

# Policy Does Matter! How Far-Right Agendas Affect Women's Access to Abortion Right. The Case for Italy (2013-2020)

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## Abstract

A foremost threat of populist politics concerns its “exclusionist” vision of social rights and liberties, also by the side of gender and women’s right. Using their ethnocentric-based narrative, far-rights’ agendas are trying to “normalize” traditional and neo-patriarchal stereotypes about family or women’s self-determination, and this led in several democracies to a backsliding in the access to abortion right, as also the overturning of the Roe v. Wade seems to highlight. Although most of the populist right-wing parties and movements do not explicitly stand for abortion’s ban, they use to surf over electorates hostile to abortion to generalize their ultra-conservative and segregationist policy-set about civil rights, pay-gap, gender diversity or pro-life standings. Italian political system seems to be a forefront on gender equality backsliding induced by populists’ ethnocentrism, as also the outlook of a success to 2022’s general elections of far-right. Brothers of Italy seem to indicate. Its party leader, Giorgia Meloni, currently supports stances about women’s rights shaped by nativism and neo-patriarchalism, and she has frequently targeted the national law—number 194/1978—which regulate the safe, public, and universal right to abort for Italian women. But how much far-right parties are impacting on gender equality backsliding, by the side of the targets they support and of the social mood they feed? Did their electoral affirmation increase resistances to the implementation of abortion policy? The article tries to deal with these questions, by developing a frame both analytical and empirical to assess how much the ethnocentric cleavage running over the Italian political system is affecting the implementation of the policy at regional level.

## Keywords

Abortion, Italy, Ethnocentrism, Far-Right, Women’s Healthcare Rights

## 1. Ethnocentric Agendas and Anti-Gender Coalitions: A Research Question about Abortion Right's Backsliding

As generally stated, a foremost threat of populist politics concerns its “exclusionist” vision of social rights and liberties (Beckman 2009, p. 64). During the last twenty years, a wide and consolidated scholarship addressed with the effect of populist spread on democratic citizenship: on the side of pluralism (Kymlicka, 2015), as well as ethnic diversity (Hammar, 2017) or gender (Meret & Siim, 2013; De Lange & Mügge, 2015). What has been mostly remarked is the impact far-right parties' agendas are having in several western democracies on “normalizing” traditional and neo-patriarchal stereotypes about family or women's self-determination to get the backsliding of well-established rights. In another sense, these conservative agenda about family, gender and women's rights seems to find a large support on the ground in the social mood. Connecting the demand-side to the supply side, it has been by the ethnocentric backlash (Inglehart & Norris, 2016), or what Hooghe and Marks (2018) called the neo-nationalist cleavage, that anti-gender policies seem to draw new materials and symbolic borders of exclusion, as far-right populists—the fourth-wave radical rights both trusting the “will of people” and contrasting several fundamentals of postwar democracy (Mudde, 2019)—support nativist, pro-family and anti-gender issues to upset new “barriers and challenges for access to healthcare” (Speed & Manion, 2020).

This also began to affect women's access to abortion policy, as the right's effectiveness started to be tangibly threatened during last years in some western democracies. Although should be connected, in its impact, to the peculiar legacy the federal system has about abortion rights, the overturning of the *Roe v. Wade* had a relevant echo on western public opinions (Cohen et al., 2021). What clearly emerged is that several liberal democracies, the younger (Poland or Hungary) as the older (USA, Italy) ones, observed after 2008's economic crash a return of “electorates often hostile to abortion” (Matalucci et al., 2018, p. 8). And, by both sides of ideology and policy agenda, these neo-segregationist standings seem to be the nickelback of the ethnocentric populist cleavage.

Generally, the most of populist right-wing parties and movements (*Fidesz*, *Front National*, *Vox*, *Alternative für Deutschland*, the Trump's movement, *Northern League*, *Brothers of Italy*) do not use to explicitly stand for abortion's ban in their manifestos, rarely in their electoral discourse. However, they largely use an “othering” approach to negatively depict and to condemn all those “non-natural” lifestyles supposedly contiguous to abortion rights: non-native, gender-sensitive, non-traditional way of “being woman” in what should be, to them, a patriarchal social-order. This ultra-conservative policy-set about civil rights, pay-gap, gender diversity includes pro-life standings, and it is embedded, as a whole, in a larger exclusionist ideology self-affirming to defend the “people” as a *pars pro toto* (Müller, 2017). Definitively, far-rights' policy standings about abortion are derivative from the ultra-traditional idea of family, citizenship and social order

they support, contrasting in itself woman's self-determination, as the *vox populi* style of politics generally vehiculates a *vox masculine* based idea of society and rights (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015).

Italian political system seems to be a forefront on gender equality backsliding induced by populists' ethnocentrism: interested by a severe electoral spread of populist and far-right parties since 2013, led by a full-populist coalition between 2018 and 2019 and running forward to a new government, as 2022's general polls suggest, led by the far-right party of *Brothers of Italy*. The party leads by Giorgia Meloni, self-defining as a "woman, mom, Italian, Christian", does currently support stances about women's right and social position deeply shaped by nativism, familyism and neo-patriarchalism visions, as Meloni herself declared the willing to "give women the right to not abort".

