

AUTHORITARIANISM, SOCIETAL THREAT, AND PREFERENCE FOR ANTIDEMOCRATIC POLITICAL SYSTEMS

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We addressed the interactive effects of authoritarianism and social threat in explaining the preference for antidemocratic political systems. Using a quasi-experimental design ($N = 171$), we manipulated exposure to social threat and tested its effect in combination with authoritarianism, operationalized as a three-dimension construct composed of authoritarianism, conservatism, and traditionalism. We found that social threat and authoritarianism lead people to endorse antidemocratic political systems. The same was true for conservatism, but only in condition of societal threat, while traditionalism was not associated with the dependent variable, either directly or in interaction with societal threat. The findings highlight the benefits of the distinction between subdimensions of authoritarianism, as well as the importance of individual-context interactions in explaining socially relevant outcomes such as support for democracy.

Key words: Social threat; Authoritarianism; Antidemocratic attitudes; ACT model; Moderated regression.

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Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.
(Benjamin Franklin, 1756)

The research on authoritarianism developed in the first half of the last century to uncover the psychological dynamics underlying mass support for Fascist and Nazi regimes. After a break of many years, we are now facing a new demand for authoritarian leaders and regimes in a lot of Western countries (Cornelis & Van Hiel, 2014). This worrying resurgence is, at least in part, a consequence of the uncertainty stemming from the societal threats we are currently experiencing, such as terrorism and the economic crisis (Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017). Thus, the need to develop solid and convincing models to explain this authoritarian revival is today extremely relevant.

At present, there is a wide consensus amongst scholars on the idea that the core motivational goal of authoritarianism is to attain collective security and stability in societal order (Altemeyer, 1981). Such motivation influences authoritarians' political attitudes and behaviors, directing their political preferences towards dominant and authoritarian (e.g., Cohen & Smith, 2016), populist, and extremely rightist (e.g., Aichholzer & Zandonella, 2016; Tillman, 2016) leaders. This need for security can even go beyond democratic principles, as shown in studies reporting that authoritarianism is strongly associated with antidemocratic sentiment (Duckitt & Farre, 1994; Feldman, 2003; Stenner, 2005), opposition to civil rights (Altemeyer, 1996), and support for abuses of power (Larsson, Björklund, & Bäckström, 2012). In this study, we adopted an interactionist approach to explain the endorsement of antidemocratic political systems based on the interplay of authoritarian attitudes and societal threat.

Authoritarianism has been traditionally conceived as a unidimensional construct, although structured into different components (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). This is true even concerning for Altemeyer's (1996) conceptualization of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). At present, this conceptualization is considered as *the standard* in authoritarianism studies (e.g., Feldman, 2001) and it conceives RWA as the covariation of three different attitudinal clusters: authoritarian aggression (a general aggressiveness, directed against various people and groups, perceived to be positively sanctioned by established authorities); authoritarian submission (a strong tendency to submit to authorities, which are perceived as established and legitimate in the society in which one lives), and conventionalism (a strong tendency to adhere to the social conventions which are perceived as endorsed by the society and its established authorities).

Recently, however, Duckitt and colleagues (2010) suggested a convincing reconceptualization of the RWA subdimensions in terms of attitudinal expressions, different but related to each other, linked to different strategies to seek collective security. The authors identified authoritarianism (which resembles Altemeyer's authoritarian aggression) as expressing attitudes favoring punitive and coercive social control, conservatism (which resembles Altemeyer's authoritarian submission) as the motivational goal of maintaining social order, harmony, and cohesion in society, and traditionalism as the motivational goal of maintaining traditional lifestyles and norms (which resembles Altemeyer's conventionalism). This approach opens up the possibility of uncovering authoritarianism differential effects. For example, while authoritarianism is associated with a general support for any tough governmental action, conservatism is associated only to actions directed against people and groups threatening social stability, and traditionalism only to actions against people and groups threatening traditional values (Duckitt, Bizumic, Krauss, & Heled, 2010).

