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Italy - a “Populist Paradise”: The rise of right-wing populism from a theoretical perspective

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Universiteit Leiden

BACHELOR THESIS

POLITICAL SCIENCE: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Bachelor Project:

Italy – a “Populist Paradise”: The rise of right-wing populism from a theoretical perspective

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Abbreviations List:

CBT	Cultural Backlash Theory
CLTT	Crisis and Lack of Trust Theory
EIT	Economic Inequality Theory
FdI	Fratelli D'Italia (Brothers of Italy)
FI	Forza Italia (Forward/ Go Italy!)
Lega/LN	Lega Per Salvini Premier/ precedentemente Lega Nord (League)
RWP(st)	Right-wing populism/populist
RWPP	Right-wing populist parties

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1. Introduction

In a world where democracies are continuously threatened by attacks on liberal institutions, the consequences of right-wing populism (RWP) are felt far and wide. Newspapers like CNN and Carnegie Europe warn of RWP “gaining ground in Europe” and that events such as the recent right-wing populist parties’ (RWPP) “victory in Italy might ripple through the EU” (Balfour, 2022; Zakaria, 2023). Although populism has been a widespread phenomenon, the sustained rise of RWP in Western Europe is a relatively recent development (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015, p. 7). In fact, Western European RWPP’ vote share in national elections has more than doubled, from some 5% in the 1960s to more than 12% in the 2010s (Sabet et al., 2023). Despite populism existing across the ideological spectrum in Western Europe, it has primarily come from the right-wing side (Iakhnis et al., 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Spittler, 2018).

In the past, the populist threat was explicit through military rule, dictatorships and fascist regimes; “today, it is more subtle, involving the gradual erosion of trust in democratic norms and institutions” (Sabet et al., 2023). After Eastern European countries like Hungary and Poland experienced democratic regression due to right-wing populist (RWPst) leaders like Orban and the PiS party in Poland (Žuk & Paczeński, 2022), Western democracies have experienced an unprecedented increase in RWP parties (Orenstein & Bugarič, 2022). RWPP such as AfD, Rassemblement National, and the Sweden Democrats are all rapidly increasing in the polls and elections, which reflects a broader Western European trend (The Connexion, 2022; Politico, 2023). Italy stands out amongst Western Europe with the highest percentage of RWPP votes received in the most recent 2022 election, resulting in the victory of Giorgia Meloni’s post-fascist Fratelli d’Italia (Fd’I) party (Kirby, 2022). Not only is she the first woman to govern Italy, but she is doing so with a RWPP. After years of centre-left leaders, the recent Italian elections signal the move towards the far right of the political spectrum, making RWP more salient (Baraggia, 2023).

While RWP’s rise in current Western democracies has renewed scholars’ efforts to understand its underlying causes, there is still a lack of theoretical explanations applied to the case of Italy (Bobbà & Legnante, 2016, p. 9). This indicates a substantial gap in the literature this thesis seeks to cover. The academic and societal relevance of studying and understanding such a gap is twofold.

Firstly, three generally accepted theories explaining the rise of RWP exist: *Economic Inequality Theory*, *Cultural Backlash Theory*, and *Crisis and Loss of Trust Theory*. However, scholars

tend to treat them separately when applying them to different cases (Margalit, 2019). Yet only a synthesis of the three theories' individual components enables a thorough understanding of why RWP has gained traction in a particular country. Thus, this thesis applies all three theories to the case of Italy to examine which aspects of each theory explain the rise of Italian RWP.

Secondly, Italy is particularly interesting as it is the only Western European country currently governed by an exclusively RWPP coalition (Vercesi, 2021). Thus, Italy may act as an example of what experts are predicting to happen in other Western European countries (The Connexion, 2022; Politico, 2023). This makes the Italian case particularly important to investigate because it seems to have progressed further in terms of the rise of RWPP compared to its Western European counterparts. Hence, insights gained from understanding the reasons for Italy's RWPP's success may reveal possible preventative measures to prevent the same trend in the rest of Western Europe. This thesis' examination of the extent to which the individual components of the three aforementioned populist theories explain the rise of Italian RWP may offer such insights. Ergo, I pose the research question:

To what extent can populist theories explain the rise of Italian right-wing populism (RWP) over the last 30 years?

After conceptualising “populism” and “right-wing populism”, the thesis reviews the populist literature by discussing the factors that explain the rise of RWP. Following this, I identify and analyse three generally accepted populist theories to be later applied to the case of Italy. The research design is outlined before the analysis applies the three aforementioned theories to the Italian context. The main findings are presented in the discussion and conclusion, which is then complemented by the implications of the results, the limits of the investigation, and avenues for future research.

2. Conceptualisation

2.1 Populism

Scholars are yet to reach a consensus regarding the definition of populism due to its multifaceted nature and constant evolution. Mudde's (2004) definition depicts populism as a political narrative that “antagonises the people and the corrupt elite and aims for policies that reflect the will and are understood by the people” (p. 542). The portrayal of the people and the elite as opposing groups is a common tactic used in populist rhetoric. This is especially

noticeable in Italy, which this thesis focuses on (Maccaferri & Newth, 2022). Despite populism not being the core subject of the analysis, it represents the root term of both the “right” and “left” spectrums.

