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Economic Globalization as a Determinant of Ultranationalist Parties in Italy: An Empirical Study at the Subnational Level

La globalización económica como determinante de los partidos ultranacionalistas en Italia: un estudio empírico a nivel subnacional

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Abstract

In recent decades, there has been a parallel development of economic globalization and an increase in support for ultranationalist parties in Italy. Therefore, the aim of this research is to analyze the relationship between globalization and support for these parties including several dimensions of economic globalization and other variables of interest. To meet this objective, a longitudinal study focused on the period 2014-2024 has been carried out with data disaggregated at NUTS3 level. The main finding is that the only factor of globalization that can explain support for ultranationalism is immigration from developing countries.

Keywords: Trade openness, Migrations, Inequality, Ultranationalism, Italy.

Resumen

En las últimas décadas, se ha producido un desarrollo en paralelo de la globalización económica y del aumento del apoyo a los partidos ultranacionalistas en Italia. Por ello, el objetivo de esta investigación es analizar la relación entre la globalización y el apoyo a estos partidos incluyendo varias dimensiones de la globalización económica y otras variables de interés. Para cumplir con tal objetivo se ha llevado a cabo un estudio longitudinal concentrado en el periodo 2014-2024 con datos desagregados a nivel NUTS3. El principal hallazgo es que el único elemento de la globalización capaz de explicar el apoyo al ultranacionalismo es la inmigración procedente de países en vías de desarrollo.

Palabras clave: Apertura comercial, Migraciones, Desigualdad, Ultranacionalismo, Italia.

JEL Classification/ Clasificación JEL: F21; F23; O11; C01.

1. Introduction

Over the past 30 years, there has been a significant increase in support for ultranationalist parties in Western Europe. Not surprisingly, after the European Parliament elections held in June 2024, ultranationalism was the most voted political party in countries as diverse as Austria, Belgium, France and Italy. Even the Iberian Peninsula, historically considered as exempt from this type of parties due to its historical context, has witnessed the rise of parties of a clear ultranationalist stance (Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015).

The trend is not only confined to Western Europe. In November 2024, the ultranationalist candidate Donald Trump managed to win the most votes in the U.S. presidential elections. Beyond his ideological characteristics, this is a historical event since the Republican Party has not had more popular support than the Democratic Party since 2004. In addition, Donald Trump's candidacy has allowed states historically considered as swing states -such as Iowa- to become consolidated fiefdoms of Donald Trump and states historically considered as Democratic -such as Michigan, Pennsylvania or Wisconsin- have supported his candidacy in the two occasions in which he has been victorious (2016 and 2024). Additionally, Latin America is witnessing the electoral success of ultranationalist candidates despite having a socioeconomic context that is not very conducive to the emergence of such ideological options (Rodrik, 2018; Zanotti et al., 2023). In the face of all this panorama, the Italian case stands out in having the maximum leader of an ultranationalist party (*Fratelli d'Italia*) as president of the Council of Ministers and, and as a vice-president the secretary of another ultranationalist party (*Lega*).

This unusual electoral surge has occurred in line with the spread of socio-economic globalization. Trade openness has accelerated sharply over the past 30 years in Western Europe in line with the increase in support for the ultranationalist parties (World Bank Group, n.d.-b). In this period, there have only been two years of setbacks and for circumstantial reasons (2009, financial crisis, and 2020, COVID pandemic). Similar events can be seen in relation to net migration in the European Union (World Bank Group, n.d.-a). From a greater number of people leaving than entering at the beginning of the 1960s, the European Union has become one of the areas with the highest number of immigrants in the world.

Given this parallelism, the aim of this research is to analyze how global changes have affected the Italian electorate from a subnational perspective. In

particular, the 107 Italian provinces (NUTS3) are taken as a reference during the period from 2014 to 2024. The study has focused on Italy since this country is a good early indicator of sociopolitical phenomena such as the reappearance of ultranationalist political forces or their entry into governments (Abbondanza and Bailo, 2018; Guisado and Bordel-Gil, 2021). In a context of imposition of isolationist policies by the Trump Administration, the main justification for this research is to understand the underlying socioeconomic factors capable of understanding the support for these parties. The interest is even greater taking into consideration the increase in the rejection of globalization, channeled through ultranationalist parties, that is being experienced throughout the Western world.

After this brief introduction, the determinants of the rise of ultranationalism are shown. Section 3 describes the current situation of Italian ultranationalism and the situation of globalization in Italy. While Section 4 explains the methodology applied in detail, Section 5 sets out the results found. The article closes with conclusions and the references used.

2. Determinants of the rise of ultranationalism

Numerous studies have investigated the determinants behind the rise of ultranationalism in Western Europe (Abbondanza and Bailo, 2018; Baur et al., 2016; Bergh and Kärnä, 2020; Goerres et al., 2018; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas, 2016), the United States (Fortunato et al., 2018; Oberhauser et al., 2019; Tolbert et al., 2018), and even in Latin America (Zanotti et al., 2023).

Most research operationalizes support for parties of the ultranationalist ideological family through individual data extracted through surveys (Allen and Goodman, 2021; Arzheimer and Berning, 2019; Attewell, 2021; Berlingozzi and Piccolino, 2019; Berning and Ziller, 2017; Bohemen et al., 2019; Brils et al., 2020; Charitopoulou and Garcîa-Manglano, 2018; Clarke et al., 2016; Engler and Weisstanner, 2020; Evans and Ivaldi, 2020; Gidron and Hall, 2019; Han, 2016; Hays et al., 2019; Hobolt, 2016; Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos, 2020; Lancaster, 2019). However, data extracted through surveys tend to avoid politically incorrect responses and, therefore, vote for ultranationalist candidacies tend to be underestimated (Bolet, 2020; Sipma and Lubbers, 2020). Additionally, most studies tend to be focused on a single country with a low level of disaggregation. Some exceptions from the contrary are few disaggregated papers with regional (Georgiadou et al., 2018; Nicoli and Reinl, 2020; Stockemer, 2017), provincial (Rodrîguez-Pose et al., 2023), district-level (Kellermann and Winter, 2018), and even municipal data (Essletzbichler et al., 2018; Lonsky, 2021).

The flagship variable among the studies that analyze the determinants of the rise of ultranationalism is immigration. However, most studies conceive this variable from an individual perspective. In other words, they take the citizen's perception of immigration. Almost the totality of studies that operationalize this variable individually conclude that having a negative perception about

immigration is a characteristic among the ultranationalist voter (Burgoon et al., 2019; Rooduijn and Burgoon, 2018; Spierings et al., 2017; Stockemer, 2016; Vergani et al., 2019). Indeed, the work of Rooduijn (2018) concludes that rejection of immigration is the only common characteristic of the ultranationalist voter within Western Europe.

