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Antonella Seddone  and Mattia Zulianello 

ABSTRACT

This paper explores a little-studied side of populist radical right (PRR) mainstreaming: if and to what extent these parties are considered to be legitimate democratic players by voters. Using survey data from Italy, we find that both Brothers of Italy (Fdi) and the League are perceived as threats to democracy by specific groups of voters, although the former raises more widespread concern than the latter. Additionally, this perception is not uniform at the mass level. Surprisingly, an uneven pattern also characterises the reciprocal views of the two PRR parties: Fdi is considered to be a threat to democracy by the League's sympathisers, but the opposite does not occur. This suggests that even in contexts where PRR politics has been normalised for decades, as in Italy, different PRR parties can be perceived very differently by voters.

KEYWORDS


Populist radical right; legitimacy; democracy; mainstreaming; Italy; populist radical right competition

Introduction

The populist radical right (PRR) has been described as the most successful new party family in post-war Western Europe (Mudde 2013). PRR parties have crossed the 'threshold of acceptability' (Van Spanje & Van Der Brug 2007, p. 1023) in many countries, meaning that the other parties in the system, especially those within the centre-right area, have increasingly perceived them to be acceptable and 'normal' political players (Bale & Rovira Kaltwasser 2021; de Lange 2012). Subsequently, PRR parties have increasingly gained influence in the political mainstream, as shown by their unprecedented involvement in national governments in Europe and beyond.

When a political party is included in pre-electoral coalitions and/or coalition governments, a process of (re)legitimation has taken place at the elite level, and this can occur after a longer or shorter period of reciprocal hostility between a given party and the main ideologically close parties (Sani 1976; Sartori 1976). Once a PRR party has been included in the group of feasible partners for coalitions or governments at the elite level, it is no longer perceived to be a potential threat, at least among the parties that are spatially closer, and this development suggests that its integration into the mainstream of national party

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politics has occurred (Zulianello 2019, 2020). In other words, the very legitimacy of a PRR party as part of the democratic game is not (or no longer) at stake. Nevertheless, while the legitimacy of the PRR at the elite level (i.e. the supply side of politics) is evident due to their participation in pre-electoral alliances or even national coalition governments, little is known about how these parties are perceived at the mass level by voters (i.e. the demand side).

Most notably, considerable attention has been paid to the mainstreaming of the PRR, that is 'the process by which parties are brought into the mainstream and designated as legitimate and/or normal' (Moffitt 2022, p. 5; see also Brown, Mondon & Winter 2023), especially by exploring how these parties have gained a central stage in the political scene through programmatic, organisational and communicative changes (e.g. Akkerman, de Lange & Rooduijn 2016). However, surprisingly little attention has been given to voters' perceptions of the democratic credentials of PRR parties once they have gained a prominent position in the political landscape.

By focusing on an original survey conducted in Italy shortly after the establishment of the government led by Giorgia Meloni in 2022, we explore if and to what extent PRR parties are perceived to be a threat to democracy at the mass level. Differently from our expectations, the findings suggest that there is not a single, uncontroversial perception of danger among voters, be they sympathisers of non-populist or non-PRR populist parties. Most notably, the results suggest that even in contexts where *PRR politics* has been normalised for decades, as in Italy, *PRR parties* can be perceived very differently even within the same group of PRR sympathisers as far as their potential impact on democracy is concerned.

This article is structured as follows. In the first section, we provide an overview of the literature on the integration of PRR parties into the political mainstream. Then we develop our research hypotheses about if and how the PRR are perceived to be a threat to democracy at the mass level. In the third section we specify why the Italian case is crucial for our purposes, then we present the data and methods employed in this paper. Subsequently, we carry out the empirical analysis in the fifth section, and then discuss the main findings in the sixth. Finally, we provide some concluding remarks, discussing the main implications of our research and highlighting the relevance of our findings for the comparative study of the PRR.

The negative integration of the populist radical right in liberal democracies

The ideological blend of nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde 2007) that characterises the PRR has proved to be a successful formula in many countries. PRR parties have increasingly moved to the core of contemporary politics, as they have progressively left the margins of national party systems and become key players in the coalition game and governmental arena in many

European countries. In some contexts, they have even established themselves as the leading actors within the right-wing camp, showing their long-term competitive viability even after repeated participation in national governments (Akkerman, de Lange & Rooduijn 2016; Albertazzi & McDonnell 2015).

For the present purposes, the key point is that the integration of PRR parties has typically followed a pattern of 'negative integration', meaning that despite their entry (and consolidation) into the mainstream of national party politics, they have not substantially moderated their core ideology (Zulianello 2020). In other words, regardless of their involvement in the coalition game or inclusion in national government, the ideas embraced by the PRR still remain in tension with some core values of liberal democracy (e.g. Albertazzi & Mueller 2013; Albertazzi & McDonnell 2015; Akkerman, de Lange & Rooduijn 2016). This point is well summarised by Akkerman, de Lange and Rooduijn (2016, pp. 276–277), who find that despite seeking office or even participating in national governments, PRR parties 'have overall remained radical in their positions on issues related to their nationalist ideology such as immigration, authoritarianism and European integration' and 'do not soften their populist ideology'. For this reason, negative integration results in 'contradictory impacts' on the functioning of political systems (Zulianello 2019, p. 22) as the PRR continues to articulate an ideology that challenges some of the key elements of liberal democracy, most notably minority rights and pluralism (Mudde 2007), while also contributing to its very functioning thanks to involvement in the coalition game and (eventually) the governmental arena.

Unsurprisingly, the increasing integration of the PRR into contemporary party systems has raised important questions about its relationship with (liberal) democracy. Empirical research shows that the PRR fuels democratic discontent among both its voters and those opposing its agenda (Rooduijn, Van Der Brug & de Lange 2016; Hartevelde, Kokkonen & Dahlberg 2017). In addition, scholars have found that PRR supporters are characterised by a lower level of satisfaction with the way democracy works and less confidence in political institutions (Hartevelde, Mendoza & Rooduijn 2022; Rooduijn, Van Der Brug & de Lange 2016; see also Zaslove & Meijers 2023). This point can be linked to the broader controversy over the implications of populism for democracy (Ruth-Lovell & Grahn 2022). In this respect, scholars have maintained that populist governments have the potential to distort democracy, curtail institutional power and diminish checks and balances and pluralism (Albertazzi & Mueller 2013; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Research also suggests that populist actors can have a positive impact on the quality of democracy in opposition, but populism in government can negatively affect the quality of democracy along key dimensions, especially in the case of the PRR (Huber & Schimpf 2017; Vittori 2022). In this respect, however, Norris and Inglehart (2019, p. 6) argue that 'it is the combination of authoritarian values disguised by populist rhetoric which we regard as

potentially the most dangerous threat to liberal democracy'. Similarly, Art (2022) maintains that the democratic backsliding in countries such as Hungary is not the product of populism per se, but rather it reflects the role played by authoritarianism.

