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When in Rome, Do as Meloni and Salvini Do: Dissecting the Potentially Extreme Nature of the Political Communication of Italy's New Right-Wing Populist Duo

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When in Rome, Do as Meloni and Salvini Do: Dissecting the Potentially Extreme Nature of the
Political Communication of Italy's New Right-Wing Populist Duo

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Government

Colby College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

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Abstract: *The fundamental question that this research project aims to answer is: what are the defining characteristics of the style and rhetoric of the communication practices of Italian right-wing populist leadership and how do they relate to those of fascism? After the Italian elections of 2022, in which a right-wing populist coalition led by Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini came to power, further research is necessary to understand the potential implications of this electoral result. Political communication has developed in recent years to shift towards direct communication from the leader to their base through social media and speeches published on YouTube. Through an analysis of this direct political communication from Salvini and Meloni, this study will add to the scholarly understanding of Italian right-wing populist leadership by investigating whether there is a slide toward a more extreme form of right-wing populism occurring. In a time where the popularity and electoral success of right-wing populists have surged, it is important to gain a more comprehensive understanding of whether these leaders are spreading extremist ideas that endanger their country's democratic system and the rule of law.*

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Chapter 1: The Foundations of the Study

Introduction

On September 25, 2022, Italian voters elected a coalition of right-wing populist parties to lead the nation, headlined by Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), Lega, and Forza Italia. Fratelli d'Italia's Giorgia Meloni and Lega's Matteo Salvini lead the first coalition dominated by right-wing populists in Italy since World War II. Salvini and Meloni have framed themselves as disruptors in the run-up to the 2022 election. Meloni assumed the position of Prime Minister and became the first woman to be Prime Minister of Italy and the first right-wing conservative leader of Italy since Mussolini. Salvini joined her coalition as one of the junior partners and has cemented his party into a position of power for the foreseeable future. Studying the aspects of how these two leaders communicated their message to arouse support for their movements is critical because Italy is the first of the post-fascist countries to openly welcome leadership that echoes the rhetorical messages of national exceptionalism and identity of the past.¹ The new Italian government is the first in Europe to be led by a prime minister with direct ties to a neo-fascist party supported by a coalition farther to the right than any other since the Second World War. This coalition has the potential to impact not just Italy but the rest of Europe as well, depending on its level of success. Meloni campaigned for a right-wing alliance on the platform of defending God, the nation, and the family, and these sentiments. This has drawn uncomfortable similarities to the fascist slogan "believe, obey, fight," which was popular in Italy during Mussolini's time.²

In the current age of both social and mass media, the manner in which politicians communicate with the public has never been more important. Apps like Twitter, Instagram,

¹ Fratelli d'Italia's predecessor, Alleanza Nazionale was a minority coalition partner a couple of times under Gianfranco Fini in coalitions led by Berlusconi's Forza Italia, first in 1994.

² A medallion from an Axis exhibition celebrating Italian War Art
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/10627>

Facebook, and even TikTok allow political leaders to get immediate, unmediated access to their support bases. Speeches given on the internet, radio, and television also are broadcast through a variety of platforms today, allowing these figures to further increase exposure to their core ideologies. The method of appeal has changed as well; movements can now be more personalized, and people often follow the personal accounts of leaders. The politicians can now make direct appeals to their base and work to persuade them on their points instead of having to work through media channels as they did before. This gives the individual politician more power over political messaging than ever before. More than ever in Europe's parliamentary democracies, the electorate associates political platforms and positions with individual party leaders, not only or primarily the parties (Getimis and Hlepas 2006). This trend is especially prominent in Italian right-wing populist politics.

Figure 1: Partito Democratico Poster



Figure 2: Lega Poster



Figure 3: Fratelli d'Italia Poster



I observed this first-hand as I traveled through Italy this past summer of 2022 in the run-up to the date of the parliamentary elections. I noticed that the political posters of the establishment parties were more focused on the party itself, especially in the case of the Partito Democratico or PD, **Figure 1**, the center-left party in Italy. Lega, **Figure 2**, and Fratelli d'Italia, **Figure 3**, however, were very different; the party logo was smaller, and an image of the leader was superimposed onto it. This raised a question as to why certain parties chose to prioritize photos of their leader while others chose slogans and logos as the primary visual takeaway.

This study aims to expand the understanding of how the personalized leadership of RPPs impacts political communication, especially with regard to whether it resembles the style and content of more extreme forms of right-wing politics. The rhetoric and style of Meloni and Salvini will be the major points of the analysis, in which the analysis seeks to understand whether their leadership portends something new and potentially dangerous to Italian democracy, or if their rhetoric is consistent with that of conventional right-wing populist parties that have emerged across the globe in recent years. Italy is one of the largest nations in the European Union while also being a member of the original founders. This raises the question as to whether there should be any alarm about the new coalition, or if there are signs that they will abide by accepted democratic principles.

Italy is potentially a bellwether for other countries where parties well to the right of the center have recently gained power or may do so in the future, Sweden, Finland, Spain, and France are some examples where the right has either already succeeded or seems primed for a breakout. In short, are there any signs of the return of the illiberalism, authoritarianism, and statism that was once championed by the fascist elites and is currently promoted by far-right extremist parties such as Forza Nuova in Italy, the National Democratic Party of Germany, and the British National Party? There does arise the question, how did a politician with a far-right background has risen to power in a Western European country in the 21st century as Meloni was a member of the youth wing of the neo-fascist MSI in her youth? In brief, Meloni gained a lot of support initially as she kept Fratelli d'Italia out of the supporting votes for the Draghi-led emergency government. She has successfully framed herself as a new option on the Italian political scene that provides new ideas and a more promising future. Also, the left in Italy has collapsed following the disappearance of the PCI (Communist Party of Italy), so

anti-establishment populist rhetoric is concentrated on the right with Meloni and Salvini.

Therefore, for a population that was hit hard by COVID-19, the desire for significant political change drives voters into the arms of this coalition that has emerged.

There are also historical factors that have allowed the rise of a political figure with historical ties to extremist movements. Following the end of the Second World War, there were no public trials held in Italy similar to those in Germany at Nuremberg because of early Allied liberation and a hastily installed, new Italian government.³ Many former members of the Italian Fascist Party were reintegrated into society. As a result, neo-fascist parties headlined by the Italian Social Movement, MSI for short, were founded by former fascists in 1946, and MSI was a significant political party for much of the 20th century. In the early 1990s, the Tangentopoli scandal imploded the Italian political spectrum, eliminating the previously dominant Christian Democratic party. Although MSI was not significantly implicated, the party reformed as the National Alliance, while adding some former Christian Democrats, before merging in an electoral coalition with Berlusconi's Forza Italia under the banner of The People of Freedom from 2009-2013. That party dissolved as a result of political disputes among the leadership, and Forza Italia and Fratelli d'Italia were formed in its wake. Following this dissolution, Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S, experienced its first success in the next national parliamentary election.

The motivating question of this study asks to what degree have Italian right-wing populist movements shifted away from conventional right-wing populism toward the far-right or even neo-fascism. Before defining neo-fascism, it is useful to revisit the meaning of fascism, an often over- or misused term. Fascism is a movement founded on anti-democratic principles that seeks the investiture of power in a single autocrat that has been anointed as the leader of the nation.

³ Rome was liberated by the Allies in June of 1944, and a new government was created that supported the Allied war effort; war crimes trials were not seen as productive at that moment (Manucci 2020).

Fascism is a movement founded on anti-democratic principles that seeks the investiture of power in a single autocrat that has been anointed as the leader of the nation. Once again, the nation is comprised of the ethnonational group that is native to the area. Fascism seeks to build popular support however, it is hostile toward democracy and favors totalitarian control to impose its societal and racial vision on the country.⁴ If this study does not find evidence of a clear embrace of neo-fascist rhetoric and style of communication, is it possible that Meloni and Salvini are softening their rhetoric to become more socially acceptable? For example, are they also looking to soften their images in ways similar to Marine Le Pen and her National Rally party in France? Barisione and Stockemer (2017) discuss how Le Pen moderated the image of the Front National by making the party's discourse less far-right and more populist and reframing the party's stance on immigration. Meloni and Salvini could have followed a similar path in their campaigns that Le Pen did leading up to her breakout performance in the 2017 French Presidential Election.

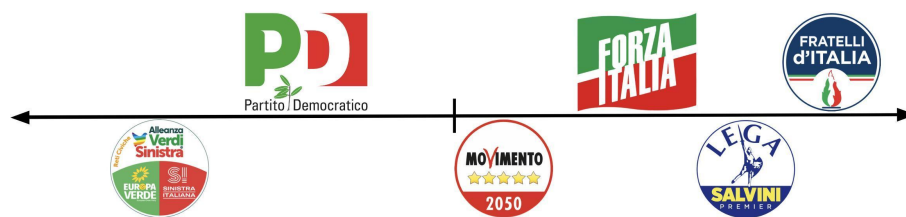
As a way to better understand the significance of this new government to Italian politics, direct political communication of the leaders with the public are analyzed. My specific interest is in the degree to which it can be considered extremist. First, it is necessary to distinguish between conventional right-wing populism, far-right or extreme right-wing populism, and neo-fascism. Right-wing populism has become a broad category that now encapsulates movements that are both more extreme and moderate than what right-wing populism truly is. Right-wing populism is a political ideology that combines traditional conservative beliefs with an active democratic model seeking to stir up popular support for elections. These movements aim to promote direct democracy and a return of power to "the people." The people that are advocated for by these parties are the national group represented by the nation, think of Donald Trump and other

⁴ This racial intolerance is core to the fascist program as can be seen in the Italian Racial Laws, Nazi Nuremberg Laws and Holocaust, and the Francoist White Terror in Spain.

Republicans' arguments to restrict immigration due to economic issues affecting Americans. When one moves into more extreme far-right populism, there are more echoes of elements of fascist communication that arise. This may take the form of emphasizing racial differences, specifically hinting at the superiority of natives or the inferiority of immigrants (Carter 2018). In a sense, far-right populism is right-wing populism, except the traditional conservative values are pushed into more ultra-conservative positions. This can be observed in far-right parties like the German Alternative for Democracy (AFD) and the media that they produce.⁵ Neo-fascism maintains the ultra-conservative positions present in the far-right, but it crosses a line that populism will not, democracy. Neo-fascism and fascism are the same at their core. The difference is that fascism was defeated in war and died out in Spain, and neo-fascism describes the revival of fascism in a modern setting. There is an anti-democratic nature to neo-fascism that is not present in the other movements. In total, neofascism is, as the name suggests, a modernized version of traditional fascism.

This new Italian coalition is unique in that the two previous right-of-center populist parties that led governments, Forza Italia and Movimento 5 Stelle, leaned more towards the center. FdI and Lega are more solidly positioned on the right as shown in **Figure 4**, which is a political spectrum of major Italian parties.

Figure 4. Italian Political Spectrum



⁵ A [video](#) from the AFD that promotes the ideas of replacement theory, the idea that white populations are being replaced by immigrants.

The spectrum shows that Fratelli and Lega are farther to the right than either of the two parties that have been in coalition governments before. FdI can be considered in general to be slightly farther to the right than Lega. Forza marks the position of the center-right in Italian politics, and M5S is drawn towards the center as a result of its syncretic nature. **Table 1** displays a summary of all of the political parties that fall to the right of center on the political spectrum in **Figure 4**.

Table 1. Right of Center Major Italian Political Parties

Party	Movimento 5 Stelle	Forza Italia	Fratelli d'Italia	Lega
Leader	Giuseppe Conte	Silvio Berlusconi	Giorgia Meloni	Matteo Salvini
Political Position	Syncretic, although typically identified as Center-Right	Center-Right	Right-Wing to Far-Right	Right-Wing
Description	A populist party originally formed on five principles including public water issues, sustainable transportation, increased internet connectivity, the environment, and development. It has no single ideological position but has morphed into a Eurosceptic party since its founder Beppe Grillo was pushed to the back by Giuseppe Conte.	The long-standing, conventional national conservative party in Italy. Founded in 1994 by Berlusconi in the wake of the Tangentopoli corruption scandal that destroyed Christian Democracy, the dominant center-right party. It has transformed from a populist to an establishment party representing the center-right.	A party formed by Giorgia Meloni and other former members of Alleanza Nazionale, the successor to the post-fascist Movimento Sociale Italian. The party remained outside the national emergency government during COVID and has taken its position as the farthest right major Italian party.	Lega Nord was formed as a synthesis of Northern regional separatist parties in 1991. Umberto Bossi led as a bombastic, charismatic leader who gradually molded the party into a populist and xenophobic conservative party. Matteo Salvini nationalized the party as Lega and established it as the anti-immigrant option.

M5S is led by Giuseppe Conte, the former Prime Minister of Italy, and they had been in power since 2018, making them an establishment party in the Italian political landscape. Silvio Berlusconi, despite his populist roots, has become an established political figure and the face of the center-right in Italy. M5S and Forza are both right-leaning populist parties, but this paper will not include their leaders in its analysis. This is because the focus of the study is on the right-wing populist parties that have risen in recent years, so the study concentrates on the two hardline right-wing populist parties' leaders, Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini. Furthermore, the dangers of any similarities to fascism will be more meaningful if they arise within the communication of a party that has already solidly established itself as right-wing.

The way the message is stated can often be as powerful as the message itself. These new methods of direct political communication give political leaders like Meloni and Salvini a new level of access to the electorate. Several questions emerge when one considers how politicians could utilize these new methods. Considering potential implications on the style substance of the communication come to mind. There has been significant discussion labeling Meloni and Salvini's victory as a win for the far-right in Europe, and political communication could be the means through which more extreme rhetoric is being promoted.⁶ Several questions emerge as a result. Are Meloni and Salvini espousing messages in a conventional populist style or something more extreme that may entail significant echoes of fascism? How does the rhetoric of Meloni and Salvini relate to general principles of ethnonationalism and more extreme right-wing views than what is conventionally accepted as being right-wing populist?

Although it may be easy to push the two together, they come from different parties and backgrounds. Therefore, one may question how similar are Meloni and Salvini's communication practices to each other, both rhetorically and stylistically, taking into account potentially different

⁶ The [news report](#) from the BBC following Meloni's victory directly calls Meloni a "far-right leader."

appeals as a result of Lega's regionalist past? More generally, what if both Meloni and Salvini push beyond conventional right-wing populism in certain areas? What if they avoid a broad movement toward extremism in favor of a more decisive, calculated approach? What are the possible implications? It could very well be possible that, if Meloni and Salvini exhibit extreme tendencies, that other electorates in Europe and beyond interpret this as a sign that more extreme parties are acceptable and viable options for government. The cultural and social implications of said conclusion would be immense, as extreme right-wing positions have largely been looked down upon by the international community since the defeat of fascism in World War II. All of these questions and potential implications demonstrate the need for a deeper look at this political communication.

Literature Review

Right-wing populism is a political wave that has swept throughout the democratic institutions of the world, not just Italy. As a result, there has been widespread research and scholarship on the movement as a whole. This section aims to provide a baseline understanding of the scholarship on right-wing populism before specifically moving to the communication of right-wing populist leadership. In order to adequately answer the research question and address the uniqueness of the communication of Italian right-wing populist leadership, one must identify the essential characteristics of the style and content of the political communication of right-wing populists, far-right populists, and fascists. This section goes through critical categories that define the communication practices of these political ideologies. The conclusions of this section will be foundational to the analysis of the communication of Meloni and Salvini. The essential categories will frame the way that the substance and style of the media is handled, identified, and labeled.

The Style of Right-Wing Populist and Fascist Political Communication

Because of the developments in the European party systems, some have sought new ways to conceptualize populism in an era dominated by social media and modern politics. Moffitt (2016) pursues a new form of identifying populism as a political style defined by performances made to audiences. Moffitt seeks to “move from a focus on just the ‘content’ of populist party platforms... towards the performative repertoires that populist leaders use to represent ‘the people’” (Moffitt 79). Populists are different in that their performances are bombastic and adopt a transgressive aesthetic that runs contrary to traditional expectations for politicians. Moffitt bases this conclusion on the idea that a traditional spectrum of politics, which has populism on one side

and technocracy on the other, is too simplistic and lacks nuance. Technocracy is the practice of political rule by the most capable, and Moffitt does believe that leaders can cross between the two positions but that they often do not. Populist leaders often do not have the technical expertise of others and therefore must source their legitimacy through other means. By identifying populism as a performance-centered political style, Moffitt creates a definition of populism more focused on practice than concept. It is expected that by using Moffitt's theory in the study, certain concepts can be illuminated that have previously been overlooked in the study of populism.

The other relevant conceptualization of populism in the literature comes from Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. They identify populism as a "thin-centered ideology" (2017, 6). They identify three core concepts as the only restricting ideas of populism, the people, the elites, and the general will. These three core tenets are well established in the literature, but Mudde and Kaltwasser utilize them to demonstrate how populism is incredibly malleable. Because there are only three requirements that have to be met for a populist movement, it can morph according to different social conditions and ideologies. They identify this as an "ideational approach" that looks at populism as a discourse, an ideology, or a worldview. The populist style is very flexible in this way, and RPPs have seized upon this to utilize populism to their advantage. The malleability is important to the style of Meloni and Salvini because it shows how their populism can be different from the populism of other right of center populist leaders in Italy. Furthermore, it allows for changes in strategy dependent upon the content of the messages or the grand strategy of the leader.

Personalization and Self- Glorification

Inherently intertwined with Moffitt (2016)'s definition is the pivotal role of the populist leader. Moffitt expands the role of the leader in the very definition of populism by insisting that the performance is what makes populism distinct. For Moffitt, the leader is the performer of the populist style and, through their performance, inspires feelings of optimism in the people and creates a heightened emotional connection with them. The leader also serves as the lightning rod for media attention, providing a wider platform for the party. The leaders of populist movements are highly skilled because they can tap into the population through their performances similar, in many ways, to an actor. They are the star of the show as well, as the focus of every event and the general movement revolves around them. This pseudo-stardom speaks to the importance of personalization to the appeal and image of right-wing populist movements. While others focused on the descriptive aspect of populist leadership, Moffitt aimed to demonstrate the importance of the leader's behavior.

Getimis and Hlepas (2006) reformulate the personalization of political leadership. The study is rooted in an analysis of the institutional and social aspects that guide political leaders, but it also takes into consideration shifts in the political world. Getimis and Hlepas found that political leaders increasingly personalized their leadership styles in an effort to drum up political support for elections. A shift towards personalization suggests that politicians emphasize their personal qualities in place of the previous focus on political position and ideology. This new leadership style goes hand-in-hand with the rise of social media and alternative channels through which political leaders can directly reach their intended audience. Leaders now have unmediated contact between themselves and their voters, which allows them to convey whatever message they choose without interference.