2.2 Right-wing populism

Wodak et al. (2013) define the key feature of RWP as its clear and indirect division of society into an ‘us’ identity based on factors like nationality, region, religion, and ethnicity, contrasting with the various treatments of a ‘them’ group (p. 20). In addition, (Ratković, 2017) describes RWP as an ideology that “supports a system of social hierarchy or social inequality” (p. 693). This belief is most evident in RWPP’s universal condemnation of immigrants as a nation should only be occupied by the native group, as the non-native other could pose a threat to the uniformity of the people (Cervi, 2020). Mudde’s (2004) conceptualisation of RWP supports Ratković, (2017) definition, characterising it as a “thin-centred ideology” that creates a division between those perceived as virtuous and similar and those seen as dangerous elites or outsiders (p. 54). This thesis uses Zulianello’s (2020) extensive classification of European populist parties, encompassing the aforementioned theoretical definitions. According to this classification, classification, the following Italian parties fall under the RWPP classification (p. 331):

Table 1: Zulianello’s List of Right-Wing Populist Parties in Italy:

Party (abbreviation)	Broad populist variety/ specific populist variety
National Alliance (NA)	Right-wing/conservative
Movimento Sociale Fiamma Tricolore (MSFT)	Right-wing/extreme right
Brothers of Italy (FdI)	Right-wing/radical right
Forza Italia (FI)	Right-wing/neoliberal
League (Lega)	Right-wing/ radical right

(Zulianello, 2020, p. 331)

Italian RWPP already gained substantial traction and popularity in the mid-1990, seen with the establishment of Forza Italia by Berlusconi before the 1994 election, which, to the shock of the political establishment, won him the position of prime minister (Diodato & Niglia, 2018). This marked the initial stages of right-wing populism in contemporary Italy. Therefore, this thesis’ time-frame spans from the 1994 election to the most recent one in 2022. This should aid in capturing the reasons for the continuously increasing success of the Italian RWP, which, in 2022, culminated in the country being governed by an exclusively RWPP coalition.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Background Today

Abromeit (2017) outlines that since the 1980s, the advancement of RWPst movements and parties has gained steady popularity in Europe and globally. In the early 2000s, the RWPP (Lega, Fd'I and FI) and leaders who currently hold significant influence globally were not previously considered noteworthy (Merelli, 2019). Today, RWPst parties continue to expand their political influence by frequently entering governmental coalitions (ECPS, 2020). Yet it has seen the largest “sustained growth and success over the last fifteen years” in the established democracies of Western Europe” (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2007, p. 1). This also facilitated the rise of RWPP across Europe, such as the French National Rally, the Italian Lega and the Dutch Party for Freedom (ECSP, 2020). Due to populism and RWP's constant changes, Wodak (2015) emphasises that there is no one-size-fits-all explanation for the continuous rise of RWPP across different countries (p. 14). Nevertheless, scholars have developed different theories to explain such a rise.

Since the 1990s, much of Western Europe's RWPP's rhetoric and subsequent rise has primarily focused on immigration. Studies by Gibson (2002), Fennema (2005), and Mudde (2007) establish anti-immigration sentiments as a powerful predictor of RWPst voting. With time, scholars like Malone (2014) and Wodak (2015) concluded that the West's RWPst movements are “predominantly occupied with questions of immigration and their migrant populations”, affirming the central role of immigration (Wodak, 2015, p. 63). As a result, RWPst attracted many supporters, building on their success (Malone, 2014, p. 23). Malone's report illustrates a correlation between immigration levels and RWPP rise (p. 24). This feeds into Inglehart and Norris' (2019) “cultural backlash theory,” which views RWP as a reaction to quick cultural changes that appear to erode “the fundamental values and customs of Western societies” (p. 30). As such, RWPP have instrumentalised voter's reactions to their advantage by making the anti-immigration sentiment the focal point of their parties. This strategy has attracted supporters who share this sentiment, resulting in a steady increase in the number of voters (Campo, 2021, p. 4). Recent work by Orenstein & Bugarič (2022) identifies immigration as a source of populist backlash in Western Europe also due to economic instability during transition years (*see the economic inequality theory below*).

In contrast, Berman (2021) demonstrates that economic grievance tied to globalisation acts as another significant factor in the rise of RWP. This links the destabilising economic trends of

recent decades with growing RWP support (Berman, 2021, p. 74). After the 2008 financial crisis, many studies observed increased RWP vote shares, with Funke & Trebesch (2017) highlighting financial crises as catalysts for RWP politics. European RWPP like the Italian Lega, Alternative for Germany, Norway's Progress Party, and Finland's Finn's Party gained traction after the crash (Berman, 2021). However, while assuming that personal financial difficulties can likely lead to RWP voting, the existent empirical evidence does not always support this (Berman, 2021). Mijs & Gidron (2019) find weak links between personal economic statuses, such as wealth or employment status, and one's likelihood to vote for RWPP. Nevertheless, economic grievances in general, including job insecurity and wage stagnation, can fuel support for populist leaders who promise to protect the interests of the working class and address perceived unfair trade practices.

4. Theoretical Framework

Scholars have identified three generally accepted theories that can successfully explain the rise of RWP: *Economic Inequality Theory (EIT)*, *Cultural Backlash Theory (CBT)*, and *Crisis and Loss of trust theory (CLTT)*.

4.1 Economic Inequality Theory (EIT)

Firstly, evidence demonstrates a global increase in economic inequality (Stoetzer et al., 2023; Jay et al., 2019). Income disparities have substantially escalated worldwide, reaching levels similar to those observed before World War II (Stoetzer et al., 2023). Such widening of wealth disparity between the poorer and wealthier segments of society signifies a deterioration in economic equality, diminished purchasing ability, escalating debts and inflation, and decreased perceptions of affluence (Fetzer & Gold, 2019). When growing up in prosperous times, individuals are generally more receptive to new ideas and accepting of cultural diversity (Jay et al., 2019). However, the previously described economic insecurity caused by economic inequality instead tends to have the reverse effect (Jay et al., 2019).

