

The Rise of the Brothers of Italy and Its Causes: From a Gramscian Perspective

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Abstract. In the past decade, there has been a surge in the triumph in elections of parties with populist ideologies on the political stage. A notable example is the Fdl party, which secured victory as the most voted party in the 2022 Italian election, leading to its leader Meloni becoming Italy's first female prime minister. Hence, this article adopts a Gramscian perspective to analyze the ascent of populism. It posits that populism appeals to traditional and conservative individuals who feel marginalized by mainstream ideologies, offering them a discourse through which they can resist elite-driven ideologies. Furthermore, it endeavors to employ electoral outcomes as evidence to illustrate that populists are also adversely affected by European integration and globalization in terms of demographic composition. This exacerbates societal divisions between ordinary citizens and elites.

Keywords: Populism, Gramscianism, Fdl, Italy.

1. Introduction

In recent years, populist parties have gained widespread support across Europe. Parties such as National Rally in France, Freedom Party of Austria, and Sweden Democrats have successfully secured a significant number of parliamentary seats. In Italy and Finland, the far-right populist government has also become a reality. This exemplifies the rapid rise of populist parties and their influence on numerous European countries. Particularly in Italy, during the 2022 parliamentary elections, four of the top five parties with the most seats were populists, including Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia-Centrodestra Nazionale, FdI), Five Star Movement, League Party, and Forza Itali [1].

However, what factors contribute to the strong competitiveness and appeal of these populist parties? To explore this phenomenon, this paper utilizes Gramscianism and specifically focuses on Brothers of Italy's rise in Italy and its underlying reasons for its emergence. Firstly, the paper provides a broader discussion on populism to establish background context for analysing Brothers of Italy. It then delves into examining the conditions and processes behind their rise while elucidating their political stances and governmental policies. Furthermore, the paper primarily employs Gramscianism to scrutinize why Brothers of Italy emerged – critiquing multiculturalism, globalism, LGBTQ and Islamic culture associated with refugees, questioning EU dominance by transnational elites, leadership through new media platforms and charismatic leaders. Finally, in the discussion section, the study analyses whether Brothers of Italy is merely a transient phenomenon or if it possesses potential for further advancement.

2. Features of Populism

Despite the increasing focus on populism in recent years, a growing number of scholars have begun to discuss in detail the phenomena and characteristics of populism. Populism, however, has yet to form a general definition. As emphasized by Bugariki and Kuhelj, 'chameleon-like, ever adapting to the colors of its environment' [2]. Margaret Canovan, for example, does not want to treat populism as unified but instead proposes a key distinction between agrarian populism and political populism. Based on this foundation, she presents a sevenfold classification of populism [3]. Moreover, populism can be right-wing as well as left-wing. Cas Mudde argues that populism has been a common feature

of Western democratic politics since at least the early 1990s; initially used by opposition parties and outsiders, but it has also been employed by the ruling party as a tool against challengers [4].

Populism, then, has always been an ambiguous subject. Thus, borrowing from Paul Taggart, this paper attempts to summarize the common features of populism. The first theme of populist discourse is the confrontation between ‘pure people’ and ‘corrupt elites’ [5]. Populists believe that corrupt elites have eroded national interests and betrayed ‘the people’ by promoting an ideology and policies serving their own interests. In such cases, they strive unconditionally against governments controlled by what they perceive as ‘evil elites.’

Naturally, this also leads to the second theme of populism, who are ‘the people’. Populist individuals often align themselves with a conceptualized heartland that embodies an idealized representation of their community. The heartland is a construct of an idyllic world, but unlike the concept of utopia, it is constructed retrospectively—essentially a vision of what has been lost, projected onto the present as if it still exists [3]. Therefore, the “people” are simply the masses within this heartland.

The third theme of populism is its lack of core values. The core values are derived from the heartland where the heartland changes depending on the situation. This explains why populism attaches itself to some different ideological positions from left to right. However, this does not make populism vulnerable; instead, it shows that populism is not confined by ideology but rather a discourse within cultural narratives and thus becomes a response to people’s demand for returning to their perceived center [6]. In other words, populism does not revolve around embracing specific values or ideologies but unifies in resistance against anything outside their heartland, resisting value systems propagated and implemented by ‘evil elites.’ Therefore, under appropriate metaphorical frameworks (such as Fortress Europe) and shared cultural imaginaries experiences shape anyone into becoming a populist citizen [6].

The last theme of populism is charismatic politicians. Populism is characterized by charismatic leader [7]. These politicians, such as Donald John Trump, Giorgia Meloni, often possess extremely high personal charm and oratory skills, and with the development of technology, they have the ability to bypass traditional media and engage in more direct communication with their followers through other platforms like Twitter.

