



The Big Read Italy politics

Spectre of immigration sparks rightward turn in Italy

Having made gains in Cascina, Italy's Northern League is exploiting concerns over migrants ahead of a pivotal general election



9 HOURS AGO James Politi in Cascina, Tuscany

78 comments

In September 1944 African-American soldiers from the US Army's "Buffalo" division helped liberate Cascina from German forces retreating north into the Apennine mountains of Tuscany. For the next 70 years, the town of 45,000 people in the Arno River valley near Pisa was run by leftwing administrations. The region became a byword in Italy for racial tolerance and social democratic politics.

Then in June 2016 something surprising happened: Cascina, whose postwar fortunes were built on the now-struggling furniture sector, elected Susanna Ceccardi, a 29-year-old rightwing firebrand from the Eurosceptic Northern League, to be mayor by just 101 votes. Roberto Luppichini, a 50-year-old stallholder at the Monday morning open-air market in Navacchio, which has emerged as a hub of support for Ms Ceccardi, says there is little doubt what triggered this small but significant political earthquake.

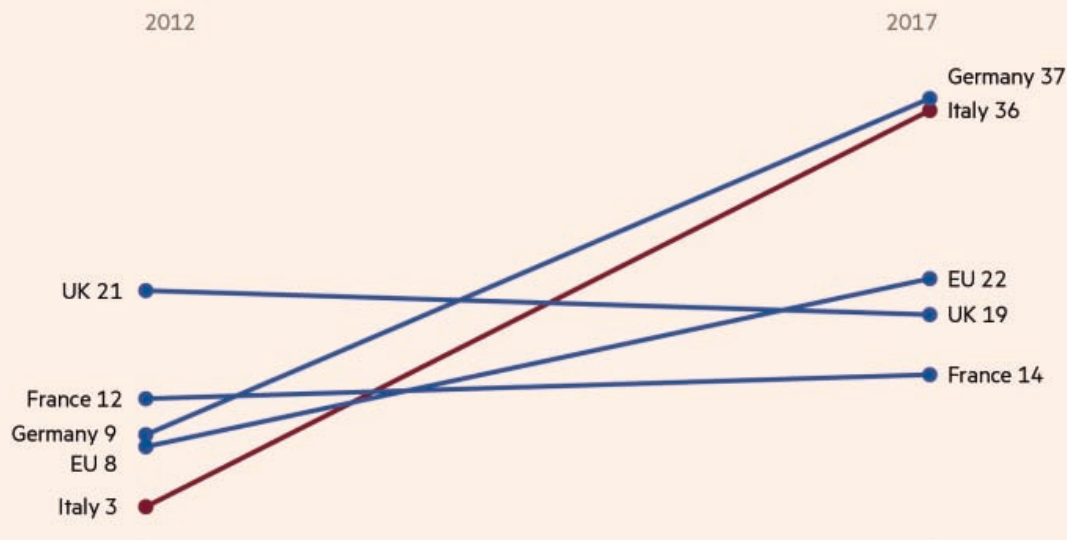
"It started with immigration," he says, referring to the more than 620,000 migrants who have been [rescued in the Mediterranean Sea](#) and brought to Italy over the past four years. "We are tired of having all these people around; we can't keep them here; we can't handle it any more. Immigration is one of the great scourges of Italy."

"When the cake was bigger for everyone and the economy worked better there were fewer complaints," he says. "Now, we feel sacrificed."

Cascina's turn to the right is part of a broader political shift in the country ahead of a pivotal general election due in Italy early next year — the latest test for [populist forces](#) in Europe after this year's mixed results in the Netherlands, France, Germany and Austria.

Share of population who believe immigration is their country's biggest issue

May 2017 (%)



Source: Eurobarometer
© FT

Rightwing parties, including the anti-immigrant Northern League, the more moderate Forza Italia led by former premier Silvio Berlusconi, and the far right Brothers of Italy, are heading into the poll with the winds at their backs, partly due to their anti-immigration stance. This month, a Berlusconi-led coalition snatched [control of Sicily](#) from the centre-left in a regional election that was widely seen as a barometer of the national mood. Next year they have a realistic chance of trumping a deflated ruling centre-left Democratic party, led by former prime minister Matteo Renzi, as well as the anti-establishment [Five Star Movement](#), headed by comedian Beppe Grillo, to win control of the Italian government.

