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Network Alliances Among Fridays for Future Local Groups in Italy: Relational Mechanisms in Action

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Abstract

Climate mobilisations unite collective actors around a common goal, yet they often diverge on problems and solutions for addressing climate change. How such heterogeneous networks sustain collaboration remains an open question. Between November 2018 and October 2019, the Fridays for Future mobilisation in Italy brought together local groups coordinating protests and organizing two national assemblies, each articulating multiple framings of climate change. This article shows how network alliances emerge as relational consequences of two mechanisms: framing affinity (homophily) and meeting attendance (foci-of-activity). Adopting a mixed-method research design, the data combine a relational survey and participant observation in meetings. Frame analysis and social selection exponential random graph models reveal the coexistence of reformist and rejectionist orientations towards political institutions, each driving a distinct alliance logic: rejectionists preferred allies with similar orientations (logic of selection), while reformists bridged framing differences (logic of inclusion). While confirming previous findings on framing homophily, the results challenge the view that framing heterogeneity inevitably leads to fragmentation. Instead, they show how meetings help negotiate orientations and form alliances in environmental networks, highlighting the relational dynamics of alliances in climate mobilisations.

Keywords

alliances; environmentalism; framing; foci-of-activity; Fridays for Future; homophily; meeting; mixedmethod; networks

1. Introduction

In April 2019, in a fully packed aula magna at the University of Milan, the first national assembly of Fridays for Future (FFF) Italia took place. Hosted by the Milan local group (LG), the meeting opens with speeches by participating LGs, guided by prompts: who we are, what we want, where we want to go, and how we want to coordinate. The speeches reflect different orientations, revealing the complexity and heterogeneity in how climate change is framed. After a moment of tension, a consensus is reached on the meeting report encompassing all orientations. In October 2019, as the mobilisation continues to expand, the FFF-LGs meet again at Castel dell'Ovo in Naples. Here, the differences sharpen: some advocate for a national reform plan for ecological transition; others call for mass civil disobedience, with intermediate positions emerging. Despite this, the FFF-LGs continue to negotiate the conflict and sustain collective action as a coalition throughout the mobilisation.

These moments show how meetings serve as key spaces of framing work—elaborating shared meanings of problems and solutions associated with the issue around which collective actors mobilize. Collective actors elaborate collective action frames (CAFs) to articulate problems, solutions, and motivations for action (Benford & Snow, 2000). When collective actors articulate the issue similarly, the resulting framing affinity facilitates alliances and, consequently, enhances their mobilizing capacity (Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010). Climate change is widely recognized as a field marked by framing heterogeneity (Parks, 2022), posing challenges of division and factionalism (Hadden, 2015). Yet in the Italian context, while diversity among FFF activists' attitudes and beliefs has been investigated (Tomnyuk et al., 2023), framing's role in alliances among grassroots climate actors remains underexplored, especially compared to other cases (e.g., Marquardt, 2020; Saunders, 2012).

Drawing on relational sociology and social movement studies (Diani & Mische, 2015; Krinsky & Crossley, 2015), this article contributes to debates on alliance formation within environmental networks by examining how Italian FFF-LGs ally through framing affinity despite meeting disputes. Specifically, this article investigates how alliances are facilitated by relational mechanisms crucial for tie formation: homophily and foci-of-activity (Fuhse & Gondal, 2024). Homophily operates through perceived affinity: actors sharing similar orientations are more likely to form ties (McPherson et al., 2001). Foci-of-activity means that co-participation fosters ties beyond events (Feld, 1981; Feld & Grofman, 2011).

The empirical material was produced through a mixed-methods research design. FFF-LGs' CAFs of climate change were collected through participant observation during meetings, and relational data were gathered via an online questionnaire. Following a sequential qual-quant approach (Hollstein, 2023), frame analysis of the LGs' speeches identified CAFs in each meeting (Lindekilde, 2014). These were transformed into variables and incorporated into social selection exponential random graph models (ERGMs)—an inferential technique for analysing relational mechanisms (Koskinen et al., 2013).

Findings confirmed homophily based on framing affinity as a key mechanism in alliance formation among collective actors with similar conflict elaborations. They also revealed two opposing CAFs. A reformist orientation framed climate change as an environmental problem and emphasized conventional protest actions (e.g., demonstrations, petitions) to pressure political institutions for national policies. By contrast, a rejectionist orientation conceived of climate change as a systemic issue rooted in capitalism and called for

disruption through confrontational protest actions (e.g., mass civil disobedience, blockade). The reformist and rejectionist CAFs sustained distinct logics of alliance formation—a logic of inclusion and a logic of selection—which, in turn, shaped the network. While protest events emphasized unity, meetings revealed a plurality where framing differences were not erased (Haug, 2013). Instead, they were actively negotiated, preventing coalitional fragmentation.

By examining a social network shaped by framing affinity and meeting participation, this article advances current debates on the politics of environmental networks. Rather than treating networks as mere nodes and ties, it shows them as relational outcomes (Lo Piccolo & Stagni, 2025) of political dynamics, constituting an "evolving social world" (Crossley, 2010b, p. 31). By unpacking how reformist and rejectionist logics emerge, and how meetings mediate disputes, this article traces how environmental networks embody ongoing processes through which collective actors negotiate differences and coordinate contentious action.

This article begins by situating the conceptual framework within the literature on environmental networks, at the intersection of social movement studies and research on relational mechanisms. Section 3 then introduces the case of FFF, contextualizing it within the Italian environmental milieu. Section 4 presents data production and outlines the methodological choices. The subsequent section analyses the data and presents the findings. Section 6 discusses implications for the literature on environmental networks and the formation of alliances. The article concludes by revisiting its core arguments.

2. Conceptual Framework

Drawing on relational and network perspectives on social movements (Diani & Mische, 2015; Krinsky & Crossley, 2015), this article develops a framework to examine how shared interpretative frames and event-based interactions shape network alliances during the expansive phase of mobilisation. Rather than viewing environmental networks as static organisational structures, it conceptualizes them as outcomes of framing and coordination negotiated during meetings. Through these processes, similarity, difference, and participation structure the network. By analysing how grassroots climate groups form alliances despite—and along—internal framing differences, this article contributes to understanding the political dynamics shaping environmental networks.

In social movement studies, alliances and coalitions have been present across different research agendas (Van Dyke & Amos, 2017). A minimal form of alliance is present "any time two or more [collective actors] work together on a common task. [This] can range from a simple partnership between just two movement groups to a complex network of many social movement organisations" (Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010, p. xiv).

Differences across perspectives hinge on the factors considered, whether separately or in interaction: pre-existing social ties between actors facilitate the recognition and identification processes; the context matters, i.e., actors' perceptions of political opportunity structure(s) facilitate or hinder alliance formation; and framing affinity between the actors favours alliances (McCammon & Van Dyke, 2010). While acknowledging that multiple factors jointly influence alliance formation (McCammon & Van Dyke, 2010), this article focuses on framing affinity as a critical and sufficient condition in coalition-building processes marked by internal framing differences (Van Dyke & Amos, 2017). Building on these insights, the focus shifts from

reviewing explanatory factors to theorizing how framing affinity operates as a relational mechanism within network formation processes.

