

## WELFARE OR DESPAIR? ITALY AND SPAIN'S DIVERGING WELFARE STATE POLICIES AFTER COVID-19

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### Abstrak

*Tujuan studi ini adalah menyelidiki bagaimana partai populis sayap kanan memengaruhi pergeseran kebijakan negara kesejahteraan pascapandemi, khususnya dalam kesejahteraan keluarga, kesetaraan gender, dan imigrasi. Penelitian ini memanfaatkan teori populisme sayap kanan dan rezim negara kesejahteraan. Menggunakan Desain Sistem Paling Serupa (MSSD) dan pendekatan studi kasus komparatif kualitatif, riset ini menganalisis perubahan kebijakan dari 2020-2024 menggunakan data sekunder. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Italia, di bawah pemerintahan populis, mengadopsi kebijakan eksklusif, memperkuat struktur keluarga tradisional, dan membatasi akses migran terhadap tunjangan sosial. Sebaliknya, pemerintahan Spanyol memperluas perlindungan sosial, mempromosikan kebijakan gender yang inklusif, dan integrasi migran. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa populisme sayap kanan secara signifikan membentuk respons negara kesejahteraan yang berbeda dalam konteks Eropa Selatan yang sebanding ini.*

### Abstract

The objective of this study is to investigate how right-wing populist parties influenced post-pandemic welfare state policy shifts, particularly in family welfare, gender equality, and immigration. This research utilizes right-wing populism and welfare state regime theories. Employing a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) and a qualitative comparative case study approach, this research analyzes policy changes from 2020-2024 using secondary data. Findings indicate that Italy, under right-wing populist governance, adopted exclusionary policies, reinforced traditional family structures, and restricted migrant access to social benefits. Conversely, Spain's governance expanded social protections, promoting inclusive gender policies and migrant integration. The study concludes that right-wing populism significantly shaped divergent welfare state responses in these comparable Southern European contexts.

## INTRODUCTION

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic which emerged in early 2020 had triggered an unprecedented economic crisis in Europe. According to statistics released by (Eurostat, 2023), the EU experienced a record-breaking annual inflation rate of 9.2 percent in 2022. By comparison, the annual value increase in 2021 was only 2.9 percent. Additionally, the costs for housing, water, electricity, gas, and other fuels saw the most significant rise, averaging an 18.0 percent increase in that year. This surge in prices has disproportionately affected the living standards of European households, causing significant hikes in the costs of essential goods, services, and housing. Unfortunately, wage growth had been sluggish alongside these rising prices, plunging the EU region into a living-cost crisis (Petrovic, 2023). While such economic downturns typically invite government intervention through its welfare state policies, the responses of European states had varied.

Within this context, the countries of Italy, Portugal, Spain, as well as Greece are considered to follow the Southern European model of the welfare state regime, which was based on (Esping-Andersen, 1990) initial framework of welfare states. The claim was based on the criticism that certain European

states do not belong in the same typology as the three categories initially introduced by Esping-Andersen; none following the social democratic model, liberal model, nor the conservative welfare state—and belong to a category on their own.

Italy and Spain present an intriguing case for comparison because the two countries exhibit a sea of similarities that make them distinct. To start, as part of the Southern European welfare model, both countries traditionally rely on strong family structures, fragmented social protection, and relatively weaker universal welfare provisions (Ferrera, 1996). But unlike Portugal and Greece, both suffer from similar regional economic disparities that are not present in other Southern European states, with Catalonia being the wealthier area in Spain and Southern Italy lagging in Italy (Giordano & Roller, 2001; Hippe M.; De Sousa Lobo Borges De Araujo, L., 2018).

Data from (Eurostat, 2024a) also shows that, in comparison to the other Southern European nations, Italy and Spain shared the most similar percentage of unemployment prior to the pandemic. In 2016, the share of jobless households was strikingly similar, at 12.7 and 12.8 percent for Italy and Spain respectively. By comparison, Greece's numbers were at a higher 17.8 percent and

Portugal was at a much lower number at 8.2 percent in the same year.

The tourism sector for Spain and Italy are also particularly important for both countries’ economies. In 2022, out of all 27 European Countries, Spain and Italy were the only Southern European nations to be among the top four countries that had accommodated two-thirds of total EU tourist overnight stays, with Spain at 16.5 percent and Italy at 15.0 percent (Statistics Poland, 2024). Thus, it is evident that these two countries’ tourism has had more of an impact in comparison to other Southern European states.

