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Post-'Post-Fascism' and Far Right Mainstreaming in Italy: Assessing Continuity Between the Italian Social Movement, National Alliance and Brothers of Italy

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Abstract

The mainstreaming of the far right is a defining feature of European politics, raising concerns that incorporating far right parties into democratic politics could lead to the normalisation of undemocratic ideas. This paper explores this contention in the case of Brothers of Italy, a radical right party with extreme right roots. Conceptualising mainstreaming as the result of moderation or normalisation, it assesses whether Brothers of Italy can facilitate the normalisation of undemocratic ideas. The analysis evaluates ideological, organisational and symbolic continuity and change between Brothers of Italy and its predecessors: the extreme right Italian Social Movement and the conservative National Alliance. Drawing on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of party programmes, the study finds limited ideological continuity, suggesting restricted potential for normalising extremism. However, continuity in party personnel and narratives highlights ongoing organisational and symbolic links, indicating that Brothers of Italy may still indirectly contribute to the normalisation of extremism.

Keywords

radical right, extreme right, Italy, Brothers of Italy, mainstreaming, fascism

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The mainstreaming of the far right[1] has become a defining feature of the last two decades of European politics. Far right parties' electoral successes enabled them to bypass the '*cordon sanitaire*' put around them by other parties, enter parliament in most

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European countries, and join in, or externally support, governments in several of them (Akkerman et al., 2016; Bichay, 2023; Mudde, 2019). The far right's move into the mainstream has been the subject of a growing scholarship (Eatwell and Mudde, 2004; Herman and Muldoon, 2019; Mondon and Winter, 2020; Valentim, 2024). A key concern expressed in works on the mainstreaming of the far right is that far-right parties' success could contribute to the penetration of radical ideas into non-radical politics (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020; Akkerman et al., 2016; Herman and Muldoon, 2019; Pirro, 2023; Valentim, 2024), with negative overall implications for the quality of democracy.

In this paper, we assess whether far-right parties can contribute to the normalisation of extremism by studying the case of Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI), a radical right party with roots in the extreme right. Officially founded in 2012 from a splinter of the right-wing People of Freedom (Popolo delle Libertà, PdL), FdI is a 'rooted newcomer' (Baldini et al., 2023): it is the successor party of the 'post-fascist' (Ignazi, 1994) National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale, AN), itself the successor of the Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI), an extreme right party founded in 1946 by supporters and high-ranking members of Mussolini's regime. In 2022, it became the main party in a majority radical right coalition government headed by its leader Giorgia Meloni. In spite of Italy's long history of including radical right parties in government, this was the first time the radical right led the government (Russo and Vegetti, 2023), and the first time a radical right party with extremist roots occupied a leadership position.

FdI's extremist past and current governmental position make it a critical case in the contemporary far right landscape. Although its victory clearly presented an instance of mainstreaming of the radical right because of its ideological profile displaying all the hallmarks of a radical right party (Baldini et al., 2023; Donà, 2022; Puleo and Piccolino, 2022; Vampa, 2023), its heritage and dominant position in government also raise more fundamental concerns that it could contribute to mainstreaming the MSI's anti-democratic ideas in Italy and, via its membership of the European Union, beyond it (Giuffrida, 2023). The latter would present a different quality of mainstreaming, in that it would not just entail a normalisation of radical right positions, but also of extreme right anti-democratic ones. In fact, whereas the extreme right and the radical right share nativist and authoritarian positions (Mudde, 2007), they differ in their approach to democracy (Golder, 2016; Pirro, 2023). Radical right parties hold 'illiberal democratic' positions, whereby they accept a democratic system based on the principle of popular rule, but oppose its liberal aspects such as non-majoritarian institutions or the protection of minorities (Enyedi, 2024). Conversely, extreme right parties reject and seek to replace the democratic constitutional order. Throughout its history, the MSI fit in the latter category (Ignazi, 2003), changing only (albeit slowly) with its transformation into AN in the 1990s (Minkenberg, 2013: 10; Tarchi, 2003: 200).

Existing literature assessing whether FdI still shares the ideas and values of its neo-fascist predecessor, and could therefore help normalise them, remains limited. Analyses have focused primarily on comparisons with AN (Baldini et al., 2023; Donà, 2022; Puleo and Piccolino, 2022), however, to understand the extent to which FdI can normalise more extreme practices it is necessary to evaluate continuity with the MSI as well.

To study whether FdI can facilitate the mainstreaming and adoption of extreme right ideas, we evaluate the extent to which it maintains an ideological, organisational and symbolic affinity with the MSI. Approaching mainstreaming as the result of sub-processes of normalisation and moderation, we systematically evaluate evidence of ideological, organisational and symbolic continuity and change between the MSI (1946–1994),

AN (1995–2008) and FdI (2012–2022) to identify both areas where FdI moderated (compared to its predecessor parties) and areas where it has not done so. Evidence of limited moderation and strong continuity, we argue, suggests that extreme practices have the potential to become normalised, with negative implications for the functioning of democracy.

Drawing on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of party programmes produced between 1948 and 2022, we find limited ideological continuity between FdI and both the MSI and AN, suggesting FdI has moderated its stances, and that the MSI's extreme right ideas are unlikely to be normalised through this channel. However, our analysis of continuity in terms of personnel, logos and narratives highlights stronger levels of organisational and symbolic continuity, suggesting that there is at least some potential for normalisation.

Adopting a unique long-term analysis, this paper contributes to a growing literature on FdI, and to debates in comparative politics on the rise of the far right and its implications for democracy. By showing how elements of an extremist past coexist with a more moderate profile in the Italian case, it indicates that FdI can contribute to the normalisation of extremism, albeit in a mainly indirect form via 'calculated ambivalence' (Wodak, 2015) towards its past. Showing how elements of an extremist past still figure in contemporary party narratives, the case of FdI also provides an example of how temporal porousness can further blur the division between an anti-democratic extreme right and an illiberal democratic radical right (Pirro, 2023). Finally, the paper corroborates the findings from research on the multidimensional nature of far right mainstreaming (Akkerman et al., 2016; Bichay, 2023; Brown et al., 2021; de Jonge, 2019; Ekström et al., 2020; Mondon and Winter, 2020) and shows some of the more subtle ways in which the far right can affect contemporary democratic politics. It is to the complex mixing of radical and non-radical appeals that researchers will have to pay attention going forward.

The paper proceeds as follows. We discuss the dual nature of mainstreaming, before introducing our analytical framework and methodology. The empirical section addresses ideological, organisational and symbolic continuity between the MSI, AN, and FdI. The conclusion summarises the findings and presents avenues for future research.

