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Challenging the mainstream in times of crisis: evidence from legislative speeches in Italy (2013–2018)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines whether and how the Eurosceptic stance of the populist Five Star Movement (M5S) has evolved since the party entered the Italian parliament and whether it has influenced the positions of mainstream parties. We combine the spatial approach to party competition with a quantitative text analysis of legislative speeches to analyse the EU domain of the Italian policy space during the 17th legislature (2013–2018). Our results suggest that this domain consists of two main dimensions: an economic dimension and an immigration dimension. The estimates of parties' position shifts along these dimensions support the moderation hypothesis of challenger parties but not the contagion effect on mainstream parties. Overall, our findings contribute to both the literature on the complexity of policy domains such as the EU and the literature on legislative speeches as a tool for capturing the dynamics of party competition between elections.

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Party competition; Euroscepticism; legislative speeches; quantitative text analysis; Italy; M5S

Introduction

Two crises marked Europe's second decade of the third millennium, particularly in EU Member States – the Eurozone crisis of 2009–2012 and the 2015 refugee crisis. A crisis – typically linked to a particular failure – is 'a condition in which failure is identified and widely perceived' (Hay 1999, 324). It denotes a 'crucial point that would tip the scales' (Koselleck and Richter 2006, 358). Both European crises were such 'crucial points' that were identified with the failure of EU institutions to cope with economic and political hardship, which led to a decline in political trust and a resurgence of opposition parties in both Western and Eastern Europe (Conti, Marangoni, and Verzichelli 2020; Hutter and Kriesi 2019; Miscoiu 2023). Indeed, Eurosceptic attitudes – often manifesting with populism as a tandem (Kneuer 2019; Rooduijn and van Kessel 2019) – are a central feature of such parties' success (Carlotti 2018; De Vries and Hobolt 2020; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Taggart 1998).

Scholars described parties that challenge the mainstream, such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, or Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, as 'niche parties'

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(Meguid 2005, 2008), 'challenger parties' (De Vries and Hobolt 2012, 2020; Hino 2012), and 'populist parties' (Kriesi 2014; Mudde 2007). Despite different approaches, these parties share a common characteristic – they transcend the traditional left-right economic dimension and mobilise voters either on new salient issues or by taking extreme positions on existing issues (Hobolt and Tilley 2016; Meguid 2005, 2008). This has also been known as new challengers' entry strategies (Schofield and Sened 2006). One entry strategy is to shift a newcomer's position away from mainstream parties, i.e. away from the centre (Groseclose 2001; Schofield 2003), creating a 'centrifugal' force that pushes it to the edges of the electoral distribution (Cox 1990; Schofield and Sened 2006). Another is to introduce a new dimension of political conflict by capitalising on issues disregarded by the establishment but salient among voters, as such issues present mobilisation opportunities (De Vries and Hobolt 2012, 2020; Meguid 2005, 2008; Riker 1986). Recent studies confirm that a new dimension revolving around nationalism, immigration, and European integration altered the dimensionality of political spaces in Western Europe. The austerity measures imposed by the EU to offset the effects of the Eurozone crisis and the EU's open-door immigration policy brought this dimension of political conflict into the limelight and created fertile ground for populist challengers to apply their entrepreneurial strategies by placing these issues at the centre of their campaigns (De Vries and Hobolt 2020; Hobolt and Tilley 2016; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Kriesi et al. 2008; Umansky, Sened, and Kohler 2025).

Mainstream parties' responses to the electoral success of populist parties prompted conflicting literature on challengers' impact on the political mainstream. Some found limited evidence of adjustments by mainstream parties when looking at their programmatic responses (Green-Pedersen 2012; Rooduijn et al. 2014). Others demonstrated spillover or contagion effects (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020; van Spanje 2010). The findings probing contagion effects are consistent with the spatial approach to party competition, which assumes that parties adopt policy positions in response to shifts in voters' preferences and other parties' behaviour (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Downs 1957; Williams 2015).

Previous studies focused mainly on the electoral level, examining the impact of challenger parties on the salience of issues such as European integration or immigration and mainstream parties' adjustment of the policy positions. However, less is known about the impact of challenger parties once they are in parliament. Rooduijn et al. (2014) noted that challenger parties 'are not immune to their own electoral success', as they must adjust their political programs once they have experienced electoral growth. The literature addressed the moderation of radical parties in Western Europe theoretically and empirically, suggesting that moderation is necessary to win subsequent elections and be perceived as credible potential coalition partners (Akkerman, de Lange, and Rooduijn 2016; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2009; Heinisch and Hauser 2016). In contrast, potential contagion effects in parliaments have been less studied. Recent research, however, suggests that it can manifest among mainstream parties in national parliaments, as a study of Swedish parliamentarians' statements on EU affairs shows (Persson, Karlsson, and Mårtensson 2023).

The case of Italy provides a unique opportunity to study the interplay between challenger and mainstream parties. In 2013, the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S) entered parliament with a quarter of the popular vote, hindering the formation of

ideologically compact government coalitions. In 2018, it became the largest party and formed a populist government by allying with the right-wing League (formerly Northern League). Previous work showed that radical positioning on the pro/anti-EU dimension contributed most to the M5S' electoral success in 2013, inducing other parties' realignment (Di Virgilio et al. 2015; Giannetti, Umansky, and Sened 2024). This paper investigates whether and how the M5S' Eurosceptic stance evolved after the party entered parliament and whether it affected other parties' positions. Specifically, our research questions are: Has the M5S changed its position on the EU issue dimension over time? Have mainstream parties maintained or changed their positions on the EU dimension following the M5S' entry?

To answer these questions, we focus on the 17th legislative term, following the entry of the M5S into the Italian parliament. We rely on data from legislative speeches to estimate changes in parties' policy positions between the elections. Legislative speeches allow us to examine the evolution of parties' policy positions in the inter-election period, capturing the dynamic aspects of party competition (Bäck, Debus, and Fernandes 2021; Laver 2005, 2021). In this article, we focus on EU-related issues by applying text-mining techniques to legislative speeches delivered in plenary sessions of the Italian parliament between 2013 and 2018.