Beforehand, as in March 2019 Italy hosted the Thirteenth World Congress of Family—a three-day event organized by associations standing for pro-life, natural-family and ultra-conservative positions on divorce, gender rights, LGBT, sexual self-determination—Meloni personally endorsed and played as conference speaker. A main target of the ultra-traditional discourse was the abortion restriction, and in 2019's regional elections, as Salvini's *Northern League* and *Brothers of Italy* turned in as leading parties in several regional governments, their announcement developed as a policy restriction about abortion. Because of the prerogatives abortion law 194/1978 devolves to the regional government in Italy, several new far-right governors tried to limit, i.e., the use of mifepristone to interrupt pregnancy (RU486), finding no large opposition in local public opinion, also through women.

Anyway, the trend about abortion policy seems to reflect an increasing favor for regressive or anti-gender issues running underground society and public opinion, at national and local level: the growling-line of a new border of exclusion gender-based. And the way abortion policy implementation is shrinking at regional level is a marker of this trend, entangling with the ethnocentric backlash overlapping Italian political system. But how much far-right parties are impacting, in Italy, on gender equality backsliding, by the side of the targets they support and of the social mood they feed? Did their electoral affirmation increase resistances in abortion's policy implementation?

The article tries to address with these questions. Paragraph number 2 is devoted to deepening the crossing between populist spread and anti-gender coalition, by setting, from politics to policy, Far-right parties' agendas on natural family, labor market, sexual freedom and identity, divorce and abortion as well as the role these party platforms play in supporting restrictions by the side of gender, and women's autonomy or self-determination. Paragraph 3 addresses the case for Italy, and the way the Italian ethnocentric forefront is challenging the effectiveness of abortion rights. It presents the empirical frame and the shreds of evidence by the side of party politics on abortion, to consider how much it is affecting the implementation of the policy at regional level. The choice has been to analyze the intersections between regional level trends about

IVG (abortion rate) and Far-right parties' vote shares increases (2013-2018) using both descriptive data and OLS regressions, to get emerged how right-wing ethnocentric cleavage is pressing on abortion rights' restriction, so backsliding women's autonomy.

All data regarding immigration adversity in public opinion are also from <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/>. The ones about parties' agendas come from Chapel Hill Expert Survey, version 2019.3 (Bakker et al., 2020). All Italian electoral data are from from CISE (2022): <https://cise.luiss.it/cise/category/politiche/>; French and Germany ones come from <http://www.parties-and-elections.eu>. Regional cluster includes 16 regions on 20: *Valle d'Aosta*, *Sardinia*, *Trento*, *Bolzano*, and *Sicilia* autonomic regions/provinces have been excluded, due to relevance of regional and autonomic parties. IVG rate are extracted from Italian national health minister annual reports (MINSAL, 2014, 2018, 2019), as well as those regarding social markers laying behind abortion rates. Last, data about population, density, foreign-born residents, women's employment and education are extracted from national statistical warehouse <http://dati.istat.it/>, as well as ones regarding IVG provincial rates.

## 2. Far-Right's Challenge to Women's Rights and Gender Equality

Generally defined as a "thin" ideology (Mudde, 2004, p. 543) whose general target is to bring back sovereignty from establishment to so-called good people's dominion, populism has been recently conceptualized as the ideology of anti-establishment, ethno-nationalist, anti-immigration, and anti-austerity parties (Gydron & Hall, 2017, p. S61). For a consolidated scholarship, the far-right wind blew on western democracies during last twenty years undoubtedly reactivate a nationalist and conservative cleavage (Hooghe & Marks, 2018), also affecting policy agendas about women's rights.

After 2008, the backlash of economic crisis bounced in the public opinion, sustained by the mainstream media and by populist and far-right parties up to enforce an ethnocentric social mood (Bos et al., 2011). Especially in some countries, the more socially affected by an anti-immigration backlash, far right parties performed in dramatizing public discourse (Bobba & Seddone, 2018, p. 28) about immigration and how it would have challenged the socio-economic—and cultural-status of the low-skilled suburban working class, the left-behind. In Italy, by using an *othering* strategy parties as Salvini's *Northern League* or Meloni's *Brothers of Italy* radicalized their discourse about pro-life, gender, family, nativism, and they improved neo-conservative, anti-gender, and chauvinist agendas. Starting from 2013's general elections, these parties succeeded in supplying a chauvinist and ethnocentric agenda—mainly anti-immigration, connectionally traditionalist, nativist, anti-gender and pro-life—promising a protection for the *left-behind* threatened by global crisis and cosmopolitanism (Inglehart & Norris,