The Northern League has the support of about 15 per cent of Italians, according to opinion polls, compared with just 4 per cent at the 2013 general election and 6 per cent in the European polls of 2014. If it performs that well it could emerge as the senior partner in a possible centre-right governing coalition with Mr Berlusconi, dictating policy and possibly choosing the prime minister. In another potentially destabilising scenario for the EU, the Northern League could accept to be a minority partner in a government led by the anti-establishment Five Star Movement, which could threaten to pull Italy out of the euro.

The reinvention of the Northern League has much to do with Matteo Salvini, its 44-year old leader who took over the party in 2013, shedding its previous emphasis on the secession of Italy's prosperous north, and turning it into a more traditionally nationalist party, along the lines of [France's National Front](#).

Not only has it strengthened its position in northern Italy, but, as Ms Ceccardi's victory shows, it has also gained ground in the "red" regions of central Italy. Between 2010 and 2015, the Northern League's support in Tuscany more than doubled from 6 per cent to 16 per cent in regional elections.



Navacchio market stallholder Roberto Luppichini: 'When the cake was bigger for everyone and the economy worked better there were fewer complaints'
 © Charlie Bibby

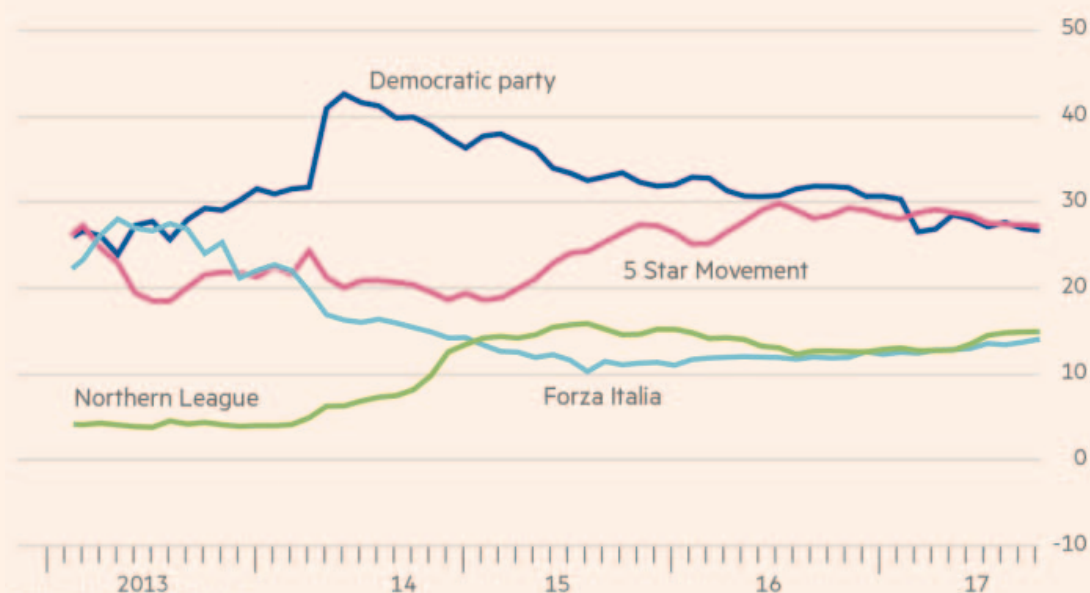
“The Northern League has been moving into central Italy and this goes hand in hand with its focus on immigration and law and order,” says Daniele Albertazzi, a senior lecturer in European politics at the University of Birmingham. “It has been consistent and coherent.”

Critics fear that the Northern League’s ascent fits in with the broader growth of far-right sentiment in Italy, including neo-fascist groups. Last week, the far right CasaPound won 9 per cent of the vote in a by-election in Ostia, a crime-ridden municipality in Rome, and secured 8 per cent in municipal polls in Lucca, not far from Cascina, this year.

“We are very alarmed. There’s neo-fascism, there’s racism, and there’s xenophobia. There’s a whole cauldron that fuels these forces,” says Franco Tagliaboschi, president of the Cascina chapter of Anpi, a national association dedicated to preserving the memory of the partisans who fought fascism and Nazism during the second world war.

Voting intentions for Italian general election, 2018

Per cent



Source: Termometro Politico
 © FT

In her office on the first floor of Cascina's porticoed town hall, Ms Ceccardi denies there is anything radical about her views or those of the Northern League. "I don't think that our positions are discriminatory. On the contrary I think that regulating immigration is a moderate position," she says. "We have to put a limit. We have to say what the point of equilibrium is so that people can live together in a civil manner."

