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Themed Issue: LGBTQ+ Politics in Contentious Times

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The anti-gender movement and the populist radical right in Italy: a symbiotic relationship

Anna Lavizzari, alavizza@ucm.es
Complutense University of Madrid, Spain

The political landscape of Italy experienced a seismic shift in the September 2022 elections, marking a watershed moment. Giorgia Meloni, the leader of the populist radical right party (PRRP) Brothers of Italy, was elected as Italy's head of government. This event highlighted a significant development in the country's gender politics, reflecting the ascent of PRRPs across Europe, marked by their reactionary politics, emphasis on traditional values and staunch opposition to gender equality. This study focuses on the dynamics between PRRPs (Brothers of Italy and the League) and the anti-gender movement in Italy. Through a qualitative content analysis of the primary sources of political parties and movements, the research explores their symbiotic relationship, the linkage and adjustment mechanisms employed by both actors, and the political outcomes of their interactions, offering insights into the mobilization of anti-gender actors and their alliance with PRRPs. It contributes to understanding how the organized opposition to gender equality is mainstreamed within political spheres, especially in contexts where right-wing populists hold power.

Keywords anti-gender movement • populist radical right • movement–party interactions
• symbiotic relationship • qualitative content analysis • Italy

Key messages

- Populist radical right parties (PRRPs) and anti-gender movements develop symbiotic relations through linkage and adjustment mechanisms.
- The linkage mechanisms include joint protest and electoral mobilization, shared ideology, and resource sharing.
- Movement–party interactions lead to the effective institutionalization of anti-gender actors in government and the mainstreamization of anti-gender actors.
- Through movement–party interactions, we observe a qualitative shift from reactive to proactive politics.

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Introduction

For many reasons, the political elections of September 2022 represent a watershed in recent Italian and European politics. For the first time, Italian voters elected the radical right party *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy [FdI]), led by Giorgia Meloni, 'a woman, a mother, a Christian' (Fernández and Solís, 2022), to guide the country's executive. In addition to being the Italian political party furthest positioned on the Right along the spectrum to govern Italy in the post-Second World War period, Meloni's election represents a defining moment for the country's contentious gender politics. In many ways, we can consider Meloni's FdI as one of the rising stars of the European populist radical right party (PRRP) family, characterized by its reactionary politics, focus on traditional values and fierce opposition to gender equality and sexuality diversity rights. The rise and success of PRRPs should be placed in the context of a larger phenomenon, which Marta Cabezas Fernández and Cristina Vega Solís (2022) interpret as a 'patriarchal reaction', taking place within a political cycle in which gender politics constitutes one of the most important fields of contention animating sociocultural, legal and economic disputes between progressive/libertarian and conservative/traditionalist actors that have been able, nonetheless, to update their agendas while capitalizing on the growing political discontent with traditional left-right party politics. Not only is the heightened politicization and polarization of gender politics in many European countries, including Italy, rooted in the ongoing erosion of democratic institutions and practices, as largely recognized in the literature on gender and politics (Walby, 2015; Lombardo et al, 2021; Abou-Chadi et al, 2021), but there is also an increased politicization of religion in the public sphere, accompanied by the moralization of such concerns as economic injustice and claims against neoliberal policies (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). Scholars have therefore come to define current developments in terms of a backlash against gender politics (Köttig et al, 2017). However, as emphasized by Paternotte (2023), it remains crucial to grasp the nature of a political project grounded in 'gender ideology', akin to a creature with its own life – a Frankenstein's monster – around which political positions, claims and policy proposals are articulated, beyond its reactionary nature. Against this backdrop, Meloni's party and, to a lesser extent, Salvini's League have been able to become champions of pro-life and pro-family stances through a successful embedding of the anti-gender movement in the government.

To understand the dynamics delineating the contemporary reactionary political climate and the centrality of gender politics at its core, researchers have underlined the symbolic dimension of gender as a 'glue' (Kováts and Pöim, 2015) or an 'empty signifier' (Mayer and Sauer, 2017) able to redefine the ideological lines around which diverse alliance structures and broad-spectrum coalitions are built. One of the defining aspects of contemporary contentious gender politics is the heterogeneity of actors coalescing in organized opposition to gender equality and resistance to feminism (Verloo and Paternotte, 2018; Roggeband and Krizsán, 2018) across electoral and protest arenas. On the one hand, among the most vocal and visible manifestations of the opposition to gender and sexual equality since the early 2010s, scholars have documented the large role of anti-gender movements and campaigns (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Ahrens et al, 2018).

On the other hand, the politicization of gender politics has been at the centre of scholarly work on gender and the far right (Köttig et al, 2017; Graff et al,

2019; Fangen and Skjelsbaek, 2020), drawing attention to such notable aspects as the appropriation of issues of gender, women's rights, sexuality and the family by populist radical right actors (Spierings et al, 2015; Dietze and Roth, 2020; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022), the instrumental use of religious discourses and symbols by populist leaders (Nilsson DeHanas and Shterin, 2018; Norocel and Giorgi, 2022), and the opposition to 'gender ideology'. Indeed, concertation between radical right-wing populists and anti-gender actors has been observed globally, especially in contexts where populists are in power (Grzebalska and Peto, 2018; Alonso and Espinosa Fajardo, 2021; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). Within this framework, several scholars have analysed the connections between PRRPs and the anti-gender movement in the Italian case, especially with respect to the content of their political manifestos, the role of the movement's activists when elected for the parties and their influence on the country's institutions (see, for example, Bellé and Poggio, 2018; Donà, 2020; Ben-Porat et al, 2023; Giorgi, 2022; Trappolin, 2022; Prearo, 2024). In particular, authors point to a crucial topic, that is, the instrumentalization of religion by populist parties (Marchetti et al, 2023; Prearo, 2024), most notably from the radical right. Moreover, it has been shown how anti-gender groups promote anti-elitist and nostalgic narratives with a high emotional value, engaging in processes of 'othering' and 'us versus them' narratives that align ideologically with PRRP discourses (Bellé and Poggio, 2018; Bellé and Donà, 2022; Evolvi, 2022). Notwithstanding these contributions, beyond the discursive level, the interactions between anti-gender movements and political parties remain one of the least explored aspects of this phenomenon, both in Italy and beyond.

A possible reason may be that research on movement-party interactions has been traditionally cumbersome due to disciplinary resistance and the tendency to establish clear-cut distinctions between political parties and social movements. Yet, an observable trend towards more intimate interactions between these actors calls for renewed theoretical and empirical attention. Dynamics like party 'movementization' (Tarrow, 2021) through the internalization of movement logics into the party system or the creation of organizational hybrids like movement-parties (Gunther and Diamond, 2003) have become increasingly common for both progressive and conservative movements, as well as left- and right-wing parties.