Mainstreaming as a Meta-Process

The progressive incorporation of far-right parties in the political mainstream has prompted a growth in research seeking to define what constitutes 'the mainstream' (Crulli and Albertazzi, 2024; Moffitt, 2022) and how one should conceive of the process that led the far right to enter it. In this article we focus on the latter process, referred to in the literature as 'mainstreaming'. Mainstreaming involves the integration in the political arena of parties and ideas that previously sat outside the mainstream, allowing them to 'cross the "threshold of acceptability" . . . needed to be seen as legitimate and/or normal' (Moffitt, 2022: 390).

Existing research on mainstreaming notes that there are different mechanisms through which this process can occur. For example, in their work on the mainstreaming of radical right actors and discourses within the media, Ekström et al. (2020) and De Jonge (2019) identify three distinct mechanisms that contribute to the mainstreaming of the radical right: the *inclusion* of radical right parties in democratic political institutions; the *moderation* of radical right stances; and the progressive social acceptance and subsequent *normalisation* of radical right discourses. Although developed in the context of the media's response to the radical right, these mechanisms can be applied to the analysis of party

systems and suggest the need to see mainstreaming as a *meta-process* – that is, a broader transformation composed of distinct but converging sub-processes (Rothut et al., 2024). This is how we approach mainstreaming in this paper, focusing our attention on the two sub-processes of 'moderation' and 'normalisation', as they are the most analytically relevant for our study. The first of these mechanisms – inclusion – is straightforward to observe: FdI is, at the time of writing, the main governing party in Italy.

Moderation refers to instances in which far-right parties move closer to the mainstream in their rhetoric, ideology and policy positions, and/or organisational practices. It is 'a process in which radical parties change to become more like mainstream parties' (Akkerman et al., 2016: 7), be it by adopting more centrist positions, focusing on a broader set of issues, or adopting accommodating stances vis-à-vis other parties. Moderation, it should be noted, is far from being a linear process (Brown et al., 2021; Meyer and Wagner, 2013), and there is growing acknowledgement that parties can moderate only for certain periods or circumstances (Capaul and Ewert, 2021), or they can moderate in certain areas but not in others (see, for example, Lorimer, 2024 on how far right parties can use positions on Europe to chart a path between moderation and radicalisation). Overall, moderation requires far-right parties to change their stances or behaviour, and do so in a way that brings them closer to an (at least in principle) more moderate mainstream.

Normalisation operates in the opposite direction and describes situations in which the far right does not change its positions to become more moderate, but non-radical actors incorporate it in the mainstream nonetheless. It is what happens when 'parties/actors, discourses and/or attitudes move from marginal positions on the political spectrum or public sphere to more central ones, shifting what is deemed to be acceptable or legitimate in political, media and public circles and contexts' (Brown et al., 2021: 170). Normalisation has often been analysed when it comes to normalisation in and by the media (De Jonge and Gaufman, 2022; Völker and Saldivia Gonzatti, 2024), with a growing literature studying it as a citizen-level process by which social norms shift and previously sanctioned behaviours become accepted (Valentim, 2024). However, it can also be productively studied in the context of party systems. Social norms are embedded in the broader structure of the polity itself and govern citizens, media and elites. As such, these norms are at the very least reflected in the party system – particularly in what political parties consider acceptable when presenting themselves and interacting with one another. Thus, it is possible to analyse normalisation as a supply-side process, and observe its expression in the party system.

Mainstreaming can be the result of either or both processes of moderation and normalisation, as they are not mutually exclusive and may occur across different dimensions of political activity. A far-right party may moderate its stance on, for example, European integration, while maintaining extreme views on issues such as nativism – and still be accepted by other mainstream actors. Crucially, however, it is worth treating the dynamics of moderation and normalisation as analytically separate. Although existing literature sometimes uses the term 'mainstreaming' to refer exclusively or primarily to what we call moderation and normalisation, it is worth considering these sub-processes separately because they carry different implications. Mainstreaming as the result of moderation would, at least in principle, seem to be less concerning to the extent that it entails far right parties adopting *less* extreme positions, although it may be only a temporary strategy rather than a permanent change. Conversely, mainstreaming as the result of normalisation is more concerning because it does not entail any form of moderation from the far right; instead, it entails the acceptance of radical elements by mainstream parties and/or voters.

In the latter case, some scholars prefer to speak of a 'radicalisation of the mainstream' (Akkerman et al., 2016), but insofar as it involves a redefinition of the boundaries of the mainstream, we contend it is better to treat it as part of the mainstreaming dynamic. Recognising the duality of mainstreaming enables a more comprehensive understanding of how far-right ideas gain legitimacy, not only through ideological compromise, but also through shifting norms of political acceptability.

In the remainder of the paper, we assess these dynamics within a longitudinal framework that traces patterns of change and continuity between FdI, the 'post-fascist' AN, and the overtly neo-fascist MSI. Our aim is to understand in what ways it has moderated, and conversely, which elements of its extremist past remain and could be normalised.

Assessing FdI's Mainstreaming Across Multiple Dimensions

Building on the previous discussion, we develop a framework to study the mainstreaming of FdI. Its main elements are presented in Table 1. Our analysis focuses on the *internal supply-side processes* – that is, changes within FdI, without considering shifts in the electorate or in other parties. The meta-process of mainstreaming is broken down into the two sub-processes of moderation and (potential for) normalisation (see below). We analyse these sub-processes across three dimensions: ideological, symbolic and organisational. These three dimensions are not exhaustive, but they capture distinct and complementary facets of party transformation. For each of these dimensions, we seek to assess whether FdI has changed in a more moderate direction, or whether there is evidence of continuity with the MSI and AN. We consider breaks from an extremist past to be consistent with a 'moderation' process because they are indicative of a party that has changed its political profile. Since not all change is a sign of moderation, a qualitative assessment of the direction of change is provided. Conversely, we view continuity as an essential condition for 'normalisation' to happen: if there are no pre-existing radical positions to normalise, they cannot become 'mainstream'. This approach enables us to trace the persistence, transformation or abandonment of extremist elements in a fine-grained manner, as we can assess whether, where, and in what guise elements of an extremist past are still present.

Although our approach enables us to study whether moderation has occurred, as well as the persistence of extremism over time, it does have two important limitations. First, adopting a longitudinal perspective means that our analysis looks at the process of normalisation primarily through the prism of continuity with past extreme features. This means we cannot exclude the emergence of new forms of extremism in FdI. New issues, such as climate change or the protection of sexual minorities, but also migration, have become more prominent since the MSI's era. On several of these issues, FdI has taken a radical stance (e.g. Montecchio, 2025) which may, however, not be picked up by our analysis because our research design centres on tracing the extremist heritage of FdI rather than its contemporary expression. As such, we do not claim to capture all possible expressions of extremism within the party.