Heterogeneous effects arise when immigration is operationalized through aggregate data (percentage of immigrants, flow of immigrants, variation of immigration...). Thus, some papers detect a direct relationship (Baur et al., 2016; Georgiadou et al., 2018; Nicoli and Reinl, 2020; Podobnik et al., 2019; Vadlamannati, 2020) while others conclude with an inverse relationship (Charitopoulou and García-Manglano, 2018; Goerres et al., 2018; Han, 2016; Rama and Cordero, 2018; Rohac et al., 2017; Rooduijn and Burgoon, 2018; Stockemer, 2017; Vlandas and Halikiopoulou, 2019).

These results are in line with the confrontation between the "contact theory" and the "threat theory". According to the former, being in contact with immigrants and knowing their personal situation leads to less support for anti-immigration parties. Thus, areas with larger immigrant populations generate less support for ultranationalist forces. On the contrary, the "threat theory" postulates that the arrival of immigrants can be seen as an economic and/or cultural threat and, consequently, increase support for ultranationalist parties positioned against immigration.

Trade openness is also commonly detected as a determinant in support for ultranationalism whether taken through aggregate data (Colantone and Stanig, 2019; Hays et al., 2019; Rohac et al., 2017; Vlandas and Halikiopoulou, 2019) or through citizens' rejection of free trade (Bohemen et al., 2019; van der Waal and de Koster, 2018). There is also some papers concluding that socioeconomic inequality is a determinant in support for ultranationalism (Engler and Weisstanner, 2020; Georgiadou et al., 2018; Han, 2016; Winkler, 2019).

The economic context also plays a key role in understanding the reasons behind the support for this type of political forces (Burgoon et al., 2019; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas, 2016; Zagórski et al., 2019). Thus, ultranationalism has been successful in Western Europe in areas in economic decline especially if there is a large presence of immigrants (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023). Additionally, other determinants in the support for ultranationalism existing in the academic literature are the contagion effect due to success in neighboring countries and regions (Czaika and Lillo, 2018), authoritarian past (Frantzeskakis and Sato, 2020), educational level and age (Rama and Cordero, 2018), corruption (Rohac et al., 2017), or social pessimism (Steenvoorden and Harteveld, 2018). Other papers focus on supply-side dynamics such as party organization, the electoral system, electoral spaces on the political chessboard, the institutional framework or the existence of *cordon sanitaire* against ultranationalist parties (Georgiadou et al., 2018; Muis and Immerzeel, 2017; Spierings et al., 2017).

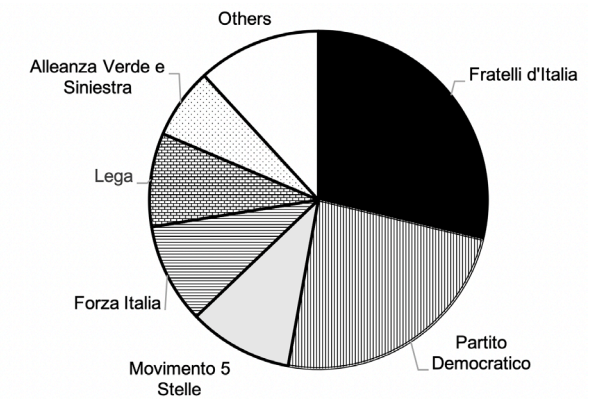
As for the works focused only on Italy, the papers by Abbondanza and Bailo (2018) and Pagliacci and Bonacini (2022) reach contradictory results. While the former reaches the main conclusion that immigration generates higher support for ultranationalist parties in Italy, Pagliacci and Bonacini (2022) show that a large presence of immigrant population reduces support for ultranationalism. In the case of this paper, the presence of immigrants in surrounding municipalities does not have a significant effect (Pagliacci and Bonacini, 2022). However, it should be taken into consideration that the work by Abbondanza and Bailo (2018) only covers eight regions in the north of the country while the work by Pagliacci and Bonacini (2022) collects disaggregated data for all Italian municipalities. Other works focused exclusively on Italy find the public service deprivation (Cremaschi et al., 2024) or the generation of logistics centers (Cuccu and Pontarollo, 2024) as a trigger for the support of ultranationalism. The work of Puleo et al. (2024) focuses specifically on the recent rise of the *Fratelli d'Italia* and concludes that the positive valuation of its leader, Giorgia Meloni, is the most determining factor in support for this ultranationalist political party.

3. Political and economic context of Italy

3.1. Current situation of ultranationalism in Italy

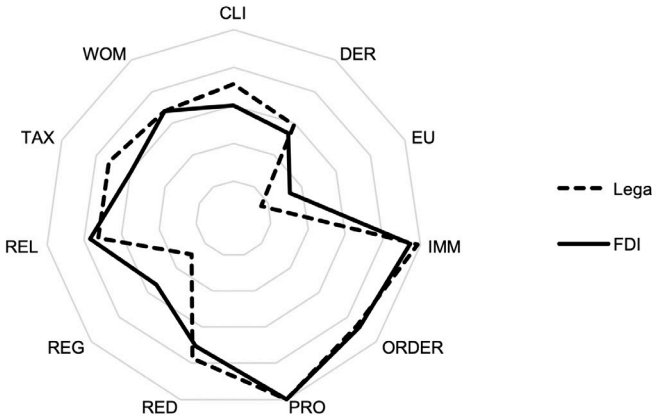
Considering the elections to the European Parliament held in June 2024, *Fratelli d'Italia* was the party with the highest electoral support, confirming the electoral victory achieved in the Italian Parliament elections of 2022. In these elections, the other Italian ultranationalist party, *Lega*, fell to fifth place.

Figure 1. European Parliament election results in Italy (2024)



Source: Own elaboration based on European Parliament (n.d.).

Figure 2. Ideological stance of FdI and *Lega*



Source: Own elaboration based on Rovny et al. (n.d.).

Likewise, the reference party of the Italian center-right, *Forza Italia*, continues to be marginalized electorally as the fourth political party.

Beyond the last elections to the European Parliament in Italy, in recent years there has been a substantial change in Italian politics with the rise of two ultranationalist parties (*Lega* and *Fratelli d'Italia*). *Lega* was a party historically based in the north of the country with an ethno-regionalist character. However, since Matteo Salvini has become Federal Secretary of the party, it has exchanged internal enemies (Rome and the South) for external ones (immigrants, the European Union and multinationals) (Cuccu and Pontarollo, 2024; Guisado and Bordel-Gil, 2021; Pagliacci and Bonacini, 2022). Additionally, under his leadership, a change in the name of his party to *Lega* (instead of *Lega Nord*[1]) has taken place. With this, the party has expanded beyond the historical northern fiefdoms. On the other hand, *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) has a quite different origin, coming from the neo-fascist party *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, and later renamed *Alleanza Nazionale*, shedding its more extremist ideology under the leadership of Gianfranco Fini (Guisado and Bordel-Gil, 2021).

According to Figure 2, it is possible to appreciate the existence of ideological differences between the two reference ultranationalist parties in Italy (FdI and *Lega*). Taking as reference the latest version of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey database (Rovny et al., n.d.), the ideological divergences between the two parties in regional policy, tax policy, environmental policy and position towards the European Union are evident. Table A.1, in the appendix section, provides detailed information on each of the ideological variables taken into consideration.

