Quaderni dell'Osservatorio elettorale
QOE
IJES
Italian Journal of Electoral Studies

Firenze University Press
www.fupress.com/qoe

Citation: Giovannini, A., Valbruzzi, M., & Vampa, D. (2023). The 2022 Italian general election: a political shock or the new normal? *Quaderni dell'Osservatorio elettorale – Italian Journal of Electoral Studies* 86(1): 3-11. doi: 10.36253/qoe-14809

Received: June 5, 2023

Accepted: June 8, 2023

Published: June 9, 2023

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

ORCID:
AG: 0000-0002-3301-0681
MV: 0000-0002-8019-1024
DV: 0000-0001-5983-5422

The 2022 Italian general election: a political shock or the new normal?

Arianna Giovannini[1], Marco Valbruzzi[2], Davide Vampa[3,*]

[1] *De Montfort University, Leicester, United Kingdom*
[2] *University of Naples Federico II, Naples, Italy*
[3] *Aston University, Birmingham, United Kingdom*
E-mail: d.vampa@aston.ac.uk
*Corresponding author

The contributions included in this special issue of the *Italian Journal of Electoral Studies* offer a multidimensional analysis of the (early) general election held in Italy in September 2022. The electoral process has been divided into four key components that are assessed separately: 1) the pre-election phase and electoral campaign, 2) the vote count, 3) the elected representatives, and 4) the formation of the government and its first policy initiatives.

This introduction to the special issue aims to complement the individual contributions that follow by placing the 2022 election within the recent electoral history of Italy and the broader European context. Following the same multidimensional structure adopted for this collection of articles, here we address general questions regarding the significance of the last election, its dynamics, and implications. Firstly, to what extent did it represent a change compared to previous Italian elections? Secondly, can Italy still be regarded as an anomaly in the European context? Have the 2022 results widened or narrowed the political gap between the country and its neighbours?

Of course, these are complex questions that would require a lengthy and systematic analysis. By providing a longitudinal and cross-sectional overview, our aim is to suggest some interpretative keys, which, in conjunction with the rich data presented and discussed by the authors of each article, may enable readers to draw general lessons about recent developments in Italian and European politics.

Our overall argument is that, while clearly significant in its political implications – producing the most ideologically right-wing government in republican history led by the first female prime minister –, the 2022 general election did not represent a radical change from previous Italian elections. Instead, it marked a further step in the emergence of a 'new political normal' characterised by volatility, fragmentation, mainstreaming of populist ideas and actors, polarisation and the reframing of socio-economic and socio-cultural cleavages. Additionally, while Italy can be regarded as the most advanced manifestation of these transformations, we observe similar shifts in

most Western European countries, indicating that their seemingly unshakable stability is now in question.

1. THE PRE-ELECTION PHASE: PARTY COMPETITION STRATEGIES AND ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN

The article by Arturo Bertero and Gaetano Scaduto demonstrates that both continuity and change were present in the 2022 electoral campaign, which, for the first time, took place during the summer. If we look at the structure of the political supply, there were clear elements of continuity with the elections held since 2013, despite changes in the voting system – through a new electoral law that was passed in 2017 (Chiaramonte and D'Alimonte 2018). As in the election that had followed the government led by technocrat Mario Monti, also in 2022, after Mario Draghi resigned, the main parties competing for parliamentary seats and government positioned themselves in four different groupings. A 'restricted' centre-left coalition, similar to the one that had emerged around the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD) led by Pier Luigi Bersani in 2013 and Matteo Renzi in 2018, was also formed in 2022 after an unsuccessful attempt to establish a broad alliance with centrist parties. The latter, led by former PD member and former minister Carlo Calenda (together with former PD secretary Renzi), gave life to what was soon renamed the 'Third Pole' (*Terzo Polo*). This was a moderate coalition which, as already attempted by the supporters of Mario Monti in 2013, aimed to continue the policies pursued by the incumbent technocratic prime minister and opposed both right-wing populism and perceived radicalism in the left-wing alliance. Unlike Monti, however, Draghi decided not to participate directly in the election. Additionally, as Bertero and Scaduto note in their contribution, Draghi's legacy was much more popular than Monti's, as he implemented expansionary policies, while Monti had to promote harsh austerity measures.