Campus (2010) builds off the idea of a direct relationship by emphasizing the importance leaders place on developing a “direct and emotional link with the voters” (Campus 222). This relationship strengthens the bond between the viewer and the politician and is only possible because of the new forms of unmitigated media access. The emotional connection that right-wing populists seek to create can be a very strong mobilizing factor for political movements. McNair (2017) expands upon this position in the wake of Brexit, the victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 election, and the rising tide of right-wing populism in Europe. McNair’s argument is that social media and the internet have globalized the public sphere and broken down the natural barriers previously in place. As a result, politicians and interest groups are no longer dependent on the traditional avenues of the conventional media. Instead, they can now reach the public directly through social media.

Barrio (2019) represents current research on the use of social media by right-wing populist leaders to promote the vision and platform of their party. Barrio analyzes the rhetoric of three political leaders in Spain during the campaign for a general election. One of the leaders was Santiago Abascal, leader of the right-wing populist party Vox, and the other two were leaders of the establishment right parties. Abascal tweeted more about immigration than either of the other candidates, but the most significant discrepancy came in his mass tweeting about his own campaign. He sent out schedules, boasted about attendance at rallies, informed people of his media appearances, and generally pursued a policy of using social media to expand his own brand. This is a poignant observation in the field of right-wing populism because it provides evidence as to how movements have become totally centralized around the leader and not the message of their party. Instead, Barrio (2019) concludes that whenever Abascal boosts his own popularity through his self-congratulatory tweets, he also supports his party and its platform.

Self-glorification is a significant development within the personalized style of RPP leaders, and it is also one with a potentially significant link to the past. This form of brand promotion is a topic that is anticipated to be present in the communication of Meloni and Salvini, and it is a focus in the portion of this study's examination of the substance of the leaders' communication.

Rahat and Kenig (2018) identify personalization as a general trend within politics with variance in the level based on country and party. They even identify Italy as one of the core examples of party personalization, meaning that the party leader becomes the focus of politics rather than the party itself. What makes personalization in Italian RPPs different is the degree of self-glorification, but it is also the apparent disregard or embrace of the fascist history of personalization present in Italy. The apparent absence of significant concern about the dangers of personalized leadership in Italian history is influential. Leaders make an effort to be as visible as possible, and messaging is centered around drumming up support for the candidate rather than policy. This is a core understanding of Italian right-wing populism that underpins this study and one that draws significant similarities to fascism.

Gentile (1996) analyzed the self-glorification present in Italian fascist politics during the time of Mussolini, 1922-1943. He focuses on the militarized nature of Italian fascist politics in order to convey the point that the end goal of the demonstrations was to glorify the role of the Fascist party. Every act in public ceremonies was meant to demonstrate the strength of Mussolini and his followers. This was something that they believed to be a virtuous quality.

Self-glorification was used to convince the public of the legitimacy of fascist rule through shows of force and authority. Duggan (2013) analyzes the rise of Mussolini, and he notes that one of the most prominent reasons for Mussolini's success was that his speeches connected emotionally with the crowd and elevated him to a pseudo-religious figure. He appeared to the people as a

divine figure sent to reinvigorate Italy and return the nation to glory. Duggan cites a newspaper article written in 1925 that states that “in a century, historians will talk of how after the war a Messiah arose in Italy, who began by speaking to fifty and ended by evangelising a million” (Duggan 104). The idea of inspiring the population is a core aspect of fascism and is also central to the style of right-wing populism.

A Transgressive Nature

McNair (2017) is concerned about the possibility that the development of direct media in the form of social media is destabilizing and can lead to anti-democratic tendencies through the possible spread of misinformation without a mediating party. The absence of moderation is a key tool for right-wing populists because they are able to speak freely without having to appeal to the traditional conception of acceptable behavior by politicians. They are instead free to embrace the transgressive nature of right-wing populism. The ability to project a message on social media without recognizing counterpoints or providing evidence allows for the populist abstractions discussed earlier to be disseminated. Brubaker (2017) also identifies the transgressive nature of right-wing populist rhetoric, but he moderates fears regarding anti-democratic sentiment. Instead, the nature of the communication is described as favoring majoritarianism and promoting selective anti-institutionalism (Brubaker 365). Instead of promoting anti-democratic messaging, Brubaker argues that populists prefer more direct democracy that increases the direct power of the people. This is a major early diverging point from fascism, as the anti-democratic positions of those movements are not accepted openly in right-wing populism.

Germino (1964) addresses the transgressive nature of fascism by observing the general style of Mussolini and the Italian fascists. Fascism declared itself to be a beginning point for a new era of history, and it rejected the institutions of the past. This includes those of the monarchy

and democracy through a rejection of liberal conventions. Lyttelton (2004) expands upon this point by characterizing Mussolini's rise to power as a result of the incremental undermining of the liberal systems. By gradually wearing away at the democratic institutions in Italy, the fascists were able to seize control of the country. The legitimacy of their seizure of power was sourced by members of the movement to the "general will."

Politics as Spectacle

Joseph LaPalombara (1987) described Italian politics as being performative in nature on all levels through a concept he called "spettacolo." LaPalombara identifies the dramatic nature of all aspects of Italian politics, from the messaging of the elites to discussions amongst the common people. The passion that goes into the everyday discussion of politics combines with the strong presence of self-interest in Italian political culture to form an attitude that is welcoming to right-wing populism. The rhetoric and style of the communication of Meloni and Salvini reflect the passion and self-interest of the Italian voter. In framing themselves as representatives of the common person, the boisterous nature of their expressions is linked to a general tendency amongst Italians to be very passionate in their own discussions of politics. They want to mirror trends amongst the population in order to appear more relatable. The self-interest aspect is modified to create a collective by drawing abstract connections between common trends in the positions of Italian. They stress the commonalities underlying each individual's self-interest and focus on conveying how Italian interests can align for what they determine to be a universal good. This is not unique to right-wing populism though, as far-right politicians and fascists, including Mussolini, also embrace the idea of politics being a spectacle. LaPalombara does not identify "spettacolo" with a specific political position but rather a general characteristic of Italian politics

Simplicity

Bos et al. (2012) is a study that focuses on the effectiveness of political communication strategies for a right-wing populist leader. The messages being communicated are reflective of traditional RPP values such as anti-immigration policy and ethnocentrism. The study was done with respect to two measures, education and political cynicism, in an effort to make a statement about who is more moved by RPP rhetoric, which is important because the audience informs the style and content of the messaging. Bos and others found that the less educated and more politically cynical are statistically more susceptible to RPP messaging based on reactions to speeches by a conventional party leader and a right-wing populist. This concept is central to the messaging and voter targeting practices of RPPs because of the logical equivalence between the less educated and cynical and “the people” whom the highly educated utopian elites have ignored.

Other studies have scrutinized the simplicity of right-wing populist rhetoric. McDonnell and Ondelli (2020) provide evidence that undermines the argument that populist rhetoric is more simplistic across the board than that of the establishment. Their analysis of four populist leaders found differing levels of simplicity in rhetoric, especially when compared to the establishment opponents in each case. Two of the leaders, Nigel Farage of the UK and Marine Le Pen of France, had more complex rhetoric than that of their opponents, while the other two, Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini, were very close to their opponents. McDonnell and Ondelli make the argument that there needs to be a distinction between simple language and the political positions that RPPs take that academics identify as simplistic. Thinking generally, the description by scholars and politicians of populist positions and policies as simplistic and narrow-minded has been common and a narrative that populists themselves have used to emphasize their opposition

to elites. The anti-elitist element has often given right-wing populism a conspiratorial element that will be a factor in the interpretation of the substance of Italian RPP leaders' messaging. Conspiracy theories were also very popular in fascist communication. In making the argument that populists are simplistic and their followers need to be spoken to at a lower level of sophistication, establishment politicians and academics play into the hands of populist leaders. This concept will be advanced by seeing how RPP leaders have incorporated this anti-elitist sentiment into their communication through the cases of Meloni and Salvini.

Fascism also took advantage of the nature of simplistic rhetoric as they targeted an analogous audience to that of the right-wing populists today. Clark (2005) focuses on the personality and methods used by Mussolini to gain and exercise power. One of the areas that is discussed is the rhetoric that Mussolini used. Clark writes that Mussolini "was a compelling speaker and a superb journalist, in both arts using clear, simple language and communicating a clear, simple message" (Clark 3). He also argues that the "Fascist ideal" within communication was "to keep the message simple" (Clark 164). Simplicity was an asset to the fascist movement as it made the messages of Mussolini widely understandable. This helped bring him popular support, which he then mobilized to take control of the government. Perhaps subsequent political movements have learned the virtue of simplicity from fascism, but it does not appear to be an indicator of backsliding into fascism that leaders wish to make their messages more broadly digestible. Simplicity, when mixed with inflammatory content, can be very dangerous.

Gendered Leadership: The Charismatic Strongman

Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) argue that the most successful model of populist leadership varies based on the societal context, with some favoring the traditional charismatic strongman while others prefer a different style, such as an entrepreneur. The charismatic

strongman is the most common leader associated with right-wing populism and is traditionally successful in societies that value action or traditional masculinity. The charismatic strongman model is most certainly popular in Italy amongst male RPP leaders. Charisma serves as a mobilizing factor along with promoting cohesion within the party, but they are hesitant to proscribe too much of populism's continued success to charisma, instead favoring it as only one facet of its allure.

Ruth Ben-Ghat (2021) identifies five tools used by strongmen to strengthen their grip on power: the greater nation, propaganda, virility, corruption, and violence. Of these five, corruption is the only tool that does not aid in the analysis of communication. The concept of a greater nation is foundational to the movement itself and forms the basis for the unification of the people (Ben-Ghat 65). Propaganda is utilized as a means to boost the profile of the strongman, an example of which is how Goebbels' machine elevated Hitler. Interestingly, virility was a method used by Mussolini to establish his masculine authority or machismo. Salvini has been noted for going to the beach and appearing shirtless similar to how Mussolini would, and it would make sense for these actions to share a common goal in the construction of the strongman's image. The final tool is violence, which is a lot clearer in the case of Mussolini and the Blackshirts. They would use violence and intimidation to suppress opponents of Mussolini, and the famous March on Rome was the coup d'état of the Italian Government led by the Blackshirts and Italian Fascists. Salvini's violence is less apparent on initial inspection, but there may be violent elements to his style and rhetoric that arise when one observes him interact with a crowd. The atmosphere that he seeks to generate could be a significant sign of whether he utilizes the concept of violence.

Leadership Cults and Political Religion: The Distinguishing Factor of the Fascist Charismatic Strongman

Griffin (1993) sees charisma as an essential factor in the construction of the “leader cult” used by the head of the fascist movement to assume and maintain control (Griffin 42-43).

Charisma is a force used by fascists to cover the gaps in their own positions in the eyes of Griffin. He argues that a defining characteristic of a sub-movement within Italian fascism was overwhelming charisma that masked the “irrational appeal” of the messaging (Griffin 62).

Gentile (1998) also describes the pivotal role that charisma played in the personal development of Mussolini. His energy matched that of the time in Italy and allowed him to surge to prominence and take power. Charisma was one of Mussolini’s most valuable assets as it created a likable and active image of the Duce for his construction of a personality cult. The charisma combined with the aforementioned militarism of the Italian Fascist movement creates the example of the charismatic strongman in Mussolini. The ways that Salvini has also utilized charisma leads to potential links to be drawn between the styles of the two leaders.

Gentile describes the role of the charismatic leader as the head of a new political religion (Gentile 46). The concept of political religion centers around the idea that politics have replaced religion in modern secular societies because of its extensive cultural impact. Gentile references the “sacralization of politics,” in which there is an “establishment of a system of beliefs, myths, dogmas, and commandments that invest the entirety of individual and collective existence through the imposition of rituals and festivals that permanently transform the collectivity into a liturgical mass for the political cult” (Gentile 47). This is combined with grassroots outreach in order to involve the general population as much as possible in the construction of the religion. Gentile identified these factors in fascism, and they can be seen in the mass demonstration of

fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. The 1934 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg that is documented by Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* demonstrates exactly the mass events and personal involvement that Gentile is emphasizing. It will be important to compare the rallies led by Salvini and Meloni to those held by the fascists. The more that right-wing populism also seems to construct a political religion, the closer fascism, and right-wing populism may become.

Women and Right-Wing Populist Leadership Style

Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) posit that women can be successful populist leaders if they play off the gender stereotypes that run through their society, along with being able to use their gender to demonstrate that they come from outside of the traditionally male establishment. They argue that a leader like Meloni is incentivized to use her gender to frame herself as a disruptor of the current system of politics. Meret (2015) looks at the role of gender in right-wing populist leadership through a case analysis of Pia Kjaersgaard, former leader of the Danish People's Party, a Danish RPP. "Mamma Pia" became her nickname as she played on traditional maternalistic ideas in order to bolster her popularity (Meret 94-95). She portrayed herself based on traditional conceptions of motherhood in direct opposition to the modern Scandinavian model based on liberal feminism and gender equality (Meret 96). In Meloni's case, her projecting traditional maternal values would represent a retrenchment of conservative values. Because of Italy's more traditional social sphere, there has not been the same development of the roles of women as in Scandinavia. Therefore, maternalism would suggest something more extreme in Meloni's case. Meloni's use of her gender and the way she expresses charisma will be core to understanding the extent of the influence of fascism. If Meloni is more boisterous and charismatic, she could be reflecting a different tradition of motherhood or broader Italian culture.

The way that relates to her neo-fascist past will be critical to understanding the broader influence of fascism in Italian right-wing populism.

The Content of Right-Wing Populist and Fascist Political Communication

Scholars differ in their definitions of populism. Laclau (2005) argues that populism results from a perception of social division in which there is a “people” who have been neglected by the institutions. Populists, therefore, claim to represent this aggrieved segment of society against the “other.” Scholars have identified the concept of “the other” as one of the core elements of populist thought. Populism manifests itself as an ideology that speaks for an ambiguous mass that supposedly encompasses the entire community.

Other scholars have expanded on that framework by focusing on the strategies used by populists to legitimize their messages. Muller (2016) draws attention to how populists identify themselves and legitimize their positions. He characterizes populists as relying on a “silent majority” justification, according to which they represent this forgotten sector of the population. Populists monopolize the discussion as the only legitimate voice for this abstract group and condemn institutional parties as having betrayed the people. Muller argues that populists will always brand other parties as illegitimate while trying to justify their positions. This anti-democratic tendency reflects the right-wing populist belief in their interpretation of the will of the people. Furthermore, Muller explicitly highlights that it is impossible to refute populists on empirical grounds because they can always refer to the abstract concept of “the people,” which is a social construct. Benedict Anderson (2006) describes his theory of imagined communities, in which all nations are constructed by society rather than naturally occurring. This allows for nationalism to be used and molded, as there is no concrete basis for the nation. Instead, the

nation consists of the collective identities of its population melted into a set of common characteristics. The leader, therefore, occupies almost a metaphysical role as the head of this community. Their authority is derived from society, and it follows that they would then work to convince those who provide them with power of their merit. Anderson's concept is important because it could help to describe the foundational myth behind the style of these RPPs and their leaders. Promises of national reinvigoration are foundational to the content of the rhetoric of Meloni and Salvini, and they may echo promises made in the past.

Far-right/Extreme Right Rhetoric

Elisabeth Carter (2018) identifies characteristics that define extreme right-wing political content in the current world. The extreme right is the area that this paper seeks to know if Meloni and Salvini's political communication has crossed into. This is done through a survey of the scholarly definitions of extreme right-wing movements. She identifies authoritarianism, anti-democracy, and aggressive nationalism as the three core characteristics of extreme right-wing politics. She identifies authoritarianism as one of the elements through strong sentiments for tradition, discipline, and law and order. Anti-democratic sentiments are also critical as they manifest themselves as either illiberal or anti-pluralistic positions. The final unifying factor is that there must be a nationalist tone that goes beyond the simple promotion of the nation. It is important to note that neo-fascism ignores all of the little nuances present in the rhetoric of the extreme right as it openly espoused fascist values. In all cases, it must also carry an illiberal nature of individual sacrifice to the collective. These points will be important for the identification of how far Meloni and Salvini have truly pushed their parties beyond conventional right-wing populism. The conventional media and popular discourse have already seemed to label these two leaders as representatives of the new far-right extremists in Europe, as

demonstrated by the *New York Times*' piece on Meloni's victory that labels her as a fascist-linked political figure (Horowitz). This study will determine the lengths to which that suggestion is accurate through the analysis of the rhetoric and style that Meloni and Salvini employ.

The Development of the Us vs. Them Argument: A Foundational Aspect of Right-Wing Populism

The distinction between left-wing and right-wing populism is easy to spot in terms of policy positions and the nature of rhetoric. There remains to be analysis of the differences in political strategy and issues areas that create a stylistic divide within populism. March (2017) provides a modern understanding of the fundamental distinctions between left-wing and right-wing populism. The primary major finding is that left-wing populist movements are more socio-economically focused along with a more inclusive attitude when compared to the right. The other major conclusion from this study with significance to this project is that the "host ideology" is more important than populism when comparing the right and left. That is to say that one should look at the content of the messaging rather than the style to determine a populist's position on the political spectrum. March argues that the policies and rhetoric associated with left-wing movements are inherently more welcoming and socio-economically focused than those on the right. This is not different from the conventional opinion, as right-wing populism is widely regarded as having a nativist and exclusionary tone that is alien to politics on the other side of the spectrum, consider the media perception of the Trump campaign. Therefore, the strategic differences between left-wing and right-wing populism are not as strong as one may have expected. Instead, right-wing populism can be characterized as ethnonationalism, with populism selected as its mode of delivery.

Rama (2019) expands on this point by focusing on specific issue areas. It finds that left-wing and right-wing populists share similar general opinions on the European Union and

immigration. The two major differences exist in the degree of their anti-elitist rhetoric and material deprivation. Right-wing populists tend to base their anti-elitist arguments on the traditional “us vs. them” style argument. On the other hand, material considerations hold more weight for the rhetoric of left-wing populists who seize on it as evidence for their ambitious socioeconomic policies compared to the relatively incremental shifts generally proposed by right-wing populism.

Mudde and Kaltwasser’s (2017) discussion of populist leaders is framed by the statement that “while a certain type of leadership is prevalent, populist leaders come in many different shapes and sizes. They all do have one thing in common: a carefully crafted image of the vox populi” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 20). “Vox Populi” represents the concept that all populist leaders present themselves not only as one with the people, but also as the voice for the people. The leader therefore embodies the national identity for right-wing populism, especially in cases where anti-immigrant rhetoric is central. Brubaker (2017) further identifies the general will as being a critical source of legitimacy for right-wing populist leaders. Their appeal to what they describe as a mass known as the “people” forms the core of the populist platform. Returning power to the people is one of the common points made by populists as they seek to reinvigorate the population and increase their popularity. In appealing to these abstract concepts, the populist leader formulates a style in which they become the mouthpiece of the people. The advocacy for the general will, combined with the leader's role as the voice, leads populism down a path of majoritarianism and pro-direct-democratic rhetoric.