Alliances are collaborative relationships among collective actors, the consequences of the mobilisation rather than exclusively their antecedent and/or explanatory factor (Diani, 1992; Melucci, 1996). Collective actors collaborate to elaborate a shared understanding of the conflict, to coordinate efforts toward specific objectives, or to provide resources to groups with limited technical expertise or media access (Eggert & Pilati, 2014). The resulting ensemble of collaborative relationships generates relational patterns, a network structure, which acquire properties that support the coordination of the phases of mobilisation (Diani, 1992). During an expansive phase, the general inclination to engage in mobilisation contributes to the formation of a dense and decentralized network structure. In contrast, during a contraction phase, the network structure is more fragmented, and the formation of alliances becomes more demanding, as each collective actor focuses on organisational maintenance (Diani, 2015, pp. 205–208).

Since collaborative relationships cannot be fully understood through their existence alone, examining attitudes, behaviours, and shared meanings—such as framing affinity—helps identify relational patterns in networks (Saunders, 2007). Empirical studies reflect this complexity, reporting diverging results concerning the relationship between framing affinity and alliances among collective actors. In some cases, short- and/or medium-term shared goals have sufficed for collective actors to form instrumental alliances. While acknowledging differences in broader orientations, the elaboration of a common goal enabled them to set these aside and collaborate in its pursuit (Diani & Bison, 2004). The instrumental character of the relationship is such insofar as the collective actors are not involved in a process of (re)defining their own collective being, but they collaborate to achieve a shared goal. Evidence shows that negotiating shared understandings of the problem, solution, and motivation of the conflict, a CAF (Benford & Snow, 2000), is necessary for an effective alliance (Croteau & Hicks, 2003). Mische (2008), for example, shows how framing processes and communicative styles influence the network structure composed of student and civil society organisations: symbolic representations both enable and constrain the establishment and maintenance of collaborative ties. An approach aligning with the suggested direction (Saunders, 2007) involves studying network structures by testing how relational mechanisms shape the formation of collaborative relationships among collective actors. Di Gregorio (2012) provides an illustrative example in this sense by introducing the relational mechanism of homophily in environmental networks. The homophily mechanism operates by increasing the likelihood that actors with a shared and relevant attribute engage in a positive relation (McPherson et al., 2001). Since alliance formation involves an ongoing process of negotiation of the alliance boundaries (Mische, 2011) and in framing activity (Benford, 1997), a CAF acts as a shared and relevant attribute:

Proposition 1: When two collective actors share the same CAF, they are more likely to form an alliance.

In this framework, CAFs are both conceived as articulations of the conflict's diagnosis and prognosis, and as carriers of deep-seated values and orientations. Notably, in the field of collective action around climate change, multiple orientations coexist. These reflect and stem from different waves of environmentalism, including conservationism, radical environmentalism, sustainable development, and environmental justice (Parks, 2022). Their coexistence is critical, as divergent elaborations may hinder the negotiation and coalition unity.

Previous empirical results show that value and discourse homophily affect environmental networks differently. While the former leads to collaborations among collective actors sharing deep-seated values, the latter enables collaboration among collective actors with different yet compatible framings. In this case, discourse practices (framing in particular) bridge collective actors with different orientations, creating more integrated network structures (Di Gregorio, 2012). Other studies, however, suggest that distinct and opposing CAFs can fragment coalitions mobilizing around climate change. Saunders (2012), for instance, reports that the presence of opposing CAFs, rooted in different orientations, led to the dissolution of a coalition. During a climate camp organized by a British coalition, the presence of a position advocating for policy change within the existing system (reformist framing), alongside another calling for a complete systemic transformation (radical framing), resulted in an irreconcilable framing dispute. Similarly, during the most recent wave of climate protests, disputes over opposing CAFs undermined coalition continuity. For instance, in Germany, the FFF coalition split over conflicting political claims—moderate reform versus radical systemic change—leading those advocating for the latter to form a new group (Marquardt, 2020). The emergence of opposing CAFs within a coalition reflects the presence of deep-seated values concerning how to achieve social and political change: while systemic transformation implies a rejection of the current political-institutional order, reformist approaches envision change as a reassessment and adjustment of that very order. Consequently, opposing orientations—rooted in deep-seated values—may activate the value homophily mechanism, preventing alliances across CAFs. Distinguishing between homophily based on shared CAFs and on opposing CAFs helps clarify the different relational consequences that framing—whether understood as a conflict elaboration and as an expression of deep-seated values respectively—can produce. Here, opposing CAFs are expected to intensify the homophily mechanism within each orientation, contributing to more polarized relational dynamics:

> *Proposition 2: When two collective actors adopt CAFs that share the same orientation (e.g., reformist or rejectionist), even if their specific frames differ, they are more likely to form an alliance.*

Given that collective actors strategically present themselves as a unified collective entity in the frontstage of mobilisation (Gerhards & Rucht, 1992), framing differences surface in the backstage of the mobilisation—e.g., internal meetings—where their impact on intra-coalitional dynamics comes to the fore (Haug, 2013), thereby allowing for a deeper understanding of their effects (Staggenborg, 2010). The role of meetings can be captured through the relational mechanism of foci-of-activity, which shows how shared physical settings enable face-to-face interaction and foster durable relationships (Feld, 1981). Framing homophily and foci of activity are distinct yet closely intertwined relational mechanisms. For a focus-of-activity to have relational impact, actors must share a relevant attribute specific to that focus (Feld & Grofman, 2011, p. 528). It follows that by not attending a meeting, a grassroots collective actor may hinder its chances of forming alliances, as it misses the opportunity both to signal its similarity to others and to recognize theirs:

> *Proposition 3: When two collective actors jointly participate in a meeting, they are more likely to form an alliance.*

A meeting, as "the result of the participants' interactions while it simultaneously structures these interactions" (Haug, 2013, p. 707), is a space where collective actors engage in the negotiation of means, ends, and view of the field—i.e., their collective identity process (Melucci, 1996). Here, differences and similarities are constitutive of the situation (Haug, 2013). During a mobilisation's expansive phase, meetings

are even more central for coordinating the mobilisation since confrontation and communication can mitigate or exacerbate frame disputes (Benford, 2022; Koopmans, 2004):

> *Proposition 4: During the expansive phase of the mobilisation, contrasting CAFs are more likely to be present in the same meeting.*

Building on these considerations, Propositions 1 and 2 focus on the CAFs enabling alliance formation, whereas Propositions 3 and 4 emphasize how meetings and co-presence shape relational outcomes. Broader contextual factors, in turn, further influence collaboration patterns. More specifically, geographical and temporal characteristics of collective actors influence how, when, and with whom these interactions take place. Alliances among geographically distant collective actors tend to involve higher coordination costs and require more substantial resources. Thus, patterns of alliance formation among collective actors across a nation-state may display geographic proximity effects (Fuhse & Gondal, 2024):

> *Proposition 5: When two collective actors mobilize within the same administrative area, they are more likely to establish an alliance.*

The temporal dimension also plays a key role. Grassroots actors do not always emerge simultaneously; some actors emerge early in the mobilisation as innovators, while others join later as reproducers (Minkoff & McCarthy, 2005). Thus, longevity can serve as a key resource—sometimes even more than size—for the accumulation of relational capital (Oliver et al., 1985), thereby contributing to the structuring of the network alliances.