With this as a backdrop, this article investigates the processes and mechanisms that define the relations between PRRPs (specifically, FdI and the League) and the anti-gender movement in Italy in terms of mobilization, shared ideology and resources. The research aims to bridge scholarly work on movement-party interactions and gender and politics under a common analytical framework in order to contribute to our understanding of movement-party relations on gender issues. To do so, it analyses the extent to which the anti-gender movement is able to influence the issue attention and strategic choices of PRRPs in the institutional arena through grass-roots mobilizations, protest campaigns and alliance building. Empirically, Italy provides a notable case for different reasons. The effect of movement-party relations is evident in a political scenario where anti-gender positions have gained support from various entities, especially from populist right-wing factions like the League and FdI, since the inception of the movement in 2013, testifying to the existence of symbiotic relations. Following a definite political strategy, the anti-gender movement has been able to successfully institutionalize itself within government offices while acting strategically across protest and electoral arenas. Italy therefore provides a particularly

salient case for an examination of the organized opposition to gender equality where anti-genderism has become a mainstream ideal.

The article is structured as follows. It first reviews significant studies in the literature on movement–party interactions, making a case for the investigation of symbiotic relations between the anti-gender movement and the populist radical right in Italy. After presenting the research strategy, the article sets the scene for the empirical analysis by tracing a periodization of movement–party interactions into three major phases. It then moves on to an empirical analysis of the patterns of interaction, focusing in particular on the linkages and adjustment mechanisms at play, which we define as mobilization, a shared ideology and resource sharing.

Movement–party interactions: a symbiotic relationship?

Despite primarily operating outside the electoral and institutional spheres, social movements engage, implicitly or explicitly, with those in positions of power. The academic literature on social movements underscores the intricate relationship between them and the institutional factors that influence their outcomes. Among such factors, this relationship involves institutional actors, such as political parties, highlighting a nuanced interplay between these two sets of political actors (see, for example, [McAdam and Tarrow, 2010](#); [Kriesi, 2015](#); [Hutter and Vliegenthart, 2018](#); [Piccio, 2019](#)). [Kriesi \(2015\)](#) similarly argues that social movements and political parties are interconnected in multifaceted ways that extend beyond mere alliances. At the extremes, parties can evolve into de facto social movements by aligning with them, incorporating their issues into the formal political arena and adopting their mobilization strategies ([Kriesi, 2015](#)). In contrast, social movements may choose to transform into political parties to directly represent their interests within the electoral arena. Transitory forms of mobilization between social movements and political parties have also been embodied by ‘movement-parties’ ([Kitschelt, 2006](#)). [Hutter and colleagues \(2019\)](#) explain how the notion of parties as allies, in particular, has played a key role in the political process approach. It posits that social movements can leverage the expansion of conflict in the public sphere to open up political opportunities and that politicians can seize these opportunities to advance their cause within the political system. Parties and their representatives may adopt the themes of their challengers opportunistically, a pattern commonly associated with populist parties when their leaders capitalize on these opportunities to position themselves as defenders of the people ([Mudde, 2017](#)). In a similar way, [Caiani and Císar \(2019\)](#) proposed a typology of party–movement interactions based on the readiness or openness of political parties to cooperate with movements, and vice versa. Thus, in a cooperative scenario, movements and parties cover complementary roles based on a functional division of labour, a symbiotic (or symmetric) relationship where both actors need each other. Conversely, we might come across situations in which parties are open to cooperation with movements but these are not willing to cooperate. In such cases, the agenda of movements might be appropriated or co-opted by political parties, which will selectively choose issues and items according to their interests.

Movements can thus influence parties in different ways. Particularly during electoral campaigns, though also beyond them, we observe forms of collective action crossing from the contentious into the electoral arena, with parties embracing the frames and rhetoric, and sometimes tactics, of social movements, often translated into

institutionalized terms. Moreover, individual party members' engagement with social movements can manifest in various ways too, from patterns of cumulative participation in social movement activities and protest events to mere sympathies with campaigns or internal mobilizations advocating for change within the party (Piccio, 2019).

In addition to the factors discussed earlier, the nature of movement–party interactions is also influenced by the characteristics of the political system in which they operate. Contrary to the notion that political parties solely alter their behaviour for electoral gain (Kitschelt, 1989), some scholars argue that parties adapt to various stimuli based on their internal priorities, political identities and objectives (for a review, see Piccio, 2019). For instance, while electoral maximization remains a primary goal for parties, they will not compete for voters who are too distant from their cultural or political identities. A degree of overlap between the party's identity and that of the social movement is therefore a key determinant of their alliance (Piccio, 2019).

Finally, McAdam and Tarrow (2010) outlined an approach focused on contentious politics, introducing a set of mechanisms linking elections, parties and social movements. Specifically, the authors (McAdam and Tarrow, 2010: 328) introduce five linkage mechanisms taking place during election periods, including elections serving as movement tactics, proactive and reactive electoral mobilization by social movements, and the long-term impact of electoral outcomes on movement mobilization. In addition, looking at the US party system and movement sector, Tarrow (2021: 149) introduced the concept of 'hybridization of the party system' to analyse 'organizations that maintain close ties with individual parties but that are not subsumed by those parties'. Within the idea of hybridity rests a combination of movement properties, such as the use of movement tactics and idealism, together with interest group features, such as policy orientation and intervention (Tarrow, 2021). At the same time, movements opting to interact with parties, particularly in periods of openness to electoral opportunities – and thus when parties open such opportunities for movements based on their electoral needs – are impacted by those interactions. Through institutionalization processes, movement organizations may need to change their tactics towards institutional lobbying or advocacy activities, their forms of organization may become formalized, and their leadership may become professionalized, while they may also tend to displace their goals and claims, most notably by weakening ideological and identity claims while centring programmatic claims and policy goals (Staggenborg, 1988; 2013).

In our case study, we conceptualize the relationship between the Italian anti-gender movement and PRRPs as symbiotic, being mutually beneficial, as both actors support and reinforce each other's goals and strategies. Analysing the life cycle of the anti-gender movement, we can first single out the main linkage mechanisms and adjustment mechanisms that characterize the movement–party relations in our case and the multiple strategies and goals pursued by the actors involved. Building on the literature presented so far, we understand linkage mechanisms as those that link movement actors to political parties during electoral campaigns (McAdam and Tarrow, 2010; Piccio, 2019) and throughout a movement life cycle. Notably, we distinguish between the following linkage mechanisms:

- Mobilization: the ensemble of joint activities carried out by a movement's activists and a party's members to organize protest events, electoral campaigns and rallies and to contribute to grass-roots and electoral mobilizing.

- Shared ideology: the overlapping of key ideological components between the movement and the party, forming the basis for cooperation between them. In the case of conservative (traditionalist) gender politics, common ideological foundations include traditional family values, pro-family and pro-life stances, populism, and nativism.
- Resource sharing: the exchange of resources between movements and parties to enhance their respective capacities, including social and human capital, institutional networks and access to power, financial resources, physical infrastructures and equipment, and rhetorical and linguistic resources.

