were massacred by anti-fascist partisans).

The immigration question

A comparative analysis of the perspectives of the LN and AN on immigration matters reveals both similarities and differences, with the latter increasing over time (see Figure 3(a) and (b)). Both parties have generally been associated with positions hostile to immigration. However, the way in which the two have framed their diagnosis of the risks associated with immigration and of the causes of migration flows has differed considerably. Moreover, it is notable that whereas over the years the LN has become more virulent in its opposition to immigration, the AN has softened its opposition to migration, and currently expresses the dominant views of European centre-right parties: a stigmatisation of illegal migration but a fundamental acceptance of the phenomenon framed within a perspective which is now frequently labelled as ‘fortress Europe’.

The focus on immigration in the LN’s discourse grew gradually and accelerated strongly during the 1990s (as indeed the presence of non-EU immigrants on the territory accelerated in the same period), with the immigrant replacing the southern Italian migrant as the main target of its exclusionist rhetoric. In the documents analysed the ethno-populist frames in which immigrants are portrayed as bringing crime, and taking away jobs and economic resources and also as having unfair preferential access to welfare resources (welfare chauvinism) occur frequently. Figure 3(a) shows that these frames have been repeatedly used in the LN’s electoral programmes (additional analysis of party press and speeches by exponents also revealed repeated use of such frames). The association of immigrants with crime and security risks is fairly frequent throughout. However, it is notable that use of the ‘immigrants steal jobs/take economic resources’ and welfare chauvinist frames (not really focused on in 1996—again perhaps because of the preoccupation with secession) really shot up in 2001. The metaphor of immigrant invasion is also repeatedly used in LN documents. Immigration is sometimes cast as bringing the extinction of local communities and the laceration of the social structure. Anti-immigrant discourse is also cast within the wider negative ethno-pluralist frame—thus immigrants are framed as destructive of local (Padanian, Italian, European or Christian) cultures. Multiculturalism is ridiculed and coexistence of cultures in Italy/Padania is

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25 On the day of the large pacifist demonstration in Rome on 20 March 2003, the AN organized a counter-meeting to pay homage to the positive role of Italian military forces employed in various peace missions around the world and Fini denounced the anti-war demonstrators as being against the ‘western world’.
rejected. As Figure 3(a) also shows, negative views of multiculturalism were particularly prevalent in 2001. A further analysis of the LN’s 2004 European election manifesto shows the continuing emphasis on this identity related theme. Moreover, it also shows a marked surge in the employment of overtly anti-Muslim or Islamophobic discourse. The Islamophobic frame has been present in the LN’s discourse since the 1990s. However, it has been particularly notable since the September 11 attacks in 2001, after which Muslims have been increasingly presented as not only a danger to Italy’s Christian identity but also generally equated with terrorism.

Turning to the AN, official party documents consistently suggest a position in favour of tough immigration controls and particularly the need to vigorously combat clandestinity. However, as Figure 3(b) shows, many of the ethno-populist frames that characterise the LN—notably the immigrants steal jobs frame and the welfare chauvinist frame—are absent, given that AN documents generally seem to accept the necessity of immigration for the Italian economy (although there is some uncertainty here with some AN documents appearing to simultaneously endorse and reject this proposition). The criminality frame is present, but concentrates on the problems posed by clandestinity (unlike LN statements which, while also focusing on clandestine immigrants, sometimes make no distinction when discussing the crime—security risks posed by regular and clandestine immigrants). The AN’s focus on the problems caused by clandestine immigration was particularly notable in 2001, in the run-up to the general election in which the centre-right made the centre-left’s alleged inability to clamp down on this phenomenon a key issue. As with the LN, identity and ethno-pluralist related frames are present in AN documents, but take as their starting point Italian national identity and culture (rather than that of Padania). However, the use of this frame is also sometimes balanced by some positive references to multiculturalism (as was notable in the 1998 document) and even when fears about cultural identity are expressed they are done so in less strident terms. Moreover, Islamophobic discourse appears to be absent from official documents adopted by the AN leadership. Official party documents since the foundation of the AN party in 1995 have used measured language, whilst at the same time advocating tough immigration controls. Nevertheless, there is a discrepancy, in that whilst the leadership (i.e. Fini) has pursued a moderate tone, analysis of party press and speeches by other party exponents uncovers a use of discourse closer to that of the LN on the part of some individuals.

The distance between the respective discourses of the LN and the AN on the immigration issue appear to have grown wider since 2001, as exemplified by the controversy surrounding Fini’s suggestion in 2003 that immigrants resident in Italy for a sizeable continuous period (e.g. six years) be given the right to vote in local elections. Fini now began to adopt frames previously employed by the left, that is, the importance of social integration, and the responsibilities of Italy as a former country of emigration. The difference in tone between Bossi and Fini on the immigration issue, despite their collaboration on the highly restrictive ‘Bossi–Fini’ immigration law of 2002, was already apparent before this. For

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26 Analysis of the AN’s 2004 programme shows that immigration was not mentioned at all.
example, Fini disassociated himself from the remarks made by Bossi in the summer of 2003, when he suggested that canons be fired at boats carrying clandestine immigrants onto Italian shores. 29

Preparing for life after Berlusconi?

