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The party politics of diplomatic engagements: evidence from Italy

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Abstract
Leaders decide to engage diplomatically with their foreign peers for various reasons but, given their limited time and resources, they have to choose which peers to prioritize. As such, the study of international diplomatic visits helps shed light on a government's foreign policy approach and better understand its priorities in how it conceives and builds foreign relations. While the literature on diplomatic engagements has largely debated its drivers and effects, the role of domestic influences, in particular of party politics, has remained understudied. We address this gap and investigate the party politics of diplomatic engagements leveraging a new dataset on Italy's high-level international bilateral diplomatic visits in 2000–2023. Our findings show that partisan differences influence not only the overall frequency of such engagements, following curvilinear left–right patterns, but also the political regimes that left- and right-wing governments prioritize in such endeavours, exposing the lower importance right-wing parties assign to democratic principles when managing their countries' foreign relations, as these governments are systematically more likely to interact with authoritarian regimes than with democracies.

Keywords: autocracy; democracy; diplomatic visits; foreign policy; Italy; party politics; political ideology

Introduction

'Scipio the African', so did an Italian newspaper rename Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni as she landed in Tunis to reach a deal on migration flows (Libero, 2023).[1] Tunisia and other African countries of migration origin or transit, almost invariably run by autocratic or autocratizing leaders (Cassani *et al.*, 2024), were indeed high on Meloni's right-wing government agenda as she was preparing to launch Italy's new plan for Africa (Carbone, 2023). Political leaders, including Italy's Meloni, are known to engage in international bilateral diplomatic meetings, known as 'high-level diplomatic visits' (Lebovic and Saunders, 2016; Hoshiro, 2021; Koliev and Lundgren, 2021), 'international trips' (Nitsch, 2007), or 'foreign visits' (Wang and Stone, 2023), for various specific aims, from economic benefits to humanitarian assistance and security, among others (Nitsch, 2007, 1,797). But because they have limited time and economic resources to engage in such endeavours, they need to prioritize which countries to visit. For this reason, we argue, bilateral diplomatic visits can serve as a useful tool to examine a government's foreign policy approach and help better understand its priorities in how it conceives and builds foreign relations, adding to what is generally stated in party manifestos, multi-annual planning guidelines, or public statements.

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[1]Scipio the African, or Scipio Africanus, was the Roman general who defeated Carthage's Hannibal in the battle of Zuma (in today's Tunisia) in 202 BC during the Second Punic war.

The literature on diplomatic engagements has recently attracted growing interest and various publications have shed light on the drivers and effects of international visits (Goldsmith and Horiuchi, 2009; Lebovic and Saunders, 2016; Goldsmith *et al.*, 2021; Hoshiro, 2021; Koliev and Lundgren, 2021; Wang and Stone, 2023; Balci and Pulat, 2024). However, the role of domestic influences, and in particular of party politics, has remained understudied. In the neighbouring literature of military interventions, domestic politics – especially governments' political ideology – has long become a crucial explanatory factor. Similar relevance has emerged in other research fields investigating state behaviour in international politics, from approaches to migration and natural disaster relief to foreign aid, trade wars and the signing of international treaties (Thérien and Noël, 2000; Raunio and Wagner, 2020; Vignoli and Coticchia, 2022; Vignoli and Baraldi, 2024; Vignoli and Corradi, 2024).[2] However, whether party politics can explain how states manage foreign relations, such as through bilateral diplomatic engagements, is a question which remains underexplored, in spite of the frequency governments resort to this tool. What role, then, does ideological leaning play in the propensity for governments to engage diplomatically abroad and in the partners they prioritize in these endeavours?

Our main theoretical argument is that the propensity to resort to bilateral diplomatic engagement and the partners prioritised in such an endeavour vary across political ideology. Drawing from neighbouring literatures, we explore the possibility of a curvilinear relationship. On the one hand, extreme governments can be expected to have fewer incentives for this bilateral foreign policy approach as they may fear more hurdles in terms of acceptance than centrist coalitions. However, on the other hand, we can expect the opposite curvilinear trend to emerge as well, as, once they do achieve power, extreme governments may well actively seek international legitimacy and credibility precisely by embarking on frequent foreign engagements. Besides this first point, we also argue that, in establishing such bilateral relations, parties give different significance to primarily ideational values such as identity and democracy when managing their countries' foreign relations, and that this is manifested in the different prioritization of democratic vs authoritarian partners across left- and right-wing parties' foreign policy agendas. In particular, we expect that right-wing parties assign lower importance to democratic principles when managing their countries' foreign relations.

To test our arguments, we focus on Italy, a middle power and parliamentary democracy where left-wing, centrist, and right-wing governments frequently alternated in power, hence providing fertile ground for a comparative analysis which can speak to the larger sample of democratic middle powers. We rely on novel data we compiled from primary and secondary sources on the bilateral diplomatic visits made or received by Italy's highest political authorities over 20 years (2000–2023). This means our dataset tracks all the outgoing bilateral visits Italian Prime Ministers made abroad in this period, as well as all the incoming bilateral visits they received from foreign high-level political authorities in the same period. For robustness checks, we also tracked the same data concerning Italian Ministers of Foreign Affairs.