Second, because our empirical focus is primarily on FdI, we are not able to directly assess whether the party has been legitimised by the broader party system. Instead, we focus on measuring its degree of moderation and assessing its *potential* for normalisation – in other words, whether it provides a conducive environment for normalisation to occur. Ascertaining normalisation would require evidence that other actors have adopted, endorsed, or treated FdI's positions as acceptable, an important dynamic that may well be unfolding in the Italian context, but falls outside the limited scope of this study.

Table 1. Mainstreaming Framework.

		Dimensions of mainstreaming		
		Ideological	Organisational	Symbolic
Supply-side sub-processes of mainstreaming	Change/ Moderation	Have extremist ideas been abandoned? Have more moderate positions been taken up?	Has there been a significant renewal in party personnel? Have new members from other non-extremist parties/ political experiences joined?	Are new symbols/ names/ slogans being used?
	Continuity/ Potential for normalisation	Are extremist ideas/values from the party's past still present?	Do current party elites have an association with the predecessor parties?	Have symbolic references to the past remained intact?

Our empirical analysis focuses on assessing continuity as an indicator of potential normalisation and change as an indicator of moderation in three dimensions: an ideological dimension, an organisational dimension, and a symbolic dimension. The ideological dimension touches upon the extent to which a successor party's ideas and policies are congruent with those of its predecessors. Ideological continuity will be most concerning when observed in the context of extremist positions such as opposition to democracy and positive references to Fascism, as well as policies that hark back to Fascism, as they recreate a clear link between the past and the present. Conversely, limited levels of continuity may indicate a form of moderation that would be unlikely to bring extreme ideas into the mainstream.

To assess ideological continuity, we draw on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of 15 national party programmes and manifestos produced by the MSI, AN and FdI between 1948 and 2022.[2] For AN, we only analysed programmes from elections when AN ran individually.[3] This gives us a smaller sample but a more accurate reading of the party's ideology. Political party manifestos are among the most used sources to assess and compare party ideology both geographically and diachronically (Gemenis, 2013). Indeed, as Gemenis (2012: 594) argues, researchers consider manifestos as 'the most objective source of information for parties' policy preferences, proposals, positions and, potentially, parties' ideology'. These documents offer important insights as they are (1) crafted by parties to present their stances to voters, and (2) tend to represent the party, rather than just the leadership, because they are usually approved at party congresses. Manifestos are also one of the most accessible sources for longitudinal analysis, as various repositories exist, including the MARPOR project (Volkens et al., 2015) on which we partially relied. Other manifestos were obtained from the archives of the Fondazione Ugo Spirito and from the archives of the MSI and AN's party newspaper *Secolo d'Italia*. To ensure that any observed changes between the MSI, AN and FdI are not simply reflecting changes in the language of Italian parties as a whole, we complement this analysis with the study of manifestoes of the MSI, AN and FdI's main competitors. We include 31 manifestos from the main left-wing and centre-right parties, the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) and Democrazia Cristiana (DC) (1948–1992), and the Partito Democratico (PD) and Forza Italia (FI) (1992–onwards; descriptive statistics and additional information on manifestos in the online appendix). For much of Italy's

post-war history, these parties structured the political space, representing the main poles around which different political groups coalesced. Including their manifestoes helps us understand the MSI, AN and FdI's proximity to the mainstream language of politics.

To analyse the data, we employ a two-pronged strategy aimed at (1) identifying key topics and understanding how party manifestos evolved content-wise, and (2) drawing a cartography of party manifestos focusing on the language they employed. To achieve the first goal, we rely on Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a statistical tool for analysing and interpreting text data that allow us to identify the main topics discussed in each manifesto.

In addition to LDA analysis, we draw a map of the semantic space in party manifestos via Correspondence Analysis (CA), a dimensions reduction technique that enables the graphical visualisation of word and document positions in a factorial space. Closely positioned words are associated with similar documents, while distant words are not. Analysing this space helps identify patterns like recurring word combinations or common topics across documents.

Our organisational dimension assesses the extent to which the three parties resemble each other in organisational terms. To assess this, we focus primarily on party personnel because although parties are organisations defined by specific formal institutions and legal statutes, they are also formed by people who uphold, steer and translate into politics the party's values and ideas. As such, they are the most likely to contribute to mainstreaming. Here, we expect the presence of high numbers of actors previously affiliated with the MSI to provide evidence of potential normalisation of extremism. We consider these actors to have been formed in a political culture defined by allegiance to fascism and anti-democratic ideals, and consider they would be likely to bring elements of that political culture into their current political action.

Empirically, we study the profiles of FdI representatives, executives and candidates in elections. We identified all FdI candidates in the 2022 Italian elections, existing MEPs, regional councillors, and members of the party's national executive ('*esecutivo nazionale'*), the body charged with controlling decision-making procedures and assisting the leader with representation of the party (Melito and Zulianello, 2025). We do not include local councillors in the analysis given the difficulty in finding reliable information on past party affiliation. Through desk-based research on these actors' CVs, web pages and newspapers, we determined whether they were previously members of the MSI and/or of AN. Where we could not find evidence of previous affiliation, we assumed they were not previously in the MSI or AN. Our calculations are therefore likely to be conservative, especially in the case of regional councillors, for whom background information was harder to find.

The symbolic dimension, finally, touches upon how FdI establishes (or not) a symbolic connection between itself and its predecessors. Political symbols take a variety of forms, but will usually play an integrative role as means of 'bringing things together, both intellectually and emotionally' (Walzer, 1967: 194). Symbols connect individuals and movements, and represent that connection both in space and in time. Symbolic continuity is important to our understanding of mainstreaming because understanding how representations of FdI's past play out in its contemporary shape highlight how willing the party is to explicitly leave its extremist past behind. A clear rejection or critical stance towards the MSI would provide evidence of moderation, as it would suggest an attempt at distancing from an explicitly anti-democratic tradition. Conversely, maintaining an attachment to the

past would be conducive to the normalisation of extremism, as it would indicate the continued significance of an extremist past in the party's contemporary manifestation.

To assess symbolic continuity empirically, we analyse party logos as well as narratives of change and continuity discussed by Giorgia Meloni in her autobiography. Party labels play a key role in representing parties figuratively and facilitating voters' recognition of parties (Kim and Solt, 2017; Snyder and Ting, 2002). Changes to a party's logo may signify a party's willingness to provide a sense of radical change (White, 2017), a dynamic potentially consistent with moderation. Conversely, continuity may suggest an attempt at representing unity over time. Narratives, for their part, reveal how actors think of themselves (Patterson and Monroe, 1998) or how they want to be thought of (Brown and Newth, 2024). They can also function as symbols themselves when used to represent a bigger idea. In this case, we expect narratives of change and continuity to act as symbols of unity (or otherwise) in the party's historical experience. Stressing continuity between past and present helps integrate the party and its supporters over time, indicating potential for normalisation; conversely, highlighting changes contributes to breaking a previous link and reforming a new one, potentially in a more moderate direction. Given the leader-centric nature of FdI, we draw on Meloni's autobiography to gauge this form of symbolic continuity. This widely read book provides important clues concerning how the MSI and AN's experience is situated in the party's history. Although the autobiography could also be looked at as an ideological document discussing the leader's worldview, we are only interested here in seeing how it is used to reflect on, and make sense of, the party's history.