While movements and parties might be linked through a combination of the aforementioned mechanisms in support of each other's goals, the process to sustain such linkages over time may involve additional adjustment mechanisms from one side or both. In particular, we refer to ideological alignment as the mechanism by which either the party or the movement aligns ideologically with the other by incorporating new claims into their political rhetoric and discourse, downplaying or reinforcing existing frames to resonate with each other's discourse, and adopting and adapting each other's language in order to build a coherent narrative based on common concepts, understandings and terms. Among the claims that denote the relationship between the anti-gender movement and PRRPs, we focus in particular on programmatic claims in order to ascertain the presence and translation of the movement's ideas, principles and goals into the parties' platforms and agendas. Moreover, to assess the degree of overlap between the identity of the parties and the movement, we take into consideration identity and ideological claims. The former would typically refer to the identity dimensions of the in-group, such as belonging to the moral majority or being Italian, Christian, Catholic and so on. The latter would refer to the ideological values and beliefs expressed by the actors, such as believing that the traditional family is the foundational unit of our society, gender binarism or the natural law. We also interpret the process of the movement's institutionalization as an adjustment mechanism given the movement's need to adapt to the new institutional environment, oftentimes through the displacement of resources or the professionalization of its members.

Case selection, data and methods

In selecting Italy as a case study for examining the rise and institutionalization of anti-gender politics, several key factors make it a particularly compelling example. Across Europe, the rise of anti-gender movements is often tied to the emergence of PRRPs. However, the degree to which anti-gender politics have been institutionalized into mainstream party politics varies significantly. In countries like Poland and Hungary, governments led by such parties as Law and Justice (PiS) and Fidesz have actively passed legislation restricting LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer+) rights and promoting traditional family values. In contrast, while Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Spain's Vox have incorporated anti-gender rhetoric, they have not achieved the same level of policy influence. Italy stands out as a critical case in Western Europe for the substantial influence of the anti-gender movement within its political system, aligning more closely with the patterns observed in Eastern European countries like Poland and Hungary. As explained in the next section, Italy's unique political and social context further underscores its selection as a case study.

According to the European Institute for Gender Equality's 2022 Index, Italy still falls 3.6 points below the European Union (EU) average, highlighting its lag in gender equality compared to other EU countries. Unlike many Western European countries, Italy has a 'public-conservative' gender regime (Alonso et al, 2023) heavily influenced by ecclesiastic hierarchies that continue to play a significant role in the political debate and have greater access to state institutions than in most European nations. Notably, due to the proximity of the Vatican, it has always been able to interfere in Italian politics, including through political parties. This ecclesiastical influence, coupled with frequent changes in government and the presence of strong moderate-right parties, has hindered the advancement of gender equality policies (Lavizzari and Pirro, 2023). To understand the nature of interactions between the anti-gender movement and parties in the Italian context, it is therefore essential to grasp the distinctive connection of Italian Catholicism with politics. Historically, the presence of the Church in the Italian socio-political landscape has created structural opportunities and avenues of influence that resonate not only with the broader public but also with decision makers, facilitated by sustained lobbying efforts. Within the political system, the persistence of Catholic influence can be attributed to the legacy of Christian Democracy (DC), a post-war Christian democratic political party that held sway in the early years of the Italian republic for five decades before its dissolution in 1994 amid corruption scandals. After the party's dissolution, a significant proportion of religious voters felt orphaned without a powerful Catholic party to support and adopted a policy of presence defined as 'Catholic diaspora' (Lavizzari and Prearo, 2019). This model characterizes the engagement of Catholics, both as voters and candidates, in defending and promoting religious values in government policies not as a single Catholic party but rather as dispersed across various political parties along the spectrum. As we will see, on this dynamic rests the ideological and strategic alignment between anti-gender actors on one side and populist right-wing actors on the other.

Furthermore, the trajectory of Italy's anti-gender politics places it in a unique position within the broader European landscape. In Western Europe, no other national government has integrated anti-gender rhetoric into its political agenda as strongly as Italy has in recent years. Italy's political developments mirror trends more commonly seen in Eastern Europe, where anti-gender movements have successfully influenced government policies. This convergence raises critical questions about how Italy has arrived at a situation where government policies increasingly reflect the agendas of anti-gender movements. As shown in the analysis, the effects of this convergence are substantial at the political and policy levels, resulting in a long-standing process of agenda denial on gender equality policies while also structurally implementing increasingly harsh measures. Examples of these in recent years are the bill to ban gestational surrogacy, the draft bill on parental custody protecting fathers' rights and hindering women's rights, the revocation of municipal registries for same-sex couples, the funding of pro-life groups to access abortion clinics, and increasing attacks on trans rights, including inspections in medical centres, the harshened regulation of hormone therapies for gender affirmation, fierce opposition to gender and sex education in schools, and the refusal to sign the EU declaration on LGBTQ+ rights.

The PRRPs selected for the analysis include FdI and the League. Under Matteo Salvini's leadership, the League has adeptly transitioned its rhetorical and ideological emphasis from ethno-regionalism to nationalism (Bellè and Donà, 2022), effectively incorporating gender issues and claims into its political agenda and aligning them

with the safeguarding of Christian culture and identity and the preservation of the traditional family (Ozzano, 2021). Similarly, under its founder and leader Giorgia Meloni, FdI has fiercely opposed progressive policymaking initiatives on sexual orientation, LGBTQ+ rights and gender identity rights (Feo, 2022) while promoting strong pro-family stances. Despite FdI holding more traditionalist positions when it comes to social values (Taggart and Pirro, 2021), both parties put a strong focus on the defence of Italian values and tradition, in which the safeguarding of the traditional (heteronormative) family is one of the core claims (Feo and Lavizzari, 2021). Additional gender claims common to both parties include the aversion to sex and gender education in schools, a biological and binary understanding of gender, restrictive reproductive rights, and opposition to LGBTQ+ rights, framed as ‘special rights’.

In this analysis, we consider the anti-gender movement as an organized effort that includes networks of formal organizations, activists, leaders and supporters, active in both protest and electoral arenas. Among the main actors are ‘ad hoc’ anti-gender groups and non-profit organizations established in the early 2010s at the onset of the mobilization, for example: La Manif Pour Tous Italia (Protest for All Italy [LMPTI]), rebranded in 2015 as Generazione Famiglia (Family Generation); ProVita Onlus – Notizie ProVita (ProLife Onlus – ProLife News), the predecessor of ProVita & Famiglia (ProLife & Family [PV&F]), founded in 2019 from the merging of Family Generation and ProLife Onlus; and the Comitato Difendiamo i Nostri Figli (Committee to Defend Our Children [CDNF]), rebranded as Associazione Family Day – Difendiamo i nostri figli (Family Day Association – Defend our Children) (but see Lavizzari, 2020; Trappolin, 2022; Prearo, 2024). These groups primarily focus on disclosure, communication, dissemination, lobbying and advocacy efforts at the national level while also organizing protest and grass-roots events, workshops and conferences on gender ideology throughout the territory. They represent the public face and the driving forces of the campaign, with direct access to the media and government offices, where they influence policies and decision-making processes. Conceptually, within this framework and given the time frame of the analysis, we consider the two political parties not as part of the movement itself but rather as key allies who work closely with the anti-gender movement to the mutual benefit of both – and thus as different from other cases in which anti-gender campaigns have led to the creation of new political parties in countries like Croatia or Slovenia (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017).