As in 2013 and 2018, the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) ran alone, but under the new leadership of former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. After governing with the right-wing League and then with the centre-left PD, and having supported Draghi's consensus-based government before contributing to its collapse, Conte decided to position the M5S as an outsider once again. However, unlike in previous elections when the party was characterised by ideological polyvalence (Pirro 2018), the M5S ran on a more clearly progressive, left-wing agenda in 2022.

The right of the political spectrum was still based on three pillars: Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI), Matteo Salvini's League, and Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI). Yet there was a clear shift in the internal equilibria of the coalition: since 2013, the leading role had shifted from Berlusconi, to Salvini and, finally to Meloni. In sum, the 'multi-polar' character of electoral competition in 2022 was not an entire novelty in the Italian scenario. Instead, the 2013 election had already marked a deep redefinition of the political supply compared to the previous two decades (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2015; Garzia 2013), and 2022 was just a continuation of this trend.

In terms of campaign themes, each election responds to specific political and economic circumstances. However, in the Italian context, economic insecurity has been a continuous thread linking successive campaigns since the start of the 21st century. Of course, the way this insecurity manifests and is interpreted by political actors has changed over time: debates around the effects of the financial crisis, Great Recession and Eurozone crisis in 2013 have been replaced by the post-pandemic and unstable geopolitical scenarios of 2022. Yet, generally, it is undeniable that successive waves of Italian populism emerged in a context of economic stagnation and precariousness (Vampa 2023a). A key development since 2013 has been the spreading and mainstreaming of populist themes. The Italian political system has moved from a situation in which rising populism challenged established equilibria that had consolidated in the 1990s and early 2000s to one in which interactions between multiple populist actors (FdI, League and M5S) have come to dominate party competition (Albertazzi and Vampa 2021). In this context, the classic framework focusing on the tensions between populism and mainstream does not seem to make much sense, as it appears increasingly difficult to define precisely where the political mainstream lies: have the populists become the 'new mainstream'?

As Bertero and Scaduto point out, in 2022, we can also observe a complex interplay between newer and older logics shaping the current hybrid media system. Again, a clear shift had already occurred in 2013, which was widely regarded as the year of the first 'Twitter Italian general election' (Vaccari and Valeriani 2015), with social media playing a significant new role in the mobilisation of supporters and communication of key messages to a wide electorate. Subsequent elections have seen a dramatic increase in the use of social media platforms, including newer ones such as TikTok (Albertazzi and Bonansinga 2023), by all party leaders. However, this has coexisted with a reliance on traditional media (or 'legacy' media), particularly in a country like Italy with a large share of older voters who still receive most of their information from television.

Thus, we can say that 2022 was an important year in the ongoing process of transformation of the system of inter-party interactions, leaders' priorities, campaign strategies, and communication, which had begun in the post-financial crisis scenario. Looking at general elections in other countries, we can note that even party systems that seemed solid and resilient have started showing signs of redefinition of their political space, ten years after the 2013 Italian election, which still stood as an outlier in Western Europe. The presidential and legislative elections in France, for instance, are a clear example of radical shifts in party competition dynamics (Durovic 2022). The country has moved from alternation between two relatively stable centre-left and centre-right alliances that dominated the Fifth Republic to a multi-polar system in 2022, with a new centrist party challenged on both sides by strengthening right-wing and left-wing populist movements. In Germany, the end of the Merkel era has also accelerated a process of increasing fluidity in inter-party relations. Socio-cultural issues have become more salient and have been used effectively by the Greens on the progressive side and by the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) on the socially conservative side, thus mobilising different constituencies that have moved away from the established Christian Democrats and Social Democrats (Pautz 2021). The Spanish party system has also become more fragmented and polarised (Simón 2020). In Sweden, the rising influence of the populist radical right has resulted in the mainstreaming of anti-immigration rhetoric, which has been embraced even by the social democratic left. This trend had already manifested in Denmark (Aylott and Bolin 2023: 1053).

Overall, in terms of strategies, electoral campaigns, and leaders' political communication, we can observe a continuation of the trends that began a decade ago, rather than significant turns in the direction of change. Compared to 2022, the 2013 election was much more disruptive since it marked the end of bipolar competition, which has not returned since then (at least in general elections). In other European countries, we also see the emergence of an increasingly complex picture, with the appearance of new dimensions of political competition, hybrid communication strategies, growing fragmentation of the political supply, and blurring lines between populism and mainstream. In all these respects, Italy is less exceptional today than it once was.

