

VOICES ON VALUES REPORT | February 2019

# FEARS AND HOPES IN A TIME OF GROWING NATIONALISM

## ITALIANS' ATTITUDES TO AN OPEN SOCIETY

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While the term 'open society' means little to most Italians, many of the values associated with open societies – freedom of expression, religious freedom and protection of minority rights – form part of the core of Italy's 1948 constitution, which Italians value highly.

Analysis of data from the *Voices on Values: How European publics and policy actors value an open society* project, however, reveals that in certain circumstances Italians will sacrifice this heritage. Many of them consider economic wellbeing and social cohesion to be more precious than civil rights like the protection of minority rights or the equal treatment of newcomers. They also consider the interests of Italian citizens paramount, which is why so many oppose the idea of granting nationality to people born outside Italy.

The report shows that whereas Italians remain deeply attached to freedom of expression, they are not nearly as concerned about the equal treatment of all citizens. Who is Italian? Who is included and who excluded? Who can enjoy certain rights? The election of a right-wing populist coalition in early 2018 marked a shift in Italian attitudes. How can we explain it? And is it really as far-reaching as it seems?

We attempt to answer these questions. First, we analyse original data from a representative survey, which looks at attitudes towards open society values in Italy. What values do Italians care about most? Which other concerns are important to people in Italy? And what can socio-demographics like gender, age and education tell us about a person's attitudes towards an open society?

Secondly, based on expert interviews with policy actors, civil society leaders, journalists and other public figures, conducted between April and June 2018, we explore some of the dynamics and developments underlying the attitudinal shift. By sharing the survey data with interviewees, we gained insights into the interplay between public perceptions and views from policy actors.

The interviews also offer new and challenging insights into political propaganda, media, and the role of institutions and civic organisations. They shed light on how social media has emerged as a powerful means of spreading fear and frustration and creating new enemies. They also show how growing nationalism and populism are linked to the weakening of church, family and school ties, as well as the decline of the political left.

# INTRODUCTION

Italian politics changed abruptly in the wake of the March 2018 elections. After five years of government led by the Partito Democratico (PD), Italians elected the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) and the League, which now together form the ruling Yellow-Green coalition.

As recently as 2013, the League was still a secessionist, regional party known as the Northern League: it polled only four percent at the elections, while Forza Italia, Berlusconi's party, obtained more than 20 percent. To general surprise (even that of its founder, Beppe Grillo), M5S – still a very young political movement – won 25 percent of the vote. The result was a coalition government made up of the centre-left and several centre-right parties.

The rise of both the League and M5S came at a time when Italy was undergoing an economic and social crisis. It faced high unemployment, particularly among women and the younger generation, as well as weakened manufacturing and financial structures. Italy's public debt threatened the country with collapse, leaving Italians afraid they would suffer the same fate as Greece.

These challenges left Italians mistrustful of public institutions, which many see as corrupt, unjust and self-absorbed. But it was the perceived security threat posed by immigration that dealt the worst blow to Italians' self-confidence. Far-right and populist movements and parties jumped at the opportunity to reinforce xenophobic, nationalistic narratives. They accused the European Union of being ineffectual, if not deliberately trying to damage Italy. In doing so they were able to build on an already widespread perception that the EU was far removed from citizens' interests and needs (Quadrelli, 2014).

The League chose this moment to morph from a regional party into a national one. Matteo Salvini renamed it La Lega (the League) and encouraged voters to see it as a party fighting for Italians' national interests rather than merely those of Northern Italy. This strategic repositioning moved the topic of immigration to the top of the party's agenda. Immigrants were presented as the enemy, invading the country to steal jobs from young Italians, while the centre-right parties in the then-governing coalition were labelled "communists" and "traitors".

In its previous incarnation until 2013, M5S had social, humanitarian and anti-establishment aspirations. Today the party promotes an anti-European and anti-immigrant agenda, and is in coalition with Salvini's far-right League.

With the League and the M5S, Italy is currently governed by two nationalistic, anti-immigrant parties, which are threatening some of the core principles of an open society. But what do their successes really tell us about how people in Italy value an open society? What does an open society mean to Italians and what values do they care about most? And how do policy actors and civil society leaders evaluate the status quo?

Using original *Voices on Values* data, this report seeks to answer these questions and contribute to a more informed public debate about Italians' attitudes towards an open society.

# DISCOVERING ITALIANS' VIEWS ABOUT AN OPEN SOCIETY

How important is an open society to Italians – and which of the values associated with it do they deem most important? This study draws on data collected within the *Voices on Values* project<sup>1</sup>. We draw on both Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union and on the work of Karl Popper to focus on attitudes towards freedoms (e.g. freedom of religion, of speech and of the press), individual rights and their protection (e.g. minority rights), as well as the principles of pluralism, tolerance and non-discrimination. We will refer to these as “open society values”<sup>2</sup>.

Data from the *Voices on Values* survey<sup>3</sup> shows that most Italians rate open society values highly – especially freedom of speech and religious freedom. These are both enshrined in the Italian constitution and seen as inalienable by many Italians. Respondents also said that they are strongly committed to the equal treatment of newcomers and protection of minority rights (Figure 1).

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1 For more information on the *Voices on Values* project and its research design please refer to the project website: [voicesonvalues.dpart.org](http://voicesonvalues.dpart.org) as well as to the *Voices on Values* publication “The Hidden Majority”.

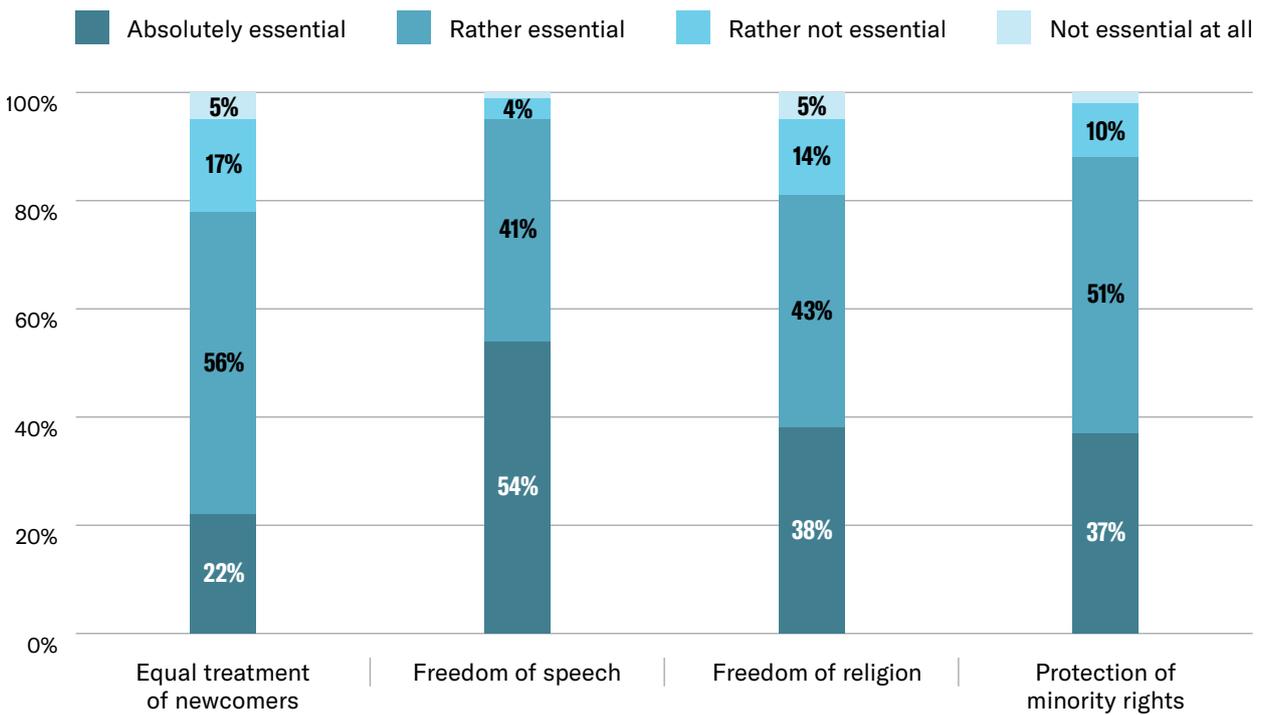
2 See “Key Insights Report” for a more detailed account of the conceptual and theoretical considerations underlying the *Voices on Values* research.