There is no open door policy in Italy but in recent years it has co-ordinated a massive humanitarian effort to rescue migrants from South Asia, the Middle East and Africa travelling to Europe on ramshackle boats across the Mediterranean Sea. Migrant flows are down 30 per cent this year, after a [controversial deal with Libya](#) orchestrated by Marco Minniti, the interior minister, involving support for the local coastguard to intercept boats before they leave Libyan waters, and for coastal cities to crack down on traffickers.

But the perception of an uncontrolled "invasion", as described by Mr Salvini, persists, even in a relatively affluent middle-class, town like Cascina.

Once migrants arrive in Italy — and while they wait for their asylum applications to be processed, which can take months — they are distributed across the country in reception centres that sometimes become a source of tension with local populations. Ms Ceccardi is campaigning to close the main reception centre in Cascina, a former farmstay called La Tinaia that houses some 60 refugees and asylum seekers, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa, on the grounds that it is overcrowded. She has vowed to resist any attempt by the Italian government to allocate new migrants to facilities in the town.



Migrants wait to disembark from a ship at Salerno, southern Italy, on November 5. Almost 620,000 have arrived in Italy since 2013. © AP

"It's not like everyone has to be collaborationist with a government if they disagree with their policies," she says. "If other mayors put welcoming migrants in their manifestos, they should take them in. I won on a different platform."

At times, Ms Ceccardi — whose victory was also propelled by a lack of enthusiasm for her centre-left predecessor — sounds more like a crusader for the preservation of western civilisation than a local conservative politician. "With immigration, there's always a victim," she says. "Someone always loses out: think of the American Indians, the pre-Colombian civilisations. We have to defend ourselves. We might lose, but at least we defended ourselves."

Shortly after taking office — in the wake of the brutal murder of a Catholic priest in France, claimed by Isis — the mayor posted a cartoon depicting a young woman with blond braids, dressed like a

Viking, kicking a dark-skinned pig clad with a turban who ends up dropping a Koran. “Wake up Europe” she wrote on the post. She later described the cartoon as a statement against “Islamic terrorism”.



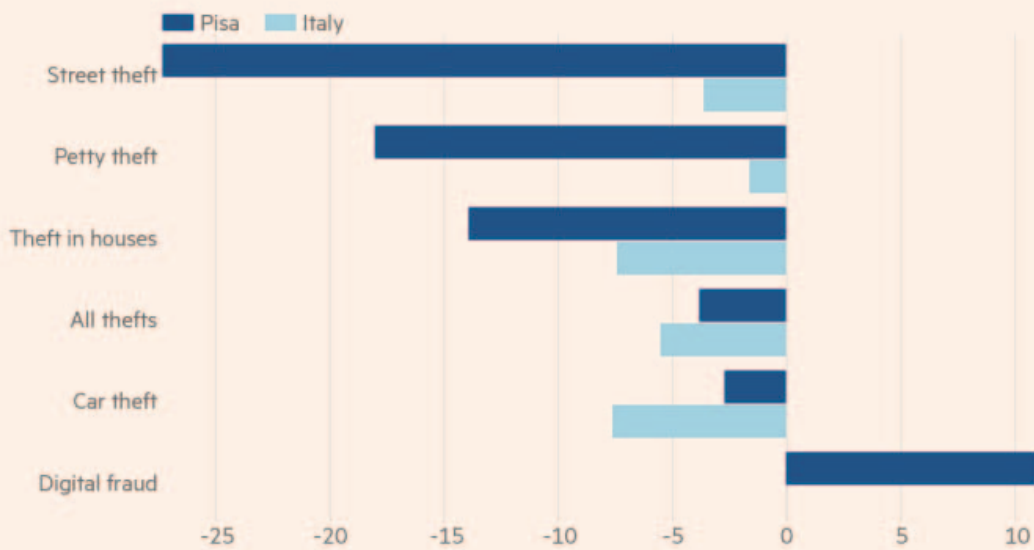
The shift is not just rhetorical. Ms Ceccardi has sought to block access for immigrants to public housing by forcing them to provide documentation from their countries of origin certifying that they do not own property back home — an almost impossible request for many to comply with. Out of 71 applications for new arrivals for public housing since she came to power, 68 have been rejected, she says.

