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Dynamics of protests and counterprotests around far-right politics.

Abstract

The article investigates the dynamics of protests and counterprotests around far-right politics. By drawing on the literature on contentious politics and the far right, we innovatively integrate the predominant actor-based approach with a more comprehensive perspective that encompasses far-right-related issues. Moreover, we expand the concept of counterprotest by including diverse forms of contentious reactions. Empirically, the analysis focuses on 778 events supporting or opposing far-right politics that occurred in Emilia-Romagna (Italy) from 2015 to 2023. The results show that the presence of far-right actors – particularly the extreme ones – increases the likelihood of experiencing a counterprotest, unlike the issues claimed or the violence of the tactic employed. Concerning the mobilization challenging far-right politics, the proximity to voting stimulates counterprotests only when the electoral result is uncertain. Conversely, the presence of a far-right party in the cabinet discourages tight countermobilization. The conclusions discuss the implications of these findings for the ongoing debate around the rise of far-right politics.

Introduction

The last twenty years have been marked by intense political conflict, rooted in a combination of old and new cleavages. The potential mobilization of this process has been successfully articulated by emerging political challengers, many of whom aligned with far-right ideologies.¹ The spread of nativist and authoritarian politics has gradually permeated all European liberal democracies, including regions traditionally hostile to far-right claims. Alongside an eye-catching rise in electoral support (Mudde, 2007), the upsurge of the far right has also materialized in increasing and enduring activity in contentious politics (Castelli Gattinara et

¹ To avoid confusion in the use of terms, following reviews on the topic (Pirro, 2023), we refer to the far right as an umbrella term that includes the radical right, which is illiberal but democratic, and the extreme right, which is anti-democratic.

al., 2022). Correspondingly, an opposing mobilization challenged such advance in various ways, from targeting emerging extreme and radical right-wing actors to supporting the issues contested by their ideology (such as multiculturalism, LGBTQIA* and gender rights, or the antifascist memory). Yet, the dynamics of how and when such countermobilization directly challenges the far right remain largely overlooked.

To address this gap, the article explores contentious interactions around far-right politics. More precisely, it focuses on the dynamics of protests and counterprotests by investigating both sides of the dispute: the triggering far-right events and the challengers' contentious responses. We examine whether far-right events trigger counterprotests, focusing on the factors provoking the reactions. We do so by exploring the following questions: do these dynamics, if any, follow the same mechanisms identified in other counterprotesting activities? What characteristics of far-right events, such as the type of actors involved, the issues raised, or the tactics employed, lead to counterprotests? Additionally, the article zooms into counterprotests by examining the contextual factors shaping countermobilization, particularly the role of the electoral arena, where the far right has achieved its most significant gains over the past decade. In this part, we wish to answer the question: how much are counterprotest dynamics influenced by electoral fluctuations? Drawing on the literature on contentious politics and the far right, we examine counterprotests through a relational approach that considers both sides of the contention: the far right and its challengers. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the conflict, illustrated by the idea that "if it takes two to tango, it takes at least two to fight" (Franzosi, 1997, p. 287).

The article introduces two novelties. First, while previous studies on the contention around far-right politics have primarily focused on pre-selected actors (Blee et al., 2024), we extend the investigation by considering the issues raised, regardless of the actor involved. Second, we broaden the defining boundaries of counterprotesting, which are still relatively undefined (Ellinas & Lamprianou, 2023). In this study, we innovatively include different forms of counterprotest, in addition to physical gatherings that are close in time and space to the original event. By doing so, we address a gap in the social movement literature, which has predominantly centered on macro-level dynamics of countermobilization, with limited attention to the event-level perspective (Reynolds-Stenson & Earl, 2018).

Our empirical study examines contentious mobilization in Emilia-Romagna, an Italian region with a leftist tradition that has recently experienced the rise of the far right. Following the

Protest Event Analysis (PEA) approach, data was collected from a local newspaper. The dataset includes 778 contentious events from 2015 to 2023, divided into 299 events supporting and 479 countering far-right politics.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we situate the contention around far-right politics within the literature on protests and counterprotests. Building on this, we formulate two sets of hypotheses regarding the factors that shape the mobilization. After providing an overview of the Emilia-Romagna case, we present the data and outline the empirical strategy. Then, we turn to the analysis and discuss the main findings, reflecting on their broader implications for understanding political conflict around far-right politics.

Theoretical framework

The ongoing political conflict surrounding far-right politics is rooted in a dynamic process that intertwines old and new cleavages, with emerging far-right actors successfully embedding prominent tensions along the cultural dimension (Hutter, 2014b). While the far right has achieved notable success in the electoral sphere, its influence has also permeated other political actors and shaped public debate (Miller-Idriss, 2020). At the same time, the far right has become increasingly prominent in contentious politics (Castelli Gattinara et al., 2022). As a result, various types of responses have arisen to face this rise of far-right politics, targeting both emerging far-right actors and the spread of illiberal stances. So far, the literature has focused on institutional and electoral reactions to the far right, although there is increasing interest in responses occurring in the protest arena (Ellinas & Lamprianou, 2021). How much this response is articulated through counterprotesting and how the latter is shaped is, however, still largely unexplored.