3. Conditions in Italy

Before delving into the emergence of the Brothers of Italy, it is imperative to examine the socio-economic landscape within which it operates. Firstly, Italy’s economy has been suffering from a sustained downturn since 2008. According to data from the World Bank, Italy’s GDP has plummeted from 2.41 trillion euros in 2008 to 1.9 trillion euros in 2020 [8]. Consequently, there has been a significant surge in unemployment rates from 6.72% in 2008 to 9.3% in 2020. Notably, during the period spanning from 2008 to 2014, youth unemployment rates escalated by over fifteen percentage points [9].

Regionally speaking, economic challenges are particularly pronounced in southern Italy. As an agrarian-based region that failed to keep pace with industrialization trends, this disparity has resulted in sluggish economic development and exacerbated North-South divides. Between 2008 and 2016, per capita GDP stagnated at €32,000 for central and northern Italy while southern Italy lagged behind at €18,000 [10]. According to Eurosta, two out of five regions with the lowest employment rates within the EU are situated in southern Italy: Sicily and Campania [11].

Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge that Italy confronts a pressing issue regarding its aging population as individuals aged sixty-five or above account for twenty-four percent of society—second only to Japan and Monaco [12]. In tandem with economic decline comes political instability within Italian politics. In just fourteen years, the country witnessed eight prime ministers who served on average less than two years each. This undermines long-term policy-making efforts, diminishing government credibility as well as policy continuity. Owing to waning support for traditional political

parties, the rise of idiosyncratic right-wing populist party, the Five Star Movement, even intensified. They self-proclaim themselves as the “People’s Opposition Party” with the aim of opposing everything [13].

Finally, Italy’s experience is particularly unique due to its strong foundation of Nazi ideology and social support. Despite its affiliation with the Axis powers, Italy was granted permission by the Allied governments to conduct autonomous trials and purges subsequent to its defection in September 1943. However, there remained ambiguity regarding who should be tried for what reasons. By February 1946, approximately 394,000 government employees were investigated but only 1,580 were dismissed. In March 1946, the senior committee responsible for carrying out cleansing tasks closed down and three months later announced amnesty that included revoking sentences below five years [14].

In reality, most local administrators, mayors, and mid-level officials who had been purged between 1944-1945 regained their positions or were exempted from penalties; nearly 50 thousand Italians sentenced to prison for fascist activities also served minimal time behind bar while many fascists in Italy managed to evade punishment and continued adhering to their fascist beliefs [14].

4. The History of FdI

The FdI Party has its roots in the Italian Social Movement (MSI), a political party established by ex-Italian Fascist officers, featuring certain elements that evoke memories of fascism. They produced a political force that, while seeking to reassemble the fascism that had dispersed in defeat, also had the goal of fostering the development of an open, unreflective, anticommunist, and pro-Atlantic movement [15].

The MSI, however, does not merely perpetuate the preceding fascist party; instead, it embodies a progressive and contemporary approach within an ideological framework that seeks to amalgamate fervent spirit with rooted traditional values as well as a dedication to societal equity [16]. Later, under the direction of Gianfranco Fini, the MSI was transformed into the National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale, AN) and gradually accepted and advocated by the public. This also led to the National Alliance becoming increasingly moderate, with AN gradually abandoning its radical past symbols. The flame preserved in the party emblem became smaller and smaller, and it completely disappeared in the 2008 election when AN merged with Silvio Berlusconi-led FI party to form the People of Freedom, erasing any trace inherited from Italian fascism [16].

The scandals that plagued Berlusconi, however, had a significant negative impact on his ability to govern, and the previous AN leader expressed his displeasure with Berlusconi’s hegemonic position inside the new party [17]. In late 2012, a faction of Members of Parliament made the decision to secede from the party and establish FdI. In the subsequent 2013 election, FdI successfully garnered just under two percent of the total votes, thereby enabling them to effectively elect a few Members of Parliament.

In the subsequent years, under Meloni’s astute leadership, FdI underwent a significant ideological transformation as it gradually assimilated various elements of the European radical right and adopted the tricolors flame symbol, which holds historical significance for MSI and AN [17]. This partly reflected the revival of fascist traditions by the FdI. Meloni also publicly expressed admiration and recognition for Mussolini. In the 2022 general election, ultimately, the FdI emerged as the dominant force in parliament and forged a coalition with other right-wing parties, resulting in the formation of a government that is widely regarded as the most populist and right-leaning since World War II.