Most notably, although the literature has variously investigated the potential implications of the rise of the PRR for democracy, there is a lack of research shedding light on the perspective of the citizens. This study therefore seeks to address this gap and explores the demand side of the phenomenon, in particular by analysing voter perceptions of PRR mainstreaming as a threat to democracy.

Mass perceptions of populist radical right mainstreaming: hypotheses

In the previous section we have provided an overview of various studies dealing with the integration of PRR parties in contemporary democracies. However, it can be noticed that these studies tend to explore the march towards the mainstream of the PRR by focusing disproportionately on the supply side of the phenomenon, which basically evokes the features of the political actors themselves and their reciprocal interactions at the elite level. Nevertheless, there is a lack of research explicitly exploring the demand side of the phenomenon, that is how the integration of the PRR into key institutions of liberal democracies is perceived by voters. This is a crucial point because 'institutions may change perceptions' (Tankard & Paluck 2016, p. 194). For instance, Norris (2005) highlights that the image of the PRR is fostered by its incorporation in political institutions 'with all the legitimacy, status, resources, and media publicity which flow from elected office'. Valentim (2021) finds that the acquisition of parliamentary representation 'make[s] individuals more eager to signal their support' for a PRR party in public, while Bischof and Wagner (2019, p. 895) explain that the entry of the PRR into parliament triggers both 'legitimization and backlash effects [...] Voters identifying with a right-leaning party *ceteris paribus* moved further to the right, whereas those identifying with a left-leaning party moved to the left'.

In this article, we tackle a specific – and to our knowledge so far unexplored – aspect of the integration of PRR parties into the mainstream of contemporary politics: the mass-level perceptions about their democratic legitimacy, that is – to put it another way – whether citizens feel that these parties represent a threat to democracy. Focusing on how citizens assess the PRR can provide us with important insights into the extent to which the influential role played by these parties in contemporary democracies is accompanied by the perception that they are legitimate players of the democratic game. This is particularly important because, as Akkerman, de Lange and Rooduijn (2016, p. 9, emphasis added) underline, 'the reputations of radical right-wing populist parties

as legitimate democratic parties are still contested and should be included in *an assessment of whether these parties are heading towards the mainstream*'.

The PRR party family is grounded on an ideological mix consisting of nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde 2007). In this respect, nativism is the most important ideological feature of these parties (Mudde 2007), and essentially it points to the preference for the 'native' exclusively on the grounds of 'being native' (de Genova 2016, p. 233). Betz (2019, p. 111) distinguished 'three facets' of nativism: symbolic nativism refers to the idea that the cultural identity of a given context should be protected at any cost, while economic nativism and welfare chauvinism point to the notion that native citizens should be given priority in the labour market and in the provision of social benefits, respectively. Authoritarianism is the other 'thick' ideology that characterises the PRR and encompasses two broad sets of ideas: on the one hand, 'the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements of authority are to be punished severely' (Mudde 2007, p. 23), and on the other, support for a traditional understanding of family, gender and sexuality (Spierings & Zaslove 2015). Finally, populism is understood as a 'thin-centred ideology' grounded on the moral distinction between 'the people' and the corrupt elite, maintaining that the ultimate goal of politics should be to enforce popular sovereignty (Mudde 2004).

Mudde (2010, p. 1178) maintains that the PRR's 'attitudes and ideas are not marginal under normal conditions; they are fairly widespread, if often in a more moderate form'. Most notably for the present purposes, nativist, authoritarian and populist attitudes do not characterise only the supply side of PRR politics but can also be found at the mass level in the form of public attitudes, even though to different degrees (Kefford & Ratcliff 2021; Montgomery & Winter 2015). From an empirical standpoint, as PRR attitudes can be found on both the supply side and the demand side, it can be expected that those with PRR attitudes are less afraid of PRR parties. Our first hypothesis aims to investigate precisely this aspect. We do not posit a varied impact depending on individual stances towards the three elements, namely nativism, authoritarianism and populism. The reason for this is that although the literature is undisputed in recognising these three features as typical components of the PRR parties' ideational morphology, little is known about if and how these individual features specifically interact with the others to drive voters' choices. Accordingly, our first hypothesis can be formulated as follows:

H1: *Higher levels of PRR attitudes at the individual level imply a lower individual perception of the PRR as a threat to democracy.*

In addition, we also developed a research question aimed at assessing whether nativist, authoritarian and populist attitudes at the individual level play a different role in influencing the individual perceptions about PRR democratic credentials. Accordingly, it reads as follows:

RQ1: Do nativist, authoritarian and populist attitudes have a diverse impact on individual perception of the PRR as a threat to democracy?

PRR parties, like populist parties more generally, typically attack and delegitimize the establishment made up of traditional mainstream actors, which are blamed for not representing or being interested in respecting ‘the will of the people’ (Mudde 2004, 2007). Betz and Oswald (2021, pp. 122, 134) argue that ‘anger, rage, resentment, and indignation together with anxiety and fear’ have an important role in the messages articulated by the PRR, whose success ‘is to a large extent the result of their ability to exploit a range of negative emotions’. At the same time, however, traditional mainstream parties typically attack and delegitimize the PRR through ‘moral condemnation’ as ‘to draw the frontier between the “good democrats” and the “evil extreme-right” is very convenient, since the “them” can now be considered as a sort of moral disease which needs to be condemned morally, not fought politically’ (Mouffe 2005, p. 57).