Recent developments in authoritarianism research have showed that the effects of authoritarian attitudes on the manifestations of authoritarianism can be shaped by the social context. For example, Stenner (2005) showed that authoritarian persons are activated to manifest authoritarian attitudes and behaviors in times of threat. Similarly, other research reveals that authoritarianism and threat interact in producing undesirable outcomes, such as prejudice (e.g., Feldman, 2003), biased information seeking (e.g., Lavine, Lodge, Polichak, & Taber, 2002), support for restrictions of civil liberties (e.g., Cohrs, Kielmann, Maes, & Moschner, 2005; Kossowska, Trejtowicz, de Lemus, Bukowski, Van Hiel, & Goodwin, 2011), and political intolerance (e.g., preferring order over freedom of speech, Roccato, Vieno, & Russo, 2014). Overall, there is ample consensus on the paramount importance of an interactionist approach to the study of authoritarianism (Lavine et al., 2002).

Nevertheless, the interactive effects exerted by authoritarianism and societal threat on people's preferences for antidemocratic political systems are still understudied, even if understanding them should be the ultimate *raison d'être* of authoritarianism research (Adorno et al., 1950; Fromm, 1941). Attitudes toward democracy are inevitably embedded in a context, and should not be conceived as abstract concepts or as attitudes in themselves (Sniderman, Fletcher, Russell, & Tetlock, 1996). On the contrary, given that "the exercise of rights generates costs, and these costs are sometimes so substantial that conflict ensues" (Gibson & Bingham, 1985, pp. 108-109), a trade-off between the desire for civil liberties and the threat to societal security is inevitable (Gibson & Gouws, 2000). Consistent with these ideas, the preference for democracy develops and changes at least in part in response to contextual features, mainly to societal threat. This threat is a powerful factor that leads people to favor antidemocratic forms of government, and thus to "give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety," as in the quotation we reported in exergue (Davis & Silver, 2004).

In this study, we addressed the effects of authoritarianism on the preference for antidemocratic political systems. We focused on preference for a political system ruled by a strong leader, whose power does not depend on Parliament or elections, and on preference for a military government (e.g., Weil, 1989). The preference for these two political systems correlates positively with several other measures of opposition to democratic values (e.g., freedom of expression and opposition and support for competitive elections; see Finkel, Sigelman, & Humphries, 1999).

THE PRESENT STUDY

In the present study, we predicted that participants' preference for antidemocratic political systems is a function of: their level of authoritarianism (conceived as a three-dimensional construct); societal threat, stemming from the context (experimentally manipulated); and their interaction. We reasoned that the recent developments in the conceptualization and measurement of authoritarianism would help disentangle the association between motivational goals for collective security and such preferences. In light of the research on the authoritarianism-threat interaction, we also examined whether a threatening social context would activate authoritarian attitudes (e.g., Stenner, 2005). We focused on threat to collective security, as this should be related to the core motivational goals of authoritarianism.

Based on the literature on the links between threat and attitudes toward democracy (Davis & Silver, 2004; Gibson & Gouws, 2000), we expected living in a societally threatening context to foster participants' preference for antidemocratic attitudes (H1). We also anticipated that authoritarianism — capturing the preference for coercive social control — would be the primary predictor of antidemocratic systems support (H2). We did not have expectations related to conservatism and traditionalism, as they capture people's orientation toward social cohesion and traditional values respectively, which are not directly related to specific forms of government. Finally, given that previous research suggests that under societal threat people tend to submit to powerful others, such as systems that impose structure and order (Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009), we expected to observe interactive effects between authoritarianism and threat. In particular, we anticipated that authoritarianism (H3a) and conservatism (H3b) would be activated by societal threat. We did not expect any significant association between societal threat and the dimension of traditionalism because, according to Duckitt et al.'s (2010) model of authoritarianism, this dimension should be activated by specific threat to traditional values and morality.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

