

Article

Exclusionary Populism and Islamophobia: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Spain

Laura Cervi 

Department of Journalism and Communication Sciences, Autonomous University of Barcelona, 08193 Bellaterra, Spain; Laura.Cervi@uab.cat

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Abstract: Exclusionary populism is well known for twisting real grievances of the citizens, by problematizing the gap between “us” and “them”, capitalizing on identity lines, calling out as “others” those who do not share “pure people’s” identity and culture. Especially after 9/11, Muslims have become the ideal-type of “other”, making Islamophobia the primary populist anti-paradigm. This article contributes to the burgeoning literature on Islamophobic populism analyzing the presence of Islamophobia in the electoral discourse of Vox party in Spain and Lega in Italy. In addition, it makes a novel contribution by discussing and testing the existence of different models of Islamophobia, distinguishing between “banal Islamophobia” and “ontological Islamophobia”. Applying clause-based semantic text analysis—including qualitative and quantitative variables—to thirty speeches by the two party leaders, Santiago Abascal and Matteo Salvini, during the last three elections (General, Regional and European), the paper concludes that, despite the similarities, the two politicians display two different models of Islamophobia. Whereas Abascal displays a clear “ontological Islamophobia”, depicting Muslims ontologically incompatible with Spanish civilization (defined precisely by its anti-Muslim history), the latter presents a mix of arguments that oscillate between “ontological” and “banal” Islamophobia.

Keywords: Islamophobia; political discourse; populism; far right parties; Spain; Italy

1. Introduction

Already more than fifty years ago, Seymour Martin Lipset (1960) indicated how social–political discontent of people is likely to lead them to xenophobia, racism and anti-cosmopolitanism. As Kaya (2018) suggests, applying Lipset’s words to the contemporary age, we could state that today Muslims have become the most popular scapegoats in many parts of the world.

Surveys show that Islamophobia is on the rise across Europe (Bayraklı and Hafez 2016, 2020). Different studies have tried to understand the reasons behind this growth, pointing at the increasingly numerous Muslim presence in the “West”, the even more increasing visibility of Islam in these societies (Allievi 2006), together with political actors’ interest in constructing the “Islamic threat” (Allen 2012), apace with growing fear of Islam, particularly since 9/11 (Cesari 2010).

Acknowledging that Islamophobia springs from different sources and discourses (Cesari 2011) and it intersects with various political rationales (Ekman 2015), from the illiberal extreme to the more liberal mainstream (Allen 2010b; Mondon and Winter 2017), it is undeniable that, especially after 9/11, Islamophobia has become the primary far-right populist anti-paradigm (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017).

Notably, exclusionary populism (Betz 2003) is well known for twisting grievances of the citizens, by problematizing the gap between “us” and “them”, capitalizing on identity lines, calling out as “others” those who do not share people’s identity and culture.

Muslims, in other words, have become the ideal-type of “other”, making Islamophobic views so central in today’s far-right populist discourse that many scholars have started to use the expression “Islamophobic populism” (Hafez 2017).

This phenomenon has been examined mainly from cultural and strategic perspectives. Betz and Meret (2009) look at Islamophobic populism as a form of identity politics, a “programmatically combination of immigration, Islamization and identity” (Betz and Meret 2009, p. 334). Other studies, focusing on the strategic logic of populism, have analyzed anti-Islam parties’ calculations to appeal to anti-Islam voters (Williams 2010), hiding their anti-Semitic past (Hafez 2014), or showed how it functions as an electoral strategy, based on vote-maximization through weakening the incumbent leaders or anti-Islam parties’ main opponents (Oztig et al. 2020).

This article contributes to the burgeoning literature on exclusionary populism analyzing the presence of Islamophobia in the electoral discourse of Vox party in Spain and Lega in Italy. Both countries are newcomers of immigration, thus find themselves fully immersed in what Allievi (2006) calls the moment of transition between “Islam in Europe” and “Islam of Europe”.

Whereas, Italy, often defined as “the promised land” of populism (Tarchi 2015), is one of the European countries with highest rates of anti-immigrant—and anti-Muslim in particular—attitudes (Istituto Carlo Cattaneo 2018), Spain has been considered an exception, precisely for the absence of populist parties, due, among other reasons, to the lack of saliency of immigration in the political debate (Alonso and Kaltwasser 2015).

In addition, the paper makes a novel contribution, discussing and testing the existence of different models of Islamophobia (Alietti and Padovan 2013), proposing to distinguish between “banal” and “ontological Islamophobia”.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Exclusionary Populism

Due to the diversity of phenomena (Canovan 1981), defining populism is not an easy task.

The most accepted definition considers populism as a “thin centered” ideology (Mudde 2004, p. 543) that differentiates itself from “thick-centered” or “full” ideologies—such as fascism, liberalism, and socialism—which provide more far-reaching ideas about social transformation, for being too insubstantial to provide a blueprint for societal change, and, accordingly, needs to be attached to a thick-ideology by populist politicians. Thus, populism can be found alternatively merged with forms of nationalism, liberalism, socialism, federalism, or conservatism (Stanley 2008).

The concept of a thin ideology solves the persistent problem of how to explain the variety of political content associated with manifestations of populism, by identifying common elements, and, at the same time, it allows us to illustrate the dependent relationship of populism with ideologies that project a more detailed set of answers to key political questions.

Defined in this way, populism, on the one hand, is totally devoid of all pejorative and authoritarian connotations and, on the other hand, it has no political color, it can be both left and right wing.

The common core of populism is a Manichean vision (De la Torre 1997) depicting society as ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the people” versus “the elites”, who are depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, and voice (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008).

The specific identity of “people” can vary according to the type of populism: right-wing populists propose a more exclusive and nativist conception of the people or “nation”, while left-wing populism tends to see the people as a “class”. However, both understand that the people are one “and their voice, if well understood, has a unified and unifying message” (Stoker 2006).

The formulation of the élite can vary—although it usually includes politics, media, financial, judicial and intellectual élites accused of being incompetent and selfish—yet the central claim that

a group of élites is oppressing the people and seeking to undermine their rights and voice, does not change (Kriesi 2014; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008).

Nativism, on the other side, can be described as a combination of nationalism and xenophobia. It is an exclusionist, ethno-nationalist notion of the nation, based on the assumption that a nation is founded on a particular historical trajectory and, thus, grounded in a particular historically evolved culture and system of values, which must be preserved and defended. At the same time, also a political doctrine holding that the interests and the will of the native-born should reign supreme over those of new arrivers (Betz 2003).