2. THE ELECTION RESULTS

For the reasons discussed so far, it is not easy to accurately describe the outcome of the 2022 Italian election. When elements of continuity and change become intertwined almost to the point of blending into each other, determining whether an election is more or less 'critical' is indeed a complex task. However, there is a way to hold together, in a useful manner, both elements (i.e., those of continuity with those of novelty or change). This is what Sofia Marini and Gianluca Piccolino seek to achieve in their article in this special issue. Specifically, they place the outcome of the 2022 election in a long-term longitudinal perspective, trying to interpret the election results in the light not only of the political events of the penultimate, turbulent parliamentary term (2018-2022), but also of the transformations that have taken place in the Italian party system and in the voters' attitudes and behaviours. In other words, the article explains the elements of change observed in the last general election in light of the factors of continuity that have long characterised the Italian political system.

This begs a key question: what is the main element of continuity that can help explain the changes, even sudden ones, that we have observed in the Italian party system? The answer is the destructuration, deconsolidation or deinstitutionalization of political parties and their patterns of interaction. As Larry Bartels (2023: 237) recently wrote with reference to Italy, 'in a political system where anything can happen, bad things are bound to happen sometimes'. What we are interested in here is the first part of the quote and especially its political-electoral implications: in a fluid party system, where the only stable element is the instability of both electoral demand and supply, anything can happen – often very quickly**.** The sudden success and decline of the M5S, the meteoric rise of new political leaders (such as Matteo Renzi and Matteo Salvini) or the entry and exit of technocrats temporary lent to party politics are clear examples of this.

To the list of 'things that can happen' after the 2022 elections should be added the success of a radical right-wing party, such as Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia*, with a (controversial) post-fascist tradition, which has gone from 4.4 to 26 percent of the vote in just four years. The victory of a right-wing coalition (and not of the 'usual' centre-right coalition, as Marini and Piccolino rightly note) is a novelty in the history of republican Italy. It also sets a record in the history of Western European countries, with the formation of the first government led by a far-right leader and dominated by political parties placed outside the Christian Democrat, popular or conservative mainstream.

However, this novelty in Italian politics, as already anticipated, can be explained by analysing the history and condition of the Italian party system, which is now

open to every possible outcome, including the success of anti-establishment, if not anti-system, political forces.

At the same time, the outcome of the Italian elections can and should be interpreted not only from a diachronic standpoint but also from a synchronic comparative perspective on a European scale. In that case, Italian elections lose their exceptionalism and, on the contrary, fit within an electoral context characterised by the progressive expansion of the radical right in Western European countries (and beyond), especially in the aftermath of the Covid-19 health emergency and, even more so, the invasion of Ukraine by Putin's Russia. Indeed, all elections held across Europe in the past two years have seen a significant growth of far-right parties. For example, in France in the 2022 presidential election Marine Le Pen, leader of the *Rassemblement National*, 'broke a record with 11.3 million votes received by a radical right party candidate in the Fifth Republic' (Durovic 2023: 621). In the 2022 Swedish general election the far-right Sweden Democrats 'did indeed overtake the Moderates to become the second-biggest party, and the biggest on the right' (Aylott and Bolin 2023: 1055). Also in 2022, in Portugal, *Chega*, another rising star in the galaxy of the European radical right, was the party that grew the most (from 1.3 to 7.2 percent) in the country. Crucially, *Chega* was particularly successful at 'setting the agenda', 'forcing [other] political parties to state their positions on a variety of topics that had not been politicised in Portugal thus far' (Lopes 2023: 440). Furthermore, in the Finnish elections of 2023, the radical right embodied by the *True Finns* party 'finished second with 20.1% of the vote' (Raunio 2023), growing by more than 2 percentage points from the previous election.

In short, all 'those parties have become a well-established political force in many European party systems. Moreover, they currently represent the most electorally successful "brand" of populism, enjoying substantial levels of popular support across Europe' (Ivaldi and Zankina 2023:16). Within this historical framework, the outcome of the Italian elections can be considered anything but an outlier. Quite the contrary: Italy is the spearhead of the rise of the far-right, so much so that, 'considering FdI and Lega together, the electoral performance of the radical right was unprecedented in post-1945 Western European electoral history' (Chiaramonte *et al.* 2023: 8).