We conducted a quasi-experimental study by simulating an electoral campaign with the Dynamic Process Tracking Environment (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001), a computer-based information board developed to study decision-making in complex social situations (cf. Russo, Mirisola, & Roccato, 2014, for a similar procedure). Student research assistants recruited participants ($N = 171$, 47.4% men, $M_{\text{age}} = 32.33$, $SD = 11.80$) from their social networks. Participants took part on a voluntary basis, completed the study individually, and were debriefed. The study was presented as a research on people's attitudes and behaviors in electoral campaigns. We asked participants to behave as they would have done in a real electoral campaign

and told them that the procedure included four stages. First, a pre-experimental questionnaire designed to assess participants' authoritarian and political attitudes. Second, a 2-minute practice session to allow them to familiarize with the dynamic board. Third, we introduced the experimental manipulation, followed by a 5-minute mock electoral campaign. We asked all participants to imagine themselves coming back to Italy after spending 10 years abroad, with a national electoral campaign going on. They had the task of getting an idea about the country and the running candidates so as to express their vote choice at the end of the study. We randomly assigned participants to read either a secure scenario ($n = 88$), describing Italy as one of the most secure nations in the world, or a threat scenario ($n = 83$), describing the country as a very dangerous place, with widespread criminality and armed squads controlling many city districts (see Manzi, Roccato, & Russo, 2015, for a similar manipulation). The scenarios are presented in the Appendix. A 5-minute electoral campaign followed, with titles of information about the candidates (four candidates running for the role of Prime Minister) and generic nonpolitical information scrolling down on the computer screen. Participants could access the information they were interested in by clicking on its title. Fourth, in the postexperimental questionnaire, we assessed participants' endorsement of antidemocratic political systems.

Measures

Authoritarian attitudes. We used a short, balanced version of the Authoritarianism-Conservatism-Traditionalism (ACT; Duckitt et al., 2010) Scale. Participants reported, using a scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 4 (*totally agree*), whether they agreed with six items measuring authoritarianism (e.g., "We should smash all the negative elements that are causing trouble in our society"), six items measuring conservatism (e.g., "The authorities should be obeyed because they are in the best position to know what is good for our country"), and six items measuring traditionalism (e.g., "The radical and sinful new ways of living and behaving of many young people may one day destroy our society"). Following Duckitt and colleagues, we adopted an item-parcelling approach and created nine 2-item parcels with one protrait and one contrait item randomly chosen from each subscale. A confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the tridimensional nature of the ACT Scale, $\chi^2(24) = 45.51, p = .01$; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .07, and its superiority compared to a one-dimension solution, $\chi^2(27) = 108.43, p < .001$; CFI = .85; RMSEA = .13; $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 62.92, p < .001$. We used the parcels to create mean indexes for each authoritarian dimension (authoritarianism $\alpha = .74$; conservatism $\alpha = .77$; traditionalism $\alpha = .63$).

Manipulation check. To test the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation, we asked participants to indicate, on a scale from 1 (*totally safe*) to 7 (*totally unsafe*), how safe they would feel living in the country described in the scenario (cf. Manzi, Roccato, Paderi, Vitrotti, & Russo, 2017, for a similar procedure).

Preference for antidemocratic political systems. At the end of the mock campaign, we asked participants to indicate whether the following systems would have been good or bad (1 = *awful system*, 4 = *excellent system*) for the country: (a) a strong leader, who does not have to bother with parliament and elections; and (b) a military government ($r = .36, p < .001$). We computed a mean index with higher scores indicating preference for antidemocratic political systems (cf. Finkel et al., 1999; Weil, 1989, for similar measures).

Control variables. In the analyses we controlled for age, gender (1 = *male*), and political orientation (ranging from 1 = *left* to 10 = *right*). Table 1 reports descriptive statistics and correlations among all the measures.

TABLE 1
 Descriptive statistics and correlations

| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|--|----------|-----------|-----|-------|------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1. Age | 32.33 | 11.73 | .07 | .21** | -.05 | .07 | .15 | .12 | -.03 |
| 2. Gender (1 = <i>male</i> , 0 = <i>female</i>) | 0.47 | 0.51 | - | .04 | .06 | -.05 | -.04 | -.03 | .09 |
| 3. Political orientation | 3.56 | 1.90 | | - | .07 | .61*** | .58*** | .55*** | .36*** |
| 4. Threat (1 = <i>threat scenario</i> , -1 = <i>secure scenario</i>) | -0.03 | 1.00 | | | - | -.05 | -.01 | .06 | .21** |
| 5. Authoritarianism | 2.21 | 0.55 | | | | - | .48*** | .56*** | .40*** |
| 6. Conservatism | 2.14 | 0.53 | | | | | - | .63*** | .30*** |
| 7. Traditionalism | 2.16 | 0.44 | | | | | | - | .30*** |
| 8. Preference for antidemocratic systems | 1.32 | 0.47 | | | | | | | - |