As previously mentioned, often far-right populists embrace nativism, proposing a more exclusive and nativist conception of the people or “nation”, generating what can be defined as “exclusionary populism” (Betz 2017).

According to some authors (Stavrakakis et al. 2017), nativism is so predominant in this type of populism, which mobilize more against the (perceived) enemy from abroad rather than against the (perceived) enemy from above, that it would be more appropriate to use the term “exclusionary (ethnic) nationalism”. However, as Betz (2017) illustrates, in exclusionary populism, the nodal points of populism acquire meaning through the articulation with nativism (Betz 2017). Through this articulation, all the “others”, that in socioeconomic terms might be close to the “ordinary people”, can be systematically excluded from the category of the “pure people” by presenting them as “non-pure”, hence threatening. In other words, the elites are perceived as residing “above” the people and the “others” are located “below” the people (Abts and Rummens 2007, p. 418). Accordingly, they are portrayed as enemies, accusing them of conspiring—normally together with or with the direct or indirect help of the élite—against the “people” (Panizza 2005, pp. 16–17).

2.2. What Kind of Islamophobia?

Before discussing the relationship between exclusionary populism and Islamophobia, it is important to understand the meaning of this concept.

As Allen (2020) points out, the recent history of the term Islamophobia begins in the United Kingdom, somewhere around the late 1980s/early 1990s, when it began to be used to indicate rejection of and discrimination against the resident Muslim population. Following the publication of the Runnymede Trust report (1997), and particularly in the post 9/11 period, it became a “contested concept in the public space” (Allen 2010a).

According to some scholars (e.g., Iqbal 2010; Shryock 2013), Islamophobia is not new a phenomena, rather “a new word for an old fear” (Iqbal 2010), and can be considered a form of religious intolerance, whose manifestations can be found in historic wars, crusades and genocides, spread long over centuries. Others believe that “to reduce it to the banal question of religion is a “mean of obviating its importance” (Tyrrer 2013, p. 5), since it is based on the racialization of Muslims (Carr and Haynes 2015).

The process of racialization entails ascribing sets of characteristics viewed as inherent to members of a group because of their physical or cultural traits. These are not limited to skin tone or pigmentation, but include a myriad of attributes, including cultural traits such as language, clothing, and religious practices (Carr and Haynes 2015).

In other words, as Garner and Selod explain, “people (physical bodies) are the ultimate site of racism, even if the path toward those bodies lies through cultural terrain” (Garner and Selod 2015, p. 4).

Islamophobia, thus, emerges as “racial”, as it can be seen as a set of ideas and practices that amalgamate all Muslims into one group and the characteristics allegedly associated with Muslims (violence, misogyny, political allegiance/disloyalty, incompatibility with Western values, etc.) are treated as “static” (Bayraklı and Hafez 2016, p. 7), innate (Garner and Selod 2015) “hereditary and unalterable” (Fredrickson 2002, p. 170).

As Taguieff (1987) has illustrated, starting from the 1980s, the lines between biological racism and cultural racism have become more blurred and there has been a displacement from differentiation

based on racial/biological elements to differentiation based on supposed identity categories. In other words, even if “race” has been replaced by “culture” in public discourse, the cultural characteristics of a human group are still understood as stemming from a shared origin, thus innate and unchangeable.

According to Sivanandan, as much as it is not color-coded “it is passed off as xenophobia, but in the way it denigrates and reifies people it is a xenophobia that bears all the marks of the old racism. It is racism in substance, but ‘xeno’ in form” (Sivanandan 2001, p. 3).

All these perspectives fruitfully highlight how this phenomenon is linked with power relations: how one group dominates another, in this case Muslims, turning them into scapegoats and excluding them from the “resources/rights/definition of a constructed we” (Bayraklı and Hafez 2020, p. 8).

Particularly interesting, in this line, is Kaya’s (2018) understanding of Islamophobia as Islamophobia, a form of ideology based on fear, fabricated by ruling political groups interested in producing and reproducing such a state of fear to foster a kind of false consciousness, as a way of covering up their own failure.

In Kaya’s words, “Islamophobia turns out to be a practical instrument of social control used by the conservative political elite to ensure compliance and subordination in this age of neoliberalism, essentializing ethno cultural and religious boundaries” (Kaya 2018, p. 7).

Nonetheless, as Bravo López (2011) argues, none of these approaches succeed in explaining what makes Islamophobia different (or similar) to other form of racism.

Furthermore, as Sajid (2005) notes, regarding the long historical evolution of Islamophobia, it may be more apt to speak of “Islamophobias”, rather than of a single phenomenon.

Accordingly, there are different types of Islamophobia in political discourse, that, precisely, differ according to the different contexts in which they appear and the different ideologies of the Islamophobes (Bravo López 2017).

Acknowledging the existence of context related differences, in order to analyze Islamophobic discourse it is critical to dispose of some generalizing categories, that can help displaying how diverse articulations of Islamophobia exist or co-exist and how each of them, or their mix, is functional to reach concrete political objectives.

Alietti and Padovan’s (2013), drawing on well-established literature, propose to distinguish between two models of Islamophobia: the “internal enemy” and the “external threat”.

According to the authors (Alietti and Padovan 2013), the “internal enemy” model is strictly connected with the fear of the proximity of Muslim body and can be placed within the category of what Sivanandan (2001) calls “xeno-racism”, a form of racism that is not just directed at those with darker skins, but at all the newer categories of poor people beating at Western Europe’s doors.

This conceptualization recalls Bauman’s idea of “neighborly aliens”, morally distant yet physically close (Bauman 2001, p. 24).

Drawing from this concept, I propose to call this first type of Islamophobia, “banal Islamophobia”, switching the attention from the physical spatial perspective (since the difference does not lie in whether the “others” already live among “us”, or are approaching “our” borders) to a more metaphorical perception of distance, connected to a general anti-foreign sentiment.

I assume that it is “banal” because it entails a reification of the “others”, through a representation that, focusing on their perceived—and stereotyped—differential traits (physical attributes, clothing, eating habits, religious beliefs), singled out as deviating from what is considered “normal” within the native community, establishes an emotional distance, allowing to frame these “others” as threatening “normality”, that is to say people’s culture, traditions and lifestyle.

In this sense “banal Islamophobia” seems rooted in Orientalism, a “subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arab–Islamic peoples and their culture”, portrayed as primitive, irrational, violent, despotic, fanatic, and essentially inferior to the Westerner that can only be saved, educated, “enlightened”, by substituting their “traditional” and “backward” values with “contemporary” and “progressive” Western ideas (Said 1978).