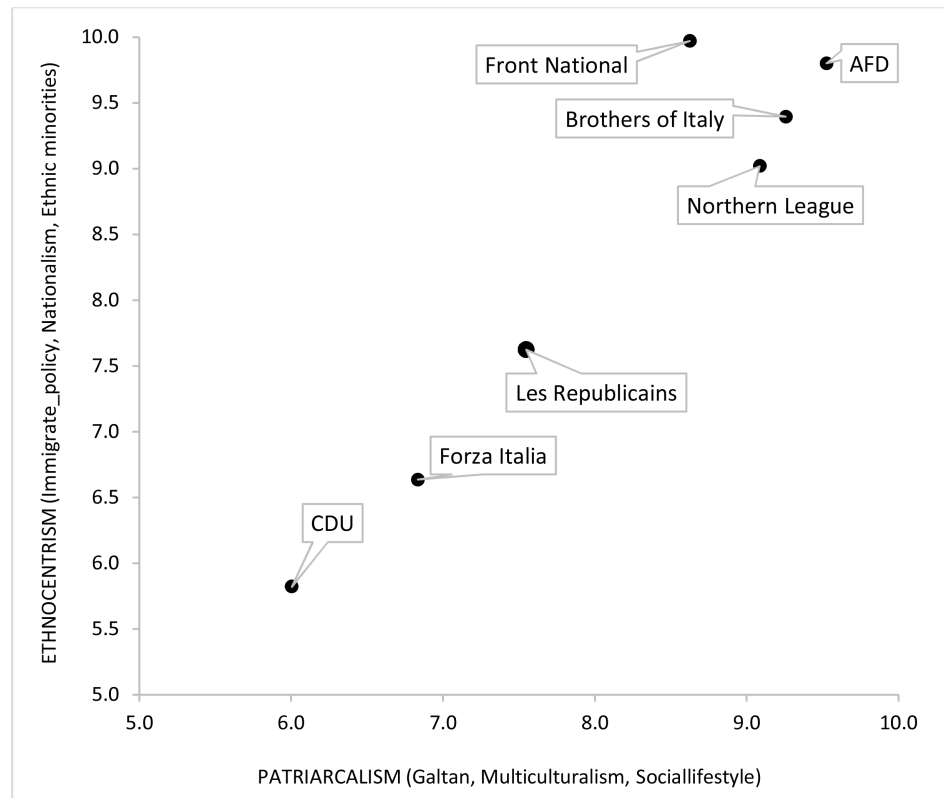
2016), included a restrictive policy agenda about gender-based rights and women's social and personal self-determination.

The relation between populism and gender should be discussed critically, surely not by retrieving any kind of analytical simplifications (Spierings et al., 2015, p. 4). These parties' standings outwardly "has no specific relation to gender", although their ideology is commonly branded by "machismo politics, promoting sexist ideas and policies, hindering than rather advancing women's political and social rights positions" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015, pp. 16-17). Yet, it's the masculine way populism defines itself to contrast gender equality, as it promotes an "image" of woman and of its social role branded by a traditionalist and "othered" message (Köttig et al., 2017). Indeed, local case-studies intersecting far-right's agenda emphasized the threatens for gender equity coming from ethnocentric stances on both sides of individual social lifestyle and women's self-determination (Norocel, 2013; Meret & Siim, 2013; Immerzeel et al., 2015).

Moreover, it is also the use of a "gendered" leadership—Marine Le Pen, Frauke Petry, Alice Weidel, Giorgia Meloni—to vehiculate regressive and ultra-conservative standings about family, abortion, sexual liberty and gender identity to be remarkable (Immerzeel et al., 2015; Spierings et al., 2015; Köttig et al., 2017). Behind the apparent gender-neutrality of a "people first" messaging it lays an ancestral-conservative idea of society placing woman (and gender) in a natural/nativist position, that far-right leaders use to polarize voters' anger towards globalisation and its cosmopolite values: "gender ideology", "gender theory" or "genderism" (Kovats, 2017, pp.176-180).

This is clear by dissecting the agenda of far-right parties about women's rights or gender equality: family policy, labor market and pay gap, sexual self-determination, divorce, abortion, LGBT issues or same-sex marriage, positiona about the Istanbul Convention. Dataset on parties' standings developed by CHES (Bakker et al., 2020) is a precious tool to outline the degree of public ethnocentrism (positions on immigration, nationalism, ethnic minorities) and patriarchalism (general views on social and cultural values, multiculturalism, social lifestyle supported) of far-right populist parties, and to position their agendas regarding their standings for *national*, *traditional*, and *morality-based* lifestyles and values which challenges gender equity and women's rights, including abortion. **Figure 1** replies the positions of German, French and Italian mainstream conservative parties (CDU, *Les Republicains*, *Forza Italia*) as well as of PRRs (AfD, Front National, Northern League, Brothers of Italy) by considering their ethnocentric and patriarchal agendas.

Conservatives and far-rights' nationalist issues—economic/welfare chauvinism, defence of national way-of-life, and traditional social order—are shaded, due to the way mainstream right flattened on populist agenda about economic anti-immigration (Van Spanje, 2010; Schumacher & Van Kensbergen, 2014). But by shifting to policy stances, it makes clearer the far-right parties' ultraconservative positions about traditional morality, especially about women's social