Our expectations are twofold. First, consistent with the literature on moderation strategies, we expect the M5S to have moderated its position on the pro/anti-EU dimension. Second, in line with the literature on the contagion effect, we expect that mainstream parties attempted to accommodate the M5S position in response to the newcomer's stance on this issue dimension. We test our hypotheses by examining how the policy positions of the M5S and the mainstream parties, such as the Democratic Party (PD), changed (or not) between the 2013 and 2018 elections. We identify two primary dimensions structuring the EU policy domain – economic and immigration – which allows us to uncover a dual strategic positioning of the M5S along these dimensions, characterised by moderation on the economic dimension and increasing radicalisation on immigration. Contrary to our expectations, we find no evidence that mainstream parties adopted the M5S's Eurosceptic stance. Our results contribute to the literature on challenger and mainstream parties' strategic manoeuvres and demonstrate the value of legislative speeches as a tool for capturing the dynamics of party competition between elections.

Theoretical background

The spatial theory of party competition assumes that parties adopt policy positions in response to voters' preferences (Downs 1957). A key insight of this approach is that elections are won in the centre of the policy space. Ideological moderation is important because it brings political parties closer to the general electorate and the median voter (Johns and Kölln 2020). Indeed, party moderation is synonymous with party convergence in Downsian terms. However, convergence can only occur under very restrictive conditions in multiparty systems. These include the uni-dimensionality of the political space, commonly interpreted as a left-right continuum. When the policy space is multidimensional, divergence, i.e. movement towards the extremes, can be an equilibrium.

In multiparty systems, new parties can adopt a 'centrifugal' strategy to enter the political arena that involves taking a radical stance on an existing dimension. Alternatively, they can introduce a new dimension that resonates with voters and comprises issues overlooked by the established parties (Schofield and Sened 2006). According to De Vries and Hobolt (2020), immigration and European integration were identified as such issues by many challenger parties in Western Europe. While the strategic advantage of mainstream parties lies within the established political spectrum, challengers' best strategy is to act as 'issue entrepreneurs' by mobilising voters around issues currently disregarded by the dominant political forces (De Vries and Hobolt 2020; Giannetti, Umansky, and Sened 2024).

Although the spatial approach is inherently static, spatial logic can be used to examine how parties respond to other parties' behaviour. Challenger parties are attributed a pivotal role in this process. On the one hand, they can pursue a moderation strategy, toning down their rhetoric and moderating their positions to appeal to a broader electorate and thus maintain their hold on power (Akkerman, de Lange, and Rooduijn 2016; cf. Schwörer 2022). By doing so, they shift their positions closer to the ideological spectrum's centre, demonstrating a centripetal movement (Cox 1990). On the other hand, mainstream parties may adopt an accommodative strategy, i.e. shift their positions to adopt the newcomer's political standpoint (Bale et al. 2010; Meguid 2005, 2008; van Spanje 2010; Wagner and Meyer 2017). This move aims to undermine the new party's issue ownership and skew the voter distribution in favour of the incumbent party because the latter has a higher degree of party valence, or reputation – one of the components of party 'brand'. Therefore, established parties with higher name recognition win when competing with challengers for existing issue spaces (Johns and Kölln 2020; Laver and Schilperoord 2007).

Conversely, mainstream parties can opt for a divergent policy – or an adversarial strategy, in the words of Meguid (2005, 2008) – and widen their distance from the newcomer. Although this strategy tends to benefit the challenger by increasing its issue ownership and electoral gains, it can be used by the incumbent party to undermine the electorate's support for its *mainstream* competitor (Meguid 2005). In addition, incumbent parties may adopt a dismissive strategy vis-à-vis challenger parties to divert voters' attention away from the new issues emphasised by the challengers, assuming it will downplay the issues' salience (Meguid 2005, 2008).

Empirical research on how mainstream parties respond to challengers' electoral success provided mixed results. Some scholars found no evidence of policy change by mainstream parties on policy dimensions such as pro/anti-EU in response to populist pressure (Green-Pedersen 2012; Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug 2014; Umansky, Sened, and Kohler 2025). Others emphasised spillover or contagion effects. For example, van Spanje (2010) found that anti-immigration parties contributed to shifting the centre of the policy space to the right. Similarly, Abou-Chadi and Krause (2020) found that established parties responded to the success of radical right-wing challengers by emphasising more anti-immigrant and culturally protectionist positions.

Previous studies focused on specific issues, party families, or single case studies. The most comprehensive study of parties' policy adjustment, although exclusively focused on the general left-right dimension, is by Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009). Analysing 193 parties in twenty-five post-war democracies, the authors showed

that in a given election, political parties tend to shift their policies in the same direction that the other parties in the system successfully moved in the previous election – the 'party dynamics result'. This finding has important implications for the spatial approach to party competition, as it confirms a central tenet of this approach, namely that parties develop their strategies in response to the strategic moves of their opponents. Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009) also demonstrated that political parties react more strongly to policy changes implemented by ideological neighbours than to those implemented by other parties within the political system – the 'party-ideological family result' (see also Williams 2015).

However, less research exists on the behaviour of challenger parties once they are in parliament. In this context, the inclusion-moderation hypothesis, initially conceived for and applied to religious political parties, became prevalent. It posits that participation in democratic institutions and procedures softens these parties' radical stances and ideologies (Akkerman, de Lange, and Rooduijn 2016; Schwörer 2022). Two factors explain this. The first factor hinges on the abovementioned incentives to get re-elected by appealing to broader constituencies, while the second is related to participation in coalition governments. Deliberation and compromise with coalition partners and veto players are necessary to survive as a government (Akkerman, de Lange, and Rooduijn 2016; Bernhard 2020; Krause and Wagner 2021). Thus, parties seeking office or government participation often adapt their behaviour by moderating their oppositional stance and cooperating with other parties (Akkerman, de Lange, and Rooduijn 2016).