Ideological dynamics of protests and counterprotests

The contention around far-right politics can be conceived as an interaction between the far right and its challengers, that is, as “opposing movements” (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, pp. 1632–1633) that constantly challenge each other. In this continuous interaction, the two sides engage either through targeted counterprotests or isolated events. This dichotomy between closely and loosely coupled forms of conflict dates back to the origin of the scholarship on countermobilization, when Zald and Useem (1987) introduced a nuanced perspective of its

dynamics. Within this framework, contentious interactions do “not always take the form of a ‘tight spiral.’ Rather, in many cases we find a ‘loosely coupled tango’ in which countermovements mobilize in response to and against the ‘success’ of their opponents rather than against the movement itself” (Andrews, 2002, p. 918).

Traditionally, countermobilization has been associated with conservative and reactionary actors seeking to preserve their existing privileges (Lo, 1982). Today, however, the situation appears reversed: the far right is challenging democratic institutions, while their exclusionary stances are being countered through contentious politics (Vüllers & Hellmeier, 2022). Contentious actions against far-right events aim to undermine the far-right ambition to mobilize in the streets by claiming to represent “the people” (Boone et al., 2018). Moreover, this countermobilization is motivated by illiberal far-right practices, their “repeated violations of democratic norms, their radical discourse, and their attempts to exclude minority groups” (Vüllers & Hellmeier, 2022, p. 3).

The competition between the far right and its challengers in contentious politics has unfolded in different ways, revolving around some specific issues or the presence of specific actors. Therefore, contemporary scholarship on countermobilization has explored contentious interactions over key issues frequently contested by the far right, such as migration (e.g., Hoffmann et al., 2022), LGBTQIA* rights (e.g., Dorf & Tarrow, 2014), or gender issues (e.g., Banaszak & Ondercin, 2016). In other cases, research has investigated countermobilization targeting specific far-right actors, including radical right-wing parties like Lega in Italy (Campo, 2023), radical right-wing street groups like Pegida in Germany (Vüllers & Hellmeier, 2022), and extreme right-wing organizations like Golden Dawn in Greece (Ellinas & Lamprianou, 2021).

Far-right events triggering counterprotests

Existing studies identify threat as a major driver of countermobilization (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; Reynolds-Stenson & Earl, 2018). Within a threat-centered perspective of collective action, the discussion generally revolves around whether threat acts as a “pull” factor, discouraging mobilization, or a “push” factor, encouraging it. In the context of counterprotesting, the prevailing idea is that threat acts as a driving force, compelling challengers to respond (Reynolds-Stenson & Earl, 2018). In particular, the greater the perceived consequences of inaction, the stronger the motivation to mobilize against the threat

(Einwohner & Maher, 2011). In this vein, it is reasonable to assume that some characteristics of far-right events perceived as particularly threatening are more likely to trigger a counterprotest.

Previous studies showed that events endorsing extreme stances evoke a heightened sense of threat (Earl et al., 2003). Similarly, the radicalism of protesters and the far-right actors involved might impact the likelihood of triggering a counterprotest. Far-right actors often face stigmatization (Ammassari, 2024), which has primarily been associated with their participation in electoral politics but also persists when they engage in contentious activities (Gagnon, 2024). However, while radical right-wing parties were often able to get around stigmatization (Mendes & Dennison, 2021), thanks also to their institutionalization within the party system, the same cannot be said for the extreme right-wing actors, who continue to face enduring vetoes, partly due to their historical connection to the fascist milieu (Bjånesøy et al., 2023). Following this, we advance the following hypothesis:

H1a: The presence of a far-right actor increases the probability of a counterprotest, particularly in the case of extreme right-wing actors.

The contested nature of protester claims, that is, the conflict over specific issues, is also acknowledged to stimulate counterprotest (Reynolds-Stenson & Earl, 2018), a mechanism that could also affect far-right mobilization. While the far right has often been inaccurately portrayed as a "single-issue" player (Mudde, 2019, p. 31) primarily focused on opposing migration and multiculturalism, many far-right actors, especially after gaining prominence in the political landscape, have campaigned on a broader range of issues. They have contributed to advancing a conservative agenda, prompting a "cultural backlash" (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) on issues such as gender and LGBTQIA* rights (Lavizzari, 2024) and the memory of the fascist past (Marchese & Tortola, 2024). Overall, the presence of contentious or threatening stances, such as those related to intolerance or discrimination, can galvanize the challengers to stand in opposition and demonstrate solidarity with targeted groups. This can create a strong motivation for counterprotests, as individuals and groups may seek to challenge and counteract the ideologies and actions they perceive as harmful or divisive. In this vein, we hypothesize:

H1b: The presence of a contested far-right-related issue increases the probability of a counterprotest.