Accordingly, this type of Islamophobia, is connected to what Mamdani (2004) describes as the differentiation between “the good Muslim”, who is seen as secular, moderate, rational and, in a word, Westernized and the “bad Muslim”, depicted as and fanatical, medieval anti-liberal and anti-modern.

In other words, by using the term “banal” I do imply that we are dealing with a softer or less dangerous form of Islamophobia, on the contrary, I understand it as a facet of a liquid, transitive, highly mobile (Alietti and Padovan 2013) type of prejudice geared towards whoever is considered as not belonging to the “pure people” and grounded on the perceived difference between the alleged “normality” (or “superiority”) of “our” values and habits and the “abnormality” (or “inferiority”) of others’ values and habits.

Thus, it is banal as non-unique, in so much as these type of prejudices might be—and they actually are—applied to Roma, Asians or any other minorities, they have constructed an ad hoc enemy (Testa and Armstrong 2012).

For example, both McGarry (2017) and Picker and Roccheggiani (2014), among others underline how Romaphobic discourse, in different context, follow the same pattern, reinforcing the typical colonial opposition between a Western and modern “us” and a backwards and uncivilized “them”, justifying political interventions to “normalize” the situation. In recent months, due to the Covid-19 crisis, studies on Sinophobia (Rafi 2020; Schild et al. 2020) are becoming recurrent. These works suggest that prejudices against Asians seem follow the same dynamic: based on stereotyped—differential traits (in this case certain physical appearance, grouping indistinctively all East Asians), deny any form of heterogeneity and perceive “Chinese” culture as backward and in need to be “educated” in order to prevent these “others” to perpetuate “uncivilized” tradition (such as, eating bats).

The second model of anti-Muslim attitude proposed by Alietti and Padovan (2013) portrays Islam as an “external threat”, framing the entire Muslim civilization (Goldberg 2006), regarded as monolithic, as a threat for the social fabric of Western democratic societies.

Again, switching from the spatial differentiation and aligning with Allen’s (2020) conceptualization of Ideological Islamophobia, I will refer to this type of Islamophobia as “ontological Islamophobia”, insofar as, rooted the “clash of civilization” theory (Huntington 1996), it is unique and specific to Islam, portraying the entire “Islamic civilization” as ontologically incompatible with the core values of the West (Cesari 2019), and thus dangerous for the very survival of Western civilization.

This model shares one characteristic with the previous one, the reification of Muslims, that ignores the complexity and subjectivity of the individual, neglecting any possible cultural, ethnical or behavioral heterogeneity and establishes an emotional distance. However, it differs from “banal Islamophobia”, on the one hand because it is not geared towards the single Muslim body, rather to the entire “Islamic civilization”; on the other, as previously mentioned, this alleged “Islamic civilization” is not only perceived as threatening the “Western way of life”, but it is seen as dangerous for the survival itself of “our” civilization.

Distinguishing between “banal” and “ontological” Islamophobia, therefore, is operatively useful for analyzing and displaying how diverse articulations of Islamophobia exist or co-exist and how each of them, or their mix, is functional to reach different kind of political mobilization.

2.3. Exclusionary Populism, Immigration and Islamophobia

The relationship between nativism and opposition to immigration is almost obvious: if nativists seek to preserve the native culture in reaction to a perceived external threat, therefore, immigrants represent a sort of natural “other” (Cervi and Tejedor 2020).

There is no doubt that, as Kallis (2018) notices, despite their ideological differences and political disagreements, a visceral hostility to Islam lies at the center of the contemporary radical right’s ideological profile and political message.

In order to explain why, in far-right populist political discourse, Muslims have become the ideal “other”, Betz and Meret (2009) rely on cultural arguments, viewing Islamophobic populism as a form of

identity politics. The authors observe how Islamophobic populism derives from a specific worldview on identity, pointing at multiculturalism—a product of immigration—as a threat to the ideal image of homogeneity, purity and authenticity, of the people.

In the same vein, [Sayyid \(2018\)](#) interprets Islamophobia as the result of the crisis of “Europeanness”, related to national anxieties regarding the protection of national identities, which are considered to be endangered in the globalizing world, wrongly attributed to Muslims.

Other approaches scrutinize Islamophobia from a strategic perspective. Michele Hale [Williams \(2010\)](#), for example, notes that Islamophobic populism is the result of the strategic adjustment of populist parties to maximize their votes in the light of rising Islamophobia. Accordingly, Farid [Hafez \(2014\)](#) argues that Islamophobia enables populist parties that have historical links to Nazism or fascism to increase their electoral base by disguising their past anti-Semitic attitudes through their reflection of more popular racist sentiments among their societies.

Recently, Oztig, Gurkan and Aydin ([Oztig et al. 2020](#)) showed how Islamophobia can be used not only a mobilization strategy appealing to people who have hostile feelings towards Islam, but also as a profitable electoral strategy to gain a competitive advantage vis-à-vis their main competitors. Manipulating the irrational hostility towards Muslims, by framing them as urgent threats, these parties are able to force their competitors into a reactive mode.

2.4. Lega

Lega Nord was founded in 1991 by Umberto Bossi. Originally born as an ethno-regionalist party defending the secession of the Northern region, called Padania, it has been one of the most successful regionalist parties in Europe.

Anti-immigrant, openly racist and Islamophobic discourses are not new to this party ([Richardson and Colombo 2013](#); [Testa and Armstrong 2012](#)). However, traditionally, due to the party’s regionalist and, in some moment secessionist stances, the main part of its racist discourse had been directed against the Italian South. Different Lega members, among which Matteo Salvini, for example, were caught in a 2009 video chanting a chorus with references to people from Naples who would allegedly stink ([Khrebtan-Hörhager 2019](#)).

It is in 2013, under the new leadership of Matteo Salvini, that the regionalist party eliminates the suffix “Nord”, to become only Lega, embracing Italian nationalism and taking a turn to the right. The nationalist push of the new leader marks the change of paradigm: the great enemy to be opposed were no longer the southerners, but the foreigners, immigrants, against whom directing the faults of the economic crisis and social insecurity ([Albertazzi et al. 2018](#)).

In the 2018 electoral campaign, the fierce opposition to immigration becomes the focal point of Salvini’s communication ([Cervi 2020](#)). Under the new slogans “stop immigration!” and “defend Italians from the invasion” migrants, especially Islamic communities and irregular immigrants, framed through increasingly explicitly xenophobic and racist positions became the target.

[Amnesty International’s \(2018\)](#) Hate Barometer, monitoring the 2018 election campaign, documented a large number of cases of hate speech by public officials: 53% of which came from the Lega political party members, and specifically from Matteo Salvini, whose main target, after the general category of “immigrants” have been “Muslims”.