Internal party dynamics is another feature that can hinder or encourage moderation (Kriesi 2018). Analysing radical right-wing populist parties, Capaul and Ewert (2021) found that the degree of governmental responsibility a party assumes is as important as its internal dynamics. In a ruling coalition, parties must make compromises, which can lead to strong internal tensions within challenger parties, sometimes resulting in splits. As scholarly attention has focused on the inclusion-moderation hypothesis, less attention has been paid to the potential contagion effects of radical parties in parliaments. However, a recent study examining statements by national MPs in the Swedish European Affairs Committee suggests that contagion effects spill over to the parliamentary behaviour of mainstream parties on EU affairs (Persson, Karlsson, and Mårtensson 2023).

Based on the literature discussed above, we examine how the salience of EU-related issues and parties' policy positions changed during the 17th Italian legislature following the entry of the M5S into the parliamentary arena. This term of the Italian Republic began on 15 March 2013 and ended on 22 March 2018. Over the 17th legislature, three governments were supported by different majorities, including mainstream parties such as the left-wing PD and the centre-right People of Freedom (PDL). The M5S remained in opposition over the entire legislative term. Our expectations are as follows:

H1 – Moderation: *The M5S will moderate its position on the pro/anti-EU issue dimension.*

H2 – Contagion: *The mainstream parties will attempt to accommodate the M5S' policy stance on the pro/anti-EU issue dimension.*

Data and method

Although participation in legislative debates is among the most relevant activities of members of parliament (MPs), scholarly attention to this kind of legislative behaviour is relatively recent. However, since the seminal work of Proksch and Slapin (2015), the literature on legislative speeches has expanded rapidly (Fernandes, Debus, and Bäck 2021), not least due to the development of computerised content analysis techniques (Grimmer and Stewart 2013; Lucas et al. 2015; Wilkerson and Casas 2017). Scholars have emphasised that speeches are a powerful tool for estimating policy positions in the inter-electoral period, allowing a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic aspects of party competition (Laver 2021).

To test our hypotheses, we rely on data from legislative speeches delivered in the Italian parliament after the entry of the M5S in 2013. We use automated data extraction and analysis techniques to capture all types of oral speeches delivered in the 17th legislature of the Italian Chamber of Deputies (2013–2018), using the transcripts available on the parliament's website as a primary source. Oral speeches can be classified into several categories: Inaugural debates, debates on ordinary bills, debates on decree-conversion bills, debates on budget bills, and finally, oral questions and interpellations. Following the 1997 reform of the Standing Order of the Chamber, these categories of debates are organised according to different institutional rules concerning aspects such as the restriction of MPs' participation in debates, the timing of parliamentary debates, and the allocation of speaking time to MPs (for more details, see Giannetti and Pedrazzani 2021). For our analysis, we exclude oral questions and interpellations, often used by MPs to demonstrate their ability to respond to constituency needs (Russo 2021).[1] Our data include a general corpus of more than 42,000 speeches delivered by 671 MPs between 2013 and 2018.

For this study, we subset the general corpus according to two criteria: 1) The speaker did not switch parties during the legislature; 2) The speech can be classified into a general topic related to attitudes toward the EU. Regarding the first criterion, Italy is an outlier among Western European party systems due to the high frequency of party affiliation changes (Klein 2021, 334) recorded from the 12th (1994–1996) and 13th (1996–2001) legislatures (Pinto 2015; Verzichelli 1996). This trend continued in the 17th legislature, where 31% of members switched parties at least once during the term (Pinto 2023). Since our unit of analysis is the party, we excluded all speeches by the 208 switchers, as they may bias party policy positions in two ways. On the one hand, switchers may use parliamentary speeches strategically to signal that they disagree with the party they originally belonged to. On the other, parliamentary debates may be a way to show switchers' loyalty to the receiving party. In either case, switchers' strategic behaviour may alter party positions.

For the second criterion, we limit our analysis to all speeches that can be assigned to a general topic related to the EU. To this end, we first construct a dictionary to identify EU-related sentences in all speeches. Table A1 (Appendix A) presents our dictionary based on the dictionary developed by Rauh (2015). It includes words such as UE (Unione Europea – European Union), Commissione Europea (European Commission), Maastricht (Maastricht Treaty), MES (Meccanismo Europeo di Stabilità – European Stability Mechanism), Bruxelles (Brussels) and SME (Sistema Monetario Europeo – European Monetary System). We then

use the keyword-in-context function (KWIC) from the *quanteda* package to extract these sentences from the speeches in which they occurred (Benoit et al. 2018).[2] Finally, we aggregated the individual speeches by party and year – our unit of analysis.[3]

Figure 1 presents the evolution of the estimated salience of the EU issue during the 17th parliamentary term (grey line), along with annual data on asylum applications per 100 inhabitants in Italy (black line), to test our measure's face validity. Salience measures the proportion of EU-related references in MPs' speeches aggregated by party and year. Applying a smoother to these data allows us to identify a slight spike in the issue salience at the beginning of the legislature, which could be associated with the entry of the Eurosceptic M5S into parliament or the 2014 European Parliament election. Another increase in the salience of the EU started in 2015. Our data show that the peak in the estimated salience of the EU issue is closely related to the dramatic increase in asylum applications registered between 2015 and 2017.[4] More generally, the two curves display similar trends, showing that the EU issue is closely related to immigration. The salience of the EU dimension decreased in the last two years of the legislature, in parallel with a decrease in asylum applications.

Table 1 provides additional insight, reporting the descriptive statistics of the final corpus used for our analysis. It shows that the length of the speeches varies by party and year, decreasing in 2018. On the one hand, these differences are due to the changing salience that different parties attach to the EU issue, as shown in Figure 1. On the other hand, they are due to the rules for parliamentary debates in Italy, which allocate debate time proportionately to party size. As a result, larger parties give more speeches, as more MPs are allowed to speak. In contrast, the short length recorded in 2018 is common to all parties and is related to the fact that the 17th legislature lasted only a few months this year, as parliamentary elections were held on 4 March 2018.