Another characteristic of contentious events that may have a role in triggering a reaction is the disruptiveness of the repertoire of action employed. As emerged from the repression scholarship (e.g., Davenport et al., 2011; Earl et al., 2003), protesters adopting peaceful tactics pose less of a threat to potential opponents, since these practices are usually considered less disturbing and entail fewer immediate costs. Conversely, more radical tactics can be considered stormier and elicit contentious reactions. Although recent studies have found mixed findings in this regard (Reynolds-Stenson & Earl, 2018; Vüllers & Hellmeier, 2022), we argue that the use of violence is closely associated with extremist and less institutionalized milieus (Minkenberg, 2019), which are also more heavily stigmatized (Bjånesøy et al., 2023). Therefore, the use of violent practices could serve as a significant trigger. In this vein, we expect that far-right events employing violent actions are more likely to provoke a counterprotest than far-right events adopting peaceful practices:

H1c: The more disruptive the far-right action, the higher the probability of a counterprotest.

Counterprotesting far-right events

In their seminal work, Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) assessed the importance of the context to understand the conditions under which countermobilization emerges. Given its genuine osmosis with the electoral sphere, several studies have pointed to the influence of the electoral context in shaping the contention around far-right politics. However, scholars have so far mostly tried to understand the way counterprotests targeting far-right events affect electoral outcomes (Colombo et al., 2024; Ellinas & Lamprianou, 2023). Evidence on the reverse perspective, namely the role of the electoral context in shaping the counterprotest targeting far-right events, is still scarce. Nonetheless, we argue that, since the nature of the current far right is strictly linked to the electoral sphere (Minkenberg, 2019), it is important to assess this framework.

When looking at the influence of electoral politics on contentious mobilization, elections and electoral campaigns are thought to create opportunities for contentious mobilization (McAdam & Tarrow, 2013). This interpretation has also been applied to counterprotesting dynamics, although the results are mixed (Inclán, 2012). The argument suggests that, during electoral campaigns, a period of heightened public attention to politics, protesters may decide to increase their mobilization to draw attention to their concerns among electoral actors or, conversely, reduce their activities to avoid being perceived as troublemakers (Inclán, 2012). In our case,

since the rise of the far right has been mostly electoral, protesters might counter its growth more intensely during electoral cycles. Furthermore, the advance of radical right-wing parties has been accompanied by expanding grassroots activism, meaning an increasing presence of these actors in the streets, especially before elections (Favero & Zulianello, 2023). Thus, we hypothesize:

H2a: The proximity to elections increases the probability of a counterprotest targeting far-right events.

Besides electoral campaigns, the political alignment of governments has well-recognized effects on contentious politics (Tilly, 2008). However, it is less clear how political opponents in power influence tight countermobilization (Inclán, 2012). Concerning the reactions against far-right events, opportunism can play an important role. On the one hand, the perceived weakness of the opponents can serve as a stimulus for countermobilization, always in case the challenged group has enough relevance (Reynolds-Stenson & Earl, 2018). On the other hand, large numbers of people do not protest if they believe that their efforts will be futile (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). Then, when the strength of the opponents makes it impossible or pointless to challenge them, counterprotesters are less likely to mobilize. In this vein, the presence of radical right-wing actors in the government might discourage opponents of far-right politics, thereby reducing opportunities for countermobilizing. So, it is expected that protesters will have fewer incentives to counterprotest far-right events when radical right-wing parties are in the cabinet, as follows:

H2b: The presence of radical right-wing parties in the cabinet decreases the probability of a counterprotest targeting far-right events.

Emilia-Romagna: a shifting political landscape

Recent political events have pointed to Italy as a fruitful lens through which to investigate the conflict around far-right politics. Over the past decade, indeed, the country was marked by an impressive advance of far-right politics: on the one hand, radical right-wing parties surged in the elections, culminating in 2022 when a coalition led by Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) won the general elections (Garzia, 2023); on the other hand, grassroots extreme-right mobilization gained important successes (Frazzetta, 2022). This wave of far-right politics has even extended to regions traditionally resistant to far-right claims, such as Emilia-Romagna.

Historically, Emilia-Romagna has been a stronghold of the left. However, the region has increasingly reflected broader trends in Italian politics, with the far right gaining ground in electoral politics, especially since 2018 (Tronconi & Valbruzzi, 2020; for further details, see Table A1 in the Appendix). Although more challenging to identify and less studied, the region has also experienced far-right grassroots mobilizations. A notable example occurred in Goro, a small town in the province of Ferrara, where, in October 2016, a group of residents set up roadblocks to prevent the arrival of refugee women and children. This was not an isolated episode: in that period, the press reported several protests targeting municipalities, hotel managers, and cooperatives involved in refugee reception (Caponio & Cappiali, 2017).

The breakthrough of the far right, however, was opposed by contentious street mobilization (Campo, 2023). Notably, since late 2019, the region has been crossed by the so-called Sardine movement, opposing the electoral advance of radical right-wing parties (Hamdaoui, 2022). That said, contentious interactions between the far right and its challengers are not new in the Italian context. Notable mobilizations have occurred throughout the last century, such as in the years preceding the fascist regime (Franzosi, 1997) and between the 1950s and 1970s (Caciagli, 1988).

In this vein, we selected Emilia-Romagna as our case study, a region characterized by a long-standing tradition of leftist hegemony, which has recently started to coexist with a growing far-right presence. This interplay between entrenched leftist traditions and the emergence of far-right forces makes Emilia-Romagna an intriguing case for analyzing the dynamics of contention around far-right politics. Furthermore, it serves as a representative example of regions that have historically been hostile to far-right ideologies but are now being challenged by their rise.