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Results

As a first step, we checked if the experimental manipulation, namely the exposure to a threat scenario, was effective. We found that participants in the threat condition expressed higher insecurity ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 1.24$) than participants in the secure condition ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.18$), $t(169) = -13.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .53$. Hence, we concluded that the experimental manipulation was successful. We then tested a moderated regression aimed at predicting the preference for antidemocratic political systems based on authoritarian attitudes (authoritarianism, traditionalism, and conventionalism, all mean centered), societal threat ($-1 = \text{secure scenario}$, $1 = \text{threat scenario}$), and their interactions. In the analyses, we controlled for age, gender, and political orientation. As reported in Table 2, respectively consistent with H1 and with H2, societal threat had a direct and positive effect on, and authoritarianism had a direct and positive association with, the preference for antidemocratic political systems, while conservatism and traditionalism were not associated with it. Consistent with H3b, the effect of conservatism, but, contrary to H3a, not the effect of authoritarianism, was qualified by societal threat, as indicated by the significant interaction term. Simple slope analysis revealed that conservatism had a significant and positive effect on the outcome in the condition of threat, $b = 0.26$, $SE = .11$, $p = .02$, but not in the condition of security, $b = -0.09$, $SE = .12$, $p = .45$ (see Figure 1).

TABLE 2
 Moderated regression predicting preference for antidemocratic political systems
 based on authoritarian attitudes and threat

| | Step 1 | | | Step 2 | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|----------|--------------------------|-----------|----------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>p</i> |
| Age | 0.00 | 0.00 | .22 | 0.00 | 0.00 | .51 |
| Gender | 0.09 | 0.06 | .15 | 0.09 | 0.06 | .17 |
| Political orientation | 0.03 | 0.02 | .28 | 0.03 | 0.02 | .28 |
| Threat | 0.10 | 0.03 | .002 | 0.10 | 0.03 | .002 |
| Authoritarianism | 0.26 | 0.08 | .001 | 0.27 | 0.08 | < .001 |
| Conservatism | 0.10 | 0.08 | .24 | 0.09 | 0.08 | .30 |
| Traditionalism | 0.01 | 0.10 | .95 | 0.01 | 0.10 | .88 |
| Authoritarianism×Threat | | | | -0.04 | 0.07 | .57 |
| Conservatism×Threat | | | | 0.18 | 0.08 | .03 |
| Traditionalism×Threat | | | | 0.10 | 0.10 | .34 |
| <i>R</i> ² | .25 | | | .31 | | |
| <i>F</i> change | 7.76(7, 163), $p < .001$ | | | 4.31(3, 160), $p = .006$ | | |

Note. *SE* = standard error.

DISCUSSION

One of the most fascinating results of the research on political attitudes is that the features of the context can shape mass support for democracy and civil liberties (Davis & Silver, 2004). In this study, we aimed to go a step further, predicting participants' preference for antidemocratic political systems via