Despite these similarities, Italy and Spain’s post pandemic responses diverged significantly. One major area of divergence is immigration and welfare policy. 2019 statistics already show some difference between the two countries: Spain having 750.480 total number of long-term immigrants arriving into the country, whereas Italy only had 247.526 immigrants (Eurostat, 2024b). Since the pandemic, these numbers have diverged even more, with Spain having a little over 1.2 million immigrants and Italy only having just a little under 411.000 immigrants.

Unemployment trends also diverged between the two countries during the

pandemic. In Italy, the share of jobless households rose from 12.6 percent in 2020 to 13.1 percent in 2021, while in Spain, it decreased from 11.2 percent to 10.4 percent over the same period.

Household income disparities widened further—20 percent of Spanish households could make ends meet easily in 2022, compared to just 6.5 percent in Italy (Eurostat, 2024c). This suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic had a more severe economic impact on Italian households, leaving them with greater difficulties in meeting basic financial needs, given their income, than their Spanish counterparts. These differences also suggest that Spain’s economic recovery was more inclusive, whereas Italy’s was more unequal and restrictive.

These diverging statistics are summarized in Table 1 based on author’s own elaboration from Eurostat data. Compared to Spain, Italy’s economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic had been met with mixed results. Although both countries are classified under the same welfare state regime, their performance during the recovery had varied significantly.

Table 1. Diverging Statistics

| Spain | Italy |
|-------|-------|
|-------|-------|

|  |           |         |
|--|-----------|---------|
| Southern European welfare states                 | ✓         | ✓       |
| Strong emphasis on family values                 | ✓         | ✓       |
| EU member state                                  | ✓         | ✓       |
| Regional disparities                             | ✓         | ✓       |
| 2016 unemployment levels                         | 12,8%     | 12,7%   |
| 2022 share of tourist overnight stays in the EU  | 16,5%     | 15%     |
| 2019 inflow of migrants                          | 750.480   | 247.526 |
| Outcome  |           |         |
| 2022 share of households making ends meet easily | 20%       | 6,5%    |
| 2021 unemployment levels                         | 13,1%     | 10,4%   |
| 2022 inflow of migrants                          | 1.258.894 | 410.985 |

Source: Eurostat (2024)

While economic differences might partially explain the divergence, a key factor in shaping these diverging policy responses is the rise of right-wing populism across the European political landscape in recent years (Aktas, 2024; Docquier & Rapoport, 2025). Political parties such as Vox in Spain, *Fratelli d'Italia* (F.d.I) and the *Lega* (League) in Italy, *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ) in Austria, and Fidesz in Hungary have been gaining significant representation in their respective governments. Parties in Spain and Italy, in particular, had gained electoral prominence by advocating nationalist, anti-immigrant, and traditionalist family policies. These parties often promote welfare chauvinism,

prioritizing social benefits for native citizens over migrants, and emphasize conservative family structures while opposing gender equality measures (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Germinario et al., (2019) compared welfare state iterations in Germany, France, Italy, the UK, and the US. It is explained that traditional right-wing parties tend to favor a form of 'exclusive solidarity', where social policies are restricted to only benefit an ethnically defined group. Their findings show that although populist right parties in France and Italy have adopted a more pro-welfare state approach, advocating for increased state-provided social services such as healthcare and unemployment benefits, they generally promote an exclusionary approach, where such benefits should only be available to certain groups, particularly native citizens, and not to migrants.

But this study is limited by its focus on political party manifestos, which do not address what actions populist right-wing parties take once they hold office, or what factors influence their shift towards specific social policies. Moreover, the research covers various welfare state typologies but lacks detailed differentiation of each model, treating Italy as the sole representative for the entire Southern European model.

León and Migliavacca (2013) examined whether Italy and Spain have shifted away from the 'familistic' welfare model, focusing on women's labor market participation in both countries between 1990-2010. However, the study does not fully explore other aspects of familism (such as child or family benefits), but it did acknowledge that it is a topic for further research.

Meanwhile, Peralta-Santos et al., (2021) compared Southern European (Portugal, Italy, and Spain) pandemic responses. Despite the similarities among the three countries, the paper concluded that Spain and Italy faced additional challenges, primarily due to their multi-level governance structures, while Portugal's more centralised response allowed it to perform better. Hence, the study reaffirms that, although Southern European countries indeed share similar economic conditions, Spain and Italy demonstrated the greatest similarities in their initial conditions.