The Past Is Present? Assessing the Paths to Mainstreaming in Brothers of Italy

Ideological Dimension

We start our analysis by relying on LDA and CA to identify and chart the main topics treated in MSI, AN and FdI manifestos. We retain an eight-macro-topic solution as the one with the highest interpretability (see online appendix for additional information). Figure 1 shows the results from the complete LDA model, but focused on MSI, AN and FDI alone. Table 2 shows the averages from the same model for all parties, allowing for comparison with other actors.

The distribution of topics in Figure 1 suggests that there is little continuity between the MSI, AN and FdI. Topic 1 covers the vocabulary of 'politics' and characterises the MSI's early attempts at institutional '*inserimento*' (insertion). Originally opposed to Italy's post-war liberal-democratic settlement, in its early years the MSI oscillated between trying to become a part of the political system and pushing for outright opposition to it. This tension was resolved by the 1970s, when the party adopted a consistent oppositional approach. Topic 6 and our reading of manifestos chart this evolution. They highlight the attempts of the MSI to define its position *vis-à-vis* the anti-fascist Italian Republic, especially through a discussion of the values that should guide public action. An example can be found in the 1963 manifesto, when the party identifies a 'sound domestic policy approach' as one that 'must defend the sentiment of the state' by 'protecting the spiritual and religious values of the Nation, fighting political corruption, protecting the prestige, freedom and dignity of the judicial system, reinforcing and defending the orders and categories introduced to safeguard those traditional values and pass them down . . . to future generations' (Movimento Sociale Italiano, 1963). By contrast, AN and FdI had fewer problems defining their relation to the political system and placed themselves in

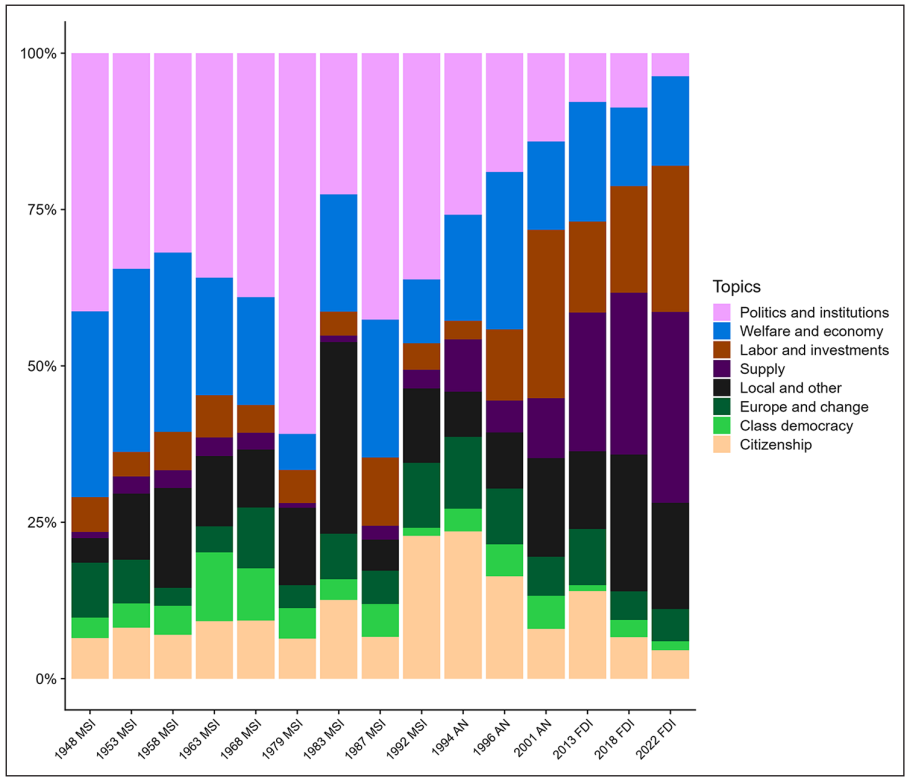

Figure 1. Topic Proportions for MSI/AN/FdI.

a different position compared to the MSI. Where the MSI took the role of permanent opponent to the Italian Republic by consistently advocating for an alternative 'corporatist state' (a hallmark of Mussolini's regime; see Ignazi, 2003), both AN and FdI have consistently placed themselves within it. The low scores for FdI appear however rather surprising considering that one of the themes that made it into the 2022 electoral campaign was the direct election of the President of the Republic, an institutional change that would alter substantively the nature of the Italian parliamentary system. Italy's post-war constitutional settlement privileged a fully parliamentary system to avoid the possibility of a strong leader taking control and falling into a repeat of Mussolini's dictatorship. The MSI opposed this settlement, and the preference for a strong president, along with their commitment to the corporatist state, speaks to their opposition of parliamentary democracy. FdI's commitment to a directly elected president could therefore be looked at as a potential channel for the normalisation of extreme ideas in that it suggests a preference for a strong leader over parliamentary democracy. However, FdI also gave little weight to the issue, with the 2022 manifesto dedicating only one line to this commitment. More significantly, this change would likely take place within the existing liberal-democratic setting, as there is no alternative conceptualisation of the state being proposed. Overall, although there is some continuity between FdI and its predecessors in the preference for a directly elected leader, FdI's opposition to the political system is significantly less preponderant than the MSI's, and consistent with a trajectory of moderation.

Table 2. Summary of Topic Proportions for MSI, AN, FdI, and Main Competitors.