Data and methods

Data

Event data was collected from a selection of articles published in the print edition of *Corriere di Bologna*, a local version of *Corriere della Sera*, Italy's most widely read newspaper, which has previously been used to investigate far-right contentious mobilization (Castelli Gattinara et al., 2022). The source was selected thanks to a pilot test (more details in the Appendix, Table A2). While newspaper-based PEA data is valuable, it inherently comes with limitations, particularly the selective reporting of events, which may not always provide a representative

sample of all events (Hutter, 2014a), even when local media sources are used (Almeida & Lichbach, 2003). However, relying on local newspapers enables us to partially mitigate the selection bias, capturing data on small-scale events that are often overlooked in national editions (Daphi et al., 2024). The list of keywords (Annex A3 in the Appendix) used to retrieve articles combines terms referring to contentious repertoires (e.g., "march" or "sit-in"), far-right actors (e.g., "Lega" or "CasaPound") and contentious issues (e.g., "migration"). The resulting dataset includes events distributed across Emilia-Romagna and provides various information on contentious mobilization. This comprises event-level variables, such as the date, repertoire of action, issues, and the actors involved, as well as contextual-level variables, such as the proximity of elections and the political orientation of the cabinet.

The unit of analysis includes several types of contentious actions: demonstrative actions, such as open letters, petitions, and peaceful marches; confrontational actions, such as non-authorized demonstrations and blockades; and violent actions, such as disruptive demonstrations and physical assaults. Moreover, the unit of analysis includes events that, as documented by the source article, either support or counter far-right politics. Concerning actions supporting far-right politics, we selected events involving either the participation of far-right actors or issues associated with the far-right agenda, such as migration and multiculturalism, gender and LGBTQIA* rights, and the memory of the fascist period. Regarding contentious actions countering far-right politics, they refer to events targeting far-right actors or addressing the aforementioned issues in opposition to far-right stances. Within these opposing mobilizations, counterprotests are those contentious actions that are explicitly motivated by another action they oppose. In contrast, actions that are not tied to another event are considered as loosely opposing the challengers. This distinction was deduced from newspaper articles, identifying an event as a counterprotest when the report explicitly stated that it was motivated by the occurrence of another action from the opposing mobilization.

The research focuses on the period between 2015 and 2023, covering eight years marked by intensified conflict around the rise of far-right politics and contentious responses to it. Specifically, data collection begins on April 15, 2015, due to the availability of sources, and ends on April 15, 2023.

The final dataset consists of 778 contentious events: 299 of them support far-right politics (38.4 percent), while 479 oppose far-right politics (61.6 percent).

Dependent and independent variables

Mirroring our research questions, the empirical section is divided into two main parts. The first part examines the role of the far-right events' characteristics in triggering counterprotests. The second part explores the impact of the context in which counterprotests occur by investigating the role of electoral context in shaping counterprotests targeting far-right events.

We work with two dependent variables. The first is a dichotomous variable indicating whether a far-right event provokes at least one counterprotest. Out of all far-right events, those that did not experience any counterprotest are assigned a value of 0, while those that experienced at least one counterprotest are assigned a value of 1. Among the 299 far-right events included in the dataset, 100 events trigger at least one counterprotest (33.4 percent). The second dependent variable focuses on contentious actions countering far-right politics. This dichotomous variable distinguishes between events that are responding to a specific far-right event, categorized as counterprotests (value of 1), and those countering far-right politics without directly reacting to a specific far-right event, categorized as loosely coupled responses to far-right politics (value of 0). Among the 479 events countering far-right politics, 144 are classified as counterprotests (30.1 percent).

The defining characteristics of counterprotest have not been systematized yet and are often “mostly implied rather than explicated” (Ellinas & Lamprianou, 2023, p. 3). Extant research typically relies on a classic definition of counterprotests, referring to counterdemonstrations where the opponents counter-organize a direct response close in time and space to the triggering event (e.g., Ellinas & Lamprianou, 2023; Reynolds-Stenson & Earl, 2018; Vüllers & Hellmeier, 2022). To provide a more nuanced understanding of the conflictual interactions, we expand this definition by conceptualizing counterprotests as contentious actions explicitly motivated by at least one other contentious action, regardless of the temporal and spatial proximity. Removing these boundaries allows for the inclusion of events that are not physically adjacent to the triggering action or that do not occur simultaneously but are still reacting to a specific event. However, in terms of temporal proximity, most counterprotests occur on the same day as the triggering event (for further details, see Table A4 in the Appendix).