The end that Brubaker identifies is different from that of fascism, but the strategy as a whole up to the final point is similar. Hannah Arendt was one of the most influential theorists of the characteristics of fascism. Arendt’s (1968) analysis of the strategies of totalitarian rulers,

including fascists, centers around them gaining power through favor with the masses. One of her key concepts is that the fascist ruler sought to establish legitimacy with a politically disconnected mass known today as the “silent majority” through the creation of a general will that this mass of people all held in common. They would position themselves as the person who understands the plight of the disenfranchised and who represents the true interests of the nation. Arendt describes the individual within the masses as “atomized,” emphasizing the decentralized nature of the fascist base (Arendt 338). This analysis bears a striking resemblance to the right-wing populist rhetoric that is present in Italy today. There are similar concerns regarding the atomized nature of European societies, particularly in the cases of disenfranchised national communities. The right-wing populist leader plays off of these same sentiments, and they appeal to the collective in a similar manner. A similar concept of the general will that Arendt identifies as being central to fascism may be reflected in the “vox populi” arguments made by right-wing populists. Arendt (1968) also references a classless “we” based on national identity in her analysis of fascism. This same subject is central to RPP rhetoric, and its association with the “vox populi” style forms the basis for a very similar us vs. them attitude to the one that is found in the communication of populist leaders. That being said, fascism is substantively different in the way it divides society within the selected true national group. Eco (1995) argues that fascism is elitist as one of its core beliefs, called “popular elitism”, is that “Every citizen belongs to the best people of the world, the members of the party are the best among the citizens” (Eco 7). There is an inherent elitism that then emerges within the party leadership, as when one moves up the ranks each individual believes themselves to be superior to those below them until you reach the ultimate elite, the dictator. Fascism largely tears down the existing hierarchy, but it replaces it with a different system that is based on party loyalty. The same idea of popular elitism is present in modern

right-wing populist movements that elevate the nation, but the presence of rigid elitism is less clear. Because of the endurance of democracy, right-wing populists generally seem to continue to perform more as amplifiers for the people.

Brubaker (2017) identifies vertical, class-based, and horizontal, racial or cultural, differences that form the boundaries within populist communication (Brubaker 363). These dimensions can be combined in certain scenarios, such as poor North African Muslim immigrants in Italy, or they can be one-dimensional, as in the case of a rich vs. poor argument. Right-wing populists do utilize economic divisions, but they are generally much more aggressive when discussing ethnic and cultural differences. The economic division strongly manifests itself in an anti-elitist tone in their communication. Brubaker specifically cites supranational concerns regarding the degradation of national identity at the hands of European elites as being a major talking point. Manucci also concludes that right-wing populism often has a conspiratorial element that further links to fascism. He argues that, within the anti-establishment rhetoric that is popular amongst leaders like Salvini and Meloni, is a conception of the elite as a conspiratorial force working against common Italians.

The common religious heritage of Italians serves as an instrument that can be used to identify a mass within Italian society as the true majority and any other religion, although most commonly Islam, is a defining characteristic of “the other” who does not belong in the society. This sense of tradition and the creation of outsiders is a subtle yet noticeable similarity to the ethnonationalism supported by the fascists. This is the critical aspect of religion in Italian right-wing populism. It is used to define an out-group within Italian society that does not belong. This represents one of the closest similarities present to fascism. It is important to note that both Italian RPP leaders are divorced, and Meloni had her child out of wedlock. This reflects the idea

that right-wing populism's obsession with traditional culture and religion is not descriptive of the leaders but their legitimacy instead. It also advances the insider vs. outsider concept that has been promoted by Salvini and Meloni. The idea that there are cultural differences that make these minority groups not Italian and a burden on the country has gained traction in the wake of the migrant crisis.

Threat Arguments: The Backbone of the Exclusionary Nature of Political Communication

There is a sector of the field that has focused on how right-wing populism adapts to differing economic conditions. Jetten et al. (2017) specifically look at how economic conditions affect the way that RPPs express anti-immigrant views. The scholars identify two types of anti-immigrant rhetoric, realistic and symbolic threat arguments. Realistic threat arguments focus on the quantifiable impacts of immigration, such as the impact on the job market and the cost of welfare programs. Symbolic threat arguments are akin to the identitarian policies of replacement and cultural disruption that take the headlines. The research finds that during times of economic downturn, the arguments against immigration that are most successful reflect realistic threats. When the economy is succeeding, people are less likely to respond to realistic threats but no more likely to turn toward symbolic threats. Instead, Jetten and others identified an "entitlement threat" that centered around the belief that those who are in the country deserve the fruits of economic success and should not have to allow outsiders to enter into the equation and drain resources. The concept of entitlement is prevalent in RPP rhetoric as those who were born in a country are identified as the rightful beneficiaries of the economic system as opposed to outsiders who are seen as parasites. As such, it is a very important aspect of the substance of Italian RPP leaders' communication, as it also contains allusions to fascist rhetoric on the outsiders draining resources meant for the true citizens of the nation.

Fascism characterizes itself as defending the nation from corrupting influences, be they from outside sources or from within. Gentile (1996)'s description of fascist demonstrations as possessing a "highly militarist character" demonstrates Mussolini's strategy of depicting fascists as a force in defense of the nation (Gentile 76). In addition to the previously mentioned self-glorifying aspect of the militarist display, Mussolini created a perceived dependence on the protection of the fascists. This strategy is similar to that of the populists. Leaders like Salvini and Meloni identify threats to Italian culture and identity and then put themselves forward as the protectors of the people. As a result, they are able to build stronger connections with voters who see them as working more for their personal interests.

History and Memory in Rhetoric: Nostalgia for a Time Gone By

Bernhard and Kubik (2014) identify a type of political actor they call the mnemonic warrior. The mnemonic warrior is a politician who identifies themselves as a protagonist within a constructed, mythological discourse with the past (Bernhard and Kubik 12-13). This is one of four types of mnemonic actors they identify that differ in the way that they deal with history. Right-wing populists are politicians that the two identify as being some of the most prevalent examples of this specific type of mnemonic actor. Bernhard and Kubik also identify the importance of structural constraints in the form of legal barriers banning certain parties or ideologies from being advocated that restrict the ability of mnemonic warriors to emerge. They discuss the concept of negotiated extrication, in which former regime members were not excluded from the government after the reform (Bernhard and Kubik 20). Cultural constraints also exist as the memory or legacy of the oppression of past extremist movements can lead to the population being adverse toward supporting a movement that seems too similar. The mnemonic is the kind of mnemonic actor that is important to this study because the crusading nature of a

mnemonic warrior fits with the way that fascists interact with history. This goes beyond the nostalgia that right-wing populists have for the past in the desire to force a return to those times.

The cases that Bernhard and Kubik examine in their study are post-communist Eastern European countries. However, this concept of institutional constraints can be applied to other cases, including Italy. The idea that the presence, or lack, of barriers within the legal system or supervisory structures of institutions affects how mnemonic warrior politicians perform in post-fascist contexts. Italy possesses some institutional roadblocks to the reforming of fascism, including the 12th provision of the Italian Constitution that bans the reforming of the party and the 1952 Scelba law that enforces it.⁷ Those laws are limited by the need for the prosecution to prove that the accused is trying to specifically resurrect the Fascist Party, not just promote ideals. Subsequent laws, such as the 1993 Mancino Law, have banned the use of racial supremacist rhetoric.⁸ More recently, a law was introduced by a member of the center-left Partito Democratico (PD) that would have outlawed all fascist symbols and items, but it was blocked by parties, including Fratelli d'Italia.⁹ The lack of institutional constraints in Italy means that there are low barriers to the development of mnemonic warriors described by Bernhard and Kubik. This study will observe the lengths to which Meloni and Salvini have ventured into that realm.

Right-wing populist leaders have complicated relationships with history and memory, especially in areas that would cast a negative light on their nationalist movements. Bull (2016) makes the argument that right-wing populist parties have a manufactured conception of history that fits their current political aims. She builds on the idea of populists as mnemonic warriors and posits that they believe they have the correct conception of history and that all others are

⁷ A *New York Times* [report](#) from the time that identifies the purpose of the law.

⁸ The [summary](#) of the Mancino Law courtesy of the OSCE.

⁹ A [summary](#) of the failed legislation along with the history of anti-fascist legislation by journalist Giampietro Vianello.

subversive and incorrect. Their conception is constructed, and it often will blur lines between times so as to connect the current movement to historical phenomena. The spirit of the past influences RPP leaders, but the spirit also only contains glorious elements of national history, such as famous kings, military victories, and empires. The current movement then seeks to establish itself as almost a second coming of these sources of national pride. An example of this is the gift given by right-wing populist Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orban to the Pope during a state visit. Orban gave Francis a copy of a medieval letter from the King of Hungary to Pope Innocent IV in the 13th century that requested aid in resisting the invasion by the Mongols. History was utilized in this case to promote an anti-immigration political stance, and there are plenty of other examples of populists using different historical markers for their own benefit.

Fascists used history to legitimize their rule and also to demonstrate the importance of the fascist transition. Mussolini (1932), called “The Doctrine of Fascism”, described the moment of fascism coming to power as a beginning of a new history. He then explains the fascist belief that history is now important as the source of national identity. The role of the individual becomes intertwined with the advancement of the prospects of the state. Kopff (2000) demonstrates Mussolini’s affinity with the historical past of the Roman empire. Historical accomplishments of Romans were used to bolster the popularity of the fascist state through events such as Virgil’s Bimillennium (Kopff 112). Mussolini saw the virtues of Ancient Rome as being inherent to Italian identity and saw the triumphs of the Roman empire as a spiritual basis for his rule. Clark (205) describes Mussolini’s creation of a “New Roman Empire” through the Italian colonial system (Clark 136). The concept of Terza Roma, which included the expansion of the capital to the coast, builds off the historical conception of Romans as builders alongside being conquerors. Roman imperial history was a source for Mussolini for national pride and inspiration. Right-wing

populists may display similar affinities for periods of history, and what period the Italians choose, if they do, will be important to this study.

Caramani and Manucci (2019) examined ways countries understand their difficult past, such as fascist regimes, and how the way they deal with that past impacts the success of right-wing populism in the present. One way of dealing with internal fascist legacies is culpabilisation, in which a country accepts the responsibility of its own fascist regime and seeks to make amends. In that case, the collective memory is formed around a sense of duty toward preventing any future rise of a similar regime. Other elites emphasize victimization, which deflects blame to external factors and eschews introspection and critical examination. While culpabilisation limits the space for RPPs to arise and thrive, victimization provides fertile ground for right-wing populist movements. Victimization has been a defining characteristic of the Italian understanding of its fascist past. This helps to explain the rise of Italian parties, as much of the blame for fascism during World War II has been shifted north to Germany. Manucci (2020) identifies a general cause for varying degrees of acceptance of right-wing populism in post-fascist countries, namely the level of stigmatization. In countries like Italy, where the fascist government of Mussolini is not stigmatized, RPPs experience greater levels of success. With the impending onset of the Cold War, it was understood that the United States needed to support and rebuild Western European nations, and, therefore, “no country was able to start a process of re-elaboration of a ‘past’ that just ended” (Manucci 109). Italy shifted to a representative democracy after World War II, and it was not a priority to litigate the crimes of the past regime. In fact, significant military figures who were responsible for Italian war crimes in Africa were not charged in the wake of the war because of their anti-communist sentiments.

The absence of an Italian Nuremberg led to a forgetting of the Italian roots of fascism and complicity in the crimes of the Nazi regime. Manucci writes that “Italy had to forget the Nazi responsibility for the 50,000 victims on Italian soil between 1943 and 1945 so that Yugoslavia, Ethiopia, and Greece could not claim a long list of Italian war criminals” (Manucci 109). As a result, these individuals were free to re-enter Italian society, unlike those associated with the Nazi regime in Germany. With this distorted collective memory, “one finds elements of self-delusion and removal” in the manner in which Fascism is dealt with (Caramani and Manucci 1173). This had a direct impact on the rise of neo-fascist Italian parties in the years following. One could argue that the impact of the lack of reconciliation still affects Italy today. The lack of immediate treatment of the impacts of fascism has caused countries like Austria to be drawn into identity crises in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Italy has never formally moved to sanitize the fascist history as Turkey has concerning the crimes at the end of the Ottoman empire, but it has not reckoned with its history like Germany. In light of Italy’s failure to examine its past, this study is interested in whether right-wing populist leaders are dissuaded from using more extreme communication strategies. The lack of stigmatization in Italy has been discussed as a reason for the societal tolerance of right-wing populist politician’s communication possibly being able to toe the line of conventional, accepted positions and those historically reserved for the extreme right and the neo-fascists. The lack of accountability could be a contributing factor in an increased similarity between Italian right-wing populist and fascist rhetoric. The lack of acknowledgment of complicated histories in populist rhetoric could lead to a greater acceptance of fascism.

Tropology and Rebirth

Tropology is the use of figurative language, or tropes, in writing or speaking. Hayden White describes tropes as “a deviation from one possible, proper meaning, but also a deviation towards another meaning, conception, or ideal of what is right and proper and true ‘in reality’” (White 2). White primarily identifies the presence of tropes in historical writing, specifically in the European world, but his general conception of tropes is also helpful to this study. Ankersmit (1994) expands upon White’s work by equating tropology in history to logic in science. Both are fundamental to the ways that those disciplines understand the world and express their findings. Fascism and right-wing populism both frequently engage with history in the process of legitimizing their positions and searching for credibility. Fascism has intensely engaged in a tropological interpretation of history, especially in the case of Nazi Germany. Hitler’s antisemitic tropes helped to form the backbone of a new German historical consciousness. Mussolini also utilized historical tropes, although he was not nearly as antisemitic as Hitler until the later 1930s as he attempted to solidify a powerful ally. A common trope within both movements was one of national rebirth and the idea of overcoming a challenge to restore the nation. The presence of similar tropes in the rhetoric of right-wing populist parties in Italy would create a very concerning parallel and suggest that the societal barriers that blocked fascism from appearing after the Second World War may be eroding.

Gentile’s political religion also affects the content of the communication of leaders. In his view, fascist content is loaded with ideas and language that reflects the elevation of the ideology to the point of religion. Griffin (1993) rejects fascism as a political religion and favors describing it as a “political ideology containing a mythic core” (Griffin 26). In this conception of fascism, the movement remains an ideology, and the historical myth that justifies the party’s existence is

the unique factor. Instead of exhibiting religious behaviors, Griffin sees fascism as acting as a unique form of political ideology. He identifies a concept called palingenetic ultra-nationalism or the “fascist minimum” (Griffin 38-39). The palingenetic aspect comes from the palingenetic myth, which can also be described as a myth of renewal or rebirth. Rebirth is necessary as the idea is that the national community is corrupted. Therefore, it must be cleansed through a process of rebirth, an idea that is not too dissimilar from that of Christian baptism. Griffin combines this idea with fascism’s ultra-nationalist nature to create a concept that underlies all fascist movements. The “fascist minimum” holds that the “mobilizing vision is that of the national community rising phoenix-like after a period of encroaching decadence which all but destroyed it” (Griffin 38). The core message is the rebirth of the true heart of the nation led by the fascist party. Whether Meloni and Salvini’s rhetoric suggests or alludes towards this message will be critical to understanding the nature of their use of history.

There has also been scholarship on the use of religion by right-wing populists to support their narratives and social positions. While anti-abortion and anti-gay marriage stances are often prevalent in right-wing populist discourse in countries with relatively religious populations, Christianity has been used more broadly by right-wing populist leaders to promote their anti-immigration agenda. Schwörer (2018) identifies this relationship in the rhetoric of Lega Nord, the Italian right-wing political party led by Matteo Salvini. Through an analysis of the prevalence of Christianity in Lega's messaging, Schwörer concludes that Christianity is used as an instrument by the party in order to propagate their anti-Islamic policies towards immigrants. Christianity represents an apparent identifying factor of traditional Italian identity, and it becomes vital for the party to utilize it as a unifying factor. Fascism had a more direct relationship with religion, as can be seen in the “Messiah” quote from Duggan (2013). Fascist

movements were pseudo-religious, especially within Italy. Although modern populist leaders try to create a loyal following, it does not reach the level of Messianic purpose.

Table 2. Stylistic (S) and Rhetorical (R) Elements of Right-Wing Populism and Fascism

Characteristics	Right-Wing Populism	Fascism
Personalization (S)	Leadership is concentrated in a visible head of the party who aims to broaden the democratic appeal of the party	A single figure is entrusted with absolute control over the party and its messaging, which concentrates on constructing a personality cult
Transgressive Nature (S)	Pushes back against modern liberal norms and institutions, along with social progressivism, with traditional conservative rhetoric and majoritarian appeals	Promotes traditional conservative social values while pushing back on democracy in favor of single-party authoritarian rule by a totalitarian dictator
Simplicity (S)	Focus on simple and concise messaging in an era dominated by social media to make its message widely digestible	Simple messaging allowed for a greater appeal to common people with a view to inciting unrest and paranoia
Gendered Leadership (S)	Many right-wing populist leaders are charismatic male figures who emphasize strength and authority, female leaders can exhibit charisma or an inversion of progressive values	Male leadership emphasizing charisma and authority, a figure meant to be seen as the father of the nation surrounded by a cult of personality. Women identified as maternal caretakers.
The General Will and Us vs. Them (R)	Appeals to a silent majority that has been left behind by globalization and seeks to take back control of their lives, which they believe they no longer control	Creates a dichotomy between a racial and national group and everyone else while emphasizing the superiority of said group, the party acts in the interests of that group alone
Exclusionary Nature (R)	Groups excluded largely include immigrants and economic migrants who are seen as economic strains on the state and sources of a loss of national identity, employs softer tropes	Advocates only for the pure nation defined by race and nationality, utilizes overtly racist and xenophobic tropes, all others are excluded and their removal advocated in some circumstances
Use of History (R)	History used as something to strive for, a lost memory in which everyone's life was better, and the nation was healthier as a whole, Nostalgia	Looks to create a rebirth of history founded upon national myths that emphasize the superiority of the nation

Table 2 illustrates the conclusions drawn from scholarly literature on right-wing populist and fascist communication. It identifies fascist and right-wing populist identifiers, and these identifiers will be used to inform the scoresheets that are created for the analysis. The content of Lega and Fratelli should be similar to what one would expect from a right-wing populist party, but it also may contain elements that appeal to the echoes of the past. There could be a greater affinity for the style and content of what the fascists promoted in Italy than in other countries with strong right-wing political groups. The fascist insider vs. outsider dichotomy should be slightly adapted by Meloni and Salvini to reflect the current situation within Italy. Differences in religion and culture might now be seen as the new major differentiating factors that are exploited by the RPP leaders to make their arguments on a culture under attack. Restoration can be a key concept as well and appears in a similar manner to that of the fascists who promised to revitalize the nation. The content would therefore be as much of a cause for concern as the style when it comes to the greater acceptance of fascism. It is important to note that simply analyzing these parties and determining they are not fascist does not solve the issue. The greater issue surrounds the possibility that this coalition will shift the political climate in Italy to where there is less of a taboo on fascism, and they can reenter politics.