This theory primarily posits that the widespread support for RWP movements is driven by the divisions resulting from globalisation and its associated processes. It suggests that individuals who are economically weak are more inclined to gravitate towards leaders with authoritarian tendencies as a response to perceived threats (Inglehart & Norris, 2019, p. 11). Based on electoral trends and social surveys conducted in Western nations, Inglehart and Norris (2019) provide evidence that the ballot support for RWP movements has risen due to economic

inequality factors (p. 10). According to this perspective, RWP emerges as a result of income inequality, discontent among individuals adversely affected by global markets, dissatisfaction with mainstream parties, and diminishing trust in the mainstream parties' ability to address these issues (Stoetzer et al., 2023; Inglehart & Norris, 2019, p. 12). As Mudde (2016) states, RWPP are more successful in elections now than at another time since WWII. Academics like Rodrik (2018), Fetzer and Gold (2019), and Guiso et al. (2020) also argued that the rise of RWP in many Western European countries can be attributed at least partially economic insecurity, globalisation shocks such as trade liberalisation, and government austerity.

Moreover, O'Connor (2017) has postulated that those nations characterised by significant income inequality are expected to experience a notable surge in support for RWPst (p. 30). This is due to economic disparities playing a role in bolstering RWPst leaders through three primary mechanisms (p. 32). First, economic inequality prompts crises that unsettle established political loyalties, paving the way for new political contenders. Second, mounting economic gaps, not effectively addressed by mainstream parties, serve as a tool for emerging RWPP to undermine the legitimacy of established political factions. Ultimately, RWPst movements mobilise around socioeconomic divisions, capitalising on tangible experiences of economic inequality beyond mere data distribution, targeting marginalised economic communities (O'Connor, 2017, pp. 31-39). The economic repercussions of globalisation and neoliberal policies, "advanced by both national governments and the European Union (EU), have generated a cohort of discontented "left-behind" individuals", becoming an easy target for RWPP to gain traction (Sandrin, 2021, p. 228).

Although Mudde (2007) agrees with the explanatory power of the economic inequality argument, he also argues that social factors are complex. Hence, while the EIT significantly contributes to explaining the rise of RWP in Western Europe, it cannot be the only one under consideration. Hence, growing unemployment or financial insecurity only provides one side of the coin (Mudde, 2007). Based on the above claims and the application of EIT, the hypothesis is as follows:

***H1** – The experience of higher economic inequality leads to the rise of RWP in Italy.*

4.2 Cultural Backlash Theory (CBT)

Another fundamental theory that explains the rise of RWP in Western Europe is the Cultural Backlash Theory (CBT). Unlike the previous EIT, it focuses on explanations arguing that “social and cultural trends over the last few decades, such as increasing immigration, the weakening of traditional values, and the mobilisation of women and minority groups, are the primary driving forces behind populism” (Llewellyn, 2022, p. 18; Inglehart & Norris, 2019). Scholars suggest that these trends have disrupted conventional ethnic and gender hierarchies, resulting in a backlash among certain groups (Margalit, 2019). Specifically, some white men have turned to RWPst, who pledge to safeguard their interests (Sides et al., 2018). Political scientists have studied these sociocultural grievances explanations focusing on advanced industrial societies, as seen in Western Europe. This theory posits that the phenomenon of RWP can be comprehended as a social-psychological construct (Inglehart & Norris, 2019, p. 13). Sides et al. (2018), Inglehart & Norris (2019), and Margalit (2019), among others, have made solid cases for the culture thesis.

The term “cultural backlash” pertains to the phenomenon when traditional orthodox groups exhibit a rightist response to the growing prevalence of liberal and progressive ideologies within a given culture (Inglehart & Norris, 2019). This derives from an apparent decline in both social and economic standing, coupled with a prevailing apprehension towards progressive values. For instance, in Western Europe, the argument mainly centres on aversion to Muslim and African immigrants, which has long been the basis of support for far-right parties such as the Lega and the French National Front. Furthermore, the recent rise of social media has increased the salience of latent cultural sentiments and cultural polarisation even more (Rodrik, 2021). The proliferation of progressive ideologies in Western societies, including concerns such as preserving the environment, LGBT rights, racial and gender parity, human rights, and other related issues, has resulted in a reactionary response from several older rationalists who see their ideals to be under attack (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, pp. 13-14). This cultural animosity subsequently contributed to the rise of populist figures who purported to safeguard conventional societal norms.

Additionally, the societal ideals of post-materialism have seen a notable surge since the mid-twentieth century, resulting from a significant cultural transformation (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The increasing prominence of progressive principles in the political sphere has shifted

public opinion, leading to a decline in the significance of conventional materialistic values and stressing cultural and physical security (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 34). Hence, the support for RWP comes from orthodox conservatives that feel threatened by this wave of “modern” and forward-thinking values. Moreover, according to Norris and Inglehart (2019), populist governance can stimulate underlying authoritarian tendencies among conservative individuals (p. 42). This phenomenon subsequently influences voting behaviour, contingent upon election regulations, patterns of voter participation, and party competition (p. 43). The increase in immigration, and the support for it inside a nation, might instigate a counter-reaction against it, which prospective RWP leaders then use to gain backing from conservative segments of the public. As studied by Kehrberg (2015, p. 569), associating immigrants with economic and cultural threats and a desire to preserve traditional social norms increases the probability of endorsing RWPP. Based on these claims and the application of CBT, the hypothesis is as follows:

H2 – The cultural backlash against progressive liberal values leads to the rise of RPP in Italy.

4.3 Crisis and Loss of Trust Theory (CLTT)

This last theory explains the impressive rise of RWP in Western Europe from a crisis narrative and loss of trust in democratic institutions perspective. As denounced twenty years ago by Bentley and Jones (2001), the ascendancy of individualism, while initially justifiable on social advancement and fairness, has resulted in diminishing trust in the once foundational democratic institutions that shaped everyday existence (p. 16). Therefore, in most industrialised societies, the willingness to vote and place “confidence in public institutions has steadily declined” (Ghymers, 2021, p. 66).