The rise of PRR parties is often discussed in connection with the process of polarisation of contemporary politics (e.g. Silva 2018), especially with regard to affective polarisation. Indeed, various studies have suggested that the PRR attracts high levels of dislike from the supporters of ideologically moderate mainstream parties (e.g. Gidron, Adams & Horne 2023). For instance, Reiljan (2020, p. 392) argues that in terms of ‘partisan like – dislike matrices’ PRR parties ‘clearly stand out’ even in contexts where the overall levels of affective polarisation are otherwise relatively low. According to Hartevelde, Mendoza and Rooduijn (2022, p. 722), the peculiar role played by these parties in the mechanisms of affective polarisation is due to the fact that ‘PRR parties indeed take a unique position in the “affective landscape” by being at both the sending and receiving ends of uniquely strong dislike across all other party families (and their partisans)’. Accordingly, we formulate two distinct hypotheses to encompass two broad groups of perceptions:

H2a: *More positive evaluations of non-populist parties at the individual level imply a higher individual perception of the PRR as a threat to democracy.*

H2b: *More positive evaluations of other populist parties at the individual level imply a higher individual perception of the PRR as a threat to democracy.*

PRR parties are not only increasingly considered as ‘normal’ partners in view of potential governing coalitions at the elite level, but they have also proliferated

even within the same national context. For instance, in Western Europe it can be noticed that more than one (successful) PRR party simultaneously exists (or has existed) in various countries, for instance in Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Switzerland. This raises the intriguing question about if and to what extent different PRR parties in the same party system may receive substantially different evaluations at the mass level, not only within the non-PRR camp but also within the broad group of PRR supporters. In this respect, it is useful to follow de Vries and Hobolt (2020, p. 38), who argue ‘that there is a qualitative difference between holding office nationally and simply influencing policy through parliamentary influence or local power’. For this reason, it is possible to distinguish two main groups of political parties (see Krause & Wagner 2021; Loomes 2012): on the one hand are established parties that have previous experience in national government, on the other are challenger parties that have never been in office.

Significantly, even within the PRR party family, it is possible to distinguish between established PRR parties and PRR challengers, according to the criterion of previous government experience at the national level. Interestingly, an established PRR party and a challenger PRR party can co-exist in the same party system, thus enabling the emergence of competitive dynamics *within* this party family. In this respect, as previously mentioned, PRR parties have typically become accepted players in the coalition game in many countries without changing their core ideology (Zulianello 2020), which remains grounded on a mix of nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde 2007). As the incorporation in political institutions results in important signals being sent at the mass level (see the previous pages), it is possible that in contexts where specific PRR parties have already taken part in a national government, voters will be more prone to legitimising PRR politics in general. In this respect, it can be expected that those who more favourably view a PRR party that already has experience in national government (i.e. an established PRR party) will also tend to positively evaluate a PRR that has never been in national government (i.e. a challenger PRR party), hence not perceiving it as a danger. Accordingly, our third hypothesis reads as follows:

H3: *More positive evaluations of an established PRR party at the individual level imply a lower individual perception of a PRR challenger party as a threat to democracy.*

Case study

This article tackles the above-mentioned hypotheses by focusing on the Italian case, which provides a textbook example of the capacity of the PRR to penetrate the mainstream of party politics. Following the 2022 general election (for details, see Garzia 2023; Pasquino & Valbruzzi 2023), Italy became the first

country in Western Europe to have a coalition government dominated by two parties both belonging to the PRR family (Zulianello 2022): Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (Fdi), as the leading partner of the coalition (26.0% of the votes), and Matteo Salvini's League, as the main junior coalition partner (8.8%).

The outcome of the 2022 general election did not occur by chance. The triumph of the PRR, instead, represented the culmination of a three-decade-long process of normalisation of nativist ideas and agenda. The establishment of Forza Italia (FI) in the first half of the 1990s opened the way for the incorporation of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI) and the populist regionalist Northern League (Lega Nord, LN) as viable coalition and governing partners. While the centre-right coalition had historically been dominated by Silvio Berlusconi's parties, over time, the balance of power has shifted to the PRR (Albertazzi, Bonansinga & Zulianello 2021). In the 2018 general elections, the League (formerly the Northern League) emerged as the leading force within the coalition, but by the time of the 2022 elections, Fdi had cannibalised the support of its PRR competitor, receiving almost three times the votes obtained by Salvini's party.

Although neither Fdi nor the League were founded as PRR parties, both can safely be categorised as members of this party family today (on the PRR as a party family, see Mudde 2007; see also Ennsner 2012). As Puleo and Piccolino (2022, p. 378) underline, Fdi embraced nativism only after the first party congress held in Fiuggi in 2014, two years after its foundation; nevertheless, 'in the last years, Fdi displayed indeed all the ideological features ascribable to the populist radical right at the core of its ideology'. Over the years, Fdi has effectively established a reputation for reliability and consistency, maintaining a steadfast and consistent position of opposition to the various governments that have held power over the past decade (Baldini et al. 2022; Vampa 2023), acting as a paradigmatic case of a challenger party (de Vries & Hobolt 2020) until the establishment of the Meloni government in 2022. The League, in contrast, is now the oldest party with parliamentary representation in Italy. With a long pedigree of participation in national governments (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2015), it is one of the most emblematic instances of a populist party that has strengthened its status over the years as an established actor in the party system. Under the leadership of Salvini, the party abandoned its Northern regionalist populist *raison d'être* to embrace a clear-cut PRR profile encompassing the whole peninsula (Albertazzi, Giovannini & Seddone 2018; Zulianello 2021; see also Brancaccio et al. 2021).

While both Fdi and the League epitomise the success of the PRR family, the literature has, more generally, highlighted how Italy is a fertile breeding ground for populism (Bobba & McDonnell 2015; Tarchi 2015). Indeed, the 2022 general elections also saw the participation of two non-PRR populist parties, the centre-right populist FI (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2015) and the peculiar case of the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S), an instance of valence populism

Table 1. Ideological profiles of the main parties in the 2022 Italian general elections.

Populist radical right parties	Other populist parties	Non-populist parties
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brothers of Italy (Fdi) • League 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forza Italia (FI) (centre-right populism) • Five Star Movement (M5S) (valence populism) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action and Italy Alive (A-IV) (centrist) • Democratic Party (PD) (centre-left) • Greens and Left Alliance (AVS) (radical left)

(Zulianello 2020). If we focus on the parties that crossed the 3% threshold set by the electoral system (Table 1), we observe that four out of the seven are variously populists, while only three did not qualify as such: the radical left Greens and Left Alliance (Alleanza Verdi Sinistra, AVS), the centrist coalition Action-Italy Alive (Azione-Italia Viva, A-IV), and the centre-left Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD).

Methods and data

This paper employs survey data collected during the period spanning from 29 November to 2 December 2022. The survey was administered via CAWI by Demetra, an Italian private company. The sampling procedure followed a probabilistic design and included 1,009 respondents from an opt-in panel representative of the Italian adult population (aged 18+). The sample stratification included socio-demographic dimensions such as gender, age, education and region of residence. The timeframe of the survey administration is particularly appropriate for the scope of the present analysis as it was carried out shortly after the establishment of the Meloni government, which was officially sworn in on 22 October 2022.