Topic	Average topic proportions						Diff. with pol system		
	MSI	AN	FdI	POL SYST-MSI	POL SYST-AN	POL SYST-FdI	MSI	AN	FdI
Politics and institutions	38.3%	19.6%	6.7%	23.5%	11.1%	6.9%	14.8%	8.7%	–0.2%
Welfare and economy	20.0%	18.7%	15.3%	27.3%	17.8%	13.5%	–7.3%	0.9%	1.8%
Labour and investments	5.7%	13.8%	18.3%	6.9%	14.2%	26.0%	–1.2%	–0.4%	–7.7%
Supply	2.1%	7.7%	26.2%	3.1%	6.0%	18.7%	–1.0%	1.7%	7.5%
Local and other	12.3%	10.6%	17.1%	7.7%	10.6%	16.3%	4.6%	0%	0.8%
Europe and change	6.6%	8.9%	6.2%	12.2%	15.3%	9.2%	–6.4%	–6.4%	–3.0%
Class democracy	5.1%	4.7%	1.7%	7.6%	3.6%	1.7%	–2.5%	1.1%	0%
Citizenship	9.8%	16.0%	8.4%	11.7%	21.3%	7.7%	–1.9%	–5.3%	0.7%
Average absolute difference	-	-	-	-	-	-	4.9%	3.1%	2.7%

The second to fourth topics are economic policy–focused and define FdI more than its predecessors. Topic 4 specifically is strongly associated with FdI, suggesting that FdI has a distinct profile compared to the MSI and, to a lesser extent, AN: FdI pays more attention to supply-side policies than its predecessor, as it identifies '*imprese*' (companies) as an important social actor. At the same time, it also engages more with the economic situation of the country and with labour market reforms in particular. Looking qualitatively at the content of these policies further confirms the existence of significant differences between the MSI on one side and AN and FdI on the other. The MSI, guided by an anti-capitalist and anti-communist agenda, pursued policies reminiscent of the Fascist regime. It had a marked statist slant, pushing for a planned economy and a 'corporatist state'. Conversely, AN accepted a (social) market economy, and FdI appears to go even further than AN in its embrace of supply-side economics. Its 2022 programme called for the extension of the flat tax for small business owners, the progressive elimination of the main corporate income tax (IRAP) and a broad pledge to roll back anti-business regulations. In its social policy, FdI promotes a division between deserving (mostly native) 'makers' and undeserving (often, though not exclusively, non-native) 'takers'. This focus on the deservingness of recipients did not appear explicitly in MSI manifestos, and places FdI closer to the contemporary radical right party family than to MSI's extreme right. While FdI does not contest the welfare state, it problematises its universality, arguing that it unfairly benefits 'takers' over 'makers'. This is particularly evident in FdI's call for the abolition of the '*reddito di cittadinanza*', a tentative form of universal basic income that Meloni strongly opposed during the 2022 electoral campaign. Overall, in line with the 'welfare producerist' agenda of other European far right parties (Abts et al., 2021), FdI advocates for a recalibration of the welfare state from universal and unconditional, to selective and conditional. This is not to say that FdI has completely abandoned the welfare agenda of its predecessor, but here too we can observe the emergence of a different frame. In terms of state intervention, Meloni's party envisages a pro-active role for the state and favours economic interventionism, an uncommon policy stance in radical right parties, with the notable exception of the French *Ressemblement National* (Otjes et al., 2018). In this regard, we can observe a degree of continuity between FdI's approach to the role of the state and the MSI's statism (see also Vampa, 2023: 22). However, these are mainly vague

echoes: the MSI's fascist-inspired corporatism is replaced by a more moderate form of collaboration between the state and small and medium enterprises, and capitalism is by and large accepted as an economic system. In economic terms, then, FdI has significantly moved away from the MSI's heritage, and abandoned policies directly inspired by fascism.

Topic 5 is a 'sister' topic to topic 1. Whereas topic 1 focused on institutions in terms of the MSI's political relationship to them, topic 4 is more policy-focused and centres on the governance of local institutions. It addresses many of the different reforms discussed in Italy's post-war history (e.g. regional policy reform in the 1980s or the federalism debate of the 2000s).

In topic 6, we find most of the references to the European Union and EU policy. The relevance of the topic is rather stable across time, however the substantive positions expressed within the manifestos are rather different between the MSI, AN and FdI. The MSI was broadly supportive of European integration and AN adopted an equally 'compromising' stance on it (Lorimer, 2021, 2024; Vasilopoulou, 2011). Conversely, FdI presents a more 'soft' Eurosceptic profile (Salvati, 2024; Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008). Although FdI's Euroscepticism could be interpreted as a form of radicalisation rather than moderation, it is also worth noting that it could be looked at as a distancing from the neo-fascist tradition of pro-Europeanism that influenced the MSI (Griffin, 1994; Mammone, 2015). Therefore, although opposition to EU integration brings FdI in line with the radical right, it distances it from a more extremist tradition.

Topics 7 and 8, finally, cover the vocabularies of citizenship and class democracy. The former is more present in AN's political language as the party started employing the word '*cittadini*' (citizens) to refer to all Italians. Doing so, it avoided the class-based language of topic 7, where the word '*lavoratori*' (workers) is instead prominent. This change in language is shared with the other Italian political parties, and captures the transition from the First to the Second Republic following the 'Bribesville' scandal.

Overall, as we can see in Table 2, there is a progressive erosion in the thematic differences between the Italian far right and the rest of the political system: during the MSI-era, on average, MSI manifestos differed from the composition of DC-PCI manifestos by around 5% per topic (i.e. the average topic proportion was either higher or lower than the average for DC-PCI by about 5%), a figure declining 3.1% for AN and 2.7% for FdI. In other words, if we look at the themes discussed, FdI manifestos today are much closer to those of the other main Italian political parties than the MSI's ever were. This confirms the idea of a mainstreaming of FdI in the political supply-side, even though it is not enough to discern between normalisation and moderation.

We complement the results from the topic analysis with CA, a dimension reduction technique that enables us to map the manifestos on the factorial space. We retain the first and third dimension, as they explain 33% of the variance and were the most relevant to our article. Figure 2 shows the position of MSI, AN and FdI party manifestos by year while Figure 3 adds the average position for Italy's main political parties. The position of the most relevant tokens, used to interpret the axis, is shown in Figures A1 and A2 in the online appendix, together with a brief discussion of the non-retained second dimension.

What appears evident from the CA is that the MSI, AN and FdI's manifestos occupy a different 'language' space, suggesting that they present different ideological profiles. The first dimension, presented on the y-axis of Figure 2, is the most consequential for the question of mainstreaming and opposes the post-ideological economic lexicon on the negative pole of the axis to the ideologically charged vocabulary of the 1970s. The

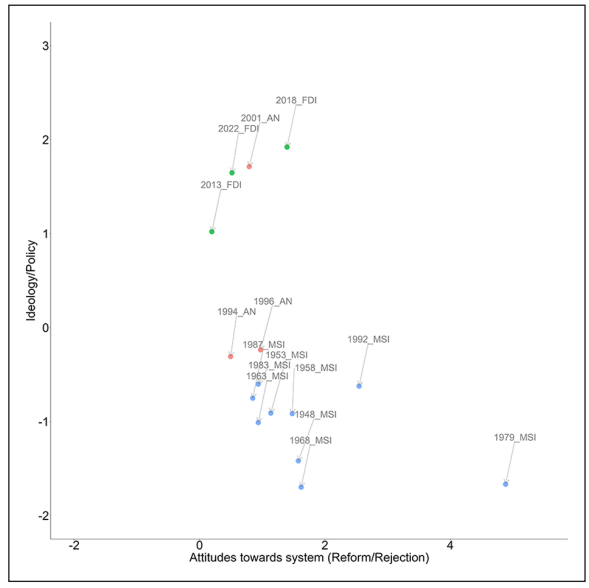

Figure 2. Position of MSI/AN/FdI Manifestos on Dimensions 1 and 3 from Correspondence Analysis.