Our empirical analysis shows that political ideology plays a role in influencing not only the frequency of diplomatic engagements, but also the partners whom left- and right-wing governments prioritise. Here, our findings highlight the higher frequency of more extreme governments to engage in bilateral diplomacy, hence supporting the legitimacy-seeking argument mentioned above, and expose the lower importance that right-wing parties assign to democratic principles when managing their countries' foreign relations, as they systematically interact more with authoritarian regimes rather than with democracies.

These findings, certainly crucial for research on Italian foreign policy that has so far neglected this high-level diplomatic perspective, contribute also to the broader foreign policy literature, shedding new light on the largely underappreciated party politics of high-level diplomatic visits, which has so far been limited to studies centred on the US two-party presidential system, not

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[2]See also the dataset http://deploymentvotewatch.eu/

middle powers and parliamentary democracies. In addition, our article speaks also about the literature on public diplomacy, both regarding long standing debates on soft power and political communication to foreign publics (e.g. Melissen, 2005; Cull, 2013) and on more recent discussions on social media and diplomatic visits (e.g. Snow and Cull, 2020; Goldsmith et al., 2021).

The article is structured as follows. First, we discuss how high-level diplomatic visits have been studied in the literature, how they relate to neighbouring fields, and what was left under-explored. Against this background, we develop our theoretical framework and present our hypotheses to explain how political ideology influences the propensity for high-level diplomatic visits and how it interacts with ideational values such as the democratic nature of the partner's political regime. Then, we introduce our new dataset, providing a descriptive overview of the patterns of Italy's visits in 2000–2023. Finally, we present the models and discuss the results of our empirical analysis.

The party politics of diplomatic engagement

Diplomatic visits are a key foreign policy tool that can be employed by state authorities to obtain something specific or influence foreign policy behaviours (Trager, 2016; Goldsmith et al., 2021). Indeed, scholars have analysed diplomatic visits as tools (i.e., independent variables) to obtain something specific such as aid, goods, military support, investments, votes, foreign support (in the framework of public diplomacy) or stability (e.g. Nitsch, 2007; Beaulieu et al., 2020; Malis and Smith, 2021).

This article flips this perspective and construes outgoing bilateral international visits as a dependent variable (Lebovic and Saunders, 2016; Koliev and Lundgren, 2021; Balci and Pulat, 2024). Visits can be economically and politically costly to organize and logistical constrains limit the number of partners that states can visit each year. Therefore, a political decision has to be made for these diplomatic engagements to happen (Fordham, 2011), and authorities have to prioritize whom to visit. For this reason, this article's theoretical perspective is that, although high-level visits can have different context-specific functional aims, altogether they provide important cues about a country's foreign policy agenda, signalling how much it relies on bilateral diplomatic engagements and the priorities it follows in such endeavours.

Earlier works demonstrated already how different political parties construe the so-called national interest in different ways (Rathbun, 2004; Schuster and Maier, 2006), showing that ideology significantly influences governments' approach to foreign policy (e.g. Bjereld and Demker, 2000). Therefore, we should expect that also a country's diplomatic engagements can be influenced by domestic factors, especially by the ruling government's own preferences over such issues. While neighbouring literatures on 'harder' foreign engagements such as military interventions have already extensively investigated the party politics of their support, diplomatic engagements have been analysed from this domestic politics perspective only rarely.

To be sure, a growing body of literature has accepted that ideological differences might lead to cross-party differences in diplomatic visits patterns just like they do with regard to the use of force (Howell and Pevehouse, 2007), both in terms of how much their governments invest in diplomatic engagements abroad, and of how they design such engagements (Lebovic and Saunders, 2016; Ostrander and Rider, 2018, Koliev and Lundgren, 2021). Yet, such studies mostly focused on two-party presidential systems such as the United States, limiting the investigation to differences between Republican and Democratic administrations or to the role of divided governments. Moreover, studies focusing on other countries' diplomatic activism and visits ignored the role of domestic partisan differences altogether (Goldsmith et al., 2021; Hoshiro, 2021; Mesquita and Chien, 2021; Wang and Stone, 2023; Balci and Pulat, 2024). Hence, we add to this literature by focusing on the neglected dimension of the party politics of diplomatic engagements, looking in particular at middle-power parliamentary democracies such as Italy.

Domestic politics aside, the literature on diplomatic visits identified various reasons why high-level political authorities travel abroad and whom they prioritize. These determinants are not

mutually exclusive, as visits are almost invariably multifocal. States can plan their diplomatic engagements by prioritizing economically interdependent states, key allies, and major powers as their partners of choice (Lebovic and Saunders, 2016). Alternatively, they can prioritise countries which need economic assistance, in particular less developed countries or countries at war, to assert its influence in its neighbourhood or globally also by relying on classic soft power tools to support national prestige both with foreign peers and on foreign public opinions (e.g. Snow and Cull, 2020). Additionally, under a so-called homophily logic, a state can choose to focus on partners that share some relevant political values and characteristics (Ridgeway and Correll, 2006; Maoz, 2012; Sheafer et al., 2014; Duque, 2018). Finally, the literature acknowledges that self-reinforcing dynamics can push a country to visit the same partners repeatedly or reciprocate a previously incoming visit (Pouliot, 2008; Hopf, 2010). Our theoretical argument cuts across all these traditional explanations as it argues that visits will not consistently feature the same aims, but rather vary across governments as they serve their own domestic political interests, sometimes overriding state interests (in line with the 'volitional basis of diplomacy' in Lebovic and Saunders, 2016).