The new government included both an established PRR party with a long pedigree of government participation, the League, and one that since its foundation had been consistently in opposition and that up to that moment qualified as a challenger PRR party, Fdi. At the time of the data collection, the new government's coalition agreements, portfolio distribution, and policy orientation were publicly evident. The balance of power within the coalition and between the two PRR parties was also apparent. The government was PRR-dominated, as these parties commanded 15 out of 23 ministers; however, there was a significant asymmetry in strength between the Fdi and the League: the former secured 9 portfolios, with its leader Giorgia Meloni as Prime Minister, while the latter gained 5 ministers.

Empirically, the operationalisation of the mainstreaming of a PRR party within a democratic context poses substantial challenges. It is indeed an intricate process, evoking distinct dimensions and thus difficult to interpret and analyse (Brown, Mondon & Winter 2023; Moffitt 2022). So far, it has been investigated in the literature by largely focusing on the supply side, taking into account

ideological adaptation and organisational or communicative changes (e.g. Akkerman, de Lange & Rooduijn 2016; Curini, Moffitt & Zulianello 2024), while the demand side – that is considering the perceptions at the mass level – has remained overlooked, making it difficult to rely on validated indicators. In other words, there is a shortage of empirical analyses exploring how the mainstreaming of the PRR at the elite level is seen from the perspective of voters.

In this respect, a classic work by Sani (1976) provides useful insight into the matter. Discussing the mass perceptions about two paradigmatic cases of anti-system parties from the Italian First Republic, the Italian Communist Party (PCI, Partito Comunista Italiano) and the Italian Social Movement (MSI), he argued that

In the eyes of their critics, the PCI and the MSI have exhibited traits that have raised doubts about their democratic credentials, their willingness to abide by the rules of the game, their commitment to the preservation of the institutions of a pluralistic society. (Sani 1976, p. 13)

Interestingly, one of the key variables included in his study was whether a given party was perceived to be ‘a threat to democracy’ (Sani 1976). Inspired by the latter work, and given that most of the literature about PRR parties emphasises the potential danger they pose to liberal democracy, our empirical investigation of the mass perceptions of PRR mainstreaming was conducted by means of two survey questions (corresponding to the dependent variables employed in our models) that asked respondents to evaluate the democratic risk represented by Fdl and the League. The questions were thus formulated as follows: ‘Do you consider Fdl as a threat to democracy in Italy?’, and ‘Do you consider the League as a threat to democracy in Italy?’. For both questions, the respondents were asked to indicate their opinion on a scale ranging from 0 (no threat) to 10 (maximum threat).

In order to examine the influence of individual PRR attitudes on perception about PRR mainstreaming (H1 and RQ1), respondents were required to indicate their agreement with statements reflecting the ideological core of this party family. Specifically, we relied on three distinct items to investigate respondents’ attitudes towards the different ‘facets of nativism’ (Betz 2019). Economic nativism was investigated through the following question: ‘Immigrants have a positive impact on the Italian economy’.¹ Welfare chauvinism was tested through an item stating ‘Italians should have priority in welfare services over immigrants’. And finally, symbolic nativism was accounted for through the following prompt: ‘Immigrants threaten Italian identity and traditions’. The responses to each item were measured using a 1–5 scale, where 1 meant

¹To enhance the comprehensibility of the findings, the model includes a recoded version of the economic nativism responses, wherein a value of 1 represents the highest level of agreement (lowest economic nativism) and 5 represents the highest level of disagreement (highest economic nativism). In this way, the responses are aligned with the other two items related to nativism.

complete disagreement and 5 indicated complete agreement. We also considered attitudes evoking the other two core ideological features of the PRR, namely authoritarianism and populism (Mudde 2007). Authoritarian attitudes were explored using two distinct items. On the one hand, we addressed the law-and-order dimension by using the item ‘Nowadays there is too much tolerance: criminals should be punished more severely’. On the other, a traditional view of family and gender roles was measured relying on the following statement: ‘A true family is one consisting of a man and a woman’.² Finally, the statement ‘Common people, not politicians, should make the most important policy decisions’ was used to measure populist attitudes, as it explicitly refers to the features of people-centrism and anti-elitism as well as to the antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’.

As previously mentioned, the literature has shown that PRR parties serve as exceptional drivers of affective polarisation. Indeed, supporters of PRR parties tend to receive very negative evaluations from the voters of the more traditional mainstream parties (e.g. Gidron, Adams & Horne 2023, Hartevelde et al. 2022; Reiljan 2020, p. 392) and this is likely to affect perceptions about their very legitimacy given the emotional nature of affective polarisation itself (e.g. Renström, Bäck & Carroll 2023; Webster & Abramowitz 2017). Accordingly, to tackle H2a, H2b and H3 we employed a set of items prompting respondents to evaluate the likeability of the main Italian political parties on a 0–10 scale, where 0 means strongly dislike and 10 means strongly like a given party.

The models also include control variables concerning: (a) ideological self-placement, measured through a 0–10 scale, with 0 representing left and 10 representing right; (b) age; (c) gender; (d) education³; (e) income⁴; (f) the population of the place of residence.⁵ Table 2 provides descriptives of the variables included in our Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) models. In the online appendix we have reported results from a set of OLS models replicating the analyses we carried out about PRR parties also on non-PRR parties, in order to have a clearer picture of the reciprocal individual evaluations across the various parties. For each of the parties included in the models reported in the online appendix, we employed a 0–10 scale variable measuring the individual

²While gender-related issues were not typically considered to be core features of the PRR (Mudde 2007), we concur with Spierings (2020, p. 42), who suggests that even though ‘gender may not be a defining quality of PRR ideology [...] it is nonetheless near to the PRR core as it brings together and highlights every element of PRR ideology tapping into fundamental parts of people’s identity’.

³We employed a dichotomous variable distinguishing respondents holding a university degree from those who did not.

⁴Income was measured using a categorical variable, with code 1 assigned to individuals earning less than 7,500€ per year, code 2 to those earning between 7,500€ and 15,000€ per year, code 3 to those earning between 15,000€ and 30,000€ per year, code 4 to those earning between 30,000€ and 50,000€ per year, and code 5 to respondents with an income above 50,000€ per year.

