The neo-fascist territorial legacy and the success of the Lega in the 2019 European elections: a multilevel approach

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Abstract

In Italy, the Lega obtained outstanding electoral success in the 2019 European elections, becoming the first party on the political spectrum. Previous literature has argued that this performance can be attributed to the leadership of Matteo Salvini, who transformed the Lega from an ethno-regionalist party into a national right-wing party (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018). Previous research has also argued that the recent geographical trajectories of the party's success might be associated with the prevalence of a neo-fascist minority during the First Republic (e.g. Mancosu, 2015). However, the empirical evidence comes from aggregate official results and focuses only on some specific Italian regions of the so-called 'red-zone'. By employing multilevel models on survey data, this paper tests whether this expectation holds also at the individual level, and in a larger geographical area. The findings show that individual propensities to vote for the Lega in 2019 are associated with the percentage of votes obtained more than forty years ago by the Movimento Sociale Italiano in the municipality where the respondent lives, but only in central and southern Italian regions, in which the Lega was an irrelevant competitor before Salvini's leadership. These findings provide additional evidence concerning the ideological drivers of preferences for the Lega.

1. Introduction

In Italy, the most relevant outcome of the 2019 European Elections was the outstanding consensus for the Lega, which obtained more than 9 million votes, equal to 34% of valid votes. Since its foundation about thirty years ago, the Lega, for the first time, has become the most supported party on the political landscape at the national level. The result is even more stunning when considering the party's strong ethno-regionalist background, rooted in the northern part of the country. We should also consider that the Lega's best performance at the national level before the leadership of Matteo Salvini, who became leader of the party in December 2013, was far lower than the most recent one – dating back to the 1996 national elections, when 3.8 million people voted for Lega Nord (about 10% of valid votes).

Until a few years ago, the electoral performance of the Lega could be depicted by the metaphor of an expanding and contracting lung, always confined to the northern regions of the country (Segatti and Vezzoni, 2011). In political times characterized by

the relative stability of the political system, the Lega reduced its area of consensus and maintained some support only around its strongholds. In more unstable political periods (e.g. the 1992 and 1996 elections, characterized by significant political turmoil), support for the Lega overcame its traditional boundaries by reaching some peripheral areas of its territorial basin, such as some provinces of Emilia-Romagna. In the last electoral cycle, pundits and academics have observed the increasing nationalization of the Lega, which largely increased its consensus in the red area in the 2015 regional elections and, starting from the 2018 national elections, became a relevant political actor even in central and southern regions.

This paper relies on the strand of literature that posits the relevance of mechanisms of *behavioural path dependence* to understanding social and political facts (e.g. Diamanti, 2003; Acharya et al., 2018). According to this literature, individual attitudes and behaviours are partially related to a self-reinforcing set of geographically-located behaviours and attitudes that persist over time. Similarly to institutional path dependence (Putnam et al., 1993), behavioural path dependence literature argues that attitudes are passed down through generations, by means of grass-roots learning mechanisms (in this respect, the role of primary socialization is crucial) and by local social structures (schools, churches, associations, etc.) that persist in the territory (Sani, 1976; Wittenberg, 2006; Voigtländer and Voth, 2012; Acharya et al., 2018). As a result, we are able to trace a certain political culture – defined geographically – back to its roots by identifying the characteristics of the same geographical place several decades (or even centuries) before.

Scholars have stressed that the success of the Lega is, among other things, related to the rapid change in the party agenda enacted by the new leader, Matteo Salvini, who aimed to transform what was originally an ethno-regionalist party into an extreme right-wing national one (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018). In this regard, the Lega started adopting a totally new set of claims and communication strategies, sometimes appealing to a narrative that resonates with that of the neo-fascist parties of the First Republic (above all, the Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI). According to previous studies (Mancosu, 2015; Mancosu and Ladini, 2018), in regions in which the Lega has never obtained a sufficient level of support because of its former ethno-regionalist structure, this new – more extreme and nationalist – rhetoric might have been particularly appealing for voters living in areas with a stronger neo-fascist political tradition. The present paper aims to test the patterns of geographical diffusion of the 'new' Lega in central and southern Italian regions by providing, among others, a contextual-level explanation of the success of Salvini's Lega.