Fini’s ‘opening’ on immigrant voting rights launched in 2003 could be interpreted as integral to his strategy of positioning the AN as a moderate centre-right force and carving out a political identity distinct from the populism of the LN and of FI. Shortly after this controversy, Fini made further strides in his re-moulding of the AN’s identity by denouncing the ‘racial laws’ introduced by the fascist regime in 1938 and the collaboration of the Italian Social Republic of 1943–1945 in the holocaust. 30 Although this caused shock within the party, and some criticism from senior figures within the party about the need to make such statements (as well as the departure of Mussolini’s granddaughter—probably to Fini’s benefit), there was no open contradiction of Fini’s words among the party’s leading members. 31 This came as Fini was also seeking to reassert his and his party’s role within the government and break what he saw as the privileged relationship between the LN and Berlusconi, whilst also demonstrating to the AN’s core supporters that the long political journey travelled on was bearing fruits in terms of policy advances made in government (a necessary pre-condition in winning support in the party for his attempts to distance it from the fascist past). Following a year of open bickering between the AN and UDC on one side and the LN and FI on the other as regards economic policy-making, this new assertive strategy resulted in the resignation of the FI finance minister, Giulio Tremonti (viewed as biased in favour of the LN’s positions) following FI’s poor display in the European elections of June 2004 (though Tremonti returned as finance minister in late 2005) and then later in the year with Fini’s appointment to the foreign ministry. However, disagreements among the ruling parties continued on a range of issues, notably on taxation where Fini and the AN sought to safeguard resources for the public sector and the south—key constituencies for the AN. 32 The LN, though weakened following the stroke suffered by Bossi in March 2004 (causing his withdrawal from public appearances for over a year), did nevertheless secure its key objective of devolution which was finally approved in 2005 as part of a broader package which included a ‘national interest’ clause and a significant strengthening of the executive powers of the prime minister, which appeared to satisfy the preferences of the AN leadership. 33 While Fini’s actions in government appeared to have the goal of positioning the AN to become the leading player on the Italian centre-right and himself as a possible leader of the centre-right post-Berlusconi,
the LN (still directed by a ‘convalescing at home’ Bossi) appeared to have now resigned itself to a niche role at the national level—a ‘king-maker’ for future governing coalitions, whilst concentrating its efforts in implementing the new powers at the disposal of Italian regions in the northern heartlands where it still continued to poll respectably.

Thanks partly to the vastly changed circumstances of the Italian political system following the collapse of the old party system, Fini had been able to execute the transformation of the AN without requiring a serious discussion of the party’s historical references. Since returning to government in 2001, his attempts finally to address the party’s past and set out a more moderate and modern image reflected an attempt to broaden the party’s electoral constituency further and prepare for possible leadership of a post-Berlusconi right. This, however, encountered resistance within a party no longer willing to support Fini simply for what he has delivered in the past, with discontent increasing as regards his tendency to take controversial initiatives without consulting his party. Indeed, this was illustrated by the controversy following his decision to vote for a relaxation of the law on fertility treatment in the unsuccessful referendum of June 2005, which set him at odds not only with the UDC but also the vast majority of his own party’s parliamentarians, some of whom pointed to Fini’s contradiction of the founding Fiuggi document as regards its endorsement of Catholic doctrine. Fini’s position here could be interpreted as stemming from an acknowledgement of the limitations of his previous strategy of aligning himself and his party with the catholic right, and was possibly related to the failure of the AN to benefit electorally despite the personal strides made by Fini since 2003, the emergence of the UDC as a serious competitor for the moderate catholic vote in the same period and a desire to present himself as a modern and secular alternative to his chief rival as regard the future leadership of the centre-right: Pier Ferdinando Casini of the UDC.34 Nevertheless, the controversy surrounding Fini’s tactics here brought out into the open the difficulties Fini was having in reconciling his modernising stance with the preferences of his party cadres and militants, despite his popularity among centre-right voters. Indeed, doubts continue as regards the beliefs and intentions of Fini’s colleagues in the party leadership—most of whom came through the ranks of the MSI youth movement—and the party as a whole. It is notable that the AN’s share of the vote still lags considerably behind the personal popularity of Fini himself. Indeed, despite the strides made by Fini to reposition the party, the AN still appears to be perceived by Italian voters as a far right party. A poll published in Corriere della Sera on 29 November 2005 in which voters were asked to position parties of the CDL on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 representing extreme right, 5 centre and 1 extreme left) gave the AN an average score of 8.5, FI 8.1, the LN 7.9 and the UDC 5.6 (that the LN was viewed as to the left of both the AN and FI was also particularly striking).