Of course, this unprecedented performance of the Italian far-right parties is not only the result of skilful political leaders, starting with Giorgia Meloni. As Marini and Piccolino point out, the victory of the right-wing coalition is also a reflection of the failure of opposition parties to organise and coordinate strategically for the purpose of providing voters a credible and viable alternative to the right-wing pole (Vassallo and Verzichelli 2023). The absence of such an alternative, with a possible centre-left coalition split into three subgroups, not only amplified the victory of the right wing beyond measure (especially in the translation of votes into seats), but also prompted a part of the Italian electorate not to take part in the vote, thus recording the lowest level of turnout since the entire post-war period (63.8 percent). Clearly, such a steep decline in turnout (-9 percentage points compared to the previous election in 2018) is exceptional in relation to elections held in Western European countries over the past five years (where, on average, the decline has been less than 1 percentage point), but it fits into that trend of 'global decline in voter turnout' (Kostelka and Blais 2023) that has involved all advanced democracies for several decades now.

In short, the Italian election of 2022 can be described as 'exceptionally normal' or, from a different perspective, 'normally exceptional'. In any case, the meaning remains the same: voters' spasmodic desire for change, and the advanced state of decomposition of the party system, from which any outcome can now emerge, including that of a radical right-wing government that brings novel challenges to Italian democracy and European governance (Jones 2023), are nothing new. If it is true, as some scholars argue, that the 'distinguishing feature of the 2022 general election has been, once again, change' (Chiaramonte *et al.* 2023: 24), it is equally true that change has become the greatest form of continuity in Italian politics. This is precisely why it is useful to place these general elections in a historical perspective. If only because, in Shakespeare's words, *what's past is prologue*.

3. THE ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

The parliament elected on 25 September 2022 is the smallest in republican history. Following a constitutional reform ratified in 2020, the total number of parliamentarians (MPs) included in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate was reduced by more than a third, from 945 to 600 (plus a number of senators for life) (Bergman and Passarelli 2023). It is too early to say how this change will impact on the role of elected representatives in the legislative process, their loyalty to their parliamentary groups and their relationship with the executive in the long term. However, the reduction in the number of seats has already had two immediate effects, which at first glance may seem contradictory. On the one hand, it has reduced the re-election opportunities for many incumbent MPs. If already in 2013, the year of the political earthquake caused by the M5S, only 344 MPs

were re-elected to the House and the Senate – a similar number occurred in 2018 –, in 2022 this figure has fallen further to its lowest level since 1994: 302. Yet, given the reduction in the overall size of both chambers, the turnover rate, which measures the share of representatives without previous parliamentary experience, has also decreased: from around 65 per cent in 2013 and 2018 to less than 50 per cent in 2022 (CISE 2013; Openpolis 2013, 2022). Consequently, many MPs failed to return to parliament in 2022, but were not replaced by a larger intake of new representatives, as the total number of seats up for grabs was reduced by a third. Thus, since the exclusion of many incumbents did not lead to an increasing relative renewal of representative institutions, 2022 does not appear to be a critical point in recent Italian democratic history comparable to 1994 or 2013.

Indeed, in their article included in this special issue, Matteo Boldrini and Selena Grimaldi show that the winner of the 2022 general election, FdI, did not trigger a process of political renewal as dramatic as that produced by the M5S in 2013 and 2018 or by Forza Italia (and its allies) in 1994. Boldrini and Grimaldi analyse the career paths followed by MPs elected in 2022 and suggest that 'it is difficult to define FdI as a new party in terms of political personnel'. This seems to be reflected in the rather 'traditional' characteristics of its parliamentary group (see also Vampa 2023b), which, controlling almost a third of the seats, carries considerable weight in shaping the overall composition of parliamentary representation. Thus, for example, the 2022 election saw a stabilisation and even a slight decline in the share of women MPs, after a sharp increase in 2013 and 2018. At the same time, while in 2013 the average age of MPs fell by 5 years in the Chamber of Deputies and by 2 years in the Senate, and fell further in 2018 (by one year in both chambers), 2022 saw a reversal of this rejuvenation trend: the average age of MPs and senators rose again (by about 5 years), approaching the peaks reached in 2006 and 2008.