Methods

With these categories of style and content of political communication in mind, the case study of Meloni and Salvini will focus on two separate spheres of messaging focused on two audiences: social media consumed by the individual and conventional speeches aimed at the masses. Social media encompasses the commonly used apps Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and even TikTok. The study will analyze the content posted to Twitter by Meloni and Salvini in the three months leading up to the 2022 election in order to gain an understanding of the issue prioritization and messaging practices used. Social media represents the most personalized form of communication as the leaders possess their own accounts that they can use to connect with their followers. In order to study the personalization of the two parties in general, the study will examine the official accounts of Lega and FdI to observe the frequency at which the leader appears in their messaging.

Figure 5. Social Media Scoresheet

Characteristics		Giorgia Meloni	Matteo Salvini
Personalization (S)	Populist		
	Fascist		
Transgressive Nature (S)	Populist		
	Fascist		
Simplicity (S)	Populist		
	Fascist		
Gendered Leadership (S)	Populist		
	Fascist		
The General Will and Us vs. Them (R)	Populist		
	Fascist		
Exclusionary Nature (R)	Populist		
	Fascist		

Use of History (R)	Populist		
	Fascist		
Miscellaneous Tweets			
Total	Populist		
	Fascist		
	All		
	Tweets		

A scoresheet, **Figure 5**, will be used for the analysis with categories that directly align with the principles outlined in **Table 2**. Tweets will be categorized as either right-wing populist or fascist in their style and content. The raw data will then be analyzed in ratios to determine the frequency to which right-wing populist communication appears compared to fascist. For the social media section, percentages will also be used to determine the frequency of occurrences of specific categories per tweet. The results of the counts will then be analyzed in order to draw conclusions about the degree to which Meloni and Salvini have shifted toward something more extreme. The elevated presence of fascist rhetorical and stylistic occurrences would suggest that there is a significant shift to the extreme right occurring. Only two pure types will be categorized and observed. Based on the conclusions from the scholarship, a far-right populist party has emerged as a mix of right-wing populism and fascism. Therefore, its communication would be a mix as well. As a result, far-right populism identified as an even split between right-wing populist and fascist rhetoric. If Meloni or Salvini trend towards that ratio in any category or overall, it suggests that they are moving toward more extreme positions.

The second area of study will be the usage of conventional media by Meloni and Salvini. This section will look at a selection of five equivalent pieces of long-form content produced by the two leaders in the form of public speaking engagements delivered in the same time period as the tweets. These formats will allow for a more detailed analysis of the rhetoric used by Meloni

and Salvini as they address their constituents in mediums that are meant to provide more substance. Instead of quick statements of policy like those on social media, the longer speeches made in this section will contain even more detail and allow for an analysis of the style of speaking used by Salvini and Meloni. The language of the five speeches will be broken down and a content analysis done. The visual component is important to the construction of an image as well, so the study will analyze the way they appear in their addresses. The same scorecard and guiding principles will be used in this section with a single modification. The “Charismatic Strongman and Gendered Leadership” indicator will not be counted as it would be difficult to identify individual occurrences within a speech as they will likely stick to a single style for the entirety of the address. The general style of each speech will still be identified and collected, but individual occurrences within the speech will not. Populists have often been identified as charismatic and bombastic speakers, and these forms of communication will allow for the expansion of the study to verbal communication beyond more than the few sentences they could say on a platform like Twitter. Essentially, a selection of long-form content will be used to further expand the understanding of Meloni and Salvini’s style of communication. **Figure 6** is the scoresheet used for the speeches and is very similar to the one used for social media data.

Figure 6. Speech Media Scoresheet

Characteristics		Giorgia Meloni	Matteo Salvini
Personalization (S)	Populist		
	Fascist		
Transgressive Nature (S)	Populist		
	Fascist		
Simplicity (S)	Populist		
	Fascist		

The General Will and Us vs. Them (R)	Populist		
	Fascist		
Exclusionary Nature (R)	Populist		
	Fascist		
Use of History (R)	Populist		
	Fascist		
Total	Populist		
	Fascist		
	Combined		

The scholarship suggests that there will be a performative element to the communication practices of Meloni and Salvini. Meloni and Salvini will act as performers, lead actors in a biographical drama where the camera follows them everywhere they go. Everything centers around them and the values that they stand for. A related expectation is that the political communication of the parties will reinforce the personalization of FdI and Lega. According to the scholarship, populist movements are strongly personalized, and this study expects that to be true as well. The very nature of Salvini and Meloni's leadership revolves around themselves being the embodiment of everything that the party stands for. In the social media of the parties and the rallies, they should dominate the timelines, and the events should revolve around them. If either of these is untrue, it would call into question the conventional understanding of the nature of RPPs. The substance of Meloni and Salvini's rhetoric is largely expected to reflect the nationalist and conservative values that are assigned to them as right-wing populists. The particularities may be different between the two candidates, but the general positions should reflect a similar underlying worldview. The study of the political communication of Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini is likely to show that the leaders run personalized campaigns that are

performative in nature and conservative-nationalist in substance. These performances, and the rhetoric of their actors, may be evocative of the memories of the fascist past of Italy.

Expectations of Specific Categories

It is expected that Meloni and Salvini will adhere largely to traditional understandings of populist communication and adopt more extreme positions only in certain areas. In addition to the anticipating performative nature of Meloni and Salvini's communication, it is also expected that both will be charismatic in the style expected of right-wing populist leaders. The degree to which they are may not be the same, but Salvini especially should come off as very charismatic and boisterous based on how he fits into the existing understanding of RPP leaders. Part of the performative expectation is intertwined with charisma. A dull or reserved performance would likely be less effective based on the understanding of right-wing populism and its followers. Nevertheless, the two should avoid sweepingly using practices that would strike voters as too extreme or contain unsettling echoes of fascism. Areas that could exhibit significant shifts towards more extreme communication are the exclusionary nature of their communication and the use of us vs. them arguments. Both of these areas could be places where Meloni and Salvini determine more extreme rhetoric could be enticing to the electorate.

The Following are the Guiding Expectations of Meloni and Salvini's Political Communication:

Expectation 1

Based on the reading of the scholarship and background knowledge of Salvini and Meloni, the study expects their communication to be transgressive. That is to say that the nature of the communication should disregard the norms established by the dominant political culture in favor of a new political atmosphere. Whether this comes in the use of informal language or more abrasive rhetoric, a central concept of relatability should be emphasized. Both Meloni and

Salvini are expected to embrace populist sources of legitimacy by framing themselves as representatives of the common Italian person. With that being said, it is not expected that this will be done in a way that reflects more extreme practices found throughout history.

Expectation 2

The study anticipates that because of the right-wing populist tendency to appeal to traditional gender roles, there will be significant differences in the style and messaging of Salvini and Meloni. Meloni will adopt a somewhat more extreme position in terms of her use of her gender. Although, based on the work of Mudde and Kaltwasser, it is not expected that this relatability to take on different forms for the two leaders largely because of allusions to traditional gender roles. The study anticipates that Salvini will reflect the blue-collar worker who feels left behind by globalization and wants control back to turn back the clock to a time they perceived to be better. Based on this expectation, Salvini will dress casually, speak colloquially, and emphasize his connection to the hard-working public, a common projection in populist political leadership. It is expected that Meloni will try to seem relatable in a different way based on a retrenchment of conservative gender norms that will create significant echoes of the past. Because of her affinity for traditional family dynamics and Italian values, the study anticipates that she will adopt maternalistic qualities in an effort for her to appear as the traditional conception of a good mother. She should be more reserved than Salvini but also fiercely defensive of the positions that she sees as critical. Defending the prospects of future generations would fit this mold, as would her dressing more respectably at events. Other traditionally maternalistic characteristics, including sternness and compassion, will all serve to reinforce her relatability to the Italian electorate. Despite this, she may be hesitant to venture too far into a

fascist version of gendered leadership. As a result, it is predicted that she will favor the conventional populist version but exhibit higher levels of fascist influence than in other areas.

Expectation 3

It is expected that Meloni and Salvini's rhetoric will contain significant shifts to more extreme values than are usually held by right-wing populists in the areas of exclusionary nature and us vs. them style arguments. With regard to what is expected of both leaders' content, an affinity for tradition is critical. Because of the conservative and nationalist nature of their platforms, emphasizing the value of tradition should be a natural development in their communication. In a different vein, the study anticipates observing significantly more usage of fascist rhetorical styles when discussing us versus them dynamic that has emerged in modern society. Both Salvini and Meloni should espouse messages warning of a conspiratorial elite whose goals run opposite to the needs of the Italian population. This fits with the manufactured image of RPP leaders as independent thinkers who fight against the grain. Based on the collective element of the previous observation, one would expect to see significant usage of the first-person plural to emphasize the connection between the leader and the public. This dovetails with the earlier discussion of the prediction that Meloni and Salvini will emphasize relatability.

Meloni and Salvini will allude to examples of tradition that include Catholic and religious ideas in an effort to reinforce the us vs. them dichotomy that has been created, with some examples being more extreme than what is expected of right-wing populism. Somewhat in line with the previously mentioned point on Meloni's expected maternalistic tendencies, it is expected that pro-traditional family structure sentiments will be present in the rhetoric of both of the leaders. There is no expectation that there will be a significant shift within the content to the previously discussed principles of civil religion and zealotry that have been associated with

fascism. The exclusionary nature of their communication is one area where it is expected that there will be significant movement by both toward more extreme positions. This has been a major issue for both Meloni and Salvini in recent years, and they may feel comfortable taking more extreme positions to energize their voting base.

Expectation 4

It is expected that the historical and ideological backgrounds of FdI and Lega will create differences in the style and substance of Meloni and Salvini's communication. The backgrounds of FdI and Lega are very different, and it is anticipated that Meloni and Salvini will have differences in their rhetorical style as a result. The study predicts that Meloni will have some far-right tendencies in her communication as a result of Fratelli d'Italia's roots in MSI. While Salvini may display some far-right tendencies associated with far-right extremism, Lega's history as a regional separatist party should make him gravitate less toward the rhetoric of statism. Another difference within the substance of the political communication of the two leaders that is expected to be seen is a distinction in the target of their appeals as it affects rhetoric. FdI is a national party with widespread support, which is believed to suggest that its rhetoric will be more generally applicable and appealing to people across classes. On the other hand, Lega remains to be more popular in the more wealthy North than in the more poor South, so the study expects to see Salvini possibly focus more on topics like burden sharing that reflect his base's economic interests.

Expectation 5

Despite the way the rhetoric of Meloni and Salvini relates to general principles of ethnonationalism, anti-elitism, and promotion of the general will, it is expected that they will not fully move into more extreme territory. This section expands upon previous literature, which was

more focused on the general nature of how societies have dealt with fascist pasts, to now focus on how political parties may be beginning to reuse concepts that harken back to the past. Appealing to the desire of the disenfranchised population for control will be characterized by anti-elitist rhetoric and may act in a similar way to the conspiratorial rhetoric promoted by fascists. Nevertheless, the content of the rhetoric of Meloni and Salvini will substantively differ from that of the extremists in terms of the general goals and will adopt a different degree of ethnonationalist spirit than the one promoted by the far-right. This is predicted because of a combination of two factors: cultural barriers to the success of the far-right and personal platforms. Italy, despite just having elected the farthest right coalition since World War II, still has the collective memory of fascism that is strong enough to prevent extreme parties from being elected. Also, Meloni and Salvini themselves do not seem to be extreme enough for their rhetoric to significantly skew toward far-right populism.

The style and purpose of the communication will be also different as they are not dispersing simple “get out the vote” messages. They may make choices about their messaging that are in a similar fashion to how fascist leaders chose to address crowds. However, fascists were unconcerned with motivating the vote because they destroyed democratic institutions once they took power. Meloni and Salvini are not expected to follow this road, but they still want to incite movement and action within the crowd. There is simply a different end goal to said mobilization. The bombastic nature and transgressive aesthetic promoted will be similar to that created by Mussolini and promoted by neofascism. The charismatic strongman that Salvini is expected to embody may draw similarities to Mussolini and far-right strongmen, but the study predicts that Salvini’s style of charismatic strongman leadership will fall in line with the populist category rather than that of the far-right extremists.

Chapter 2: The Evolution of the Italian Right and Its Leadership

This chapter will provide the historical context of the right in Italian politics and its leadership, along with providing similar information for subsequent movements that played a significant role in the development of the parties in this study. The chapter focuses on the history and leaders of the Italian Fascist Party, MSI, Alleanza Nazionale, Lega, and Fratelli d'Italia to provide the historical context on which Meloni and Salvini build. It begins with an account of the history of Italian Fascism, concentrating on the role of its inventor, Benito Mussolini. Key areas to understand will be how Mussolini spread fascism and the context from which the movement was born. From there, the chapter transitions to a discussion of the post-fascist MSI and its leadership. Gianfranco Fini and his Alleanza Nazionale, the successor to MSI, follow as a critical inflection point in the party's evolution. The chapter has examples of parties that fell under the right-wing populist, far-right, and neo-fascist labels in the form of Lega Nord, Alleanza Nazionale, and MSI, respectively. Following that, the personal journey of Meloni and her party's founding are discussed. The chapter closes with a discussion of the history of Lega and Matteo Salvini. Meloni's room for success is argued to be critically tied to the sanitization of the right that Gianfranco Fini was able to achieve when he formed Alleanza and entered into government with Berlusconi in 1994. Similarly, Salvini seeks to expand upon the success that Umberto Bossi experienced when Lega Nord also entered government in 1994. This also helps to create a foundational understanding of the evolution and mainstreaming of conventional right-wing populist parties and leaders that will be useful later in the study.

Mussolini and Fascism

It is fitting to begin this section with the birth of fascism itself. Through an explanation of Mussolini's personal rise to power, one can see the conditions under which the ideas of

fascism were formed. Benito Mussolini was born on July 29th, 1883, in the small town of Predappio in the northern region of Emilia-Romagna. Mussolini reached prominence in the Italian Socialist movement, becoming the editor of *Avanti!*, the leading Italian Socialist newspaper, at the age of 28. Mussolini was drafted into the Italian military following the nation's entrance into the war and served on the front lines in the trenches before being wounded by a shell. Following the war, he returned to his newly founded paper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, which transformed from a pro-war journal to one of Mussolini's aggressive nationalist ideas (Bosworth 110). This tendency towards using the dominant forms of media available to spread his message is something that Salvini and Meloni have also done. Most non-establishment political leaders focus on spreading their message through media, but Mussolini's strategy parallels that of Meloni and Salvini in that all three have aimed to spread conservative, divisive viewpoint.

By 1920, Mussolini had incited the rise of the fascist movement within Italy and took his place as Il Duce, the charismatic leader of men, the most fanatical of which were known as the Blackshirts. Mussolini led the National Fascist Party that he founded in 1921 into government on the back of the famous Blackshirt-led March on Rome in October 1922. It is interesting to note that Mussolini rose in response to a period of public dissatisfaction following the end of World War I. Mussolini co-wrote the *Doctrine of Fascism* with Giovanni Gentile in 1932 and maintained his charismatic personality throughout the 1930s leading up to the Second World War (Bosworth 256). Mussolini is regarded as being one of the first to fully embrace the idea of a charismatic strongman (Ben-Ghiat 2021). The party espoused the ultranationalist rhetoric that provided the blueprint for future fascist movements, the Nazis in particular. As World War II wore on, Mussolini grew to become a shell of his former self, losing the charismatic air that had catapulted him to political power (Bosworth 331). As the Allies advanced on Rome, the Italian

Fascist government fell, and Mussolini was captured while attempting to flee to Spain and was executed. While Il Duce was dead, his impact on Italian society was understandably immense. As a result, parties led by former fascist officials were formed in the wake of the war as the fascist past of these nations was sidelined. This was not the case in Germany, where former high-ranking Nazis were banned from public service.

The Italian Social Movement and Giorgio Almirante

The Italian Social Movement, abbreviated as MSI, was the first major neo-fascist party to emerge after the end of World War II. The party was formed by former followers of Benito Mussolini and incorporated rhetorical and symbolic elements of the former fascist regime, including the tricolor flame and black outfits. The party was led by Giorgio Almirante, a former fascist in the German puppet Italian Social Republic who had also written for a journal titled *The Defense of Race* during the war. Almirante and MSI worked early on to consolidate more extreme and moderate views within the party and create a digestible neo-fascist doctrine for a population that was largely disillusioned with fascism (Keyse 109-110). Despite being a neo-fascist party, the membership was not uniformly far-right, as many held beliefs that the party would be better off as more moderate. Ultimately, Almirante chose to take right-wing positions, something that angered the liberal and moderate factions. Ultimately, Almirante was removed in favor of more moderate leadership, and Arturo Michelini assumed the secretaryship four years later in 1954. Under Michelini, prominent Italian fascists were allowed into the party, and MSI adopted a strategy of normalization¹⁰, an attempt to destigmatize the party in Italian politics, and

¹⁰ For an article from *Secolo d'Italia*, the official newspaper of MSI details Michelini's process of normalization, see <https://tinyurl.com/2u73jd7z>

rapprochement with conventional parties called *inserimento*¹¹, referencing the insertion of MSI into the party landscape (Gallego 4-6).

The success of this strategy mellowed over time, and Almirante retook control of his party in 1969. Almirante “recovered the ‘original’ character of fascism” and created “an inflammatory discourse”¹² that “reproached the system for its incapacity to satisfy the needs of the sectors beneath its administration” (Gallego 8). This anti-establishment rhetoric, combined with the incendiary nature of neo-fascist ideas, strengthened the party and characterized its rhetoric for the remainder of its existence. Almirante was controversial within Italy due to his [energetic style](#) and bombastic rhetoric and was stripped of his parliamentary immunity in 1979 so that he could be charged¹³ with attempting to revive the fascist party. Ultimately, Almirante passed leadership on to his successor Gianfranco Fini in 1987, who led the party for eight years before reforming it as the National Alliance, AN, with former conservative members of the newly defunct Christian Democratic Party.