1 Literally Northern League

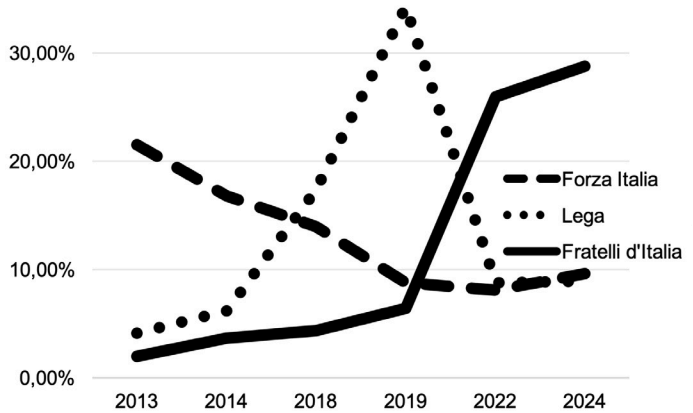
The most obvious difference between the two ultranationalist parties is to be found in the political decentralization issue. Consistent with its historical background, *Lega* maintains a position much more inclined to political decentralization as opposed to the centralism of state competences defended by *Fratelli d'Italia*. A divergent situation is also observable in relation to the position on the European Union. While FdI maintains a neutral position, *Lega* is an eminently Eurosceptic party. In relation to environmental policy, *Lega* gives greater priority to economic development -even if it could have the effect of damaging the environment- than FdI. Regarding the economic variables, the main difference is related to tax policy. On this aspect, *Lega* supports tax cuts more clearly than FdI.

In relation to the remaining variables, such as protectionism versus global free trade or migration policy, the position of both parties is similar. The ideological differences between the two parties justify a separate analysis of the underlying socioeconomic determinants of support for ultranationalism in Italy.

Taking as a reference the Italian state elections, both general and to the European Parliament, from 2013 (first state elections to which FdI is running) to 2024, it can be seen in Figure 3 that, at the beginning of the period, *Forza Italia* was the hegemonic party within the Italian right wing. In 2013, FdI's results were practically anecdotal, since they were held just 40 days after the party's birth. They achieved only 600,000 votes and nine seats.

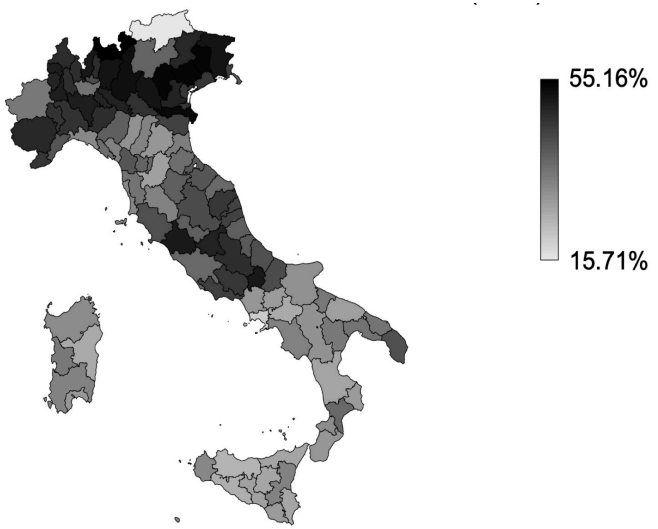
The 2018 general elections witnessed how the ultranationalist *Lega* emerged as the main reference party of the Italian right wing reaching its historical peak in the 2019 European Parliament elections. The fall of the government between *Movimento 5 Stelle* and *Lega*, forced by Matteo Salvini

Figure 3. Evolution of right-wing parties in Italy (2013-2024)



Source: Own elaboration based on Italian Ministry of the Interior (n.d.).

Figure 4. Support for ultranationalism in Italy by provinces (2024)



Source: Own elaboration based on Italian Ministry of the Interior (n.d.).

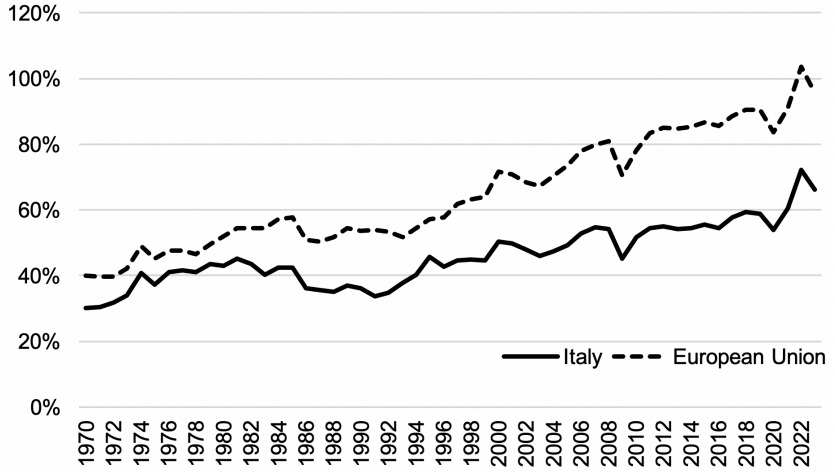
in 2019, was the turning point for the *Lega* (Guisado and Bordel-Gil, 2021). From that moment on, *Fratelli d'Italia* becomes the main party of the Italian right occupying the space where *Forza Italia* had been in the last decades.

However, electoral support for ultranationalism in Italy is not evenly distributed throughout the country. As can be seen from Figure 4, the main electoral fiefdoms of Italian ultranationalism (FdI + *Lega*) are located in the north and center of the country. However, according to Figure A.1 (in the Appendix), support for FdI is rather better distributed than for *Lega*, basically centered in the center-north. The concentration of the ultranationalist vote in the center-north of the country is in line with the study by Rodríguez-Pose et al. (2024). According to his result, there is strong connection between being stuck in a development trap in middle- or high- income regions and support for ultranationalist parties.

3.2. Economic globalization in Italy

Although there is no single commonly accepted definition of globalization, this process can be defined as an increasing interdependence between countries through growing global investments, global trade and movements of people and ideas weakening the competences of the nation-state (Sandano et al., 2019). In addition, many authors consider that growing socio-economic inequality is a negative consequence of globalization (Milanovic, 2016).