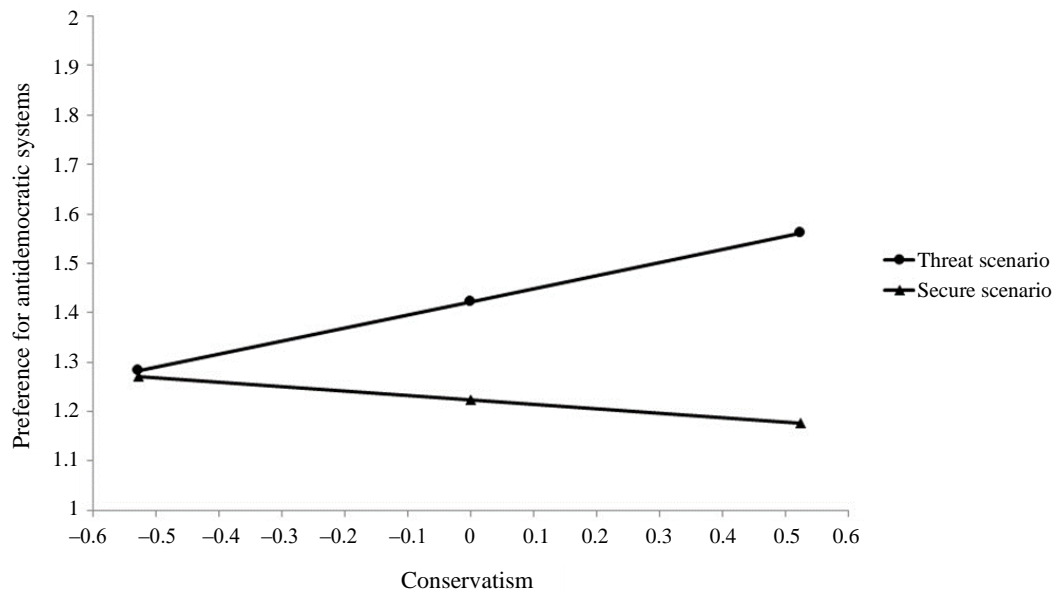


FIGURE 1
Moderating effect of threat on the association between conservatism
and the preference for antidemocratic political systems.

an interactive approach, focused on individual differences, on the social context, and on their interaction. We showed that preference for antidemocratic political systems is fostered by living in a societally threatening context and is associated directly with the authoritarianism dimension of Duckitt and colleagues' (2010) ACT model. Moreover, we found that the conventionalism dimension of the ACT model had a negative association with the dependent variable in condition of societal threat.

Overall, the idea that the expression of individual difference variables depends on the characteristics of the situation dates back to the 1930s (e.g., Lewin, 1936) and periodically re-emerges across the years (e.g., Lavine et al., 2002; Mondak, Hibbing, Canache, Seligson, & Anderson, 2010). Originally, the literature on the psychological origins of antidemocracy had a genuinely interactionist outlook. Emblematically, the "The authoritarian personality" research team conceived potential fascism as the "degree of *readiness* to behave antidemocratically should social conditions change in such a way as to remove or reduce the restraint upon this kind of behavior" (Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1947, p. 40, italics in the original). However, this interactive approach has seldom been used in the prediction of people's preference for antidemocratic political systems. Our study, confirming the usefulness of predicting political attitudes via the interaction of individual and contextual predictors (Lavine et al., 2002), is an exception in this individualistic landscape. Even beyond the specific results we acquired, we believe that this is definitely a plus of this study.

Our choice to measure authoritarianism as a three-dimensional concept, operationalized in terms of the ACT model (Duckitt et al., 2010), is another strength of this study. At present, most available research adopts the RWA scale (Altemeyer, 1996), that conceives authoritarianism as a unidimensional construct, defined as the covariation of authoritarian submission, aggression, and conventionalism. The main methodological criticisms to this approach concern the alleged unidimensional structure of the scale and the presence of double- and triple-barreled items (e.g., Duckitt & Fisher, 2003; Funke, 2005). From the substantive point of view, disentangling the three dimensions of authoritarianism proved to be useful to ad-

vance our knowledge about the complex relationships between threat and authoritarianism. First, we found that authoritarianism was related to the preference for antidemocratic systems independently from societal threat. This supports the idea that this dimension encompasses a general preference for coercive social control, as the antidemocratic systems we looked at — a strong leader who does not bother with Parliament and elections and a military government — both imply a limitation of people's will and action within the electoral process. In other words, we found that the general preference for coercive social control translates into the preference for coercive political systems.