In 2018 general elections, the two main populist parties, Lega and Movimento 5 Stelle, achieved historic success, with a combined vote representing the absolute majority of votes ([D’Alimonte 2019](#)), allowing them to form a coalition government.

Matteo Salvini, appointed Minister of the Interior and Deputy Prime Minister, lost his Ministry after only 445 days, when the coalition, broke leading to the formation of a new Government that does not include Lega.

In 2019 European election’s campaign, Salvini perpetuates his anti-immigration discourse. According to [Amnesty International’s \(2019\)](#) Hate Barometer, Salvini openly targeted Muslims and the “Muslim threat”, to the extent that Muslims become the second most targeted minority (after

“immigrants” and together with women and Roma) by hate speech. Lega stands out as Italy’s most voted party, collecting 34% of the preferences (Mudde 2019), in this election.

The latest survey, published in April 2020, shows that, after the Covid-19 crisis, Lega, while remaining the first party in people’s preferences, with 26, 3%, lost two points and Salvini himself fell to the third place in the ranking of most appreciated politicians (Ansa 2020).

2.5. Vox

Until recently, far-right populist parties have been absent or irrelevant from an electoral and political point of view, thereby Vox’s success can be considered as the end of the Spanish exception (Alonso and Kaltwasser 2015).

VOX was born in 2013, promoted by Alejo Vidal-Quadras, the first leader of the party, José Antonio Ortega Lara and Santiago Abascal, as a radical schism of the conservative, Popular Party.

The party ran for the first time in the 2014 European elections, without getting representation, and, in the same year, Santiago Abascal become the leader. Afterwards, Vox participated in the 2015 and the 2016 elections scoring 0.23% and 0.20% of votes respectively.

In 2017, after the terrorist attack of Barcelona, and coinciding with the independence struggle in Catalonia, Vox tripled the number of its affiliates in Spain. In December 2018, in the regional elections of Andalusia, the party obtained 12 seats, becoming a fundamental piece to form a right-wing government led by the Popular Party. In the general elections of April 28, 2019, Vox entered the Congress of Deputies for the first time, with 24 seats (10.3% of the votes), while in the second voting, on November 10, the figure multiplied with 52 seats (Climent and Mirian 2020).

Due to its newness Vox is still understudied, however there is a shared agreement (Turnbull-Dugarte 2019; Climent and Mirian 2020), on including the party in the exclusionist populist party family.

Vox, in fact, expresses a nativist ideology based on the populist Manichean perspective of the fight against “us” and “them”, characterized by an intense hostility to anything deemed alien and threatening to national cohesion—“separatism” on the inside and immigration, especially Muslim immigration, on the outside—for the ultimate purpose of achieving a mononational and monocultural state.

In particular, their exclusionist vision of the nation translates into a very hard line on immigration, marks its ideological parity with other parties of a similar ideological and populist flare such as France’s Front National, or Lega itself.

3. Methods

Understanding populism does not simply mean focusing on the “set of basic assumptions about the world”, but specifically on “the language that unwittingly expresses them” (Hawkins et al. 2012), I analyze speeches by the two party leaders, Santiago Abascal and Matteo Salvini, during the last three elections (General, Regional and European).

Monitoring all these campaigns, both through newspapers and social media, I collected all the available speeches and public intervention of both politicians, amongst which I have chosen an ad hoc sample of 30 items, five speeches for each politician in each campaign. The selection aims at representing a balanced sample of campaign meetings (in which the leaders talk to their party followers), media interventions (in which they talk to all the audience) and social networks videos (directed to their social followers).

Following Patterson and Monroe (1998), I consider political discourse as a narrative. The term narrative “refers to the ways in which we construct disparate facts in our own worlds and weave them together cognitively in order to make sense of our reality” (Patterson and Monroe 1998, p. 315).

In order to display the narrative structure, clause-based semantic text analysis (Franzosi 2009) has been implemented, to the corpus, made of the verbatim transcription of the selected speeches ($n = 117.000$), using a standardized codebook, including qualitative and quantitative variables.

Clause-based semantic text analysis organizes the information contained in narrative texts by exploiting the invariant linguistic structural properties of narrative. The original text is reformulated into a set of clauses, termed semantic triplets (Franzosi 2009), comprising the elementary syntactic components of language: subject, verb, and object. That is to say, the unit of analysis (the statement) is broken down in the following analytical categories: “subject-actor”, “verb-action” and “object-actor”.

In every instance, coders capture semantic triplets into databases, subsequently probed to identify frequencies of social actors registered as subjects and objects, as well as their qualitative features and interactions expressed in verbal form.

By showing the grammar of a history, this model allows to identify concepts, preserving the centrality of agency (actors and their actions) in social scientific explanation of social reality, but also disclosing relations among the concepts, by coding both the words and their position combinations of actions and objects in the statement.

Therefore, through this method, not only is it possible to identify general themes emerging in the clauses, it also allows devoting strong attention to qualitative variables (i.e., adjectification and linguistic qualifiers), in order to grasp the meaning and understanding of the key frame elements and the context of their production.

Hence, results will be presented in a qualitative form.

As suggested and proven by Aslanidis (2018), semantic triplets are particularly fitting instruments for measuring populism, due to their perfect structural commensurability with the formal features of populist discourse. As much as the core populist message is essentially structured around references to three symbolic categories of social actors (people, elites, others) and their interactions, its structure fits perfectly with the syntactic form of semantic triplets, where people (people-centrism) elites (anti-elitism) and others (exclusionary populism) are expected to function as the subject (and/or object) part of semantic triplet clauses.

In our analysis, semantic triplets grant the possibility to analyze the construction of each actor and the relationship between them, revealing both the function and the model of Islamophobia displayed.

4. Results

In this section, isolating and analyzing semantic triplets, illustrates how the three core social actors, “us” (“the people”), “them” (“the other”, immigrants and Muslims) and the other “them”, the elites, are linguistically constructed, pointing out the interactions amongst them and revealing both the functions and the model (or models) of Islamophobia displayed by the two politicians.

4.1. The “Us” Actor

Table 1 displays clauses and linguistic qualifiers of the “us” values. Words are displayed in lists following a quantitative criterion: the first words are the most recurrent.

The “us”, category, representing Italians, in Salvini’s discourse is mainly defined by the term “friends”, followed by “people”, “us”, “families” and “workers” and is positively charged through the use of adjectives such as “good” or “honest”, and “common sense”.