National Alliance and Gianfranco Fini

Gianfranco Fini led the National Alliance, AN, for all fifteen years that the party existed, from its creation in 1994 to its dissolution in 2009. MSI was largely unaffected by the *Tangentopoli* corruption scandal because of its position outside the government, but the major parties were decimated by the fallout. Democrazia Cristiana, the Christian Democratic party that dominated the center-right and Italian politics, was destroyed by the scandal. Conservative former members gravitated toward Fini’s new project, and this acceptance formed the basis for Fini’s sanitization of the right in Italy. When the party was founded, Fini made a point to state

¹¹ For speech by Michelini in which he expresses support for the Christian Democratic presidential candidate, see <https://tinyurl.com/j9k5bbub>

¹² For an Almirante speech from 1974 in which he espouses very traditionalist attitudes surrounding divorce and the family, see <https://tinyurl.com/2p85wtz7>

¹³ See the original Jewish Telegraphic Agency report on Almirante’s charges at <https://tinyurl.com/56wvaa95>

that it “fully accepted a liberal regime, rejected any form of dictatorship or racism whatever, and consigned its former anti-capitalist gestures to the history books” (Gallego 13). This is demonstrative of Fini’s policy of outwardly opposing the idea of fascism even though his party was constructed of individuals who just a year earlier were part of a neo-fascist party. In terms of his personal style, Zaslowe (2004) explains that Fini adopted a more reserved and calculated public appearance than his predecessors and right-wing populist leaders as he sought to drag the party to a point of political acceptance. Fini achieved his goal almost immediately in 1994 as the new party was voted into power with a coalition government led by Berlusconi’s Forza Italia and Lega, led at the time by the charismatic populist Umberto Bossi. Nevertheless, illiberal factions within the party remained for the better part of the next decade as Fini struggled to reform the party fully.

In 2001, AN entered government alongside Forza Italia and Lega for the second time, and Fini was made Deputy Prime Minister. Fini made a personal stand during a visit to Jerusalem in 2003, where he declared fascism to be an “absolute evil” (Ignazi 339). This upset some more extreme members, but the majority followed his lead. With Fini’s presence in government contributing to the sanitization, the party was finally at a point where it was seen by the public as a safe national conservative option divorced from the history of fascism (Ignazi 338-342). It is important to note that it took sixty years for this separation to happen within the far-right in Italy. The impact that a large stretch of time like that has on the way that individuals perceive periods in their history cannot be understated. Many individuals, including one of the two subjects of this study, were raised within these parties at a time when it was acceptable to hold neo-fascist sentiments. Fini remained Deputy Prime Minister until 2006, when he and Berlusconi’s coalition was defeated by the center-left coalition of Romano Prodi. Fini and Berlusconi came to an

agreement in 2008 to create a united center-right party called People of Freedom that ran in the upcoming election. That coalition secured a victory, and the National Alliance was merged into Forza Italia under the name of the new party. Fini was made President of the Chamber of Deputies, the speaker of the lower chamber of the Italian government. The coalition collapsed in 2012, and Fini did not return to the right-wing political scene, but one of the young members of his party did.

Fratelli d'Italia and Giorgia Meloni

The story of the party that emerged in 2012 as the spiritual successor is intertwined with that of Giorgia Meloni. Meloni was born in Rome and joined the youth wing of Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) when she was fifteen years old. She maintained her membership when the party became the National Alliance and became¹⁴ the leader of the youth wing of the party, which supported and promoted Fini's agenda. "In 2006, when Meloni was serving as a city councilwoman in Rome, Berlusconi tapped her to be the deputy vice president in the parliament (where Meloni was a prominent defender of his platform). A few years later, he named her his Youth Minister, making her one of the first women, and the youngest person ever, to hold the office" (Nadeau 16). From that point onwards, Meloni was a prominent actor within the Italian Right, and she became one of the founders of Fratelli d'Italia when she resigned alongside the rest of Berlusconi's cabinet following Berlusconi's inability to pass a budget and Italy's debt crisis.

Meloni founded Fratelli d'Italia alongside Ignazio La Russa, a fellow former MSI member, and Guido Crosetto, a former Christian Democrat. She has led the party as President since 2014, after La Russa and Crosetto each spent around a year at the helm. Meloni has gained

¹⁴ For a news release from Alleanza Nazionale announcing Meloni's leadership position, see <https://tinyurl.com/mv3ff2xu>

a reputation as being a fierce and emotional defender of traditional values and Italian nationalism (Nadeau 17-18). This reputation catapulted her to prominence in the Italian political sphere as she oversaw a steady rise in the electoral success of Fratelli d'Italia in spite of fierce competition from Five Star, Forza, and Lega. Meloni specifically gained popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic when she kept her party as the lone opposition to the national unity government led by Mario Draghi, which was formed as an emergency response entity. Meloni continued to espouse traditional conservative values alongside anti-immigration policies. She has expressed many controversial views as well in recent years, including publicly praising Giorgio Almirante on the anniversary of his death in 2020.¹⁵ Nevertheless, her leadership led Fratelli d'Italia to become the leader in the polls for a significant period of time leading up to the 2022 election, and, although they finished second to the center-left Democratic Party, her coalition won. This study seeks to examine the results of her development. The degree to which she has held on to the more extreme views that existed in the past is central to the questions guiding the analysis.

Lega Nord and Umberto Bossi

Lega Nord emerged as a collective of regional parties from the northern half of Italy in 1989. The party seized upon separatist and autonomist sentiments in the North as a result of tensions with the southern half of the country. The North of Italy is traditionally the wealthier and more industrialized half, while the South is more agricultural and poor. As a result, there were tensions with the unitary government in Rome that was seen as sapping the resources of the North in order to make up for the weakness of the South. Lega Nord initially promoted federalizing the government in order to grant greater autonomy to the North. Umberto Bossi was the face of the movement and currently remains the Federal President of the party. Bossi “employed the typical populist rhetoric of radical antinomies, small vs. big business,

¹⁵ See Meloni’s tweet commemorating the anniversary of Almirante’s death at <https://tinyurl.com/dfm33pn>

establishment vs. the people, the centre vs. the periphery, northerners vs. southerners, and finally us vs. them, to attract a larger electorate” (Ignazi 345). Lega Nord supported local Italian businesses and framed itself as the party of the people for northern Italy. The party was also regionalist at its conception as it advocated for northerners, and it did so through the us vs. them arguments that are utilized by all populist parties. Lega Nord promoted neoliberal values in its beginnings as it sought to promote a decentralized system (Ignazi 345). These values were more aggressive than traditionally held in Italy because the goal was to deregulate as much as possible to delegate authority to local institutions.

The issue was that Forza Italia was promoting a very similar message, so Bossi decided to take the party in a more radical direction, which manifested itself in the promotion of what it called Padanian separatism (Ignazi 346). Padania is an invented, mythical region of northern Italy that the League stated needed to be liberated from the constraints of Rome and the South. Bossi’s fiery, charismatic leadership style¹⁶ helped to incite support, and Bossi also changed the target of Lega Nord’s grievances from Southern Italians to foreign immigrants. Ignazi states that “the xenophobia of the Lega, while rather folkloric when aimed at Italian southerners, acquired a different, much harder, meaning in this new phase” (Ignazi 346). Bossi and Lega were unrelenting in their xenophobic attitudes throughout his time as leader of the party. Bossi served as the Reform Minister, the cabinet member in charge of internal reforms, in two separate Berlusconi cabinets, which aligned with his fierce anti-corruption campaigns (Ignazi 344). Bossi led Lega Nord until 2012, when he was forced to resign due to an appropriations scandal. Roberto Maroni was elected in his place, and he passed leadership to Matteo Salvini in 2013.

¹⁶ For a clip from a speech made by Umberto Bossi in 1994, see <https://tinyurl.com/4eycy4cw>

Lega and Matteo Salvini

Matteo Salvini, born in Milan, joined the youth branch of Lega Nord, the Young Padanians Movement, at the age of seventeen. He was elected to the City Council of Milan at the age of twenty and was an MEP, a Member of the European Parliament, by thirty. Salvini gradually gained popularity leading up to the leadership election following Bossi's scandal and Maroni's resignation. With the support of the party, he became Federal Secretary and Leader of Lega Nord in 2013. Salvini decided to make significant changes to the party immediately, including apologizing for his historically anti-southern rhetoric only a few days after he took office (Albertazzi et al. 649). Salvini was seeking to increase the party's national appeal and leave behind the regionalist bindings that had held Lega Nord back from national success. While Bossi had successfully captured the national spotlight due to his bombastic rhetoric, he was closely tied to the concept of Lega Nord, something that undermined his electoral success. Salvini sought to capture the same spirit as Bossi while spreading his electoral appeal across the country.

In the lead-up to the 2018 elections, Salvini dropped Nord from the name of the party. The party was now called simply Lega, and he added his own name to the party logo to increase his personal control of the party (Albertazzi et al. 650). Lega per Salvini Premier (Lega for Salvini Premier) experienced record levels of success in the 2018 Italian general election with 17.4 percent of the vote, almost double the high during Bossi's tenure. Salvini entered into government as the coalition partner and Deputy Prime Minister to the Five Star Movement led by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. Salvini's popularity surged during his time as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior as Lega became the most popular party in Italy. He was seen as a political strongman fighting for Italian national interests against the European Union and

outside interests (Kirchgaessner). Salvini pushed welfare chauvinism and anti-immigration rhetoric further than where Lega traditionally stood to broaden his support amongst the right in Italy (Albertazzi et al. 655-660). Lega peaked at thirty-eight percent in the polls as the most popular party in Italy in 2019 (Agenzia Dire).

As a result, Salvini attempted a power grab in September 2019 and broke the coalition with Conte. This ultimately failed as Conte was able to avoid an election through a coalition with the center-left. Salvini's popularity declined as a result, and Lega fell in the polls to the point it became a supporting party in the Meloni-led coalition. Nevertheless, Salvini occupies an important position as the modern-day right-wing charismatic strongman in Italy. His role in radicalizing right-wing politics in Italy, alongside normalizing a more bombastic and unfiltered style of politics, is critical to the current state of politics in Italy.

Analysis

The primary value of the analysis of Mussolini and the Fascist Party is to see how Mussolini also emphasized the use of media and exploited a period of turmoil. Based on the results of the study, one will be able to draw parallels between the communication of Meloni and Salvini, and the positions historically taken by the right in Italian politics. Meloni represents the sanitized leader of a party with a far-right legacy. On one hand, there is a possibility that she will return to the more extreme values and leadership style of the traditional neo-fascist MSI leaders like Almirante. However, she has worked in traditional right-wing populist parties and center-right governments. It is possible that, in addition to the party moderating its positions over time, her views from her youth have also become more moderate as she has attempted to climb the political ladder.

Salvini seems to represent a continuation of the rhetoric adopted by Umberto Bossi, but he has taken the movement in a new nationally focused direction in an effort to experience electoral success. Salvini has transformed Lega from a regional separatist party to a national one. Lega experienced a greater level of support during his time as leader than they had ever achieved under Bossi before him. The focus of the rhetoric has shifted to external forces as is shown by Salvini's reputation as a Eurosceptic and anti-immigration politician. His policies now position him as the deputy coalition member in the first Italian coalition led by the right.

Both are representatives of a new generation of the Italian right that has consolidated political influence to form the first right-wing coalition government. Identifying similarities will be key to understanding if that coalition is moving toward a more extreme position. Meloni and Salvini come with some security for Italian voters as well because, despite framing themselves as outsiders, they both have significant experience in government. Italian voters are familiar with the two leaders, especially Salvini, thanks to their track records. This likely will affect their political communication in that they will not feel as though they need to explain themselves to the population. They are a known outsider commodity that seeks to upset the balance of power in the Italian political landscape.

Chapter 3: The Social Media Communication of Meloni and Salvini Analyzed

Introduction and Acknowledgement of Limitations

This section contains the data from the observations of the social media of Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini. The results of the analysis of the three months of Twitter posts leading up to the 2022 general election, from June 25th to September 24th, are contained, along with the measurements of the frequency of each category and an evaluation of whether they are more populist or fascist in nature. First, I interpret the nature, style, and content of the tweets, using the categories developed in chapter 1. Then I provide percentages to express the frequency of select fascist and populist occurrences per tweet. As additional measures, ratios express the frequency of populist occurrences per fascist occurrence. The scorecard described in the methods section was used to categorize the occurrences of both conventional right-wing populist and fascist content and style. The scorecard was inspired by the pure types that were identified in the scholarship on right-wing populist and fascist communication.

Before delving into the data and analysis, certain limitations and aspects must be declared that apply to both this social media section and the speech data that follows. The first potential limitation is that all of the translations are my own. All of the media that was dealt with was originally produced in Italian. I was able to read and understand the majority of what was said and written without needing aid, and translated subtitles allowed me to fill in the gaps. I also consulted one of my Italian professors, Doc. Danila Cannamela, about all of the evidence that is used in this project to ensure that my interpretations were valid with regard to the language. Despite the difficulties, I am confident in the measures that were taken to address them.

The goal of this project is to investigate whether these Italian movements have become something different and more extreme than conventional right-wing populism. To do so, I

analyzed 1,422 tweets and nearly six and a half hours of selected speeches that Meloni and Salvini produced in this timeframe alone. As a result, this study reflects an individual's interpretation of the media that the two have created. There were measures taken to attempt to remain as unbiased and uninfluential in the results as possible. The study leaned heavily upon the indicators that were identified in the literature review to inform the measurement instrument. The content and style largely either conformed to populism or demonstrably crossed the line to fascism. The one area where the more difficult decisions arose at a higher rate was the **Exclusionary Nature** of communication. At times, the language would reach a point of being hostile towards migrants but not extreme enough to align with the fascist identifier. In those cases, the decision was made to place them in the right-wing populist count.

The final potential issue that one could raise is that assigning the occurrences to one of only two groups – populist or fascist – may be reductionist. One may say that all of these examples of communication would be better placed on a spectrum of numerical values. However, it is the position of this paper that a spectrum would be even more subjective. How could one determine that one tweet is .5 more fascist than another? By sticking with two categories for identification and then a spectrum of the degree of the extremeness of their right-wing positions based on relative occurrence, calculated through ratios of populist to fascist occurrence, this study limits the degree to which subjectivity affects the results.

Important Guidelines

This part of the study focuses on short-form communication by Meloni and Salvini through their social media accounts. The specific platform that was selected for analysis was Twitter due to the platform's reputation as a prime location for the dissemination of political messaging. There were a couple of initial guidelines that were created to limit potential

subjectivity. Each tweet can only count for one point to a category but can count for more than one category. That is to say that a tweet may exhibit populist Transgressive content with a fascist personalized style. In that case, both of the categories would receive a single point, and this is true no matter the nature of the tweet. There may be a single tweet that contains multiple references to replacement theory ideas, but it would still only count for one point to the fascist Exclusionary Nature category. If a tweet was contained within a longer thread, it was treated as independent from those earlier.

If the tweet includes a video, it will also only count for one point in all categories that apply for the sake of consistency. In order to maintain a focus on the social media platform of Twitter, the study only includes videos that were embedded on the platform, not links to external videos on news sites and YouTube. While the content of the linked videos was not subject to analysis, any writing or imagery that was visible on the Twitter platform was fair game. For embedded videos, a time limit was instituted that videos can be no longer than 3 minutes. For example, Salvini has many tweets that contain long-form tv interviews and radio interviews, which can be seen in his high level of miscellaneous tweets in **Table 3**. This is because allowing any longer videos would undermine the purpose of having a section focused on short-form media. Another example of what would fall in the miscellaneous tweets category is “get out the vote” messages like this [one](#) by Meloni that increased in frequency towards the end of the period under observation.

Analysis of Social Media Data with Examples

Table 3. Social Media Occurrences: The Raw Data

Characteristics		Giorgia Meloni	Matteo Salvini
Personalization (S)	Populist	113	271
	Fascist	8	3
Transgressive Nature (S)	Populist	54	104
	Fascist	9	33
Simplicity (S)	Populist	39	167
	Fascist	1	11
Gendered Leadership (S)	Populist	26	210
	Fascist	45	2
The General Will and Us vs. Them (R)	Populist	123	351
	Fascist	11	4
Exclusionary Nature (R)	Populist	23	119
	Fascist	13	60
Use of History (R)	Populist	25	67
	Fascist	5	6
Miscellaneous Tweets		66	171
Total	Populist	403	1289
	Fascist	92	119
	All	495	1408
	Tweets	413	1009

Table 3 shows the data collected from Twitter that was posted in the three months leading up to the election. The initial discrepancy that was the most noticeable was the difference in the volume of tweets that Meloni and Salvini put out. Salvini tweeted over 1000 times, while Meloni tweeted much less, around 400 times. Therefore, Salvini utilized Twitter at a rate of two-and-a-half times that of Meloni. This was not surprising as Salvini is well known for his use of social media, and people have gone so far as to nickname his social media program “The Beast” (Martini 2018). Despite a difference in volume, both focused on having at least one tweet

released every day within the selected period. This maintains a level of consistency in which the viewer of the tweets interacts with the content. As a result of the difference in volume between the two, Salvini had many more occurrences of populist and fascist communication than Meloni.

Table 4. The Ratio of Populist to Fascist Occurrences on Twitter and Other Select Ratios

Characteristics	Giorgia Meloni	Matteo Salvini
Populist occurrences per Tweet	0.98	1.28
Fascist Occurrences per Tweet	0.22	0.12
Total, Populist + Fascist, Occurrences per Tweet	1.20	1.40
Personalization Ratio	14.13	90.33
Transgressive Nature Ratio	6.00	3.15
Simplicity Ratio	39.00	15.18
Gendered Leadership Ratio	0.58	105.00
Us vs. Them Ratio	11.18	87.75
Exclusionary Nature Ratio	1.77	1.98
Use of History Ratio	5.00	11.17
Total Populist vs. Fascist Ratio	4.38	10.83

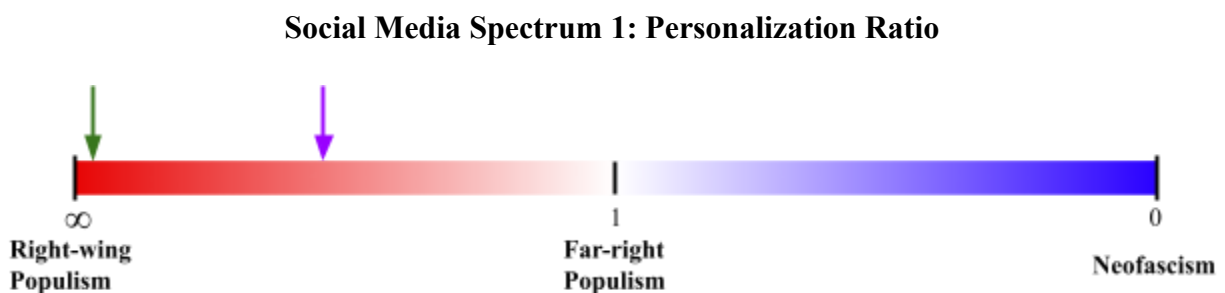
In order to create more comparable values, ratios and percentages were created that eliminate the variance in volume in favor of data based on a single occurrence or tweet, and **Table 4** contains those ratios. This form of analysis focuses on whether the two were more likely to use populist or fascist communication when tweeting within the categories under observation. In terms of the broader data, Meloni and Salvini each exhibited more than one occurrence of either fascist or populist communication in their tweets, with Salvini being .2 occurrences per tweet higher than Meloni at 1.4 to 1.2. Again, this was not all too surprising because of the reputation that Salvini's social media apparatus comes with. Salvini tweeted populist messaging at a significantly higher rate than Meloni, while Meloni tweeted fascist messaging almost twice

as often as Salvini. This was not something that was expected as the difference between the two was much larger than initially imagined. While Salvini's messaging being more politically charged than Meloni's was not surprising, the idea that Meloni would be twice as likely to utilize fascist communication practices was not initially expected. The rest of **Table 4** concentrates on the ratios of populist to fascist communication employed by the two leaders. The decision was made to analyze the ratios this way as it fits with the expectation of seeing more populist communication than fascist.