**Figure 1.** Parties' ethnocentrism and patriarchalism degree: the scale is 0 to 10. Ethnocentrism value is the average of: IMMIGRATE\_POLICY goes from "strongly favors a liberal policy on immigration" (0) to "strongly favors a restrictive policy" (10); NATIONALISM goes from "strongly promotes cosmopolitan conceptions of society" (0) to "strongly promotes nationalist conceptions" (10); ETHNIC\_MINORITIES goes from "strongly favors more rights for ethnic minorities" (0) to "strongly opposes more rights" (10). Patriarchalism is the average of: GALTAN is the position of the party in 2019 in terms of their views on social and cultural values, going from a "Libertarian" position about personal freedoms, for example, abortion rights, divorce, and same-sex marriage" (0) to a "traditional" or "authoritarian" one rejecting these ideas (10); MULTICULTURALISM is the position on integration of immigrants and asylum seekers, between "strongly favors multiculturalism" (0) to "strongly favors assimilation" (10); SOCIALLIFESTYLE is the position about rights for homosexuals or gender equality, going from "strongly supports" (0) to "strongly opposes" (10). [Data and codebook: Bakker et al., (2020)].

role and rights, as their contradictions. Both the German *AfD* and *Brothers of Italy* rudely support traditional morality and adverse same-sex unions, a family model built outside the marriage or women's body selfdom about the choice of interrupt pregnancy. To be noteworthy is the contradictory habits these party leaders have in their private sphere: Giorgia Meloni is not married and moreover she conceived a child with her boyfriend outside a marriage or a formal union; AfD's leader Alice Weidel shares with her girlfriend a civil partnership, but the party stands for traditional family. Anyway, this is a confirm of an ability in managing post-truth rhetoric strategy, as to use a broader nativist-ethnocentric ideology to weaken the support in public opinion about women's right (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015, p. 17).

### 3. An Ethnocentric Backlash Running Underground? The Access to Abortion Right in Italy during Last Inter-Electoral Stage (2013-2018)

During last years, Italy's been the only big post-industrial country of the Euro-zone led by a full-populist coalition. The large support for populists' and PRRs' agendas in 2018's general elections seemed to ratify by the emergence of a neo-nationalist cleavage (Hooghe & Marks, 2018) the ethnocentric mood running underground Italian society and public opinion, as the geography of the vote for populist and far-right parties overlaps those critical post-materialistic junctures (Inglehart & Norris, 2016) running over center/periphery and urban/non-urban. Is this trend designing a new border of exclusion gender-based in the public sphere, and is it backsliding abortion right, namely by restricting the implementation of the policy stated in 1978?

Both last general elections and regional ones scheduled from 2018 to 2020, marked a large affirmation for populist and far-right parties—Northern League and Brothers of Italy—especially in those regional constituencies the less developed and the more peripherals to a globalized economy. By considering the provinces, the second-level constituent entities after regions, the map of voters' realignment on populist positions highlights as it overspreads in suburban and rural/internal area (Ceccarini, 2018, pp. 169-174). The overspread in support for those parties designs an ethnocentric border composed by constituencies for the most (67.6%) exposed to immigration by their natural or coastal border, and generally below the national average level of urban density of 270.1 inhabitants for square km<sup>1</sup>. Here, those parties succeeded in intercepting a decreasing social support for values as pluralism, diversity, or self-determination narrowly linked to the socio-economic fear these parties' propaganda instilled in the public opinion: that's the first implication of populist spread for gender equity and women's right, as some institutional reports has already stated (WEF, 2017), because of an indirect-defense of traditional morality—or directly—to limit or banning abortion access-challenge.

The social mood and the voters' sentiment is linked to the policy agenda about abortion. The program shared by *Northern League* and *Five Stars Movement* in their national alliance for government (*Contratto di Governo*) did not formally include explicit gender-sensitive issues, although the standings about family politics figured out a social idea of family, welfare and women's role smoothly alluding to traditionalism: "It is necessary ... to provide for: the raising of maternity allowance, an economic premium for maternity concluded for women who fall to work, and contributions to companies that keep mothers at work after the birth of their children. It is necessary to introduce facilities for families through reimbursement for crèches and babysitters, taxation of advantage, including "zero VAT" for neonatal and infant products (*Contratto di governo*, 2018, p. 33). So, it was not surprising the support and the endorsement of numerous mi-

<sup>1</sup>The average score of 270.1 inhabitants on km<sup>2</sup> has been developed in all 107 provinces (ISTAT, 2020).

nisters and leaders to the *XIII World Congress of Family* celebrated in Verona in March 2019: a three-day event organized by the largest international network of associations standing for pro-life, natural family, and ultra-conservative positions on divorce, gender rights, LGBT, sexual self-determination. Both Giorgia Meloni and the applied regional minister of education of Veneto from *Brothers of Italy*, Elena Donazzani<sup>2</sup>, stood the Congress, whose slogan was “God, family, and country”, and whose main targets was to introduce to public opinion the “decree Pillon”.

The bill number 735/2018, promoted by the Northern League representative Simone Pillon, was formally directed to modify laws about family and divorce, and to extend men’s dues in child custody. Strongly supported in parliament also by some representatives of the opposition, as for *Brothers of Italy*, the bill aimed to re-institutionalize a one-dimension type of family based on women’s re-segregation, especially as it tried to contrast divorce, and forced on compulsory bi-parentality and on excluding women’s right to resort public justice for protecting herself from familiar harassments: a radicalism of contents that even provoked the reaction of international organizations, leading the UN special rapporteur on violence against women to formally address Italian government, worried for “the potential serious retrogression in the advancement of the rights of the women and their protection from discrimination and gender-based violence” (UN, 2018, p. 2).