Second, we observed a relationship between conservatism and the preference for antidemocratic political systems only in condition of threat. We have focused on a specific type of threat, namely threat to societal security. Our choice was driven by the fact that previous research showed a close link between this type of threat and authoritarian attitudes (see e.g., Manzi et al., 2017; Mirisola, Roccato, Russo, Spagna, & Vieno, 2014). Interestingly, we found here that only people high in conservatism are susceptible to this threat, supporting the idea that the motivational goal of conservatism is related to threats to social order (Duckitt et al., 2010). On the other hand, we did not find the interactive effect between authoritarianism and threat we expected. According to the ACT model, the dimension of authoritarianism is related to threats to social security and safety, but Duckitt and colleagues also specify that these threats should be “direct, real, physical” (Duckitt et al., 2010, p. 690). While the threat scenario we used in this study described widespread criminality and armed squads, thus referring to potential threats to security and safety, it was framed as a general picture of the country as being a dangerous place. This framing might explain why we found no interactive effect for the dimension of authoritarianism, as the scenario did not evoke a personal direct threat. Finally, traditionalism should be related to threats to social values and morality, and our manipulation clearly did not include these threats. Therefore, our findings also offer evidence supporting the discriminant validity of the ACT authoritarian dimensions in relation to threat susceptibility.

This study is not without limitations. First, we assessed preference for antidemocratic systems through the mean of two items. Even though these items strongly correlate with other measures of opposition to democratic values (Finkel et al., 1999), using composite scales for the preference for antidemocratic systems would certainly increase the measure's reliability. On this issue, we also highlight that we focused on the general endorsement of antidemocratic political systems, instead of the endorsement of specific leaders or specific governmental actions. For example, Crowson and Brandes (2017) examined the effects of the three subdimensions of authoritarianism in predicting intentions to vote Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, and found that authoritarianism and traditionalism significantly predicted preference for Trump. While this approach is certainly informative about individual differences in real-world political contexts, it is also limited in terms of generalization, because preferences for political leaders are strongly related to political orientation and party identification, which are tightly connected to authoritarianism itself (e.g., Mirisola, Sibley, Boca, & Duckitt, 2007). However, a replication of our research in a real-world context, with real-world political candidates, could be interesting. Second, we used a short version of the ACT Scale (Duckitt et al., 2010). Even if this choice does not allow a direct specific comparison between our measure and other studies using the full ACT Scale, the scale displayed good fit indexes for the expected three-dimension solution. Also, it is worth noting that a very short version of the ACT Scale, much shorter than ours, has recently been published (Bizumic & Duckitt, 2018). Even if it had only two items for each authoritarianism dimension, it proved to have good reliability, factorial structure, and validity. Third, consistent with most of the literature on the threat-authoritarianism links, we focused on societal threat only. It would be interesting to replicate this study by including the manipulation of other kinds of threat (e.g., physical threat and threat to morality or social values) to delve into the dy-

namics related to the motivational cores of all authoritarian dimensions identified in the ACT model. Despite these limitations, we believe that this study has helped to explain the complex interplay of individual and ecological factors influencing the present resurgence of attitudinal antidemocracy.

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APPENDIX

Secure scenario

Italy in 2027: A model of harmony.

The country you find in 2027 has deeply changed. A recent Istat research showed that crime and delinquency are still present, but have decreased so much that every year Italy is becoming more secure than ever. The immigration tension that used to be high at the beginning of the IIIrd millennium is over, thanks to some legislative changes approved by a large majority. Today Italy is looked at as an example of harmony and racial integration: Italians and immigrants live and work together contributing to increasing social well-being. In the world, these are peaceful and flourishing times.

For the most part, polls show that Italians feel that they are living in one of the best periods of human history, with security, progress, and success widespread. Tourists are impressed by Italian friendliness, worthiness, integrity, and kindness, and by the nice, clean, and neat country.

Threat scenario

Italy in 2027: A profound social crisis.

The country you find in 2027 has deeply changed. A recent Istat research showed that crime and delinquency are all over and violent assaults take place everywhere. Whenever they can, people avoid walking alone at night because armed squads control many city districts and go around assaulting and robbing. The huge number of immigrants that arrived in Italy in the last years has made the situation worse by increasing the crime rates. Home burglaries, especially at night, are today a common experience and are more violent than ever. The police are unable to handle the situation and it seems they are not implementing strategies to fight crime anymore. From the beginning of the IIIrd millennium, there has been a succession of different governments but none of them has been able to manage these serious problems.