Existing studies provide strong foundations for understanding welfare state regimes and their right-wing populist ideologies' influences. However, there remains a gap in understanding how these ideologies translate into actual policy shifts

in Southern European welfare states, especially post-pandemic. As such, this paper builds on these contributions by examining the intersections between the rising popular right-wing parties and welfare state policy, rather than solely attributing economic recovery to welfare state structures. Additionally, the study contributes to the literature on welfare state regimes by further analyzing the case of the Southern European model and exploring the variations between Italy and Spain, despite their shared typology.

Therefore, despite both being categorised as following the Southern European welfare state models, this study aims to answer the question: how has right-wing populism influenced welfare state policies in Italy and Spain during the Covid-19 pandemic?

## ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

### Welfare State Regimes

To understand the welfare state systems in both Spain and Italy, it is important to first look at their general design and purpose. Klimczuk (2017) refers to the welfare state as a system where the government social rights while moderating market effects. Esping-Andersen in Bamba (2007) and Begg et al.,

(2015) categorises the welfare states based on three key dimensions:

- a) **Decommodification:** the extent of an individual's dependence on the market.
- b) **Social stratification:** the extent to which welfare systems reduce social inequalities by redistributing wealth and resources and universal benefits.
- c) **Private-public mix:** the balance of responsibilities between the state, families, voluntary sectors (charities), and the market in the provisioning of welfare.

Thus, a welfare state can be defined as systems of policies in which the state actively participates in the provisioning of social rights to its citizens to ensure the welfare of its people, ranging from basic needs, such as food and housing, to social, political, and economic rights and privileges. Esping-Andersen in Ferenc (2023) categorizes welfare state regimes into three different typologies: the liberal model (market-reliant), social democratic (universalist), and conservative (status-based, family-centered) models.

But Esping-Andersen's typologies have not been met without its fair share of criticism. One of the most contentious points of issue is the absence of clear differentiation

between the conservative welfare system and those prevalent in 'Southern' European countries (Campa & De Bonis, 2015). This theory did not include countries such as Greece, Spain, or Portugal, and Italy, which were considered too different to be categorised in the same typology as France or Germany (social-democratic). Thus, in addition to the three welfare state models, Ferrera (1996) had introduced two new models: the Southern and Eastern models of welfare state regimes—though in this study we will focus on the former.

Ferrera believes the Southern European welfare states stand distinct from other models due to several notable features. As mentioned in the introduction, these countries exhibit a highly fragmented system of social protection, characterized by varying levels of coverage and support across different regions and demographics. Second, there is a prominent practice of 'clientelism', where political favors and benefits are exchanged for support, influencing social welfare distribution. These Southern countries also often struggle in developing key social services like childcare and early education, which remain underdeveloped compared to other European welfare models. Lastly, the Southern European welfare systems are characterized by an insider-

outsider dualism, where job security and benefits are greatly divided between established workers and those on the periphery of the labor market.

Scholars also agree that the Southern European welfare state model is also associated with an emphasis on a male-breadwinner model—meaning that the prevailing cultural traditions or norms have not left the structure of traditional family values and gender norms (León & Pavolini, 2014).

### Right-Wing Populism in the Welfare State

Mudde and Kaltwasser explain that right-wing populism in Europe blends authoritarianism, nativism, and welfare chauvinism. These parties often frame immigrants, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other welfare recipients as ‘outsiders’ undermining the traditional identity of the ‘good people’ (Bobba & McDonnell, 2016). In the context of welfare policy, outlined below are the key right-wing populist agendas which will serve as the independent variables of this study:

1. **Familism:** reinforcing the family's role as the primary facilitator for care, as opposed to relying on outside care services. These policies often come in the form of family allowances, child benefits, cash-for-care, and tax rebates (Giuliani, 2023).
2. **Male-breadwinner model:** reinforcing the traditional gender roles, which have implications for the inequality of economic distributions (Giuliani, 2023, p. 197). Kurou (2020) highlights several instances of these policies, such as the promotion of anti-abortion legislations, restricting women to housework or part-time job positions, and the prohibition of same-sex marriage.
3. **Nativism:** right-wing groups tend to advocate for exclusion of immigrants or non-citizens from social benefits and services (Enggist & Häusermann, 2024; Kurou, 2020, p. 5).

The key concepts identified above are operationalized as independent variables and summarized as variables in Table 2 below.

