

Extreme Right Parties in Italy

An overview

Leaving aside some groupuscules which obtained less than 0.5% of the vote in the May 2001 elections (*Forza Nuova* and *Fronte Nazionale*), three Italian parties are usually associated with the extreme right: the National Alliance (*Alleanza Nazionale*, AN), the Social Movement-Tricolour Flame (*Movimento Sociale-Fiamma Tricolore*, MsFt) and the Northern League (*Lega Nord*, LN). While for the MsFt the inclusion in the extreme right family is unquestionable, the inclusion of the other two parties is much more debatable.

The Northern League – on which see more below – is a relatively new party, born about 10 years ago from the merger of small ethno-regionalist movements (*Liga Veneto* and *Lega Lombarda* being the two most important) in the Northern regions. In contrast to the other two parties, the League has no relation to neo-fascism, which represents the common roots of both the AN and the MsFt, both being recently founded from the dissolution of the *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, the most successful extreme right party in Europe in the post-war period up to the 1980s.

The *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (Italian Social Movement, MSI) was founded in 1946 by a group of fascist veterans. While in 1948 the party scored 2.0% of the vote (almost 70% of which came from the regions south of Rome) it then achieved more significant results, averaging 5-7% in the elections up to the 1980s and entering into government in some municipal administrations. However, because of its explicit and strong neo-fascist and anti-democratic ideology, the party has long been isolated from the other parties (despite some approaches by the DC).

In order to understand the ideological character and the transformation of the MSI, it is important to recall the distinction first made by the Italian historian Renzo De Felice. Indeed, the history of the MSI from 1946 to 1992 can be characterized by the alternative prevalence of one of the two different ‘faces’ of fascism, which De Felice called respectively *Fascism-movement* and *Fascism-regime*. This distinction was associated both with an internal division and to a different set of political values and attitudes among the militants. While the *movement* version represented a sort of «left-wing fascism» (anticapitalist, revolutionary, antibourgeois, but also spiritualist and anti-egalitarian) which had its origins in the RSI (Italian Social Republic, the regime established by Mussolini in 1943 in Salò with the support of the German army), *fascism-regime* represented conservative-authoritarian, clerical and corporatist values. The latter component has been dominant during most of the MSI life. The former, led by Pino Rauti, has often been minoritarian, even if it has been very popular inside the MSI’s youth association, *Fronte della Gioventù* (Youth Front).

In the early 1970s, party secretary Giorgio Almirante officially declared acceptance of the democratic system, and the party achieved its best electoral result in 1972 with 8.7%. Although references to fascism were somewhat weakened, party ideology did not change. Neither did the party undergo any transformation during the 1980s, despite gaining acceptance as a legitimate actor in the talks for the formation of the cabinet led by Bettino Craxi in 1983 and enjoying a deradicalization of political conflict after the decline of terrorism and a more relaxed confrontation *vis-à-vis* the party system in general. After the brief secretaryship of Pino Rauti in 1990-91 brought the party to its nadir, the re-election of Gianfranco Fini, Almirante's dauphin (who had already been party secretary from 1987 to 1990) represented a return to the more traditional face of the party (focusing on law and order, plebiscitarian, nationalist and authoritarian values). In the 1992 elections, the party managed to avoid the decline of the other «old parties», scoring 5.4% and capitalizing on the anti-partyocratic battle that allowed the MSI to present itself as a newcomer against the corrupt system of the «First Republic».

More generally, the opportunity structure for success of the extreme right parties in the last decade has radically changed. Some factors are particularly relevant for the success of the MSI. First of all, the collapse of the DC – as well as that of the other governmental parties – left a void on the centre-right of political space, giving the MSI an important way out of its political isolation. The «freeing» of the centre-right electorate from old partisan attachments was all the more relevant for the MSI after it had moderated its appeal, although still stressing authoritarian and nationalistic issues (but not with a clear xenophobic position, also because immigration was not a relevant issue yet) as the most relevant. As far as the systemic attitudes are concerned, the MSI's very limited involvement in the *Tangentopoli* investigations on political corruption provided the party with strong credentials to distance itself from the other parties. On this aspect, the legitimacy offered by Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* to the MSI was one of the decisive factors that contributed to the electoral success of the party. Finally, the media appeal of Fini (moderate and calm in every speech and debate), was a sort of «certificate of authentication» of the political moderation of the party.