Just after 2018’s general elections, both the agenda and the media mood about family or traditional values started to focus progressively on an intended target: the restriction in access to safe and public abortion. Moreover, the full-populist government acted rapidly as an anti-gender coalition first by challenging law number 194 in its effectiveness. That was the target of another draft law, 1238/2018 presented by Northern League representative Alberto Stefani to limit abortion rights and to institutionalize the possibility for a third persons to adopt the embryos.

The bill got the support a large parliamentary support, also from Brothers of Italy, then at the opposition, but due to the change in government coalition occurred in the autumn 2019 it has never been discussed. Nevertheless, as for the initiative promoted by Pillon, it perfectly epitomizes that kind of far-rights’ standings (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015, p. 27) directed to restrict stated rights. on the side of abortion, by encouraging the uplift of barriers or franchises in the access to it as a right granted by the public healthcare service (Speed & Manion, 2020).

However, it should be remarked that problems with the implementation of law 194 by national health system started before 2018, as in 2013 Italy had been sanctioned by the Council of Europe for the de-application of law. Clearly, the challenge to abortion right itself by ultraconservative coalitions did already start in the previous fifteen years, mainly by weakening at regional level the bureau-

<sup>2</sup>Supporter of “Christian roots of the public sphere”, until the 90’s she had been a regional representative for *MSI*, the largest neo-fascist Italian party.



cracies serving the right's implementation (Quagliariello, 2018). After the changing in national government majority, the new center-left health minister sent to the regional governor new directives to implement law 194. Even so, the pressing for an abortion policy downsizing continued (Caruso, 2020, p. 94), above all because of the regional elections results in 2019 and 2020: in seven regions majority changed from left to right wing, and Friuli Venezia-Giulia, Marche, Umbria e Abruzzo got a governor belonging to far-right parties, Northern League or Brothers of Italy. Still in July 2020, the delegates of Italian trade unions (CGIL) alerted the European Committee of Social Rights, especially by reporting the increasing number of objectors through public doctors, the weakening of social security aids to women accessing to abortion (family centers), and the growth of illegal interruptions (CGIL, 2020).

National law number 194 legalizing a universal, safe, and public access to abortion—*interruzione volontaria di gravidanza* (IVG)—had been passed in 1978, following to an intense civil debate and a very participate referendum consultation. The policy has well worked for several years, also because of the widespread support in civil society and through the public health system's doctors. Originally, and along with the increase of sexual education, these elements contributed to drop-down both the incidence of mortality through pregnant women as well as the abortion rate, the latter going from 15.3 in 1980 to 7.8 points by the 80's to 2013 (MINSAL, 2018). However, the design of policy implementation is characterized by a complex system involving both local/regional bureaucracies of the National Healthcare System (*Servizio sanitario nazionale* or SSN). And it is precisely to regional level of administration that is devolved the policy implementation, whose main charges are to follow up and support women who have decided to interrupt their pregnancy, from first-level medical consultancy up to on-going psychological counseling.

But, by 1983 the whole system granting public access to safe interruption of pregnancies started to be less performant, and the IVG rate felt down of 7.5 points<sup>3</sup>, up to become one of the lowest among western European countries (MINSAL, 2018, p. 7). This could be either a marker of a positive policy effect over sexual prevention—as for countries as Germany (7.3) or Nederland (8.4)—but it could be else compared to another cluster of countries with strong welfares systems and high rates of gender equity to which the high IVG rates—i.e., Norway (12.4), France (14.9), Sweden (20.0)—probably derives from the high degree in women's freedom these systems allow. Paradoxically, facing to these countries, the low long-term IVG rate expressed by Italy could suggest a restrictive trend in the access to abortion right, somehow confirmed by the critical features that Italian public healthcare system highlighted (MINSAL, 2018).

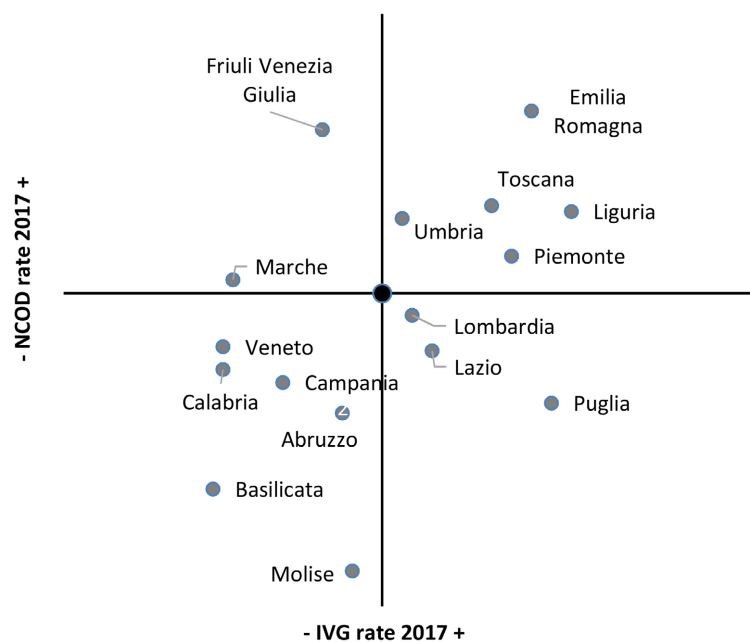
The main one to emerge has been the increasing number of objectors, the public servants refusing to practice abortion (NCOD), which remained permanently under 50% during the first twenty years of 194's application and grew