⁵This variable was categorised based on the number of inhabitants. A score of 1 was assigned to places with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, a score of 2 to places with 10,001 to 30,000 inhabitants, a score of 3 to cities with 30,001 to 100,000 inhabitants, a score of 4 to cities with 100,001 to 250,000 inhabitants, and a score of 5 to cities with more than 250,001 inhabitants.

Table 2. Descriptives.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
League as a threat to democracy	981	4.925	3.689	0	10
Fdl as a threat to democracy	982	4.747	3.651	0	10
Economic nativism	1009	3.084	1.139	1	5
Welfare chauvinism	1009	3.187	1.253	1	5
Symbolic nativism	1009	2.799	1.285	1	5
Authoritarianism: Law and order	1009	4.019	1.02	1	5
Authoritarianism: Traditional family	1009	2.774	1.471	1	5
Populism (1–5 scale)	1009	3.017	1.147	1	5
Ideological self-placement	1009	5.137	2.787	0	10
A-IV – party evaluation	961	3.189	2.849	0	10
AVS – party evaluation	927	3.731	2.928	0	10
Fdl – party evaluation	991	4.113	3.558	0	10
FI- party evaluation	994	3.329	3.022	0	10
League – party evaluation	995	3.155	3.263	0	10
M5S – party evaluation	995	3.756	3.219	0	10
PD – party evaluation	993	3.537	3.04	0	10
Age	1009	47.227	14.187	18	92
Gender	1008	.505	.5	0	1
Residency dimension	1008	2.809	1.406	1	5
Income	1009	2.765	1.056	1	5
Education	1009	.344	.475	0	1

assessment for each of the non-PRR parties included in this study, namely A-IV, AVS, FI, M5S, PD.

Analyses

Table 3 shows the attitudes of the respondents towards the core elements of the PRR ideology, according to the party voted for in the 2022 general election. The data suggest that in terms of ideological self-placement, the position of Fdl (7.9) and the League (7.9) are largely overlapping and clearly located on the right-wing portion of the political space. Interestingly, the voters of FI (7.8) also indisputably locate themselves on the right, almost overlapping with the electorate of the two PRR parties. In the centre, we find A-IV's voters (5), while on the left-wing portion of the political space are the voters of the M5S (3.9), the PD (2.5), and the AVS (1.7).

When examining attitudes related to the core ideological tenets of the PRR, it becomes evident that Fdl exhibits slightly more radical stances compared to

Table 3. Ideological self-placements and individual attitudes on the PRR's core values, according to the party voted for in the 2022 Italian General Elections (avg).

	A-IV	AVS	Fdl	FI	M5S	League	PD
Ideological self-placement	5	1.7	7.9	7.8	3.9	7.9	2.5
Economic nativism	2.7	2.2	3.7	3.3	3	3.6	2.3
Welfare chauvinism	2.8	2.1	3.9	3.4	3.1	3.6	2.4
Symbolic nativism	2.4	1.5	3.5	3.2	2.6	3.5	2.1
Authoritarianism: Law and order	4	3.3	4.5	4	4.2	4.1	3.6
Authoritarianism: Traditional family	2.5	1.4	3.9	3.2	2.6	3.4	1.9
Populism (1–5 scale)	2.5	2.7	3.2	3.3	3.2	3.3	2.5
N	55	38	218	45	168	43	160

Table 4. Matrix of correlations of the individual evaluation of the Italian political parties.

Variables	Evaluation of A-IV	Evaluation of the AVS	Evaluation of Fdl	Evaluation of FI	Evaluation of the League	Evaluation of the M5S	Evaluation of the PD
Evaluation of A-IV	1.000						
Evaluation of the AVS	0.402	1.000					
Evaluation of Fdl	0.262	-0.229	1.000				
Evaluation of FI	0.406	-0.001	0.763	1.000			
Evaluation of the League	0.257	-0.149	0.832	0.766	1.000		
Evaluation of the M5S	0.116	0.427	-0.190	-0.011	-0.098	1.000	
Evaluation of the PD	0.480	0.742	-0.219	0.021	-0.141	0.419	1.000

the League, except in the case of populism (Fdl = 3.2; League = 3.3). While nativist attitudes show minimal differences between the PRR parties, substantial differences emerge in the realm of authoritarianism. In this respect, Fdl demonstrates (slightly) greater authoritarian attitudes in terms of both law and order (Fdl = 4.5; League = 4.1) and traditional family values in comparison to its PRR competitor (Fdl = 3.9; League = 3.4). [Table 4](#) illustrates the correlation matrix of the individual evaluations of Italian political parties.

The data suggest a certain alignment in the evaluations of the two PRR parties under investigation. Indeed, the correlation coefficient of 0.832 indicates a significant alignment between individual assessments of Fdl and the League, implying a substantial convergence between these two political parties. This suggests that individuals who hold favourable opinions towards one of these parties are likely to have a similarly positive assessment of the other. It is worth noting that individual evaluations of FI, which we identified as a populist party (see [Table 1](#)), also show significant correlations with the assessments of both the two PRR parties: 0.763 with Fdl and 0.766 with the League. This alignment could be interpreted in two distinct ways: on the one hand, it could indicate a convergence driven by a shared populist feature; on the other hand, it may stem from their belonging to the same (centre-right) electoral and governing coalition. The results related to M5S, the other populist party in the Italian political landscape (see [Table 1](#)), indicate that the latter of the two possible interpretations is more convincing. Despite the populist nature of the party, the correlation coefficient of the M5S's evaluation with both Fdl and the League is negative. Similarly, the correlation coefficients pertaining to the other parties included in the analysis and the two PRR parties are quite low or even negative, supporting the idea that the dualism between government and opposition (as well as different coalitions) should be considered as an important factor shaping individuals' evaluations of the main Italian political actors.

[Table 5](#) displays the results of three OLS regression models testing the factors that influence the perception of the League as a threat to democracy. Model 1a

Table 5. OLS model testing the individual perceptions of the League as a threat to democracy (0–10 scale).