Figure 5. Trade openness in the European Union and Italy (1970-2023)



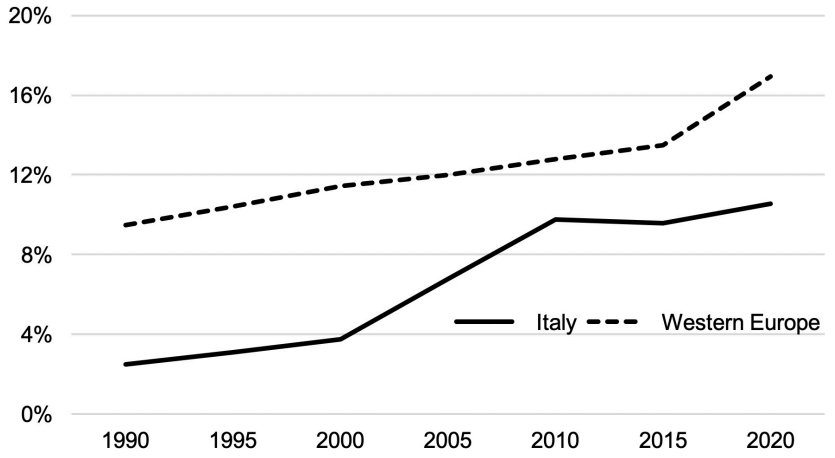
Source: Own elaboration based on World Bank Group (n.d.-b).

In the case of trade openness, Figure 5 shows a constant growth in both the European Union and Italy. This growth is not at odds with some sudden drops such as those that occurred in 2009 (Great Recession) or in 2020 (COVID19 pandemic). However, it is clear that throughout the entire historical series, trade openness in Italy is lower than in the European Union. A similar occurrence happens in the case of immigration. According to Figure 6, there has been a considerable increase in the immigrant population in Italy, but the presence is considerably lower (in relative terms) than in Western Europe. The third component of globalization, economic inequality, increased as a result of the Great Recession. Although it is true that it has been reduced in recent years, it is still substantially higher than in 2007.

Given that the expansion of globalization has occurred in parallel with the rise of electoral support for ultranationalism, this research postulates as a research hypothesis the existence of a positive relationship between globalization -and its components- and the vote for ultranationalism in Italy. Specifically, the following three hypotheses are proposed:

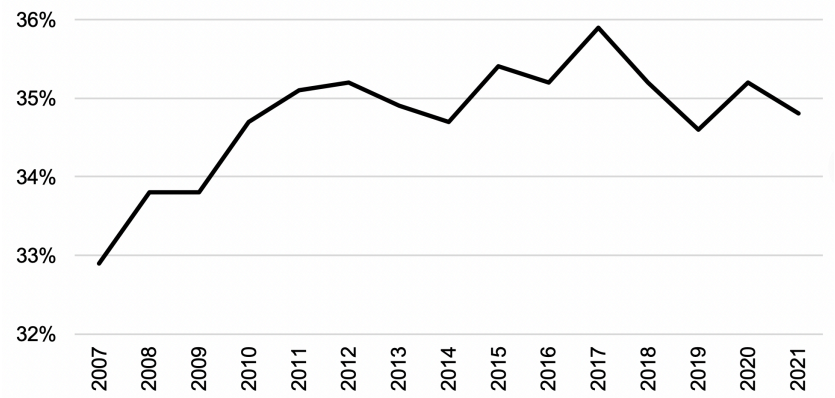
- *H1*: There is a positive relationship between trade openness and support for ultranationalist parties.
- *H2*: The arrival of a greater number of immigrants has led to an increase in electoral support for ultranationalism in Italy.
- *H3*: Areas with greater economic inequality are more likely to support ultranationalist parties in Italy.

Figure 6. Share of immigrant in Western Europe and Italy (1990-2020)



Source: Own elaboration based on United Nations (n.d.).

Figure 7. Inequality evolution in Italy (2007-2021)



Source: Own elaboration based on World Bank (n.d.).

4. Methodology

In order to assess the objective of the work, and to test the hypotheses put forward, six fixed-effects OLS models have been carried out. Time fixed effects and, additionally, province fixed effects have been included. The use of OLS has important advantages such as simplicity, flexibility and ease of interpretation of results (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2024). The period 2014 to

2024 is taken into consideration since Matteo Salvini assumed the leadership of *Lega* in December 2013, being the first state-level elections in which the party is running under his leadership the 2014 European Parliament elections. Likewise, although FdI ran in the 2013 elections, the party emerged only 40 days before the elections and its results were anecdotal. In addition to 2014 being a turning point in Italy due to the irruption of FdI and the ideological change of *Lega* with the arrival of Matteo Salvini to the leadership of the party, the selected period concentrates the beginning of international ultranationalist victories such as Donald Trump in the United States or the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union. Conducting a longitudinal study overcomes the existing gaps in previous studies that analyze the object of study with cross-sectional studies (Pagliacci and Bonacini, 2022).

Equation (1) describes the model used. Electoral support is collected under the dependent variable *ULTRANATIONALISM*. Under this denomination is included the sum of electoral support for FdI plus *Lega* in each of the Italian provinces. Electoral support is taken as reference both in the general elections (2018 and 2022) and in the elections to the European Parliament (2014, 2019 and 2024) despite generally being considered second-order elections.

$$ULTRANATIONALISM_{i,t} = \beta_1 + \beta_2 TRADE_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 IMM_{i,t-1} + \beta_4 INE_{i,t-1} + \beta_5 UNE_{i,t-1} + \beta_6 logGDPpc_{i,t-1} + \beta_7 ELD_{i,t} + \beta_8 CRI_{i,t-1} + \beta_9 logPOP_{i,t} + \beta_{10} EDU_{i,t-1} + \beta_{11} FI_{i,t} + \beta_{12} TURNOUT_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t} \quad (1)$$

Moving on to the central variables of the study, *TRADE* refers to the ratio consisting of the sum of imports plus exports in relation to the provincial Gross Domestic Product existing one year before the electoral process. Additionally, the percentage of immigration in the province is represented by the term *IMM*. Likewise, the reference year is the share of immigrant population one year before the elections. As for the central variables of the study, *INE* is defined as the Gini index existing in each study area one year before the elections[2]. Since there is no disaggregation available at the provincial level, regional data has been used for each province[3].

The model is completed with a series of control variables commonly incorporated in papers that analyze a similar object of analysis. Thus, the formula includes the percentage of the population aged 15 to 64 unemployed and looking for a job on December 31 of the year prior to the elections in the province (*UNE*). The inclusion of this variable is more than supported by its enormous presence in the academic literature (Abbondanza and Bailo, 2018; Baur et al., 2016; Essletzbichler et al., 2018; Evans and Ivaldi, 2020; Frantzeskakis and Sato, 2020; Georgiadou et al., 2018; Goerres et al., 2018). Another variable commonly analyzed in the literature is GDP per capita, *GDPpc*

2 In the absence of data for the year 2023, the data available for the year 2022 are used.

3 Although increasing global investment is a clear driver of globalization (Sandano et al., 2019), it has not been included in the model due to insufficient data disaggregation.

(Rama and Cordero, 2018; Stockemer, 2017). Likewise, the percentage of the population aged 65 years or older (*ELD*) as of January 1 of each electoral process is a variable used, among others, in Pagliacci and Bonacini (2022). The equation also incorporates the number of crimes reported to the judicial authorities by the State Security Forces in relation to the population of the province (*CRI*). The data comes from a year before the elections.