For the qualitative content analysis, a comprehensive search for relevant documents was conducted using online resources, specifically targeting the websites of the political parties and social movement organizations under study. The search included specific such keywords as ‘parties’, ‘candidate(s)’, ‘election(s)’, ‘vote’, ‘government’, ‘Fratelli d’Italia’, ‘Lega’, ‘Meloni’ and ‘Salvini’ to identify the movement’s documents. For documents related to the political parties, such keywords as ‘gender’, ‘gender ideology’, ‘gender theory’, ‘family’, ‘prolife’ and ‘abortion’ were used. This search yielded a total corpus of 64 documents. From this corpus, 47 documents were selected based on their relevance to the research objective, meaning when explicit references were made to the actions of political parties and candidates, movement actors, electoral strategies and campaigning, and joint mobilizations, or when referring to gender ideology and pro-family- and pro-life-related issues in the case of parties. On the one hand, we selected official manifestos released by the two political parties

in the forms of electoral programmes (years 2013, 2018, 2019 and 2022 for FdI and 2013, 2018 and 2022 for the League), along with three speeches of Giorgia Meloni (at the WCF in 2019, the inaugural address to the Chamber of Deputies in 2022 and at the General States on Natality in 2023) and media interviews and statements issued by single party officials and leaders covering the period from 2015 to 2023, for a total of 17 documents. While manifestos allow us to infer the ideological and collective positions of the parties at a given point in time, data issued by single party officials enable us to grasp the patterns of interaction between parties and movements based on the individual mobilization of selected individuals, who may engage in cumulative participation at protest events and movement activities or may come from a militant background closer to the movement and may be particularly vocal in advocating for the anti-gender cause within the party. On the other hand, we selected 30 documents from material the anti-gender movement made publicly available during the time frame from 2014 to 2023, including press releases, official statements, opinion articles and interviews with anti-gender representatives published on the websites of the organizations analysed or in the press. As in the case of political parties, we also include five political documents and value manifestos produced by anti-gender organizations in concomitance with European (in 2019), general (in 2018 and 2022) and administrative elections (in 2016 and 2021), along with six additional documents that function as electoral instruments, namely providing guidance on voting preferences. These latter documents prove to be particularly important for our analysis, as they are the movement's tools for electoral campaigning and support to political parties and candidates.

Our empirical findings are based on a combination of deductive and inductive coding through the use of the MAXQDA software. The code system built for the analysis consists of a number of deductive codes drawing from theory on movement-party interactions meant to reflect the linkage mechanisms at play (that is, resource sharing, shared ideology and mobilization) and the adjustment mechanisms (that is, institutionalization and ideological alignment), as explained in the theoretical section. Additional codes include the goals, strategies, claims and outcomes (see 'Code scheme' in the Online Appendix) that either emerged from the data themselves and were employed to organize the content of the analysis in a coherent narrative or were drawn from previous works investigating movement-party relations.

The trajectory of Italy's anti-gender politics: from grass-roots cooperation to institutionalization

Research conducted on this phenomenon in the Italian case reflects the evolution of anti-gender actors and discourses as they adapted to the political and institutional context (Lavizzari, 2020; Prearo, 2024). Indeed, the establishment of the anti-gender movement in the Italian landscape since the early 2010s has been favoured by certain political circumstances, or political opportunities (Meyer, 2004), presented by the attempted introduction of gender equality legislation. In this sense, we can consider the onset of anti-gender mobilization as part of a political and public debate that developed around a series of bills aimed at strengthening the institutional recognition of LGBTQ+ subjectivities, as well as improving the legislation on the family and the national school system (see Table 1). In particular, the 2013 Scalfarotto Draft Bill proposed the introduction of the crime of

Table 1: Key gender policy draft bills and bills from 2007 to 2023

Phase	Name	Aim	Year	Proponent	Outcome
Expansion and consolidation	Dico Draft Bill	Civil unions	2007	Barbara Pollastrini, Rosy Bindi (Democratic Party)	Dismissed
	Scalfarotto Draft Bill	Homotransphobia	2013	Ivan Scalfarotto (Democratic Party)	Merged into Zan Draft Bill
	Fedeli Draft Bill	Gender education in schools	2014	Valeria Fedeli (Democratic Party)	Stalled; merged into Law 107/2015 'Good School'
	Cirinnà Bill	Civil unions	2013–16	Monica Cirinnà (Democratic Party)	Passed into Law 76/2016
Infiltrate the government's political agenda and public offices	Pillon Draft Bill	Child custody	2018–22	Simone Pillon (League)	Stalled (Senate, 2019); resumed (2022)
	Zan Draft Bill	Homotransphobia	2020–21	Alessandro Zan (Democratic Party)	Passed (Chamber of Deputies, 2020); rejected (Senate, 2021)
	Varchi Draft Bill	Gestational surrogacy	2022–23	Maria Carolina Varchi (Fdl)	Passed (Parliament, 2023)

homophobia in the penal code, the 2013–16 Cirinnà Bill proposed the recognition of civil unions and the 2014 Fedeli Draft Bill proposed the inclusion of gender-sensitive educational programmes in schools. Several bills discussing the inclusion of the crime of 'homotransphobia' were presented from 2007 but were not discussed until Parliament started to debate a single bill against hate crime and hate speech in 2013 (the Scalfarotto Bill). In 2021, a new bill on homotransphobia proposed by the Democratic Party Member of Parliament (MP) Alessandro Zan (the Zan Bill) was rejected by the Italian Senate after a heated debate within and outside the institutional arena (Feo, 2022). As shown in Table 1 and detailed in the following analysis, in addition to 'progressive' attempts at legislation, initiatives have also come from the anti-gender side, such as the exemplary cases of the controversial bill on shared child custody that enhanced fathers' rights at the expense of women and the recent introduction of the crime of gestational surrogacy. As we will ascertain in the following analysis, on the one hand, these developments show the proactive behaviour of anti-genderists and not only their reactive strategies to progressive legislation, especially after their institutionalization in public offices. On the other hand, such policy initiatives are not detached from the evolution of movement-party interactions; on the contrary, they express the policy and political outcomes of their symbiotic relationship.

Analysing the life cycle of the interactions between the anti-gender movement and PRRPs in the period 2010–22, we can distinguish three phases. The first phase, spanning from 2013 to 2016, can be identified as one of expansion and consolidation, marked by the organization and capillary diffusion of the anti-gender campaign throughout the Italian territory and the coordination of the movement's strategies in the public sphere, ultimately leading to their consolidation. This phase was exemplified by the organization of the Family Day rallies held in 2015 and 2016 and by the continuous presence and heightened visibility in public space, in

particular through the organization of conferences and workshops on the origins and dangers of gender theory and ideology (Prearo, 2024). Within the context of the movement's expansion, the goal was to build a political home for those individual and collective actors who adhere to and share the anti-gender cause while consolidating membership in a collective identity, particularly through the creation of a new collective actor, the CDN (later rebranded as the Family Day Association – Defend our Children). As explained by Massimo Prearo (2024), it is through its president and spokesperson, Massimo Gandolfini, that the movement's 'pre-political' entrepreneurial strategy is outlined. This strategy aims to give voice and represent the Family Day people in Parliament in two ways: first, through lobbying activities with political parties, 'contaminating' party action with the movement's discourses, rhetoric and, ultimately, pro-life, pro-family and anti-gender policies; and, second, by providing voting guidance to voters for parties and candidates close to (or, in some cases, originating from) the movement. It is in this phase, particularly during the administrative (in 2016, 2017 and 2021), political (in 2018) and European (in 2019) elections, that synergies are created between the movement and the centre-right, eventually excluding the entire centre-left area and including the two PRRPs of FdI and the League.