3 Details about the survey methodology and Italian sample can be found under “Methodology” in the Appendix.

**FIGURE 1**

**Italians and open society attributes**

Answers to question "How important are the following for a good society in your opinion?" in percentages



Source: d|part, 2018

The number of “absolutely essentials” and “rather essentials” in Figure 1 shows Italians’ broad support for values of an open society. Some freedoms are considered more important than others: only

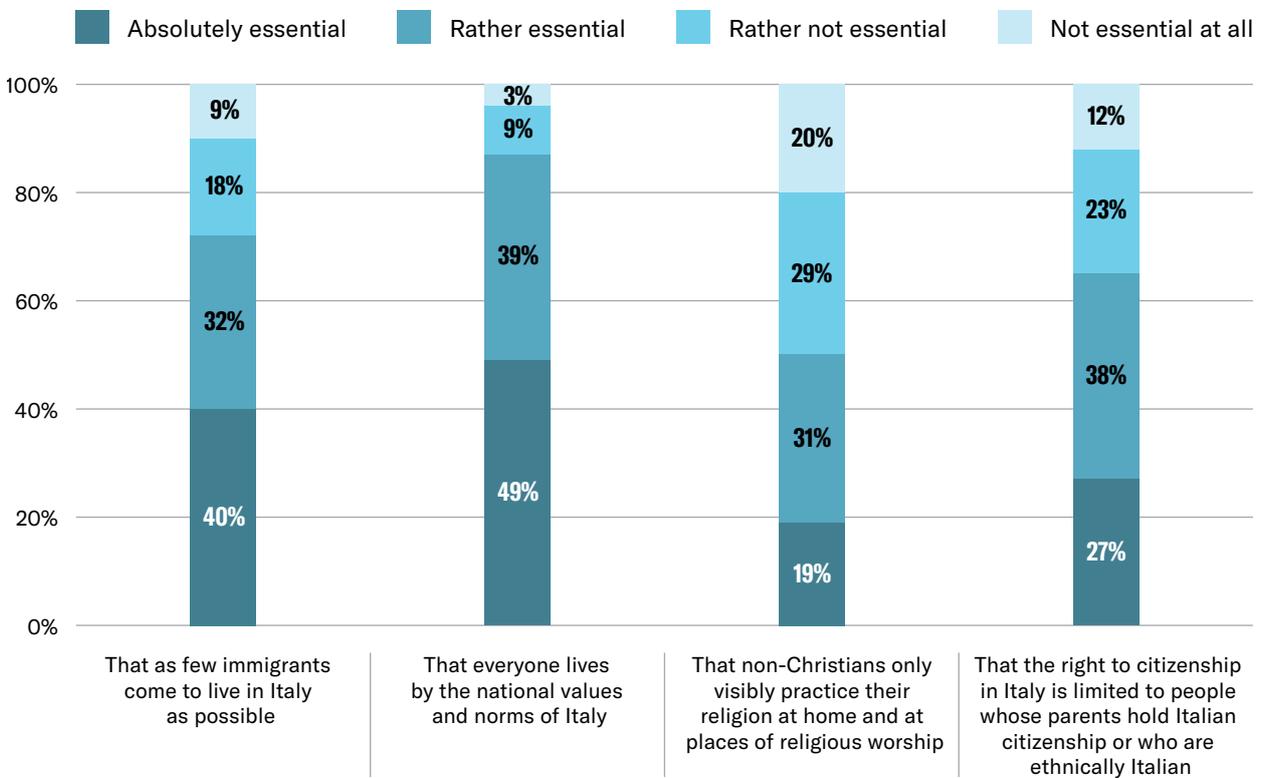
one percent, for example, said freedom of speech was “not essential”, with 54 percent seeing it as “absolutely essential” and 41 percent considering it “rather essential”.

By contrast, only 22 percent considered the equal treatment of newcomers “absolutely essential”: 56 percent thought of it as “rather essential”, whereas five percent did not consider it essential at all. This was also the value Italians cared<sup>4</sup> for the least overall, suggesting that the League’s anti-immigrant propaganda is bearing fruit.

A look at how respondents evaluated the seven values commonly associated with closed societies and, in particular, those concerning immigration curbs, constraints on minorities and majoritarian rule, seems to confirm this. (Figure 2).

**FIGURE 2**  
Italians and closed society attributes

Answers to question "How important are the following for a good society in your opinion?" in percentages



Source: d|part, 2018

Most Italians believe that migrants are a threat to a “good society”, meaning a society based on equality, democracy and sustainability. They consider it essential that as few immigrants as possible come to Italy (Figure 2), and that citizenship rights be reserved to those whose parents have Italian citizenship or are ethnic Italians.

Matteo Renzi’s government attempted to change access to Italian citizenship from a blood right (*jus sanguinis*) to a right applying to anyone born in Italy (*jus soli*), or whose children had completed an education cycle there. The bill was abandoned a few months before the 2018 elections. IPSOS (2017) reported that in 2011, the majority of Italians - some

4 Cf. Grabbe H., and Eichhorn J., (2018) *Despite populism, values still matter to Europeans*, in <http://voicesonvalues.dpart.org/index.php/blog/11-article-themes/59-values-populism>, 24 September 2018.

71 percent - agreed with the bill, while only 23 percent disagreed with it. By 2017 only 44 percent supported the bill, while 54 percent opposed it.

*Voices on Values's* data (Figure 2) shows that in February 2018 more than 60 percent of Italians now opposed the bill (those who replied “absolutely essential” and “rather essential” to the question about limiting citizenship). These feelings reflect a cultural preference for assimilation rather than egalitarianism enshrined in law. Italians prefer to eliminate religious and cultural differences.

Figure 2 shows that respondents were less certain when asked whether religious practice should be limited to the home and places of worship; more saw this as “rather essential” or “rather not essential”.