> *Proposition 6: When collective actors are founded in the early phase of the mobilisation, they are more likely to receive collaborative ties than those founded later.*

Taken together, the six propositions advance the understanding of alliance formation through relational mechanisms, whereby interpretative dynamics, interactional settings, and structural embeddedness jointly interpret how grassroots actors sustain unity despite framing differences.

3. Fridays for Future in the Italian Environmental Milieu

Italian environmentalism has long displayed framing heterogeneity, significantly shaping mobilisations over the years. From the outset, a division emerged between conservationist and political-ecological orientations. While the former prioritized environmental preservation, the latter linked environmental degradation to the disruptive effects of economic activity (Della Seta, 2000). This divergence shaped coalitional patterns: organisations collaborated mainly with groups framing the conflict similarly—an instance of homophily—producing an archipelago-like structure (Diani, 1995).

Environmental mobilisation gained mass character only when nuclear energy was framed as a threat and disarmament as the solution (Asara, 2022). This convergence fostered organisational capacity and broad participation (Diani & Forno, 2007). However, when environmental issues lost public salience in the mid-1990s, reformist and conservationist groups turned to consensual action, such as animal and landscape protection campaigns. In contrast, radical organisations focused on local struggles over pollution and transport (Forno, 2006). This divergence distanced organisations and weakened collaboration.

Since then, environmental protests have remained active, especially through local, disruptive actions that faced increasing repression. Many of these mobilisations took on a Locally Unwanted Land Use (LULU) character and adopted an environmental justice frame (Schlosberg, 2002). They have been widespread nationwide (Imperatore, 2023). Yet alliances within them are often unstable. Tensions between environmental organisations and local committees generated fractures (della Porta & Piazza, 2008), but these conflicts have also sparked renewed waves of mobilisation (della Porta et al., 2019). While environmental collective actors succeeded in building coalitions around local issues, they struggled to articulate global environmental challenges through sustained national campaigns, focusing instead on lobbying international institutions (della Porta & Diani, 2004).

The diffusion of climate mobilisation in late 2018 marked a turning point for the Italian environmental milieu. New groups formed, and the issue of climate change gained unprecedented centrality (Biancalana & Ladini, 2024). The new wave originated with the pioneering protest by Greta Thunberg, then a 16-year-old Swedish student who performed a climate strike in front of the Swedish parliament in August 2018: a perceived political opportunity given the approaching parliamentary elections (de Moor et al., 2021; Uba, in press; Wahlström et al., 2024a). School strikes held on Fridays spread in Italy through a downward scale shift. "Fridays for Future" protest events were performed in front of local political institution buildings. Strikers denounced the lack of political attention and intervention on climate change. On 15 March 2019, the first global mass demonstration under the banner of FFF was organized. The mobilisation continued throughout the year with further mass demonstrations alongside weekly school strikes, marking the mobilisation's expansive phase in Italy (Wahlström et al., 2024b; Zamponi et al., 2024).

In Italy, the diffusion process is distinctive for organizing two national assemblies. During the expansive phase, no other country attempted such federal-level coordination, which is in line with the Italian social movement milieu's propensity to build national grassroots coordination (Caruso et al., 2010). The Italian FFF mobilisation took a coalitional form involving a constellation of actors: newcomers, environmental associations, student unions, and social centers (Wahlström et al., 2024a). Tensions and disputes at each meeting did not lead to coalition breakdown, and the federal organising remained active throughout the mobilisation. By contrast, German FFF mobilisation experienced internal fracture due to framing differences (Marquardt, 2020). The Italian case is thus a crucial one for studying the role of framing similarities and differences in shaping alliances.

4. Data and Methods

The research adopts a sequential qualitative-quantitative mixed-method design (Hollstein, 2023). It began in the field with participant observation, then moved to a survey. This same sequence guided the analysis: frame analysis first unpacks how FFF-LGs frame climate change, followed by analysing their network alliances using social selection ERGMs. This is set out together with an explanation of the rational and each instrument's contribution.

The event-based approach defines the network boundaries by identifying its population through the researcher's observation and recording of participation in key events (Laumann et al., 1989). In this case, the meetings held in Milan (April 2019) and Naples (October 2019) serve as key events where face-to-face interactions and negotiation foster alliances. This approach uses joint event participation as a sampling

criterion and evidence of a direct social tie, which reduces the researcher's nominalist contribution (Diani & Mische, 2015). Based on this criterion, a FFF-LG—a meso-level actor—is included as a network node if it attended at least one meeting. The network's population consists of 107 LGs: 57 attended both assemblies, 28 only Milan, and 22 only Naples.

Within the mixed-method design, data production relied on distinct sources and instruments. The relational data were gathered through an online questionnaire administered between November and December 2019, a well-suited instrument to reach geographically dispersed actors. The response rate (83%) was considerably high. Several factors may account for this: the questionnaire was circulated during the mobilisation's expansive phase, likely motivating LGs to seek visibility and recognition; at the time, the field was still unsaturated; LGs were contacted via their social media accounts, their primary communication channels; and the participant observation approach (Gobo, 2008, pp. 122–124) may have helped build trust. Additionally, a two-month contact diary recorded outreach efforts, allowing systematic follow-ups (typically after 10 days of non-response).

The questionnaire included a series of stepwise questions to elicit the relational data vital to movements (Diani, 1990): "Has your group been in contact with other groups related to FFF?" "If yes, what are the names of these groups?" and "With the groups you mentioned, did your group share material resources or share information?" The alliance tie is conceptualized as a dyadic flow-type relation (Borgatti et al., 2009) and as an inter-organisational exchange (Diani & Mische, 2015). The resulting alliance network is a binary one-mode directed matrix where 1 indicates that a node nominates another, and 0 otherwise. The use of a directed network preserved respondents' representations of relationships and allowed detailed investigation of network configurations.

To handle missing data, a reconstruction-based imputation strategy was used. Specifically, for non-respondent nodes—i.e., with no outgoing tie information—ties were imputed based on incoming nominations. Following Krause and Huisman (2023, p. 604), it was assumed that if a node was chosen by another, it is more likely than not that an exchange occurred, making this a plausible estimate. This assumption aligns with relational approaches that treat nominations as indicators of meaningful ties, even when unreciprocated (Crossley, 2010a).

The framing data were gathered through participant observation conducted during meetings. Field notes, together with the Facebook live-stream recording of the Milan meeting and the video-recorded speeches from the Naples meeting shared on social media, enabled transcription of speeches. This methodological choice reflects an interest in observing speech-in-action—how CAFs were negotiated and constructed backstage—and a preference for naturalistic data (Cardano, 2011).