Other variables incorporated are population on January 1 (*POP*), educational level (*EDU*), support for the main center-right party in Italy (*FI*), and electoral turnout (*TURNOUT*). Educational level is one of the variables most incorporated in similar studies and is defined as the percentage of the population, aged between 25 and 64, who have completed university studies. In the case of this variable, information is disaggregated regionally since no provincial data is available. Since ultranationalism has grown in Italy at the expense of the decline in the main support of the main Italian center-right party (*Forza Italia*), the variable FI reflects electoral support for that party in order to test the possibility of the existence of a relationship of substitute products. Additionally, the fact that FdI was the winning party in the Italian general elections with the lowest voter turnout since World War II generates interest in testing voter turnout as a possible explanatory element of support for ultranationalism.-

$$FdI_{i,t} = \beta_1 + \beta_2 TRADE_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 IMM_{i,t-1} + \beta_4 INE_{i,t-1} + \beta_5 UNE_{i,t-1} + \beta_6 logGDPpc_{i,t-1} + \beta_7 ELD_{i,t} + \beta_8 CRI_{i,t-1} + \beta_9 logPOP_{i,t} + \beta_{10} EDU_{i,t-1} + \beta_{11} FI_{i,t} + \beta_{12} TURNOUT_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t} \quad (2)$$

Equation (2) and (3) complete (1) by incorporating the electoral support to *Fratelli d'Italia* and *Lega* as dependent variables, respectively, in a single approach. The ideological differences between the two ultranationalist political parties, explained in the section CURRENT SITUATION OF ULTRANATIONALISM IN ITALY, justify the analysis of the socioeconomic determinants of both parties individually.

$$Lega_{i,t} = \beta_1 + \beta_2 TRADE_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 IMM_{i,t-1} + \beta_4 INE_{i,t-1} + \beta_5 UNE_{i,t-1} + \beta_6 logGDPpc_{i,t-1} + \beta_7 ELD_{i,t} + \beta_8 CRI_{i,t-1} + \beta_9 logPOP_{i,t} + \beta_{10} EDU_{i,t-1} + \beta_{11} FI_{i,t} + \beta_{12} TURNOUT_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t} \quad (3)$$

In order to analyze the impact of immigration depending on its origin, equation (4) gathers the percentage of the immigrant population coming from countries with a very high Human Development Index (*IMM1*) and other origins (*IMM2*). There is only disaggregated information on immigration by origin starting in 2019. Therefore, the analysis is restricted to the period 2019-2024. Far from being a limitation, concentrating the study to this period allows us to analyze the underlying reasons for support for Italian ultranationalism in the period of highest support. In addition, the Chow test of models (1), (2) and (3)

-shown in models (7), (8) and (9) in the Appendix- indicate the existence of a structural change in 2019.

$$ULTRANATIONALISM_{i,t} = \beta_1 + \beta_2 TRADE_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 IMM1_{i,t-1} + \beta_4 IMM2_{i,t-1} + \beta_5 INE_{i,t-1} + \beta_6 UNE_{i,t-1} + \beta_7 logGDPpc_{i,t-1} + \beta_8 ELD_{i,t} + \beta_9 CRI_{i,t-1} + \beta_{10} logPOP_{i,t} + \beta_{11} EDU_{i,t-1} + \beta_{12} FI_{i,t} + \beta_{13} TURNOUT_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t} \quad (4)$$

By emulating equations (2) and (3), expressions (5) and (6) take into consideration, specifically, the support for FdI and *Lega* taking into account the origin of immigration.

$$FdI_{i,t} = \beta_1 + \beta_2 TRADE_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 IMM1_{i,t-1} + \beta_4 IMM2_{i,t-1} + \beta_5 INE_{i,t-1} + \beta_6 UNE_{i,t-1} + \beta_7 logGDPpc_{i,t-1} + \beta_8 ELD_{i,t} + \beta_9 CRI_{i,t-1} + \beta_{10} logPOP_{i,t} + \beta_{11} EDU_{i,t-1} + \beta_{12} FI_{i,t} + \beta_{13} TURNOUT_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t} \quad (5)$$

$$Lega_{i,t} = \beta_1 + \beta_2 TRADE_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 IMM1_{i,t-1} + \beta_4 IMM2_{i,t-1} + \beta_5 INE_{i,t-1} + \beta_6 UNE_{i,t-1} + \beta_7 logGDPpc_{i,t-1} + \beta_8 ELD_{i,t} + \beta_9 CRI_{i,t-1} + \beta_{10} logPOP_{i,t} + \beta_{11} EDU_{i,t-1} + \beta_{12} FI_{i,t} + \beta_{13} TURNOUT_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t} \quad (6)$$

To provide greater stability to the parameters, the variables GDPpc and population have been operationalized in logarithmic terms. The models are completed with the constant, β_1, and the error term $\varepsilon_{i,t}$. Errors have been clustered at the province level. The subscript i refers to each of the 107 Italian provinces, equivalent to the NUTS3, while the subscript t represents each of the elections held during the period analyzed (2014, 2018, 2019, 2022 and 2024). The database used for each variable has been the *Istituto Nazionale di Statistica*[4] (ISTAT) excepting in the case of *GDPpc* and educational level (Eurostat), and electoral support for ultranationalism and *Forza Italia* (Italian Ministry of the Interior).

Table 1. Variables included in the model

Name	Description	Source
Dependent variable	Votes for ultranationalism, *Lega* and *Fratelli d'Italia*	Ministry of the Interior
TRADE	Trade openness	ISTAT
IMM	Share of immigrant resident population	ISTAT
IMM1	Share of the resident population from countries with a very high Human Development Index	ISTAT
IMM2	Percentage of resident immigrant population from other origins	ISTAT
INE	Gini index	ISTAT
UNE	Share of population, 25-64 years old, unemployed and looking for work	ISTAT

(Continue)

4 Italian National Institute of Statics

Name	Description	Source
GDP_{pc}	Gross Domestic Product per capita	Eurostat
ELD	Share of the resident population aged 65 and older	ISTAT
CRI	Number of crimes and offenses in relation to resident population	ISTAT
POP	Resident population	ISTAT
EDU	Share of population with university education	Eurostat
FI	Electoral support to *Forza Italia*	Ministry of the Interior
TURNOUT	Voter turnout	Ministry of the Interior

Source: Own elaboration.

5. Results

The average vote for ultranationalism in Italy has been 28.89% throughout the period under analysis. However, there is a large variability with a minimum support of 2.60% (Agrigento, Sicily; in 2014) and a maximum of 59.73% (Treviso, Veneto; in 2019). Table A.2, in the Appendix, contains all the descriptive statistics for all the variables in the models.