“Per me gli Italiani sono persone per bene a prescindere”

“Regardless, for me the Italians are all good people”

(Matteo Salvini, 22 May 2019. L’aria che tira, TV Interview, La7)

Table 1. The “us” values.

Variable	SALVINI	ABASCAL
Subject	Us	Us
Definitions	friends; people; us; workers; Italians; families; home.	España Viva; homeland; compatriots; Spaniards; home; La Reconquista historical figures (Fernando III El Santo, Isabel la Católica, etc.);
Positive adjectives	good, normal; hard working; honest, common sense; Catholic first	Españoles al cuadrado; proud of their identity; great history; Catholic first
Negative adjectives	tired; angry; poor; terremotati; concerned; worried	hopeless; worried; in need; unemployed
Positive actions	work hard; do their best; want; need; has understood	hope; need; deserve
Object	Salvini; Lega; normality, order	order; protection; Vox
Negative actions	are fed up; suffer; have enough; don't know how to earn a living	suffer; have enough; don't know how to earn a living
Objects	political class, politicians; immigrants; invasion	invasion; political class, politicians; left

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

This description of Italians as good-hearted people, besides unveiling one of the main component of populist discourse—the depiction of a “virtuous and homogeneous people” (Canovan 2005), also resonates in Italian culture, reflecting the common stereotype of Italiani brava gente (Italians, good people).

This popular belief takes its origin from a form of historical revisionism, emerged under the post-war republic, about the participation of fascist Italy in World War II. According to this stereotypical representation, during the Second World War, Italian soldiers always maintained a humane behavior towards the local population, unlike their ideologically motivated and brutal German allies (Rodogno 2005). Through a repeated use of these stereotypical representations, echoed by numerous media, Italian cultural production strengthened the alleged belief of the good-hearted nature of the Italians and, by doing so, conveyed a series of self-absolving depictions of Italy's participation in World War II, later disproved by historical research.

This portrayal is, thus, functional to justify negative responses.

“Gli italiani non son razzisti, sono stanchi”

“Italians are not racist, they are tired”

(Matteo Salvini, 1 March 2018. Press conference)

In addition, the positively charged adjective “normal” is retrieved multiple times to describe the people. As explained in the next section, it allows creating a dichotomy between what is “normal” (us), and what is “not normal”, thus wrong (them).

Abascal's definition of “us” is mostly based on a nationalistic metonymy, personifying Spain as the sum of all Spaniards. The discourse draws from classical patriotic pride (La España viva) and a mythological portrayal of the homeland, the most recurrent word, together with “los españoles” (Spaniards) often defined as al cuadrado (two times Spanish) and “compatriot”. Identity, in other words, seems to be centered on the nation and on the concept of hispanidad (Spanishness).

“La España Viva . . . con su Soberanía, su Identidad y sus Leyes”

“The “living Spain” with its sovereignty, its identity and its laws”

(Santiago Abascal, 12 November 2018, TV Interview, Trece TV)

Spain is represented through a wide recall to foundational myths such as Fernando II El Santo (Ferdinand II of Castile) or Isabelle I of Castile, defined as Isabel la Católica (Isabel the Catholic), related to the conquest of al-Andalus and La Reconquista, that becomes a distinctive feature of Spain. In this way, Spanish identity is presented as ontological incompatibility with Muslim values.

“Frente a los que reivindican la Andalucía de Blas Infante, de Almanzor y de Al-Andalus, nosotros reivindicamos la Andalucía de Fernando III El Santo, de Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, de Isabel La Católica y de las Cortes de Cádiz”

“Against those who claim the Andalusia of Blas Infante, Almanzor and Al-Andalus, we claim the Andalusia of Fernando III El Santo, Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, Isabel La Católica and the Cortes de Cádiz”

(Santiago Abascal, 1 December 2019. Public meeting, Madrid).

Accordingly, it is important to note that the leader opened his campaign for April’s general election in in the tiny town of Covadonga, in the northern region of Asturias. Covadonga is the site of the first victory of Christian Hispania against Muslim rulers, considered the beginning of the Reconquista, which would end with the fall of Granada in 1492. Reconquista, therefore, becomes the slogan of his campaign.

Furthermore, both politicians define their people as “Catholic” and “first”, depicting them as suffering, because of the political élite and because of the immigration “invasion”, and desiring law and order, using almost the same linguistic qualifiers.

4.2. The “Them” Actors: Immigrants as the “Others”

As shown by Table 2, the two politicians mainly refer to immigrants as a “mass of people” and as an “invasion”.

Table 2. The main “them” actor: immigrants.

Variable	Description	Description
Subject	Immigrants	Immigrants
Definitions	supposed refugees; immigrants; clandestini (illegals); those; mass. invasion	foreigners; immigrants; Muslims; mass invasion; avalanche
Positive adjectives		Hispano-American brothers; legal; Christian
Negative adjectives	criminals; delinquents; animals; drug dealers; not normal	criminals; incompatibles; rapist; manadas (pack).
Positive actions		come here to integrate, contribute, adapt, accept
Objects		homeland; Spain
Negative actions	invade; intrude; steal; rape; exploit; sell drugs; bring war; terrorism	invade; steal; rape; exploit; come in without permission terrorism
Objects	home; Italy; people; geographical names	home; Spaniards; geographical names

Source: elaborated by the authors.

Matteo Salvini’s predominant linguistic qualifier for immigrants is *Questi presunti rifugiati* (these supposed refugees), sentence pronounced multiple times, in all the speeches. There is, indeed,

a linguistic construction of the distinction between “real refugees”, fallaciously defined as people who “run away from a war” and clandestini, illegals, who “pretend to be refugees”. This dichotomy between “real” and “fake” refugees is developed using two different, complementary strategies. On the one hand, the formulation of the above mentioned fallacy leads to an almost automatic categorization between people who actually are refugees, and thus deserve to be helped, and people who do not, because their countries are not in a warzone. Whoever comes from reasons other than escaping for a war, thus, can be depicted an “intruder”.

The situation is portrayed as “non-normal”, differentiating immigrants from the Italian “normality”. Characterizing them as fake, hence not trustworthy, and “non-normal”, opens the door to criminalization.

“Se apriamo i porti questi fenomeni rimangono in Italia a spacciare droga”

“If we open the ports these phenomena will stay in Italy to smuggle drugs”

(Matteo Salvini, 20 February 2018. Facebook Live).

Abascal’s construction of immigrants is also based on a distinction: in this case, the distinction draws on identity, religion and culture.