The constitutional reform that downsized the parliament was purely quantitative and has not altered the type of bicameralism existing in Italy, where the two chambers perform identical functions, including the appointment of the executive. This remains an anomaly in Europe and the world (Russell 2000). Yet, when looking at some of the key characteristics of the elected MPs, we can detect similar patterns across the parliaments of the major European democracies. Just as Italy is no longer an extreme outlier in terms of electoral volatility, the continuous 'regeneration' of its parliamentary representation can also no longer be regarded as an anomaly in Western Europe. Chiaramonte and Emanuele (2022) have shown that like Italy in 2013 and 2018, also Germany in 2013 and 2017 and Spain in 2015 and 2019, have experienced sequential elections characterised by high regeneration in the parliamentary arena due to the rise of new parties. Also France, after the 2017 electoral earthquake that fundamentally reshaped its parliamentary equilibria, has seen a further shift in the political personnel elected to the National Assembly in 2022: for the first time, despite the high barriers imposed by the majoritarian electoral system, two parties of the radical left and radical right dominate the opposition in the legislative process (Durovic 2023).

Thus, also when it comes to representation, the 2022 election does not seem to have marked a new critical juncture in recent Italian history nor a widening of the gap between continuously changing parliamentary equilibria in Italy and more stable political elites in the rest of Europe. A situation of permanent fluidity seems to have spread from the electoral to the parliamentary arenas of most European countries.

Yet instability is not entirely negative for the quality of representative democracy, as it can create new opportunities for previously underrepresented groups. In 2013 and 2018, Italy made significant progress in challenging an ageing and male-dominated political elite by electing a more gender-balanced and younger political personnel, a process that saw the country converge with (and in some cases even surpass) its main European counterparts (some comparative data are provided by the International Parliamentary Union, https://data.ipu.org/). Of course, these positive trends can still come to an abrupt end or be reversed, with political dynamics remaining highly volatile but producing no improvement in the inclusiveness of democratic institutions. For instance, the 2022 election seems to have signalled a setback in the rejuvenation of Italy's political class and the expansion of women's spaces at the parliamentary level, even though at the governmental level another important milestone was achieved: the election of Italy's first female prime minister.

4. THE POST-ELECTION PROCESS: GOVERNMENT FORMATION AND NEW POLICY AGENDA

The decisive victory of the right-wing coalition, with FdI at the head, allowed Meloni to form a government quite quickly. This is in contrast with trends of the previous two general elections, where, due to the mechanics of byzantine electoral laws and precarious coalition/party-political dynamics, swearing in a new executive had been a complicated affair (Jones, 2023). In 2018, it took a record 89 days between the elections and the appoint-

ment of the Conte I government; while in 2013, Letta could form a government only 62 days after the vote. In Meloni's case, the meeting with the President of the Republic Mattarella, who appoints new PMs and their government, lasted only 11 minutes, and her executive took office 27 days after the election. Since 1992, only the Berlusconi IV government took less than that (24 days) to form. This quick turnaround can be partially explained by the fact that key economic deadlines, such as the autumn budget, were impending (Bordignon et al 2023). Yet, the rapidity of the process also recalls the political patterns of the Second Republic, reviving the narrative of the early 1990s according to which elections should produce a clear outcome: a winning coalition and a leader who becomes the head of government (Idem).

However, building a cohesive front across the governing coalition was less straightforward. As Marianna Griffini underlines in her contribution to this collection, the (male) leaders of the right-wing coalition parties did not take well Meloni's success. First, since FdI upsurge drew largely on vote haemorrhages from the Lega and FI, Salvini and Berlusconi feared that their parties could be eclipsed once in government with Meloni. Second, and related to this, the sizeable share of votes obtained by FdI gave Meloni the ability to 'pick and choose' ministers, with limited wiggle-room for bargaining within the coalition. While it is true that the Lega and FI gained important (and symbolic) roles in the Cabinet to reflect some of their key agendas (e.g. Lega's Calderoli as Minister for Regional Affairs and Autonomies), Meloni sent a strong signal to her partners as to whom held the reins of the executive – i.e. denying the Ministry of Interior to Salvini, who clearly set his sights on it; or refusing to assign any key position to Berlusconi's 'favourite' Licia Ronzulli. Until now, the honeymoon period enjoyed by the government has helped keep open frictions within the coalition at bay – but it remains to be seen whether, and for how long, the leaders of the Lega and FI will continue to be satisfied playing second fiddle to Meloni. After all, it is not the first time these parties (or their precursors) have been in government together but struggled to maintain 'good working relationships' due to shifting, internecine power dynamics (see Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Jones 2023).