Table 2. Correlation between independent variables and support ultranationalism

Independent variable	FdI + *Lega* (14-24)	FdI (14-24)	*Lega* (14-24)	FdI + *Lega* (19-24)	FdI (19-24)	*Lega* (19-24)
TRADE	0.3273	0.2000	0.1915	0.4084	0,2320	0.0893
IMM	0.3417	0.1635	0.2424	-	-	-
IMM1	-	-	-	0.4143	0.1361	0.1717
IMM2	-	-	-	0.3788	0.1671	0.1222
INE	-0.1887	-0.1105	-0.1162	-0.4080	-0.2419	-0.0789
UNE	-0.5276	-0.3342	-0.3018	-0.5249	-0.2983	-0.1121
GDPpc	0.3594	0.1696	0.2571	0.3056	0.1301	0.1024
ELD	0.4093	0.3689	0.1283	0.2738	0.3242	-0.0779
CRI	-0.4201	-0.2540	-0.2490	-0.3768	-0.2148	-0.0818
POP	-0.0449	-0.0275	-0.0263	-0.1229	-0.0449	-0.0472
EDU	0.6372	0.5128	0.2622	0.5097	0.4084	0.0114
FI	-0.6309	-0.4135	-0.3477	-0.3047	-0.0574	-0.1601
TURNOUT	0.0180	-0.2125	0.2193	-0.1229	-0.0449	-0.0472

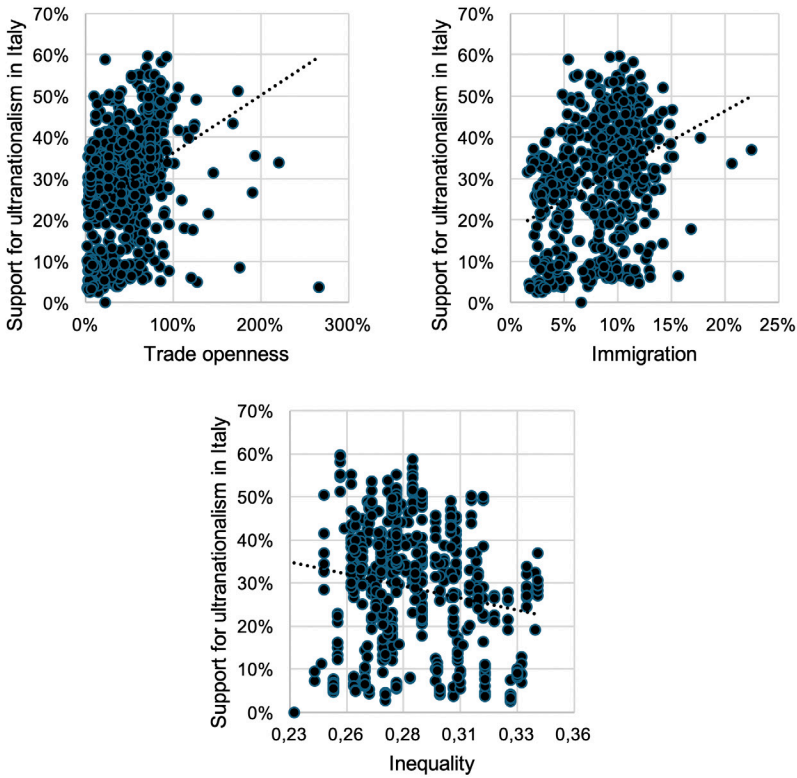
Source: Own elaboration.

Before moving on to the multivariate analysis described in the methodology section, Table 2 shows the correlation matrix between the independent variables (central and control) and the dependent variables of the six models

described. As can be seen in the table, there is a direct relationship between trade openness, and the percentage of immigrant population, and support for ultranationalism in Italy. This relationship is visible in both support for *Fratelli d'Italia* and support for *Lega*. Likewise, it can be seen that this relationship is present in the whole of the period analyzed (2014-2024) as well as in the period of greater expansion of ultranationalism in Italy (2019-2024). However, the positive relationship is not particularly strong. In relation to socioeconomic inequality, an inverse relationship between this variable and support for ultranationalism is appreciated. Figure 8 provides graphical insight into the relationship between the central variables of the study and support for ultranationalism.

In relation to the rest of the existing variables in the model, only a strong relationship is observed between educational level, and support for *Forza Italia*, and the ultranationalist vote. In relation to educational level, the relationship

Figure 8. Relationship central variables and support for ultranationalism



Source: Italian Ministry of the Interior and ISTAT.

is direct. That is, geographic areas with a higher level of education vote to a greater extent for Italian ultranationalism. On the other hand, for descriptive terms, an inverse relationship is observed between the main Italian center-right party and ultranationalism. That is to say, in a first analysis they look like parties competing for the same electoral niche.

Turning to the multivariate analysis, Table 3 shows the parameter estimates of the six equations proposed. Due to 7 missing observations, the number of observations is 528 provinces in models (1), (2) and (3), and 317 in (4), (5) and (6) due to 4 missing observations. The high value of Adjusted R^2 shows the high explanatory power of the models proposed. Figure A.2 shows the result estimated by model (1) and the actual support. As can be seen, there are no remarkable outliers. Table A.3, in the Appendix, presents the Variance Inflation Factors Analysis.

Focusing on the role played by the central explanatory variables of the study, it is observable that open trade in the geographic area analyzed does not have a significant impact on support for ultranationalism. As for immigration, in aggregate terms, it has no effect on the vote for either *Fratelli d'Italia* or *Lega*. However, it can be seen that the percentage of immigrant population coming from countries with a low level of development (IMM2) is an element able to explain the rise of these parties during the period 2019-2024. As for inequality, this factor has heterogeneous behavior depending on the political party analyzed. While greater inequality generates less support for the *Lega*, there are only signs of significance of a positive relationship in the case of FdI for 2019-2024.

Turning to the control variables introduced in the model, ultranationalism and the Italian center-right political party are substitute parties according to the consistent negative sign of the variable *Forza Italia* (FI). This result should not be surprising since the rise of ultranationalism in Italy has gone hand in hand with the electoral marginalization of *Forza Italia*. A variable that has produced mixed consequences has been the electoral turnout in the 2019-2024 period. While the provinces with higher voter turnout are more inclined to support *Lega*, those with lower turnout vote for FdI to a greater extent. Heterogeneous effects on the vote for one or the other party are also seen depending on the population size.