The European financial crisis, coupled with mishandled migration challenges and insufficient support from the EU, have all played a role in fostering the rise of RWP, fueling sentiments of xenophobia, nationalism and euro-scepticism (Viparelli & Balla, 2022). This situation not only endangers “liberal democracy, regional integration and multilateralism” (De Souza Guilherme et al., 2021, p. 4) but also generates a sense of fear of the future, which is instrumental in understanding RWP (Berman, 2021, p. 75). When individuals are concerned about being left behind and ignored by the establishment or system around them, they become more susceptible to anti-establishment populists who employ “scapegoating” strategies (Bornschiefer & Kriesi, 2012). Moreover, the constant crisis narrative perpetuated by RWPP and the “us” against the

establishment/system ideas erodes public trust in political institutions (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022, p. 102). Especially within a “post-truth environment” (public opinion is shaped by appeal to emotions and personal beliefs rather than facts – “truth”), RWPP exploit social media platforms Twitter, Instagram and Facebook to propagate their political discourse like never before for direct, albeit unrestricted, communication with the public (Viparelli & Balla, 2022, p. 76). Thus, social media blurs the lines between truth and lies, forming a disinformation system that challenges distinguishing between authentic facts and fake news. This has led to unparalleled triumphs of RWPP in national and European elections, further harming democratic principles and trust in political institutions (Viparelli & Balla, 2022, p. 74). As a result, the people that feel let down by the mainstream parties look for security, scapegoats, and simple solutions, ultimately provided by new attractive RWPP (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022). RWPst groups capitalise on this diminished trust to galvanise economic polarisation and nativist emotions, promulgating anti-EU rhetoric (Viparelli & Balla, 2022, p. 74). Consequently, the remarkable increase in support for RWP become a cyclical process driven by the loss of trust, contributing to the growth of RWPP in Western Europe, especially in the last decade (Algan et al., 2017).

Lastly, according to De Souza Guilherme et al. (2021), RWP appeals to the public by offering a sense of “national belonging” and “warmth” and channelling their sentiments towards various scapegoats. These can range from “denouncing “the” globalisation, “the” EU to criticising the systemic establishment, along with targeting specific groups like “the” Greeks or “the” foreigners (De Souza Guilherme et al., 2021, p. 14). In recent years, especially against refugees (De Souza Guilherme et al., 2021, p. 14). This process of assigning blame to others helps maintain the attractiveness of RWPP narratives. By attributing inconsistencies and a sense of dissatisfaction to historically racialised groups, the shortcomings in the subject and symbolism are concealed (Sandrin, 2021). Ultimately, considering the abovementioned, another driving force of RWP politics in Western Europe is the weakness of democratic institutions, which makes voters less trusting on that politicians, despite their rhetoric, might be corrupted by the rich lobby (Acemoglu et al., 2013). Based on these claims and the application of CLTT, the hypothesis is as follows:

H3 – The constant crisis narrative and loss of trust in institutions leads to the rise of RWP in Italy.

4.4 Gap in Literature

Scholars studying populism across various regions have conducted reliable comparative studies (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Wodak, 2016; Mouffe 2005; and more), yet there is a noticeable lack of theoretical understanding of RWP that encompasses multiple factors together. This is especially noticeable when looking at the case of RWP in Italy, which has not been explored thoroughly yet. While individual theories such as the economic inequality or cultural backlash theory have been applied to Italy (Della Porta, 2022; Pianta, 2020; Campo et al., 2021), they focus exclusively on indicators that fit their theory. For instance, Pianta (2020) lists economic disparity as a reason for the rise of RWPP votes yet does not acknowledge the role of culture. Vice versa, Lapenna (2019) accounts for cultural reasons for the rise of RWP but disregards the economic ones. However, theories can only accurately depict RWP's rise if analysed together, providing a more complete picture of a multi-layered case such as Italy. Notably, recent developments such as the German AfD's record poll performance, Le Pen's strong prospects as future PM in France and, of course, Meloni's victory in Italy with Fratelli d'Italia underscore the substantial impact of RWP (The Connexion, 2022; Politico, 2023). All of this occurred in just one year. This phenomenon's endurance is emphasised by Olsen's (2021) observation that "Europe is proof that right-wing populism is here to stay" (p. 2). Hence, the thesis applies the three main populist theories to Italy to determine which aspects of each theory explain the rise of Italian RWP.

Italy serves as a prime example of the RWP phenomenon as it is the only Western European democracy to be governed by a RWP leader and an exclusively RWP coalition, making it a unique case worth analysing (Vercesi, 2021). Previous literature that investigated Italy's rise of RWP often inadequately addressed it by merely citing a few outdated examples, like the "Cinque Stelle" party (not categorised as RW) and the old "Lega Nord" party (Albertazzi & Zulianello, 2021). Thus, the lack of scholarly assessments on the most recent triumph of the Italian RWPP and Meloni's victory denotes a clear gap in the academic literature (Caiani & Graziano, 2016, p. 2). Although there seems to be a consensus that RWPP are detrimental to European societies, understanding their rise and implications remains a largely unresolved task for the social sciences (Sandrin, 2021).

5. Research Design

5.1 Methodological Approach

To examine the hypotheses, this study applies the three aforementioned dominant theories to explain the rise of Italian RWP, assessing each theory's explanatory powers. The thesis adopts a qualitative single case study design because it holds the external conditions within the tested relationships constant, facilitating the reliability of findings (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 269). According to Gerring (2004), delving deeply into the analysis of a singular unit allows for comprehension of the broader category of similar units (p. 342). Thus, the in-depth analysis of the rise of Italy's RWP should facilitate a better understanding of the same phenomenon in other Western European democracies. Although studying only one case may constrain the transferability of findings, it enables a detailed understanding of the different factors that influence the unprecedented rise of RWP in a specific context. Additionally, identifying the observable relationship revealing the mechanism of a theory leading to the explanation of a particular outcome like RWP increases the internal validity (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 269). Since this thesis attempts to explain the relationship between three RWP theories and the rise of RWP in Italy, the research follows an explanatory approach.