Italians may display a strong propensity to openness when considering general principles - probably because of recent debates on the constitution<sup>5</sup> - but this is not reflected in practical choices. In the second part of our survey, respondents were presented with trade-off questions in which open society values are contrasted with other concerns, such as economic security or political stability. Many choose the latter<sup>6</sup> - for instance, preferring economic wellbeing and social cohesion (Figure 3) over the equal treatment of newcomers.

On the other hand, Italians are steadfast in their commitment to freedom of speech (Figure 4), and unwilling to trade it away even when the alternative is the protection of Catholic values, or minority

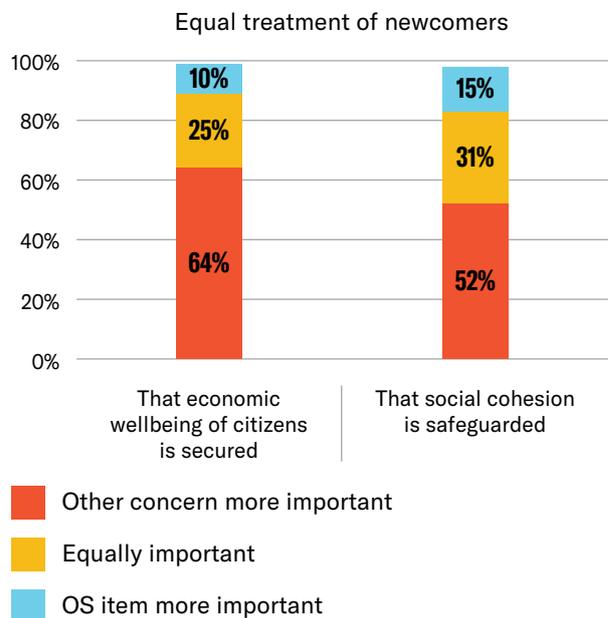
protection. Quite a few considered both to be equally important - which suggests that for Italians, freedom of speech can justify many excesses.

**FIGURE 3**

**Trade off between equal treatment of newcomers and economic well-being/social cohesion**

Which of the following is more important for a good society or are both equally important?

**THAT PEOPLE WHO HAVE RECENTLY COME TO LIVE IN ITALY SHOULD BE TREATED EQUALLY**



Source: d|part, 2018

5 The last two attempts to change the Italian constitution failed. The first part of the constitution cannot be changed by law. The other parts can be changed only if Parliament approves every change by a qualified majority (two-thirds of its members). If that does not work, the government has to call a referendum. In 2016, 60 percent of Italians rejected all the reforms the government proposed. The same happened in 2006.

6 The developed trade-off experiments are artificial in the sense that they contrast values and concerns, which do not actually stand in opposition with each other. However, public debates are often framed in this way. For more details on the rationale and methodology behind the trade-off questions, please refer to the 'Key Insights Report'.

Far-right politicians systematically attack the *Legge Mancino*, a law that allows authorities to prosecute the production and distribution of fascist propaganda, or attempts to revive the Fascist Party. This law punishes hate speech based on ethnic, religious and political discrimination.

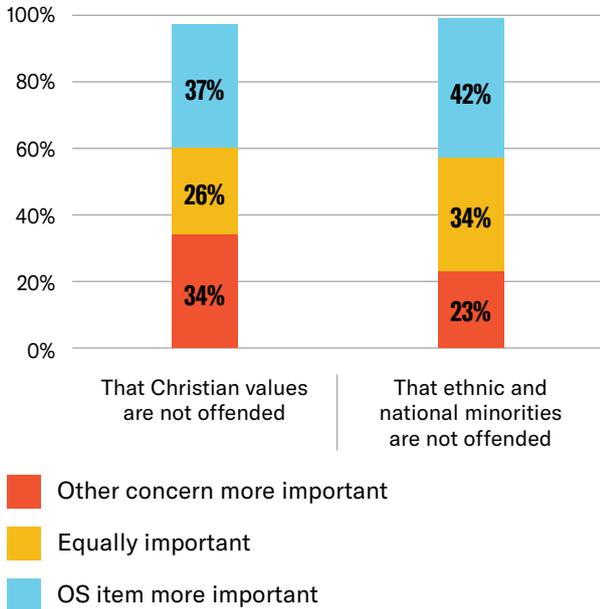
Lorenzo Fontana, the newly appointed Minister of Family and Disability, wrote on his Facebook page in 2018: “The Mancino law should be abandoned. In recent years it has been turned into a legislative tool used by globalists to dress up their anti-Italian racism as anti-fascism.”<sup>7</sup>

**FIGURE 4**

**Trade off between freedom of expression and defence of Christian values/minority protection**

Which of the following is more important for a good society or are both equally important?

**THAT EVERYONE CAN EXPRESS THEIR OPINION FREELY**



Source: d|part, 2018

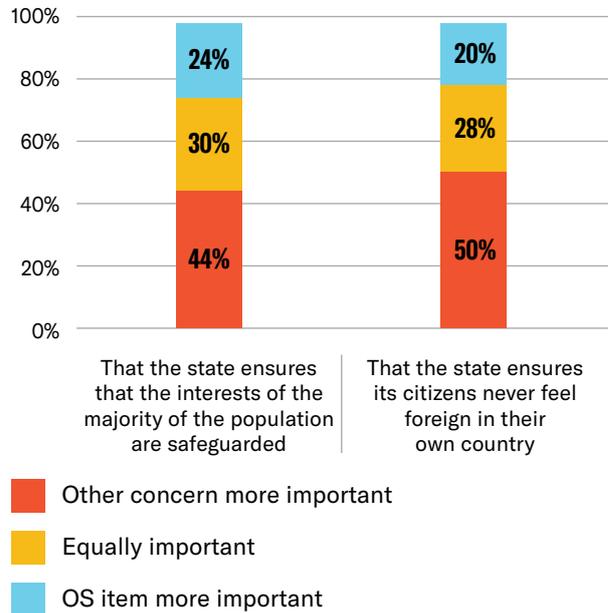
Minority rights are perhaps the best example of Italians' ambivalent approach to an open society. Respondents were asked whether they would trade off minority protection for their own interests. Figure 5 shows that a majority of Italians would limit minority protection. Although - as discussed above - many Italians value open society principles, they also feel strongly that majority interests are essential and quite strongly that citizens' interests should be put first to prevent Italians from feeling like foreigners in their own country.

**FIGURE 5**

**Trade off between minority protection and safeguarding majority interests or ensuring that citizens don't feel foreign in their own country**

Which of the following is more important for a good society or are both equally important?

**THAT THE RIGHTS OF MINORITIES ARE PROTECTED**



Source: d|part, 2018

7 *Il ministro Fontana vuole abolire la legge Mancino*, in *Il Post*, 3 August 2018, *Politica*. The original text “Abrogliamo la legge Mancino, che in questi anni strani si è trasformata in una sponda normativa usata dai globalisti per ammantare di antifascismo il loro razzismo anti-italiano”.

## MIGRATION AS A PROBLEM

Italians display considerable ambivalence: they want civil rights to be protected, but they will sacrifice them for freedom of speech, the protection of their own interests and economic wellbeing. The majority will accept limiting the rights of immigrants to protect the interests of Italians.