Table 3. Parameter estimates

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
TRADE	0.0069	0.0127	−0.0058	0.0060	0.0127	−0.0067
	(0.0053)	(0.0090)	(0.0101)	(0.0059)	(0.0142)	(0.0137)
IMM	−0.3941	−0.4748	0.0807			
	(0.5197)	(0.3745)	(0.6066)			
IMM1				−0.7568	3.6446	−4.4014
				(1.7519)	(4.5133)	(4.7472)

(Continue)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
IMM2				1.4359**	−0.2314	1.6673
				(0.6174)	(0.8991)	(1.1251)
INE	−0.6177***	0.3558	−0.9734***	−0.4850***	0.5391*	−1.0242***
	(0.1730)	(0.2205)	(0.2252)	(0.1520)	(0.3196)	(0.3475)
UNE	−0.1869	0.1852	−0.3720**	−0.1810	0.3865	−0.5675**
	(0.1174)	(0.1483)	(0.1609)	(0.1341)	(0.2709)	(0.2349)
GDPpc	0.1438	−0.0245	0.1683	0.0874	<0.0001	0.0873
	(0.0964)	(0.1051)	(0.1100)	(0.0681)	(0.1912)	(0.2010)
ELD	−0.1913	−0.8610	0.6697	0.3733	−0.7000	1.0734
	(0.5037)	(0.5894)	(0.5887)	(0.5690)	(1.1938)	(1.3799)
CRI	0.0368	0.4234	−0.3866	0.2589	−2.4245	2.6834
	(0.9181)	(1.3894)	(1.5505)	(1.3488)	(2.9642)	(2.8740)
POP	−0.3939	0.9718***	−1.3657***	−0.5659*	0.6961	−1.2620**
	(0.2409)	(0.3577)	(0.3410)	(0.3054)	(0.4292)	(0.5422)
EDU	1.5610***	0.1829	1.3781***	0.1848	−0.4728	0.6575
	(0.2974)	(0.2728)	(0.3230)	(0.3201)	(0.5856)	(0.6795)
FI	−0.3980***	−0.1769**	−0.2211**	−0.3094***	−0.0931	−0.2162
	(0.0794)	(0.0750)	(0.0967)	(0.1170)	(0.1030)	(0.1505)
TURNOUT	−0.2098***	−0.1674***	−0.0424	−0.0107	−0.2692***	0.2585***
	(0.0563)	(0.0412)	(0.0492)	(0.0581)	(0.0674)	(0.0683)
Constant	4.4664	-12.4804**	16.9468***	7.3109*	-8.9804	16.2912**
	(3.6854)	(5.2508)	(4.9094)	(4.3208)	(6.7515)	(8.1524)
Temporal Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Provincial Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	528	528	528	317	317	317
Adjusted R^2	0.9537	0.9387	0.9134	0.9599	0.9213	0.9338

Notes: Standard deviation in brackets.
* p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.01

With these results, we are in position to clearly reject the first hypothesis as the degree of trade openness has not been found to influence support for ultranationalism in Italy. As for immigration (H2), the positive relationship between the share of immigrant and support for Italian ultranationalism is accepted. However, a significant relationship is only perceived in cases of immigration from countries with a low level of economic development. Finally, H3 is not possible to accept since there is only evidence of significance of a positive relationship in the case of FdI in the period 2019-2024.

There are few works that take into consideration the origin of immigration as an explanatory element of support for ultranationalism in Western Europe. Among them, also focused on Italy, is the study by Abbondanza and Bailo (2018). Their research also finds that there is an effect on the ultranationalist vote depending on the origin of immigration. However, their study focuses only on Northern Italy while the present one covers the country as a whole. In any case, the results of this article are in line with the "threat theory" explaining

how one of the elements of the global changes occurred in recent decades, the increase in the immigrant population, is able to explain the vote for Italian ultranationalism.

6. Conclusions

The research that has been carried out has important implications since it analyzes a growing trend such as the rise of ultranationalism. While it is true that this is a current issue in Western Europe, the United States and Latin America, the Italian case is particularly noteworthy since the leader of an ultranationalist party (*Fratelli d'Italia*), Giorgia Meloni, is the President of the Italian Council of Ministers and the federal secretary of another ultranationalist party (*Lega*), Matteo Salvini, is the vice-president of the country's Executive Power.

Among the results of the study, it is worth noting that the socioeconomic determinants of support for ultranationalism in Italy differ notably according to the party analyzed. The only variable that maintains a stable behavior is the inverse relationship between support for *Forza Italia* and for each of the two ultranationalist parties taken into consideration. As for the central variables of the study, trade openness does not play a relevant role in the ultranationalist vote and inequality generates an unequal impact on *Fratelli d'Italia* and *Lega*. However, immigration from developing countries has shown to be a relevant factor in explaining the rise of ultranationalism in Italy. To arrive at these results, a longitudinal study was carried out, covering the period 2014-2024, with disaggregated data corresponding to the 107 Italian provinces (equivalent to NUTS3).

This result should encourage policies of social inclusion of immigration, highlighting its benefits: increase in the number of contributors in rather aged societies (such as the Italian one), performance of jobs that are difficult to fill by the native population, multiculturalism... The study carried out is of particular interest due to the new ultranationalist wave that, far from diminishing, seems to be increasingly successful in the elections. Therefore, we consider it necessary to understand the underlying factors capable of explaining the ultranationalist boom in order to avoid the implementation of isolationist measures promoted by these parties when they are in office.

As a possible limitation of the study, it is worth mentioning that the study has focused on the determinants of support for ultranationalism from the perspective of demand, ignoring the ideological properties of the Italian ultranationalist political parties.

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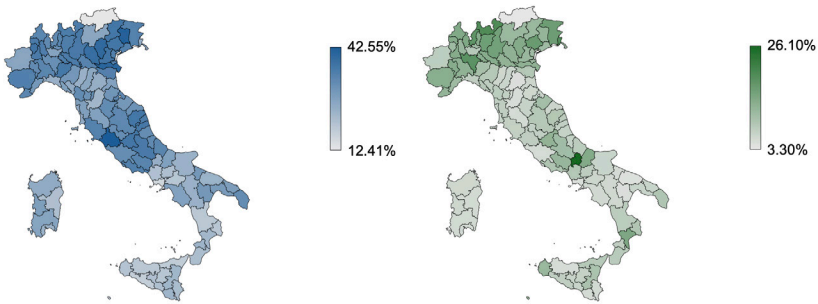
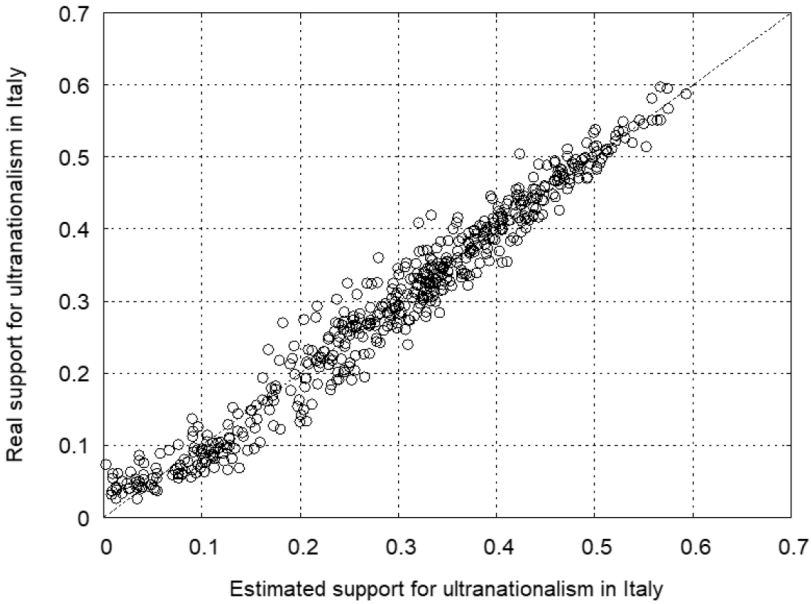
Appendix

Figure A.1. Support for *Fratelli d'Italia* (left) and *Lega* (right) in Italy (2024)



Source: Own elaboration based on Italian Ministry of the Interior (n.d.).