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Looking at the left–right political spectrum[3] in terms of foreign policy preferences and postures, a robust literature has demonstrated that, moving beyond the classic doves vs hawks divide (Palmer et al., 2004), a curvilinear relation is often in place. For instance, support for peace and security missions is found to be lowest at the far left, grows as one moves to the centre reaching its peak at the centre-right, before declining towards the far right, whose support is nonetheless higher than at the far left (Wagner et al., 2018). This curvilinear relation is not a unique characteristic of political attitudes towards the use of force, as other important issues present similar distributions on the left–right axis, for example the relation between perceptions on political polarization and support for democracy (Torcal and Magalhães, 2022).

Exploring the under-investigated field of the diplomacy of party politics, we have reasons to expect a curvilinear pattern to emerge also with regard to diplomatic engagements, whereby moderate (centre, centre–right or centre–left) and extreme (right- or left-wing) governments behave differently. On the one hand, we are inclined to think that moderate governments are the most open to bilateral diplomatic activism compared to the two extremes because bilateral engagements require at least some degree of a mutual, if often tacit, approval in order to take place. While moderate governments can more safely ensure such approval with other governments, radical parties might fear a higher risk of rejection and are thus expected to rely more on multilateral engagements and related side meetings.[4]

Such expectations descend from various factors. First, and especially in the time frame we focus on, non-moderate, non-mainstream parties have more and more built an identity as challengers, a political trait that has greatly contributed to their success (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). More radical parties indeed challenge the status quo and the nature of political relations not only internally, but also in their international policies, changing the way their approach relations with other governments, countries and international organizations.

Such a 'challenge', which is present as well when radical parties are minor coalition partners in more centrist governments, has certainly hindered the stability and legitimacy of some bilateral relations as well, hence likely reducing the bilateral exchange across different countries in

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[3]For the underlying definition and distinction between left and right, we build on Sartori (1987), who centred it around the notion of equality. Then, regarding the right part of the spectrum, for distinctions on moderate versus radical and extreme, we largely draw from Bruno (2022) and Pirro (2023).

[4]Participation in multilateral fora is hardly ever a decision of a specific government, rather the consequence of membership in a regional or international organization. A new government cannot skip participation, which therefore continues by default, unless it decides to leave the organization (for more on this, see von Borzyskowski and Vabulas, 2019).

Europe and beyond (Hobolt and Tilley, 2018). Recent examples in Europe such as the German AfD being expelled by the European parliamentary group Identity and Democracy after some controversial statements by one of its leaders or the Italian Five Star Movement being harshly criticized by various European governments for its initial anti-establishment stances clearly show how non-mainstream parties often face rejection or lack of acceptance in diplomatic relations.

Second, and representing the other possible side of such a lack of acceptance, more extreme parties often show more conflictual world views, especially when the focus is on far-right radical parties. Although these parties rely on various 'instrumental' positions which are shared by their mainstream homologues, their more conflict-prone attitude has surely the potential to hinder different forms of diplomatic relations (Özdamar and Ceydilek, 2020).

Finally, Italy certainly represents a case in which extreme parties have played a significant role in shaping the country's recent foreign policy. As a start, radical Italian parties have downgraded the relevance of diplomatic, international relations, focusing instead more on internal issues (Coticchia and Davidson, 2018). For instance, the (former) Italian Northern League has devoted almost all its international focus to foreign policy on immigration that, although could increase chances for bilateralism, has downgraded most other international issues that are strong drivers of diplomatic relations (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015). As said, this should reinforce our expectations about moderate, mainstream parties showing a higher propensity for diplomatic activism, considering also the strong salience assigned to bilateralism by mainstream governments in recent Italian history, especially those led by Berlusconi (Brighi, 2006).

However, on the other hand, we acknowledge that there are equally valid reasons to expect an opposite, U-shaped, curvilinear pattern. First, as extreme parties are more often populist than mainstream ones, scholars working on populism and foreign policy have noted how populist parties more frequently engage in bilateral rather than multilateral relations, for instance the Law and Justice Party in Poland or the Justice and Development Party in Turkey (Cadier and Szulecki, 2020; Destradi *et al.*, 2022). Research on Italian populist parties has been less clear about this point, for example underlining the more traditionally leftist-multilateral foreign policy approach of the 5 Star Movement (Coticchia and Vignoli, 2020).