To test the first set of hypotheses on how far-right events may trigger counterprotests, we consider the presence of different types of far-right *actors*, the claim for contested *issues*, and the disruptiveness of the *repertoire of actions* as independent variables. Concerning mobilizing

actors, the involvement of radical and extreme right-wing actors in an event is operationalized through two dummy variables (1 = a radical / extreme right-wing actor is involved; 0 = the actor is not involved). We differentiate between radical and extreme right-wing actors according to their relationship with the democratic system: actors who are illiberal but operate within democratic boundaries are classified as radical, whereas those who are both illiberal and anti-democratic are labeled as extreme (Pirro, 2023). A comprehensive list of radical and extreme right-wing actors mobilizing in Emilia-Romagna during the investigated period is provided in the Appendix (Table A5). The *issues* claimed during the triggering events are operationalized as dummy variables (1 = a certain issue is claimed during the event; 0 = not claimed). The issues' categories were developed by combining pre-selected issues from existing research on far-right contentious politics (e.g., Castelli Gattinara et al., 2022; Ellinas, 2020) with issues emerging from the data collection process. In particular, the analysis includes the following issues: migration and multiculturalism, gender and LGBTQIA* rights, and the contentious memory of the fascist past. Lastly, for the *repertoire of actions*, we assign a value of 1 to events involving violent tactics and 0 to non-violent tactics. Violent tactics include physical violence against people (e.g., brawls), damage to property (e.g., arsons), or symbolic and verbal aggressions (e.g., burning puppets).

To test the second set of hypotheses, which examines the role of the electoral context in shaping counterprotests, we consider two independent variables. The first variable is the presence of a radical right-wing party in the national government, operationalized as a dichotomous variable (0 = no; 1 = yes). The second variable is proximity to elections, also measured as a dichotomous variable, based on the temporal distance between the action and the election day (0 = outside the electoral cycle; 1 = inside the electoral cycle). The electoral cycle is defined as the three months leading up to election day, including election day itself. The elections held in the investigated period include regional elections on 26 January 2020 and national elections on 4 March 2018 and 25 September 2022.

Methods

The investigation of whether event characteristics affect the occurrence of a counterprotest employs a survival analysis by selecting far-right events (N = 299). A main feature of survival analysis is that it allows to capture the time-specific risk of experiencing an event, in this case, a counterprotest. We can thus examine far-right events experiencing counterprotests from those that are not followed by any. Far-right events are at risk of counterprotest in the period

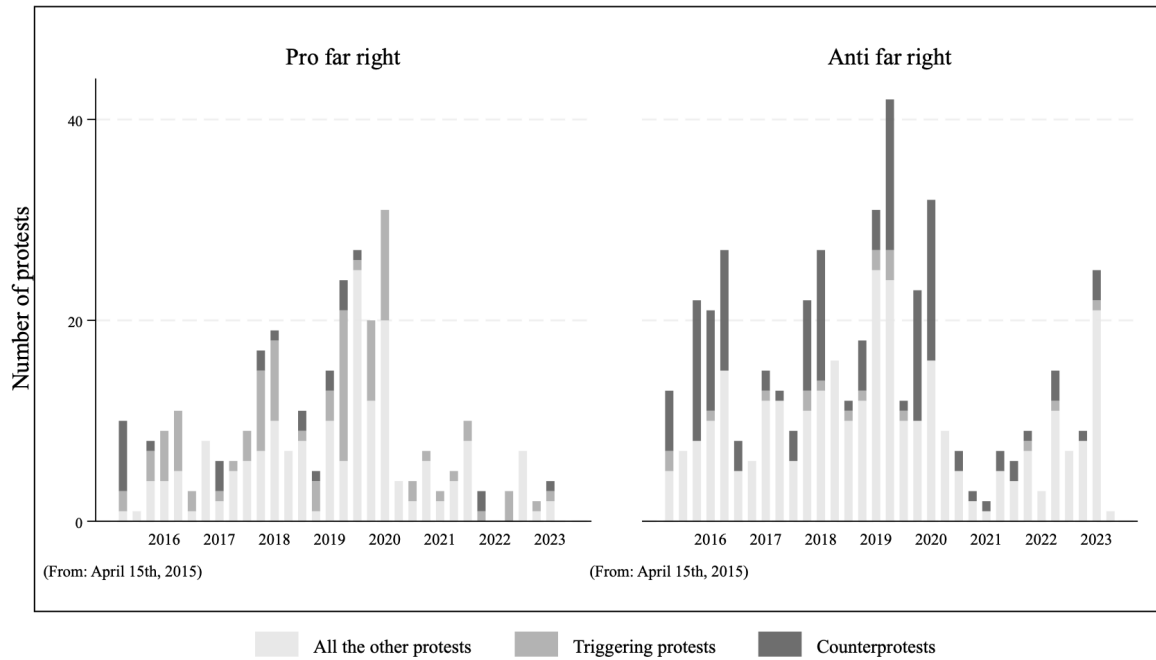
considered, measured in days from 15 April 2015 to 15 April 2023. We consider an episode to be censored if it does not trigger any counterprotest. We first descriptively explore survival rates with Kaplan-Meier curves, categorizing far-right events into two different groups: events attended by far-right actors and events not attended by far-right actors but supporting far-right-related issues. In a second step, since our interest lies in the association between the covariates and the triggering of a counterprotest while controlling for confounders, we use Cox proportional hazards regression (Cox, 1972). We consider every contentious event at risk of experiencing a counterprotest, even counterprotests themselves. Survival analysis is not new to protest event data, including studies on counterprotests against the far right (Vüllers & Hellmeier, 2022). As robustness checks, we run logistic models that have been included in the Appendix (Table A7).