Against this background, Griffini's contribution analyses the first 100 days of Meloni's government, assessing whether, once in power, FdI has adopted more moderate or radical stances both in its ideology and policy agenda. She finds that, in line with trends in previous Italian elections as well as across European countries where populist radical right parties (PRR) are in office, moderation has been a hallmark of Meloni's government so far – although some radical positions have emerged, especially in the domestic sphere and on symbolic measures.

Despite fears that FdI dominance within the government would drive Italy towards a far-right or even neo-fascist backslide (The Economist 2022), Meloni has deliberately (and successfully) built the image of a competent and reliable leader for the country, through the development of what Griffini calls a 'civic façade' and by keeping steady relations with EU and international partners. In short, while Meloni portrayed herself as a radical to win power, she soon realised the need to widen her appeal and project a sense of stability to keep her position – thus reinventing herself as a moderate centrist leader. This impacted on her policy approach.

In terms of economic and foreign affairs policy agendas, the government has been more moderate than some had anticipated – adhering to institutional processes, economic rules and geopolitical positions shared with other Western European liberal democracies. On the economy, Meloni has shown continuity with Draghi's executive, and the autumn budget was orthodox and in line with EU guidelines. Fears of a Eurosceptic drift did not materialise and, indeed, Meloni's first diplomatic trip was, strategically, to Brussels. Even on the wicked issue of the PNRR (the National Recovery and Resilience Plan linked to to Next Generation EU), despite struggles, Meloni has been seeking mediation on the amendments needed to carry out the plan. On immigration, calls for a 'naval blockade' heralded during the electoral campaign have been toned down and the current government's migration policies are for the most part in continuity with those of its predecessors. Meanwhile, the approach to foreign policy remains firmly pro-NATO, and full support for Ukraine after Russia's invasion has superseded previous friendly relationships with Putin's regime.

Thus, as Griffini shows, FdI's radical rhetoric has translated into a government practice characterised by 'reasonable and accommodating' measures (Jones 2023), especially on the economy and external relations. This is, once again, an approach not too dissimilar from that of previous Italian governments in recent years, as well as with other PRR parties across Europe (e.g. see Heinisch 2003; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Pappas 2019). From the anti-establishment M5S to the nativist-nationalist Lega, since 2018 political actors with radical ideologies and anti-EU views have been in office: and yet, they have ended up tempering, if not completely changing, their positions. Taking the example of the European Union, despite promoting a referendum on the Euro until 2018, once in office the M5S softened its position on the EU – and in 2019 its vote in Brussels proved key to the election

of Ursula Van Der Leyen as President of the Commission. Despite having campaigned in 2014 to 'Dump the Euro', Salvini became a supporter of former European Central Bank President Mario Draghi and joined his 'national unity' government (Giovannini and Vampa 2022). Meloni has followed suit, relegating FdI's Eurosceptic views to the past and displaying a tendency to surrender, in a pragmatic fashion, radical positions to retain power (and continue to draw essential funding from the EU).

However, on the domestic front, Meloni has played a different game. Here, as Griffini notes analysing a range of policies pursued by FdI in its first 100 days in office, some shifts towards the radical right can be registered. Meloni's government has kept fighting some of FdI's traditional, more reactionary, 'symbolic battles' to appease the elements of nostalgia that survive across party elites and sympathisers – e.g. stoking culture wars on linguistic and gender issues, or attempting to push for protectionist measures on Italian products in a quest to defend the national interest vis-à-vis the external threats of immigration and globalisation. Meloni's government has also placed particular emphasis on law and order, immigration and the national interest – in keeping with FdI electoral manifesto pledges and, more broadly, with key issues owned by PRR parties in Europe. Yet, there has been a clear gap between policy statements and actual policy implementation/effectiveness on these agendas. The 'anti-rave decree' that some feared would curb freedom of expression was considerably watered down throughout the legislative process. And, despite much boosterism on the matter, sea crossing has increased sharply since the days of Draghi's government: in the first six months since the elections, over 75,000 people have landed on Italy's shores, more than the double (about 32,000) in the same period in 2021/22 (Ministry of the Interior 2023).

In this respect, Meloni's government has been less radical than other right-wing executives in Europe. On immigration, for instance, Meloni's measures (such as the 'code of conduct for NGOs' decree assessed by Griffini), pale in comparison to the UK Conservative government Illegal Immigration Bill (which, in practice, would amount to an asylum ban – see Donald and Grogan 2023) or the restrictive positions of the new Swedish government under the Sweden Democrats' influence (e.g. cracking down on asylum legislation, revoking permanent residency on several grounds, investigating the possibility of 'overseas prisons', and drastically dropping Sweden's annual refugee quota – see Swedish Government 2023; Rothstein 2023).