Migration is a particularly sensitive issue: 18 percent of respondents believe that migration represents a major social threat. A quarter say it threatens society “somewhat”, while only eight percent see migration as a “great” asset, and 22 percent as “somewhat” of an asset. This negative view of immigrants represents a big shift over the last few years from a majority believing that migration enriches a country to a majority saying it undermines it.<sup>8</sup> To gain more understanding of the role of migration attitudes in shaping open society views, we also asked respondents to assess the last centre-left government’s migration policies. While the general opinion was negative, as many surveys and opinion polls have already shown, the majority of Italians supported the restrictive policies.

When asked about the abolition of a second chance for asylum applicants to appeal in court<sup>9</sup>, 51 percent said that the restriction was needed, while only 24 percent said that it was a violation of asylum-seekers’ human rights. Other respondents did not know (25 percent).

Measures against NGOs and irregular immigration were central to the Italian political debate in 2018. NGOs, civil society organisations and left-wing parties have opposed them, seeing them as an attempt to raise “legislative walls”. Far-right movements and centre-right parties supported them.

Comparing respondents’ evaluations of the impact of migration on society with how they self-position themselves on a right-left scale seems to confirm this. Indeed, a look at Figure 6 shows that people who self-classified as rather left-wing tended to be more likely to say that migration enriches society, whereas those self-classifying as rather right-wing were more likely to believe migration constitutes a threat to society. Those who said they were on the political right probably agreed with the centre-left government’s legislative initiative because they see migration as a threat.

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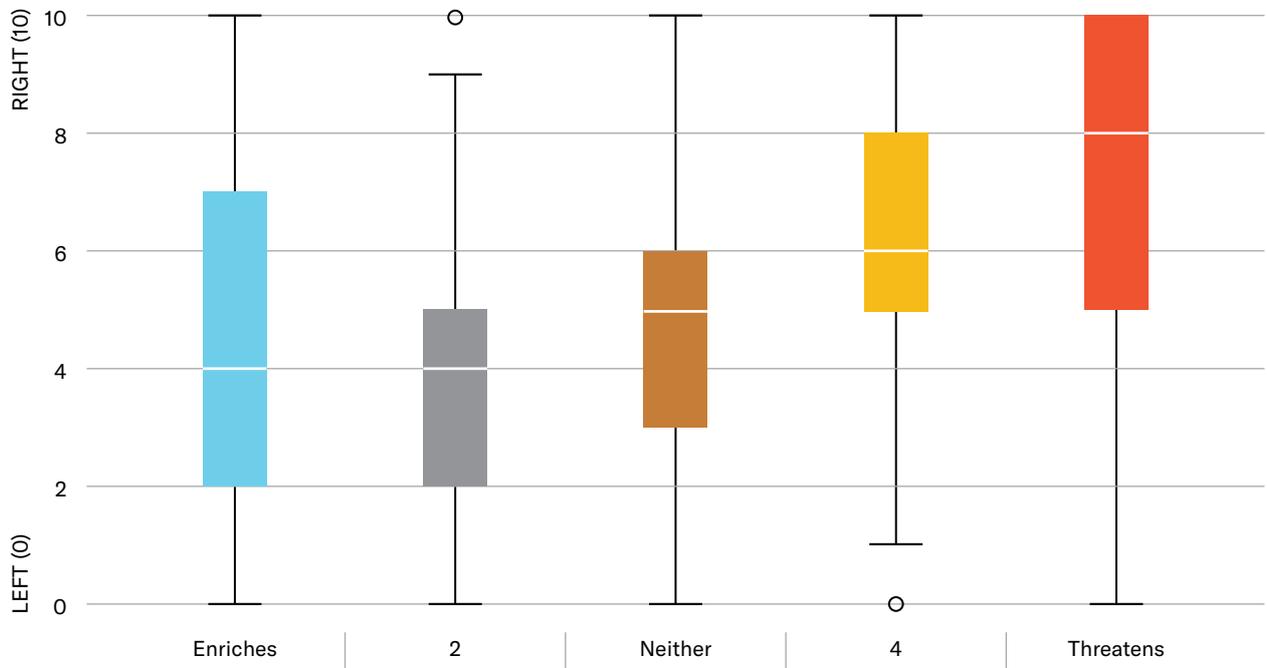
8 European Social Survey, [www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/round-index.html](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/round-index.html)

9 The measure was introduced by former Interior Minister Marco Minniti of the Democratic Party.

**FIGURE 6**

Political positioning and approach to migration issues

**DOES MIGRATION ENRICH OR THREATEN SOCIETY?**



Source: d|part, 2018

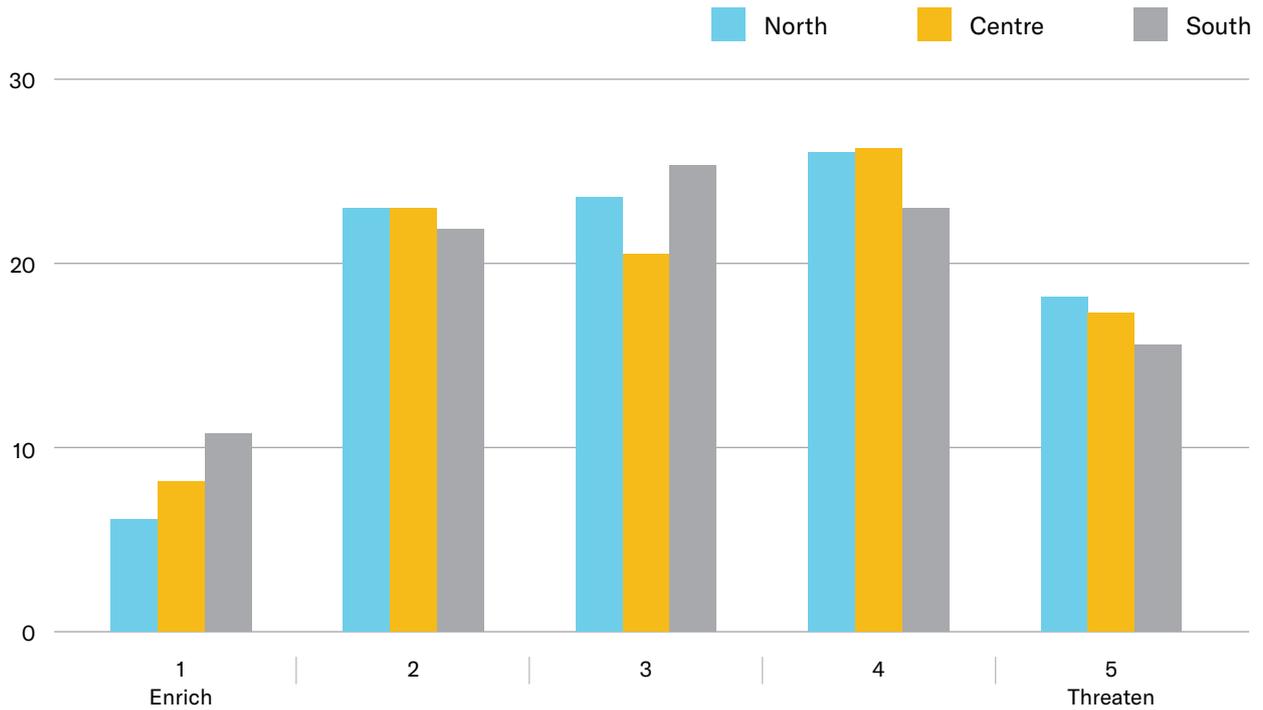
Interestingly, when we look at where respondents live (Figure 7), Italians from the south of Italy - which has had the most direct experience of migration -

seem to consider migration slightly less of a threat than those living in the north.