Analysis of the Style of Social Media Communication

Spectrums were created for both sections of data to provide the reader with a relative illustration of the degree to which Meloni and Salvini have moved towards a more extreme form of right-wing populism in their social media communication. The placements of the arrows representing their positions are based on the ratios created in **Table 4**. It is worth noting that even a widely accepted conventional right-wing populist party that is not under scrutiny for a potential shift towards something more extreme likely would not be all the way on the left at the point of the pure type. Likewise, a neo-fascist party would probably find itself far to the right, but it would not be all the way to the right, aligned with the pure type.

Personalization



Social Media Spectrums: Green = Salvini Purple = Meloni

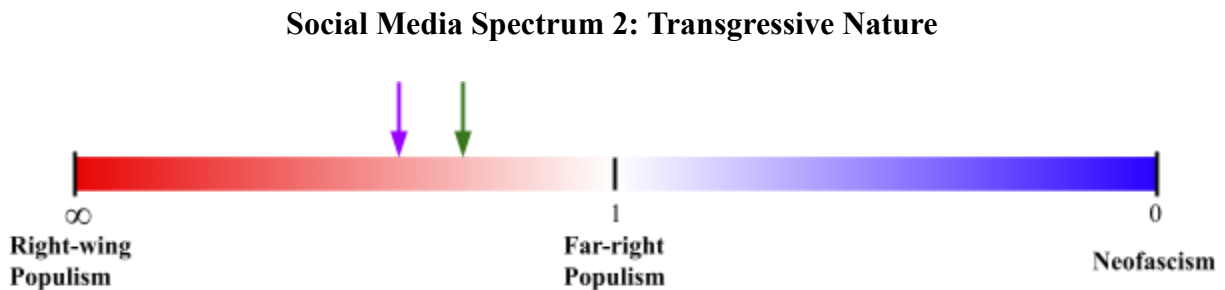
Personalization, illustrated in **Social Media Spectrum 1**, was the first stylistic category analyzed, and it showed that Salvini represented a significantly higher propensity to utilize populist communication. It is worth noting that when looking back to **Table 3**, it is not as if Salvini utilized populist personalized messaging in all of his tweets, but that he hardly ever exhibited fascist **Personalization**. Meloni did not utilize a fascist personalized style very much either, but her ratio is over six times lower than Salvini's because of his almost complete lack of usage. This could be due to concerns over the potential implications of significant usage of fascist **Personalization**. Both of the leaders frequently pronounced pro-democratic stances, and fascist **Personalization** is rather incompatible with democratic messaging.

Fascist **Personalization** was identified as highlighting and glorifying the individual to a higher degree than generally common among populists. This [tweet](#) by Meloni demonstrates how a collection of factors can push a tweet into the fascist category. Meloni features prominently in the graphic, and she is identified as the lone patriotic candidate that will revive Italy. While this tweet would likely fall into the right-wing populist category if its parts were separated, the combination aligns more with the fascist category. Salvini demonstrates a different path in this [tweet](#), which is a four-hour-long video of Salvini's highlights from the campaign. This excessive self-glorification pushes beyond what is considered populist by the study.

This [video](#) of Meloni demonstrates the populist version of **Personalization**. She is framed as the head of the movement, and the crowd is shown to emphasize her popularity. This falls into the populist category because it emphasizes her personal profile but does not overexaggerate as Salvini's video did. Salvini provides a different [example](#) that contains images from his address at Pontida, a sacred rally point for Lega. The images also emphasize his personal status as the leader, and they show him as a man of the people. This fits with the

populist **Personalization** strategy that supports framing the leader in a certain light to increase their democratic appeal.

Transgressive Nature



The first close ratio was the **Transgressive Nature**, illustrated in **Social Media Spectrum 2**, of the rhetoric that Meloni and Salvini espoused. In this case, Meloni was twice as likely to exhibit more populist **Transgressive** behavior in relation to fascist than Salvini. In this case, it was less to do with one side's lack of usage, as a 6 to 1 ratio does suggest a significant fascist presence, than one side's increased propensity to utilize fascist **Transgressive** communication. Salvini utilized fascist **Transgressive** rhetoric at twice the frequency as that of Meloni and once every four **Transgressive** occurrences. This is the first example of a potentially serious shift to something more extreme than conventional right-wing populism. Salvini consistently choosing to employ fascist **Transgressive** rhetoric that comes with anti-institutionalist and extreme socially conservative positions indicates a potential indicator of a shift towards far-right populism. There is not quite an indication of a shift to neo-fascism as the standard for far-right populism is set at an even ratio of 1. Until a category passes below that, the analysis is focused on a shift toward far-right populism.

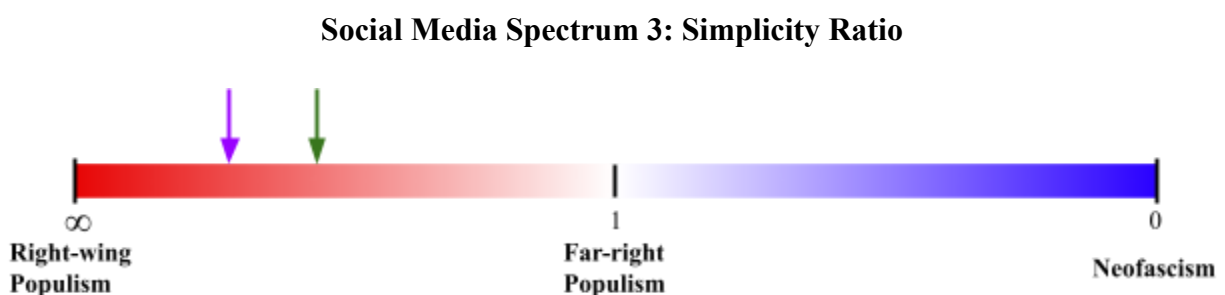
Fascist **Transgressive** tweets were identified as pushing extreme social conservatism or emphasizing an increase in the rule of law. This [tweet](#) by Meloni shows a **Transgressive** tone promoting division and advocating for an increase in the rule of law. Meloni highlights a video

that shows a group of immigrants harassing individuals, and police responding inadequately.

Salvini shows a more explicit **Transgressive** strategy in this [tweet](#), which cites a rape committed by an immigrant followed by the statement, “You can, and you must, stop them.” This represents an overwhelmingly socially conservative message that directly attacks more socially progressive messaging. Salvini and Meloni both highlight **Transgressive** concepts that aim to divide Italian society.

This [video](#) of Meloni demonstrates the populist version of a **Transgressive** tweet. Meloni clarifies the stance of her party on abortion in this tweet. She makes it clear that her strategy is not to try to overturn the Italian law protecting abortion rights, but she does suggest she will try to work around the law. The idea of working around the law but not directly working against it fits with a more populist version of a **Transgressive Nature**. Salvini provides a different [example](#) that focuses on attacking the media as figureheads for the left. This showcases a different form of populist **Transgressive** communication that focuses more on being anti-elitist. Salvini frames the left as being in control, and he acts as a disruptor that will return control of the narrative to the Italian people.

Simplicity



The next section was the **Simplicity** category, illustrated in **Social Media Spectrum 3**, in which neither Meloni nor Salvini exhibited the significant usage of fascist simplification relative to populist. Meloni actually did it the least out of any category that was observed, as she only

exhibited fascist simplification once in her tweets. Salvini did utilize a fascist simplified style more, but he was also much more likely to use the populist method instead. It stands to reason that this is an area where the potential benefits of utilizing the fascist version are outweighed by that of the populist. Especially on a platform focused on widespread digestibility, the populist method seems to be more stable. Inciting unrest and paranoia in the electorate may be attractive at certain times in some areas, but largely it seems as though making a message comprehensible and clear wins out.

Fascist **Simplicity** was identified as deliberately framing a message in a way to promote paranoia or incite action amongst followers. This [tweet](#) by Meloni demonstrates one method of Simplicity that aims to create an enemy. Meloni provides a letter supposedly from the Brigade Rosse, a left-wing terrorist organization that had disappeared by the end of the 2000s in Italy. She uses this letter to provide a message stating that she is not afraid and will not back down, but her simplification of the events is misleading as there is no evidence to suggest the Brigade Rosse have returned. This is an example of a tweet that can fit into multiple categories as it qualifies as an **Us vs. Them** example as well. Salvini demonstrates a different method in this [tweet](#). Here Salvini blames integration for the rape of an Italian woman. This reductionist message deliberately promotes fear in the Italian population against a group of individuals.

This [tweet](#) from Meloni shows the populist version of **Simplicity**. She attacks the Italian left as having failed to deliver on their promises during their time in control of the country over the past decade. What she deliberately leaves out is that the program they promoted in their most recent coalition was destroyed not on its own merit but by COVID. This deliberate preference for bending the truth fits with the goals of populist **Simplicity**. Salvini provides a more innocent [example](#) that contains a video giving a brief overview of his party's energy policy. Salvini gives a

quick, 20-second overview of why Lega is in support of nuclear energy. Simple policy position videos are an effective way for right-wing populists to make their message widely digestible.

Gendered Leadership

Social Media Spectrum 4: Gendered Leadership Ratio



The section with the highest difference between the two, and the only one to exhibit a higher occurrence of fascist messaging than populist, is that of the **Gendered Leadership** category, illustrated in **Social Media Spectrum 4**. Salvini almost exclusively utilizes the populist charismatic strongman style to the point that he hardly ever exhibits any fascist elements. However, Meloni exhibits a fascist **Gendered Leadership** style at a rate of almost twice as often as she exhibits a populist style. On her social media, Meloni has embraced the fascist conception of a traditional Italian woman, emphasizing maternal qualities. From the way she dresses and speaks to the issues she chooses to highlight, there is an undertone of fascism that runs through a very significant portion of her messaging. This represents the one area where Meloni or Salvini has truly chosen to move into a more extreme position than that accepted by conventional right-wing populism.

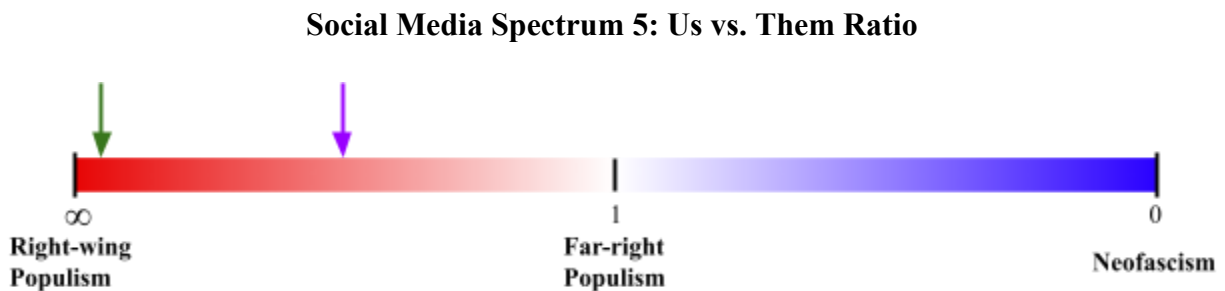
A possible explanation for this occurrence is that Meloni is seeking to differentiate herself and reflect the traditional social values that some may think are lost in modern Italian society. Appearing as the maternal defender of the family could gain significant amounts of support from the electorate. Also, this is the one area that has been identified in fascism that is not incredibly apparent at first glance. While the other categories either require racial

connotations or anti-democratic tendencies, fascist **Gendered Leadership** is a much more benign-appearing style than any other in this study. The fascist version of the charismatic strongman is a much more recognizable identity, and the issues that it would carry for Salvini are obviously not worth the controversy. The difference between the populist and fascist charismatic strongman is also likely not to increase appeal to a significant group that does not already enjoy the populist version, and Salvini is likely further dissuaded by the patriarchal and anti-woman nature of male fascist leadership.

Gendered Leadership was identified as either exhibiting the charismatic strongman or conventional populist leadership or performing in a way that links to fascist gender norms. This [video](#) by Meloni contains an example of how she played on the conception of the traditional Italian mother that was dominant in fascism. Meloni promotes herself as a politician who cares for everyone and wants to provide for their safety and security. This directly links to the concept of the fascist mother who acts to protect her family, in this case, the Italian people. This was a very common theme in Meloni's messaging as she utilized her unique position as a woman in Italian politics to differentiate herself. In this [tweet](#), however, Meloni pursues a more populist version of **Gendered Leadership** that promotes the ability for women to act in the same capacity as men, something not promoted by fascism. She frames a tweet by Enrico Letta, leader of the center-left PD, as being misogynistic. Salvini demonstrates a convention consistent with the populist **Gendered Leadership** category for men in this [tweet](#). Salvini comes across as the traditional charismatic strongman through his dress and his mannerisms. He looks like a man of the people, and he speaks with an energy that promotes this idea.

Analysis of the Content of Social Media Communication

Us vs. Them



The first content category analyzed was that of the ratio of **Us vs. Them** rhetoric. The ratio of populist to fascist occurrences in the **Us vs. Them** category, illustrated in **Social Media Spectrum 5**, is very similar to that of the personalized category. Looking back to **Table 3**, it is again not as if Salvini utilized populist **Us vs. Them** messaging in most of his tweets, but that he hardly ever utilized a fascist version of the style. Meloni did not utilize a fascist **Us vs. Them** style very much either, but her ratio is around eight times lower than Salvini's because of his almost complete lack of usage. Salvini only utilized a fascist **Us vs. Them** attitude in four of his tweets within the period. This is rather surprising considering the **Transgressive** data that was looked at earlier, but the necessity for the racial or ethnic division to be discussed likely created a significant barrier to the usage of this style. If Salvini or Meloni wanted to project a more extreme position, they generally chose to do so elsewhere in areas that may contain more nuance, like the gendered leadership and exclusionary nature categories. This may suggest that they were careful not to lean too heavily on collective rhetoric based on racial or ethnic identity due to fears of backlash.

Fascist **Us vs. Them** usage was identified as claiming that a group is under threat from outside forces, promoting diligence and solidarity. This [tweet](#) provides an example of how Meloni framed the Italian left as a threat to her supporters. She promotes the idea that the left is a

potentially violent group that aims to threaten the right into silence. Salvini demonstrates a different path in this [tweet](#), which characterizes Italian immigrants and migrants as an invading force in Europe. Salvini states that there is no room for everyone in Europe, and these people should be kept out of the continent. In portraying them as a violent force, Salvini creates fear in his followers of this other that threatens their way of life.

This [tweet](#) by Meloni demonstrates the populist version of **Us vs. Them** rhetoric. She follows a tweet with a video of a prominent PD politician with a statement accusing the left of wishing to subvert democratic institutions. She then promotes the idea of a double standard enforced by the media that is unfair to the right and favors the left. Salvini provides a similar [example](#) in an edited cartoon that was created as a critique of Meloni and Salvini that they each want to betray the other at some point for power. Salvini replaces the knives with flowers, emphasizing unity and promoting the idea that outside forces seek to divide the right.

Exclusionary Nature

Social Media Spectrum 6: Exclusionary Nature Ratio



The ratios of the **Exclusionary Nature**, illustrated in **Social Media Spectrum 6**, of Meloni and Salvini's rhetoric are very similar. They both significantly chose to use a fascist form of exclusionary rhetoric over once every three occurrences. There is a lot of discussion by both on the economic burden of migrants and immigrants that the two used to justify more populist exclusionary rhetoric. That being said, they both choose to use fascist rhetoric a significant amount in this area, with Salvini using it relatively more in relation to his total number of tweets.

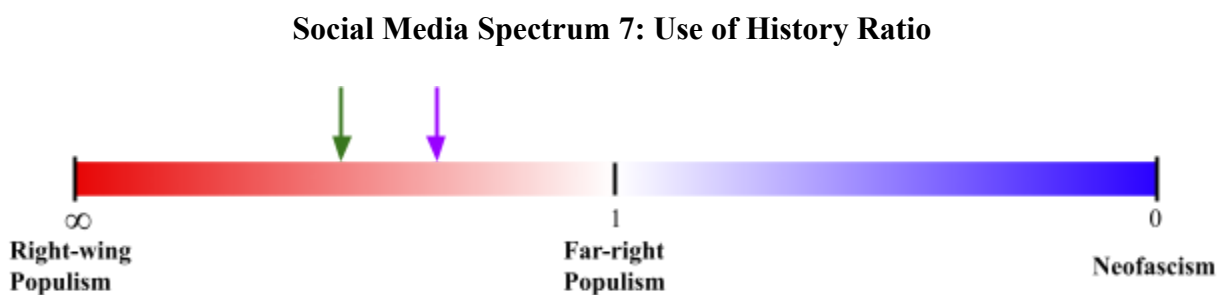
This is an area in which they do focus on the ethnic status of Italy as a positive. While the **Us vs. Them** category requires an element of a superiority complex, the **Exclusionary Nature** of rhetoric does not. Meloni and Salvini advocate for the defense of Italian identity, be it through the halting of immigration and migration. This represents another significant shift to more extreme views on immigration, and also race and ethnicity, than those of conventional right-wing populists.

Exclusionary Nature is the second-to-last category in the scoresheet, and it featured heavily on both leaders' social media accounts. Fascist **Exclusionary** rhetoric was identified as promoting stories and messaging that identified a racial or ethnic group as not belonging in the country. This [story](#) promoted by Meloni emphasizes the race of the attacker of a young Italian woman. Stories of crimes committed by immigrants on Italians were the dominant method by which fascist **Exclusionary** rhetoric was used. Rape was also one of the most common crimes discussed as it naturally promotes disgust in the reader, which can then be manipulated. Salvini demonstrates a different path in this [tweet](#), a story of a Muslim girl being beaten by her parents for dating an Italian boy. This portrayal of Islam as a backward and restrictive religion is followed by Salvini stating his belief in "the freedom of the West." This represents the version of fascist **Exclusionary** rhetoric that promotes the removal of an idea from society. According to Salvini, Islam does not belong in Italy, and it represents a threat to the freedom of the Christian West.