Taken together, these reflections on the formation and policy agenda of Meloni's executive show elements of continuity, in the wake of moderation, with previous government experiences in the past decades – albeit with some swings to radical positions. They also suggest the presence of a distinction, in terms of discourse and practice, between the electoral phase and the transition into office of PRR actors in Italy. It is in the space between these two stages that we see the emergence of changes that, while creating turbulence on the surface, eventually abate in the wake of institutionalisation – leading to a recalibration of radical position. Read through this lens, the 2022 election did not provide the drastic watershed that many feared, neither within the Italian context or the wider European one. Indeed, as Minkenberg (2001) notes comparing the policy activity of radical right parties across Europe, holding office often produces a 'taming effect' on these actors rather than a sharp 'right turn' – and when they hold executive office, a 'right turn' occurs primarily in cultural policies. In its first 100 days, Meloni's government policy activity fits within this framework, suggesting that, despite being the only European country with a far-right PM at the helm, Italy is not an outlier – as, if anything, its agenda has been more temperate than some of its PRR counterparts.

CONCLUSION

This introduction has outlined some key themes that are explored more systematically and comprehensively in the contributions included in the special issue. Looking at four key areas (i.e. the electoral campaign, the results, the elected representatives and the government formation and policies) both from a diachronic and synchronic comparative perspective, we have shown that Italy remains a highly unstable political regime – although this inherent fluidity is now widely recognised as a stable feature of its party system. Italian elections have also ceased to surprise international observers because they no longer appear anomalous events in an increasingly turbulent European context. It is perhaps no exaggeration to assert the 'Italianisation' of European politics today, as Italy has been the spearhead of political processes that, while often being dubbed as 'radical', have indeed become increasingly common, and have emerged in many other countries. In this respect, change – prompted by volatility, fragmentation, mainstreaming of populist ideas and actors, polarisation and the reframing of socio-economic and socio-cultural cleavages – seem to have become the new normal. However, it is imperative for political scientists, analysts, and citizens to avoid complacency in the face of these consolidating trends. Indeed, the normalisation and mainstreaming of previously marginalised political paradigms may, in the long run, give

rise to more profound and consequential transformations in the democratic fabric of contemporary societies.

REFERENCES

Albertazzi, D. & Bonansinga, D. (2023). Beyond Anger: the Populist Radical Right on TikTok. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2022.2163380

Albertazzi, D., & Vampa, D. (Eds.) (2021). *Populism and New Patterns of Political Competition in Western Europe*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Aylott, N., & Bolin, N. (2023). A New Right: the Swedish Parliamentary Election of September 2022. *West European Politics*, 46(5), 1049-1062.

Bartels, L. M. (2023). *Democracy Erodes from the Top: Leaders, Citizens and the Challenge of Populism in Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bergman M. E., & Passarelli, G. (2023). Party and Leadership Effects on Referendum Voting: The Italian 2020 Constitutional Referendum. *Representation*. DOI: 10.1080/00344893.2023.2210149

Bordignon, F., Ceccarini, L., & Newell, J. L. (2023). Italian voters: where they have come and where they are going. In F. Bordignon, L., Ceccarini & J.L. Newell (Eds.) (2023, forthcoming) *The Italian General Election of 2022. The Right Strikes Back*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Chiaramonte, A., & D'Alimonte, R. (2018). The New Italian Electoral System and its Effects on Strategic Coordination and Disproportionality. *Italian Political Science, 13*(1), 8-18.

Chiaramonte, A., & Emanuele, V. (2022). *The deinstitutionalization of Western European party systems*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Chiaramonte, A., Emanuele, V., Maggini, N. & Paparo, A. (2023). Radical-Right Surge in a Deinstitutionalised Party System: The 2022 Italian General Election. *South European Society and Politics*, DOI: 10.1080/13608746.2022.2160088

CISE (2013). *Il Parlamento 2013: nuovo e al femminile*. Retrieved from https://cise.luiss.it/cise/2013/03/02/il-parlamento-2013-nuovo-e-al-femminile/

Donal, A., & Grogan, J. (2023) 'The Illegal Immigration Bill', *UK In a Changing Europe*, 25 May 2023 (available from: https://ukandeu.ac.uk/explainers/the-illegal-migration-bill/)

Durovic, A. (2023). Rising electoral fragmentation and abstention: the French elections of 2022. *West European Politics*, *46*(3), 614-629.