We combine survey data at the individual level with official data at the contextual level to show that, in the centre-south of Italy, individual propensities to vote for the Lega during the 2019 election campaign are positively correlated with the electoral performance of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (measured more than forty years ago) in the municipality where the respondents live.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section focuses on the success of the Lega in the 2019 European elections beyond its traditional borders, illustrates the shift in the communication strategy of the party, and describes the possible social mechanisms fostering the party's diffusion trajectories. The third section explains data, variables and

models employed in the paper; the fourth section presents the results and the fifth draws some conclusions and suggests some limitations of the paper.

2. Background

2.1. The Lega beyond its borders

Previous studies have provided various explanations for the increased performance of the Lega on the political spectrum and the overcoming of its traditional borders (Mancosu, 2015; Albertazzi et al., 2018; Mancosu and Ladini, 2018; Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018). Nonetheless, these explanations agree that the success of the Lega is largely dependent on the shift in the party's rhetoric carried out by Matteo Salvini. Since he took office, the new leader of the party has characterized his political action by transforming the Lega from a somewhat traditional right-wing regionalist party (Tarchi, 1998), into a national/nationalist right-wing party (Albertazzi et al., 2018; Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018) radically based on anti-immigrant and anti-EU rhetoric.

As outlined by Passarelli and Tuorto (2018, 90), although the Lega started to move towards the right in the mid-1990s, the leadership of Salvini 'sped up' the process of radicalization of the party. This strategy was intended to increase the potential electoral basin of the Lega, with the realization that, among the Italian population, anti-immigration attitudes are widespread (Sniderman et al., 2002; Vezzoni, 2018) and anti-EU attitudes have substantially increased in the last 20 years (see Albertazzi, 2016; Brunazzo and Della Sala, 2016; Serricchio, 2018).

Moreover, the refugee crisis which led to the arrival of about 600,000 immigrants in Italy from 2014 to 2017 contributed to making the voice of the Lega louder on the immigration issue. In this respect, we should outline that the salience of this issue dramatically increased between 2013, when only 4% of Italians considered it as the first or second Italian problem, and 2018, when the percentage rose to 23% (Vezzoni, 2018). By shifting its main enemy from Rome to Brussels (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017) and avoiding attacks against southern Italians (largely present in the first incarnation of the party, Lega Nord), Salvini's Lega has been successful in going beyond its traditional geographical boundaries.

Starting from the last election of the pre-Salvini era – the 2013 national elections in which the share of votes for the Lega was around 4% – the positive trend of party support has led the Lega to largely increase its consensus at every election (obtaining 6% of valid votes in the 2014 European elections, 17% during the 2018 national elections, and 34% in the 2019 European elections). To appreciate the effectiveness of the Lega's strategy, Table 1 compares the percentages of valid votes for the Lega before and after the appointment of Matteo Salvini as leader of the party in two European elections (2019 and 2009 in which, incidentally, party performance was above the historical average up to that moment).[1]

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[1] The five areas considered refer to the Istat geographical categorization, where the northwest is composed of Valle d'Aosta, Liguria, Piemonte and Lombardia, northeast includes Veneto, Friuli, Trentino-Alto Adige and Emilia-Romagna, Centre includes Toscana, Marche, Umbria and Lazio, South includes Abruzzo, Molise, Puglia, Basilicata, Campania, and Calabria, and Islands comprise Sicilia and Sardegna. We decided not to employ the geopolitical categorization (Galli, 1968), in order to keep separate Emilia

Table 1. Voting percentages for the Lega in 2009 and 2019 European Elections in Italy

Geographical area	Lega Nord 2009 (pre-Salvini)	Lega 2019 (post-Salvini)	Delta
North-West	19.4	40.7	110%
North-East	19	41	116%
Centre	3	33.5	1017%
South	0.6	23.5	3817%
Islands	0.4	22.4	5500%
Italy	**10.2**	**34.3**	**236%**

In addition to the party's growth in its strongholds (in which the Lega doubled its strength in the northeast and northwest), the most stunning performance is the increase in support in places in which the party was substantially irrelevant 10 years ago (becoming 11 times larger in the centre, 39 times in the south and 56 times in the islands). We can thus say that the 2019 European elections consolidated the new geographical pattern which started at the beginning of Salvini's office.