<sup>3</sup>By now, IVG rate is the number of pregnancy's interruptions on 1.000 women, aged 15 - 49.

up—here just considering the gynecologists—to 70 % in 2013. This share of public doctors refusing to practice legal abortion, and so denying women’s effective access to IVG as a universal healthcare right, today reaches up to 80% in many Italian regions. A data-crossing of IVG and objectors’ trends seems to confirm the effect that the ethnocentric cleavage is having on abortion right’s effectiveness. As **Figure 2** shows, all the regions both under national IVG and NCOD rates (lower left quadrant) are generally under the national average level of 196,8 inhabitants on km<sup>2</sup> (ISTAT, 2020), and they have all been interested by the overspread of populists and far-rights at last general elections.

Though some markers just suggested the inference of far-rights’ electoral arising on national agendas about abortion (Thomson, 2019), it takes a more complex analysis to assess the specific correlation between the ethnocentric backlash and the downsizing of the access to abortion for women.

At a first level, it seems to be relevant how ethnocentric socio-economic cleavages impact on policies’ implementation, in example as for the way gender gap affects the abortion rate (IVG). Even by using two the simpler gender markers, as women’s general employment rate (WGER) and the share of women with an education up to the tertiary (GRAD + POSTGRAD), it is possible to highlight how regional IVG rate is sensible to the increase of women’s economic autonomy and self-determination, but in a different way. Considering the period underlining the last two general elections (2012 to 2017), as shown by **Table 1**, the requests to interrupt pregnancies raised up as women’s employment and education increased. Apparently divergent, both the markers may suggest that a progress in women’s sphere of autonomy and self-determination infers on a free decision to access to abortion as a possibility: for each increasing point in women’s occupation



**Figure 2.** Regional IVG and NCOD rates. Single-region position to national average of 6.2 IVG rate and 31.7 NCOD rate: 2017 [Data: MINSAL (2019)].

rate growth there's a 1.8% increase in IVG rate's growth, while a more intensive arise in women's education growth finds a decrease of 2.6% in IVG rate trends.

Furthermore, the institutional framework and the policy drivers matter. The way these drivers affect women's access to the abortion as a healthcare and social right concern, in a wider sense, the effective implementation of the policy, in Italy—as said—especially at the regional bureaucratic level. In a first sense, it frequently emerged through some bad habits recurring in Italian regional hospitals, as the disrespectful customs to improve the presence of women's partner during the psychological or medical consultations afore the abortion operation. More generally, it concerns the influence that local healthcare bureaucracies have on effectively restricting the possibility to abort for a woman (Quagliariello, 2018, p. 99), especially because of the two problems that have increasingly affected healthcare regional systems during last fifteen years: the growth of conscience-based refusals through public doctors as through healthcare professionals, and the reduction in the supply of regional public hospitals' disposable to operate abortion. While the latter could also depend on the general efficiency in the regional health system governance, the increase of objectors also roots in a cultural opposition branded by conservative and patriarchal values. As Table 2 shows, if we measure the degree of implementation of the policy (API) going from 0 (no implementation) to 1 (maximum implementation) as the average between the availability of public doctors practicing abortion (NOD, from 0 to 1) and the

**Table 1.** OLS model using 16 regional observations. Dependent variable: Y, Logarithm of abortion rate growth 2017 on 2012 at the regional level. The standard error in parentheses. \*p < 0.10, \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < 0.01. Robust standard errors compared to heteroscedasticity, variant HC1, in parentheses. Data on WGER and GRAD + POSTGRAD are from ISTAT (2020), extracted the 13 of October 2020. Data on IVG rates are from MINSAL (2014) and MINSAL (2019).

<b>Log Y = IVG rate, 2017 on 2012</b>	
Log WGER, 2017 on 2012	1.835** (0.709)
Log GRAD + POSTGRAD, 2017 on 2012	-2.696*** (0.295)
N	16
R <sup>2</sup>	0.802

**Table 2.** OLS model using 16 regional observations. Dependent variable Y: regional IVG rate 2017/2012. Standard error in parentheses. \*p < 0.10, \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < 0.01. Robust standard errors compared to heteroscedasticity, variant HC1, in parentheses. API-index considers the NOD regional rate—0.000 [none], 1.000 [the whole]—and the HAP rate—0.000 [none], 1.000 [the whole]. The index is the average by the two. Data: MINSAL (2014, 2019).

<b>Y = IVG rate 2017 on 2012</b>	
API-index, 2017 on 2012	0.778*** (0.024)
N	16
R <sup>2</sup>	0.986

availability of regional hospital practicing abortion (HAP, from 0 to 1), the more these two drivers have improved the implementation of law 194 at the regional level the more also it increased the full access to abortion as a healthcare service.