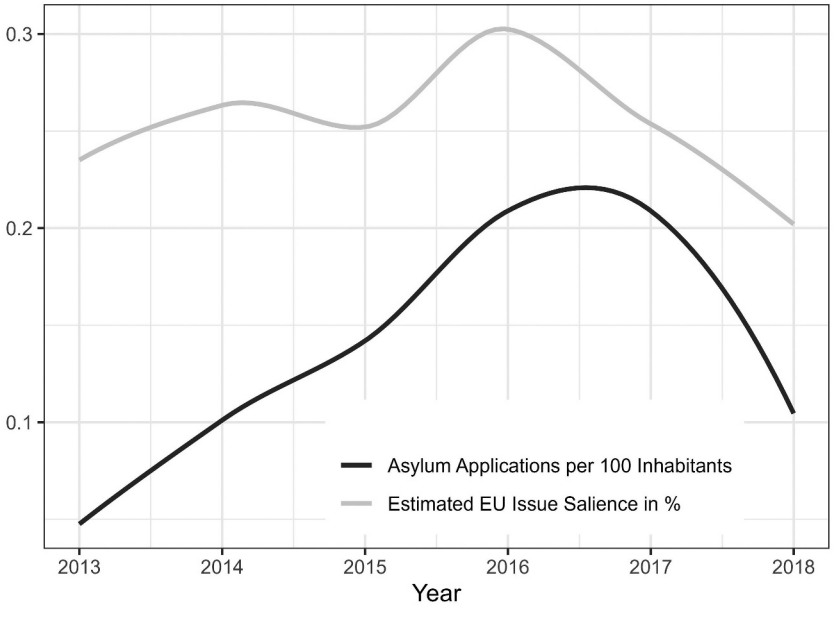

Figure 1. Estimated EU salience by party and year. Source: Eurostat (migr_asyappctza).

Table 1. Corpus of EU-related speeches aggregated by party and year.

Party	Year	Number of Words
LN	2013	27359
	2014	49571
	2015	36232
	2016	30605
	2017	11183
	2018	104
M5S	2013	60625
	2014	119210
	2015	115821
	2016	77267
	2017	27806
	2018	740
PD	2013	55127
	2014	83382
	2015	72838
	2016	78591
	2017	22991
	2018	393
PDL	2013	12074
	2014	21544
	2015	34646
	2016	36008
	2017	15593
	2018	117
SC	2013	2367
	2014	1116
	2015	322
	2016	440
SEL	2013	12235
	2014	22945
	2015	20208
	2016	18711
	2017	8997
	2018	227

Acronyms: LN – League (former Northern League); M5S - Five Star Movement; PD – Democratic Party; PDL – People of Freedom; SC – Civic Choice; SEL – Left, Ecology and Freedom.

Note: SC ceased to exist as a parliamentary group in 2016, and its members joined other groups. On 19 November 2013, the group 'Il Popolo della Libertà - Berlusconi Presidente' changed its name to 'Forza Italia - Il Popolo della libertà - Berlusconi Presidente'.

In the final step of the preprocessing stage, we encoded the speeches following standard text analysis practices (Grimmer and Stewart 2013; Lucas et al. 2015) in a standard format, omitting numbers, punctuation, capitalisation, and 'stop words'. We employed natural language processing models developed in the SpaCy environment and retained only the base form of words, using a lemmatiser to parse texts and identify token attributes (Benoit and Matsuo 2023). To reduce sparsity, we retained only the base form of verbs, adjectives, nouns, and proper nouns that occur at least ten times in the corpus. The original vocabulary was therefore reduced to a total of 1,914 tokens, which form the document-feature matrix (DFM) – the basis for the analysis presented in the following section.

In the analysis step, we applied correspondence analysis (CA) (Nenadić and Greenacre 2007) to the DFM to map the dimensionality of the EU domain and extract the parties' positions on these dimensions in each legislature year.[5] CA belongs to a family of singular

value decomposition techniques of unsupervised machine learning methods that aim to explain the variance in a dataset by introducing principal components. Applied to our DFM, CA measures similarities between parties and tokens and identifies the strength of these relationships by providing degrees of association between them along principal components in a low-dimensional space. As CA approximates a statistical ideal point model for words (Lowe 2008), we used contribution coefficients to interpret the extracted dimensions' meaning and determine the parties' positions on these dimensions. A comparison of the party positions derived using our method with those of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) indicates a high degree of correlation (Appendix B: Tables B1 and B2). To further ensure the reliability of our findings, we replicated our analysis using Wordfish (Slapin and Proksch 2008), with no substantial difference in the results (Appendix C: Figures C1 and C2). Moreover, introducing different thresholds for word and document frequencies to ensure robustness did not affect our results.

Results

This section analyses the parties' strategic manoeuvres following the entry of the M5S. Did the M5S moderate its position and move toward the centre of the voter distribution to improve its electoral prospects? And did the widely discussed 'contagion effect' prompt other parties to adopt the M5S's Eurosceptic stance? To address these questions, we first identify the EU-related dimensionality of the Italian policy space. Then, we determine the parties' contribution to these dimensions and their positions on them.

Dimensions of the EU domain in Italy, 2013–2018

The CA results of parliamentary speeches suggest that two dimensions emerge as primary axes of party competition in the EU domain, with the first dimension explaining most of the variance (Appendix D: Figure D1). CA allows us to break down the level of association and the contribution of the parties and words to the extracted dimensions (Figure 2). The overall distribution of the 30 words that contribute most to the definition of Dimension 1 strongly suggests that it is the fiscal, redistributive aspect of the EU domain. Many words refer to Europe and the EU (e.g. 'euro', 'europeo', 'europa') from an economic/fiscal point of view (e.g. 'soldo', 'banca', 'fiscal', 'crisi'). Moreover, Dimension 1 is strongly associated with the M5S, as the name of the party ('stelle' and 'movimento') is one of the most important contributors to the definition of this dimension.