CAFs were identified through qualitative frame analysis of speech transcripts. Following Lindekilde's approach (2014), each speech was coded into diagnostic and prognostic parts. These parts were compared to find patterns of similarity and difference, enabling systematic CAF identification. The heterogeneity of the CAFs outlined in the theoretical framework was clearly reflected in the speeches. While some groups framed climate change as primarily an environmental issue, others attributed it to the capitalist system's mode of production. Still others emphasized its social consequences, such as its impact on citizens' health. This diagnostic diversity was mirrored in the prognostic dimension: some advocated scientific and technical

solutions, expressing confidence in science; others stressed raising public awareness to increase mobilisation and political pressure; while others called for a fundamental socio-political and economic transformation.

In addition, the coding procedure revealed two main axes of differentiation and similarity. Notably, previous studies showed this wave of mobilisation is characterized by "bringing the political institutions back" into the conflict's elaboration (de Moor et al., 2021). Ultimately, the jurisdiction of the targeted political institutions and the stance toward them shaped the CAFs articulated by the Italian FFF-LGs during the meetings. As reported in Table 1, the CAFs were grouped by the level at which the FFF-LGs situate the problem—global, glocal, national, or local. This axis of differentiation was further articulated in the character of the proposed solutions. A first distinction concerned whether the solutions were individual or collective. An individual orientation implied that climate change is caused by, and can be addressed through, changes in individual consumption and behaviour. In this case, political institutions were neither blamed nor targeted. In contrast, collective orientations differed in their stance toward political institutions—whether reformist or rejectionist. The former involved articulating policy demands to political institutions, while the latter called for the rejection of the current socio-political and economic system.

Table 1. CAFs typology.

	Collective		Individual
	Reformist	Rejectionist	
Global	Global climate justice; Global reformist (N)	Global rejectionist	Lifestyle change (M)
Glocal	Glocal reformist (M)	Glocal rejectionist	
National	National reformist		
Local	Local reformist (N)	Local rejectionist	

Notes: (M) only Milan meeting; (N) only Naples meeting.

As part of the sequential qual-quant mixed-method design, the CAFs typology (see Table 1) was coded into two categorical variables: Milan CAFs and Naples CAFs. Each FFF-LG is assigned a CAF based on their speech framing during each assembly. These variables serve to test Proposition 1 (framing homophily) and Proposition 4 (framing heterogeneity). Additionally, in line with Proposition 2, the CAFs were categorized according to the orientations towards political institutions, resulting in two dichotomous variables: Milan rejectionist and Naples rejectionist. Furthermore, to assess meeting participation's effect (Proposition 6), a dichotomous variable—Not present—is included to indicate whether the FFF-LGs were present in each meeting.

In addition, geographical and temporal attributes characterized FFF-LGs. The geographical attributes include a continuous variable representing the population size of each FFF-LG's urban context, and a categorical variable, *region*, indicating each FFF-LG's Italian administrative area. The latter is used as a node attribute to test Proposition 5.

The temporal attribute, included for testing Proposition 6, is a categorical variable indicating each FFF-LG's creation date, grouped into *earlier*, *middle*, and *later groups*. These categories reflect phases of mobilisation: the *earlier* group includes FFF-LGs created between November 2018 and February 2019; the *middle* group

includes those formed in March 2019; and the *later* group refers to those established between April and October 2019. This division follows the Italian mobilisation's timeline (Zamponi et al., 2024).

The ERGMs test the propositions concerning homophily as a social selection mechanism, since they allow inferences about ties' patterns (Robins & Lusher, 2013). ERGMs assume that social networks are composed of various configurations reflecting social processes such as reciprocity, transitive closure, activity, and popularity, which together contribute to the social network's self-organizing pattern (Koskinen & Daraganova, 2013). Network configurations are selected for an ERGM based on the theoretical framework guiding the formation of network ties (Robins & Lusher, 2013). Since multiple social processes interact to shape the network structure, ERGMs simultaneously consider these processes and detect which drive tie formation (Lusher et al., 2021). Social selection ERGMs test whether nodal attributes influence social structures alongside self-organisation. In these models, node attributes are fixed covariates that can be binary, continuous, or categorical. Social selection models simultaneously assess endogenous effects (network configurations) and exogenous effects (node attributes; Robins & Daraganova, 2013).

In this article, four social selection models test relational mechanisms controlling for clustering, centralization, reciprocity, and baseline tie formation's tendency. The baseline model (Model 0) considers network configurations such as *arc*, *reciprocity*, *alternating in-star*, *alternating out-star*, *triangulation*, and *cyclic closure*, which together form a solid starting point for directed networks (Lusher & Robins, 2013). Specifically, the arc effect (*Arc*) measures the general propensity to form ties, while reciprocity (*Reciprocity*) captures the tendency for mutual ties. The alternating in-star (*AinS*) and out-star (*AoutS*) effects assess the spread of popularity and activity, respectively. Triangulation (*AT-T*) reflects the tendency for transitive closure—closing structural holes by forming triangles when multiple independent paths exist between nodes—whereas cyclic closure (*AT-C*) accounts for the presence of 3-cycles, indicating non-hierarchical network closure.

The independent variables indicated above act as node attributes. Since social selection models also assess changeable attributes like attitudes and behaviours (Robins & Daraganova, 2013), CAFs are included as changeable attributes along with fixed geographical and temporal ones.

The four models differ in the two time points to which the CAFs attribute refers. Models 1 and 2 assess Milan meeting CAFs, while Models 3 and 4 assess the Naples meeting CAFs. Models 1 and 3 focus on Propositions 1 and 4, while Models 2 and 4 focus on Proposition 2. Propositions 3, 5, and 6 are tested across the models.

In directed networks, an attribute may encourage node activity (expressing ties) or popularity (receiving ties). For binary attributes, these correspond to *sender* and *receiver* effects, while homophily is assessed through the *match* effect. Homophily for categorical variables is measured by the *match effect*, for continuous ones by the *difference* and *sum* effects (see Robins & Daraganova, 2013, p. 95, for graphical representations). ERGMs are estimated using the *R* package ergm (Handcock et al., 2025; Hunter et al., 2008; Krivitsky et al., 2023). Additionally, the goodness-of-fit and multicollinearity tests for each model were conducted following the Borgatti et al. (2022) and Duxbury (2018) approaches. Goodness-of-fit statistics (see Supplementary File) show that the models replicate key structural features of the observed network. Variance inflation factors based on simulated networks indicate acceptable multicollinearity levels among covariates.

5. Results

The analysis first examines the network's population and descriptive properties. The FFF-LGs are distributed across Italy, yet LGs from Lombardia and Campania are over-represented—i.e., administrative areas where the meetings took place. This pattern reflects lower participation costs for LGs closer to event sites. The founding rates of these groups indicate a steady diffusion of new groups throughout the expansive phase of mobilisation, peaking in April before slowing down (see Figure 1).