All the retrieved speeches mention, at least once, the difference between “good” immigrants, *nuestros hermanos hispanoamericanos* (“our Latin American brothers”, retrieved in 14 speeches) who, sharing common linguistic and cultural traditions (especially Catholicism), are described as coming to integrate and help the country grow, and non-better defined “Muslims”, depicted as a threat to the Spanish way of life, as their religion and culture are seen as incompatible with Spanish values.

“No es lo mismo una persona que viene de Colombia que tiene nuestra cultura y nuestra lengua que alguien que venga de un país islámico”.

“A person coming from Colombia, sharing our language and culture is different from someone who comes from a Muslim country”

(Santiago Abascal, 22 May 2020. TV interview, *Espejo Publico*, Antena 3)

This differentiation becomes a sort of mantra to describe immigration.

Arising from different premises, the strategies of criminalization seem very similar: immigration is linked to terrorism and criminality. Consequently, both politicians frame the situation as a war.

“Estamos en guerra”

“We are in a war”

(Santiago Abascal, 1 December 2019. Public meeting, Madrid).

“Questi non scappano dalla Guerra ma la Guerra ce la portano in casa”

“They do not run away from war: they will bring war to our homes”

(Matteo Salvini, 18 May 2019, public meeting, Milan)

4.3. *Muslims and Islam*

Within the broader category of “immigrants”, it is possible to isolate the sub-category of “Muslims” to analyze the specific presence and models of Islamophobia.

First, it is important to stress out that, from a quantitative perspective, Muslims are not at the center of Salvini’s discourse, which dedicates more time to generic “illegals”.

The Spanish politician, on the other side, almost treats “undesirable immigration” and “Muslims” as synonyms. As Table 2 illustrates, the third most recurrent word Abascal uses to refer to immigrants is, in fact, “Muslims”: almost all his discourse against immigration is geared towards Muslims.

Spain itself is interpreted as quintessentially anti-Muslim, for the basis of identity is grounded on the Reconquista, thus on the opposition against Muslims.

“La nación española se inició con Roma, que le confirió unidad y ser, y fraguó su identidad en la Reconquista”

“The Spanish nation began with Rome, which gave it unity and existence, and forged its identity in the Reconquista”

(Santiago Abascal, 1 December 2019, public meeting, Madrid).

In addition, in the Spanish language, the adjective Islámico, Islamic and Islamista, Islamist, have two completely different meanings: the first refers to a person professing Islam, the latter describes someone belonging to Islamic integrism. In all the speeches, the politician uses Islamista as a noun, to say Islamic, Muslim, implying that there is no distinction between Islam and Islamists (intended as fanatics).

“Vamos a seguir comiendo jamón, digan lo que digan los animalistas o los islamistas”

“We are going to continue eating ham, whatever the animalists or Islamists say”

(Santiago Abascal, 3 December 2019, TV Interview, Antena 3).

As shown in Table 3, Muslims lack any positive characteristics and are represented mainly as incompatible with Spanish civilization and clearly framed as an external threat, willing to invade the homeland with the open intention to “Islamize” it, imposing religion, culture and (dangerous) habits.

Table 3. Muslims and Islam.

Variable	SALVINI	ABASCAL
Subject	Islam, Muslims	Islam, Muslim
Definitions	Muslims; “a certain type of Islam”	Islamistas, Muslims
Positive adjectives		
Negative adjectives	terrorist, not compatible; fanatics, caliphate; extremism; Allah; Allahu akbar; burqa; veil; Mosque	not compatible; terrorist; fanatics, caliphate; extremism; Allahu akbar;
Positive actions		
Object		
Negative actions	endanger; kill; abuse (women); Islamize	Islamize; impose; kill; abuse (women)
Objects	women; home; values, freedom	Spaniards; value; freedom; home; women

Source: elaborated by the authors.

“No queremos que los españoles nos tengamos que acostumbrar a escuchar el grito de Allahu akbar en nuestras calles”

“We don’t want Spaniards to get used to hearing the cry of Allahu akbar in our streets”

“No quiero que mis hijas tengan que arrodillarse mirando a la Mecca”

(Santiago Abascal, 22 May 2019, Facebook video).

The “clash of civilizations” (Huntington 1996) is, thus, openly dramatized through the presentation of the only possible solution: in order to stop this new invasion, Spain needs to fight back, starting a new Reconquista.

“No queremos una Europa islamizada. Vamos a iniciar la Reconquista”

We do not want an Islamized Europe. We are going to start la Reconquista”

(Santiago Abascal, 3 April 2019, public meeting, Cordoba)

These results allow, without any doubt, to state that Vox's discourse displays an almost by the book model of "ontological Islamophobia", where not only Islam is seen as incompatible with Western values, but anti-Muslim values are considered to be the core of Spanish identity.

"España tiene una ventaja: que fue vacunada contra la inmigración islámica durante ocho siglos de ocupación y ocho siglos de Reconquista"

"Spain has an advantage: that it was vaccinated against Islamic immigration during eight centuries of occupation and eight centuries of Reconquista"

(Santiago Abascal, 1 December 2019, public meeting, Madrid).

Salvini's narrative construction, on the other side, appears to be more ambiguous. Although, as previously mentioned, Muslims are not the main target of Salvinian discourse, both Muslim and Islam as a religion, are depicted as inherently linked with terrorism and fanaticism, endangering the social fabric of the West.

"Musulmani disoccupati a rischio "sociale"? Ma quanti Italiani cattolici non hanno lavoro e non vanno a fare i terroristi!?"

"Unemployed Muslims at "social" risk? But how many Catholic Italians do not have work and do not become terrorists!?"

(Matteo Salvini, 21 May 2019, Facebook Live).

Islam itself is framed as a "different type of religion", completely unable to integrate with Western values.

"Il problema dell'Islam è che non è una religione ... é una legge incompatibile con i nostri valori"

"The problem with Islam is that it is not a religion... it is a law incompatible with our values".

(Matteo Salvini, 18 May 2019. Public meeting, Milan).

Accordingly, in a similar way as observed in Abascal's case, religious symbols are transformed into sources of danger for the homeland.

"Nel nome di Allah Milioni di musulmani pronti a sgozzarci"

"In the name of Allah, millions of Muslims are ready to slit our throats"

(Matteo Salvini, 1 March 2018, press conference).

Therefore, Muslims are framed as an external threat trying to intrude Europe's borders in order to impose their religion and way of life.

"If we do not take back control of our roots, Europe will become an Islamic caliphate"

(Matteo Salvini, 6 May 2019, interview with Hungarian TV).

These tropes, and the construction of Islam as an external threat, would suggest that Salvini presents the same ontological model of Islamophobia as Abascal. However, Salvini's narrative presents two main differences. First, he dedicates more attention to the visible side of Islam among "us", retrievable in the multiple references to Mosques and religious and cultural practices (such as Eid and the killing of lambs), specifically, to veil and Burqa.