**FIGURE 7**

Relations between geographical areas and view of migration

**DOES MIGRATION ENRICH (1) OR THREATEN (5) SOCIETY?**



Source: d|part, 2018

The NGO rescue operations in the Mediterranean have dominated the political debate in Italy for months. When we looked at Italians' views on the role of NGOs vs. state rescue operation in the Mediterranean: 20 percent feel that NGOs should be allowed to operate there, while another 21 percent believe they should not be involved. 26 percent favoured cooperation between NGOs and state-run rescue missions, and 17 percent felt that NGOs should restrict their work to helping migrants.

Looking at Italians' attitudes towards migration-related issues shows that their perceived implications for security have a profound effect on attitudes towards an open society. This may go some way to explaining their political shift to right-wing politics.

## THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL POSITIONING

To better understand respondents' views on open society values, we created two standardised scores. One summarises respondents' ratings of open society

values, and the other summarises their evaluations of attributes associated with a closed society<sup>10</sup>. We then looked at how, if at all, these scores differ by gender, education levels, age and political preferences.

Analysis of the data (Figure 8) reveals no significant differences in open society scores across the four variables among Italian respondents.

**FIGURE 8**

Open / closed society scores according to age, education, gender and left-right political positioning

	OPEN SOCIETY SCORES	CLOSED SOCIETY SCORES	DIFFERENCE
<b>Generation</b>			
Silent Generation (<1945)	0.74	0.61	0.13
Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	0.75	0.6	0.15
Generation X (1965-1976)	0.72	0.59	0.13
Millennials (1977-1995)	0.72	0.62	0.1
Centennials (1996>)	0.72	0.5	0.22
<b>Education</b>			
Low	0.7	0.6	0.1
Medium	0.74	0.57	0.17
High	0.77	0.52	0.25
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	0.73	0.58	0.15
Female	0.73	0.56	0.17
<b>Left-Right</b>			
Leftists	0.77	0.46	0.31
Centrists	0.73	0.58	0.15
Rightists	0.7	0.66	0.04

Source: d|part, 2018

<sup>10</sup> The two scores were standardised between 0 and 1 with a score of 0 meaning respondents said all seven attributes were "not at all essential" and a score of 1 meaning all seven attributes were "absolutely essential" to them. Consequently, an open society score close to 1 means respondents considered many of the open society values as very important. A score close to 0 means that many open society values were rated as not important. The same applies to the closed society score.

We see very high open society scores (more than 0.7, with 1 the maximum level and 0 the lowest), with no significant differences linked to age, education levels or political positioning on the left or right.

The situation is slightly different for respondents' closed society scores. While there are no substantial differences among the older generations and millennials, the youngest generation (Centennials) tend to hold fewer closed society views. We also find some variation depending on education levels and political self-positioning, with the better-educated

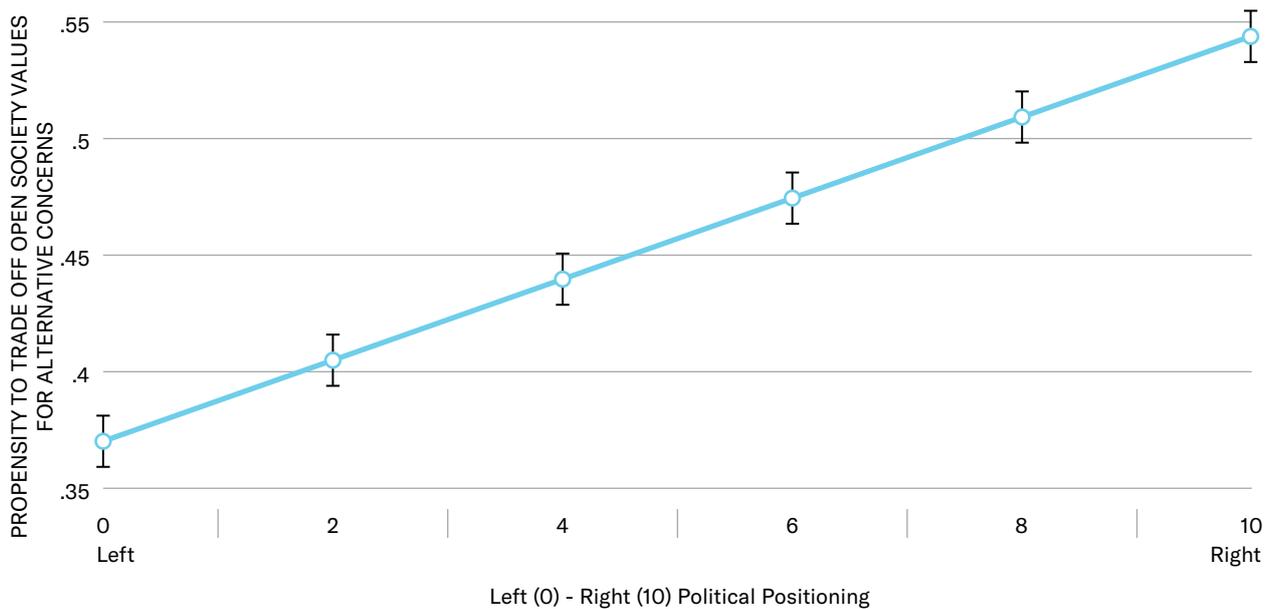
as well as self-described leftists being the least likely to hold closed society views (with scores of 0.52 and 0.46, respectively).

Overall, self-positioning on the left-right scale as well as education levels – the latter to a slightly lesser extent – seem to be the most reliable predictors for closed society views. The significance of political self-positioning in relation to views on open society values is confirmed when looking at the linear graph shown in Figure 9.

**FIGURE 9**

Linear regression: political positioning and positive-negative views of open society

**PREDICTIVE MARGINS WITH 95 PERCENT CONFIDENCE INTERVALS**



Source: d|part, 2018

## OPEN AND CLOSED SOCIETY VIEWS ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE

The significance of political self-positioning in helping explain attitudes towards an open society is perhaps unsurprising. But the differences in the influence of education and gender for open / closed society attitudes are noteworthy. They confirm that, as discussed in detail by Jan Eichhorn and Magali Mohr (2019)<sup>11</sup>, open and closed society attitudes cannot be understood as two opposite ends on a one-dimensional scale, but may actually coexist. People can consider certain – or indeed many – open society views as important and, at the same time, rate closed society characteristics highly. In Italy,

this is the case for freedom of expression – which many consider very important – and the restriction of immigration (“that as few immigrants as possible come to Italy”), which many also rate as highly important.

This finding implies that a person’s support for certain closed society characteristics does not necessarily mean they reject open society values. Instead of thinking of open and closed society attitudes as opposites or mutually exclusive, a more nuanced approach is required. This applies to both research on open society attitudes as well as advocacy campaigns or strategies that seek to promote them.