Second, once challenger, extreme parties enter into government could not only assume more moderate positions (see the inclusion-moderation hypothesis, e.g. Tepe, 2019) but also seek more strongly international legitimation and credibility, therefore intensifying bilateral engagements. Indeed, the literature on domestic and international government legitimization has highlighted that new non-mainstream parties and governments often look at international engagements as a relevant legitimizing tool (e.g. Franck, 1992; Wajner, 2022). In this context, bilateral visits could play a particularly important role, as radical governments would not need to face the typical criticism that often comes with broader multilateral meetings that receive more media attention.

H$_{1a}$. L–R values' curvilinear effect: Inverted-U shape

Moderate governments engage more often in diplomatic exchanges than left- and right-wing governments, which fear rejection in establishing bilateral relations.

H$_{1b}$. L–R values' curvilinear effect: U shape

Moderate governments engage less often in diplomatic exchanges than left- and right-wing governments, which seek international legitimacy and credibility.

In addition to these considerations on governments' overall inclination to resort to bilateral diplomatic exchanges, we expect that party politics plays a role also in the choice of the partners to diplomatically engage with. In particular, we expect that parties assign different significance and salience to ideational values when managing their countries' foreign relations (Ridgeway

and Correll, 2006; Duque, 2018), following also the literature on parties' values and foreign policy (e.g. Rathbun, 2004). In a consolidated democracy like Italy, state authorities should overall prefer other consolidated democracies (homophily effect – Duque, 2018) or at least hybrid regimes rather than autocracies as partners of choice whom they build foreign relations with. However, we hypothesise that this preference is also influenced by political ideology, so that not all governments similarly select their partners on the basis of the same shared ideational values.

We argue that right-wing governments are less likely to be driven by such affinity for democratic partners and that this can be explained by the different domestic audience costs related to their different electorates. On the one hand, we expect left-wing governments to be less willing to engage with countries that enforce civil liberties restrictions (i.e., autocratic regimes) as their voters can punish them for not endorsing values of equality, justice and human rights. On the other hand, especially with the recent increase of distortions concerning the job market and traditional Western values supposedly created by globalization, conservative voters more strongly support nationalist policies (Colantone and Stanig, 2018) and sympathize with authoritarian and nativist ideals (Nilsson and Jost, 2020; Castelli Gattinara and Froio, 2021). This is all more the case for the radical and extreme right's illiberal, when not firmly anti-democratic, positions (Pirro, 2023, 105), as moderate, centre-right governments are found to still subscribe to liberal constitutional principles instead (ivi, 104).

Therefore, we expect especially right-wing governments to turn a blind eye on engaging with non-democratic regimes, for the sake of national interest, as this is what eventually matters to most of their electorate (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015; Hanania, 2019; Kupchan, 2020).[5] Overall, these factors should reflect how parties' different ideational values influence their foreign policy approach (Kertzer et al., 2014).

H₂. Democratic values

Right-wing governments are less influenced by the democratic credentials of partner countries, and are more likely to design their foreign policy with authoritarian regimes instead.

A new dataset on Italy's high-level diplomatic visits

To operationalize our theoretical framework, we compiled a new dataset on Italy's bilateral diplomatic visits in 2000–2023. It focuses primarily on the prime ministers (PMs)' bilateral visits as the most representative and visible manifestations of their governments' priorities. For each Italian PM, we tracked the outgoing bilateral visits they performed abroad, as well as the incoming visits they received at home from their counterparts or other high-level personalities (Presidents, Prime Ministers, or Foreign Ministers). Collecting data on both directions is required to examine above-mentioned routine and reciprocity effects between them. Our full data collection includes also observations on the diplomatic visits done or received by Italian foreign ministers. We use them only as robustness checks in the appendix as we reckon that they cannot always be considered full manifestations of the priorities of the government the Foreign Minister belongs to[6].

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[5]It is possible that right-wing governments engage in assertive democratic promotion (e.g. George W. Bush's foreign policy agenda or John McCain's idea for a League of Democracies) by boosting their bilateral diplomatic activism and by prioritizing ideational values such as (democratic) political regime affinity, but we expect this relates more to a global than a middle power (which our research focuses on).

[6]Foreign ministers' visits can also be organized by Foreign Affairs Ministries as part of their responsibility for their State's functions in matters concerning their country's political, economic, and social relations with other countries. Thus, they cannot always be considered as manifestations of the priorities of a Foreign Minister's government. Hence, we deem only Prime Minister data are fully appropriate for this specific research purposes without ambiguities. In the data repository associated with this research we also present data related to Presidents of the Republic but never include them in the model as they are

In our data collection, we collected data on all such visits that take place in person rather than online because, although also video or phone calls can provide cues about governments' priorities, they are less costly in terms of planning and performance, and so sub-optimal manifestations of such concepts.[7] Additionally, and related to the fact that they matter less than in-person visits, they are also more difficult to retrieve as they are not always reported by the media and by the governments involved.

We collected our data from various primary and secondary sources such as institutional websites of the offices of the Prime Ministers[8], as well as media sources when official data was not available. Because of the lack of a single repository of such data for Italy (on the contrary, US visits have one) and the need to triangulate various sources, we describe our original dataset as the 'least bad best guess', with some possible, yet most likely very limited, omissions. Figure 1 offers some descriptive statistics about the data we use in our main models, showing the evolution of Italy's PM visits over the past decades.