Garzia, D. (2013). The 2013 Italian Parliamentary Election: Changing Things So Everything Stays the Same. *West European Politics*, 36(5), 1095-1105.

Giovannini, A., & Vampa, D. (2022). Boom to Bust. Where Next for Matteo Salvini's Lega? *The Loop*. Available from: https://theloop.ecpr.eu/what-happened-to-matteo-salvinis-league/

Heinisch, R. (2003). Success in opposition – failure in government: explaining the performance of right-wing populist parties in public office. *West European Politics*, 26(3), 91-130

Ivaldi, G., & Zankina, E. (2023). The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe. *European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS) Report*.

Jones, E. (2023). Italy's Hard Truths. *Journal of Democracy*, 34(1), 21-35.

Kostelka, F., & Blais, A. (2023). The generational and institutional sources of the global decline in voter turnout. *World Politics*, 73(4), 629-667.

Lopes, H. F. (2023). An unexpected Socialist majority: the 2022 Portuguese general elections. *West European Politics,* 46(2), 437-450.

Ministry of the Interior / Ministero dell'Interno (2023). *Sbarchi e accoglienza dei migranti: tutti i dati*. Available from: https://www.interno.gov.it/it/stampa-e-comunicazione/dati-e-statistiche/sbarchi-e-accoglienza-dei-migranti-tutti-i-dati

Minkenberg, M. (2001). The radical right in public office: Agenda-setting and policy effects. *West European Politics*, 24(4), 1-21

Openpolis (2018). *La carriera politica dei nuovi parlamentari*. Retrieved from https://www.openpolis.it/la-carriera-politica-dei-nuovi-parlamentari/

Openpolis (2022). *La XIX legislatura e gli equilibri del nuovo parlamento.* Retrieved from https://www.openpolis.it/esercizi/la-composizione-delle-nuove-aule-parlamentari/

Pappas, T. (2019). Populists in Power. *Journal of Democracy*, 30(2), 70-84.

Pasquino, G., & Valbruzzi, M. (2015). The impact of the 2013 general election on the Italian political system: the end of bipolarism? *Journal of Modern Italian Studies, 20*(4), 438-453.

Pautz, H. (2021). Germany. In D. Albertazzi & D. Vampa (Eds.). *Populism and New Patterns of Political Competition in Western Europe*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 112-130.

Pirro, A. (2018). The polyvalent populism of the 5 Star Movement. *Journal of* Contemporary *European Studies, 26*(4), 443-458.

Raunio, T. (2023). *The pendulum swings to the right again in Finland*. LSE Europp Blog, 6 April 2023. Available from: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2023/04/06/

the-pendulum-swings-to-the-right-again-in-finland/
Rothstein, B. (2023). The Shadow of the Swedish Right. *Journal of Democracy*, 34(1), 36-49.
Russell, M. (2000). *Reforming the House of Lords: Lessons from Overseas*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
Simón, P. (2020). Two-bloc Logic, Polarisation and Coalition Government: The November 2019 General Election in Spain. *South European Society and Politics*, 25(3-4), 533-563
Swedish Government (2023) *Sweden's New Migration Policy*. Available from: https://www.government.se/government-policy/swedens-new-migration-policy/
The Economist (2022). "How afraid should Europe be of Giorgia Meloni?" *The Economist*, 22 September 2022 (available from: https://www.economist.com/leaders/2022/09/22/how-afraid-should-europe-be-of-giorgia-meloni)
Vaccari, C., & Valeriani, A. (2015). Follow the leader! Direct and indirect flows of political communication during the 2013 Italian general election campaign. *New Media & Society, 17*(7), 1025-1042.
Vampa, D. (2023a). Italy: Populism and business in a stagnant economy. In M. Feldmann & G. Morgan (Eds.). *Business Elites and Populism: The Odd Couple?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 118–137.
Vampa, D. (2023b). *Brothers of Italy: A New Populist Wave in an Unstable Party System*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
Vassallo, S., & Verzichelli, L. (Eds.) (2023). *Il bipolarismo asimmetrico. L'Italia al voto dopo il decennio populista*, Bologna: Il Mulino.