A second phase of movement-party interactions between 2016 and 2018 saw the intensification of exchanges and the direct cooperation and coexistence in the activist and political arenas of the actors involved. Thanks to the political opportunity created by three political events – the constitutional referendum (December 2016), the law on civil unions (June 2016) and the political elections (March 2018) – the movement transitioned to action focused on the electoral arena, aiming for direct cooperation with political parties. In the name of a declared common goal – the defence of the family – the movement implemented a series of tools and strategies to insert itself into the electoral arena. Among these, as analysed later in this article, the value manifestos produced by the movement stand out as campaign tools and support for candidates. Finally, the intensification of interactions between the movement and parties is also confirmed by their joint presence at multiple electoral events, including the participation of the two parties' leaders, Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini, in support of pro-family candidates.

The third phase began with the political elections of 2018 and continues today, in which movement actors, capitalizing on the long-term work of contamination and lobbying, have effectively managed to infiltrate the government's political agenda and public offices, particularly through candidates present on the lists of the League and FdI. Starting with the political elections in 2018, the League facilitated the inception of pro-family, pro-life and anti-gender candidates into public offices, including such individuals as Simone Pillon, known for his ultraconservative, homophobic and anti-abortionist stances. He was a key promoter of the Family Day, a member of the Neocatechumenal Way, a former member of the Forum of the Families and the force behind the controversial Pillon Bill on parental shared custody. Lorenzo Fontana, another ultraconservative pro-life figure, served as Minister of Family and Disability from 2018 to 2019 and, as of October 2022, assumed the role of President of the Chamber of Deputies. In conjunction with the League's support and its role in paving the way for anti-genderists, Giorgia Meloni publicly endorsed her party's alliance with the movement during the World Congress of Families held in Verona in 2019. As emphasized by many scholars, the

World Congress of Families in Verona represents the most visible effort of FdI's and the League's endorsement of the anti-gender cause (Pavan, 2019; Trappolin, 2022). Ultimately, the results of the political elections in September 2022, where Giorgia Meloni's FdI emerged victorious, while in continuity with the previous phase, signify a clear manifestation of the institutionalization of the movement and the effective embedding of the anti-gender agenda in the political platforms of the governing parties. To denote this process, the number of pro-life and pro-family candidates multiplied during the 2022 elections within the ranks of the centre-right coalition, with numerous candidates publicly showing support for the pro-life, pro-family and anti-gender agenda. Under Meloni's government, the presence of anti-gender exponents in public offices is consolidated through the appointment to key positions of the following: Eugenia Roccella, a spokesperson and supporter of the Family Day staunchly opposed to abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, as Ministry of Family, Birth and Equal Opportunities¹; Alfredo Mantovano, an active member of the Committee to Defend Our Children and President of the Catholic jurists' network the Livatino Studies Centre, as undersecretary to the Prime Minister's Office; and Lorenzo Fontana as president of the Chamber of Deputies. Last but certainly not least, although he did not directly run in the elections, Massimo Gandolfini, the leader of the Family Day, was appointed by Meloni as a consultant on anti-drug policies in the Prime Minister's Office.

Movement-party interactions: mobilization, shared ideology and resources

Mobilization

Mobilizing efforts happen through the interactions between the movement and parties in both the protest and electoral arenas. While several of these efforts see the concomitant presence of movement activists and party members, they are more often initiated by the movement with the aim to garner support within different arenas at the grass-roots and elite levels. Therefore, we identify three major strategies put in place by the movement to allow it to gradually get closer to the parties of the political Right. The first is the organization of protest and movement events that reflect interconnections between grass-roots activism and electoral strategies (Pirro, 2019). These typically involve the participation of party members in key anti-gender events, as well as the participation of anti-gender actors in parties' electoral campaigns and rallies. The second strategy refers explicitly to additional forms of electoral mobilization involving the indication of voting preferences for specific parties and candidates, along with lobbying activities targeting political candidates preceding the elections. The third strategy combines advocacy efforts, such as sensitizing and awareness campaigns on issues of interest, aimed at mobilizing the larger public but more importantly at setting the government and party agendas, along with a watchdog function over political parties' activities in government. This latter function is especially employed by anti-gender movement actors in periods of electoral mobilization to supervise political parties' behaviour by pointing at good and bad practices by single MPs or senators – for instance, voting in favour of a law that supposedly contradicts pro-life and pro-family values – and thus promote pro-family officials while blaming 'traitors'. It is also employed to assess the government's overall action on pro-family,

anti-gender and pro-life issues by assessing the laws, policy measures and initiatives undertaken in defence of such values.

Empirical examples of the first strategy include right-wing MPs, senators and leaders attending the Family Day rallies or the national pro-life March for Life event, as evidenced by FdI's endorsement of and call to participate in the Family Day and the March for Life in 2015: 'FdI adheres to the 20th June demonstration called by the committee "Defend Our Children". We will be in the square together with Italian families to stop the shameful gender ideology aggression that is hitting the weakest: children' (Meloni, 2015). Another illustrative example has been the co-participation of MPs from the centre-right and anti-gender actors during the campaign organized against the constitutional referendum in 2016, as well as the participation of key political leaders from FdI (Giorgia Meloni) and the League (Matteo Salvini) at the World Congress of Families, along with national anti-gender leadership. Instances of the involvement of key anti-gender leaders at events organized by political parties themselves include the presence of CDN leader Massimo Gandolfini at the electoral rally for regional elections in Umbria in 2019, together with Silvio Berlusconi, Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini, or at FdI's 'More Family, More Italy' event organized in Florence the same year. Most of these events happened during both the 'expansion and consolidation' and the 'cooperation and coexistence' phases of movement-party relations, with the explicit aim of aligning and supporting each other's grass-roots and electoral mobilizing efforts:

We recognize that Brothers of Italy and Giorgia Meloni are advancing a policy in favour of the family, for the defence of life from conception to natural death, and for the educational freedom of parents, absolutely consistent with the Family Day and our initiatives. That is why, in the upcoming European elections, we will support the candidates of Brothers of Italy, because it is the party that has steadfastly supported the demands of the Family Day. (Massimo Gandolfini [2019], President of the Family Day Association)

Finally, the organization of events with the co-participation of movement and party actors significantly changed their setting after the inception of anti-gender actors into government offices, happening directly within governmental institutions themselves, for instance, the organization of an event on education and young people that took place directly within the canteen of the Chamber of Deputies in 2023, endorsed by President of the Chamber Lorenzo Fontana himself (PV&F, 2023c), and the presentation of the *Report on the Costs and Health Effects of Law 194* (the Italian law legalizing abortion) at the Senate's entrance by PV&F during the same year (PV&F, 2023b). In this strategic development, we observe the ability of the movement to adjust to the institutional environment through its own institutionalization by gradually leaving aside grass-roots mobilizing events to instead focus on the organization of events aiming at institutional representation and policy influence.