This [video](#) of Meloni demonstrates the populist version of **Exclusionary** rhetoric. She promotes the idea that her immigration policy is better because it counters the human trafficking that does occur. She makes her anti-migrant position through a legitimate lens that promotes an image of her as someone who cares for all people, not just her own. Restrictive policies are

framed as a universal benefit rather than a product of fearmongering and ethnonationalism. Salvini utilizes a similar strategy in this [example](#) that contains a video of him touring the harsh conditions at a migrant camp on the Italian island of Lampedusa, the Italian island closest to Africa that has become a major landing spot for migrants. He also frames restrictive policies as being in the best interest of all parties. Instead of focusing on cultural divides, humanitarian issues are raised along with the burden the migrants place on the system.

Use of History



The final area is that of the **Use of History** category, illustrated in **Social Media Spectrum 7**. This category did not exhibit as significant a shift towards something more extreme like the previous category. While both did exhibit some examples of fascist attitudes towards rebirth and renewal of the nation that were reminiscent of those described by Griffin, they largely utilized history as a way to allude to a better time that they are seeking to recreate. The nostalgic factor of the populist **Use of History** was more present in the rhetoric than a full-scale attitude towards rebirth and national superiority. Pride in their nation's historical background and tradition was present throughout a decent portion of their communication, but it largely focused on a more nostalgic and wistful message than something more concrete and extreme. Overall, Meloni's **Gendered Leadership** category led her to be over twice as likely to exhibit a fascist tendency than Salvini.

Fascist **Use of History** was identified as promoting the revival of the true spirit of the nation that had supposedly disappeared at some point. This [video](#) by Meloni demonstrates the desire to revive the spirit of the nation. She promotes being proud of being Italian, the flag, and the culture with a video that cuts between her speech and images of “true Italian.” These people are all ethnic Italians who reinforce the idea of a nation that has been slowly dying out that needs to be revived and reinvigorated. Salvini demonstrates a different way of using history in this [tweet](#), which is a memorial to Oriana Fallaci, a prominent writer who, after 9/11, wrote scathing attacks on Islam as a threat to the West that must be eliminated. This shows how history can be manipulated to promote extreme positions, and the use of prominent figures like Fallaci can be beneficial to modern leaders. Salvini’s memorial acts as a way of tying his message to hers, and it serves to give him legitimacy.

This [memorial](#) by Meloni of a famous anti-fascist hero during World War II demonstrates the populist version of the **Use of History**. She cites the story of Salvo D’Acquisto, an Italian *Carabinieri* who sacrificed himself by taking responsibility for a crime he did not commit to spare a group of Italians from being executed by the Nazis. Meloni uses this story to challenge the narrative that she represents a return to fascism. By taking a widely adored historical figure and celebrating his sacrifice, Meloni attempts to ease the concerns of more moderate voters. Salvini provides another way of utilizing history and tradition that more directly appeals to the nostalgic factor. While the content of the [video](#) is not relevant, the backdrop of Salvini’s office is. Salvini deliberately frames himself surrounded by Catholic icons that remind the viewer of an institution that has been somewhat lost. This can elicit a nostalgic feeling amongst his followers to return to a time when faith was a key part of Italian life.

Summary Social Media Spectrums and Analysis

Social Media Spectrum 8: Total Populist vs. Fascist Ratio



Social Media Spectrum 9: Total Populist vs. Fascist Ratio Excluding Gendered Leadership



In total, these spectrums show that Meloni has employed fascist elements more often in more categories than Salvini. Salvini is only more extreme in **Social Media Spectrum 2** and **Social Media Spectrum 4**, but he still remains a considerable distance away from the far-right populist median. Altogether, if one considers that a conventional right-wing populist party would find itself a bit to the left of Salvini in **Social Media Spectrum 8**, Salvini seems to be relatively faithful to right-wing populist strategy. Meloni does show signs that she has moved to a more extreme position, as shown in **Social Media Spectrum 5**, but **Social Media Spectrum 9**, which excludes the **Gendered Leadership** category, shows that the majority of her rhetoric has not strayed too far from where would be acceptable for a conventional right-wing populist.

The Frequency of Select Occurrences in Tweets Explored in Percentages

Table 5. Percentages Illustrating the Frequency of Select Occurrences in Tweets

Characteristics		Giorgia Meloni	Matteo Salvini
Fascist Occurrences		22.28%	11.79%
Populist Occurrences		97.58%	127.75%
Populist Personalization		27.36%	26.86%
Populist Us vs. Them		29.78%	34.79%
Gendered Leadership	Populist	6.30%	20.81%
	Fascist	10.90%	0.20%
Fascist Occurrences Excluding Gendered Leadership		11.38%	11.60%
Populist Occurrences Excluding Gendered Leadership		91.28%	106.94%

Table 5 holds the significant percentage calculations that were created through an analysis based on a single tweet. The first three calculations represent a look at percentage versions of the total ratios that were described in the previous section. The rest of the values were selected as they represent significant statements, either high levels of usage or significant difference between Meloni and Salvini, about the results of the observations. All of these percentages are meant to demonstrate the significance of certain styles and rhetorical conventions that both Meloni and Salvini utilize in their social media posts. The ratios give a sense of the similarity between the two figures in regard to their relative usage of populist and fascist conventions. These percentages show similarities in the frequency of usage despite differences in volume that are not apparent through the ratios. The frequency of usage says a lot about the goals and strategies utilized by figures like Meloni and Salvini. Given the nature of their position on the political spectrum, they find themselves under constant scrutiny. As a result,

they are likely to be very selective over the styles and rhetoric they choose to use, making those used most often likely to be those deemed the most effective and valuable.

The first percentage selected was the percentage of tweets that exhibited populist **Personalization**. This was the case in just over 25% of both Meloni and Salvini's tweets. Both of the two seem to have identified the populist leadership model as the most effective for their personal campaigns. Similarly, both exhibited a very high usage of populist **Us vs. Them** rhetoric in their tweets. This was not surprising as the collective nature of populist rhetoric was something that was well-established in the literature and struck me as more effective and acceptable than the fascist version. Salvini actually utilized populist **Us vs. Them** rhetoric even more than Meloni and to a higher degree than any other method of communication. These are the two areas that appear to be where Meloni and Salvini have most maintained and utilized the conventional populist versions of communication.

The second set of percentages is that demonstrating the levels of usage of the populist and fascist versions of **Gendered Leadership**. The difference here is the most significant of anywhere in the study. Meloni utilizes the fascist version of **Gendered Leadership** at over fifty times the percentage of Salvini and more than she uses the populist. The percentages put into perspective the high frequency of Meloni's usage of the fascist woman in her social media presence. Salvini embracing the charismatic strongman of populism was possibly the least surprising aspect of the study, but Meloni's degree of acceptance of the fascist version of **Gendered Leadership** was unexpected. The expectation was for her to largely maintain adherence to the conventional populist version with a slide towards the fascist version similar to what was observed in the **Exclusionary Nature** count. The idea that she would actually favor the fascist, maternal figure was something that caught me by surprise.

The final percentages that were selected were the percentage of fascist and populist occurrences per tweet, excluding those belonging to the category of **Gendered Leadership**. This percentage was created to try to gain a sense of how significant the difference between the two figures was in the absence of one category that could not be applied uniformly to both. As Meloni is a woman, it could be possible that it is easier for her to use the fascist version than Salvini. The analysis showed that after removing the gender category, the two used fascist communication at a rate within .2% of each other. They were essentially equally as likely to use a fascist version as each other. This, to me, signified an extremely important similarity between the two that was not initially apparent upon looking at the data. The populist percentages were different as Salvini was still significantly more likely to exhibit populist positions even without the charismatic strongman category. That being said, they were still both extremely likely to display a populist convention in their social media messaging and nearly equally likely to display a fascist element. Combining this conclusion with the one that they use populist and fascist rhetoric at similar ratios leads one to recognize that the social media strategies of the two are very similar.

Summary of Social Media Section Findings

In summary, the social media data demonstrated strong shifts towards a more extreme version of right-wing populism in only a few of the categories that were analyzed. It was interesting to note that these shifts largely came in areas that did not necessarily require an anti-democratic angle. Salvini did utilize a more extreme form of **Transgressive** communication relatively frequently, but it largely came in the form of extreme conservatism or conspiratorial anti-establishment rhetoric rather than illiberal or anti-democratic rhetoric. The **Exclusionary Nature** category was the one area in which both Meloni and Salvini displayed substantial

movement towards the far-right. The one area of significant difference was the **Gendered Leadership** category of the social media section. Meloni did exhibit an overwhelming propensity to utilize a fascist version of gendered leadership that even went as far as to go beyond what is expected of far-right populism towards neofascism. That single category drove Meloni to appear as being much more likely than Salvini to employ fascist rhetoric. After removing that value, the relative usage of fascist conventions in their social media profiles is extremely similar and displays no significant shift towards the far-right.

Chapter 4: The Presence of Populism and Fascism in Meloni and Salvini's Speeches

Introduction and Summary of the Context of the Analyzed Speeches

The second section of the study focused on short-form communication by Meloni and Salvini through their public addresses. The same can be said for the speeches, as an almost identical scorecard was used, with a single modification. Public addresses, largely in the form of speeches, were selected due to their timeless nature as a method of communication, along with the accessibility of high-quality audio and video. All of the addresses were taken from the official YouTube accounts of Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini, respectively. There were a couple of initial guidelines that were created to stay true to the spirit of the study and limit potential subjectivity. The first was that equivalent addresses from the two figures were selected. If they both published a speech from the same event, as was the case twice, they were chosen in order to gain a more legitimate ability to compare the two's results. Also, each statement made during a speech is treated in the same way that the tweets were earlier. That is, each statement can only count once for each category but can count for multiple categories.

There was one less category because the **Gendered Leadership** category was made a general observation from the speeches rather than a count category. The nature of the tones and mannerisms of the two leader's speeches were compared side-by-side. As these were largely speeches and not something written down, one could not accurately separate Salvini and Meloni's speeches into complete sentences as they would go on or speak in fragments at times. Instead, the speeches were separated into coherent statements, which were then the unit of analysis. Lastly, addresses were chosen that were of similar lengths to each other in an attempt to replicate the scenarios that the two were in. That is to say that they both have points that they

want to get across more than others. In selecting similar-length speeches, one can observe what they choose to address and how they address those topics under similar circumstances.

Summary of the Context of the Speeches

In total, there were ten speeches observed in this study, five belonging to each of Meloni and Salvini. Both leaders' speeches from the closing of the center-right's campaign on September 22nd were used as they were of equal length and to the same crowd. Also, both leaders were interviewed at the Versiliana Festival, a cultural and entertainment festival, on August 17th for just under an hour. A speech given by Meloni at a rally in Milan on September 12th was analyzed alongside one given on August 23rd at Ancona, a city in the middle of Italy on the Adriatic Coast. The final speech was one given at the beginning of the campaign by Meloni in Rome on July 25th, a few days after Mario Draghi's resignation as Prime Minister. For Salvini, his address on September 18th at Pontida, a sacred rally for Lega in the northern countryside, was selected. His comments from an appearance on a panel at the Rimini Meeting on August 23rd, a Catholic festival, were also analyzed. The final speech came from an interview, also done soon after Draghi's resignation, on July 31st in Milan. Video from all of the speeches was taken from the official YouTube channels of Meloni and Salvini.

Analysis of Speech Data

Table 6. Total Occurrences in Speeches by Category

Characteristics		Giorgia Meloni	Matteo Salvini
Personalization (S)	Populist	132	130
	Fascist	4	8
Transgressive Nature (S)	Populist	111	115
	Fascist	17	14
Simplicity (S)	Populist	278	261
	Fascist	14	13
The General Will and Us vs. Them (R)	Populist	247	196
	Fascist	27	13
Exclusionary Nature (R)	Populist	61	51
	Fascist	19	10
Use of History (R)	Populist	40	42
	Fascist	8	11
Total	Populist	869	795
	Fascist	89	69
	All	958	864
	Length(minutes)	191.43	194

Table 6 shows the data collected from the speeches that were selected from Meloni and Salvini's official YouTube channels that were posted in the three months leading up to the election. The initial aspect that strikes the viewer about the contents of **Table 6** in contrast to those in the social media section is that the data is actually very similar between the two leaders. Meloni and Salvini each exhibit similar counts of the individual categories across most of the selected categories, with some coming within one or two occurrences of each other. One possible explanation for this is that, as the styles of the two speeches were similar with regard to the populist nature, the results were likely to be similar as well, especially when one considers their ideological similarities. Another possible reason is that they can be held more directly

accountable for what they say in a speech than what is posted on their official Twitter account. For example, if Meloni or Salvini post something that reflects fascist exclusionary content and is called out for it, they can simply delete the post and possibly even blame it on someone from their team. This damage control does not exist in the world of public speaking. If they say something along similar lines in a speech given to thousands of people, it is nearly impossible for them to deflect blame or controversy away should it arise. This is not what was expected, as the idea was that they might feel more secure around supporters, and, therefore, more likely to take more extreme positions. It is worth noting that often when they espoused their most extreme and fascist positions, it coincided with a bombastic explosion identified by raising their voice and making energetic gestures. Overall, though, the speeches were generally conventional and rather similar to previously described.

Table 7. The Ratio of Populist to Fascist Occurrences in Speeches and Other Select Ratios

Characteristics	Giorgia Meloni	Matteo Salvini
Populist Occurrences/min	4.54	4.10
Fascist Occurrences/min	0.46	0.36
Total Occurrences/min	5.00	4.46
Personalization Ratio	33.00	16.25
Transgressive Nature Ratio	6.53	8.21
Simplicity Ratio	19.86	20.08
Us vs. Them Ratio	9.15	15.08
Exclusionary Nature Ratio	3.21	5.10
Use of History Ratio	5.00	3.82
Total Populist vs. Fascist Ratio	9.76	11.52

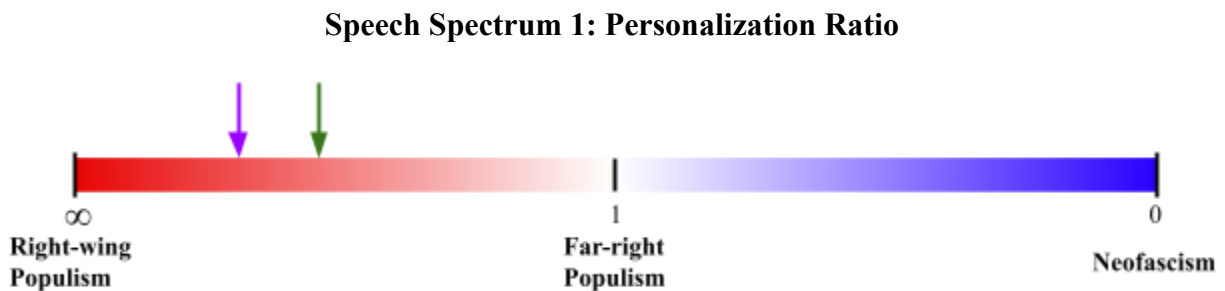
Table 7 contains the ratios that were created in an effort to standardize the data in order to more accurately compare the political communication in the speeches of the two figures.

Similar to the social media section, this analysis largely focuses on whether the two were more

likely to use populist or fascist communication when speaking within the categories under observation. In terms of the frequency of occurrences, Meloni and Salvini each exhibited more than four populist occurrences within their speeches per minute, with Meloni being around .4 occurrences per minute higher than Salvini at 4.54 to 4.1. A minute made the most sense as a unit of analysis for time as the speaker could make a few statements in that interval. A second would be far too short, and an hour would be longer than all of the speeches. As for fascist occurrences, Meloni utilized fascist conventions at a rate of .1 occurrences per minute higher than Salvini. Overall, Meloni exhibited either a populist or fascist convention at a rate of one every two minutes higher than Salvini. This was not expected or immediately apparent in the data. Based on Salvini's more charged social media profile, it stood to reason that his speeches would be more charged as well. This could be explained by the topics that the two chose to address. Meloni addressed many of the same social issues that Salvini did, but she actually spoke more about immigration than he did. Salvini favored issues like nuclear power and the flat tax, which did have some rhetoric that fell into the categories of the study but less than more contentious issues like immigration. An investigation of the individual category ratios shows the general lack of affinity towards fascism. The rest of **Table 7** concentrates on the ratios of populist to fascist communication employed by the two leaders.

Analysis of the Style of the Selected Speeches

Personalization



Speech Spectrums: Green = Salvini Purple = Meloni

Personalization is the first stylistic category, illustrated in **Speech Spectrum 1**, and shows overwhelming usage of the populist variety in both cases. It is worth noting that when looking back to **Table 6**, it is not as if Meloni utilized populist personalized messaging all too frequently in her speeches, but that she hardly ever exhibited fascist **Personalization**. Salvini did not utilize a fascist personalized style very much either, but his ratio is double Meloni's because of her almost complete lack of usage. Again, both of the leaders frequently pronounced pro-democratic stances, and fascist **Personalization** is rather incompatible with democratic messaging. Because of the potential concerns described earlier as well, they may have chosen to steer clear of this area.

Personalization is the first category in the scoresheet. Fascist **Personalization** was identified the same way as in the social media section, highlighting and glorifying the individual to a higher degree than generally common among populists. This [clip](#) by Meloni demonstrates fascist **Personalization** in the way she characterizes herself. Beyond assuming responsibility as the leader, she states that she is not afraid of her adversaries and will lead the right in this battle. This militant rhetoric portrays her as a leader of an army, a personalized image that is reminiscent of Mussolini and his army of Blackshirts. Salvini demonstrates a different method in

this [moment](#) from his interview in Milan. He portrays himself as a martyr for the cause of defending Italy, something consistent with the religious aspect of fascist personalization. This level of pseud-religious rhetoric is not something found in the communication of right-wing populists.

This [moment](#) from Meloni's interview at the Versiliana Festival demonstrates a populist version of **Personalization**. She begins by discussing supply chain issues and states that everyone was tricked that no such issues would occur when things were outsourced to the East. She then qualifies that statement that she was not tricked, but everyone else was. This fits with the populist category because it represents the idea that the populist leader has the answers for the suffering of the common person who has been tricked by elites. Salvini provides a similar [example](#) in his address at Pontida. He frames Lega as the party of those left behind by the elitist governments of the past few years. This makes Salvini their representative and voice in government, a role that he welcomes as a way of boosting his voting numbers.