### Italians’ open society views – key findings

Our analysis of survey data shows that Italians are very protective of open society values, which they identify with the values of the Italian constitution. They feel particularly strongly about freedom of opinion, and will not trade this away for any of the suggested alternatives. This does not apply to the equal treatment of newcomers or the protection of minorities. They will sacrifice these or at least limit them if it means ensuring their own economic wellbeing and protecting social cohesion.

For Italians, migration is the biggest social and political problem. The anti-immigrant campaigns of far-right movements and parties, as well as M5S, are likely to have contributed to this view. Indeed, despite the fact that most asylum seekers enter Italy from the south, people from southern Italy feel less threatened by immigration. This suggests that anti-immigrant feelings are largely the result of efficient far-right propaganda rather than the outcome of high levels of immigration, or negative experiences of it.

We find no clear socio-demographic profile that explains or predicts people's attitudes towards open or closed societies. To a limited extent, age and education are a factor, with older and more educated respondents more likely to rate open society values highly. For closed society values there are no substantial differences based on age, except for the youngest generation, which tends to hold the fewest closed society views. The same applies to gender. Only political self-positioning on the left-right scale is a consistent and strong predictor for both open and closed society views. This adds weight to our conclusion that these views coexist and cannot be simply assigned to a spectrum.

11 Cf. Eichhorn, J, and Mohr, M. (2019). *The Hidden Majority: How most Europeans care about open society values*. Open Society European Policy Institute and d|part

# SHARED FEARS FOR AN OPEN SOCIETY

To gain a broader perspective on open society attitudes in Italy and their political, economic and social context, we conducted 11 elite interviews as well as our public survey. We interviewed Italian politicians, civil rights activists, NGO leaders, a journalist, a social scientist, the former mayor of Lampedusa and a priest. The following section discusses the key findings from these interviews and how interviewees evaluate and make sense of the survey results, as well as how they see the interplay between the political, social and economic developments of recent years and open society attitudes in Italy.

## ITALIAN AMBIVALENCE

Italians are not familiar with the term 'open society', but most of its principles are enshrined in the Italian constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights.

Our analysis of *Voices on Values* survey data showed that age, gender, education and political allegiances do not affect Italians' attitudes to an open society. They will often choose other concerns, such as economic wellbeing, social cohesion, and the protection of national values, traditions and norms over open society values.

Our interviewees were not surprised by this finding, characterising their fellow Italians as "ambivalent", "incoherent", even "two-faced". Former MP Sergio Lo Giudice, (and former President of the LGBT association ArciGay Italy) says they "confirm the nature of Italian national identity: not really liberal, displaying little concern for individual rights but with a more developed concern for collective rights. They are loyal to their community, or as people say in Italy: "chiesa, famiglia e campanile" (church, family and bell tower).

The American political scientist Edward Banfield coined the phrase "amoral familism" in the 1950s, which one of our interviewees aptly described as reflecting the Italian psyche. According to this definition, Italian culture is characterised by a low level of civic engagement and an inclination to put family first, while communal interests are considered irrelevant, if not an obstacle.<sup>12</sup>

We see the greatest ambivalence when we look at specific rights and freedoms. According to Lo Giudice, religious freedom is a case in point: "Religious freedom is seen as the right of the Christian majority to occupy the public space without limitations. Problems arise when we talk about giving religious minorities a space in the public sphere".

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12 Cf. Banfield E., (1958) *The moral basis of a backward society*, the free press, Chicago.

The tendency to discriminate against religious minorities and to protect Christian traditions is not always logical. According to Giuseppe Guerini, a member of the Special Commission for Migration and Security, “in the north of Italy, we are witnessing ‘social secularisation’, or a waning of the influence of the church and its traditions.” But, he adds, “if we try to take the next logical step and formally recognise freedom for other religions, we’ll see many people react by saying that Christianity is different from other religions. Especially Islam.”

Is this about the old dichotomy of who is in and who is out? The far right argues that religion and ethnicity define the limits of who is a legitimate member of the community, and the populist view implies that real Italians are those who believe that there is such a thing as a real Italian. The far right’s focus on migration and security, with its anti-immigrant propaganda, warnings of an “invasion” and “losing your home”, conveys a nostalgic vision of a community that no longer exists (Anderson, 1983). This re-definition of Italians as a homogeneous entity is the central element of the populist discourse, as the political theorist Jan-Werner Müller (2016) has noted.

Italians who do not share this vision are labelled “enemies” or “do-gooders” (*buonisti*), with the latter implying excessively moral behaviour.

According to the people interviewed, these views are supported by the media, and particularly online media. Following this logic, Italians are not fundamentally racist and egotistical, but they interpret the world through the lens of a reactionary media.

## ROLE OF NEW AND OLD MEDIA

Journalist Annalisa Camilli, an expert on migration issues, explains the different ways Italians perceive an open society. She has witnessed the effects of anti-immigrant propaganda. “It’s an almost uncontrollable machine,” she says, “I see the same sentences coming back again and again, ‘helping

them back home’, ‘Italians first’, ‘parasites’, ‘they are invading us’ or ‘there is a plan to substitute us’. We didn’t think these issues would be important again.”

Traditional media uses its “incestuous ties with politics” to spread this propaganda, says Camilli, while new media like Facebook and Twitter allow people to communicate with no geographical or temporal limitations. This makes them the perfect conduits for spreading fake or biased news and for attacking political opponents.

Italian sociologist Alessandro Dal Lago (2017) argues that the internet as a new political space generates an illusion of freedom. People think they are in a free space, when in fact they are swimming in an aquarium controlled by companies like Facebook, Twitter or Google or by political structures.

M5S is a case in point. They talk of the internet as producing a form of direct democracy. Blogging is used as a political space, where members can vote and participate in major decisions, even if both the software and the blogs are controlled by a private company. This is a false idea of direct democracy, but the illusion is powerful (Quadrelli, 2013).

As the IPSOS report on the 2018 elections showed, M5S and Lega were the parties that spent the most time fighting their political opponents online. During the last political campaign, their main targets were the Democratic Party and Laura Boldrini, the former President of the Lower Chamber, whom they described as a pro-immigrant politician who put the interests of Italians after those of “clandestines”, as League supporters like to call them.

Another woman who has been a regular target of online and newspaper attacks is Cécile Kyenge, who was Minister of Integration in 2013 in Enrico Letta’s government, and is now a member of the European Parliament. Kyenge was the first black woman to be elected to the Italian Parliament and to hold a ministerial post.

A prime target of the Lega Nord and far-right movements, she was threatened and insulted, and misinformation and memes were used to stoke anger against her as someone who was deemed not to be “part of the community” because of her skin colour and political preferences<sup>13</sup>.

The role of digital media in the political debate and in the 2018 elections in particular, as Camilli points out, should be seriously examined:

*“Much hate speech has been normalised, particularly through the unmediated communication channels of social networks. Communication between politicians and voters is now completely unmediated.”*

The interviewees said the rise of the far right was the result of a mix of social and political phenomena: the increase in migration flows, lack of trust in political institutions, the 2008 financial crisis and ensuing economic instability, and people’s frustration and anger – together with the idea that globalisation is an untrammelled force that damages ordinary people.