While grass-roots mobilizing has been a key strategy in the constituent phase of anti-gender movement actors, electoral forms of mobilization, such as vote indications, have become another central and recurrent strategy crystalizing the alliance between the movement and parties. A first strategic shift in this direction, for instance, is seen in the vote for/against the law granting civil unions to same-sex couples in 2016.

By assuming the role of watchdog, scrutinizing the activity of political parties in the two chambers, the CDNF promises electoral mobilization during the next elections for those who vote according to its ideals:

Only those who have fought to affirm the family and defend children will be able to count on the votes of our people. In the upcoming electoral appointments, Gandolfini specifies, we will support mayoral candidates representing forces that in Parliament are tenaciously opposing the Cirinnà Bill [law on civil unions]. (CDNF, 2016)

Conversely, ‘As promised, we will keep in mind those who voted in favour of civil unions and those who opposed them. We will especially remember those who profess to be Catholics and have “solidarized” with the Family Day people, revealing themselves as traitors and cowards’ (PV&F, 2016b).

Leaving the phase of expansion and consolidation and entering the coexistence and cooperation one implies a shift in the movement’s strategy from being centred on grass-roots mobilization to projecting its efforts into the electoral arena. Assessing the functional commitment of political parties and their representatives allowed the movement to quickly identify centre-right parties as the closest to its own agenda:

And as for the fundamental non-negotiable values of life, family, and educational freedom? Which candidacies inspire more confidence? Indicatively, as is also the case at the national level, the coalition that seems more sensitive to the pro-life and pro-family agenda is, both in Lombardy and Lazio, that of the centre-right. (PV&F, 2023a)

The voting recommendations conveyed to the electorate following the scrutiny of parliamentary activities on relevant issues also occur through the preparation of a series of lobbying tools for electoral campaigns. These tools materialize, in particular, in the drafting of value manifestos and political documents, urging candidates to commit to promoting and supporting policies reflecting the non-negotiable values on the one hand and to countering policies that threaten them on the other. These documents are presented to all candidates ahead of the elections, ultimately establishing a ‘pact’ between movement actors and party representatives:

In anticipation of the upcoming municipal elections, ProLife presented the ‘Pact for the Natural Family’ in a press conference at the Senate. It is a cross-party political proposal aimed at all people of goodwill, without distinction of party affiliation. The objective is to create unity around issues that, by their very nature, transcend political colour and should therefore form the basis of any form of civil coexistence. This document is addressed to various mayoral candidates, inviting them to sign it as a guarantee of commitment to the defence of family and life in various local contexts.... This ‘Pact’ aims to represent, in the upcoming municipal elections, all those Italian families who identify with the principles of the natural family and life. A ‘Pact’ that, beyond different political parties, fosters unity among pro-family candidates. (ProVita Associazione Onlus, 2016)

These value agreements between movement and party representatives will then serve as voting guidelines for the electorate, granting pro-family ‘seals of approval’ to those candidates who are deemed most capable of representing the movement in Parliament:

It is an indication to voters of the candidates’ adherence to certain fundamental principles regarding family and life. ProLife will publicize the names of candidates who have signed the ‘Pact’ and will support initiatives by any elected candidates aimed at fulfilling the commitments outlined in the ‘Pact.’ The candidate may use ProLife’s ‘seal of approval’ in their electoral campaign. (*Pro Vita Associazione Onlus*, 2016)

Specifically, PV&F produced four documents from 2016 to 2022: the *Pact for Natural Family* ahead of the 2016 municipal elections (PV&F, 2016b); the *Manifesto for Life and Family* for the 2019 European elections (PV&F, 2019a); the *Political Document* for the 2021 local elections (PV&F and Family Day Association, 2021); and the *Principles Charter* for the 2022 political elections (PV&F, 2022). On all these occasions, the documents were endorsed by candidates from the centre-right, particularly from the League and FdI, including leader Giorgia Meloni: ‘The first party leader has signed the *Manifesto for Life and Family*, circulated by PV&F and directed at candidates for the upcoming European elections. We are referring to Giorgia Meloni, the leader of Brothers of Italy’ (PV&F, 2019b).

In this way, movement actors identify themselves as key players outside of Parliament capable of influencing parliamentary voting through constant pressure. By combining ideological and programmatic claims, awareness and information campaigns are deployed as concrete and concerted efforts of pro-life and pro-family propaganda:

The decay of these bills was indeed caused by the fall of the government and the dissolution of the chambers, but it was also made possible by the constant and prolonged civil and parliamentary debate fostered by the work of the Italian pro-life and pro-family associations, particularly by our battles. For months, PV&F did not remain passive about what was happening in the political arenas but carried out an extensive campaign of awareness and information on all fronts. (Jacopo Coghe [2022a], spokesperson of PV&F)

Some of these campaigns are in fact publicly endorsed by the parties, which also contribute to the mobilization of resources and actively participate in the campaigns themselves at the local level:

From Reggio Calabria to Rome, passing through Bologna, Turin, and Milan, our local administrators have been present in all the stages of the campaign. As a mother, I am grateful to all the associations that are defending the right of the family to freely educate their children, especially when it comes to very delicate issues such as sexuality and affectivity. Among the many committed organizations, I also thank the CDNF, Gandolfini and the non-profit organization ProVita. Once in government, Brothers of Italy will be a guarantor of the initiatives promoted in the last two Family Days, which constitute a central point of our program. (Meloni, 2018)

Finally, a complementary function to the direct support of parties by movement actors is covered by watchdog activities. In this sense, the movement scrutinizes, captures, deplors and applauds the work carried out by parties. In exchange for their votes, concrete government action is indeed required and expected for the approval of anti-gender, pro-life and pro-family laws and measures, as well as opposition to measures considered progressive: 'We will continue to watch, to play the role of a "watchdog" for politics and the State' as 'We keep an eye on the conduct of parties and individual parliamentarians' (PV&F, 2022).

Shared ideology

The presence of assimilable ideological elements in the discourses of the movement and the parties has been present since the initial endorsements of politicians of the protest events organized by the movement, especially the Family Day. The words and expressions defined by the movement itself are taken up and reported almost literally in the communications of the parties. Among the recurring themes proposed by the movement to which parties align, we find a biological and binary understanding of gender, strongly opposed to gender ideology. Specific ideals of womanhood and manhood are defined to support national identification (Walby, 2006), as explained by the leader of FdI on the occasion of International Women's Day: 'to be a woman, it is demanded that it suffices to proclaim oneself as such, while at the same time, efforts are made to erase its body, essence, and difference. Male and female are rooted in the bodies, and this is an incontrovertible fact' (La Repubblica, 2023).