Dimension 2, on the other hand, is heavily dominated by the theme of (illegal) immigration and security. Words like 'clandestino' (clandestine), 'immigrato' (immigrant), and 'nostrum', which stands for Operation Mare Nostrum, launched by the Italian government to rescue immigrants and refugees in the Mediterranean, contribute most to this dimension. It is associated with parties such as the League ('autonomie' and 'lega') and the M5S ('stelle' and 'movimento').

Thus, CA provided us with a finer gradient of the EU dimension. Two aspects of this dimension stand out clearly – economic/fiscal and immigration. These results show the EU-related domain's dimensionality, highlighting the complexity of political space. Moreover, our results help to understand the different facets of Euroscepticism – a concept widely used to denote political actors' negative stances towards the EU

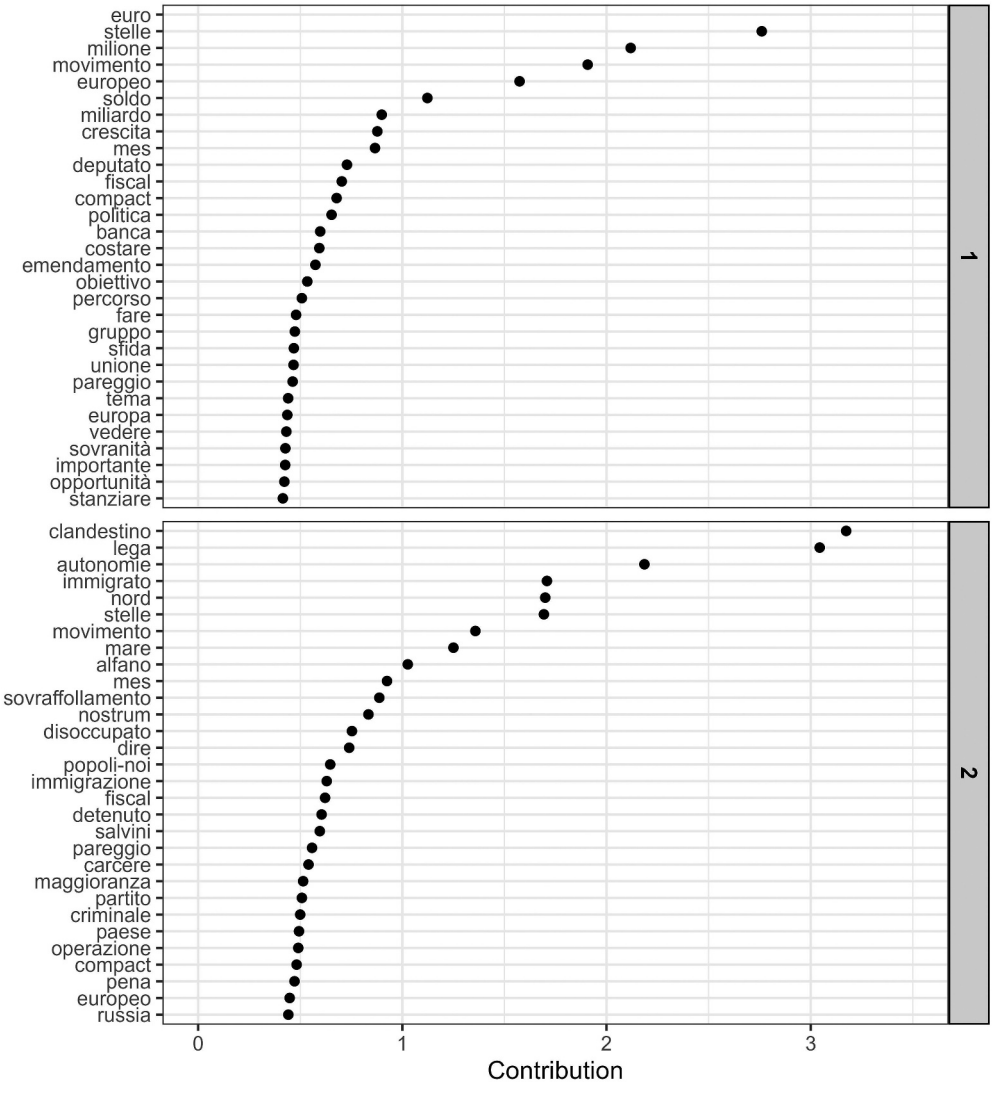

Figure 2. 30 most contributing words to the definition of Dimensions 1 and 2.

(Leruth, Startin, and Usherwood 2017). This is consistent with previous research analysing patterns of opposition to the EU. Researchers identified several key policy areas emerging as focal points, such as immigration and border controls, as well as economic and environmental concerns (Carlotti 2021).

Parties' contributions to the EU domain

Figure 3 shows the parties' contribution to the two dimensions structuring the EU domain between the 2013 and 2018 elections and their movement along these dimensions. The parties' colour represents the degree of their contribution to the definition of these

dimensions. The red indicates a strong association, meaning a party dominates the dimension. The blue represents a weak association, meaning a party does not define the dimension.

Dimension 1 – the horizontal axis, which can be interpreted as the economic dimension of the EU policy domain – is dominated by the M5S at the beginning of the legislative term. This finding underscores the often-proclaimed hostility toward banks, austerity, and the euro – a crucial component of the M5S' Euroscepticism. Examining Beppe Grillo's blogs, Pirro (2018) noted that the M5S described the decision whether to remain in the eurozone as a 'choice between life and death' that was 'neither difficult nor impossible': 'Italians should be able to decide whether to die with euros in their hands or to live and reclaim their sovereignty'.