Second, to test hypotheses related to the role of the electoral context on counterprotesting, we elaborate a logistic regression by selecting events countering far-right politics (N = 479). Even in this case, the model selection is in line with similar studies (Reynolds-Stenson & Earl, 2018). Since the modeling might suffer from small-sample bias, a Firth correction (Firth, 1993) has been employed. Differences between this regression and the standard one were negligible, suggesting that the original model was worthy of remaining. However, the Firth-corrected model is included in the Appendix (Table A8).

Results

Figure 1 illustrates the contentious events spanning from 2015 to 2023 in Emilia-Romagna, divided by ideological alignment and grouped into quarterly intervals. The figure distinguishes between three types of events: those that provoked at least one contentious reaction (i.e., *triggering protests*), those that are motivated by such triggering protests (i.e., *counterprotests*), and all other protests. Although the analysis primarily focuses on far-right events as triggers and identifies their challengers as counterprotesters, the graph includes all three event types in both mobilization scenarios to achieve a more nuanced perspective.

Figure 1. Quarterly distribution of protests and counterprotests by ideological side



Notes: Emilia-Romagna, 2015-2023 (N = 778). For the sake of clarity, events that both counterprotest another event and experience a counterprotest are classified as counterprotests. Due to the limited number of these events (7), this overlap does not affect the interpretation of the graph.

Differences emerge between the two types of contention. Events supporting far-right politics (left-hand graph of Figure 1) are mostly contentious actions that neither trigger nor are reactions to other events (60 percent). However, triggering events constitute an important portion of the contention (31.3 percent), while counterprotests are less frequent (8.7 percent). A closer examination of the various types of far-right actions reveals that they are primarily demonstrative and peaceful (for further details, see Table A6 in the Appendix).

Even in the case of challengers' mobilization (right-hand graph of Figure 1), contentious events that loosely challenge far-right politics are prominent (66.2 percent). However, this mobilization shows a minimal proportion of triggering actions (3.8 percent) and a substantial presence of counterprotests (30.1 percent). A closer look at the diverse forms of counterprotesting actions (see Table A6 in the Appendix) shows a predominance of confrontational yet non-violent tactics, which account for 66.7 percent of all cases. Among the 144 counterprotests, the most common actions are non-violent disturbances of other events (28.5 percent) and confrontational demonstrations (19.4 percent), together accounting for most

activities. Violent actions, while less common (20.8 percent), include violent demonstrations and disturbance of other events. This indicates that counterprotests primarily rely on non-violent confrontation, while violent escalation occurs sparingly.

For both sides of the contention, the number of events declines after the first quarter of 2020, likely due to the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. The restrictive measures implemented during this period, including lockdowns, significantly reduced opportunities for in-person street mobilizations (Borbáth et al., 2021), thereby impacting the overall distribution of events.

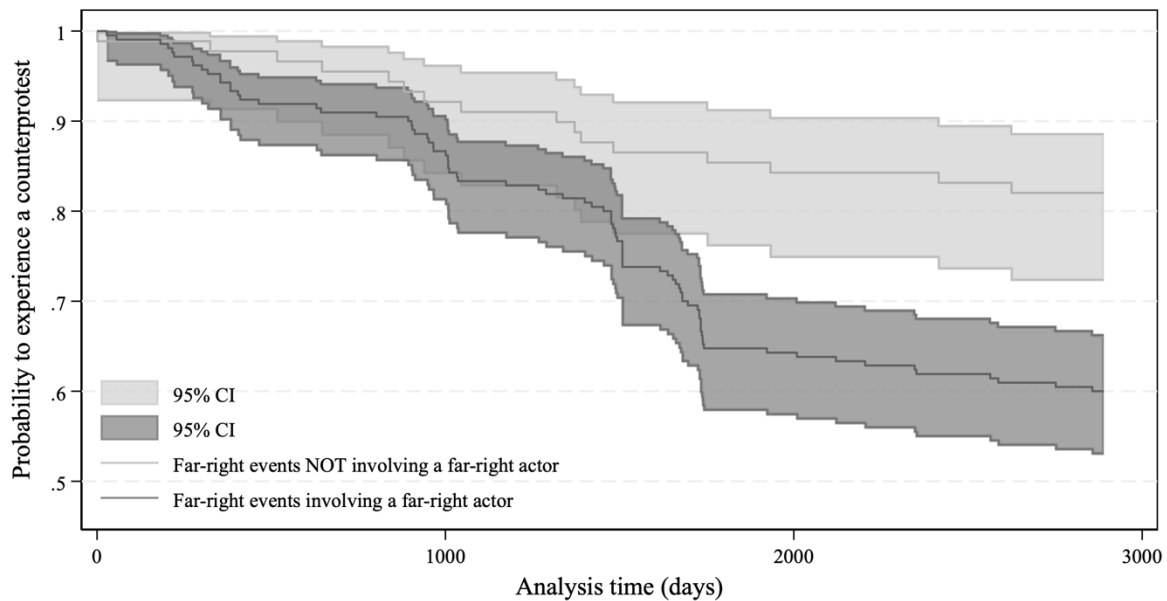
Ultimately, these descriptive statistics suggest two key findings: the divergent nature of the two types of contention and how counterprotesting predominantly pertains to mobilization countering far-right politics.