2.2. A neo-fascist inheritance?

Why did this operation become so effective? The new era of the Lega comes in a moment of crisis of the centre-right coalition, which began with the economic crisis of 2011. The progressive erosion of the image and political credibility of the main shareholder of the centre-right coalition, Silvio Berlusconi, and his personal party Forza Italia, combined with the corruption scandal that involved the former leader of Lega Nord, Umberto Bossi, in 2012, allowed new actors to exploit the potential of this political space.

If, on the one hand, the opening of this political space has been crucial in the new success of the Lega, on the other it is also important to understand what kind of claims and communication strategies filled this political gap. Salvini's communication, since the very beginning of his office, has been aggressive and mainly based on negative campaigning (Bracciale and Martella, 2017), aimed at targeting a certain number of enemies of his potential electoral constituency (immigrants, NGOs, intellectuals, and everything that might recall the 'left' or the 'outgroup') and repeatedly attacking them on every medium at his disposal.

The communication strategy enacted by the new leadership was also characterized by a certain 'hidden' openness to even more extreme positions, a form of scantily disguised sympathy towards more extreme right-wing parties and, in general, to the neo-fascist area. For instance, as noticed by De Giorgi and Tronconi (2018, 341), 'While the use of violence by [...] extreme right groups was apparently condemned, [...] the League [...] often justified episodes of racism and xenophobia that took place during the course of 2017, placing the blame ultimately on the various governments in office over recent years and the decisions they took on immigration'. Other examples can be traced back by employing the direct communication of its leader via social media, often characterized by

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Romagna, where the Lega was a relevant competitor even before Salvini's leadership (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2012, 2018), and the other regions belonging to the 'red zone', where the Lega obtained a very low consensus in the pre-Salvini period (see Mancosu and Ladini, 2018).

positive referencing to the public works done during the so-called 'Ventennio' (the 1922-1943 period of fascist dictatorship, see Rame, 2018). Although this communication style could be interpreted as a form of tactical 'dog-whistle politics' (Haney-Lòpez, 2014), instead of a clear endorsement of the dictatorship, the subtle but insistent references to the fascist regime and its most important characters might have produced some effect on the resilient minority of Italian voters that look with sympathy and nostalgia on the Ventennio period as a 'golden age' of order, discipline and security (see Castelli Gattinara, 2018). This shift toward the right in the rhetoric of the party was also reflected in the profile of the voters of the Lega. According to the Itanes data, while in the mid-1990s, on average, voters of Lega Nord located themselves at the centre of the left-right (0-10) scale, their average values increased from 6.8 to 7.8 from 2001 to 2013, and to 8.2 in 2018 (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018).

In this respect, several studies have argued that the Lega diffusion trajectories in the last 5 years might be partially explained by the more extremist and nationalist turn operated by Salvini. In some of these studies (Mancosu, 2015; Mancosu and Ladini, 2018), it is shown, by means of aggregate analyses, that places in which the performance of the 'new' Lega was stronger are also those contexts in which the neo-fascist minority, measured by means of the support for the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) in the '70s, was strong as well.

As concerns the social mechanism that might explain this empirical evidence, we move in the wake of the strand of literature aimed at explaining political and electoral behaviour by means of patterns of 'behavioural path dependence' (Acharya et al., 2018). Analogously to path dependence in institutions (see, above all, Putnam et al., 1993) this strand of literature argues that attitudes and behaviours become, in some way, self-reinforcing: once a path of development is embedded in the political culture of a certain geographical space, it becomes increasingly harder to erase. Similarly to institutions like language, religion and rituals, attitudes are passed down from generation to generation, encouraged by families and mechanisms of primary socialization and by social structures, such as schools, churches, political and non-political institutions rooted in the territory (see Acharya et al., 2018). Many examples which suggest behavioural path dependence can be traced back in the literature: Voigtländer and Voth (2012) show that the Nazi Party's support in 1933 elections was higher in places that had Jewish pogroms during the fourteenth century (showing a persistence in behaviour of almost 500 years); Wittenberg (2006), by analyzing voting behaviour in Hungary before and after the communist period, shows that the performance of right-wing parties after communism was higher in areas in which right-wing parties had higher consensus during the pre-communist period.