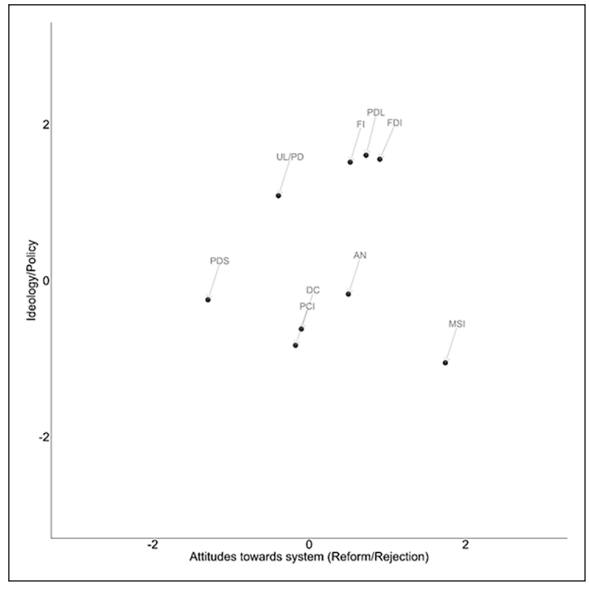

Figure 3. Average Position of Manifestos from the Main Italian Political Parties on Dimensions 1 and 3 from Correspondence Analysis.

division between 'ideological' and 'post-ideological' is a contested one (Freeden, 2005), but here we consider it to reflect a distinction between politics conceived of as a struggle for alternative political and social orders – that is, a struggle over what constitutes the

'good society' (Sainsbury, 1980), and politics conceived of as an overcoming of divisions aimed at solving (policy) problems within a taken-for-granted order (e.g. by articulating a 'third way' beyond division; see Giddens, 1998). Whereas the former is expressed in the language of conflict and the 'ends' of politics, the latter is reflected in a language of consensus and day-to-day political action. As we observed in the topic modelling, there seems to be a progressive and steady shift from the heavily ideological language of MSI maanifestos (in light blue) to the policy-focused one of FdI manifestos (in light green), especially as the harsh language of the 'Years of Lead' dies off. The shift seems to trace a process of moderation, whereby the ideologically charged, conflictual and frequently anti-establishment language that characterises the extreme right leaves place to less extreme and strongly policy-oriented positions, compatible with a radical right or even mainstream right agenda.

The third dimension (x-axis) allows us to mitigate the judgement from the first dimension, as it captures the radicality of a party's manifesto in terms of its outright rejection of the political system. Here we find most commonalities between AN, FdI and the MSI: in their manifesto rhetoric, the idea of a right-wing 'excluded pole' as the sole true opposition to an otherwise undifferentiated political system is still present. What changes is how this is framed – the main 'skeleton', represented by dimension 1. Whereas the MSI distinguished itself in terms of ideological opposition, FdI differentiates itself from 'the system' in policy terms, thereby adapting to the post-ideological environment of the 2010s Italian political landscape.

The analysis of the MSI, AN and FdI's position in the broader political space, as captured by the comparison with their main competitors (Figure 3), confirms that FdI is much more integrated in the political mainstream than its neo-fascist predecessor. Its stronger focus on policy aligns with the behaviour of mainstream parties in Italy, who all shifted from an ideologically charged language to a more policy-oriented one. While in and of itself, this is not evidence of moderation as the content of the policies could still be radical, it indicates that FdI 'speaks' like other political parties and leaves behind its anti-establishment features by using less oppositional language. More importantly, the comparison between the MSI, AN and FdI and its main competitors shows that whereas the MSI found itself in a radically different lexical space compared to the DC and PCI, FdI sits squarely within the lexical space of the Italian right, especially as far as its attitudes towards the system are concerned. Where the MSI found itself in a position of strong anti-system opposition, FdI is in a more central position, and one that is similar to that of mainstream right-wing parties. In this sense, it is much more integrated in the political system than the MSI ever was. While some of that might be due to a progressive radicalisation of the mainstream, it is nonetheless indicative of FdI's better implantation in Italian mainstream politics.

Neither the LDA nor the CA appears to capture a topic one would consider to be the heart of FdI's message: anti-immigration. This absence is partially explained by the fact that our sample is skewed towards the MSI, who had little to say about migration. It is nonetheless worth noting that this is a topic on which FdI breaks with its predecessors. The MSI never made migration a topic of political contestation both because of its limited salience and because some in the party leadership were reluctant to embrace opposition to migration (Ignazi, 1994, 1998). On its part, AN remained relatively moderate in its positions (Ignazi, 2005; ter Wal, 2000). FdI adopts a more starkly nativist position, but also dedicates little space to this issue in its programmes. In the 2022 manifesto, for example, anti-immigration is just one of the 25 points put forward by FdI, and is given a

similar amount of space as less central issues such as youth unemployment or tourism. This is not to say that FdI does not talk about migration policy in party manifestos; however, when using fewer topics, migration does not appear on its own but is rather subsumed in other topics, such as economic policies (topic 3) or the EU (topic 5).

An important aspect of mainstreaming the analysis so far has not enabled us to gauge concerns continuity between the MSI, AN and FdI's relationship with Fascism and democracy. This, however, is a crucial concern when it comes to FdI's potential to normalise extreme ideas. The qualitative analysis of programmes and secondary literature helps us address this point and shows little evidence of continuity between the MSI, AN and FdI. The MSI remained sceptical of democracy and Italy's constitutional order throughout its history. In a country built on the principle of anti-fascism, it continued pledging allegiance to Mussolini's regime (but rarely in party programmes) until its dissolution, and even though it accepted to take part in the electoral democratic game, it maintained links with more violent groups (Ignazi, 1998). The MSI also consistently defended the idea of developing an alternative form of 'corporatist' state to that proposed by liberal democracy (Ignazi, 2003). AN slowly changed its position on these themes, first through the broad acceptance of the liberal-democratic constitutional order, and then through the recognition that Fascism had been an 'absolute evil' (Chiarini and Maraffi, 2001). AN does not mention Fascism in its programmes, and most of its (limited) discussions about it were confined to the public sphere. FdI places itself in continuity with AN in the sense that it does not mention Fascism in programmes (although aspects of its relationship to it remain unresolved and will be discussed later), and it does not propose a radical rethinking of the constitutional order. Therefore, there seems to be very little potential for a normalisation of the ideas of the MSI here, insofar as FdI does not share the MSI's ideological affinity with Fascism or its opposition to parliamentary democracy.