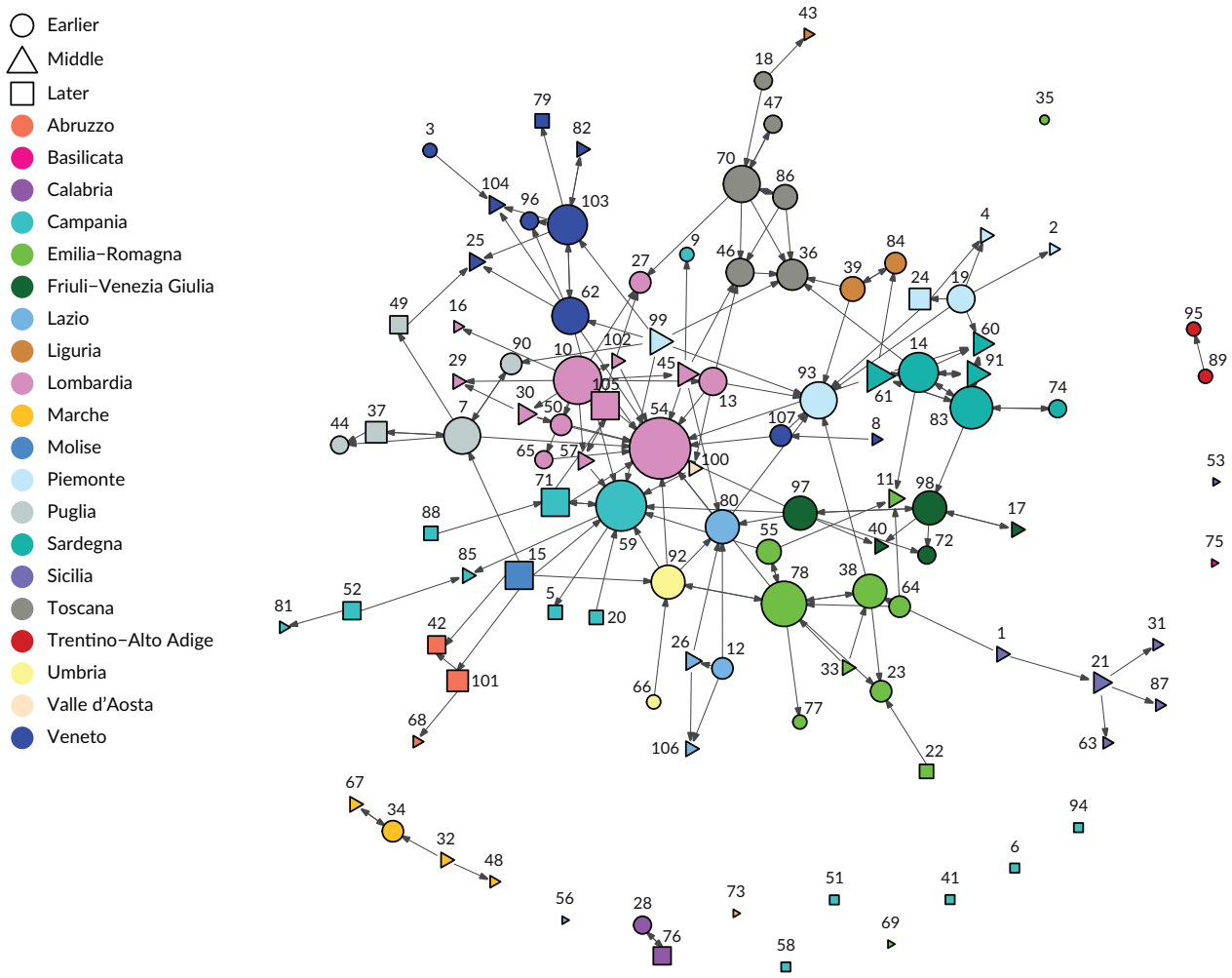

Figure 1. Alliance network by region (colour), total degree (size), and foundation group (shape).

The network structure features a large, well-connected main component, alongside eleven isolates and three smaller components. Network density is low, ≈ 2% of possible ties (see Table 2). However, this low density must be interpreted considering the national scale of the network: despite sparseness, it shows active networking among geographically dispersed groups.

Centralization is low overall, suggesting the network is not dominated by a few central nodes. However, there is a notable difference between in-degree and out-degree centralization: incoming ties concentrate more than outgoing ties. The coefficients of variation for in-degree and out-degree further confirm that the network is more homogeneous in terms of outgoing ties than incoming ties. These results highlight the presence of

Table 2. Whole network level descriptives.

Size	107
Density	0.016
Total degree centralization	0.065
Indegree centralization	0.145
Outdegree centralization	0.098
Reciprocity	0.236

influential nodes, with Milan-LG ($n = 54$) and Naples-LG ($n = 59$) emerging among the most central. Thus, the network is functionally organized around the coordination roles played by LGs hosting the meetings.

Building on this overview, the second step of the analysis applies inferential modelling to test the propositions derived from the theoretical framework. This step shows how mechanisms like framing homophily and foci-of-activity shape alliance formation.

Model 0 (see Table 3) concerns the estimation of the self-organising structure of the alliances network, specifically the endogenous effects shaping network configurations. The arc effect indicates the baseline propensity for tie formation, and it is usually not interpreted. The significant effects are those of reciprocity and transitivity. Reciprocity, positive and significant, indicates, on average and among the relevant node pairs, a positive propensity to form reciprocated ties. The positive triangulation effect (AT-T) and the negative cyclic closure effect (AT-C) suggest the presence of an informal hierarchical structure: within a triad, one actor becomes the common ally while the other two remain unconnected.

Table 3. Parameters estimation for Model 0 univariate ERGM.

Effects	Model 0
	est. (s.e.)
Arc	**−5.62***** **(0.17)**
Reciprocity	**6.35***** **(0.33)**
AinS	−0.20 0.36)
AoutS	0.32 (0.37)
AT-T	**1.45***** **(0.26)**
AT-C	**−0.73**** **(0.26)**
AIC	1,626
BIC	1,679

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

5.1. Framing Homophily

Model 1 tests whether the CAFs from the Milan meeting activated framing homophily. As reported in Table 4, the positive and significant match effect associated with the Milan meeting CAFs supports the Proposition: on average, FFF-LGs were more likely to ally with others expressing the same CAF. To further assess the presence of framing homophily, Model 3 considers the CAFs elaborated during the Naples meeting. Here too, the match effect is positive and significant (see Table 5), providing additional support for Proposition 1. Taken together, these findings suggest that, in both meetings, the articulation of the same CAF by two FFF-LGs increased their propensity to become allies.

Table 4. Parameters estimation for Models 1 and 2 bivariate ERGM based on FFF-LG CAFs in Milan.