5.2 Case Selection

Although previously mentioned in other parts of the paper, one of the reasons for choosing Italy as this thesis's case study is its unmatched electoral support for RWP compared to other Western European countries (Vercesi, 2023). Although it does share institutional and political features with other Western Europe states, Italy appears as a unique case in terms of the support for and varieties of RWPP populist parties (Vercesi, 2023, p. 112). Pew Research Center (2023) shows the evident steady rise of RWP in Italy. In 2013, around three-in-ten voters cast their ballots for one of the three major RWPP: Fratelli d'Italia, Forza Italia and Lega, then up from around a third did the same in 2018 and lastly, around four-in-ten voters in 2023. Moreover, Vercesi (2021) adds that recent Italian electoral polls in 2022 clearly demonstrate that the two RWPP, the Lega and Fd'I, are the voter's most preferred parties. Additionally, four out of the top five major parties with the largest portion of electoral backing in parliament are populists. This illustrates even more, the endurance and prevalence of RWP populism in Italy (Vercesi, 2021). This depicts Italy's singularity as RWPst case since no other major West European democracy has experienced such high levels of support for RWPP (Vercesi, 2021). Based on the recent 2022 elections, at the moment, Giorgia Meloni is the only RWP Prime Minister in

the entire Western European region (Zakaria, 2023). Hence, due to this singularity and Italy's unique economic and political history, this country is chosen as the prime example to analyse the recent rise of RWP in Western Europe. However, most explanations of RWP populism fail to fully account for Italy's unique situation (Vercesi, 2023, p. 111).

Investigating Italy's RWPst rise in the past decades is beneficial because Italy has never been thoroughly investigated by many international scholars, making it even more interesting and relevant to focus on. Understanding the rise of RWP in this country can reveal the reasons for this phenomenon's persistent occurrence in other Western European states. This is advantageous as it displays what other European countries need to do to prevent such a rise. Preventing such a rise is necessary because populism erodes democratic values and institutions (Fahey et al., 2022; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). In a way, Italy is considered as "ahead" of other Western European countries that are heading in the same direction, making its study even more crucial. Ultimately, understanding what events and factors led to Italy's RWPst remarkable rise aids other parts of Western Europe in addressing it and finding strategies to prevent it before it is too late.

In this thesis, with the rise of RWP in Italy, it is intended the percentage of votes in parliamentary elections for the senate and the chamber of deputies. This is considered for every parliamentary election in Italy from 1994 to 2022. For the analysis and the graph (Figure 1), I use an Italian election database (Alvarez-Rivera, 1997).

6. Empirical Analysis

This empirical analysis applies the three dominant theories (EIC, CBT and CLTT) to examine which aspects of each theory explain the rise of Italian RWP, offering a more nuanced approach.

6.1 Economic Inequality in Italy

Italian scholar Fusaro (2019) argues that the emergence of globalisation has induced swift transformations within Italian national settings (Fusaro, 2019). In fact, in recent decades, Italians' economic situation has been characterised by extensive impoverishment, instability and high unemployment, pushed by lower salaries, larger profits, and financial riches (Pianta, 2020; Pastorelli, 2022). Moreover, these changes include the crisis of welfare systems, the collapse of whole industrial sectors, the proliferation of unemployment, and the income disparities between richer and poorer groups in the Italian population (Fusaro, 2019). The

emergence of these economic challenges has presented a predicament whereby neither the mainstream political parties (Partito Democratico, Movimento Cinque Stelle) nor the administration or opposition are capable of adequately representing and addressing them (Biorcio, 2012). Hence, this factor created a structure of political opportunity conducive to the rise of RWP in Italy (Biorcio, 2012; Pastorelli et al., 2022).

As illustrated in the theoretical framework, one way that scholars (Jay et al., 2019; Stoetzer et al., 2023; Norris and Inglehart, 2019) have looked into the EIT is by looking at the percentage of income distribution in a country’s population measured by the Gini Index. This index of inequality measures statistical dispersion to indicate income, wealth, and consumption inequality in a country or social group (World Bank, 2023). Its measurement ranges from 0 to 100, with 0 indicating perfect equality and 100 ideal disparities. Perfect equality implies a country's whole wealth is divided equally among its citizens, whereas perfect inequality means one person owns it (World Bank, 2023). Therefore, this thesis gathered the Gini Index for Italy in the World Bank Database (2023) to observe the causal mechanism between income inequality distribution and the rise of RWP in Italy. I developed my own table (see Appendix) and graph, as seen in Figure 1, comparing the percentage of the votes for Italian RWPP found in Alvarez-Rivera’s (1997) election database. It provided vote percentages for both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies (identified as rise of RWP - see Research Design), and Italy’s Gini income inequality distribution in percentage. It was executed for every general parliamentary election year in my timeframe (1994-2022). Two values of the Gini index were missing, so I calculated the average between the year before and the year after in order to have a close enough estimate.