We believe that Italy represents an insightful case study for various reasons. As mentioned, in the last decades there has been a frequent change in the political parties in government, showing significant legislative volatility. Moreover, differently from the US case which has so far predominantly been used in the investigation of domestic influences of diplomatic engagements, Italy is a middle power and parliamentary democracy whose analysis can speak to a broader sample of cases. In this way, although the focus on a single case limits the generalizability of our results, they can nonetheless better contribute to future comparative analyses with other similar cases. In particular, our results should at least shed light on similar European middle powers like Italy, where the party system and the breadth of foreign policy show consistent and important similarities with our case study.

Data and methods

To test our hypotheses, we reorganized our data in government-partner dyads. We include all dyads in which, over the past two decades, there has been at least one visit, therefore excluding irrelevant partners, primarily small, remote states. Concerning our main dependent variable, we created a count variable (*PM outgoing visits*) that counts how many times in their whole mandate Italian Prime Ministers visited a specific partner and a continuous variable (*PM outgoing visits rate*) that captures the frequency of such visits, by dividing the count dependent variable by the government duration (numbers of days). For ease of interpretation and reporting, this rate is then multiplied by 100 to represent the rate per 100 days. Because the latter operationalization addresses more robustly potential time-related concerns regarding high variations in Italian governments' duration, we use it as our main dependent variable. We still include *government duration* as a control in most models.

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certainly not representatives of the government. Finally, we could not track visits by lower cabinet members due to scarcity of public sources systematically tracking such visits. While we acknowledge their exclusion provides a less complete picture of governments' foreign policy engagements, the impossibility to have reliable and systematic collections on such lower-level visits makes this alternative unfeasible.

[7]We also exclude bilateral meetings held on the margins of multilateral fora, not only because they are difficult to systematically retrieve but also because they bear an intrinsic bias. Once you are part of multilateral organizations, you are generally obliged to participate in their meetings and it is easier to have a side meeting with other participants, thus distorting the signals relevant to our research. As a result, we include only those bilateral events that happen in either country of the two meeting partners (i.e., if Italy's PM goes to New York to attend UN General Assembly and then stops to meet bilaterally a high-level US official, the latter visit is coded. If he meets another country's representative while in New York, it is not coded).

[8]More specifically, the main institutional sources for our full data collection were: www.governo.it/it/agenda; www.sitiarcheologici.palazzochigi.it/; www.esteri.it; /www.farnesina.ipzs.it/; www.quirinale.it/ricerca/Visite. Given the major gaps related to pre-1999 data, we decided to start our data collection with the first post-1999 government, namely Amato's 2000–2001 government.

| Government	Beginning	End	Days	L-R scale*	Outgoing	Incoming visits
Amato	26/04/00	11/06/01	411	3.6 centre-leftist	16	35
Berlusconi II	11/06/01	23/04/05	1412	7.1 centre-rightist	46	140
Berlusconi III	23/04/05	17/05/06	389	7.1 centre-rightist	8	32
Prodi II	17/05/06	08/05/08	722	2.6 leftist	39	67
Berlusconi IV	08/05/08	16/11/11	1287	7.4 centre-rightist	34	97
Monti	16/11/11	28/04/13	529	5.6 centrist	36	50
Letta	28/04/13	22/02/14	300	4.0 centrist	26	24
Renzi	22/02/14	12/12/16	1024	4.0 centrist	52	91
Gentiloni	12/12/16	01/06/18	536	3.9 centre-leftist	25	25
Conte I	01/06/18	05/09/19	461	6.2 centrist	21	16
Conte II	05/09/19	13/02/21	527	4.1 centrist	14	26
Draghi	13/02/21	22/10/22	616	5.7 centrist	11	25
Meloni	22/10/22	31/12/23	435	8.1 rightist	33	37
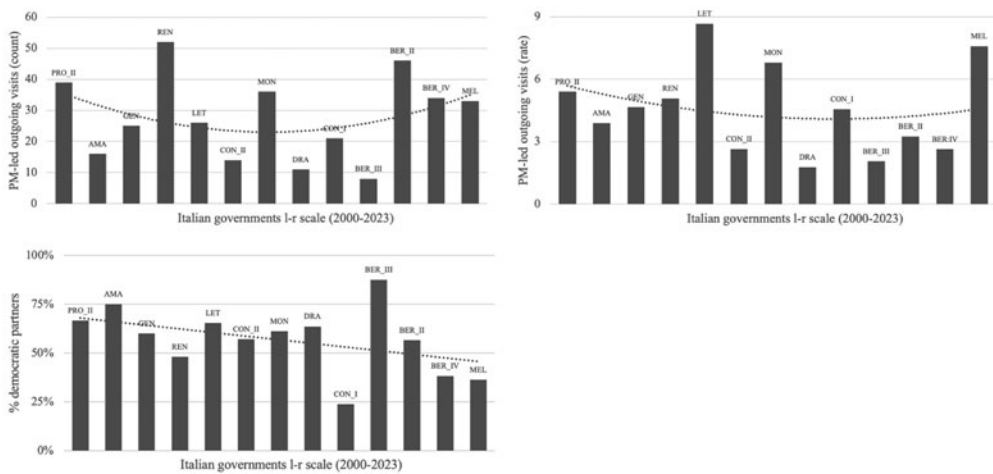
Figure 1. Italian PMs' visits 2000–2023, by government, direction, and democratic partners.
*Data and labels elaborated on the basis of Bakker et al., 2015; Novelli, 2021; Jolly et al., 2022; Bruno, 2022; Herre, 2023; Pirro, 2023.