Our data show that the M5S moved toward the centre in the following years. This result provides evidence for the moderation hypothesis and is consistent with the literature highlighting a repositioning of the party with respect to the EU from 2013 to 2018. Di Lieto and Mascitelli (2018) point out that the M5S consistently advocated for a referendum on eurozone membership between 2013 and 2015. In 2017, Luigi Di Maio, who served as deputy speaker of parliament and ran for the office of Prime Minister, became the lead candidate for the leadership of the M5S in the upcoming general election.[6] Meanwhile, founder Beppe Grillo launched a vote on his online platform to determine the M5S group's membership in the European Parliament. Nearly 80% of M5S voters favoured their MEPs joining the pro-European Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), under the leadership of Guy Verhofstadt.[7] The 2018 election manifesto, however, no longer included a proposal for a referendum on leaving the eurozone but proposed reducing the public debt-to-GDP ratio by 40 points over ten years. Many other scholars have emphasised

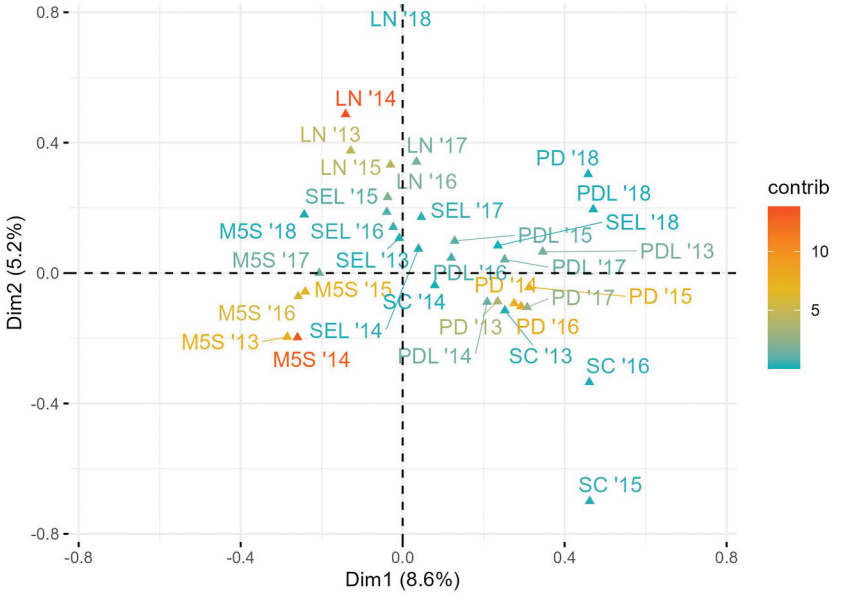

Figure 3. Parties' movements in a two-dimensional EU domain, 2013–2018.

a normalisation of the M5S by examining aspects of its legislative behaviour, from parliamentary questions to legislative votes in the national and European parliaments (Borghetto 2018; Franzosi, Marone, and Salvati 2015; Pedrazzani and Pinto 2015).

The PD dominates the opposite side of Dimension 1. The association between the PD and the economic side of the EU policy domain makes sense, as the party consistently acknowledged EU support for national economies. The PD gradually moved away from the centre to distance itself from the M5S. This shift can be interpreted as an 'adversarial strategy' in Meguid (2005, 2008) terms. It is consistent with literature highlighting a more proactive stance of the PD under the leadership of Matteo Renzi on EU-related issues from 2013 onward (Guidi 2015). Renzi advocated for Italy to play a more central role in the dialogue between EU member states and European institutions on austerity measures vs expansionist policies. His leadership strongly impacted the PD's position on European integration and economic policy.

Dimension 2 – the vertical axis that captures the immigration aspect of the EU policy domain – is dominated by the League. This is hardly surprising, as when it comes to immigration, the League is commonly regarded as 'issue owner' (Urso 2018). The association between the League and the immigration side of the EU policy domain highlights that this party's Euroscepticism depends primarily on its sovranist stance, i.e. defending national borders against uncontrolled immigrant flows. The M5S' most important shift occurs on Dimension 2, where it gets closer to the League. By examining various sources (e.g. political documents, Beppe Grillo's blogs), Pirro (2018, 452) highlights that the M5S has gradually adopted 'a less-than-mild nativist and exclusionary framing of immigration. These stances [. . .] liken to a reasonable extent the M5S to the populist radical right Lega'. The League also moved toward the M5S on Dimension 2. The convergence of the two parties foreshadows the coalition government formed after the 2018 elections. The coalition agreement between the M5S and the League was based on an exchange between the two parties' flagship policies, such as universal income and restrictive immigration policies (Marangoni and Verzichelli 2019).

To sum up, our results underline the complexity of the EU policy domain, showing that it is defined by at least two dimensions: The first refers to the economy, and the second to immigration. Highlighting these distinct dimensions helps to understand the different nature of Euroscepticism represented by the parties considered in this analysis. Regarding our theoretical expectations, we found evidence supporting the moderation hypothesis as the M5S moved toward the centre on the economic dimension of the EU policy domain. On immigration, on the other hand, it shifted its position away from the centre toward the right-leaning League. Our results show no contagion effect on the mainstream parties. On the contrary, the PD shifted its position away from the M5S.[8]

Conclusion

In recent decades, Western European democracies have faced enormous challenges propelled by the economic and immigration crises. These crises deeply shook the foundations of the European integration project, with anti-EU parties gaining ground in several countries. Scholars identify Euroscepticism as a common trait of such parties, often defined as challenger or populist parties. This article examined the behaviour of such

challengers once they are represented in parliaments. We chose Italy as a case study because the entry of the M5S into the political arena in 2013 profoundly reshaped Italian politics.

To this end, we used data collected by the authors from legislative speeches delivered in the Italian Parliament during the 17th legislature. Data from legislative speeches offer a unique opportunity to estimate shifts in policy positions between elections, helping to understand party competition as an evolving process. Our quantitative text analysis of the speeches on EU-related issues reveals that the two main dimensions that explain the most variance in the EU policy domain are related to the economy and immigration. These two dimensions were prompted by the 2011 Italian financial crisis with the austerity measures imposed by the EU on national economic policies and the immigration policies implemented following the 2015 European refugee crisis.