The social mechanism argued in these studies is somewhat similar to theories explaining the persistence over time of scattered zones of political influence in Italy: areas with a strong communist or Christian-democratic tradition during the First Republic were usually characterized by a stronger activism of militants of the local majority party, as well as a stronger presence of associations connected to the party itself (Bellucci and Segatti, 2010). Moreover, in these areas, it was more likely that the primary socialization, operated by the family of origin, was more able to convey a precise set of values compatible with the ideology of the dominant party.

In our case, the mechanisms argued here have a probabilistic component. Given certain contextual conditions, a larger quota of the local electoral body will be more likely to accept a neo-fascist rhetoric if the characteristics of the context are exogenously more permeable to such rhetoric. What has been argued in the previous literature, thus, is that the shift of the communication operated by Salvini could have contributed to triggering parts of the electoral body that were exogenously prone to accepting this type of rhetoric (and that one of the more prompt measures to identify the exogenous propensity to accept it is the prevalence of the neo-fascist right in a previous period). We need to outline that since support for the MSI during the First Republic was far lower than that for the Democrazia Cristiana and Partito Comunista Italiano, its political tradition could be referred to as a 'minority political tradition' (Mancosu and Ladini, 2018). Moving from the suggestion of Sani (1976, 394), who argued that the 'search for contextual forces shaping political attitudes should not be limited only to the identification of the major political tradition of the larger community', our contribution aims at analysing how neo-fascist political traditions could be reflected in recent voting trajectories.

The abovementioned empirical research on the topic presents at least two drawbacks: first, almost all the studies aiming to explain the new Lega's geographical trajectories of success with the scattered neo-fascist legacy of the context are mainly aggregate analyses, based on official electoral data at the municipality or provincial level, over a small part of the territory (Mancosu, 2015; Mancosu and Ladini, 2018). This approach, which in addition does not take into account southern regions that saw a massive increase in support for the Lega in 2019, keeps open concerns regarding the inference to the entire part of the country exposed to the party's outbreak and exposes these studies to issues of ecological fallacy (Robinson, 1950). In other words, just by looking at the aggregate, we do not have the 'smoking gun' of the effect of the context on individual attitudes and behaviours.

2.3. Hypotheses

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, we assess whether contextual characteristics are able to explain, by means of an aggregate measure, the variance of likelihood to vote for the Lega explicitly *at the individual level*, net of several other individual-level controls. Second, we extend previous analyses (focusing on a few regions) to the entire country, by looking in particular at central and southern regions, in which the Lega was an (almost) irrelevant competitor before Salvini's leadership, and in which the increase of consensus has been more impressive in relative terms. These regions also made up the most important basin of the MSI during the First Republic (see Ignazi, 1998), leading to a more precise test of our theoretical framework. In addition, while the diffusion of Lega Nord in northern regions took place in a period in which the party had ethno-regionalist connotations, the unprecedented diffusion of the Lega beyond its strongholds coincided with the shift of the party to nationalistic and more radical right-wing positions. In this respect, we hypothesize that the effect of MSI strength on individual support for the Lega will be stronger in central and southern regions. The first hypothesis will thus read as follows:

H1. *Contextual levels of the neo-fascist minority are positively associated with individual propensities to vote for the Lega in the 2019 European elections, especially in the centre-south.*

As an additional drawback, previous studies do not take into account the transformation of the extreme right-wing parties in the past decades. A correlation between the strength of the Lega (either at the aggregate or individual level) in recent elections and the permeability of the context to the MSI, *per se*, does not automatically lead to a corroboration of the mechanism depicted above. As stressed in the literature, indeed, the neo-fascist right has undergone several vicissitudes since the end of the First and the beginning of the Second Republic (see Ignazi, 1998). In 1993, the MSI leadership abandoned the ideological references to fascism (which clearly characterized the MSI during the First Republic), by dissolving the old party and founding Alleanza Nazionale, a more moderate party that aimed at qualifying itself as a potential governing party. The ideological shift, similar to the one that invested the centre-left parties in the same period, allowed this new party to receive 5 million votes at its first appearance in the 1994 elections, almost doubling the historical best performance of the MSI (almost 3 million votes in 1972). However, the relationship between the two parties remained quite strong. For instance, the municipal-level correlation between the Movimento Sociale Italiano in 1976 and Alleanza Nazionale in 2001 – two periods in which the voting percentage for the parties was about one percentage point higher than their average – is indeed equal to .54 (authors' analysis). It is thus possible that the places in which the MSI was strong became progressively less extreme, aided, in this process, by the decreasing extremism of the political entrepreneur which they referred to. The effect of the neo-fascist tradition on the Lega must thus be discounted by the effect of a subsequent, and less extreme political entrepreneur that might have mitigated the original extreme ideological tenet of MSI in the context. The second hypothesis will thus read as follows:

H2. *Contextual levels of the neo-fascist minority in the centre-south are positively associated with individual propensities to vote for the Lega in the 2019 European elections, irrespective of the contextual performance of Alleanza Nazionale during the Second Republic.*

3. Data and methods

To test our hypotheses, we employed a survey carried out in Italy before the 2019 European elections (from 13 March to 15 May, 2019). Overall, 11,063 respondents from an opt-in panel of a private company (SWG) were interviewed through the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) mode. The survey contains questions referring to the socio-demographic, attitudinal, and behavioural characteristics of the respondents. In addition, the survey contains information on the municipality in which the respondents live. This piece of information is employed here to link the individual dataset with the election results extracted from the official database of the Italian Ministry of the Interior. In particular, the voting percentages for the Movimento Sociale Italiano in 1976[2]

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[2] The distribution of the voting percentages for the MSI in the 1976 national elections by geographical area are reported in Appendix 1. To take into account possible bias due to the extreme values of the MSI strength in some municipalities, we also attempted to fit the same models without these extreme values. Results, available on request, are substantially equal to those presented in this article.

and Alleanza Nazionale in 2001 at the municipality level have been matched with every respondent declaring a non-missing municipality of residence.

In this paper, we present four different models with the aim of providing consistent empirical evidence to back our hypotheses. The dependent variable is the individual propensity to vote for the Lega, measured by means of a 0-10 scale in which the respondents express the likelihood of their voting for the party, with 0 meaning '0% likelihood' and 10 meaning '100% likelihood' (for more information on the measure see van der Eijk et al., 2006). The first model, fitted only on respondents coming from the northern regions (northeast and northwest), explains the variation of the propensity to vote for the Lega conditional to the level of support for the MSI at the municipal level in 1976. The second model also includes the share of votes for Alleanza Nazionale at the municipal level as control variable. In this way, we are able to assess whether the propensities to vote for the Lega are associated with the permeability to the neo-fascist tradition of the context in which people live, controlling for the level of the (more moderate) heir to this tradition in a subsequent election (Alleanza Nazionale). The same two models are fitted only on the respondents living in central and southern regions (third and fourth model)[3]. All the models also include a set of individual-level control variables: gender, age group (six categories: <25, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65 and more), educational level (three categories: primary, secondary, and tertiary), perceived wealth (five categories: wealthy, living easily, living with difficulties, living with huge difficulties, poor), and left-right self-placement on a 0-10 scale recoded in 6 categories (left: 0-1; centre-left: 2-3; centre: 4-6; centre-right: 7-8; right: 9-10; refused to locate).[4] According to our hypotheses, we could expect that the coefficient of MSI will be positive and significant in the centre-south of the country, net of control variables.

To control for the possible inflation of standard errors because of the hierarchical structure of the data, we employ linear multilevel random-intercept regression models (Snijders and Boskers, 1999). This multilevel approach has some antecedents in the study of Italian electoral behaviour aimed at analysing the role of territorial political traditions on vote choice (Vezzoni, 2008). To further take into account the context at a lower level of specification, all the models are fitted with a fixed-effect control that indicates the Istat geographical area to which the respondent belongs.

4. Results

Table 2 shows the coefficients for the four multilevel regression models, fitted on respondents living in the northern (Model 1 and 2) and central-southern (Model 3 and 4) regions.

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[3] To stress the differences in voting behaviour for the League between north and centre-south we employed a separated model approach instead of estimating a single pooled model with an interaction between MSI strength and a dichotomous north/centre-south variable. This choice is explained by both theoretical and methodological reasons: first, insofar as we deal with the geographically scattered support for the Lega, subdividing north and centre-south signals that we are dealing with two different subnational contexts that should be treated in different ways (see Passarelli and Tuorto, 2012). Second, by applying a two-model approach, we provide a more conservative interpretation of the effects that, in this way are estimated separately in the two subnational contexts (a pooled approach would indeed provide a weighted average of the control variables' effects without taking into account geographical specificities).
[4] All the question wordings can be found in Appendix 2.