Overall, we observe limited levels of continuity, with AN and FdI displaying a more moderate profile than the MSI. The language registers of the three parties are markedly different. The MSI's language reflects a deeply anti-system party. By contrast, AN and FdI's language is reflective of a more post-ideological policy-focused approach. They spend relatively little space critiquing the measures and politics of others on ideological grounds and use their manifestos to present their own political agenda. This suggests that moderation has indeed taken place, and that it is unlikely that the extreme right ideas of the MSI will become normalised – quite simply, most of them, and the more extreme ones in particular, have disappeared from FdI's agenda.

Organisational Dimension

One concern expressed by those who oppose FdI is that FdI members formed in the MSI and AN might carry with them a political culture defined by allegiance to Fascism and anti-democratic ideals. Our analysis shows there is a moderate to high level of continuity between the MSI and FdI, and significant levels of continuity between FdI and AN. Looking only at the 276 candidates for the 2022 Italian elections, we find that 75 (27%) were previously affiliated with the MSI or with its youth organisations. The number nearly doubles when it comes to AN, with 141 candidates (51%) having had previous experiences in AN or its youth organisations.[4] FdI, however, also managed to attract 75 candidates (27%) who previously belonged to other political parties, mostly of the centre-right and Christian-democrats (55), but also from the Lega, Five Star Movement and civic lists.

A similar picture emerges when looking at the party's MEPs in the 2019-2024 legislature. Three of them were previously members of both the MSI and AN or their youth organisations, while the remaining four came mainly from different parties of the Italian centre-right (Forza Italia, Lega and the Nuovo Centrodestra). Only one MEP had no previous political party affiliation. At the regional level, there seems to be more space for new candidates. Out of 85 FdI regional councillors, we found 14 (16%) were previously affiliated with the MSI and 31 (36%) with AN. However, this figure should be taken with a pinch of salt: the data are patchier, insofar as many candidates do not have strongly identifiable public profiles.

What is most striking, however, is that the party's executive is dominated by long-standing members of the MSI and AN. In 2022, out of 24 members of this small group of people whose role it is to support the leader and coordinate the work of different party departments (Melito and Zulianello, 2025; Vampa, 2023), 19 were previously affiliated with the MSI and 21 with AN. In short, whereas party candidates have somewhat varied profiles, the 'head' of the party is dominated by loyalists.

Overall, there is significant organisational continuity between AN and FdI, and, to a lesser extent, between the MSI and FdI. Given AN's more moderate outlook, this would suggest a lower likelihood of extremist ideas being normalised. However, it is noticeable that continuity dominates in some of the most crucial instances of party life such as the executive and candidates for national elected office.

Symbolic Dimension

A final area where we might be able to observe normalisation of extremism is in the symbols of FdI and in narratives of its own past. The evidence presents a mixed picture. On the one hand, the MSI, AN and FdI would appear to be rather different parties. They have different names, and the only recurring term is 'Italy/Italian', not enough to indicate strong previous affiliation.[5] This would suggest an interest from the party in breaking with its own past and offering a new start – one unlikely to contribute to the mainstreaming of extremist ideas. On the other hand, although the parties' names are different, there is significant continuity in their logos. The MSI's original logo was a tricolour flame in the colours of the Italian flag superposed on a trapeze containing the name of the party. The logo was meant to symbolise Mussolini's enduring message, with the trapeze being said to represent Mussolini's tomb (Cheles, 2010). AN's logo consisted of a half-blue and half-white circle, with the party name in the top half and the MSI's logo in the bottom half. FdI's logo by and large reprises the elements of AN's, however, the trapeze containing the MSI's name has been removed. As such, at least one direct reference to its extremist past has been removed (Figure 4).

Continuity also manifests itself in the logos of FdI's youth organisations. Although each party named its youth branches differently (Youth Front for the MSI, Youth Action for AN and National Youth for FdI), the logos varied only minimally. All three logos display a hand grasping an Italian flag, however, in the case of the MSI and AN, the hand is holding a torch, and the Italian flag is the torch's flame. In the case of FdI it is simply a flag that is being grasped. The logos for the three parties' university branches (University front of National Action for the MSI and University Action for AN and FdI) are all the same: an open book and a university hat. Importantly, these symbols all hark back to Fascism itself. The hand reproduced in the youth wings' logos comes from a painting by Futurist artist Guglielmo Sansoni which originally depicted 'an aggressive hand grasping the fasci before

Figure 4. MSI, AN and FdI Logos (Cheles 2010; Fratelli d'Italia, n.d.).

Figure 5. MSI, AN and FdI Youth Organisations Logos (Cheles, 2010; Gioventù Nazionale n.d.).

Figure 6. MSI, AN and FdI University Association Logo (Cheles, 2010).

a blaze' (Cheles, 2010). Similarly, the symbol of the university organisations was originally based on the insignia of the Fascist University Groups (Gruppi Universitari Fascisti, GUF), although the GUF's symbol also included a musket (Cheles, 2010). As such, there is some element of normalisation of extremist symbols. Although few will be aware of their origins in Fascism, many are likely to recognise these as symbols dating directly back to the MSI's era. This kind of mixed messaging is consistent with a common far-right strategy of 'calculated ambivalence' (Wodak, 2015). This term is usually used to capture far-right discursive strategies around controversial issues, whereby these actors will discuss such issues 'in a way that allows for possible ambiguous interpretations and is open for at least two opposite meanings' (Hatakka et al., 2017: 142). In this case, FdI's logos are open to opposite interpretations: one that stresses novelty and detachment from a (neo-) fascist past, and the other that highlights continuity (Figures 5, 6).

The analysis of Meloni's own narrative of change and continuity similarly provides some evidence of normalisation of extremism, albeit in an indirect form. Although Meloni

does not openly endorse the positions of the MSI, she explicitly draws a connection between her political past and her present, stressing how the battle she conducts in Parliament began 'in the summer of 1992 . . . in the streets of Rome with my first events rallies and flyering' (Meloni, 2022, 'Il battesimo del fuoco') and claiming that FdI is merely 'a new party for an ancient tradition' (Meloni, 2022, 'Tutto è iniziato quando tutto stava per finire'). Drawing a connection between the past and present in these terms suggests little by way of moderation from Meloni. Quite on the contrary, presenting FdI as 'a new party for an ancient tradition' stresses continuity of values between the parties, suggesting the potential for normalisation of extreme ideas. As above, 'calculated ambivalence' creates the space for this normalisation. The ideas of the 'ancient tradition' are, in fact, open to interpretation, meaning they could be taken to indicate both some of the MSI's more moderate stances, or its more extreme ones. The latter are potentially 'normalised' by association with a more seemingly moderate party.