	Model 1a – PRR policy issues			Model 2a – Party evaluation			Model 3a – PRR policy issues & party evaluation		
	Coef.	St.Err.	Sig	Coef.	St.Err.	Sig	Coef.	St.Err.	Sig
Economic nativism (1–5 scale)	–0.44	0.12	***				–0.25	0.12	**
Welfare chauvinism (1–5 scale)	–0.22	0.11	*				–0.16	0.12	
Symbolic nativism (1–5 scale)	–0.08	0.11					–0.07	0.12	
Authoritarianism: Law and order (1–5 scale)	0.11	0.12					0.15	0.12	
Authoritarianism: Traditional family (1–5 scale)	–0.18	0.09	**				–0.15	0.09	
Populism (1–5 scale)	0.16	0.1					0.05	0.11	
Ideological self-placement (0=left; 10=right)	–0.34	0.05	***				–0.1	0.07	
A-IV – party evaluation (0–10 scale)				–0.08	0.05		–0.08	0.05	
AVS – party evaluation (0–10 scale)				0.32	0.06	***	0.24	0.06	***
Fdl – party evaluation (0–10 scale)				–0.17	0.06	***	–0.11	0.07	*
FI – party evaluation (0–10 scale)				–0.1	0.07		–0.1	0.07	
League – party evaluation (0–10 scale)				–0.02	0.07		0.05	0.07	
M5S – party evaluation (0–10 scale)				0.1	0.04	**	0.11	0.04	***
PD – party evaluation (0–10 scale)				0.09	0.06		0.06	0.06	
Age	–0.01	0.01		0.01	0.01	*	0.01	0.01	
Gender (ref. cat. Women)	–0.32	0.22		–0.18	0.22		–0.18	0.23	
Residency dimension	0.07	0.08		0.03	0.08		0.04	0.08	
Income	–0.29	0.11	***	–0.32	0.11	***	–0.32	0.11	***
Education (ref. high school or lower degree)	0	.		0	.		0	.	
University degree	0.32	0.24		0.47	0.25	*	0.41	0.25	*
Constant	9.46	0.71	***	4.41	0.58	***	6.13	0.91	***
R-squared		0.19			0.23			0.25	
Number of obs		979			898			898	

*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$.

investigates to what extent the attitudes of the respondents towards the core ideas of the PRR play a role (H1), and suggests that increased levels of economic nativism, welfare chauvinism, and greater support for the traditional family structure correspond to a reduced perception of the League as a menace (RQ1). The same applies to individuals who have more right-wing ideological positions. In contrast, symbolic nativism and authoritarianism, particularly in relation to law and order, do not reach statistical significance; this also holds true for the coefficient linked to populist attitudes. These results, therefore, seem to suggest that in the case of RQ1, the different elements of the PRR core ideology play a varying role in shaping individual assessment of the League's democratic credentials.

Model 2a assesses the influence of the individual evaluations about the likeability of the main Italian political parties (H2a, H2b). We found mixed empirical evidence supporting H2a, focusing on the association between the individual evaluations of non-populist parties and those of the PRR, represented in this model by the League. Indeed, the coefficients that pointed to the evaluations of non-populist parties are statistically significant only for the radical left party, the AVS. More precisely, the results suggest that a more positive assessment of the AVS corresponds to increased levels of concern about the potential impact of the League on democracy. When it comes to the other non-

populist parties, even though the coefficients are positive – thus implying a greater concern about the League’s democratic credentials – they are not statistically significant. The only exception here is represented by A-IV. Indeed, despite the lack of significance at the statistical level, coefficients of evaluations of A-IV are negative, thus suggesting that a more positive assessment of A-IV would imply lower concern about the League’s impact on democracy. Moving on to H2b, which focuses on the relationship between the individual assessment of populist parties (in our case FI and M5S), we also found mixed results that do not fully support the hypothesis. The coefficients indicate that those who exhibit higher levels of likeability for the M5S are associated with an increased fear about the impact of the League on democracy. However, this does not apply to the evaluations of FI. In the latter case, the negative coefficient – although lacking statistical significance – suggests an opposite trend: a lower concern for the potential impact of the League as positive evaluation of FI increases. Finally, we find that an increase in positive evaluations of Fdl corresponds to lower levels of perception in viewing the League as a danger.

In order to control for both the role of the core values of the PRR and the individual assessments, we also ran Model 3a. The changes in coefficients associated with core values of the PRR allow us to provide an answer to RQ1, suggesting not only that authoritarianism, nativism and populism play different roles in driving individuals’ evaluations about the League’s democratic credentials, but also that they are moderated by party evaluations. Indeed, respondents who reported higher scores in economic nativism are less concerned about the League’s democratic credentials, but none of the other attitudes pointing to the ideological features of the PRR reaches statistical significance. Instead, the relationship between the parties’ evaluations and the assessment of the League as a threat to democracy is supported, thus confirming all the findings identified by Model 2a. All in all, as concerns the League, we found only partial confirmations of our hypotheses.

Table 6 presents the results of three OLS models investigating the factors that influence the perception of Fdl as a threat to democracy, replicating thus the analytical strategy presented above for the League. Model 1b reveals patterns akin to those identified for the party led by Salvini. This thus confirms the findings highlighted for H1 concerning the impact of individual attitudes to the core ideological features of PRR parties on the perception of those parties as a danger to democracy. Nonetheless, some interesting differences between the League and Fdl emerge. Although also in this case we found an association between individuals’ positions on the core ideology of PRR (H1), when considering the distinct components, we found confirmation of the statistical significance of economic nativism, meaning that respondents scoring higher on this item tend to express lower concern about Fdl being a danger. However, in contrast to the previous models focusing on the League, welfare chauvinism’s coefficient, even though negative, lacks statistical significance. Likewise, higher

Table 6. OLS model testing the individual perceptions of Fdl as a threat to democracy (0–10 scale).