We do not include incoming visits in the dependent variable because although they still require the hosting government to make a political choice about whether to accept the incoming foreign partner or not, the literature acknowledges this happens only to a smaller extent than outgoing ones, given the lower time and resource efforts required for the organization of their reception. In the literature outgoing and incoming visits are thus hardly ever treated as one and the same. However, they can still influence the propensity of Italian PMs to travel abroad, either by asking them to reciprocate that visit or, on the very contrary, by exhausting the reasons for the Italian PM to embark on an outgoing visit. For either reason, it is worth adding incoming visits Italian PMs received at home from foreign peers as a control (*PM incoming visits* or *PM incoming visits rate,* depending on and matching each model's specific DV operationalization). Given the structure of our dependent variables, Models 1–2 (which use the continuous DV) are linear models whereas Model 3 (which uses the count DV) employs a Poisson pseudo maximum likelihood (PPML) estimator. All these models have partner fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered at the government level and at the partner level.[9]

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[9]We do not use government fixed effects because they would remove any time-invariant government-related predictor, including the one of interest in this research (political ideology). We use two-way clustering as generally suggested for estimating gravity-like models with source-destination data structures like ours (Egger and Tarlea, 2015).

Regarding our key explanatory variable, *Political ideology*, we used longitudinal Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) data, in particular the variable *lrgen* (Bakker *et al.*, 2015; Jolly *et al.*, 2022). CHES expert surveys cover the period 1999–2019, fitting well our research time span. For each party, the values of this variable range from 0 to 10, from left to right (*lrgen*). We measured a government's ideology by weighing the ideological position of the parties composing the cabinet by their share of seats (Clare, 2010; Haesenbrouk, 2017)[10].

To capture our democracy-related hypothesis positing that governments give different priorities to democratic values in their foreign policy design, as embodied by the more or less democratic nature of the political regimes of their foreign policy partners, we coded the democratic status of each partner using the polyarchy variable of the Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem) dataset (Coppedge *et al.*, 2022). Given the dyadic structure of our data, we first calculate the average yearly polyarchy values (continuously ranging from 0 to 1) of a given partner during each Italian government's years, as well as its average V-Dem's Regimes of the World (RoW) categorical status. Then, for each dyad, we dichotomously code as democratic (taking value 1) those partners which, throughout a given Italian government's mandate, had an average RoW above 1 (which distinguishes democracies from autocracies) and an average polyarchy score higher than 0.6.[11]

By using partner fixed effects, we already account for any other potential confounder related to partners, including geographic distance, economic drivers, or security-related factors we briefly discussed in the literature review of the traditional determinants of high-level visits. Therefore, our set of controls is limited to few variables that may directly influence our key explanatory factors.

The status of the world's economy (yearly GDP growth, averaged for each Italian government's years, World Bank Indicators, 2024) captures exogenous shocks and disruptions generated by pandemics or global recessions, which can severely limit Italian PMs' visits abroad as well as their peers' own visits to Italy. The share of world democracies, instead, calculates the average number of democracies during a government's mandate, as a percentage of the world's total number of countries, to account for the new wave of autocratization (Cassani and Tomini, 2019) that may have recently increased the number of potential autocratic partners for Italian PMs compared to the early 2000s[12].

Results and discussion

Table 1 presents the results of our main models for Italy's PM outgoing visits (M1–M3). Both the linear regression and PPML models confirm our expectations that diplomatic engagements are

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[10]Following recent studies which have shown that another political dimension, the so-called GAL-TAN cleavage, ranging from green-alternative-libertarian (GAL) to traditional-authoritarian-nationalist (TAN), can sometimes better capture parties' positions on security and foreign policy than the classic left–right divide (Wagner *et al.*, 2017), in the appendix we replicate these tests with the *galtan* variable (retrieved from the same CHES dataset), whose values range from 0 to 10, from GAL to TAN poles.

[11]In the appendix we test alternative operationalizations. We call 'soft' operationalization the measure we obtained by selecting 0.5 as the cutoff point for the average polyarchy values. The one we use in the main text, which has instead 0.6 as cutoff point, is deemed more robust because it more robustly distinguishes democracies from hybrid regimes with averages close to the 0.5 cutoff point. Finally, we also use V-Dem's RoW variable alone, itself based on polyarchy values, to code as democracies those partners whose RoW value was above 1 (RoW 0 refers to close autocracies, 1 to electoral autocracies, 2 to electoral democracies, 3 to liberal democracies). Being RoW categories already an approximation, we deem this as the softest of our operationalizations. As shown in the appendix, these three measures are highly correlated (above 0.90) and yield the same results. In the main model we use the strictest one among these, which better distinguishes democracies (firmly above 0.6) from other political regimes.