Meloni also contributes to the normalisation of the MSI specifically through a sanitisation of its political image. In fact, she rarely talks about the MSI as an extremist party with roots in Fascism, and explains her choice to join it as the result of her passion for liberty and 'anti-anti-fascism' (Meloni, 2022, 'Non andò tutto bene'). Meloni here dissociates the MSI from its own extremist past and seeks to present it as a standard conservative party. Presenting the MSI as a democratic party provides yet another opportunity to display attachment to an extremist past, without, however, presenting it as such. More importantly for this paper, it also potentially normalises extremism, because it presents an extreme right party as part of a democratic tradition while it was manifestly not. Such blurring and expanding the boundaries of what is considered democratic facilitates the inclusion of extreme ideas dressed up as 'democracy' into the political mainstream, potentially making extremism part of a new normal.

Conclusion

In this paper, we considered whether FdI has the potential to facilitate the normalisation of extreme right ideas by analysing evidence of ideological, organisational and symbolic continuity and change with its predecessors. Table 3 summarises our findings. Concerning its ideology, it appears unlikely that FdI will contribute to the normalisation of past forms of extremism. In this area, it has moved on from the heritage of the MSI and presents a distinct ideological profile that is closer to the radical right than to the extreme right. This is not to say that FdI's success might not help the normalisation of other aspects of far-right ideology, but the overt fascist pride that characterised the MSI seems to have been left behind. However, several former members of the MSI are still members of FdI, and there are strong levels of symbolic continuity between these parties. Through these channels, there is some potential for a normalisation of the MSI's message, mainly via calculated ambivalence and a 'sanitisation' of the MSI's image. Therefore, while the extreme right nature of FdI may have been overstated, particularly in its early media coverage, it is not altogether possible to extricate the party from its historical roots. The deliberate cultivation of symbolic links seems most worrying here, because it suggests that while the party may have given up on extreme right policy commitments, it still considers its extreme right past as a defining element of its identity.

Although our focus on an individual case means that we cannot generalise our findings to a broader set of parties, our study still provides an important insight into the contemporary politics of the far right. By showing how radical and mainstream

Table 3. Summary of Findings.

		Dimensions of mainstreaming		
		Ideological	Organisational	Symbolic
Supply-side sub-processes of mainstreaming	Change/ Moderation	Primarily policy-oriented manifestos Acceptance of democracy	Limited number of former MSI/ AN members amongst regional representatives	New name Some changes to party logo (i.e. dropping reference to MSI & trapeze)
	Continuity/ Potential for Normalisation	No normalisation of extremist (neo-fascist) ideas But: Normalisation of radical right stances	National party dominated by cadres with MSI/ AN experience. National executive dominated by former MSI/AN members	Maintenance of the tricolour flame & limited change in youth organisation logos Narratives of unity between past and present and sanitisation of MSI experience

elements can coexist, our research provides a concrete example of the fact that mainstreaming is not a linear or even unidirectional process, and that attention needs to be paid to both change and continuity. As we have shown, 'mainstreaming' does not involve only the far right moderating; rather, it is often about the far right standing still and others normalising them. Both dynamics are important to consider when analysing the success of the contemporary far right, and our framework can be used to analyse other parties belonging to this family. In addition, our case shows that the boundary between the 'extreme' and 'radical' right can become porous in a variety of ways, including temporally.

This study was an initial assessment of how FdI may contribute to the mainstreaming of extremist ideas. Future research could expand its findings in three directions. A first possibility is to study FdI's policies in government for evidence of effective moderation (for an early assessment, see Griffini, 2023). A second possibility is to consider not just the 'frontstage' of the party but also the 'backstage'. As Andrea Pirro pertinently noted, far right parties rely on 'a – by and large hidden – production structure (the "backstage")' and operate 'within a network of networks that might also pose a threat to the democratic status quo' (Pirro, 2023). Finally, future research could analyse how other political parties and voters respond to FdI, and determine whether a normalisation of extremism has occurred. In this article, we focused solely on the potential for normalisation, but future research on the supply side could study whether and how other parties have incorporated some of FdI's more radical stances in their own platforms or started treating them as 'normal'. Research on the demand side could, instead, study the spread of radical attitudes among previously moderate voters, or the normalisation of such attitudes, understood as 'the perception that the preferences they already had in private have become more acceptable' (Valentim, 2024: 11). As mainstreaming is neither purely bottom-up nor entirely top-down, and involves several actors (Crulli and Albertazzi, 2024), further research is required to assess whether the dual nature of FdI's mainstreaming that we described in this article can be found in the electorate and other parties as well.

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Supplemental Material

Additional Supplementary Information may be found with the online version of this article.

Methodological Appendix

Table A1. List of Manifestos Included in the Analysis with Main Descriptive Statistics.

Figure A1. Optimal Topics Tests.

Table A2. First 20 Terms per Topic and Macro-Topic Aggregation.

Table A3. Correlation Matrix for the 16-Topic Solution.

Figure A2. Proportions of Topics in the Italian Far-Right Manifestos.

Table A4. Summary of Topic Proportions for MSI, AN, FdI, and Its Main Competitors.

Figure A3. Screeplot for Correspondence Analysis on the 46-Manifesto Corpus.

Table A5. Factor Score for the 30 Most Relevant Words for Each of the Three Dimensions from Correspondence Analysis.

Figure A4. Position of MSI/AN/FdI Manifestos on Dimensions 1 and 2 from Correspondence Analysis.

Figure A5. Average Position of Manifestos from the Main Italian Political Parties on Dimensions 1 and 2 from Correspondence Analysis.

Notes

1. The term far right is used to refer to parties of both the extreme and radical right (Vasilopoulou, 2018).
2. Within this time frame, we excluded the (brief) parenthesis of the PdL (2009-2012) given the party was mostly driven by people close to Silvio Berlusconi and Forza Italia.
3. We excluded AN's 2006 manifesto because in that election, the centre-right presented a single coalition manifesto.
4. Note that some of those who were in neither party themselves did have family connections to them. Candidates such as Andrea Tremaglia and Marta Schifone have illustrious former MSI and AN relatives (Mirko Tremaglia and Luciano Schifone). However, this was a rare occurrence.
5. Note that when first founded, FdI bore the denomination 'Fratelli d'Italia-Alleanza Nazionale' (Sondel-Cedarmas, 2022).

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