[Attr]		Effects	Model 1	Model 2
			est. (s.e.)	est. (s.e.)
		Arc	**−6.63*** (0.34)**	**−6.76*** (0.27)**
		Reciprocity	**6.01*** (0.40)**	**5.59*** (0.35)**
		AinS	0.58 (0.46)	0.13 (0.41)
		AoutS	−0.07 (0.26)	0.34 (0.42)
		AT-T	**0.91*** (0.26)**	**1.12*** (0.26)**
		AT-C	**−0.74** (0.26)**	**−0.96*** (0.25)**
Region	Region	Match	**2.25*** (0.16)**	**2.24*** (0.16)**
Population size	Population size	Difference	**0.49*** (0.11)**	**0.52*** (0.09)**
Founding group	Earlier	Sender	0.15 (0.23)	0.15 (0.23)
		Receiver	**0.81** (0.25)**	**0.80*** (0.24)**
	Later	Sender	−0.14 (0.38)	−0.07 (0.38)
		Receiver	0.00 (0.41)	−0.21 (0.44)
Milan CAFs	Glocal reformist	Sender	0.63 (0.39)	
		Receiver	−0.66 (0.37)	
	National reformist	Sender	0.75 (0.48)	
		Receiver	−0.47 (0.48)	

Table 4. (Cont.) Parameters estimation for Models 1 and 2 bivariate ERGM based on FFF-LG CAFs in Milan.

[Attr]		Effects	Model 1	Model 2
	Global rejectionist	Sender	**1.08*** **(0.55)**	
		Receiver	−0.94 (0.58)	
	Glocal rejectionist	Sender	0.22 (0.36)	
		Receiver	−0.09 (0.33)	
	Local rejectionist	Sender	**1.75***** **(0.49)**	
		Receiver	**−2.10**** **(0.65)**	
	Lifestyle change	Sender	**1.19**** **(0.41)**	
		Receiver	**−2.22***** **(0.48)**	
	Milan CAFs	Match	**0.32*** **(0.13)**	
	Rejectionist	Sender		0.08 (0.24)
		Receiver		0.38 (0.23)
		Match		**0.32**** **(0.12)**
	Not present	Sender	0.27 (0.44)	−0.40 (0.35)
		Receiver	−0.79 (0.43)	0.09 (0.35)
AIC			1,193	1,218
BIC			1,391	1,342

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

To further unravel the content dimension of the CAFs, Proposition 2 examines the role of opposing orientations in alliance formation. This proposition looks more closely at the effect of the reformist–rejectionist CAFs—whether change is pursued through reformist demands or through the total rejection of capitalism. In Models 2 and 3, the homophily effect is captured by the rejectionist match effects (see Tables 4 and 5, respectively). The positive and significant estimates in both models support the proposition.

Table 5. Parameters estimation for Models 3 and 4 bivariate ERGM based on FFF-LG CAFs in Naples.

[Attr]	Effects	Model 3	Model 4
		est. (s.e.)	est. (s.e.)
	Arc	**−6.47***** **(0.31)**	**−6.92***** **(0.30)**

Table 5. (Cont.) Parameters estimation for Models 3 and 4 bivariate ERGM based on FFF-LG CAFs in Naples.

[Attr]		Effects	Model 3	Model 4
		Reciprocity	**5.77*** (0.37)**	**5.60*** (0.36)**
		AinS	0.46 (0.44)	0.36 (0.43)
		AoutS	0.15 (0.43)	0.12 (0.42)
		AT-T	**0.99*** (0.26)**	**1.03*** (0.26)**
		AT-C	**−0.85*** (0.26)**	**−0.88*** (0.25)**
Region	Region	Match	**2.33*** (0.16)**	**2.37*** (0.16)**
Population size	Population size	Difference	**0.32** (0.12)**	**0.34*** (0.10)**
Founding group	Earlier	Sender	0.13 (0.24)	0.22 (0.23)
		Receiver	**0.85** (0.26)**	**0.70** (0.24)**
	Later	Sender	−0.42 (0.35)	−0.26 (0.33)
		Receiver	−0.25 (0.36)	−0.26 (0.36)
Naples CAFs	Global reformist	Sender	0.07 (0.53)	
		Receiver	0.06 (0.50)	
	National reformist	Sender	−0.16 (0.34)	
		Receiver	0.63 (0.33)	
	Local reformist	Sender	**0.83* (0.40)**	
		Receiver	−0.02 (0.42)	
	Global rejectionist	Sender	0.37 (0.38)	
		Receiver	−0.57 (0.40)	
	Glocal rejectionist	Sender	0.03 (0.42)	
		Receiver	−0.34 (0.43)	
	Local rejectionist	Sender	−0.43 (0.64)	
		Receiver	−0.00 (0.60)	

Table 5. (Cont.) Parameters estimation for Models 3 and 4 bivariate ERGM based on FFF-LG CAFs in Naples.

[Attr]		Effects	Model 3	Model 4
	Naples CAFs	Match	**0.29*** **(0.14)**	
	Rejectionist	Sender		−0.14 (0.27)
		Receiver		**0.72**** **(0.27)**
		Match		**0.43***** **(0.12)**
	Not present	Sender	0.14 (0.32)	0.05 (0.29)
		Receiver	**−0.83**** **(0.33)**	−0.30 (0.31)
AIC			1,205	1,190
BIC			1,403	1,314

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

These results are further analysed through an estimation of tie propensities for each group. They are calculated by adding the arc effect estimate and the attributes' effects, depending on whether a node sends or receives ties. Tables 6 and 7 report the propensities, which result in negative values due to the arc effect's negative estimates in Model 2 and 4, respectively. Looking at Table 6, the homophily mechanism is slightly stronger for the Milan rejectionist LGs than for the reformists: reformists display more similar propensities to send ties to other LGs compared to rejectionists. Accordingly, by favouring alliances based on similarities, rejectionists display a stronger identification in alliance building.

Table 6. Estimation of tie propensity based on FFF-LG CAFs in Milan.

		Receiver		
		Reformist	Rejectionist	Not present
Sender	Reformist	−6.76	−6.38	−6.66
	Rejectionist	−6.68	−5.98	−6.58
	Not present	−7.15	−6.77	−7.06

The differences suggest the presence of two distinct logics driving alliance formation: a logic of selection and a logic of inclusion. By preferring alliances with groups promoting similar orientations in CAFs, rejectionist LGs negotiate a sense of belonging rooted in a system of ideas with defined and closed boundaries (logic of selection). In contrast, reformist LGs prefer directing part of their relational exchanges toward groups holding opposing orientations, showing intent to overcome framing differences (logic of inclusion).

The co-presence of these two logics in alliance formation is further assessed through the framing echoes observed during the Naples meeting (see Table 7). The propensities are consistent with the interpretation of the two logics. This points to a polarization among the LGs, especially considering the opposing orientations: Reformist LGs articulated a set of demands for an ecological transition, while rejectionist LGs embraced blockades as a preferred tactic and adopted a more explicitly anti-capitalist stance.

Table 7. Estimation of tie propensity based on FFF-LG CAFs in Naples.