**Table 2. Concept Operationalization**

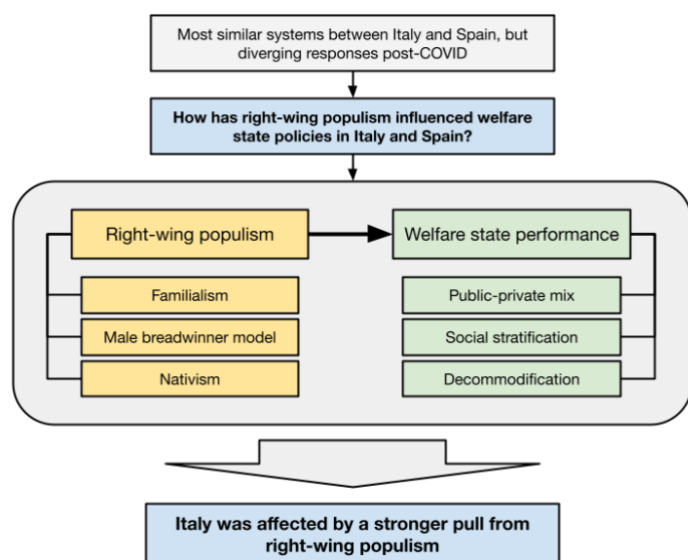
| CONCEPT               | VARIABLES         | INDICATORS   | OPERATIONALISATION  |
|-----------------------|-------------------|--|---|
| Welfare State Regimes | Decommodification | Provisioning of welfare benefits regardless of employment or | Reviewing policies such as pensions, unemployment benefits, and health insurance. |



|                            |                        |  |   |
|----------------------------|------------------------|--|---|
|                            |                        | income level and health insurance.   |   |
|                            | Social stratification  | Redistribution of wealth and resources   | Reviewing the policies of income redistribution, social housing, and poverty relief policies  |
|                            | Public-private mix     | The state's role compared to the family's role   | The extent of responsibilities Italy and Spain's government has in the provisioning of welfare rather than being dependent on family support, in terms of kindergarten care, state education, and out-of-work training. |
| <b>Right-wing Populism</b> | Familism               | The reinforcement of the family's role as the primary facilitator for care, as opposed to relying on external care services. | Comparing the conditions of family allowances and child benefits.   |
|                            | Male-breadwinner model | Policies which hinder the full participation of women in the labour market   | Comparing abortion policies, same-sex marriage policies, maternal leave policies, share of female participation in the labour market.   |
|                            | Nativism               | Preference towards nativistic and authoritarian policies   | Comparing preference towards exclusionary policies towards immigrants or non-citizens.  |

Source: Author's elaboration adapted from Bambra (2007), Begg, et al. (2015), Giuliani (2023), Enggist and Häusermann (2024), and Kurou (2020).

**Figure 1. How Right-Wing Populism Affect the Welfare State**



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Based on the framework above (Figure 1), the study hypothesizes that Italy's welfare state policies were more significantly affected by right-wing populist governance during the Covid-19 pandemic than Spain's.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The research is of a qualitative type with a comparative case study approach to answer the research question in the introduction. Creswell (2013) defines qualitative research as a method in which researchers gather data in real-life environments that are attuned to the individuals and locations being studied. Here, the analysis of data involves both deductive



and inductive reasoning to identify patterns or themes. Case study research approaches, as defined by Bozonelos et al. (2023), provides an in-depth analysis across several dimensions, making it suitable for cross-national comparisons.

The cross-national comparative approach will compare data between two countries as the subjects of research, namely Italy and Spain. Using John Stuart Mill's Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), this study compares similar cases that yield different results (Bozonelos et al., 2023, p. 54). The main similarity between these countries is that they are both Southern European welfare states, and the outcome is that the policies along with several other indicators had diverged post-pandemic.

This research will focus on the countries of Italy and Spain as the subject of analysis and will examine three key areas: (1) family welfare provisions, (2) gender equality policies, and (3) native vis-à-vis immigrant policy changes. These policies will be analyzed based on policy scope – who who benefits from the policy? (2) accessibility – how easy is it to qualify for benefits? (3) ideological framing – does the policy reflect exclusionary or inclusive welfare principles? The key is to analyze

policy changes and not merely the existence of certain policies themselves, since the aim is to investigate how right-wing populist parties have influenced governance during the pandemic—whether through reform, restrictions, or ideological shifts—rather than to simply catalog welfare policies. The scope of research will focus on the 2020 to 2024 period, which was when the economic crisis during the Covid-19 pandemic peaked, leaving the two countries to impose their own measures.