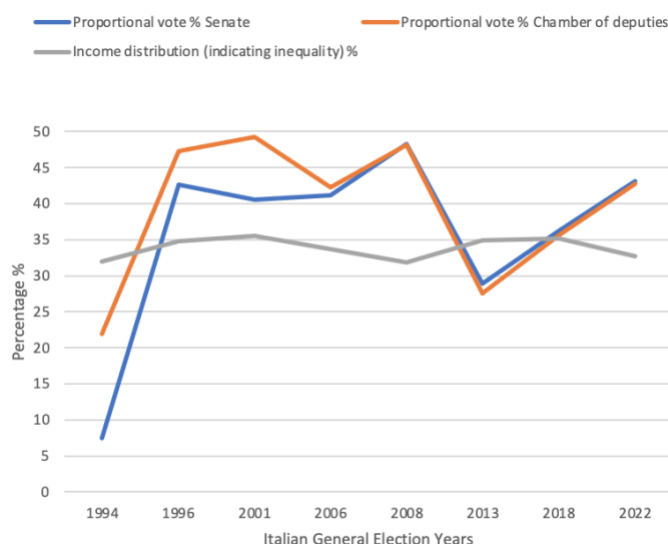


Figure 1

By looking at the graph, income inequality in Italy slightly fluctuated over time, and it had reduced, the Gini index fell from 32% in 1994 to 30 % in 2008, but the crisis worsened these disparities causing the index to increase to 35,2 % in 2018. After 2018 it is clear that there was another decrease in income inequality, making the distribution of income wealth fairer. This shows that parties like the Lega had greater consensus where the incomes of the middle classes were pushed down, and there is lower average wealth distribution (Pianta, 2020). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that it's unlikely that fluctuations in Italian inequality over such a short time span (30 years) would immediately result in a perfect correlation with votes for RWPP Pianta (2020). But by comparing the percentage of the votes for RWPP in both chambers with the income distribution, one can still analyse whether the support for RWPP parties may be driven by inequality or not. Therefore, confirm or not whether the EIT explains the rise of RWP in Italy in the past 30 years. Nevertheless, it is also worth visualising this process to detect subtle changes which may indicate alternative reasons for the rise in RWP votes.

Furthermore, RWP votes seem to fluctuate around inequality, which has roughly stayed the same, so it seems to somewhat support the theory. However, one can speculate why it increased so much between 94 and 96. It was probably due to the aftermath of the Mani Pulite scandal combined with the individualistic politics of Berlusconi. This would suggest that singular events/shocks (third theory) to the political system were more influential in the elections than inequality. Nevertheless, because inequality also remained roughly the same, it could've led to dissatisfaction of Italians towards the political system as it does not seem like their situation was improving. Segatti (2006) quantitative analysis revealed consistent political discontent among groups (1996-2018), with discontent levels always exceeding 50% in Italy, notably peaking in 2001 with Berlusconi's re-election (p. 260). Segatti's (2006) analysis concluded that discontent in Italian society is deeply ingrained and has the potential to perpetuate over successive generations. This feeling of deep discontent and mistrust contributed to the rise of RWP. Because dissatisfaction seemed to have increased over time, it may also be related to the way the media/RWPP manipulate the voters with their crisis narrative (covered in the third theory). It remains a fact that economic inequality represented by income inequality distribution has played a big role in the rise of Italian RWP (Jay et al., 2019; Stoetzer et al., 2023; Inglehart & Norris, 2019, p.14.)

The analysis reveals a positive association between income distribution and voting patterns, indicating that in periods in which there is a higher percentage of income inequality, people tend to exhibit a stronger propensity to vote for Lega. The act of voting in favour of the Democratic Party and its affiliated organisations is often seen in regions characterised by the presence of wealthier individuals (Bloise et al., 2019).

6.2 Italy's Cultural Backlash

When applying it to the case of Italy, the theory explains the process through which conservative Italian groups have a negative reactionary response to an increase in liberal and progressive values in society (Inglehart & Norris, 2019, p. 13). The causal mechanism between sociocultural elements (such as the increasing immigration, the weakening of traditional Italian values, and the fear of multiculturalism) and the rise of RWP exists. These elements have disrupted conventional ethnic hierarchies, resulting in a backlash among conservative groups of society that manifest their frustration by supporting RWPP (Margalit, 2019).

Unlike in the second half of the 1900s, individuals from Southern Italy (portrayed as corrupt and ethnically different from Northern Italian) were no longer seen as the primary threat at the end of the century (Campo et al., 2021). Instead, immigrants, mainly from non-European nations, emerged as the new perceived concern for the stability of the Italian nation (Campo et al., 2021). This issue became further hostile after 9/11, when people (due to fear) and several RWPP, like the Lega in Italy, started associating all immigrants with terrorism and placing anti-immigration measures at the top of the agenda (Torresin, 2017, p. 7). Particularly in response to the onset of the 2015 European Refugee Crisis, which presented significant political and administrative obstacles for governments across Europe. Especially in Italy, one of the leading countries receiving refugees (Angel, 2018; Lapenna, 2019). Since that period, Italy has been characterised by a rapid and substantial yearly influx of immigrants which has bolstered tensions. During the refugee crisis, both Lega and Fd'I manifestos included negative references to diversity and aversion to multiculturalism (Campo, 2021, p. 7).

The challenges of managing the refugees generated significant media coverage and ignited intense political debates (Angel, 2018). According to Italian citizens, the presence of refugees resulted in "employment displacement" and posed a risk to the welfare programmes available to Northern Italians (Torresin, 2017, p. 8). This caused Italian people to develop fear, anti-immigration sentiments and a prevailing discontentment with immigration policies, fueling electoral support for RWPP like Lega and Forza Italy. For example, Lega exploited concerns

about immigration to attract specific Italian supporters (mainly conservatives and traditionalists) who felt unsafe towards the new foreigners (Angel, 2018). As a result, Italian mainstream parties lost control because they could not adequately respond to the crisis (Angel, 2018). That gave even more power to the rising RWPP. Italian RWPP often portray Muslim immigrants as a dual hazard (Torresin, 2017, p. 7). According to them, many of these refugees are suspected of having ties to foreign terrorist organisations, threatening Italy's security. Second, their religious beliefs and their religious symbols in public spaces threaten Italian Christian identities (Torresin, 2017, p. 7). This depicts the formation of a cultural backlash from RWPP and their supporters as they associate unfounded negative attributes to all migrants solely because they are not from Italy. Hence, as the CBT states, these "outsiders" immigrants are seen as a peril to the homogeneity/identity of the Italian nation (Vercesi, 2021, p. 11). This highlights Italy society's inability to keep up with social changes towards liberalism and openness towards migration, leading to disorientation and the desire for strong RWPst leaders (Vercesi, 2023, p. 1).