5. The Reasons for FdI’s Rising

Compared to other theories, Gramscianism has provided an innovative explanation of the concept of hegemony by introducing ideology as a crucial factor [18]. Hegemony refers to the control exerted by a dominant class and its representatives over subordinate classes through a combination of

coercion and persuasion. Consequently, the dominant class cannot solely exploit the state as a mechanism for enforcing its interests upon subordinate classes; instead, hegemony is established based on consensus [19]. To achieve ideological reconciliation and consensus, the hegemonic class forms an ideological group that incorporates organic intellectuals who identify with their ideology and align with its interests. These intellectuals utilize civil society—the arena in which class struggle takes place—to disseminate their class’s patterns of thinking, emotional disposition, and worldview. Furthermore, they foster homogeneity within their class and promote awareness in economic, social, and political spheres [20].

Therefore, two phenomena emerge within Gramscian hegemonic societies. Firstly, the dominant classes have established a consensus with a diverse range of subordinate classes in civil society, thereby forging a robust relationship. Secondly, the dominant classes have entrusted their direct authority over political society to institutionalized structures that are overseen by a bureaucratic class [21]. In contrast, in non-hegemonic societies, the disappearance of these characteristics can be observed. The ruling class encounters difficulties in reaching consensus within the country. Civil society starts to oppose the bureaucratic class and its constructed institutions. Poulantzas further posits that the state should be regarded as a locus of contention between social classes, encompassing both material resources and ideological perspectives [20]. This ideological conflict has been fully manifested in Italy.

Firstly, Italy itself is a relatively conservative nation. In Western Europe, Italy ranks second in terms of the proportion of Christians in the population, standing at 80 percent. Moreover, it is noteworthy that Italy is the sole country within the survey exhibiting a higher prevalence of devout Christians compared to non-devout individuals [22]. Secondly, the significance of family is highly valued by Italians. The family provides continuity to life for Italians and is an all-consuming ideal. Its honour must never be compromised, and its power is one’s first loyalty. Traditionally, being without family has meant being completely empty [23]. Furthermore, as argued earlier in this paper, despite the conclusion of World War II, fascist elements in Italy were not entirely eradicated; thus, the enduring influence of fascism remains significantly pervasive within Italian society.

While the robust local culture has encountered significant challenges from alternative ideologies like multiculturalism, this has consequently contributed to the emergence of FdI. Since 2015, Italy has been disproportionately affected by the migrant crisis compared to other nations. Moreover, it actively engages in numerous rescue operations conducted within the Mediterranean. Out of the total influx of refugees in 2015, Italy received an overwhelming number of over 150,000 individuals, leading to a substantial surge of 31% in annual asylum applications [24]. Between 2014 and 2017, an average of 150,000 people a year were smuggled to Italian shores by North African traffickers and rescued at sea [25]. Generally, the discourse surrounding humanitarian emergencies has progressively shifted towards conflicts pertaining to racial and cultural disparities within multicultural societies. While only a quarter of Italians expressed concerns about immigration’s impact on public order prior to 2014, the proportion of individuals reckoning this notion rose to 35% in 2015 and further increased to 40% in 2016 [25]. Therefore, Italian anti-immigration activists strategically formulated the notion of a “refugee crisis” in order to mobilize public sentiment against corrupt non-governmental organizations, mainstream media outlets, and “multiculturalist” elites [24].

Meloni and FdI are also keenly aware of the disappearance of social consensus; thus, they try to use this discourse to emphasize the destruction of local culture and values by refugees and illegal immigrants. She has previously lamented Italy’s historically low birth rate as well as warned of left-wing government conspiracy to “fund the replacement of Italians with immigrants.” In the documents of FdI, the conspiracy theory of the ‘great replacement’ is also mentioned, which claims that the European Union is attempting to encourage a plan to use immigration to offset Europe’s declining population and undermine its Christian roots [17, 26].

Not only does FdI oppose Islamic culture, but it also strongly opposes LGBTQ rights. Meloni once said in a speech, “I want to introduce in the Constitution the fact that to adopt a child, you have to be a father and a mother” [27]. Documents of FdI also emphasize, “safeguarding children against the

encroachment of gender ideology, preserving the distinction between males and females, and advocating for homosexual couples to engage in adoption” [28]. It all adds up to Meloni stating, “I’m a woman, a mother, an Italian, a Christian, you cannot take these from me”. Therefore, in Italian society characterized by a lack of consensus, FdI offers an alternative for marginalized individuals to reclaim their heartland, embodying an ideology that resists dominant elites and encroaching ideologies.

Besides, Gramsci argued that the primacy of social relations precedes international relations, and it is evident that the latter are a direct outcome of the former. The presence of a dominant representative embodying specific forms of social production relations can be imposed on a global scale by hegemony. As long as hegemony has been established locally, it possesses the ability to disseminate a distinct social structure throughout the global system [29, 30]. Therefore, Cox argues that it is increasingly imperative to consider the presence of a global class hierarchy in conjunction with or transcending national class hierarchies due to the partial trans-nationalization of national production and finance systems as a result of globalization [31]. There is an ongoing struggle not only between capital and labor within a country, but also conflicts arise between the domestic capital and labor as well as transnational forces of capital and labor [31]. This phenomenon is vividly reflected in Italy.