	Model 1b – PRR policy issues			Model 2b – Party evaluation			Model 3b – PRR policy issues & party evaluation		
	Coef.	St.Err.	Sig	Coef.	St.Err.	Sig	Coef.	St.Err.	Sig
Economic nativism (1–5 scale)	–0.43	0.12	***				–0.16	0.12	
Welfare chauvinism (1–5 scale)	–0.16	0.11					–0.10	0.11	
Symbolic nativism (1–5 scale)	–0.04	0.11					–0.01	0.11	
Authoritarianism: Law and order (1–5 scale)	–0.06	0.12					0.06	0.12	
Authoritarianism: Traditional family (1–5 scale)	–0.19	0.09	**				–0.21	0.09	**
Populism (1–5 scale)	0.38	0.10	***				0.24	0.10	***
Ideological self-placement (0 = left; 10 = right)	–0.32	0.05	***				–0.06	0.07	
A-IV – party evaluation (0–10 scale)				–0.10	0.05	**	–0.10	0.05	**
AVS – party evaluation (0–10 scale)				0.36	0.06	***	0.30	0.06	***
Fdl – party evaluation (0–10 scale)				–0.21	0.06	***	–0.16	0.06	**
FI – party evaluation (0–10 scale)				–0.12	0.06	*	–0.12	0.06	*
League – party evaluation (0–10 scale)				0.13	0.06	**	0.16	0.07	**
M5S – party evaluation (0–10 scale)				0.12	0.04	***	0.12	0.04	***
PD – party evaluation (0–10 scale)				0.14	0.06	**	0.13	0.06	**
Age	–0.01	0.01		0.01	0.01		0.01	0.01	
Gender (ref. cat. Women)	–0.25	0.22		–0.14	0.22		–0.09	0.22	
Residency dimension	0.05	0.08		0.04	0.08		0.05	0.08	
Income	–0.28	0.11	**	–0.34	0.11	***	–0.31	0.11	***
Education (ref. high school or lower degree)	0.00	.		0.00	.		0.00	.	
University degree	0.16	0.24		0.31	0.24		0.31	0.24	
Constant	9.14	0.72	***	3.93	0.56	***	4.58	0.88	***
R-squared		0.18			0.26			0.27	
Number of obs		980			901			901	

*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$.

levels of authoritarian attitudes measured as support for the traditional family result in lower levels of threat perception. Finally, symbolic nativism and law and order do not have a significant impact. Differently from the models focusing on the League, populist attitudes reach statistical significance, suggesting that higher levels of populist attitudes are associated with a stronger inclination to perceive Fdl as a threat to democracy. In other words, with respect to RQ1, we found that the elements related to the core ideology of PRR may have a diverse effect in driving individuals' concerns about PRR parties' democratic credentials, and more importantly that their impact can diverge across parties within the same family. Finally, we also found that respondents with more right-wing positions have a lower tendency to worry about Fdl.

Model 2b examines the impact of individual party evaluations, aiming at providing empirical confirmation of H2a, H2b and H3. The results are quite consistent with those that we found for the League, but again with some differences. Regarding hypothesis H2a, which examines the influence of individual evaluations of non-populist parties on the perceived threat to democracy posed by Fdl, the results align with those found in the models investigating the case of the League. In general, we observe that a more positive assessment of non-populist parties is linked to a heightened level of fear about the potential impact of Fdl on democracy in Italy; most notably, all the coefficients hold

statistical significance. In this respect, the sole exception is A-IV, whose negative coefficient suggests an inverse relationship: namely that as the individual evaluation of A-IV increases, concern about Fdl's democratic credentials decreases. With respect to hypothesis H2b, divergent findings have emerged, preventing us from unequivocally endorsing the idea that favourable assessments of populist parties are associated with a greater apprehension regarding the influence of PRR parties on the democratic structure. The coefficients associated with individual assessments of M5S align with expectations, namely more favourable assessment of M5S implies an increased apprehension concerning Fdl's impact on democracy. Conversely, coefficients related to individual evaluations of FI demonstrate the opposite pattern, where more positive evaluations of the party mitigate concerns about Fdl.

H3 was aimed at investigating the internal dynamics within the PRR family, distinguishing between established and challenger PRR parties, and our expectations were not confirmed. In this instance, the positive coefficient, which is statistically significant, clarifies that a rise in individual appreciation for the League, an established PRR party, is associated with higher apprehension towards Fdl, a challenger PRR party. This outcome is unexpectedly intriguing, particularly when considering the results of analyses related to the League (see [Table 5](#)), where a favourable assessment of Fdl, despite not reaching statistical significance, suggested a reduction in worry about the democratic legitimacy of the League, as evidenced by the negative coefficient.

Model 3b combines the variables related to the core PRR ideas and those related to the likeability of the political parties. Among PRR attitudes (H1 and RQ1), only the variable about the traditional family maintains statistical significance. This confirms that a stronger endorsement of traditional social values implies a reduced level of concern about Fdl posing a threat to democracy. Likewise, populist attitudes still demonstrate statistical significance, suggesting that a rise in populism is associated with an increased perception of Fdl as a danger. Accordingly, while we found partial confirmation of H1, as at least one of the PRR core values maintains its statistical significance, we also found evidence that components of the PRR core values may have a diverse effect in shaping individual concerns about PRR parties' democratic credentials. In contrast, evaluations about the political parties consistently align with the outcomes predicted by the previous models, partially confirming our expectations about H2a, and similarly providing mixed evidence for H2b. Finally, even if our expectations about H3 are not supported by the analysis, the results are intriguing, confirming that individuals who have a more positive assessment of the League have greater concern about the potential impact of Fdl on democracy.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that, predictably, concerns about the impact of PRR parties on the democratic system are especially pronounced among individuals with an opposite ideological background, namely those who tend to evaluate left-wing or left-leaning political parties more positively. This is also the result of the rhetoric of ‘polarising the campaign in us-versus-them terms’ (Garzia 2023, p. 1042), alluding to a potential fascist threat coming from the potential victory of Fdl (Martella & Roncarolo 2023) that was widely used in the 2022 Italian general election campaign by left-wing and left-leaning parties. Beyond that, however, the analysis revealed that PRR parties in the same context may be not uniformly evaluated by respondents, as there is not a homogeneous perception of (il)legitimacy among voters who sympathise with non-PRR parties, be they populist or not. Although both Brothers of Italy (Fdl) and the League are considered threats to democracy by specific groups of voters, the former is viewed as more dangerous than the latter at the mass level. In other words, among non-PRR party sympathisers, the perception that Fdl poses a menace to democracy is more widespread compared to the perception of the League, which is, instead, limited to the sympathisers of certain parties.

In addition, even though Fdl and the League share the same ideological PRR core, the role played by individual attitudes to the key ingredients of the PRR agenda, that is nativism, authoritarianism and populism, in influencing the perception of democratic threat is nuanced. While economic nativism moderates the perception of democratic danger associated with both Fdl and the League, the other variables related to the core agenda of the PRR suggest mixed results. In particular, favourable attitudes towards symbolic nativism and law and order do not have an impact on respondents’ evaluations of the democratic threat posed by the PRR parties, and higher levels of welfare chauvinism decrease concerns only about the democratic credentials of the League, while stronger support for the traditional family reduces those about Fdl. These findings could be interpreted in the context of associative ownership (e.g. Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch 2012; Tresch, Lefevere & Walgrave 2015), which shapes the individual stances and affects the ways the two parties are perceived. In particular, the traditional family structure is a prominent aspect of Fdl’s identity and its programmatic platform (e.g. Baldini, Tronconi & Angelucci 2022; De Giorgi, Cavaliere & Feo 2023), while defending welfare provisions and services only for the native population is a primary concern of the League, in particular by protecting Italian pensioners while reducing benefits for immigrants (Fischer & Giuliani 2023). In other words, while Fdl and the League have the same ideological core, the relative salience given to the specific elements of the PRR agenda vary. This is also due to the very co-existence of two successful PRR parties in the same party system, which incentivises the parties to

differentiate their message by giving more importance to specific ingredients of the PRR message in their competitive strategies.