The rise of parties like Lega, Fd'I and Forza Italia in Italy has been driven by the cultural backlash surrounding immigration. This has given new life to the RWP ideology feeding a climate of racism and hatred along with triggering anti-European and anti-immigration sentiments. Factors that are strongly identified with the theory. In 2018 Italian elections, Lega under Matteo Salvini's leadership, placed nativism and authoritarianism at the centre of their discourse (Albertazzi & Zulianello, 2021). As such, the party fought the campaign focussing on migration and law and order issues. This shift led to an increase of racially motivated attacks from politicians through standard communication channels and social media platforms (Romarri, 2020).

Analysis by Ozzano (2021) revealed that the escalation of Italian RWPP leaders' rhetoric mostly concerning immigration from Muslim-majority populations, frequently used phrases such as "Muslim invasion" or "Islamic virus" (p. 72), constructing a narrative of "invasion". Within this framework, party's spokespeople positioned Christian identity as a protective barrier for national stability and interests (Ozzano, 2021, p. 71). In some instances, these perspectives came into conflict with the official attitudes of the Catholic Church, which leaned towards a more welcoming approach to immigration (Ozzano, 2021). This example shows the persistent rise of RWPst anti-immigration sentiments from the 1990s to recent years,

showcasing a consistent characteristic of RWPP in Italy, aligning it with cultural backlash theory.

In their investigation, Campo et al. (2021) assess the underlying mechanisms behind the increased support for RWPP (anti-immigration parties) by examining the significant consequences of refugee settlement with electoral support at the national level. Indeed, immigration significantly contributed to a discernible rise in electoral support for the RWPP Fd'I. However, this theory also presents a limitation when explaining the rise of RWP in Italy. CBT does not account for the role of historical and geographical factors and the country's unique heritage of strong regional identities. This has been problematic since the beginning of the Italian Second Republic in 1994. In fact, compared to most other European countries, Italian regions still need a better sense of nationhood or unity (Ozzano, 2021, p.71). This theory focuses primarily on cultural tensions arising from societal changes, e.g., immigration, but Italy's history of fascism and intricated regional dynamics could contribute substantially to explaining RWP's surge.

6.3 Crisis and Loss of Trust in Italy

Vercesi (2021) prominent scholar of this theory, emphasises that the rise of RWP in Italy derives from a constant crisis narrative and a loss of trust in institutions in the last decades (p. 8). These factors have been propagated by RWP leaders like Salvini, Meloni, and Berlusconi through the use of social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, creating a direct link with the Italian population (Viparelli & Balla, 2022).

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union on the international scene and the wide-reaching Tangentopoli or Mani Pulite corruption scandal (1992-1994) on the domestic scene, Italy's political environment was characterised by a pervasive feeling of suspicion and scepticism towards elites and representational institutions (Vercesi, 2023). After that, Italy's national identity and every aspect of its history began to be questioned. In these circumstances, the Lega Nord saw its initial triumphs. According to Chiapponi (2014), Lega's leader, Umberto Bossi, strategically capitalised on the prevailing political discontent among numerous Italian citizens, leveraging the weakened ideological politics and the political legitimacy crisis. This anti-corruption judiciary campaign targeted various segments of the political class, revealing a fraudulent or corrupt system that colluded with Italian politics and business, undermining the credibility of the democratic system (Chiapponi, 2014). The corruption crisis played a significant role in accelerating the decline of the party system known as the "Prima

Repubblica”, which had already been experiencing a credibility crisis in the preceding decade (Torresin, 2017, p. 4). Specifically, it created a new urban middle class that no longer identified with the established left-Christian Democratic divide that had previously defined the country's political landscape (Torresin, 2017, p. 4). As a result, the fragile and untrustworthy political landscape gave space to the initial rise of RWP in Italy, bolstering the Lega Nord's prominence and electoral support, achieving a vote share of 8.65% in the 1994 election (Chiapponi, 2014). The political legitimacy crisis caused by the corruption scandal is one of the many examples that confirm the importance of crises as catalysts for the rise of RWPP (Vercesi, 2023). Especially in Italy, political and economic crises have facilitated the potential electoral triumph of established and emerging RWPP due to the Italian people's lack of trust in mainstream parties, resulting in greater support for the RWPP (Campo et al., 2021; Bobba & McDonnell, 2015; Vercesi, 2023). For example, as Vorbeek and Zaslove (2016), the disintegration of traditional parties presented an opportunity for Berlusconi (and his newly formed political party Go Italy in 2013) to appeal to a broader base of voters who had previously supported them (p. 312). On a similar note, Salvini of Lega went further and has utilised social media platforms in his political campaigns to spread the crisis and lack of trust narrative even more in recent years (Cervi, 2020). This tactic helped Lega win its greatest national and European elections in 2018 and 2019.

The prevailing sense of lack of trust and scepticism among Italians towards elites, politics and institutions is rooted in various issues affecting the legitimacy of the country's structure (Vercesi, 2023). This feeling can be traced back to the post-World War II era, where (weak) democratic consolidation was accomplished by centralising political authority among mass parties, namely the Christian Democrats, Socialists, and Communists (Maccaferri, 2022, p. 8). These emerged as the primary sources of democratic legitimacy for the newly established administration. As a result, the Italian populace embraced democracy by demonstrating allegiance to political entities resulting in a fragile institutional framework (Maccaferri, 2022, p. 8). Linking this back to the Mani Pulite scandal, it further eroded trust in democratic values and bodies by exposing a corrupt and self-interested political class, promoting disoriented voters to seek stronger political leadership. This was seen in RWPP, which prioritise the immediate link and interaction between leader and followers. Thus, the increasing personalisation of Italian politics paved the way for the RWP surge (Chiapponi, 2014). As argued by Maccaferri (2022), the anti-corruption discourse oversimplifies politics as a division between the dishonest establishment and the honourable working people. This favoured the

success of outsiders, political actors (RWP) not stained by the past and could connect directly with ordinary people's sentiments (p. 9). Berlusconi's 1994 election victory became the catalyst to make people more receptive to the populist message, leading to an "us" against the "establishment" sentiment that ultimately bolstered support for RWP.