Transgressive Nature

Speech Spectrum 2: Transgressive Nature



The **Transgressive** nature, illustrated in **Speech Spectrum 2**, of the rhetoric that Meloni and Salvini espoused was closer to something more extreme than **Personalization**, but still quite far off approaching a significant shift towards the equal ratio representing the far-right. Meloni was marginally more likely to exhibit more fascist **Transgressive** behavior than Salvini. Both seem to have identified **Transgressive** rhetoric as an area where they could possibly sprinkle in

some more extreme positions, but they have largely stayed away from a significant shift. Salvini consistently chose to employ fascist **Transgressive** rhetoric in his social media. It came with an anti-institutionalist and extreme socially conservative nature that may not be seen as appealing in a public speaking format. Fear of backlash could again be a possible explanation, along with the general acceptance of a more exclusively populist charismatic style.

Transgressive Nature is the second category in the scoresheet. This [point](#) by Meloni shows a **Transgressive** tone promoting the idea that the left has hegemonic power over Italian society. She argues that the left has built a society that is predatory toward and excludes the Italian right in an effort to suppress support for their positions. The right is portrayed as the victim of oppression by the left. Salvini shows a more explicit **Transgressive** strategy in this [clip](#), in which Salvini claims that left-wing judges control the Italian system of justice. Salvini claims that Italy will not truly be free until these judges are defeated, something that closely resembles the anti-democratic and illiberal messages that characterize a fascist **Transgressive Nature**.

This [moment](#) from Meloni demonstrates the populist version of a **Transgressive** moment within a speech. Meloni argues for the need for Italians to take back control of their political system and economic future. This kind of rhetoric is fundamental to populist political rhetoric and was made famous during the Brexit Referendum, which was won by right-wing populists. Salvini provides a different [example](#) that focuses on a similar point to the example of **Transgressive** social media communication by Meloni. Salvini argues for the defense of life from beginning to end, in this case, conception to death. This anti-abortion stance is then qualified so as to reinforce that he does not want to ignore existing law, but rather to work within

left-wing rally was not. No other context is given, but she makes sure to frame the situation in a way that creates a victim out of the right-wing activists. Salvini demonstrates a more aggressive use of simplicity in this [moment](#) from his closing address in Rome. Here Salvini praises the sound of the bell towers as an example of Italian society that is under threat by immigration. Salvini identifies immigrants as coming to Italy and wanting to change the way Italians behave through their very presence, which is a reductionist way to view the world and personal interactions.

This [point](#) from Meloni shows the populist version of **Simplicity**, which was heavily present in their speeches. She herself states that she will simplify the goals of the European green policy for the listeners. That is followed by her critique of the policy, which makes this a perfect example of the deliberate nature of the use of **Simplicity**. Salvini provides another [example](#) where he states that those who refuse to work should not be entitled to government benefits. This is a very quick, digestible policy point that identifies those who refuse to work as a burden on the system that siphons resources away from those who truly cannot work. Simple statements like this are easy to agree to and play on the attitudes of the average citizen who is not informed on the nuances of the economy.

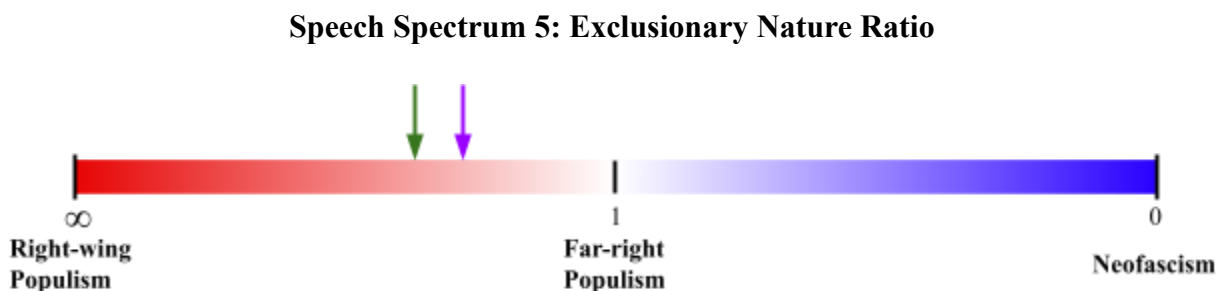
Discussion of the Presence of Gendered Leadership

Overall, the two both held very similar tones and styles throughout all of their speeches. There was not a noticeable difference in the style of the speeches when it comes to a **Gendered Leadership** categorization. Meloni abandoned the maternalistic attitudes that were so prevalent in her social media messaging when the medium moved to public speaking. Instead, she favored a traditional, charismatic projection consistent with what is expected of a populist leader. At times, one could have characterized her attitude as a “charismatic strongwoman,” as she

wants to silence the right and maintain the left's control over the country. This argument is more extreme than what would be accepted as populist because it identifies the media as a conspiratorial agency dedicated to suppressing the voices of Italians. The same [clip](#) that was used for fascist **Simplicity** also demonstrates Salvini's usage of the fascist **Us vs. Them** convention. The immigrant and their religion are framed as a threat to Italian culture, Christianity, and the Italian way of life. This fearmongering shifts Salvini's position into the fascist category because it identifies immigrants as invading forces bent on destruction.

This [point](#) by Meloni demonstrates a populist version of **Us vs. Them** rhetoric. She puts out the idea that, despite nobody being public, it is unlikely that there is not a single person in the entertainment world who supports her platform. Instead, the left's dominance in that field leads them to stay silent for fear of reprisal. This acts as a reassurance to her supporters that they are not ignorant but that it is the left who scare those who support them into silence. Salvini provides a somewhat similar [example](#) in a statement he makes that the media will have a difficult time stating that the large crowd gathered at Pontida did not exist. This also plays on the idea that the media seeks to discourage support of the right and that people need to see through that and understand the media's true agenda.

Exclusionary Nature



The ratios of the **Exclusionary Nature** of Meloni and Salvini's rhetoric, illustrated in **Speech Spectrum 5**, are similar as well, but they represent the closest Meloni gets to a more

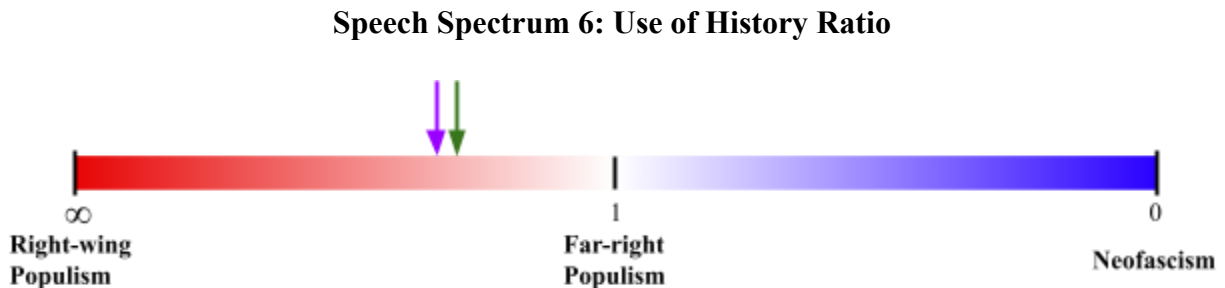
extreme version of right-wing populism in her speeches. Nevertheless, they both use it less than they did in the social media section, with Meloni using it one in five times and Salvini one in six. Again, there is a significant discussion from both of the economic burden of migrants and immigrants, but they do choose to use fascist rhetoric a decent amount in this area. There is a noticeable presence of replacement theory in the speeches of Meloni and Salvini. They focus on the idea that Italians are being replaced, especially in small towns, by immigrants. Citing increasing incentives to raise the birth rate demonstrates that this is a racial and ethnic concern, not an economic one. That being said, the results only suggest a moderate shift towards something more extreme.

Exclusionary Nature is the second-to-last category in the scoresheet, and it featured heavily on both leaders' social media accounts. Same as for social media, fascist **Exclusionary** rhetoric was identified as promoting stories and messaging that identified a racial or ethnic group as not belonging in the country. This [clip](#) of Meloni promotes the idea of replacement theory. In a similar moment, Salvini also espouses rhetoric consistent with replacement theory in this [clip](#). Replacement theory is an ethnonationalist belief that the true nation is being replaced by foreign immigrants not from their culture. This fits with the **Exclusionary** rhetoric of fascism as it creates a racial or ethnic division that poses a threat to the future of the nation. Both Meloni and Salvini express the necessity of supporting programs that will incite higher birthrates so that the Italian population does not disappear.

This [video](#) of Meloni demonstrates the populist version of **Exclusionary** rhetoric. She argues that the exportation of the production of Italian brands to foreign countries is harmful to the Italian economy and culture. Her rhetoric is similar to what has been observed amongst right-wing populists in the United States like Donald Trump advocating to “buy American.”

Salvini focuses more on immigration in his populist **Exclusionary** rhetoric. In this [clip](#), Salvini boasts about the low number of migrants that reached Italian shores during his time as Interior Minister. This fits with right-wing populism because it projects the idea that migration should be prevented without explicitly identifying racial or ethnic differences.

Use of History



The final area is that of the **Use of History** category, illustrated in **Speech Spectrum 6**. This category showed a similar shift towards something more extreme like the previous category, except for Salvini this time. They both demonstrated some fascist attitudes toward the rebirth and renewal of the nation that were reminiscent of those described by Griffin and yet they largely still largely utilized history as a way to allude to a better time. The nostalgic factor of the populist **Use of History** was more present in their speeches rather than a full-scale attitude towards rebirth and national superiority. Salvini was more likely to refer to history or renewal in general, and he tended to do so in his arguments about autonomy. Salvini praised the independent nature of the Italian regions and their diverse histories, while Meloni generally focused on the nation as a whole. Meloni's ratio was identical to her social media ratio for the same category. This was the other category that saw a marginal increase in usage, along with a slide towards something more extreme in the case of Salvini. That being said, it ended up at 3.82 populist per fascist, which is not a massively impactful shift. In general, Meloni was marginally more likely to utilize

fascist conventions than Salvini in their respective speeches, as is shown in the final ratio regarding the totals.

The **Use of History** is the final category on the scoresheet. The fascist **Use of History** was identified the same as it was in the social media section. This [clip](#) of Meloni contains her telling the crowd that Italy needs to find itself again. The nation needs to recover its pride and its freedom; things that have been taken from it over the past few years. This fits with the fascist idea of revival that is part of the **Use of History** as a return to a point in time where individuals had pride in their nation is what Meloni is arguing is necessary. Salvini demonstrates a similar **Use of History** in this [clip](#), in which he argues that it is the responsibility of the current generation to defend Italian culture and traditions. He argues the need to reconnect to the roots of Italian culture.

This [point](#) by Meloni represents a much softer **Use of History** that is much more nuanced. She uses the example of the television program MasterChef as something that promotes Italian culture and tradition to the next generation. Meloni believes that through these “cultural operations,” the next generation can be educated on the important aspects of Italian tradition. Also, it creates interest among the youth to work as a chef, a traditionally common Italian occupation that had fallen out of favor among the youth due to the post-industrial economy and education. Salvini provides another way of utilizing history and tradition that appeals to traditional religious and cultural beliefs about the family. This [moment](#) of his July speech in Milan references his belief that the traditional family structure is the only one acceptable in Italy. He states that “there is no parent 1 and parent 2 but only the mother and the father.” This is in response to socially progressive positions on same-sex couples adopting children and other

elements in their speeches, especially when considering Meloni's abandonment of the fascist maternal gender role.

Summary of Speech Section Findings

Overall, speeches seem to be the least likely of the two forms of communication analyzed to exhibit significant fascist elements. Because of the aforementioned risks in delivering a more charged and controversial speech, it may be too risky for Meloni and Salvini to include fascist elements. Meloni and Salvini largely exhibited very similar levels and proportions of usage across all categories in their speeches. Even with Meloni's use of the model of the fascist mother in her social media, she abandons it in her public addresses. It seems as though it is more of a tool being used as a means to an end rather than a significant aspect of her campaign and platform. The two leaders seem to be exhibiting behaviors that are more akin to the far-right in certain areas of their social media, but those areas still remain more closely related to conventional right-wing populism in their speeches. This may suggest that the two are both comfortable as right-wing populists and do not personally see any advantage or allure towards moving to the far-right. More extreme positions could be used tactically just to excite their followers and spur them into action, especially in long-form content like speeches.

Chapter 5: Concluding Insights: The Nature and Impact of Meloni and Salvini's Rhetoric

The goal of this study was to determine whether there was cause for concern that right-wing extremism was gaining momentum in Italy. Through an analysis of the direct political communication of Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini via Twitter and speeches, there was insufficient evidence to suggest a shift towards more extreme forms of right-wing populism. Revisiting the five expectations for the study, they were largely accurate in the end. Meloni and Salvini both frequently utilized **Personalized**, **Simple**, and **Transgressive** messaging that reflected values and tendencies associated with conventional right-wing populists. This is in line with *Expectation 1* and is bolstered by the evidence that both still favored the populist version of **Transgressive** communication rather than the more extreme fascist alternative. Secondly, in line with *Expectation 2* on different appeals to gender roles, there were significant differences in the style and messaging of Salvini and Meloni concentrated in the **Gendered Leadership** category. Where the data diverged from *Expectation 2* was that instead of occurring within the populist category, Meloni adopted a much more extreme position in terms of her use of her gender on her social media. It resulted in that category being the only one to demonstrate a significant shift towards fascism. That being said, she abandoned this strategy in her public speaking and reverted to being the charismatic leader of populism.

Expectation 3 was partially correct in its belief that Meloni and Salvini would exhibit significant shifts in their rhetoric in their **Exclusionary Nature** and use of **Us vs. Them** style arguments. In reality, their rhetoric only contained a notable shift to more extreme values in the **Exclusionary Nature** of social media communication. There was little evidence to suggest a movement towards something more extreme in either of the **Us vs. Them** categories or in the **Exclusionary Nature** category in the speech section. *Expectation 4* focused on the backgrounds

of the two parties and predicted a difference in the rhetoric of their leaders as a result. The idea that the historical and ideological backgrounds of FdI and Lega would create differences in the style and substance of Meloni and Salvini's communication was not supported by the evidence. Geographic distinctions were largely minimized by both leaders, reinforcing Salvini's aim of nationalizing Lega and leaving Northern separatism in the past. Likewise, Meloni did not focus her campaign on the Southern portion of the country, and she too prioritized spreading her message as far as possible.

The final expectation, *Expectation 5*, was that despite the rhetoric of Meloni and Salvini expressing ethnonationalism, anti-elitism, and promotion of the general will, they will not fully move into more extreme territory. This was largely supported by the results of the study. This could largely be down to both individual preferences and the nature of the parties that they lead. Meloni, despite starting in MSI, spent most of her early political career in the sanitized *Allenza Nazionale* led by Fini, who made deliberate attempts to make the party less extreme as described in *Chapter 2*. Salvini also leads a party that has embodied conventional right-wing populist strategies as exemplified by Umberto Bossi. Salvini may see a more extreme shift as potentially alienating towards Lega's base. Although there were some areas, the **Exclusionary** and **Transgressive** natures, that seemed to suggest that a moderate shift was occurring, there was no compelling case that there was a significant shift occurring within the Italian right-wing populist leadership. I think that there was not a drastic shift towards extremism because, aside from the personal positions of Meloni and Salvini, there did not seem to be any advantage gained from a shift. The left in Italy has struggled in recent elections, and the previous threat of M5S has moved toward the center and lost support. Forza Italia has seen a steady decline as well, which

means that Fratelli and Lega do not need to push extreme right-wing views when simply staying at more conventional positions will give them more broad support.

Possible avenues for future research could focus on expanding the subjects of the study. By looking at the communication of the leaders of Movimento 5 Stelle and Forza Italia, one could draw a full picture of the communication practices of the Italian parties that fall to the right of center. It would then be possible to understand how far to the right this new wave of leadership is of movements that are traditionally understood to be part of the center-right in the country. Also, one could expand the study to other countries. Observing the political communication of right-wing populist parties, such as Vox in Spain, Chega! in Portugal, the Sweden Democrats, or the Finns Party, could give insight as to whether other movements, which have been identified as potentially being more extreme than conventional right-wing populist parties, truly are something new. Vox and Chega are newer parties formed by exiles, Santiago Abascal and André Ventura, from the dominant center-right parties in their respective countries. These parties share similarities with FdI and Lega in that their countries also have a fascist past that creates a cultural barrier for extreme right-wing parties to enter the political landscape. The Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats are different in that their nations do not have the fascist past the Iberians and Italy do. The Sweden Democrats emerged as a collection of right-wing and far-right groups. The Finns Party succeeded the Finnish Rural Party, but they have changed the rhetoric of the old party to embody right-wing conservative views. Both parties have experienced significant success becoming the second largest parties in their countries in their most recent elections, and the Sweden Democrats are now a critical member of the coalition government.

Based on the findings of the study, for now, there is no shift towards more extreme forms of right-wing populism in Italy because there was insufficient evidence to suggest such a

shift. The political communication of Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini mainly reflected values and tendencies associated with conventional right-wing populism. Although there were some shifts in certain areas, such as the **Gendered Leadership** and the **Exclusionary Nature** of their social media rhetoric, the overall analysis did not present a compelling case for a significant shift towards more extreme ideologies within the Italian right-wing populist leadership. In her time as Prime Minister, Meloni has largely acted like one would expect a right-wing populist to. She has remained a staunch supporter of Ukraine, has taken a hard line on migrants, and has promoted reform in the European Union that benefits her country. She even went as far as to publicly disavow fascist and promote the European Union in her first speech as Prime Minister.¹⁷

If one is searching for potential danger as a result of the success of the right across Europe, the best place to look for potential significant shifts may be the Scandinavian countries. Sweden and Finland's second-largest parties are now both identified as right-wing populist. In nations without the presence of a fascist past, the allure of more extreme politics may be easier to make widely digestible. While this may seem counter-intuitive, memory plays a powerful role in the prevention of the rise of extremist movements as can be seen in Germany. A country without a memory of a fascist regime ingrained in its past lacks that protection. People may not have the same visceral reaction someone from a post-fascist country would have when being exposed to extreme right-wing rhetoric. Italy could be framed as a bellwether, indicating that the right is achieving widespread acceptance and are even able to form their own coalitions instead of following the center-right. In conclusion, the evidence found by the study suggests that the Italian Right has been normalized in the recent years to the point where it can experience national success. Thanks largely in part to Gianfranco Fini's sanitization of the Italian Right in *Alleanza Nazionale* and similar to Marine Le Pen's National Rally, there has been a

¹⁷ A [Politico article by Hannah Roberts](#) detailing Meloni's disavowal of fascism and promotion of the EU.

de-demonization of the right in Italy. As a result, they have felt comfortable promoting right-wing populist rhetoric to an audience of citizens that is increasingly willing to listen, and vote for, their ideas. More extreme stylistic elements and content do not seem to provide much value.

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