Evidently, the Italian trend about the access for women to abortion as a healthcare right depends on the implementation of the policy—the law 194—which is linked to regional politics of healthcare administration, as different types of governance could affect the possibility to access pharmacological or surgical abortion. This is evidently the institutional ground through which the increasing restrictions in abortion policy-implementation at regional level connect to the ethnocentric cleavage underlying Italian political system. Anyway, it seems that policy as well as politics matter.

Not for a case, the cycle of regional elections following 2018 have been featured by radical changing in regional politics producing several new restrictive policies about abortion at local level. As eight of the sixteen regions in the cluster (Table 3) changed political control, passing from a progressive coalition to a

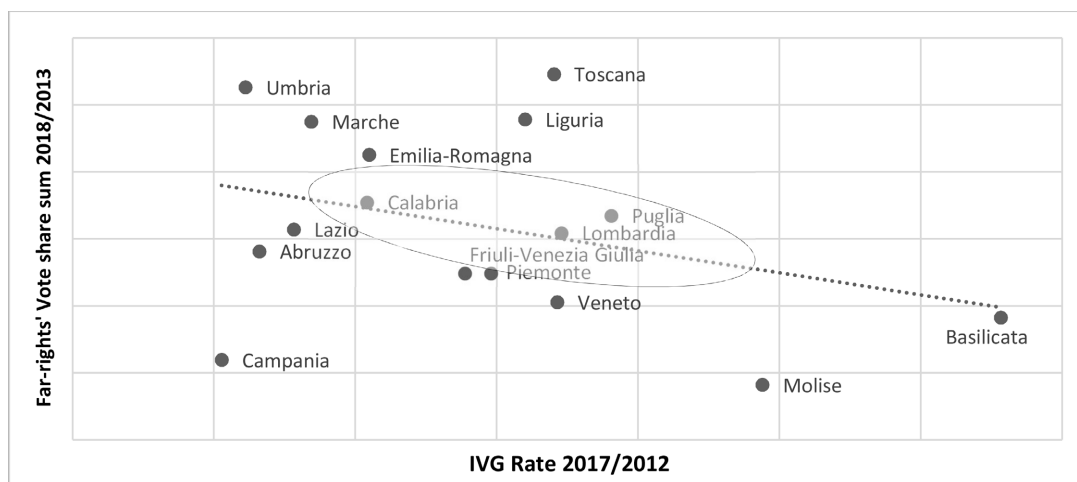
**Table 3.** Support for anti-gender agendas: change in regional political control (2013-2020). Here are included all parties with an explicit anti-abortion agenda NL, BOI, *Il Popolo della Famiglia* and neo-fascists *Casa Pound* and *Identità Nazionale-Forza Nuova* [Data: CISE (2022)]. The deadline of the elections is different: 2013/2018 for Lombardy, Friuli, Lazio, and Molise; 2014/2019 for Piemonte, Abruzzo, and Basilicata; 2015/2020 for the other nine regions belonging to the cluster.

Region	Governor's wing and party				Far-right RPs
	Prior election (2013, 2014, 2015)		Last election (2018, 2019, 2020)		
	Left wing	Right wing	Left wing	Right wing	
Piemonte	<i>Democratic party</i>		<i>Forza Italia</i>		19 (+17)
Lombardy	<u><i>Northern League</i></u>		<u><i>Northern League</i></u>		31 (+3)
Veneto	<u><i>Northern League</i></u>		<u><i>Northern League</i></u>		38 (+14)
Friuli V. Giulia	<i>Democratic party</i>		<u><i>Northern League</i></u>		19 (+16)
Liguria	<i>Forza Italia</i>		<i>Forza Italia</i>		9 (+3)
Emilia-Romagna	<i>Democratic party</i>		<i>Democratic party</i>		17 (+12)
Toscana	<i>Democratic party</i>		<i>Democratic party</i>		11 (+6)
Marche	<i>Democratic party</i>		<u><i>Brothers of Italy</i></u>		15 (+11)
Umbria	<i>Democratic party</i>		<u><i>Northern League</i></u>		10 (+7)
Lazio	<i>Democratic party</i>		<i>Democratic party</i>		7 (+4)
Abruzzo	<i>Democratic party</i>		<u><i>Brothers of Italy</i></u>		13 (+13)
Molise	<i>Democratic party</i>		<i>Forza Italia</i>		2 (+2)
Campania	<i>Democratic party</i>		<i>Democratic party</i>		7 (+5)
Puglia	<i>Democratic party</i>		<i>Democratic party</i>		10 (+10)
Basilicata	<i>Democratic party</i>		<i>Forza Italia</i>		7 (+6)
Calabria	<i>Democratic party</i>		<i>Forza Italia</i>		8 (+8)

right-wing (Piemonte, Molise, Basilicata, Calabria) or a far-right (Friuli Venezia-Giulia, Umbria, Marche, Abruzzo) one. Parties supporting a restrictive agenda about abortion reached a total of 204 representatives, with a net growth of 137 representatives (+67.1%) from the prior election, so portraying a new map of regional governments and majorities for the most lead by the far-right parties, *Northern League* or *Brothers of Italy*.