The CLTT is a valuable theoretical explanation for understanding why RWP has gained prominence in Italy from the early periods in the 1990s until now. In the political arena, this is observed through the increase in electoral support at the expense of other mainstream competitors. However, a critique of this theory is that its explanations appear limited when comprehending the sustained and enduring support for RWP populist movements. The aforementioned analysis suggests that institutional weakness and a crisis narrative are unlikely to fade in the Italian context in the near future.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

This thesis investigates the notable rise of RWP in Italy, aiming to elucidate the fundamental factors driving this phenomenon in the last decades. The qualitative analysis confirms that all three hypotheses (*H1*, *H2* and *H3*) for each of the theories are supported by the causal mechanisms. While a simplified representation, higher economic inequality, as indicated by the Gini index, correlates with the rise of RWP in Italy. Similarly, an increased cultural backlash, especially concerning immigration, also led to an increased rise in RWP. Lastly, the constant crisis narrative and loss of trust in institutions within Italians' unstable political environment also foster the ascent of RWP. However, the study reveals that in Italy, RWP's rise is mainly attributed to *CB* and the *CLL* theories. This is because Italian voters prioritise cultural and trust-related matters above strictly economic considerations (offered by *EIT*). Italy's significant cultural backlash around migration issues has driven parts of the population towards RWPP due to fear of the "other". Additionally, the lack of trust in (political) institutions stemming from a constant crisis narrative drew considerable support for RWP candidates like Berlusconi and Salvini in the past and now Meloni.

Hence, the research demonstrates that although all three theoretical explanations play a pivotal role in explaining the enduring expansion of RWP, the *CB* and *CLT* are the ones that reflect the Italian case best. Nevertheless, they can facilitate the identification of patterns and similarities among different Western European cases, driving the advancement of the literature on the subject and increasing generalisability and replicability. Furthermore, the findings also shed light on the adverse consequences of RWP on the nation, such as the gradual deterioration

of democratic principles and the deprivation of basic human rights for immigrant populations. This stresses the need to investigate such relevant threats to Western Europe countries.

Despite its significant contribution, this study also presents some limitations. The analysis mostly employs a qualitative descriptive approach, utilizing statistics and real-life events to explain the rise of RWP in Italy. This benefitted the theories' credibility and validity. However, integrating qualitative reflections with quantitative data could provide even greater findings. Yet, the limited scope and strict timeframe of the study constrained this possibility. Future research could incorporate first-hand public opinion surveys to establish an even deeper and more exhaustive analysis. This could be instructive when designing economic and social policies to better address inequality-related concerns that drive people's support for RWP movements. Another limitation is that the study overlooks abstentions in Italian elections when calculating the voter turnout, potentially missing insights into the stances of these non-voting individuals. Furthermore, while Italy's unique circumstances provide valuable insights into the phenomenon of RWP, the findings are only partially applicable to other Western European countries. Italy is similar in many ways to other Western European countries, as it remains essential to consider the specific local settings when implementing these theories. Increasing the potential for replicating and generalising research results. For example, some Italian contextual factors and individual system shocks (i.e. Mani Pulite) may not be generalisable to the rest of Western Europe.

In conclusion, this thesis establishes a foundational framework for thoroughly explaining the rise of RWP in Italy from three different perspectives, paving the way for further research on this topic. It also contributes to the understanding of RWPP and leaders' emergence in Western Europe, such as Marine Le Pen in France, and to decipher why certain RWP candidates, like Spain's Santiago Abascal Conde and his Vox RWPP, have not achieved comparable electoral success to Italy. Ultimately, this study emphasises the necessity of developing strategies to mitigate the proliferation of RWP to protect other Western European states. Future research could explore whether the possible reinvigoration of the left-right political spectrum would provide voters with concrete, trustworthy alternatives (Mouffe, 2005, p. 67). Like many other European countries like Italy, the population began supporting RWPP when they lost trust in the mainstream parties viewing populist parties as their only source of hope. Policymakers and politicians have the opportunity to use this paper as a guide to comprehend contemporary political dynamics, address social polarisation, safeguard democratic institutions, and develop

effective policy responses to the challenges posed by RWPst movements (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022). By delving into the underlying drivers of RWP, one can work towards building more inclusive, democratic, and resilient societies.

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Appendix:

To calculate the percentage of the vote for the Senate and for the Chamber of Deputies, I summed the single percentages of only the parties classified as RWP (as identified in my conceptualisation section Zulianello's, 2020, p. 331) per election year.

E.g.: (Chamber of Deputies % 2022 = Fd'I (26) + Lega (8.8) + FI (8)= 42,8%).

This data was found in the Alvarez-Rivera (1997) election database which provided each percentage every year in all Italian elections.

On the other hand, the income inequality percentage for Italy is found in the World Bank Database (2023), which gave the Gini index per year from 1994 to 2022.

General Elections (years)	Proportional vote % Senate	Proportional vote % Chamber of deputies	Income distribution (indicating inequality) %
1994	7,5	21,9	32
1996	42,6	47,3	34,8
2001	40,5	49,3	35,5
2006	41,2	42,3	33,7
2008	48,3	48,1	30
2013	28,9	27,6	34,9
2018	36,3	35,7	35,2
2022	43,1	42,8	32,7