Anti-immigrant propaganda came at the perfect time to create a prototype of ‘the enemy’: the immigrant who had come to steal Italians’ jobs and threaten social cohesion. In the words of the priest Don Biancalani: “Some time ago in Europe the target of anger was the Jews. Today, it’s the migrants.”

Elly Schlein, shadow rapporteur of the S&D group for the reform of the Dublin regulation in the European Parliament, has strong views on the role of the media: “We need a big truth operation on the numbers. There is a great distance between the reality of immigration and the perception of it (...) This problem of perception is encouraged by a type of reporting that instead of examining root causes, speaks mostly about immigration as a crime issue, helping to create an equation between immigration and criminality, immigration and security.”

The truth is irrelevant, as few people pay attention to the sources or veracity of information they are picking up. As sociologist Dal Lago (2017:61) has written: “Reality [today is] a viral construction” in which “truth online has become a function of the person who is pronouncing it”. But can speeches and a particular type of political communication bring about cultural change?

The way politicians like Lega’s Matteo Salvini and M5S’s Luigi Di Maio communicate on television, via social media, and even during official meetings on issues like migration, security and minority protection, has had concrete repercussions. Their effectiveness has led to the criminalisation of specific targets, including migrants and political opponents.

Cécile Kyenge’s direct experience of racism during her time as Minister of Integration is paradigmatic. Roberto Calderoli, former Vice-President of the Italian Senate and one of Lega’s leading lights, repeatedly used racist language when talking about her. The Italian High Chamber denied Kyenge the legal right to prosecute him. When she asked for the Mancino law to be applied, the Senate denied this by a large majority.

As Kyenge explains, by doing so they created a dangerous precedent: “There is danger every time we bow our heads and allow our institutions to discriminate, although our constitution sanctions discrimination. Calderoli used racist language, he (...) went to court and because he had parliamentary immunity, the court wouldn’t proceed without authorisation from the Senate, and the Senate rejected the authorisation. I stood up and said that allowing this to happen was letting institutions open their doors to racism (...) No title or position should protect a person when they violate human rights”.

*“Every time we lower our heads and open the doors within the institutions to phenomena that are already disowned by our constitution, that’s the danger.”*

13 Cf. Open democracy (2013) *The racist attacks against Cécile Kyenge and the enduring myth of the ‘nice’ Italian*. Accessed on 27.08.2018; Il Mitte (2017) Cécile Kyenge in Berlin: “Hate speech e fake news sono diventati uno strumento politico”, downloaded on 27.08.2018.

Freedom of speech is often used by politicians as an excuse for justifying their own hate speech. Hate speech is not neutral, says Kyenge. It conveys messages and if they come from a government's leading politicians, then why should ordinary people not be allowed to repeat them and even act them out?

The new government appears to confirm Kyenge's fears: Matteo Salvini (League) and Luigi di Maio (M5S) have attacked NGOs, minorities like the Roma, Sinti and gay people and, of course, migrants. We are witnessing a growing number of verbal and physical attacks against black people in Rimini, Turin and Pistoia, and against gay people in many parts of Italy.

For an NGO volunteer operating in the Mediterranean and responsible for the integration of migrants and asylum-seekers in Rome, this is the effect of a "defamatory campaign against NGOs together with disinformation about migration numbers". Moreover, "over the last twenty years, and particularly the last decade, xenophobic and demagogical political propaganda, together with an erosion of social rights due to the economic crisis, have produced their effects."

## DOES THE LEFT'S FAILURE MEAN A NEW CULTURAL HEGEMONY OF THE (FAR) RIGHT?

Far-right movements and parties are more skilled at communication, and have been using social media to create "public opinion" (Dal Lago, 2017; Müller, 2016), or to quote Gramsci, to promote "cultural hegemony". All our interviewees criticised the Italian and European political left, not only for their manifest inability to develop good communication strategies, but also for their failure to manage crucial issues like migration, integration, security and the fight against inequality.

The far right and populists' tactic is to criminalise "the other", and make members of the community feel like victims. Anyone who does not agree with them is an enemy or a traitor - and defenders of an open society have failed to find a riposte.

The linking of migration with security issues, for instance, began years ago and the interviewees all criticised the former Interior Minister in the last PD government, Marco Minniti, for failing to manage the migration crisis and capitulating to right-wing rhetoric.

Giusi Nicolini, a social scientist and former mayor of Lampedusa, says: "We should understand whether it's the values of the left that are in crisis, or the left itself." She describes the migrant deaths in the Mediterranean as the "holocaust of our times" and the government's restrictions on asylum rights, as "absurd, a right-wing-oriented way of obtaining consensus."

What is needed now, says Nicolini, is for the left to behave differently. Consensus should be obtained "through respect of human rights, doing our job as left-wingers of educating, sensitising and offering people the chance to think and be properly informed. We (PD) did the opposite, but trying to behave like populists didn't do us any favours."

Some of the interviewees argue that the left should avoid the temptation of indulging the fears and anxieties of voters in order to gain consensus. One example of cultural capitulation to the right, according to Guerini and Kyenge, is the debate on the *jus soli* bill, which would have granted an easier path to citizenship for the Italian-born children of foreign parents.

According to Guerini, "we didn't [as PD] approve the *jus soli* because we didn't want to lose votes in the upcoming election. Despite that, we had the worst electoral results in republican history. If we had approved the *jus soli* we might have gained some points, but above all we would have been moving in the direction of civil rights."

The reform of citizenship rights has for decades been central to the progressive political agenda: "The fight for human rights is [the] fight of progressives and the left," says Kyenge. But as she observes: "the [Italian] left was scared by the upcoming elections and didn't fight to the end. And this was wrong. We didn't have the courage to find our own words, to be protagonists in the fight. The left lacked courage."

Another issue is the fight against increasing inequality and the erosion of social rights. When traditional parties or the established political system cannot answer simple questions, or respond to anxieties and fears, then far-right movements, nationalists and enemies of an open society step into the breach.

A shift from social and economic problems to migration and security issues is central to the political discourse. It was instigated, according to social scientist Federico Oliveri, to distract people from genuine problems like high unemployment, income inequality, social insecurity and the inability of the left to respond to the anxieties and preoccupations of citizens.

Schlein stresses that politicians should not underestimate the role played by fear. While the far right exploit it, others should act differently by offering answers and solutions, and by using a new language and approach. According to Lo Giudice: "The Italian left, like the left in other Western European countries, is still bound to an old idea of labour market policies and to an outdated form of welfare that can't respond to the challenges of globalisation. This has produced a shift in consensus towards nationalism and populism, which of course cannot provide any answers but have been able to create an emotional connection based on those needs, fears and anger."

This kind of emotional connection is based on a positive narrative and focuses on what brings people together, rather than on what separates them. The interviewees all considered a space for the protection of human rights essential: while the far right wants to contrast pluralism with openness, progressives should have the courage to say that the restriction of anyone's rights is a danger to everyone, not only migrants or other minorities.

We seem to be speaking and writing about something we have already seen. As the senator and Auschwitz survivor Liliana Segre pointed out in her interview: "(...) I have lived enough to see symbols, attitudes, facts and situations that I thought had been rejected

by history, and that I had never thought I would see again. But they are coming back. In fact, they are here, that horrendous desire to close borders and to reaffirm nationalism. Deep inside, I think those ideas never really disappeared. They were hiding because their obscenity was so great that after the Second World War no one had the courage to defend them publicly."