The former town councillor says she was invited to Crimea for a conference with Russian entrepreneurs and members of Vladimir Putin’s Russia United party, but could not make it. She has also expressed sympathy for the Catalan independence movement, and attracted criticism for personally refusing to celebrate civil unions of same-sex couples in the town.

Sara Pellegrini, a 35-year-old psychologist having a drink in the town’s main square, believes Ms Ceccardi has simply gone too far — especially on immigration. “There is a fringe of people, the populists, who are looking for simple solutions which won’t have any results.”

Crime in Pisa province and Italy

2016, annual % change in reported incidents



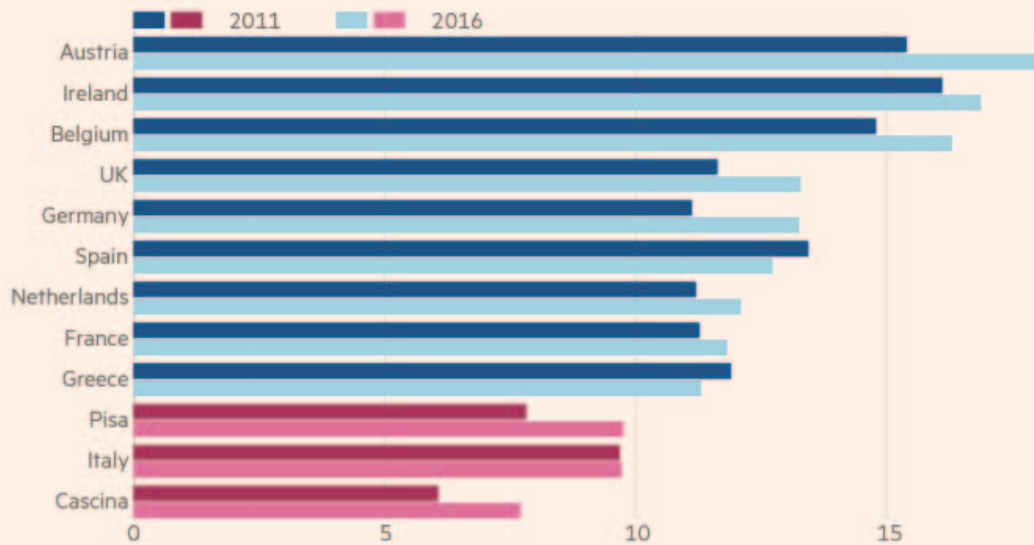
Source: Italy's interior ministry
© FT

The idea that Cascina, Tuscany, or even Italy are about to be overwhelmed by a violent, radical minority of foreigners is fanciful. Despite the recent growth, foreign residents add up to just 8 per cent of the 60m population, much less than in many other EU nations. In Cascina, there are 3,550 foreigners, up from 1,687 in 2006 but still close to the national average, with large Albanian and Senegalese contingents. Moreover, criminality has been dropping across Italy — and in the province of Pisa, where Cascina is situated, it was down by 2.5 per cent between 2015 and 2016, when Ms Ceccardi was elected.

But at the Democratic party's headquarters in the main square, Cristina Conti, the PD's town secretary, acknowledges that what she calls Ms Ceccardi's "false message" on migrants seems to be working politically.

Europe's foreign born population

Selected countries and areas (%)



Sources: Eurostat; ISTAT
© FT

“People are convinced that if we kick them all out we will suddenly return to wellbeing,” says Ms Conti. “They gave a simple answer but you don’t have to be [Albert] Einstein to realise that it’s not the right one. It’s much harder to say we have the Mafia, we have kickbacks, we have tax evasion. Those are invisible problems, while the immigrant is identifiable.”

Ms Conti believes social relations in Cascina have already been damaged by the Ceccardi administration. “It would be better if they stopped scaring people,” she says. “People who have walked calmly in the streets of the town centre until now are moving a few metres to the side if they see a dark-skinned person.”



Cristina Conti, Democratic party secretary for Cascina: 'It's much harder to say we have the Mafia, we have kickbacks, we have tax evasion. Those are invisible problems, while the immigrant is identifiable' © Charlie Bibby

The residents of La Tinaia, the migrant reception centre, are among the most anxious. “She cannot come here and evacuate everyone and throw them on the street. It’s not right,” says Chilly Stephen,

at the centre were too frightened to have their photographs taken.