With regard to the control variables, although we can detect some differences between the models, results are in line with previous literature (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018). All over the country, the propensities to vote for the Lega are far higher among respondents with a low educational level, whose average value is more than one point higher than tertiary educated ones, both in northern and central-southern regions.

Table 2. Multilevel linear regression models to study the propensity to vote for the Lega

Indep. Variables	Model 1 North only Lega PTV		Model 2 North only Lega PTV		Model 3 Centre-south only Lega PTV		Model 4 Centre-south only Lega PTV	
MSI municipal level (1976)	-0.00	(0.04)	0.03	(0.06)	0.06***	(0.02)	0.06***	(0.02)
AN municipal level (2001)			-0.03	(0.03)			-0.01	(0.02)
Gender: Female	0.33***	(0.09)	0.32***	(0.09)	0.26***	(0.09)	0.27***	(0.09)
Age: 25-34 (ref. <25)	0.04	(0.22)	0.03	(0.22)	-0.22	(0.22)	-0.22	(0.22)
35-44	0.25	(0.21)	0.25	(0.21)	0.18	(0.21)	0.18	(0.21)
45-54	0.57***	(0.21)	0.57***	(0.21)	0.22	(0.21)	0.22	(0.21)
55-64	0.02	(0.21)	0.02	(0.21)	-0.03	(0.21)	-0.03	(0.21)
>64	-0.19	(0.20)	-0.19	(0.20)	-0.43**	(0.20)	-0.43**	(0.20)
Education level: Secondary (ref. Primary)	-0.23	(0.18)	-0.23	(0.18)	-0.58***	(0.18)	-0.58***	(0.18)
Tertiary	-1.09***	(0.19)	-1.09***	(0.19)	-1.39***	(0.19)	-1.39***	(0.19)
Income: I can live easily (ref. I'm wealthy)	-0.04	(0.34)	-0.04	(0.34)	-0.47	(0.36)	-0.47	(0.36)
I have difficulties	0.35	(0.35)	0.35	(0.35)	-0.56	(0.36)	-0.56	(0.36)
I have huge difficulties	0.79**	(0.37)	0.80**	(0.37)	-0.56	(0.38)	-0.56	(0.38)
I feel poor	0.65	(0.43)	0.65	(0.43)	-0.07	(0.41)	-0.07	(0.41)
Left-right s-p: Centre-right (ref. Right)	-1.07***	(0.19)	-1.07***	(0.19)	-0.86***	(0.20)	-0.86***	(0.20)
Centre	-3.56***	(0.22)	-3.57***	(0.22)	-2.28***	(0.22)	-2.28***	(0.22)
Centre-left	-6.30***	(0.18)	-6.30***	(0.18)	-5.01***	(0.18)	-5.01***	(0.18)
Left	-6.86***	(0.19)	-6.86***	(0.19)	-5.37***	(0.19)	-5.37***	(0.19)
Not located	-4.73***	(0.19)	-4.74***	(0.19)	-3.52***	(0.19)	-3.52***	(0.19)
Constant	7.97***	(0.46)	8.15***	(0.49)	7.75***	(0.48)	7.84***	(0.55)
Level-2 variance	0.17**	(0.08)	0.17**	(0.08)	0.24***	(0.07)	0.24***	(0.07)
Level-1 variance	1.08***	(0.01)	1.08***	(0.01)	1.13***	(0.01)	1.13***	(0.01)
Observations	*4,467*		*4,467*		*5,121*		*5,121*	
Number of groups	*1,053*		*1,053*		*922*		*922*	

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1 (the models contain fixed effect for the geographical area – coefficients not shown).

When looking at gender, women present on average a propensity to vote for the Lega which is 0.3 higher than men. Concerning age groups, the analysis shows that, in the south, older voters (age > 64) have the lowest propensity to vote for the Lega, In the north,

45-54 year old individuals are more likely to choose the Lega than the youngest ones. As expected, individuals who locate themselves at the extreme right pole of the left-right scale had the highest propensity to vote for the Lega in the 2019 European elections. In line with the argument on the radicalization of the Lega, they are even significantly more supportive of the party compared to respondents locating themselves on the centre-right. Individual economic conditions seem to be associated with a preference for the Lega only in the north, with people with difficulties having a higher propensity to vote for the party.