European integration was primarily an ambition of the elite, undertaken apart from the daily worries of national communities in Western Europe where Roy Jenkins response to a question on television in 1975 about why he believed the British people had chosen to join the Common Market in the referendum, he said, ‘they took the advice of people they were used to following’ [32]. Furthermore, the interconnections among European national leaders within the pan-European framework level have strengthened in their own right. Initially employed as a strategy to mitigate the influence of domestic actors on the policymaking process, this approach has gradually evolved into a means for national governments lacking connections with their own domestic communities to establish legitimacy [32]. In other words, national governments that lack connection with their own societies will formulate policies based on the policy of European integration and the globalization, where European Union has effectively shifted the power dynamics in favor of elites and international capital within the ongoing class struggle between transnational capital and labor. They have also successfully inserted their own social production relations into other EU countries.

However, amidst the process of integration and globalization, the ruling class comprising farmers and workers has encountered significant setbacks. They have faced a loss of employment opportunities, while their domestic agricultural markets have been overtaken by inexpensive foreign goods. FdI presents an alternative avenue for these social classes and individuals whose interests have been compromised during the course of integration and globalization to challenge the prevailing elites. This can be clearly reflected in the voter distribution of FdI. The country is geographically, politically, and socioeconomically divided into three major regions: the affluent North, the Centre, which includes historically left-leaning regions referred to as the 'Red Belt', also known as relatively modernized and rich area, and the less economically developed South comprising Sardinia and Sicily. The impoverished southern regions have been identified as crucial constituencies for FdI [16].

Despite further changes in electoral geography where growth was mainly in the north and to a lesser extent in the south, FdI became more ‘provincialisation’ compared to 2018, suggesting that more rural northern votes flowed to FdI from her right-wing Allies. The party’s territorial contours have shifted not only north but also outside the cities. In addition, the FdI party experienced a significant surge in backing from individuals with less educational attainment. Similar to the situation in 2018, it achieved notable success not only among small business owners and skilled workers belonging to the "petty bourgeoisie," but also resonated strongly with manual laborers. Currently, the right-wing political spectrum collectively garners more than 50% of the working-class electorate's favor [16].

FdI also advocates for the promotion of domestic enterprises and underscores the significance of safeguarding Italian companies and trademarks against potential risks posed by multinational

corporations, as well as the broader challenges arising from economic and financial globalization [17]. Occasionally, this is portrayed as an expression of nationalistic sentiment: despite the reckless actions of an international banking system solely focused on maximizing private profits, resilient Italian entrepreneurs persistently uphold the esteemed "Made in Italy" brand, undeterred by potential repercussions [28]. All of this shows that FdI has astutely captured the dynamic contradiction between transnational capital and labour and used this populist concept to provide a more radical alternative for those left behind by globalization.

6. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the concept and rise of populism in Europe. Many populist parties in Europe have enjoyed considerable success in European elections and polls. And the success of right-wing coalitions in Italy, Sweden, Finland, Greece and elsewhere reflects this general populist, rightward trend. Therefore, this study aims to examine the emergence of populist parties through the lens of Gramscian theory. Based on the diversity and complexity of populism, this paper attempts to summarize the FdI in Italy as a case study and carry out a specific analysis.

First of all, this paper adopts the views of Paul Taggart to avoid the confused discussion on the definition of populism by summarizing the common characteristics of populism, and summarizes the four characteristics of populism: the confrontation between the 'pure people' and the 'evil elites'; Populist individuals often align themselves with a conceptualized heartland that embodies an idealized representation of their community. Populism is not about ideology, but about becoming a discourse; Charismatic politician. Then, this paper discusses in more detail the present social situation of Italy and the road of the rise of the FdI. The article focuses on Italy's economic decline, political chaos and deep fascist tradition. At the same time, this paper also describes the fascist origin of the FdI and the history of the founding of the party.

Finally, this paper uses Gramscian's new definition of hegemony, which refers to a class and its representatives controlling the lower classes through a mixture of coercion and persuasion. According to this definition, this paper argued that populism is the resistance of the people abandoned by the mainstream to the ideology promoted by the elites in the non-hegemonic society, and its means is to utilize the guidance of such concepts as nativism and hope to return to the heartland.

Meanwhile, from the perspective of the class conflict between the transnational capital and the transnational power of labor, it tries to explain that people who are abandoned by the mainstream and do not recognize the ideology of the elite are also severely hit in the process of globalization and regional integration. All of these reflect the rise of populism in Italy.

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