Far-right politics triggering a counterprotest

The Kaplan-Meier curves (Figure 2) graphically represent the survival rate of two groups of far-right events: events attended by far-right actors and events not attended by far-right actors but supporting far-right-related issues. Here, survival rates refer to the chance of experiencing a counterprotest in the time span that goes from 15 April 2015 to 15 April 2023. A lower survival curve indicates that the group of events is less likely to survive and, consequently, is more likely to trigger counterprotests. As shown by the two curves, the survival probability of events involving far-right actors decreases over time at a faster rate than that of events associated with far-right issues. Therefore, events involving far-right actors have a higher probability of provoking a contentious reaction throughout the observation period. Conversely, events supporting the far-right agenda but not registering the presence of far-right actors are less likely to experience a counterprotest. This descriptively suggests that, within far-right mobilization, provoking a contentious reaction is primarily associated with events where radical and extreme right-wing actors are present, rather than with those solely addressing far-right-related issues.

Figure 2. Kaplan-Meier survival curves of experiencing a counterprotest

Kaplan–Meier survival estimates



Notes: Emilia-Romagna, N = 299. Analysis time ranges from April 15, 2015, to April 15, 2023 (in days: 0 to 2923). Y-axis cut off at 0.5 to improve readability.

The results from Kaplan-Meier estimates are confirmed by the Cox regression model, which computes the probability for far-right protests to trigger a counterprotest. In particular, the results allow us to test H1a, H1b and H1c, examining how the presence of far-right actors, contested issues and violent actions affect counterprotests. As shown in Table 1, the presence of far-right actors significantly increases the hazard of experiencing a counterprotest within the considered timeframe. This effect is particularly pronounced for events involving extreme right-wing actors and less so for those with radical right-wing actors. Specifically, events involving radical right-wing actors show an exponentiated coefficient of 1.789, indicating that the hazard of experiencing a counterprotest increases by 78.9 percent for each event attended by such actors, though this result is only slightly significant. The increase is even greater when there is an extreme right-wing actor involved in the far-right event, as, in this case, the hazard of a counterprotest increases to 270.3 percent (at a p-value of less than 0.001). This twofold outcome – namely, the higher chances of provoking a counterprotest with the presence of a far-right actor and the stronger effect when the actor is extremist - is in line with our expectations (*Hypothesis 1a* is confirmed). Conversely, different contested issues raised are not statistically significant to predict the hazards of triggering a counterprotest. The same goes for the use of

violent forms of action. These two findings do not confirm our expectations (*Hypotheses 1b* and *1c* are not confirmed).

Table 1. Cox proportional hazard models

	Hazard ratio (s.e.)
Actor attendance	
Radical right	1.789† (0.576)
Extreme right	3.703*** (1.206)
Issue raised	
Migration and multiculturalism	0.861 (0.226)
Gender issue	1.391 (0.838)
LGBTQIA* rights	0.549 (0.235)
Contentious memory	0.727 (0.246)
Form of action	
Violent	0.713 (0.413)
N of failures (events experiencing a counterprotest)	100
N of events	299

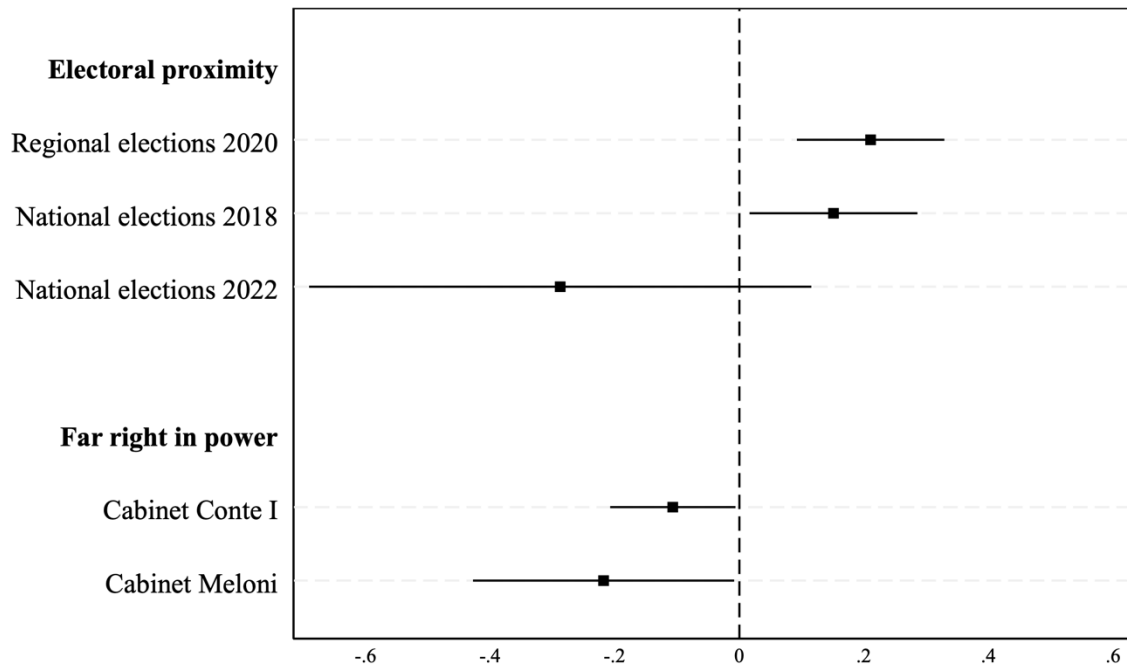
Notes: DV: experiencing a counterprotest. Exponentiated coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.1$.