Another key theme displaying a clear overlap between the political identity of the movement and the parties is based on a pro-family discourse founded around the centrality of the traditional patriarchal and heterosexual family, which should be reflected in all government actions:

From our very first day in office, the Government has placed children, parents, mothers, and fathers at the top of the political agenda. We have made natality and family an absolute priority of our actions.... Therefore, this priority cuts across all government policies. The choice of a Ministry dedicated to this matter is not the choice of sectoral policies; it is the choice to have the family's perspective three hundred and sixty degrees on all the policies the government carries out. (Meloni, 2023)

This familist frame extols the parental figures of father and mother, categorically opposing alternative family structures, particularly same-sex families, seen as primary threats to national tradition. Furthermore, the pro-family discourse is accompanied by pro-life claims, based on the promotion of natality, parenthood and opposition to the practice of surrogacy:

We want to give Italians a nation where being a father is not out of fashion, and being a mother is not a private choice but a socially recognized value. A nation where everyone, men and women, rediscover the beauty of becoming parents, of welcoming, protecting, and nurturing a child. A nation where having a child is a beautiful thing that takes nothing away from you, doesn't prevent you from doing anything, and gives you a lot.... In a nation where it is not taboo to say that motherhood is not for sale, that wombs are not for rent, that children are not off-the-shelf products. (Meloni, 2023)

This ideological alignment between the movement and political parties has occurred and developed over time through two important mechanisms. The first refers to an adjustment mechanism, whereby we can observe a qualitative shift in the discourse and positions of the movement, which occurred with the change of government following the elections of 2018 and 2022. Indeed, the leadership of the government entrusted to right-wing coalitions and the entry of anti-gender figures into Parliament caused a key change in the perspective and action of the movement, which transitioned from a reactive stance to a proactive one. In other words, while the movement found itself expressing an essentially oppositional ideological approach to the policies proposed by the majority government ('progressive') during the phases of 'expansion and consolidation' and 'cooperation and coexistence', the establishment of the right-wing coalition at the helm of the executive, being a kind of armed branch within the decision-making centre, compelled and simultaneously allowed the movement to assume a proactive role regarding these issues:

At the same time, one cannot limit oneself to defending the status quo; a more vigorous commitment is needed at the propositional level for an improvement in the existing social order. How? Discussing 'end of life' but also 'how to alleviate suffering'. Deploing abortion is not sufficient; we need to 'support and incentivize motherhood and the balance between family and work.' Within the Parliament, therefore, these positions, although decisive in neutralizing unjust legislative projects, remain a minority bloc, useful in electoral terms but still too small to bring about a change that makes Catholic social doctrine the true engine of the country once and for all, disrupting the plans of the radical mass society. (Jacopo Coghe [2023], spokesperson of PV&F, quoted in [Marcolivio, 2022](#))

A second mechanism of ideological alignment is found in the recurring discursive tactic of using the 'us against them' narrative. As expressed earlier, the electoral alignment with the Right involves, in contrast, the identification of the Left as one of the main enemies – alongside bad feminists and pro-LGBTQ+ lobbies – upholding values contrary to the majority. This discursive strategy, typical of populist parties, dividing society into virtuous 'common' people and out-of-touch elites, is a clear manifestation of ideological alignment between movement and party actors:

The stakes are really high: it's a matter of choosing – in this case – between those who support gender ideology by the artifice of denying it, and those who recognize it by opposing it every day, from Parliament to schools. Supporting the Zan proposal goes exactly in the ideological direction. Therefore, today more than ever, it's 'us or them!'. ([Massimo Gandolfini \[2022\]](#), President of the Family Day Association)

As such, it is expressed through a series of identity claims that specifically refer to the idea of the 'common' people: a people of mothers, fathers, grandparents, Italians, patriots, men and women. Moreover, this conception of the people is also clearly conveyed through meanings of 'normality' and 'ordinary', being part of the 'common' people, and identifying and representing the interests of everyday citizens, or the moral majority. Such ideals are reinforced by invoking the concepts of 'common

sense' and a 'common good', appealing to a shared sense of collective well-being. As explained by PV&F's spokesperson Jacopo Coghe (2022b), the movement and parties should unite 'all under the banner of a cultural revolution that I love to define as a revolution of normality'.

Finally, and importantly, such ideological and identity claims are mostly driven by and expressed through rational arguments rather than confessional ones, in the name of a 'secular common sense':

I do not have a confessional [religious] approach to this matter. I believe in God, but I don't have a confessional approach to this matter. I am reasonable about it. I fight these battles for secular common sense.... Because we don't want to be numbers. We are here to say that we are not numbers, and we will defend the value of being human, of every single human being. Each of us has a unique and unrepeatable genetic code. And that, like it or not, is sacred. (Meloni, 2019)

The battle to defend family and life – and thus common sense, reason, and human nature itself – must be fought in every corner of Italy, and each person can and should do their part, according to their role. Courage! (PV&F, 2016b)

Resource sharing

In terms of resources, the exchange between the movement and political parties takes place through three main modalities.² The first encompasses part of the mechanisms and tools mentioned earlier, specifically focusing on the sharing of resources expendable in electoral campaigns, such as value manifestos containing both linguistic and rhetorical resources – such as naming, defining and discussing gender-related policies in favour of family and life – along with ideological claims, similar to what studies on social movements define as 'frames' (Benford and Snow, 2000). These documents provide concrete policy proposals, including normative and legal references for implementing targeted pro-life and pro-family measures. For instance, the *Political Document* prepared by PV&F and the Family Day Association for the administrative elections in 2021 was accompanied by legislative instruments addressed at mayors and municipal assemblies aimed at actualizing the commitment to pro-family and pro-life values: 'our associations have also, in synergy with other pro-life and pro-family groups in the galaxy, prepared some legislative instruments aimed at concretizing – both on the cultural and welfare fronts – the commitment to the aforementioned values through the administrative action specific to Local Authorities', including, for instance, motions for the legislative establishment of the 'Day for Unborn Life', a dedicated national day 'to spread a culture of welcoming unborn life' (PV&F and Family Day Association, 2021).

The second modality of resource sharing is based on the movement's access to institutional power through political parties, particularly through the development of institutional networks that connect movement and party actors. As we have seen, these networks are articulated through the organization of shared events, the participation and/or sponsorship of parliamentarians and senators at events proposed by the movement, and the candidacy of movement actors as parliamentarians. An additional electoral strategy that embodies the concept of contamination thus consists of directly

nominating representatives of movements on the electoral lists of selected parties or seeking the parties' willingness to nominate movement actors as their candidates:

As an additional guarantee that there is a concrete willingness to collaborate and support our demands, we have requested that men from the Family Day be nominated in the electoral lists for the upcoming elections. Therefore, we will soon inform the large Family Day audience about which parties have embraced our requests. (CDNF, 2018)

Such a case is the candidacy of Maria Rachele Ruiiu on the electoral lists of FdI for the 2022 political elections, being one of the founders of LMPTI and a current member of the directive of PV&F. As she clearly explains, the passage from the movement to institutional politics constitutes an opportunity to strengthen the links between the two:

I have decided that if in politics one can bring some tangible benefit, even in terms of hope, then I too can step forward. The world of associations [civil society] from which I come can work perfectly well even without my direct contribution. In fact, we will remain connected, work together, interconnected, directed towards the same goal. On the institutional level, I can promote initiatives in favour of life and the family. (Maria Rachele Ruiiu [2022], Spokesperson of PV&F, cited in Guzzo, 2022)