		Receiver		
		Reformist	Rejectionist	Not present
Sender	Reformist	−6.92	−6.19	−7.21
	Rejectionist	−7.06	−6.49	−7.36
	Not present	−6.86	−6.14	−7.16

Focusing on differences in propensities, although the reformists' preference for dissimilar others becomes more pronounced compared to the Milan meeting framing, the preference shown by the rejectionists is sharper. Consequently, the presence of the two logics persists when modelling the network through the Naples meeting's CAFs. Rejectionists further close their ranks: they prefer organizing with their peers and characterize the mobilisation as part of a wider conflict that transcends national borders. Reformists, on the other hand, show greater tolerance of framing differences in forming alliances. This tolerance, together with a preference for similar others, as reported in Model 4, suggests greater openness in ongoing negotiations and an instrumental approach to alliance formation. Observing the homophily mechanism at two different moments highlights its strengthening role in the association between alliances and framing.

5.2. Foci-of-activity

Beyond framing affinity, spatial and temporal co-presence mattered. Including meeting attendance tests the foci-of-activity mechanism (Proposition 3). In Model 4 (see Table 5), the negative and significant receiving effect suggests that, on average, groups that did not participate in the Naples meeting were less likely to receive alliance ties compared to those that did attend. This finding supports the presence of a foci-of-activity mechanism: by attending the meeting, FFF-LGs increased their opportunities for direct interaction, which in turn enhanced the likelihood of transforming these interactions into more durable relationships and being perceived as allies. Conversely, non-attending LGs were less likely to be seen as allies, confirming that shared participation in key events shapes alliance dynamics.

5.3. Framing Heterogeneity

Building on the theoretical expectation that mobilisation's expansion phase features framing heterogeneity and disputes (Proposition 4), the analysis delves into the divergent diagnostic and prognostic tasks of the CAFs identified with the qualitative frame analysis.

During the meeting in Milan, a framing dispute concerning the proposed solutions created a divide between reformist and rejectionist orientations, with institutional action on one side and protest action on the other. The glocal reformist CAF frames climate change primarily as an environmental issue. By framing the problem as the destruction of the planet and local territories, the CAF identifies implications occurring simultaneously at both global and local levels. Its prognosis focuses on three main elements: a persuasion strategy aimed at raising awareness among citizens to promote lifestyle change; the establishment of a roundtable with political institutions; and the development of scientifically grounded proposals:

Table 8. Relative frequency distribution of Milan CAFs and Naples CAFs.

Milan CAFs	%	Naples CAFs	%
Global climate justice	11.21%	Global climate justice	18.69%
Glocal reformist	16.82%	Global reformist	4.67%
National reformist	6.54%	Local reformist	6.54%
Global rejectionist	3.74%	National reformist	15.89%
Glocal rejectionist	21.50%	Global rejectionist	10.28%
Local rejectionist	4.67%	Glocal rejectionist	12.15%
Lifestyle change	12.15%	Local rejectionist	3.74%
NA/not present	23.36%	NA/not present	28.04%
Total (*N*)	100.00% (107)	Total (*N*)	100.00% (107)

> Reliance on science, on experts, we want what they study to be disseminated as widely as possible.... We believe that only with a strong awareness of citizens can we expect a change in policy choices at all institutional levels.... We must ask for a dialogue with the institutions and that they make possible a more sustainable model of life, a greater efficiency of services and that they enforce those written laws precisely to protect the territory. (Milan Meeting Glocal Reformist CAF)

Conversely, the Glocal Rejectionist CAF traces climate change to the global capitalist system, thus reframing it as not merely environmental but also economic and social. It further highlights a territorially specific and critical situation: large infrastructure projects are both environmental and social problems. Blame is explicitly assigned to private corporations, most notably ENI in Italy, alongside global political institutions. Its prognosis envisages systemic transformation, with dismantling capitalism as central to addressing climate change. This CAF further stresses the strategic alliances with LULU mobilisations:

> It is only the effect of an economic system that is killing us today and that in recent years has had as its sole objective the depletion of environmental resources and their excessive use.... As it happens, in so many parts of the world, there are multinationals that circulate billions, millions of dollars on the extraction of fossil fuels and on the mistreatment of the territory. This mistreatment is taking place by these multinationals such as ENI,...that exploit natural and human resources against ethical and moral principles.... We are not here to create discussion tables with politicians, with those who do not listen to us and with those who have never listened to us.... There are many committees and associations that for years, have been fighting for the defence and protection of the territory from large infrastructures. In my opinion, this FFF movement must, and must cooperate with these kinds of associations and committees. (Milan Meeting Glocal Rejectionist CAF)

Additionally, the Global Climate Justice and Lifestyle Change CAFs were consistently present during the meeting (see Table 8). Their prognosis was close to that of the initial universalistic CAF of the transnational mobilisation, emphasizing demands for politicians to "follow the science" to achieve technical goals, alongside the necessity of individual actions (Svensson & Wahlström, 2023).

Six months later, in Naples, framing changed (see Table 8). While the division between reformist and rejectionist CAFs persisted, the territorial differentiation disappeared. The national reformist CAF gained a more prominent position:

> It is now up to us how to relate to those [the political institutions] who have the power to change things so that the change is as fast as possible. At the national level, we call for the abolition of environmental subsidies and the displacement of those funds to finance ecological transition and scientific research aimed at a change in development patterns.... We want to cut subsidies for fossil fuels, we want the pollution tax to fall on those who produce and not on those who consume, we want the net decrease of CO2 by 2030. (Naples Meeting National Reformist CAF)

It represented a downward shift in the scale of its prognosis: demands were now directed at national political institutions. This downward scale shift was counterbalanced by the continued relevance of the Global Climate Justice CAF.

This framing transformation reflects the expansive phase of mobilisation. The initial universalist nature of the CAF at the onset of mobilisation facilitated—if not necessitated—a progressive narrowing and specification of claims. For example, the national reformist CAF specifically targeted national institutions, demanding national regulations and policies (e.g., reduction of environmental subsidies). This dynamic appears particular to the reformist framing, whereas the rejectionist framing remained unaltered:

> The territory...brings with it and lives many contradictions that we can find everywhere: large infrastructures, incineration plants, concreting... And in general, the whole capitalist system that aims at profit rather than at the preservation of the territory... We can no longer act against climate change from a purely local and environmental perspective. The disputes we carry on in our territory are the same in many other cities. The current system permeates our lives, exploits our territories, our bodies, and destroys the environment. (Naples Meeting Glocal Rejectionist CAF)

While the presence of opposing CAFs during both meetings supports Proposition 4, the results of Models 1 and 3 (see Table 4 and Table 5) show how single CAFs affect alliance formation. The models investigate the effect of each CAF on the propensity to form ties, using the Global Climate Justice CAF as the reference category. Moreover, since the network is directed, it is possible to evaluate whether framing attributes shape the nodes' propensities to send or receive ties.