"Allahu Akbar? A cá tua Allahu Akbar! Che i mussulmani preghino a casa loro."

"Allahu Akbar? You go back home to say Allahu akbar! Muslim can pray inside their houses."

(Matteo Salvini, 18 May 2019, public meeting, Milan).

“Quando le vedo mi fanno una pena . . . coprire una donna da capo a piedi non è libertà ma sopraffazione”

“Whenever I see them I feel sorry for them... covering a woman from head to toe is not freedom but abuse”

(Matteo Salvini, 10 May 2019, Facebook Live)

This aspect, and the attention dedicated to the “disturbing” presence of Muslims in what is perceived as people’s “home”, embodies the construction of what [Testa and Armstrong \(2012\)](#) call the “Islam folk devil”, that is to say the “internal enemy” that [Alietti and Padovan \(2013\)](#) see as constitutive of cultural racism. Islamic traditions are reified and portrayed as uncivilized and backwards, thus making Muslims inherently incompatible to integrate in “our” societies.

Furthermore, as indicated by [Table 3](#), the most recurrent qualifiers for Muslims, after the words Muslims itself, is “a certain type of Islam”, underlying that Islam is not all the same.

Salvini’s view on Islam can be summed up in the following sentences:

“Credo nella libertà di culto, non nell’estremismo religioso. Non ce l’ho col singolo mussulmano che è una brava persona, ma chi usa la propria fede per mettere a rischio la sicurezza di un Paese va allontanato”

“I believe in freedom of worship, not religious extremism, I am not angry with the individual Muslim who is a good person, but those who use their faith to jeopardize the security of a country should be removed”

(Matteo Salvini, 11 February 2018, public meeting, Umbertide).

The problem, in other words, is not the single (moderate) Muslim, but Muslim extremism and extremists. Ergo, there is some potential for redemption for (good) Muslims.

This point seems to openly contradict the reified vision of all Muslims following the same backwards traditions. However, a closer look reveals that this narrative presents the classical components of Orientalism ([Said 1978](#)).

“Fino a quando l’Islam non farà chiarezza e non ribadirà che gli esseri umani sono tutti uguali davanti a Dio e davanti alla legge, io non concedo neanche mezza moschea”

“Until Islam clarifies and reaffirms that all human beings are equal before God and before the law, I will not grant even half a mosque.”

(Matteo Salvini, 1 March 2018, press conference)

Salvini, in conclusion, somehow mixes “banal Islamophobia”, geared toward the more visible side of Islam (burqa, veil, etc.), stressed out by portraying Muslim with a potential re-educability (if they renounce to their uncivilized practices and embrace Western civilized values) and “ontological Islamophobia”, when he uses the trope related to Islamic civilization inherent dangerousness.

Interestingly, as reported by other studies ([Cervi and Tejedor 2020](#)), the politician adopts a very similar discursive strategy (adapted to another context and using other attributes) to depict Roma as impossible to integrate, due to their inherently uncivilized way of living (only redeemable if they accept community standards).

This similarity allows arguing that Muslims constitute only one of the possible options of constructing an ad hoc enemy ([Testa and Armstrong 2012](#)) to be politicized for the purpose of political mobilization.

4.4. The Other “Them” Actors: Political Élites

As previously mentioned, anti-elitism is another main component of populist rhetoric; furthermore, as recently pointed out by [Oztig and colleagues \(Oztig et al. 2020\)](#), Islamophobia can also serve as an

electoral strategy based on vote-maximization through weakening the incumbent leaders. Therefrom, the analysis of semantic triplet can shed light on the relation people–élite–others, in this case, Muslims.

Table 4 shows how the depiction of the political élite is very similar: first, the élite is personified by the political class and by the left, does not have any positive qualities and shows a clear disconnection and lack of knowledge of the true needs of the people. While Salvini insists on the élite’s lack of knowledge of people’s reality, through the massive use of the colloquial expression “sono fuori” (they are out of their mind), Abascal goes a step further, depicting them as hating their own people.

Table 4. The other “them” actor: the élite.

Variable	SALVINI	ABASCAL
Subject	Élite	Élite
Definitions	them; political class; elite; the left; feminists	“los progre”; the left; feminists
Positive adjectives		
Negative adjectives	inept; useless; crazy; irresponsible; guilty; “fuori”; incompetent; radical-chic; Buonisti; live on planet Mars	criminals; totalitarian; guilty; crazy; cosmopolitan arrogance
Positive actions	like; defend; love; show tenderness	like; defend; love; prefer;
Object	immigrants; illegals	immigrants; Muslims
Negative actions	have no clue; have forgotten; betray	betray; hate; manipulate; put an “ideological burqa”
Objects	home; Italy; people	Spaniards; homeland

Source: elaborated by the authors.

However, in both narratives the political class is argued to betray the people mainly because of its positions on immigration and multicultural society. In both cases, the main argument for calling the elite illegitimate is, thus, a nationalist one. The central claim is that the political elite has furthered the rights of foreigners and immigrants to the detriment of the interests of its own nation (Mudde 2004).

“Chi nega le sue radici é un traditore La Sinistra fa un favore ai terroristi”

“Anyone who denies his/her roots is a traitor The left is doing terrorists a favor”

(Matteo Salvini, 18 May 2019, public meeting, Milan).

“Se empieza felicitando el ramadán, luego se desprecian y se persiguen las raíces cristianas de España, y se acaba garantizando que los extranjeros ilegales tengan más derechos en España que los españoles. Los progres están enfermos.”

“It begins by congratulating Ramadan, then the Christian roots of Spain are despised and persecuted, and it ends by ensuring that illegal foreigners have more rights in Spain than Spaniards. The progressives are sick.”

(Santiago Abascal, 22 June 2018, public meeting, Madrid).

In the same vein, both politicians implement similar discursive strategies, transforming positive adjective into insults: Abascal talks about the leftist “cosmopolitan arrogance”, assuming that cosmopolitanism is wrong, a priori, and Salvini popularize the adjective buonista. The neologism (translatable in English as “do-gooders”), used for the first time by political commentator and scholar Galli Della Loggia in 1995, is intended to criticize unnecessary goodness and serves to transform

a quality, goodness, into an insult. Its direct historical and linguistic background lies in the term “pietism”, used during Italian Fascism after 1938 against those who tried to defend Jews harassed by racial laws: here, too, a virtue, piety, the compassionate being, was distorted and became a symbol weakness (Cervi 2019).