Figure 1. Predicted propensities to vote for the Lega according to the different levels of MSI at the municipal level in 1976 (95% confidence intervals) – centre-south only, Model 4 predictions
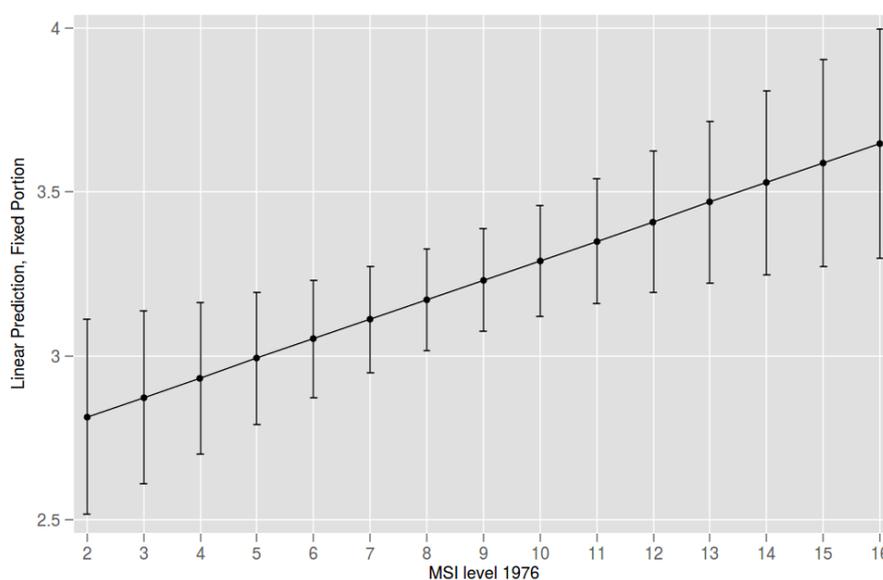
Our two substantively relevant independent variables are, as stressed above, the municipal-level strength of the MSI in 1976, and the level of the less extreme heir to this party, Alleanza Nazionale, about twenty years before the 2019 elections. Results seem to support our hypotheses. The association between the strength of the MSI in the municipality and the propensity to vote for the Lega in 2019 is positive and significant, but only in the south. In the north, the traditional stronghold of the party, we find no correlation between MSI performance and individual support for the Lega. This is further proof of the fact that the neo-fascist explanation of party trajectories can be an explanation only in the centre-south of the country.

Another relevant result is that this outcome is stable even when controlling for the municipal levels of Alleanza Nazionale, the less extreme heir to the MSI, which turns out to be non-significant in explaining the variation in the propensity to vote for the Lega.[5]

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[5] Since the two variables might present issues of multicollinearity, we performed a variance inflation factor (VIF) test on the model. In both north and centre-south models, the VIF score of MSI and AN variables are around 2, a value that reassures us regarding the absence of multicollinearity issues (in general, a VIF value over 5 or 10 starts to be worrisome; see Hair et al., 2010).

An analysis of the magnitude of the effects is enlightening as to the relevance of the MSI effect in shaping voters' attitudes and behaviours. As figure 1 shows, if we select the central 90% of the distribution of our independent variable, the predicted propensity to vote for the Lega (on a 0-10 scale) is equal to 2.8 when people live in a municipality in which the share of votes for the MSI was around 2%. Instead, when people exposed to areas which are more permeable to the neo-fascist minority (level of MSI in 1976 equal to 14% on valid votes), their average propensity to vote is 0.8 points higher, equal to 3.6.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This paper aims to test the relevance of one possible explanation for the success of the Lega in the 2019 European elections in Italy, by focusing especially on central and southern regions where the consensus for the Lega was irrelevant before Matteo Salvini's leadership. To do so, we moved from the previous literature (see Mancosu, 2015; Mancosu and Ladini, 2018) by looking at the persistence of the neo-fascist political tradition in the vote for the new Lega. According to this view, one of the communication strategies of Salvini started from the standpoint that support for the Lega could expand by exploiting a potential national basin of extreme right-wing voters who were, if not contiguous, not reluctant to a classical set of neo-fascist claims (which include Ventennio nostalgia, a supremacist view of the Italian cultural and ethnic milieux, and a general preference for a 'strong leader' figure). Some of the rhetoric in the communication strategy of the Lega's leader followed this general trend and progressively shifted its claims and political action to the extreme right of the political spectrum and to the centre-south as regards the geographical diffusion trajectories. Previous research aimed at finding an association between the geographical scattering of the Lega in the last 4-5 years and the contexts in which the extreme right minority was stronger, were mainly based on aggregate data – a strategy that does not allow us to clearly identify causal mechanisms.