Further, we identified which parties contributed most to defining these two dimensions and how they moved along them over time. Our fine-grained analysis helped capture the different character of Euroscepticism of the populist challenger M5S and the radical right-wing League, as their negative stances toward the EU were related to economic issues and immigration, respectively. Our results are consistent with a large body of literature distinguishing left-wing and right-wing Eurosceptic parties according to their positioning on these issues.

Our data on party shifts along the two dimensions of the EU domain allowed us to test the hypotheses advanced in the literature on the moderation and contagion effects of challenger parties. Consistent with previous studies, we found evidence for the moderation hypothesis when the M5S moved toward the centre of the economic dimension of the EU policy domain. Contrary to our expectations, we found no contagion effect. Shifts in party positions, however, revealed that the M5S moved toward the radical right-wing League on the immigration dimension of the EU domain, while the mainstream PD moved away from the M5S on the economic dimension, indicating an adversarial rather than an accommodative strategy.

This study shares the typical limitations of single-case studies, focusing on one country and a single legislative term. While the narrow scope may limit the generalisability of the findings, the Italian legislature examined here offers particular analytical value as it was shaped by the long-term effects of the 2009 economic crisis and the peak of the 2015 migration crisis. Another limitation lies in the study's focus on the inter-election period, which precludes establishing a direct link to subsequent election stages.

Despite these limitations, the study offers several important contributions to the literature on party competition, Euroscepticism, and the strategic behaviour of challenger and mainstream parties. First, it emphasises the multidimensional nature of the EU domain, advancing a more nuanced understanding of Euroscepticism. Our findings reveal a dual strategic behaviour of the M5S over time: a moderation of its stance on the economic dimension of the EU domain and a simultaneous radicalisation on the immigration dimension. This pattern underlines the complexity of challenger party strategies and their ability to selectively adjust their positions across different issue dimensions, rather than adopting a uniformly oppositional stance.

Conversely, the absence of a contagion effect calls into question the assumption that the rise of challenger parties necessarily prompts policy convergence or strategic

accommodation by mainstream parties. This finding invites a closer examination of the conditions under which challenger parties influence broader party system dynamics.

Finally, our study demonstrates the analytical potential of legislative speeches as a data source for tracing intra-term shifts in party positions. By focusing on the inter-election period, it contributes a more dynamic account of party competition that complements traditional election-centred analyses.

Notes

1. To test the robustness of our analysis, we also conducted it including oral questions and interpellations. The results did not change substantially.
2. KWIC assumes that speakers convey meaning thematically, so both words and their context are important for classifying content. For applications to political science, see Klüver and Mahoney (2015), Klüver, Mahoney, and Opper (2015).
3. Our code is available here: https://github.com/uman-sky/IT2013-2018.git.
4. The annual aggregated data from Eurostat (migr_asyappctza) indicate that the number of first-time asylum seekers in Italy increased from 82,790 in 2015 to 126,550 in 2017.
5. CA was used to examine shifts in members' preferences on monetary policy by analysing transcripts from the Federal Reserve's FOMC meetings (Bailey and Schonhardt-Bailey Bailey and Schonhardt-Bailey 2008; Schonhardt-Bailey and Bailey 2013) and legislative hearings in the UK and the US (Schonhardt-Bailey, Dann, and Chapman 2022).
6. Di Maio became Minister of Foreign Affairs in the first M5S-led government after the 2018 elections.
7. Due to Verhofstadt's opposition to M5S membership in the ALDE group, M5S MEPs had to join the Eurosceptic Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group. In November 2017, an M5S member became Vice-President of the European Parliament with the support of the ALDE, Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and European People's Party (EPP) groups.
8. Our analysis indicates a clear divergence between the PD and the M5S on the second dimension of the EU domain. While this reflects the aggregate positioning of PD MPs, the case of Marco Minniti – Minister of the Interior in the Gentiloni government (2016–2018) – reveals a more nuanced picture within the party. Minniti's adoption of anti-immigration policies, such as the 'agreement with Libya', raises questions about the ideological cohesion within the PD on immigration policy.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Table A1. Dictionary used to identify EU-related sentences in parliamentary speeches.

Italian	English
AEE	EEA
AELS	EFTA
BCE	ECB
Brexit	Brexit
Bruxelles	Brussels
CEE	EEC
Commissione Europea	European Committee
Dexit	Dexit
Dublino	Dublin (treaty)
euro	euro
Grexit	Grexit
Italexit	Italexit
Lisbona	Lisbon (treaty)
Maastricht	Maastricht (treaty)
mercato comune	single market
MES	ESM
non eletti	unelected
PAC	CAP
parlamentari europei	MEP
SME	EMS
sovranità	sovereign
stato membro	member state
sussidiarietà	subsidiarity
UE	EU
UEM	EMU

Appendix B

Table B1. Correlations of party positions.

	Dimension 1	Dimension 2
CHES: eu_position	**0.67**	−0.21
CHES: lrgen	−0.14	**0.54**
CHES: lrecon	0.26	0.22
CHES: immigrate_policy	−0.25	**0.53**
CHES: galtan	−0.2	**0.47**

Table B2. Interpretation of Spearman coefficients.