The Catholic church — inspired by a consistently pro-migrant message from Pope Francis — has been one of the main forces defending the migrants in Cascina. “As a Church, and as Christians, the idea is not to lose sight of the fact that there are people behind this problem,” says Father Elvis Ragusa, a priest in Cascina’s San Lorenzo alle Corti parish. “It’s about looking them in the eyes and welcoming their story.”

The efforts of Father Ragusa, known as Don Elvis, have faced a backlash from Ms Ceccardi, who describes herself as a “not really practising” Catholic. “The Church has the right and duty to send messages of brotherhood and equality,” she says. “But if a government has limited resources, it has to think of its own citizens, otherwise we create a social tension that is not good for anyone.”



Father Elvis Ragusa, a priest in Cascina: ‘There are people behind this problem. It’s about looking them in the eyes and welcoming their story’ © Charlie Bibby

Claudio Loconsole, the Five Star candidate who lost to Ms Ceccardi, takes comfort in the fact that she has not yet succeeded in rooting out migrants from the town, a sign that her strident rhetoric rings hollow, he says. “It’s as if I said from tomorrow I will get rid of gravity — we would all be lighter but it’s impossible. She says: ‘let’s clear out La Tinaia’ but what about water? What about social issues? It’s not 90 people out of 45,000 who are crashing the town.”

Yet the “Cascina model” — as Ms Ceccardi calls it — has inspired the Northern League to set its sights on new political targets. The Northern League last month opened an office in nearby Pisa, the provincial capital. It chose a street in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood near the central railway station as its headquarters for next year’s mayoral race.

At the inauguration, local officials and a few national lawmakers beat the immigration drum incessantly. “On social issues, we always put Italians first; the PD puts immigrants first and we will send them home,” Edoardo Ziello, the Northern League’s town secretary for Pisa, told the gathering. Ms Ceccardi added: “The few Pisans who are left are saying, ‘thanks, thanks for being here, because you are the only hope’.”

At the event, Paolo Pietrini, a 52-year-old radiologist from Cascina, signed up to be a party member, saying he had followed a “political rainbow” that brought him to the Northern League from the extreme left in recent decades. “It’s about security and legality,” he says. “As a man, I am uneasy walking through the streets of Pisa. Imagine a woman or a little girl.”



The opening of a Northern League office in Pisa, Tuscany, attended by Cascina mayor Susanna Ceccardi © Charlie Bibby

Back in Cascina some are despondent at the prospect that the Northern League could penetrate further into Tuscany, and the rest of Italy, on the back of anti-immigrant tirades. Giancarlo Freggia, the president of Paim, a local co-operative that offers services for disadvantaged groups such as the disabled, the elderly and the mentally ill, says political change would be welcome but not if it is a distraction from bigger problems.

Europopulism's next test:

As Italy prepares for elections, the FT has joined La Stampa newspaper to survey the attitudes of Italian voters. In coming weeks the FT will look at just what Italians are thinking ahead of the next test of europopulism.

And in December: Italy's voters share their stories

Unemployment in the province of Pisa has risen from 4.4 per cent in 2008 to 7.3 per cent in 2016. Although relatively low by Italian standards it is still a big jump. “[Ceccardi] campaigned against refugees but the problems are about business, about development,” Mr Freggia says, adding: “It’s actually the Chinese who are taking our jobs. These are people who have a greater entrepreneurial predisposition. It’s not the Senegalese or the Eritreans.”

Down the main street, though, a group of elderly leftwing former carpenters sides with the mayor


when it comes to the new arrivals. “Immigration from Romania, from the east: that’s OK because they do the work our kids won’t do. But not African immigration, no. They come shoeless, naked, they don’t know how to do anything, they will never work, they will never do a thing, they will always be a burden,” says Nevilio Puccini, 73.



Retired carpenter Nevilio Puccini: 'Immigration from Romania, from the East: that's OK because they do the work our kids won't do' © Charlie Bibby

Thousands of miles away, in southern California, Ivan Houston, a 92-year-old second world war veteran and one of the African-American soldiers in Cascina during the liberation, was sorry to hear that intolerance had returned to the town, after so many decades. “The black soldiers were very kind and helpful, and treated the Italians so nicely,” Mr Houston says in a telephone interview. “A lot of our guys came from the Deep South, they worked in the fields, just like the Italians. They saw the state they were in was not so different from where they came from.”

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