“Le vittime del mare? Colpa di scafisti e buonisti”

“Immigrants deaths in the sea? It’s smugglers and do-gooders’ fault”

(Matteo Salvini, 1 March 2018, press conference)

“Quieres defender la aldea global? Ala . . . pa Paquistán. Aquí queremos defender nuestro país”

“Do you want to defend the global village? Com’on, go to Pakistan. Here we want to defend our country”

(Santiago Abascal, 3 April 2019, public meeting, Cordoba)

As Farris (2012) had already noticed, exclusionary populism has started framing women’s rights and gender equality as central to the national or European or Western values/civilization, strengthening these parties’ nationalist and exclusionary messages, especially against Islam.

In this case, both politicians have a traditional understanding of family and use Islam to delegitimize feminist discourse representing it as contradictory and hypocritical. Feminists, who belong to the élite characterized by the previously mentioned buonismo or cosmopolitan arrogance, are interested in women’s right, but they abandon Muslim women, who are, by definition, abused.

“A certe femministe che ce l’hanno tanto con la famiglia suggerisco di preoccuparsi di quell’estremismo islamico che le donne le vorrebbe sottomesse, umiliate e magari anche picchiate.”

“I suggest to certain feminists that are so against family, to worry about Islamic extremism that wants women to be submitted, humiliated and even beaten”

(Matteo Salvini, 30 March 2019, press conference)

Anti-feminism, in particular, is one of the pillar of Vox’s platform (that, among other, proposes to abrogate gender violence law stating that violence as no gender). Accordingly, its leader point at feminists as having an “ideological burqa”, alleging that they only (illegitimately) defend women against white men, being completely blind in front of the endemic Islamic discrimination against women.

“(Feminists) apoyan leyes totalitarias que rompen el principio de igualdad, calladas frente a discriminaciones machista de otras culturas como el islam”

“(Feminists) support totalitarian laws that break the principle of equality, but are silent in the face of sexist discrimination from other cultures such as Islam”.

(Santiago Abascal, 8 October 2018, public meeting, Madrid)

5. Conclusions and Discussion

As Stefano Allievi (2006) pointed out, today we find ourselves in a not-simple moment of transition between “Islam in Europe” and “Islam of Europe”, hence focusing on the conflictual perceptions of Islam is a timely and crucial matter.

Acknowledging its geographical limitations, our study confirms that Islamophobia has mutated into the primary populist anti-paradigm (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), transforming the irrational hostility towards Muslims into a rational electoral strategy.

Although, aligning with other studies (Hafez 2018; Cesari 2010) in showing that Anti-Muslim political discourse in the West often revolves around similar tropes (Islam want to impose its ‘backward’

culture—that oppress women—and is linked to terrorism), it underlines the existence of different types of Islamophobia.

As seen, in fact, VOX's definition of the "people", drawing on classical patriotic pride and a mythological representation of the homeland, basically constructed upon the expulsion of Muslims invaders from the homeland, allows to paint a sort of natural incompatibility between Spaniards and Muslims. Accordingly, Muslim and Islam are represented as the most important external threat, menacing to erase Spanish identity, culture and traditional way of life. In other words, Vox expresses a clear "ontological Islamophobia."

Lega's leader, on his side, focuses on every illegal immigrant as a burden to society, mostly displaying what [Hogan and Haltinner \(2015\)](#) define as an "interest-based threats", based on economic and security anxiety. When referring to Muslims in particular, Salvini performs an interesting mix between ontological arguments (Islam is not a "normal" religion, and, thus it is a threat to the cement of Western society), representing Islam as the most urgent threat for "our" civilization, and therefore, geared towards ontological Islamophobia, by the book *Orientalism* ([Said 1978](#)), implying that Muslims can be saved if they renounce to their "uncivilized practices" embracing Western values, and a stereotypical representation of the proximity of Muslims (with their veils, their burqa and their mosques), that can be placed within a general anti-foreign sentiment, pointing at a model of banal Islamophobia.

These results, on the one hand allow to confirm [Mondon and Winter's \(2019\)](#) observation on how diverse and changing articulations of Islamophobia can both co-exist and, in some cases, shift from one to the other, according and functional to the political strategies.

As mentioned, fact, other studies ([Cervi and Tejedor 2020](#)) have highlighted how Lega's leader adopts a very similar discursive strategy to depict other minorities, such as Roma, leading to conclude that both Muslims and other minorities serve as ad hoc enemies ([Testa and Armstrong 2012](#)). Islamophobia, in other words, is predominantly a discursive opportunity ([Koopmans and Olzak 2004](#)) for Lega.

Accordingly, future studies should focus on understanding how, and under which circumstances, Islamophobia (and any other forms of discrimination) becomes a discursive opportunity ([Koopmans and Olzak 2004](#)) for exclusionary populist movements. In particular, researchers should look at how minorities are problematized and politicized ([Green-Pedersen 2012](#)), manipulating their salience and visibility, in order to be transformed into discursive opportunities ([Koopmans and Olzak 2004](#)) for the party/candidate able to better symbolically articulate (and emotionally charge) the "problem", presenting himself/herself as the best option to solve the it ([Koopmans and Statham 2010](#)).

Therefore, meticulous comparative research, identifying different models of Islamophobia is, indeed, needed not to overstate what could be context-specific and, in particular, to allow some extent of generalization ([Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017](#)).

Furthermore, previous literature have shown that exclusionary populism have an ideational dimension, providing a contrast between Western and Islamic values ([Betz 2003](#)), is a mobilization strategy aimed at excluding the visibility and even the practice of Islam in European societies ([Hafez 2018](#)) as well as an electoral strategy to gain a competitive advantage vis-à-vis their main competitors in electoral contests ([Oztig et al. 2020](#)).

Our results allow assuming that often all these aspects are interconnected and intermixed.

Vox's "identity-based threat" ([Hogan and Haltinner 2015](#)) construction, in fact, is useful both for the political mobilization of those who share anti-Muslim vision and for those who do not (the majority of Spaniards) and for delegitimizing the ruling élite. This is even more visible in Salvini, who somehow switches from one model of Islamophobia to the other according to political goals. Muslims are, in fact, portrayed as an external threat for the sake of political mobilization and to debilitate competitors, framed as unaware or careless of the invasion. On the other side, they are also depicted as internal enemies, subject to cultural racism to capitalize on irrational fears and, again, to delegitimize the élite, especially feminists, who allegedly "tolerate" Muslims' "uncivilized practices", leaving an

open door to “moderate” Muslims for redeeming themselves accepting “civilized” Western—in this case, Italian-values.

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