[12]See Tables A8–A9 in the appendix for additional models inclusive of other potential confounders related to social and security ties between Italy and the destination country, such as Italian military exports and the presence of Italian migrant communities abroad.

Table 1. Results of the main models

	(1) Continuous DV	(2) Continuous DV	(3) Count DV
Government ideology	−0.0243**	−0.0250**	−0.650**
	(0.0115)	(0.0115)	(0.294)
Ideology × Ideology	0.00251**	0.00262**	0.0628**
	(0.00110)	(0.00110)	(0.0272)
Democracy	0.0188	0.0191	0.0451
	(0.0181)	(0.0179)	(0.477)
Democracy × Ideology	−0.00798***	−0.00798***	−0.126**
	(0.00253)	(0.00252)	(0.0632)
Incoming (rate)	0.0926**	0.0943***	
	(0.0364)	(0.0363)	
Incoming (count)			0.212***
			(0.0653)
World share of democracies	0.164***	0.130**	3.288*
	(0.0573)	(0.0567)	(1.766)
World economy status (% GDP growth)	0.00167	0.000537	0.0456
	(0.00155)	(0.00164)	(0.0484)
Government duration (days)		−1.77e-05***	0.000505**
		(6.72e-06)	(0.000228)
Constant	0.0353	0.0617*	−0.612
	(0.0325)	(0.0351)	(0.939)
Observations	1574	1574	1047
R^2	0.347	0.350	
Adjusted R^2	0.289	0.292	
Pseudo R^2			0.239
Partner FE	Yes	Yes	Yes

*** $P < 0.01$, ** $P < 0.05$, * $P < 0.1$. Standard errors within parentheses, clustered at government (13 clusters) and partner (123 clusters) level, estimated using cluster bootstrapping to account for the limited number of government clusters.
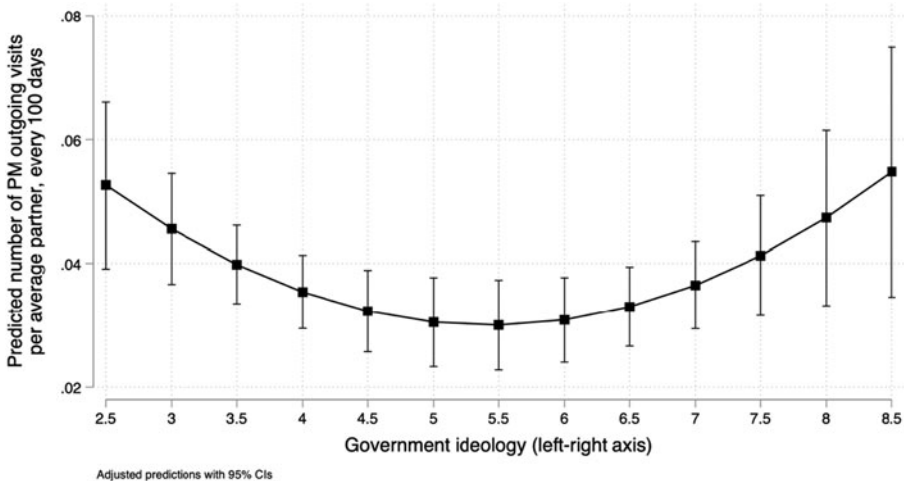

Figure 2. Curvilinear relationship between political ideology and predicted rate (per 100 days) of PM-led diplomatic engagements abroad with any world partner.

also explained by partisan differences. Concerning the effect that extreme parties have in this regard, these models provide empirical support to our H1b. Indeed, Figure 2 draws on M2 to show that the rate of Italian PM-led diplomatic engagements abroad towards any given world partner during their mandate follows a curvilinear relationship (although shaped differently from Wagner *et al.*, 2018), whereby extreme governments are the most active to engage bilaterally
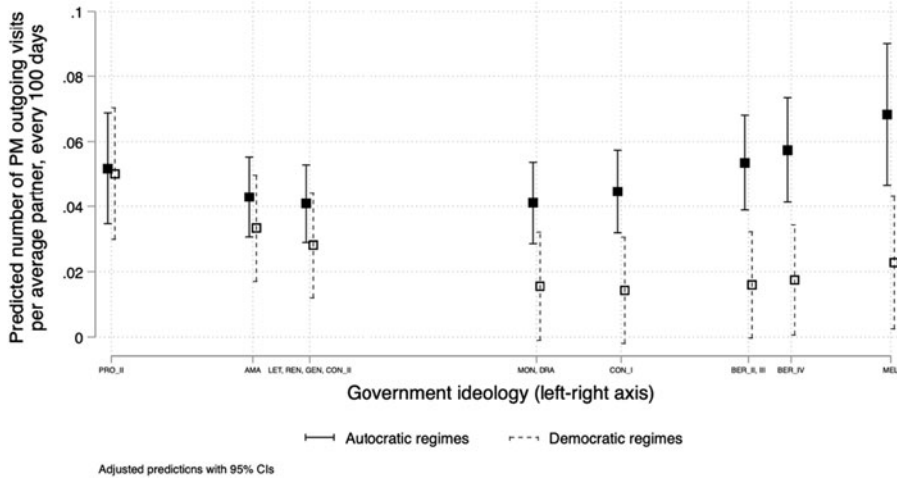
Figure 3. Prioritizing different political regimes.