Fini’s shaky relationship with his party contrasted with the apparent continued supremacy that Bossi enjoyed over the LN, despite the physical

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34 Despite its return to government in 2001, the AN’s vote share fell from its 1996 highpoint of 15.7 to 12 per cent (the UDC parties combined polled 3.2 per cent). In the European elections of 2004 it polled 11.5 per cent (the UDC polled 5.9 per cent). In the 2005 regional elections it polled 11 per cent (the UDC polled 5.7 per cent).
frailties that were obvious when he began to make public appearances again in
2005. In government after 2001, the LN leadership managed—unlike populist
movements in government elsewhere in Europe—to walk the tightrope of
reconciling its radical constituency and its institutional character, appearing to
have ‘one foot in and one foot out’ of government.35 It did this by uniting around
a number of clear objectives, most obviously devolution, but also restrictive
policies on immigration and a populist localist and anti-cosmopolitan stance on
issues such as globalisation, immigration and European integration, with its
leaders continuing to employ populist and quasi-oppositionist rhetoric despite
holding key positions in government.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the context of the analysis of the two parties ideology, both
formations remain solidly set in the ideological sphere of the right but they have
chosen different and sometimes contradictory ideological focuses. Nonetheless
there has clearly been a transfer of issues and views between the two parties.
Xenophobia and law and order policies have been taken up by the LN which can
now be seen as the true embodiment of the Italian extreme right. But its localist
and traditionalist communitarianism sets it apart from previous experiences.
In addition its fundamental ambivalence on issues such as economic liberalism
make it an ideologically unclear formation whose dominant attitude seems
more one of ideological opportunism than the pursuit of coherent and
established policies.

Beyond its economic protectionism, anti-Europeanism and xenophobia, the
LN remains a party which speaks with different voices—its message varies all
too frequently over time, and it is remarkably different when addressed to its
militants, its electorate, public opinion and institutional arenas. Its ideology
remains therefore a complex mix of sensibilities which are expressed in a
contradictory fashion, and sometimes appear just haphazard. This is in part due
to the lack of an intellectual leadership in the movement and in the party—
a leadership able to give coherence and continuity to the ideology. This
ambiguity has been recently worsened by the impact of the health problems of its
leader and uncertainty on the question of succession.

One has, however, to stress that the ideological instability of the LN is also a
weapon of political theatricality which is instrumentally used to achieve
relevance in the public sphere. A small party, confined to only one area of the
country, has often being able to polarise public attention through quick and
unexpected reversal of policies and ideological perspectives. Its chameleon-like
nature is an essential characteristic of its populism. As McDonnell suggests, its
oppositional nature as a populist movement often requires it to perform
u-turns, and the nature of the party, particularly the supremacy of its leader
and the deference of its militants to him facilitates Bossi’s ability to execute
dramatic changes in position.36 Though its vote share has declined, the LN
retains the capacity to make its influence felt, given that the dynamics of the

35 Albertazzi and McDonnell, op. cit.
Italian bipolar system rewards the construction of broad electoral coalitions. While there was talk of it replacing the DC when it first burst onto the political scene, it may now be content with a niche role in the developing party system, making selective demands on issues in which it can appeal to its particular core constituency and maintain its visibility in exchange for support for governing coalitions.

The AN on the other hand, and Fini in particular, seem to have grander political ambitions. The agency role played by Fini in the early 1990s was crucial. Fini had been exploring other options prior to the political crisis—for example, the idea of moving the MSI in the direction of the French FN and radical right-wing populism, ground that the LN was already beginning to occupy. A move in a radical populist direction would have allowed the MSI to maintain a niche in the developing party system. However, it would have precluded it from garnering more moderate voters and exploiting the rich pickings offered by the collapse of the DC. The latter (together with the move to a majoritarian electoral system) offered more interesting political opportunities, allowing the AN to move to the centre ground. The uncertainty over the long-term durability of FI, given the way it was founded and created by Berlusconi and its consequent unconventional nature when compared to other European centre-right parties has encouraged Fini to pursue this centrist strategy in preparation for when Berlusconi does eventually leave the political scene. The conflation of neo-liberal positions with a self-interested clan style of politics of the party of Berlusconi aids Fini’s goal of developing an alternative pole of attraction on the centre-right.

Aside from question marks over Bossi’s health and Fini’s hold on his party, the differing ideological strategies employed by the AN and the LN have rendered the definition of a coherent centre-right pole rather problematic in Italy. This rather undermined the attempted shift to the genuine bipolar system that the switch to majoritarianism in the early 1990s sought to engineer. Although this switch was reversed by the centre-right government’s endorsement of a return to a proportional electoral system in late 2005, the high electoral thresholds for party representation in parliament and the incentives for forming electoral coalitions present in the new system were intended to ensure the retention of a bipolar logic, as evidenced by the 2006 election where only a tiny percentage of votes went to parties not aligned with the two poles. Although the centre-right lost the election by a slender margin, both AN and LN registered small increases in their share of the vote, demonstrating the durability of these formations and their success in shoring up their own constituencies as well as the dependence on a high vote for FI to ensure electoral success for the centre-right. How the various political formations which make up Italy’s new and partly re-invented right and centre-right would respond to and exploit the political opportunities presented by the new circumstances of opposition remained difficult to predict given the ever present potential for surprise offered by its leaders.

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37 Fella, op. cit.
38 See Paolucci in this issue.
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