Gramsci said that history is a teacher but has no pupils<sup>14</sup>. The interviewees saw civic education as a possible solution to exclusion and discrimination.

Segre says that to remember and testify against the pain and shock of Auschwitz is her life's goal, and that only through a sincere commitment from such institutions as schools and universities can we hope to avoid seeing the history of the latest century repeating itself. Those institutions have become less important, at least according to the interviewees, and are no longer active protagonists.

But Segre's hopes are not focused only on the official educational system. All the interviewees agreed that family, trade unions, parties and community associations should act more decisively to promote an open society.

Particularly relevant, at least in the Italian case, is the role the Church and Catholic organisations can still play. On migration, the Church – especially thanks to the Pope – has done a great deal. According to former mayor Giusi Nicolini, without the support of the local church in Lampedusa, she would have been unable to handle the migration crisis. The church's hands-on commitment and its capacity to mobilise support were crucial.

But like other institutions, the church has its problems. This may seem a paradox, but it is not: the universal church (*Chiesa Universale*) is not at ease with the notion of universality. It too is concerned about multiculturalism. Kyenge was particularly struck by the reaction of a priest to her speech on the importance of an open society. He recalled the need to protect Western values and traditions from "other" cultures and religions.

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14 Gramsci, A., (1921) Italia e Spagna, L'Ordine Nuovo, anno I, n. 70.

As the priest Don Biancalani admits: “The church is too shy, too weak about many open issues. The Pope speaks, but I do not see priests, bishops or even cardinals following suit. The people [of the Church] are not listening anymore.”

## **TOLERANCE AS THE GLUE FOR A GOOD AND OPEN SOCIETY**

The interviewees agreed on the need for everyone to feel part of a community that shares a set of values achieved at great cost by previous generations. Pluralism, openness and the ability to live together despite differences are the elements of a good society. The glue that holds this together is tolerance, which is the pillar of a society based on openness.

Many opponents of an open society disagree, saying: “Open, but how much?”. Segre provides some potential answers to this question: “The fundamental

element of cohesion is to respect the other” because “there are rights and duties that everyone has to respect”. In other words: It is only through reciprocity that we can protect and empower an open society to be a good society, in which no one is exploiting anyone else.

But tolerance also has its limits. According to Biancalani: “Tolerance doesn’t mean accepting everything. If a racist comes inside my church and says that he is willingly a racist, I’ll kick him out: there is no place in the church for racism or supremacism.”

He concludes with a definition of tolerance: “To tolerate, yes, so as to assure that principles and values are protected, within certain boundaries. The boundaries are breached the minute someone wants to oppress, exploit or offend someone else.” This is exactly the paradox Karl Popper put forward when he said: “We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant<sup>15</sup>.”

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15 Cf. Popper K., (1945) *The Open Society and its Enemies. The spell of Plato*. Routledge, London. In Note 4., Chapter 7., p.226.

# CONCLUSION

Italians see an open society as bringing together the general principles and values contained in the Italian Constitution. Different groups may experience these principles differently, and will sometimes sacrifice them for a nostalgic idea of Italian identity they believe existed before globalisation.

Many Italians are now reverting to the age-old dichotomy that divides those who 'deserve' to be included in the community from those who should be excluded for ethnic or religious reasons, and because they do not correspond to the image of the 'true Italian'. These imaginary identities spread via social media and represent a deep social change.

Analysis of *Voices on Values* data makes it clear that generalisations about fascism and racism do not adequately reflect a very complicated reality. Umberto Eco (1995) once wrote that an "eternal fascism" is present throughout history, reappearing with special features, like racism or the myth of nation and traditions. Recognising this fact should help us react against it.

Our interviews show how much we need to protect open society values if we are not to risk returning to a past everyone thought would never be repeated. Far-right movements and parties are stirring fear of migrants and other minorities.

In Italy, those who seek to protect an open society have been ineffective in the face of populism. Education, social and cultural interactions and a new role for politics, as made up of parties, politicians and organisations, must contribute to a counter-narrative. Our survey results and the interview findings show that over-simplifications and easy conclusions risk dividing society into mutually exclusive groups. How we communicate is crucial.

Open society values and principles are not a "spontaneous" product of history, but the result of human experience. The threat of authoritarian politics looms behind the closing of borders and the restrictions on civil rights that were painfully rolled back over the centuries.

# METHODOLOGY

We collected original qualitative and quantitative data for this report. A representative survey administered using online panels and quota sampling methods was administered for over 6,000 respondents across Europe, of which 1,047 were from Italy. The online survey was carried out between 12 February and 5 March 2018.

The survey first asked respondents to rate the importance of seven statements reflecting values that the researchers identified as characteristics of open societies, such as the equal treatment of newcomers, freedom of speech and minority rights. Respondents were asked to do the same for seven characteristics that tend to appear in closed societies, such as limiting immigration and citizenship rights. The decision about which attributes to include was taken by the researchers from the six countries involved, who aimed to include key issues in current political debates in all countries. A full discussion of the conceptual ideas behind these decisions and the debates they correspond to can be found in the project's publication "Voices on Values: How

European publics and policy actors value an open society"<sup>16</sup> which sets out the detailed rationale and includes a full list of attributes.

After analysing how people evaluated both different characteristics associated with open and closed societies in their own right, we tested how robust people's evaluations of the former were when juxtaposed with other concerns. For this purpose, in the second part of the survey, we presented respondents with the seven characteristics associated with open societies again, this time opposed to other concerns people might have, such as economic security, political stability or the protection of cultural traditions. Respondents were then asked to evaluate the relative importance of the two alternative choices: they could choose one or the other as more important or say that both were equally important. These trade-off experiments are artificial in the sense that they contrast values and concerns which are not necessarily in contradiction, but which are often presented that way in current public debates<sup>17</sup>.

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16 Cf. Eichhorn, J., Kupsch, V., Molthof, L. and Mohr, M. (2019). *Voices on Values: How European publics and policy actors value an open society*. Open Society European Policy Institute and d|part.

17 Cf. *ibid.*

Additionally, general and country-specific correlate questions were asked that could be used for further analyses. Based on dimension reduction techniques<sup>18</sup> we could identify two separate factors (open and closed society attributes respectively) that were only weakly correlated with each other. We therefore computed two summary measures that combine the scores for each set of seven attributes and that are used in our analyses. For full details, please refer to the *Voices on Values* publication “The Hidden Majority: How most Europeans care about open society values”<sup>19</sup>.

We also conducted interviews with experts. In Italy we conducted 11 semi-structured interviews. Participants included politicians, civil society leaders, church members, journalists and civil servants. We asked respondents to discuss what they perceived as the challenges to an open society in Italy. We also discussed findings from the survey to identify possible dissonances between their views and those of the public.

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18 For further information on the methods applied in this study, visit <http://voicesonvalues.dpart.org>

19 Cf. Eichhorn, J. and Mohr, M. (2019) *The Hidden Majority: How most Europeans care about open society values*. Open Society European Policy Institute and d|part.

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