As a result of these changes, the MSI managed to enter the (new) political mainstream without going through real programmatic change. The party that entered into coalition following the 1994 elections with Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* and Umberto Bossi's Northern League, was different from the old MSI mainly because it managed to get over 13% of the votes under the new label of *MSI-Alleanza Nazionale* (launched in mid-1993 in order to recruit some independent candidates from outside the MSI).

The Fiuggi Congress, held in January 1995, represented a turning-point for the extreme right. After a sharp confrontation between the different factions, the hard-line faction led by Pino Rauti opposed abandoning the MSI and transforming itself into the National Alliance, giving birth to the MsFt, in strong continuity with the MSI. Ever since the MsFt has kept fascism as its main political reference-point. Rauti is today still the party leader (although having been challenged by a group that then left the party to form the *Movimento Sociale Europeo* in 1999) and the party has managed to obtain some good results in subsequent elections. These were all the more significant if one thinks that almost all the MSI dominant coalition had accepted the change in Fiuggi, entering into AN. The party's electorate is – as much as it was for the old MSI – concentrated in the South, but it also tends to be higher than average among the marginal sectors of society (which was not the case for the MSI).

The MsFt split has been successful mostly because of the strategic relevance of the party in majoritarian electoral competition. The presence of an extreme right competitor has forced AN and the other parties of the centre-right to look for cooperation, especially after the votes obtained by the MsFt candidates in the 1996 legislative elections proved to be decisive in bringing about the centre-right's defeat in many constituencies. The party has then reached an agreement, after the good result obtained in the 1999 European elections (10,3%), with the centre-right coalition of the Casa delle Libertà (Freedom House) in some regions during the 2000 regional elections and – above all – in some constituencies in the 2001 elections (when the party obtained one senator, elected in Sicily under the symbol of the Casa delle Libertà).

Concerning AN, the departure from the MSI tradition has been somewhat discontinuous. One could also analyse the process of party change inside the «electoral cycle» provided by the new law on the direct elections of mayors (see table below). If in the autumn municipal elections of 1993 the party had astonishing success, overtaking all the major governmental parties (party leader Fini scored 46.9% and Mussolini's granddaughter 44.4%, in the second ballots of Rome and Naples respectively), it was not until after the harsh defeat in the subsequent 1997 municipal elections that the party really undertook a more genuine process of ideological (and organizational) change. Electoral defeat proved to be, for the AN, the major source of party change.

In this respect, the programmatic conference held in spring 1998 in Verona represented the first important step towards a clear distancing from the neo-fascist imprint. Despite increasing centralization in many of its organizational dynamics (the party leader is now called President, and has almost «absolute power» over the internal decision making bodies) it was during this conference that the debate on fascism was dealt much more in depth than it had been the case in Fiuggi. Fini expressed a clear condemnation of some of the acts of the fascist regime. Below the leadership level, the picture is less clear. Survey data on party delegates at the Conference show that the middle-level élite still has political attitudes very close to the traditional MSI both in terms of authoritarian values and in the evaluation of the fascist regime.

It is also true that in many instances AN voters tend to express more moderate views, especially when these are compared with the electorates of other European extreme right parties on important issues such as xenophobia, ethnocentrism and authoritarianism. One can conclude that today, though with many uncertainties and difficulties (due to many reminiscences of the past which seem to be particularly appealing for the party cadres) the AN leadership – also refusing to cooperate with other extreme right parties such as the FN or the FPÖ in the European Parliament – is trying to push the party definitively away from the extreme right, leaving the old political location of the MSI to the MsFt, to the small extraparliamentary movements and, to some extent, also to the Northern League.

Umberto Bossi's party can be described as a «regionalist-populist» party. The rise of the party in the early 1990s benefited greatly from the crisis of the old party system. The great success it achieved in the Northern regions in the early 1990s (becoming the first party in several provinces of the rich Lombardy and of the economically fast-growing North-East) was due to several facilitating conditions. The first and foremost was the decline of the DC. The greatest successes of the party came from the provinces where the DC had traditionally been the dominant party, often scoring over 50% of the vote.