Robustness checks, including binary and Firth-corrected logistic regressions (Table A7 in the Appendix), confirm the consistency of these findings across alternative modeling approaches, bolstering confidence in our results.

Counterprotesting far-right politics

The electoral context emerges as a key factor in shaping opportunities for counterprotest. Results in Figure 3 show, firstly, that findings regarding electoral proximity are mixed. The proximity to the 2018 national elections and the 2020 regional elections enhances the likelihood of observing counterprotests that directly challenge a specific far-right protest, rather than being loosely coupled responses to far-right politics not tied to any particular far-right event. Specifically, the proximity to the 2020 regional elections increases the probability of counterprotesting by about 19 percent, while the effect is slightly weaker for the proximity to the 2018 national elections (15.5 percent). The proximity to the 2022 election, instead, is statistically not significant. Both the 2018 and 2020 elections were characterized by close competition with radical right-wing parties (Tronconi & Valbruzzi, 2020). In contrast, before the 2022 election, the success of the far right, especially of FdI, was expected (Garzia, 2023), potentially fostering a sense of resignation among the challengers. The results partially support *Hypothesis 2a* concerning the positive influence of electoral campaigns on the decision to directly counterprotest far-right events. However, the varying influences of each election suggest that this mechanism may change, especially considering the closeness of the competition with far-right challengers.

Figure 3. Change in the predicted probabilities of engaging in a counterprotest targeting far-right politics



Notes: Emilia-Romagna, 2015-2023 (N = 479). Full models are included in the Appendix, Table A8.

Secondly, we analyzed how the presence of at least one radical right-wing party in the national government affects the likelihood of challengers counterprotesting a specific far-right event. During the period studied, Italy had two far-right cabinets: the first Conte cabinet (from June 2018 to September 2019), in which Lega collaborated as a minor force, and the cabinet led by Meloni (since October 2022), which is a full-fledged far-right government. During the first Conte cabinet, the probability of observing counterprotests directly challenging far-right events decreased by 10.7 percent. This decline was even more pronounced under the Meloni cabinet, where the probability fell by 21.8 percent. These findings align with our expectations about the diminishing opportunities for counterprotests when radical right-wing parties are in power at the national level (*Hypothesis 2b* is confirmed).

Discussion and conclusion

Although there is increasing research on countermobilization against the far right, the dynamics of protests and counterprotests are still largely unexplored. By adopting a broader approach to the conceptualization of counterprotesting and far-right politics, the results underscore the crucial role that different actor types play in provoking counterprotests. In particular, the presence of extremist actors, like CasaPound and Forza Nuova, is a stronger trigger than the

presence of radical actors, like Lega and FdI. The trigger for counterprotest thus mostly concerns far-right events attended by actors with explicit ties to fascist milieus, while other events are much more tolerated, even those involving radical right-wing actors. These findings align with recent research on public tolerance of the contemporary far right (Bjånesøy et al., 2023). Additionally, the type of issue claimed or the disruptiveness of the forms of action do not stimulate countermobilization. This result suggests that counterprotesters' mobilization tends to be driven by the repulsion towards specific actors rather than the threatening nature of far-right events.

Furthermore, our results show how the electoral context shapes countermobilization directly targeting far-right events. The proximity of elections increases the likelihood of counterprotests only when voting outcomes are uncertain. Conversely, the involvement of radical right-wing parties in government reduces the probability of counterprotest activities. These outcomes raise two further reflections. First, they highlight the strong connection between the electoral and protest arenas in the contention around far-right politics. Second, they suggest that countermobilization is affected by the perceived strength of the far right in electoral politics: when it is possible to compete with the far right, the stimulus for directly countering it is higher; otherwise, counterprotesters appear resigned.

These findings have important implications for how democracy functions, especially in relation to the long-lasting and still crucial dilemma of "tolerating the intolerant" (Capoccia, 2005). On the one hand, the heterogeneity of contention illustrates the pluralistic nature of participation, where various voices and perspectives are represented and contested. Notably, our results specifically demonstrate that challengers actively countering the extreme right, which itself poses a threat to democratic principles, mobilize in tight responses. This indicates a protective mechanism, where countermobilization rises in contentious politics to defend democratic values against extremist threats. On the other hand, our results reveal that electoral politics plays a crucial role in either encouraging or suppressing counterprotests to far-right events, especially depending on the success of radical right-wing parties.

The article expands research on the contention around far-right politics by offering an original investigation on the dynamics of protests and counterprotests and finding relevant results concerning the factors shaping this mobilization. At the same time, we fully acknowledge its limitations. Mostly, while Emilia-Romagna provides a compelling case through which to examine the dynamics of conflict around far-right politics, particularly as a representative

example of regions traditionally hostile to far-right claims that recently experienced a rise of far-right politics, the lack of a cross-sectional perspective limits the generalizability of the results beyond this type of context. Further studies may explore these dynamics across different contexts.

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