In Model 1, the groups adopting global and local rejectionist CAFs show, on average, a higher propensity to send ties—that is, a higher level of activity—compared to Global Climate Justice adopters. However, the activity level is not matched by a similar level of popularity (i.e., receiving ties), as the negative receiver effect for the local rejectionist CAF and the non-significant effect for the global rejectionist CAF indicate. The mismatch between activity and popularity is similarly observed for groups adopting a lifestyle change CAF (see Table 4). It suggests that the CAFs divergent from the initial universalist CAF—those focused on a local level with a rejectionist orientation or adopting an individualized framing—were less likely to receive ties. These CAFs—either too localized or overly individual—were perceived as less compelling for forming alliances within the mobilisation. These differences, however, do not persist when accounting for the framing articulated during the meeting in Naples. The results of Model 4 show that only local rejectionist CAF groups display a positive

and significant activity level compared to the Global Climate Justice CAF. It suggests that, beyond the overall match effect, CAFs did not influence the FFF-LGs' activity and popularity levels.

5.4. Spatial and Temporal Effects

Spatial characterization is key to facilitating alliances among FFF-LGs within the same administrative region. This is confirmed by the consistently positive and significant region match effect estimates across all models. This finding aligns with the expectations laid out in Proposition 5: it highlights how FFF-LGs tend to form stronger connections with others mobilizing in the same administrative area, indicating coordination shaped by geographical proximity.

Lastly, Proposition 6 hypothesizes that the longevity of FFF-LGs influences their propensity to establish alliances. Across all models (see Table 4 and Table 5), LGs founded during the early phase of the mobilisation, on average, and compared to those founded in the middle period, receive more ties. The positive receiver effect indicates the presence of a popularity effect: receiving, on average, more ties, these LGs are seen as influential in coordination. This finding provides empirical support for the theoretical idea that group longevity is indeed a resource enabling groups to accumulate relational capital. This accumulated relational capital lets earlier FFF-LGs occupy a more prominent position in the network structure.

6. Discussion

The literature has widely recognized that the articulation of a shared framing is crucial for coalition building (Van Dyke & Amos, 2017; Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010). While shared CAFs foster unity, framing disputes can just as easily undermine cohesion and lead to fragmentation. Comparison with other climate mobilisations reinforces this interpretation. In the British case analysed by Saunders (2012), the radical-reformist divide weakened intra-coalitional relations, culminating in what the author terms a reformist drift: a gradual marginalization of radical demands in favour of a more moderate agenda, ultimately narrowing internal plurality and dissolving the coalition. A similar dynamic emerges in Marquardt's (2020) analysis of FFF in Germany, where the coexistence of moderate and radical positions—both in repertoires and future imaginaries—had a fragmenting effect. In that case, the radical faction opted for an autonomous trajectory, leading to a coalitional split rather than an internal transformation.

By contrast, the Italian case followed a different trajectory. Although opposing orientations—reformist and rejectionist, based on their stance toward political institutions—were present, neither fragmentation nor dissolution occurred. On the contrary, framing differences were negotiated to preserve a broad, active coalition capable of sustaining mass mobilisation.

Two factors help explain this outcome. First, the presence of alliances cutting across opposing CAFs served as connective tissue between orientations. Second, the shared identification of a minimal common goal—the continuation of the mobilisation itself—fostered a pragmatic alliance-building (Croteau & Hicks, 2003). However, rather than a purely instrumental compromise, the propensity to collaborate suggests the coexistence of two parallel processes of identification. These are the logic of selection and the logic of inclusion, each unfolding on its own terms within the coalition. The Italian case recalls the bridging effect of discursive homophily identified by Di Gregorio (2012), but it highlights the central role of meetings as

moments of negotiation. During meetings, framing negotiation mitigated the fragmenting effect of opposing and heterogeneous CAFs on alliance formation.

Initial evidence supports this interpretation, showing that alliances persisted in later phases of the mobilisation. Over the years, this has been expressed through the co-presence of both protest and institutional actions and the ongoing organisation of national assemblies (Zamponi et al., 2024). Moreover, the observed variation in tie propensities within and between reformist and rejectionist groupings echoes dynamics identified in the 1990s environmental networks. During mass mobilisations, collective actors with different environmental CAFs tend to overcome divergences to prevent fragmentation from jeopardizing the endurance of the mobilisation (Diani & Forno, 2007).

In this respect, the comparison with Saunders also highlights the role of meetings—such as national assemblies and climate camps—as foci-of-activity that do not always yield uniform outcomes. While in the UK climate camps fostered confrontation and rupture, in the Italian case, they played a mediating and coordinating role, contributing to the symbolic cohesion and organisational endurance. Together, these elements explain diverging coalition trajectories. While in the UK and German cases, opposing CAFs acted as a centrifugal force, in the Italian case, they were elaborated and negotiated as a resource, sustaining both the stability and plurality of the climate mobilisation.

A final point concerns continuities with broader trends in the Italian environmental milieu. The lifestyle issue, central in the early 2000s (Graziano & Forno, 2012), re-emerged at this wave's onset but faded as politicisation advanced. Other elements—such as the focus on large infrastructure projects, alliances with LULU movements, the use of blockades, and the anti-capitalist position of rejectionist FFF-LGs—show continuity with previous mobilisations (Andretta & Imperatore, 2023; della Porta & Piazza, 2008; Imperatore, 2023). The coalition-based character of the mobilisation (Wahlström et al., 2024a) may also reflect a spillover effect or influence of pre-existing organisations. Future research could explore FFF-LGs' trajectories across local contexts to assess whether pre-existing ties or perceived political opportunities, alongside evolving CAFs, have contributed to coalition endurance.

7. Conclusion

This article has examined the relationship between framing and alliance formation, a longstanding but contested topic in social movement studies (Staggenborg, 2010; Van Dyke & Amos, 2017). To advance this debate, it builds on a relational mechanism framework—homophily and foci-of-activity—and adopts a mixed-method design that combines qualitative frame analysis (Lindekilde, 2014) and social selection ERGMs (Robins & Daraganova, 2013).

The analysis shows how shared CAFs facilitate alliances among collective actors, confirming the relevance of framing homophily. At the same time, the Italian FFF coalition illustrates how framing heterogeneity—particularly the reformist-rejectionist divide rooted in differing orientations toward institutions—does not necessarily fragment social networks.

Rather, the coexistence of a logic of inclusion (more open, reformist) and a logic of selection (more bounded, rejectionist) shows that distinct patterns can coexist within the same network. Despite these differences,

the coalition remained unified throughout the mobilisation wave (Zamponi et al., 2024). This challenge accounts for portraying alliances under framing disputes as merely instrumental (Benford, 2022; Van Dyke & Amos, 2017). Instead, it highlights boundary negotiation behind the scenes of protest events—particularly in meetings, which activated the foci-of-activity mechanism by fostering trust and cooperation (Haug, 2013; Mische, 2011).

These insights underscore the inherently political nature of environmental networks: not neutral structures, but the outcomes of political processes through which grassroots actors negotiate their boundaries and orientations. By tracing how reformist and rejectionist orientations drive contrasting coalition logics, and how meetings facilitate (or fail to facilitate) their negotiation, this article reveals the political stakes embedded in network structures. It bridges relational network approaches with the political analysis of grassroots contention. In this sense, the Italian FFF case illustrates how environmental networks not only embody but also reproduce broader struggles over institutional engagement and systemic change.

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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