The League first appeared as a relevant actor on the national scene after the merger of the different leagues which were first formed to support the ethno-regionalist claims of the Venetian and Lombardy «populations». In its ten years of life, the party has experienced several changes, most of which have been promoted by the charismatic and uncontested leadership of Umberto Bossi.

Having started as an ethno-regionalist party, the League undoubtedly profited from several existing attitudes which the governing parties of the «first republic» had managed to keep at a latent level. Anti-political discourse, welfare chauvinism, anti-southerner and anti-immigrant prejudices rank high among the motivations for the League's vote in the early 1990s. The rise of *Forza Italia* represented a problem for the League: though contributing to its access to power in the national arena, the personality of Berlusconi and the programme of his party overshadowed the League with a more moderate and less divisive approach. In the subsequent years the party changed political strategy and coalition alliances according to Bossi's acute evaluation of the political opportunities for its success. From federalism to secession, through fiscal protest and strong anti-systemic discourse, the League has shown positions very close to the extreme right on some items. In terms of xenophobia, authoritarian values and anti-systemic attitudes, both at the élite and at the mass level, these stances are in several cases more to the right than the AN (note also that the two parties have been on opposite sides concerning national identity, the League being federalist, regionalist or even separatist and the AN very nationalist, until the official federalist line adopted by the *Casa delle Libertà* in the last year brought produced an apparently unitary position of the coalition).

However, on other grounds, the League could hardly be defined as a classic party of the extreme right. First of all the radical opposition to fascism denotes a clear distancing from those extreme right parties that have been formed on an explicitly neo-fascist platform. Also in terms of self-location on the left-right axis, both leaders and militants have for a long time refused to consider themselves as right wing, not to say extreme right-wing. Some authors have therefore spoken of the League's electorate as «centre-extremist». Indeed, if the electorate first tended to spread all along the left-right continuum, in the last years they increasingly identify with centre or centre-right positions, probably following the return of the party into coalition with *Forza Italia* and the AN. In comparison to the electorates of European extreme right parties, the League's voters show peculiar traits: they are more concentrated in rural constituencies than in urban ones (but in general they are also quite numerous in the small cities along the line between the Padanian plain and the Alps) and, most of all, they don't come from marginal sectors of society. In conclusion, if xenophobia and a strong anti-systemic (and separatist) political discourse define the party as very close to the positions of other West European ERPs, today the best definition for the League is probably that of a regionalist-populist party, that often changes strategy and policy according to the opportunity structure.

After the 2001 elections, both the AN and the League have acquired ministerial positions in the Berlusconi government. But it is still too soon to tell what the effects of government on their policies and attitudes will be.

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Table 1 Electoral results of the MSI-AN, AN, Ms-Ft and Northern League.

	1993 municipal*		1994 legislative**		1994 European***		1995 regional****		1996 legislative	
	%	mayors	%	MPs	%	MEPs	%	Pres.	%	MPs
MSI-AN/AN	18.0	4	13.5	105	12.5	11	14.4	-	15.7	93
Ln	7.3	1	8.4	117	6.6	6	6.4	-	10.1	59
MsFt	-		-		-		0.4	-	0.9	-

	1997 mun.		1999 Eur.		2000 reg.		2001 leg.	
	%	mayors	%	MEPs	%	Pres.	%	MPs
MSI-AN/ AN	12.3	1	10.3	9	12.9	2	12.0	96
Ln	17.6	2	4.5	4	5.0	-	3.9	30
MsFt	2.0	1	1.6	1	0.3	-	1.0	-

* *Municipal elections: % and n. of mayors in the autumn elections (n.: 19 provincial capitals)*

** *Legislative: % in the proportional ballot and number of MPs (Chamber of Deputies- n. 630)*

*** *European: % of votes and n. of MEPs (total italian members 87)*

**** *Regional: % of votes (data referred to the 15 Ordinary Statute regions) and n. of regional presidents elected*