Given the study's focus on government policy shifts, the research will use a secondary data collecting technique by way of literature review through internet-based sources, accessing data from previous research, relevant articles and publications, statistics from credible websites, books, as well as government sites to track policy changes from 2020 to 2024. Primary data collection, such as interviews or surveys, would be less effective for capturing national-level policy transformations. These policy measures will be assessed based on their evolution over time and the extent to which they align with right-wing populist agendas. While the Covid-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for policy shifts, it serves a contextual time frame for analyzing policy

changes in this study, rather than being treated as an independent research variable.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Right-wing Populist Party Agendas in Spain and Italy

Reviewing electoral performances of political parties gives concrete evidence as to which stances and policies are becoming more attractive to its citizens. In this section, we will examine the agendas and ideologies of populist right-wing populist parties between Spain and Italy.

In Spain, most scholars agree that the prevailing far-right party is Vox. Based on the analyses conducted Rama et al. (2021), Pawłowski (2019), and Ramis-Moyano & Font (2023), Vox's positions include: (1) A strong anti-immigration stance with calls for strict law enforcement, often connected to policies reflecting past dictatorship regimes.; (2) A firm defense of Spain's unity, particularly from separatist groups in Catalonia; (3) An opposition towards "progressive dictatorship". (4) A strong endorsement of "traditional values" rooted in Catholic beliefs

Vox's advocacy for a nativist stance is evident in its anti-immigration positions and its emphasis on defending Spain's unity against separatist groups, particularly in the region of Catalonia, which it views as a threat

to national identity. In the same way, Vox promotes familism and the male-breadwinner model through its endorsement of "traditional values", which also includes anti-abortion stances and the traditional division of gender roles.

In Italy's case, it is generally accepted among scholars that the parties classified as right-wing populists are the League (*Lega*) and *Fratelli d'Italia* (F.d.I), though the former's position on the political spectrum has been a topic of debate in itself due to its shifting political stances (Cremaschi et al., 2024; Valbruzzi & Ventura, 2023; Zulianello, 2020).

Analyses from other studies had described F.d.I's ideology as based on the combination of Euroscepticism, nativism, sovereignism, and authoritarianism, even as far as being described as 'neo-fascist' (Donà, 2022; Puleo et al., 2024; Valbruzzi & Ventura, 2023, p. 11). In the 2018 electoral program of F.d.I., out of its 15 agendas, its key priorities include (Donà, 2022, p. 787): (1) "The defense of the natural family"; (2) "Law and order priority"; (3) "Fight against illegal immigration and Italians first in accessing social provisions"; (4) "Identity defense from Islamization".

On its road to the 2022 general elections, F.d.I had laid out its list of its party agendas consisting of 21 points, which include the following statements (Fratelli d'Italia, 2022): (1) "Support for births and families. The family is the founding element of society and what makes 'a Nation truly sovereign and spiritually strong' (John Paul II)"; (2) "Stopping illegal immigration and restore security to its citizens. ... Illegal immigration threatens the safety and quality of life of citizens"; (3) "Italy, a protagonist in Europe and in the world. ... Defense of classical and Judeo-Christian roots of Europe and its fundamental values of freedom, democracy, solidarity, subsidiarity, and justice.

In this 2022 political manifesto, F.d.I highlighted the importance of family, quoting Pope John Paul II to emphasize the connection between Christianity and the traditional family values, a characteristic of right-wing populist parties. Their focus on defending the 'Judeo-Christian roots of Europe' further stands to reason that the party aims to pursue the traditional structure of family and gender roles. F.d.I also linked security with the issue of immigrants, perceiving them as a core threat to the safety of citizens. This echoes with the theoretical

framework that the radical right advocates for nativist ideas.

Assessing the League's political agendas, however, is more challenging, as the party evolved its position over time since its founding in 1991. Originally founded by Umberto Bossi as *Lega Nord* (Northern League), the party first campaigned for the country's northern region, seeking independence from the rest of the country, labelling and attacking the country's southern counterparts, immigrants, and the European Union—essentially regarding them as 'Other' (Waters, 2021).

But after Matteo Salvini assumed leadership as party leader in 2013, as well as subsequent name change to simply 'League' ('*Lega*' in Italian), the League has shifted its political identity from this exclusive Northern Italian regionalism to a nation-wide nationalism and nativism. It was during this time that the League's ideology focused on three key principles: (1) national laws should take precedence over European laws, (2) religion should define the Italian identity, and (3) a complete institutional reform was needed to restore popular power (Adinolfi & da Silva, 2024).