In this paper, we aimed to explain the electoral success of the Lega in 2019 by explaining the individual variation of propensities to vote with levels of the neo-fascist minority in the First Republic – measured by means of the municipal strength of the Movimento Sociale Italiano. The mechanism hypothesized here can be identified with a form of behavioural path dependence (Acharya et al., 2018) that argues that contexts more open to accepting a strong neo-fascist minority are those in which more extreme ideas can spread, even if more than forty years have passed.

The analyses presented here provide empirical evidence towards our hypotheses, by showing a significant association between support for the MSI and the propensity to vote for the new Lega, but only in those areas where the Lega was almost absent before Salvini's leadership. We think that our results can be relevant in showing the persistence of political attitudes over time. Similarly to other cases of behavioural path dependence shown above, the attitudes of the neo-fascist minority at the local level which were present, and sometimes relevant, during the whole of the First Republic, show up again with the exploits and communication shift of the new Lega, after a period in which they have been hidden.

These results must be evaluated by considering at least two *caveat*s. The first one is that results do not show that 'Lega voters are neo-fascists', nor that 'neo-fascists massively vote for the Lega'; rather, what we show here is that people in contexts in which a

neo-fascist minority were particularly present might have been socialized in a political context in which, among other things, shreds of the ideology were present. It is not necessary for people voting nowadays for the Lega to accept the complete set of ideological tenets of neo-fascism; nor do they need to completely understand all the consequences of the ideological structure, which, by the way, has been historically extremely vague and foggy. In addition, the relationship between the MSI's prevalence and the propensity to vote for the Lega allows us to explain only a part of the success of the party in the centre-south, which can also be accounted for by more recent trends, such as the immigration and economic crises (see Albertazzi et al., 2018).

Finally, our results only indirectly argue that the trigger of the correlation that we see is the shift of Salvini's communication. Although previous studies stressed that the correlation between the neo-fascist legacy and the trajectories of diffusion of the Lega are related only after the advent of Salvini as leader of the party, we do not present any evidence relating to this (crucial) point. Future research should aim at better identifying the path dependence mechanism – by means, for instance, of panel data.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1. Voting percentages for the Movimento Sociale Italiano in 1976 national elections

Geographical area	MSI 1976
Northwest	3.8
Northeast	3.4
Centre	6.3
South	9.4
Islands	10.1
Italy	**6.1**

Note: Within the centre, in Lazio – the only region of the macroarea not belonging to the so called 'red zone' – the voting percentage for the MSI was equal to 9.5.

Appendix 2. Question wording (authors' translation)

Dependent variable

Propensity to vote for the Lega: What is the likelihood that you will vote for the Lega in the upcoming European elections?

> 1. not at all likely — 11. totally likely
>
> (variable rescaled on a 0-10 scale in the analyses)

Independent variables

Gender: you are...
> 1. Male
> 2. Female

Age: Age class at 6 – pre-coded in the dataset.
> 1. <25
> 2. 25-34
> 3. 35-44
> 4. 45-54
> 5. 55-64
> 6. >64

Education level – pre-coded in the dataset
> 1. Primary
> 2. Secondary
> 3. Tertiary

Your income allows you to live...
> 1. I'm wealthy
> 2. I can live easily
> 3. I have difficulties

4. I have huge difficulties
5. I feel poor

Politically, you would locate yourself more on the… – pre-coded in the dataset

1. Right
2. Centre-right
3. Centre
4. Centre-left
5. Left
6. I would not locate myself

Geographical area – pre-coded in the dataset

1. Northwest
2. Northeast
3. Centre
4. South
5. Islands