abroad while this propensity declines moving towards the centre of the left–right scale.[13] This suggests that in extreme governments the quest for international credibility and legitimacy trumps fears of rejection. Giorgia Meloni's right-wing government best exemplifies this quest: in the first 15 months (our data collection ends in December 2023), the rate of visits abroad per 100 days was 60% higher than the ones of Monti and Draghi, but very similar to that of Prodi's leftist government.

With regard to the democracy hypothesis (H_2) on the existence of an interaction effect between governments' political ideology and their prioritization of partners who value democratic principles, all the models confirm a statistically significant negative effect, whereby governments to the right are less likely to prioritise democratic partners than centrist and left-wing governments. These significant effects are confirmed as well with alternative democracy operationalizations and the inclusion of MFA data (see appendix).

We show this in Figure 3, displaying the predicted rate of PM-led outgoing visits towards democratic or autocratic regimes, for each Italian government. The figure shows that right-wing governments such as Meloni's, but also the centre-right coalition of Berlusconi IV's, in which yet the Northern League had a significant share of seats, systematically visit more authoritarian regimes than democratic ones. To be sure, as long as democratic priorities are concerned, the official declarations by Meloni's government were to safeguard democracy (Ministero della Difesa, 2023, 4) in a global scenario which largely pits the liberal-democratic model against the totalitarian-autocratic one (ivi, 17). But its diplomatic engagements showed that, in practice, this safeguard has so far been disregarded.

This result is important also for the broader literature on the role of homophily, whereby similar states, including those sharing similar ideational factors such as identity and the democratic status, should be more likely to exchange visits with each other. As previous studies produced mixed results on the importance of ideational values in global diplomacy, our findings can provide a contribution in refining this discussion, showing that homophily can be influenced by political ideology. Indeed, different ideological frameworks attach different importance to some attributes (such as democracy) on which homophily-related considerations are subsequently made (Duque, 2018, 588).

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[13]Similar findings emerge when using GAL-TAN values instead of L–R values, but with a significance only at 10%.

Conclusion

This article introduced an original contribution to the literatures on diplomatic engagements and Italian foreign policy. Various scholars have addressed the latter's determinants and evolution (Coticchia and Davidson, 2019), from the involvement of Italian troops in military operations abroad (Carati and Locatelli, 2017; Coticchia and Moro, 2020; Vignoli and Coticchia, 2022) to the status of Italy in the world order (Costalli and Ruggeri, 2020), from foreign policy discontinuities and challenges (Isernia and Longo, 2017) to more specific aspects such as how civil–military relations influence Italian foreign policy (Casiraghi, 2021). Yet, none of them has so far systematically addressed the party politics of Italy's high-level diplomatic engagements.

After collecting original data on all diplomatic visits performed by Italian high-level authorities in 2000–2023, we systematically tested the effect Italian governments' political ideology had on the numbers of diplomatic visits and the partners prioritised in such endeavours. We found that diplomatic engagements do not only serve state interests, but provide cues also about party interests. In general, the quantitative analysis of the Italian case suggests not only that Italian governments do design their foreign policy differently on the basis of their political ideology, with extreme governments more active to engage diplomatically abroad to seek international credibility and legitimacy than centrist governments. But it also shows that there are partisan differences in the prioritization of democratic values in such engagements, such as in the selection of partners characterised by democratic political regimes. Data from Italy revealed a systematic right-wing preference for authoritarian regimes over democracies, showing that when right-wing governments engage diplomatically abroad, they care less about the democratic characteristics of the destination countries than other governments, being systematically more likely to visit authoritarian regimes than democratic ones.

Beyond its primary contribution to the Italian scholarship, this research also speaks to the broader international audience of foreign policy studies. To this end, further investigation is needed, not only to expand the empirical test to other case studies with comparative perspectives, but also to uncover more interaction patterns that are possible only with broader, multi-country samples. This future investigation may well include institutional actors' sequencing patterns and cluster effects about whether countries visit countries which their own partners visit, hence more closely to Duque's original network analysis (2018), providing a different shade of meaning to the homophily effect as well. But as ideology, in fact, does not represent the only domestic politics factor that influences foreign policy, future research should also focus on other domestic politics variables we sidelined due to data limitation such as government coalition politics and leaders' traits (Kaarbo and Beasley, 2008; Oppermann and Brummer, 2014; Oppermann et al., 2017; Malis and Smith, 2021). Similarly, our paper provides initial clues about differences in approaches to public diplomacy. As previous studies focused on public diplomacy as originating from supposedly unitary states (e.g. Snow and Cull, 2020), our approach should encourage scholars to unpack this dimension and see whether different governments target foreign public opinion in different ways and what approaches are more successful.

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