Before its shift in identity, the party received just 4.09% of the vote in the 2013

general elections, but under Salvini's leadership, its share had surged to 17.35% of the in 2018, winning the general election (Ministry of the Interior, 2018). This meant that the party's shift in its identity worked in its favor of gaining more voting prominence in the country.

But how well do these far-right parties fare in comparison to each other? In Italy, F.d.I has gained prominence since the party's co-founder and leader, Giorgia Meloni, took office as Prime Minister in the 2022 general elections. Meanwhile, the League's popular party votes fell back to 8.79% in the general elections of 2022, with Meloni's F.d.I. overtaking it to claim the top of the voting polls (Ministry of the Interior, 2022).

In Spain, rose from 10.97% in the Andalusian elections to 15.08% in the 2019 general elections by exploiting anti-immigration sentiment following the 2015 migrant crisis (Morales, 2023; Pawłowski, 2019, para. 1). Spain's previous resistance to right-wing populism makes Vox's success notable, following weak performances in the 2015 and 2016 elections (Fernández-Vázquez, 2024). However, their success was short-lived since Vox's support has since declined, with its share of votes falling to 12% in the 2023 elections (p. 5).

Comparing electoral performances in their respective countries reveals notable differences. While Vox's influence waned after 2019, Italy's radical right consolidated power, with the League leading in 2018 and F.d.I in 2022. This long-standing dominance allowed Italian populist right-wing parties to shape more lasting policy outcomes. Particularly, F.d.I's victory over the 2022 general elections show a clear direction towards nativistic, ethnocentric tendencies as well as a desire for traditional gender roles in the family. Meanwhile, in Spain, Vox's popularity peaked during the 2018 flux of immigrants but has since lost momentum.

While both Italy and Spain saw the rise of right-wing populist parties, their ability to influence policy outcomes were rather different. In Spain, Vox's limited parliamentary power would mean that its ability to reshape welfare policies would be hindered, leading to the continuation of progressive social measures. In Contrast, Italy's F.d.I and the League benefitted from stronger electoral support and coalition dominance, which would translate to a significantly greater influence over welfare state transformations. Such divergences are reflected in the following policy changes.

### **Family Welfare Policies**

In the following section, we will discuss the subsequent changing of familistic, nativistic, as well as gender ('male-breadwinner') policies after these parties gain seats in parliament in order to compare where Spain and Italy has been heading in terms of its welfare state regime.

First, we will review the family welfare policies in the two countries. In Spain's case, under the Royal Decree 1335/2005, families are granted from 1,000 to 8,470 euros per year depending on the number of dependent children as well as disability levels. In 2023, an expansion of this law provides an extra 100 euros for new mothers with a child aged 0-3 (Idealista, 2023). Meanwhile, another law is currently under work for 2025 which will provide 200 euros for families with children regardless of their economic status (ELFAC, 2024). Thus, it can be seen that family policies in Spain over the years have not changed so much.

In Italy, under Law 46/2021 of the Single and Universal Allowance for Children policy, families can get 57 to 200 euros per month depending on the number of dependent children as well as parents' household income (European Commission, 2024). Italy also provides a grant to help with child-raising expenses known as the

Kindergarten Voucher, granting families from 1,500 to 3,600 euros per year depending on household income.

Thus, Italy's family benefits policies have changed during the pandemic years and are more lenient in requirements in comparison to Spain but grants considerably lower amounts. Additionally, while the two countries factor in the number of dependent children, Spain includes disability levels in children as an additional factor.

### **Male Breadwinner Policies**

We will examine policies which directly affect women's participation in the labor market, which will determine a country's propensity to be centered around the male-breadwinner model. To start, in 2021, the Spanish parliament had renewed a 17-year-old State Pact Against Gender-Based Violence, which was a legislative measure backed by all major political parties except Vox, which continued to deny the existence of gender-based violence (Borraz, 2024). Then, in February 2023, the Spanish parliament passed Law 4/2023, which expanded upon reproductive and LGBT+ rights across different social spheres including the workforce (Official State Bulletin, 2023). Along with ensuring rights to

gender self-determination, Law 4/2023 decreased restrictions for abortion and introduced paid menstrual leave for workers, making Spain the first European country to implement such paid leave laws (Bello & Llach, 2023; Riccioli, 2023). Thus, these policies were met with backlash among right-winged coalitions, but nonetheless prevailed.