Our results also suggest that populist attitudes have different impacts for the League and Fdl. This is certainly due to the placement of M5S supporters on this dimension (i.e. they have strong populist attitudes), but it is also influenced by the League's long-standing status as an established PRR party compared to that of the (previously)⁶ challenger PRR party, Fdl. Indeed, the League's long record of participation in national governments, and in particular the experience of the coalition government between the League and M5S, may have led sympathisers of the latter to show greater leniency towards Salvini's party. In contrast, the relationship between M5S and Fdl has consistently been tense and shaped by the different trajectories between government and opposition. Most notably, the focus on 'coherence' was a key point in the communications of the Fdl until the 2022 elections, especially to highlight their difference from the League, who governed with the M5S: 'we have always remained on the same side, consistently serving the nation [...] as the only opposition force' (Meloni, Twitter/X, 14 March 2021). In particular, these patterns can be primarily understood in terms of the competition between the League as a long-standing established PRR party and Fdl as a (previous) challenger.

The analysis also revealed that despite the evident overlapping between the sympathisers of Fdl and the League, a contrasting pattern also characterises the reciprocal perceptions of danger associated with the two PRR parties. While the League is not perceived as dangerous by Fdl's sympathisers, Fdl is considered to be a threat to democracy by the League's sympathisers. Also in this case, the diverging pattern points to the established – challenger nature of the interactions between the two parties that has long characterised the relationship between them. A possible explanation for the fact that Fdl sympathisers do not perceive the League as a danger is that during its participation in national government, the League implemented specific policies that are particularly salient for Meloni's party too, especially in the fields of law and order and immigration. In contrast, the League's supporters are likely to be influenced in their evaluations of Fdl by that party's capacity to progressively and consistently cannibalise its electoral support over time. The League emerged for the first time as the leading force within the centre-right coalition in the 2018 general election (17.4% of the vote), followed by FI (14.0%) and Fdl (only the 2.0%). However, after four years, the balance of power within the coalition had completely changed, with Fdl obtaining 26% of the vote, around three times the support of the League (8.8%). In this light, the concern of the League's sympathisers is likely to be especially motivated by the potential irrelevance of the party in providing a distinctive contribution to the political direction and

⁶On the grounds of the definition of challenger party provided by de Vries and Hobolt (2020), the Fdl ceased to be so, becoming an established party once the Meloni government was established.

functioning of the new coalition government. This may be particularly true in the case of decentralisation: even though the League, a party that historically advocated for the interests of Northern Italian regions, has largely abandoned regionalism in favour of a state-wide nativist approach (Albertazzi, Giovannini & Seddone 2018), it remains the policy dimension where it is more ideologically distant from Fdl (Giannetti, Pedrazzani & Pinto 2018), suggesting a possible concern from the more traditional constituency of Salvini's party. Again, this finding is consistent with the literature, which suggests the importance of partisan motivations when it comes to the perception of democracy (e.g. Frederiksen 2022; Gidengil, Stolle & Bergeron-Boutin 2022; Graham & Svolic 2020). In other words, despite the disinvestment in regionalist issues by the League, they still hold importance for at least some of the voters who support the party, possibly the more long-term ones. Accordingly, given the traditional nationalist and centralistic approach by Fdl – a direct competitor within the same party PRR family – supporters of the League may perceive that their regionalist claims have not just been marginalised but are also in danger. Thus, the alignment of part of the League's supporters with more traditional regionalist stances may influence their concerns about the democratic credentials of the major partner of the coalition government, Fdl.

Conclusion

In the literature to date, analysis of the mainstreaming of the PRR has mainly focused on the elite level, that is the supply side of politics. However, very little is known about how voters perceive the mainstreaming of the PRR, namely the demand side of politics, especially in terms of mass perceptions about the democratic legitimacy of these parties. This paper has explicitly explored this topic: by using original survey data from Italy, a country that has experienced three decades of normalisation of PRR politics, it has analysed if and to what extent the two PRR parties, Meloni's Fdl and Salvini's League, are perceived by voters to be threats to democracy.

Inclusion in national political institutions is important to provide information to the broader public and to signal, directly and indirectly, what is acceptable or not (e.g. Bischof & Wagner 2019; Norris 2005; Tankard & Paluck 2016; Valentim 2021). This point is certainly relevant to the normalisation of *PRR politics in general*, but our study found important differences *between PRR parties themselves*, even within the same party system. We suggest that the legitimacy of the PRR at the elite level (i.e. the supply side of politics) is not necessarily linked to the legitimacy attributed to it at the mass level (i.e. the demand side).

Our analysis reveals that even where PRR politics has a long tradition of mainstreaming and normalisation, as in Italy, competing PRR parties can be perceived in different ways at the mass level. This mismatch is not only due to the peculiar path taken by the PRR in its march towards the mainstream,

that is its negative integration (Zulianello 2020), but is also decisively shaped by partisan cues, which play a key role in the interactions between PRR and non-PRR supporters, as well as in those taking place between the supporters of competing PRR parties. This confirms previous findings in the literature (i.e. Frederiksen 2022; Gidengil, Stolle & Bergeron-Boutin 2022; Graham & Svolik 2020) but also suggests that an important role is also played by the relationships among PRR parties themselves, especially in the form of the competition *within the same party family*: that is between a long-standing established PRR party, the League, and a (formerly) PRR challenger, Fdl. Most notably, our results highlight the importance of the established – challenger divide even within the PRR: despite a similar ideology, Fdl is perceived to be more dangerous than the League. This is certainly due to the ‘post-fascist’ historical background of Fdl, but also to the fact that voters had already seen the League in government several times as a junior coalition partner, while the potential impact of Meloni’s party on democracy pointed to uncharted territory, particularly because of its new status as the leading force in power.

Overall, our paper suggests that future research will need to pay attention not only to the competition between the PRR and other parties, but also to the interactions taking place between the PRR parties themselves.

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