Range	Strength
0.00 to 0.19	No or negligible
0.20 to 0.29	Weak
0.30 to 0.39	Moderate
0.40 to 0.69	Strong
0.70 to 1.00	Very strong

Appendix C

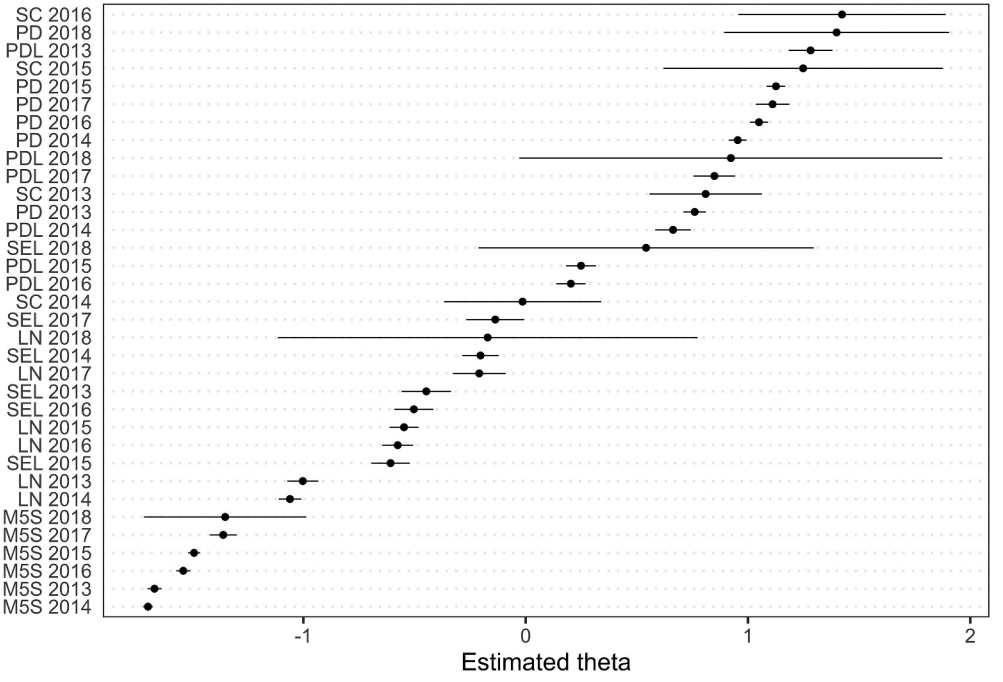

Figure C1. Party positions extracted with *Wordfish*.

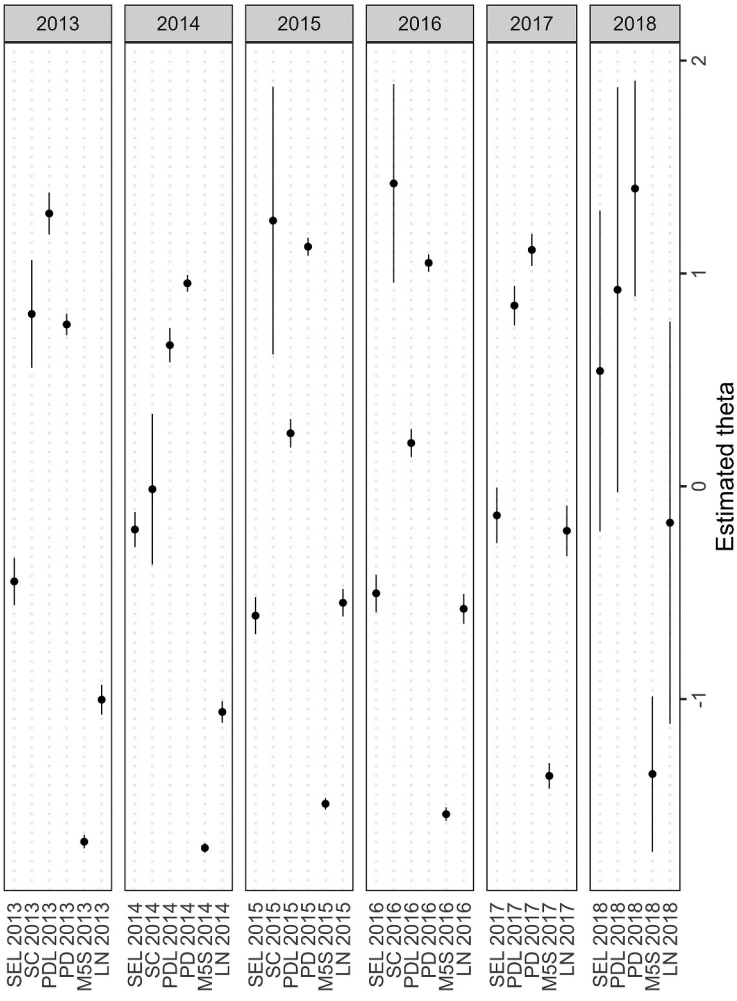

Figure C2. Party positions extracted with *Wordfish*, by year.

Appendix D

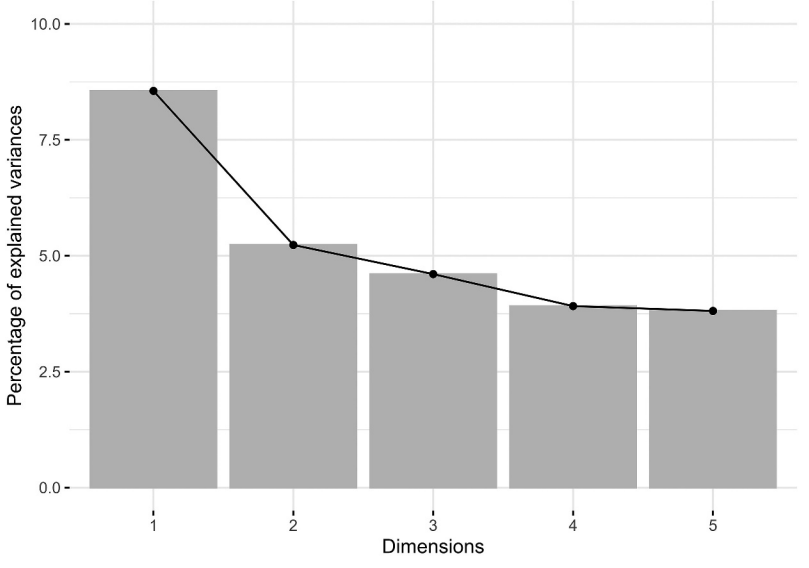

Figure D1. Screeplot of the EU-related dimensionality of the Italian policy space, 2013–2018.