Figure A.2. Estimated and real support according to regression (1)



Source: Own elaboration.

Table A.1. Ideological variables analyzed in FdI and Lega

Code	Variable	Description
- Economic stances		
DER	Deregulation	Ideological stance on market deregulation (0 means maximum opposition to deregulation, and 10 means maximum support for market deregulation)
PRO	Protectionism	Ideological stance on trade liberalization (with 0 being maximum support for trade liberalization, and 10 being maximum protection for domestic companies against global trade)
RED	Redistribution	Ideological stance on wealth redistribution (0 being the highest support for redistributive measures, and 10 the highest opposition to such measures).
TAX	Tax policy	Ideological position on public service improvement and tax reduction (where 0 is the maximum support for public service improvement, and 10 is the maximum support for tax reduction)

(Continue)

Code	Variable	Description
Social stances		
CLI	Environment	Ideological stance on environmental sustainability (where 0 is the maximum support for environmental protection measures, even if they go against economic growth, and 10 is the maximum support for economic growth measures, even if they have as a counterpart the carelessness towards environmental protection)
EU	European Union	Position on the European Union (1 completely against, 7 completely in favor)
IMM	Immigration policy	Ideological stance on immigration policies (where 0 is the maximum support for liberal immigration policies, and 10 is the maximum support for restrictive immigration policies)
ORDER	Law and Order	Position on civil liberties vs. law and order (with 0 being fully in favor of enhancing civil liberties, and 10 fully in favor of enhancing tough measures to fight crime).
REG	Political decentralization	Ideological stance on political decentralization (where 0 is the maximum support for decentralization, and 10 is the maximum opposition)
REL	Religious principles	Role of religion in politics (with 0 being maximum opposition to the entry of religious principles in politics, and 10 being maximum support for the entry of religious principles in politics)
WOM	Women rights	Position on the expansion of women's rights (9 fully in favor, 10 fully against)

Source: Own elaboration based on Rovny et al. (n.d.).

Table A.2. Descriptive statistics

	Variable	Obs.	Mean	S.D.	Min	Max
Dependent variables	Ultranationalism	542	28.89%	0.1467	2,60%	59.73%
	FdI	542	13.71%	0.1178	1,37%	42.53%
	Lega	542	15.15%	0.1261	0,44%	53.64%
Central variables	Trade	532	48.72%	0.3246	1.81%	265.67%
	IMM	532	7.95%	0.0347	1.60%	22.43%
	IMM1	320	2.57%	0.0109	0.64%	5.31%
	IMM2	320	5.47%	0.0282	0.94%	19.37%
	INE	544	28.45%	0.0236	22.90%	33.90%
Control variables	UNE	536	10.72%	0.0569	1.99%	29.00%
	GDP	532	26,877.26	7,509.83	14,600	59,900
	ELD	532	22.75%	0.0252	14.96%	28.61%
	CRI	530	1.48%	0.0034	0.65%	2.78%
	POP	532	557,415.05	605,538.58	79,385	4,263,542
	EDU	544	18.99%	0.0325	13.20%	28.40%
	FI	542	11.87%	0.0539	1.73%	36.43%
	Turnout	542	60,11%	0.1182	29.76%	80.44%

Table A.3. Variance Inflation Factors Analysis

Variable	Model	
	(1) (2) (3)	(4) (5) (6)
TRADE	1.321	1.397
IMM	3.010	-
IMM1	-	1.775
IMM2	-	2.741
INE	2.024	2.221
UNE	5.704	5.385
GDP	6.329	5.797
ELD	2.065	2.086
CRI	1.655	1.668
POP	1.841	1.853
EDU	2.705	2.565
FI	2.187	2.125
TURNOUT	1.451	2.904

Table A.4. Augmented regression for Chow test

	(7)	(8)	(9)
TRADE	−0.0025	0.0038	−0.0063
	(0.0144)	(0.0035)	(0.0178)
IMM	−1.7855***	−0.1188	−1.6667**
	(0.5556)	(0.1566)	(0.7318)
INE	−0.7669***	−0.0225	−0.7445**
	(0.2655)	(0.0685)	(0.3377)
UNE	−0.0069	−0.0771*	0.0702
	(0.1587)	(0.0455)	(0.1990)
GDPpc	0.4052***	0.0257	0.3795**
	(0.1275)	(0.0316)	(0.1643)
ELD	−4.6770***	−0.2814	−4.3956***
	(0.8914)	0.1984	(1.1481)
CRI	−1.6066	0.7299*	−2.3364
	(1.2424)	(0.3936)	(1.5440)
POP	−0.4314	0.0987	−0.5301
	(0.9575)	(0.2541)	(1.2194)
EDU	1.9872***	0.2106**	1.7766***
	(0.3347)	(0.0945)	(0.4176)
FI	−0.0881	0.0489	−0.1369
	(0.1252)	(0.0398)	(0.1626)
TURNOUT	−0.1908***	0.0097	−0.2006**
	(0.0714)	(0.0191)	(0.0931)
Splitdummy*TRADE	0.0076	0.0092	−0.0016
	(0.0149)	(0.0130)	(0.0215)
Splitdummy*IMM	2.9233***	0.1748	2.7485**
	(0.6270)	(0.6952)	(1.0969)
Splitdummy*INE	0.2552	0.6189**	−0.3637

(Continue)

	(7)	(8)	(9)
	(0.2839)	(0.2726)	(0.4434)
Splitdummy*UNE	−0.1908	0.4995**	−0.6903**
	(0.1789)	(0.2139)	(0.2792)
Splitdummy*GPDpc	−0.3237**	−0.0103	−0.3134
	(0.1359)	(0.1490)	(0.2238)
Splitdummy*ELD	5.2740***	−0.6992	5.9732***
	(0.9780)	(1.0302)	(1.6208)
Splitdummy*CRI	1.7806	−2.8938	4.6743
	(1.5044)	(2.5379)	(2.8901)
Splitdummy*POP	−0.1244	0.6289	−0.7532
	(0.9758)	(0.4232)	(1.2934)
Splitdummy*EDU	−1.8264***	−0.6923	−1.1340
	(0.4083)	(0.5570)	(0.7363)
Splitdummy*FI	−0.2129	−0.1486	−0.0643***
	(0.1444)	(0.1138)	(0.2083)
Splitdummy*TURNOUT	0.1801**	−0.2810***	0.4611***
	(0.0804)	(0.0632)	(0.1138)
Constant	7.1540	−9.4320*	16.5861**
	(2.6502)	(5.2941)	(6.4747)
Observations	528	528	528
Chow test at obs. 2019 (p-value)	1,852.28	643.61	436.49
	(0.0000)	(0.0000)	(0.0000)
Adjusted R^2	0.9713	0.9514	0.9259

Note: * p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.01