Finally, the movement's institutional representation includes the direct appointment of representatives close to or originating from the movement to prominent political positions. As mentioned, it is especially during the infiltration phase starting from 2018 that we witness the appointment of several anti-gender political figures. In fact, after the elections of 2018, it is the movement itself that is congratulated for the electoral successes achieved by the League's candidates who have been involved in the anti-gender campaign close to the movement throughout the years:

A sincere 'Good job' goes to the newly appointed Minister for Family and Disability, Lorenzo Fontana. Always a prominent figure at various editions of the March for Life, he has been interviewed multiple times by ProLife and has also joined us in various public events, most recently the Festival of Life held in Verona a few months ago. In addition to his support for life, Fontana is also a great expert on family and demography. Finally, a 'Good job' also goes to the newly appointed Minister of Agriculture, Gian Marco Centinaio, who has shared many pro-life battles with us. (PV&F, 2018)

The number of human resources increased significantly with the political elections of 2022, marking the highest degree of institutionalization of the movement, as explained by PV&F (2022) itself:

the presence of pro-life and pro-family advocates in significant decision-making and support roles is noteworthy, such as Alfredo Mantovano, Undersecretary to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Eugenia Roccella as Minister for the Family, Natality and Equal Opportunities, or Massimo Gandolfini, serving as an advisor on the issue of combating

addictions. PV&F expresses satisfaction for the presence in the Meloni government of individuals with proven commitment and dedication to the non-negotiable principles of the Common Good.

Conclusions

Recently, we have witnessed the increasing engagement of PRRPs with gender issues and the development of closer interactions between anti-gender movements and these parties as one of the main dynamics defining a backlash against gender politics. While numerous studies have evidenced the emergence and evolution of anti-gender movements and campaigns across countries, little is known about how they relate to institutional actors of various types, especially political parties, and how these relations bring about multiple political and policy outcomes. This article has investigated the processes and mechanisms that define relations between the anti-gender movement and the PRRPs in Italy, looking at their joint efforts in terms of mobilization, shared ideology and resources. The implications of these cooperative dynamics must be carefully scrutinized in order to ascertain not only their functioning mechanisms but also, and especially, their broader reach in the political and social environment, as we are witnessing a restructuring of PRRPs' political identities as the bearers and keepers of anti-choice stances, in which gender issues are increasingly central to their agendas and platforms. Indeed, this empirical analysis aligns itself with those in a broader context, echoing other empirical cases beyond Italy and Europe that highlight how certain phenomena are globally structured, profoundly impacting society and threatening to overturn years of legal-normative and cultural struggles and achievements. Similar cases of backlash have been observed not only in Europe but also in Latin America (Correa, 2021; Güemes, 2022) during the governments of Jair Bolsonaro (Correa and Kalil, 2020) and currently the Milei government in Argentina. These intricate dynamics between movements and parties have, in some cases, developed into symbiotic relations, leading to a mutually beneficial relationship where both entities support each other's goals and objectives through multiple linkage and adjustment mechanisms: sharing resources, aligning ideologically and jointly participating in grass-roots and electoral mobilizing efforts.

Reflecting on the evolution of the symbiotic relationship between the anti-gender movement and PRRPs, we can draw two important conclusions. First, we observe a qualitative shift in the discourse and strategies of the movement from reactive to proactive, happening in parallel with its institutionalization process and the changing government's power balance in favour of PRRPs as the majority coalition. The concept of backlash, in this sense, needs to be contextualized within a framework of broader dynamics in which it is not always possible to categorize the outcomes of anti-gender mobilizations as solely reactionary. Having jointly entered the rooms of power, the movement and the parties were able to restructure their action by proactively drafting policy proposals reflecting their strategic goals. Second, we found that ideological alignment between the movement and the parties involves the recurrent use of two intersecting strategies: on the one hand, creating an 'us against them' narrative using identity claims that divide society into virtuous common people (the people of the families) and perceived enemies, such as the powerful elite, composed of feminists, LGBTQ+ lobbies and the Left, thus reflecting the typical populist's distinction between the people and elites; on the other hand, what we

conceive as a reversal logic, according to which the common people, characterized through notions of ‘normality’ and ‘ordinary’ and representing the interests of the moral majority, are, however, depicted as a threatened minority. According to this logic, the positioning, beliefs and desires of the moral majority have become minoritarian, where being ‘normal’ is now perceived as revolutionary, threatened by a new majority, characterized as progressive, LGBTQ+ and feminist.

Taken together, these findings have relevant implications, as the joint efforts between parties and movements can produce important consequences for the institutionalization and mainstreamization of regressive gender policies, acting at the discursive, organizational and political/policy levels. In terms of political positioning, it would be important to deepen our reflection on the role of gender in shaping ideological divides between conservatism and progressivism, as well as left and right, in the electoral arena. In this sense, opposing mobilizations around gender have highlighted how ‘rebellion has become right-wing’ (Stefanoni, 2021); progressivism begins to be perceived as the defender of the status quo, often entangled in political correctness and busy defending the achievements accumulated in past decades, while the PRRPs have been able to subvert this logic, rebelling as such, carrying gender-related issues to the fore of their agendas and managing to mobilize consensus in a transversal manner. This article suggests, therefore, that the convergence between movements and parties in this field has been successful in making gender a central theme to appropriate and advocate for, going beyond reactionary dynamics. We have seen how, for instance, while some factions of PRRPs reject feminism altogether, others prefer to distinguish between good and bad feminisms and redefine the terminology of a supposed genuine and historical feminism (Güemes, 2023). In this sense, feminist achievements are no longer generally denounced but selectively chosen and used in a pre-emptive manner.

Finally, the analysis of symbiotic relationships between parties and movements must be problematized as a key element, in this case, within the anti-gender movement life cycle. As highlighted by the analysis of the three phases of interactions among different actors, the process of institutionalization of the movement, which subsequently led to its actual inception within the government, must be interpreted as a continuity element within the movement cycle rather than a point of arrival. Echoing recent studies on social movements (Bosi, 2016; Barone, 2024), the process of institutionalization identified in this study should therefore be understood not as the end of the movement cycle but as a long-term temporal process. This interpretation helps us position symbiotic relationships as a broader framework in which the positions, strategies and claims of the actors involved change and adapt to themselves, redefining the perimeters of relations between social movements and democracy.

Notes

¹ It should be noted that the label of the ministry was changed by Meloni’s government to include the word ‘birth’ in the previous Ministry of the Family and Equal Opportunities.

² The exchange of financial resources among different actors is conceivable but goes beyond the scope of this study, particularly given the difficulty of gathering data on these types of resources.

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Author biography

Anna Lavizzari is a Ramón y Cajal Research Fellow at the Faculty of Political Sciences and Sociology, Complutense University of Madrid, Spain. Her research agenda focuses on issues of political participation and behaviour, with notable attention to gender dynamics and protest politics. She is the author of *Protesting Gender: The LGBTIQ Movement and its Opponents in Italy* (Routledge, 2020).

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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