By comparison, the Italian parliament had not passed any new legislations on abortion since its first policy on the matter, namely Law 194/1978, leaving Italy's abortion rights less substantive and less protective of women than those established by Spain. In fact, instead of expanding upon abortion rights, Prime Minister Meloni had made amendments to Law 194/1978 in 2024 which permitted anti-abortion groups to enter abortion consultation clinics with the goal of dissuading women from undergoing the procedure (Giuffrida, 2024).

Thus, this comparison illustrates that while both Spain and Italy experienced shifts under right-wing populist governance, Spain has deviated further from the male-breadwinner model more so than Italy, highlighting a divergence in their gender welfare policies.

### **Nativist Policies and Immigration**

Lastly, we will now review nativist policies in the two countries. One aspect is the issue of immigrants in the job market, in which Italy regulates under Decree Law 34/2020 (Official State Gazette, 2020).

Decree Law 34/2020 introduced new pandemic-era regularization by focusing on healthcare, labor support, for undocumented workers in agriculture and domestic work. However, the law had narrow eligibility, strict requirements, and a six-week application window. The law was also the result of a debate within parliament where right-winged coalitions, including Lega, opposed such "amnesty for illegal recruiters and employers" (Perna & Batalla, 2023).

Italy also passed Decree Law 18/2020 which aimed to provide emergency health and economic assistance to families, workers, and businesses, yet it made no mention of including provisions for non-native citizens (FAO, 2020). Subsequent decrees, such as Decree Law 137/2020, expanded job market issues and other economic measures but did not introduce new immigration regularisations (Ministry of Economics and Finance, 2020).

Additionally, Decree Law 20/2023 ('Cutro Decree'), passed after a migrant shipwreck off Cutro's coast, tightened immigration controls and limited special

protection permits, which restricted access to residence, healthcare, and disaster aid (Derossi & Sica, 2024). Such reductions of rights clearly indicate Italy’s nativist attitude in border security, irregular migration, and the job market sector. It can be seen how the right-wing oppositions framed immigrant regularisation throughout the passing of these decrees. The League had consistently portrayed regularisation as a threat to native workers since they “steal” the jobs of natives (D’Ambrosio et al., 2021). In January 2024, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni had even expressed dissatisfaction with increasing migration levels despite government efforts (Zampano & Santalucia, 2024).

By comparison, in Spain, Royal Decree Law 13/2020 regulated the temporary suspension of residency requirements for migrants in agriculture. However, one must also take into account that the Spanish parliament initially proposed a law to regulate the status of undocumented migrants, but the bill never came to pass in parliament due to right-wing coalitions (Perna & Batalla, 2023, p. 430).

Spain expanded social protections through Royal Decree Law 20/2020 and 30/2020, introducing the minimum living income and worker safeguards that indirectly benefited migrant labour (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020; Official State Bulletin, 2020). While their focus did not mention anything on foreigners, its impact on migrant workers was that it extended pathways for their temporary residency, expanded upon the requirements on the previously established minimum vital income, which may have enabled some migrant workers to be eligible.

One major development was that in 2022, immigration reform (*reglamento de extranjería*) reduced bureaucratic hurdles for migrant hiring processes and residency pathways, facilitating long term migrant integration (Pasetti, 2022).

These developments reflect broader policy trajectories in both countries. A summary of key welfare policy shifts in Spain and Italy since the pandemic is provided in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Comparative Table of Welfare Policies Since the Pandemic

| Policy Area | Spain | Italy |
|-------------|-------|-------|
|             |       |       |



|                             |  |  |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Family Welfare</b>       | Expanded child benefits (Law 4/2023), extra support for new mothers  | Expanded some family benefits (Law 46/2021), stricter eligibility  |
| <b>Gender Policies</b>      | 2021 State Pact Against Gender Violence, expanded social protection for non-gender conforming citizens Law 4/2023                          | No major reforms, but supported anti-abortion activism   |
| <b>Immigration Policies</b> | Temporary suspension of residency requirements (Royal Decree-Law 13/2020), eased residency pathways for migrants (2022 Immigration Reform) | Emergency measures for workers (Law 137/2020; 18/2020), and Cutro Decree (2023) restricted migrant protections |

Source: Author's elaboration based on data from European Commission (2024), FAO (2020), Ministry of Economics and Finance (2020), Official State Bulletin (2020, 2023), Official State Gazette (2020), Pasetti (2022), and Perna and Batalla (2023)