The changing immediately shifted on regional politics of abortion. After its election, Friuli Venezia-Giulia governor, Massimiliano Fedriga from *Northern League*, began to contrast the law 194, and stopped the institutional cooperation with associations committed to protecting gender stances and LGBT's community issues. Still, another Northern League's governor, Donatella Tesei, placed in June 2020 a decision to restrict the use of mifepristone (RU486) to interrupt pregnancies in Umbria. Furthermore, all these restrictive tendencies were furtherly wedged by the upsurge of the Covid 19. As pandemic began to stress public healthcare systems, and many governors prioritized some services and the hospitalization of Covid cases, so downgrading other healthcare services which faced to a real "difficult to access", as in the case of abortion (Cioffi et al., 2020). Mainly, because conservative and far-right politicians began to use instrumentally pandemic for attempting or limiting access to abortion care (Jones et al., 2020). A real troubling situation for women seeking an access to abortion, which led the national Health Minister, Roberto Speranza, to mandate regions in implementing non-hospitalized abortions extending the use RU486.

Anyway, the pandemic did further radicalize a restrictive impact of ethnocentric cleavage over abortion policy implementation broadly on stage. The data which intersect trends about IVG rates and far-right parties' vote shares from 2012 to 2018 at regional level (Figure 3) clearly highlight as the growth in support for



**Figure 3.** OLS model using all 16 regional observations (N). All variables are expressed in logarithm. Dependent variable Y: IVG rate 2017 on 2012 at regional level, regressed with regional Vote share sum of parties with an antiabortion agenda, 2018 on 2013 (PRRs' VSS 2018-2013). Coefficient:  $-0.166^{***}$ ,  $***p < 0.01$ . Standard error: 0.013. R squared = 0.881. Robust standard errors compared to heteroscedasticity, variant HC1. [Data: MINSAL (2019) and CISE (2022)].

ethnocentric agenda affected regional trends in legal pregnancy interruptions. For each point of increase in Far-rights' vote share sum IVG rate decrease of 1.6%, and the p-value underlying this correlation is very significant.

By running over the regression line showed by **Figure 3**, three by six regions the most compactly and narrowly displaced on the regression line—Lombardia, Piemonte, Friuli Venezia-Giulia—are governed by far-right or right-wing coalitions. Despite their efficient supply of public hospitals and healthcare services, nonetheless their public opinions have been greatly affected during last years by an ultraconservative and anti-immigration mood. Contrarily, the deficient supply of healthcare public system probably explains the position of Calabria, that is furthermore one of the less developed and urbanised regions in Italy.

A very paradigmatical case is that of Puglia. Although steered by a centre-left populist as well “bizarre” governor, Michele Emiliano, the region has been the first southern one electing three national deputies from *Northern League*. Still, its socio-economic system seems to present some markers potentially supporting a narrow connection between the ethnocentric cleavage and the retrenchment of abortion right's effectiveness. During the inter-electoral period considered (2013-2018), this region displayed a raw effect of austerity through native-born working class, due to a crisis that fired both the steel industry in Taranto and the large number of farmers operating in the Capitanata (Foggia). Moreover, in this region the number of foreign-born residents increased largely over 17.2% national share (ISTAT, 2020), and the same was in all the single provinces of the region—Taranto (+50.4%), Lecce (+49.8%), Foggia (+43.6%), Bari (+34.8%), Brindisi (+31.7%), Barletta-Andria-Trani (+25.9%). At a local level, the case of Puglia seems to strongly confirm the correlation between the immigration pressures and the restrictions in abortion-policy implementation inside the 90 provinces belonging to the regional cluster: the more increase the immigrants by provinces, the less increase the number of legal abortions<sup>4</sup>.

#### 4. Findings

As the ethnocentric cleavage emerges along the borders between urban/suburban/peripheral areas, new borders of exclusion, also gender based, raise up inside western democracies. For women's right to choose as to access to abortion right, the menace seems coming on the side of popular support for far-right parties' agendas. Anyway, this seems to be factual mainly in the countries that have been seriously hit by the “populist spread”, such as Italy. Here, the large electoral support for far-rights, by itself a marker of the emergent ethnocentric/patriar-

<sup>4</sup>By deepening the observation to provincial level, these correlations sensibly upgrade their significance. The coefficient for the logarithm of foreign-born residents 2018 on 2013 is  $-0.044^{***}$ : R-squared = 0.409, Standard error = 0.005. So, the more increase the immigrants by provinces, the less increase the number of legal abortions. The one for Logarithm of NL' support increase, 2018 on 2013, is  $-0.0716^{***}$ , standard error is 0.0117 and r-squared is 0.375. The effective N is 86. For both regressions, no data on abortions were available for Isernia (Molise), Fermo (Marche) and Crotona (Calabria), and 2012's data for Benevento refers to 2013. Electoral data for the province of Matera (Basilicata) was not processable: here NL did not collect votes in 2013.

chal cleavage running underground the society, is challenging women's consolidated rights as their social role and autonomy. The case for abortion policy implementation is paradigmatic, especially by looking forward to the ingoing new government led by the far-right leader Giorgia Meloni. To follow data point, as the ethnocentric mood and its support by voters grows, abortion policy implementation decrease at regional level, thus restricting the access and practicability of what is affirmed—by national law—as a healthcare right and a woman's choice of self-determination.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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