### Policy Implications on The Welfare State in Spain and Italy

We have established that—as Southern European welfare states—Italy and Spain had traditional familist characteristics, where family structures play a bigger role in social support than the state. However, as shown in Table 3, Spain had moved away from this characteristic while Italy remained more conservative in recent years. Spain's Law 4/2023 expanded reproductive and LGBT+ rights, introduced paid menstrual leave, and set protections against gender-based violence. By contrast, Italy had not passed significant family welfare reforms. In fact, under Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, policies have reinforced traditional gender roles, as seen in the 2024 amendment to Law 194/1978, which allows anti-abortion groups

into consultation clinics. Italy's 2021 Single and Universal Allowance for Children provides financial support for families but remains less generous than Spain's system and does not prioritize women's participation in the labor market.

These policy choices reflect a diverging approach in how Italy and Spain's welfare states address gender and family roles. Italy continues to follow a traditional, familistic welfare model, where caregiving responsibilities fall primarily on women and families, with limited state intervention. The lack of comprehensive family and gender policies suggest a continued reliance on the male-breadwinner model where women are expected to prioritize domestic roles over labor market participation. Spain, however, has gradually moved away from strict

familism, integrating state-driven gender protections that support dual-income households. By introducing paid menstrual leaves and expanded child benefits, Spain acknowledges the economic and social role of women beyond the home. This divergence suggests that Spain is adapting its social policies to modern gender dynamics.

Most evident is the diverging approaches to immigration during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Italy's Decree-Law 34/2020 introduced temporary regularization for undocumented migrants but was highly restrictive, since it only applied to workers in agriculture and domestic labor under many requirements. Then, Decree-Law 20/2023 (Cutro Decree) reinforced Italy's nativist stance, tightening entry rules and limiting access to the special protection status for refugees and asylum seekers. By comparison, Spain's Royal Decree-Law 13/2020 suspended the residency requirements for agricultural workers, broadening more participation in the labor market. This was then followed by the 2022 Immigration Reform, which was a major development in streamlining bureaucratic procedures and enabled more residency pathways for long-term undocumented migrants.

These contrasting immigration policies also have direct implications for each country's welfare state model. Italy's approach remains nativist, where social benefits are primarily reserved for native-born citizens, limiting migrant access to unemployment aid and long-term residency rights. By reinforcing barriers to legal integration, Italy maintains an insider-outsider dualism of a welfare state system, where migrants remain in a fragmented labor market, with limited access to state protection. On the other hand, Spain has moved away from the typical Southern European welfare state characteristics by integrating migrant workers into the labor force and facilitating long-term stability for migrants, which in turn minimizes economic vulnerability and ensures more access to social safety nets.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to answer how right-wing populist parties in Italy and Spain influenced different approaches during the Covid-19 crisis by looking at the policies passed during that time. The analysis focused on three dimensions of right-wing populist discourse: familism, male-breadwinner model, and nativism.

The findings show that right-wing populist agendas with electoral success significantly influenced welfare state policies. Italy's sustained radical-right governance enabled exclusionary welfare policies, particularly in immigration (Cutro Decree 2023), gender roles (amendments to Law 194/1978) and a continued emphasis on traditional family structures. Conversely, Spain's—where Vox failed to maintain electoral dominance—pursued progressive social protection expansions, including Law 4/2023, the 2022 Immigration Reform, and gender equality measures such as paid menstrual leave. These differences demonstrate that right-wing populist governance correlates with exclusionary welfare approaches that prioritize native citizens, reinforce conservative gender roles, and limit access to social benefits for migrants.

These outcomes challenge the assumption that economic constraints alone drive welfare state transformations. Despite facing similar pandemic-related hurdles, political ideology played a decisive role. Italy's right-wing populist leadership prioritized nativist and traditionalist welfare measures, while Spain's center-left governance pursued a more inclusive, egalitarian welfare model. If these divergent

trends persist, Spain's may be moving closer Northern European welfare models, while Italy's trajectory reflects trends observed in Central and Eastern European populist regimes, such as in Poland and Hungary.

However, there are limitations to this study. Focusing on only two countries restricts the generalizability of the conclusions, and reliance on secondary data limits direct insights into the policy-making process. Future research should include elite interviews or in-depth content analysis of parliamentary debates to better trace how populist rhetoric informs actual policy. Additionally, further comparative work, including Southern European cases like Portugal and Greece, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of regional welfare state transformations. Longitudinal studies could also examine whether recent policy changes persist beyond current electoral cycles, shedding light on long-term influence of populist ideologies on European welfare states.

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