



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

ARCHIVIO ISTITUZIONALE
DELLA RICERCA

Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna Archivio istituzionale della ricerca

Populism Put to the Polarisation Test: The 2019-20 Election Cycle in Italy

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:

Tronconi F., Valbruzzi M. (2020). Populism Put to the Polarisation Test: The 2019-20 Election Cycle in Italy. *SOUTH EUROPEAN SOCIETY & POLITICS*, 25(3-4), 475-501 [10.1080/13608746.2020.1821465].

Availability:

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/775666> since: 2020-10-23

Published:

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2020.1821465>

Terms of use:

Some rights reserved. The terms and conditions for the reuse of this version of the manuscript are specified in the publishing policy. For all terms of use and more information see the publisher's website.

This item was downloaded from IRIS Università di Bologna (<https://cris.unibo.it/>).
When citing, please refer to the published version.

(Article begins on next page)

Populism Put to the Polarisation Test: The 2019-20 Election Cycle in Italy

Filippo Tronconi and Marco Valbruzzi

Abstract

One year after the birth of an unprecedented government characterised by the strong populist stance of both coalition partners (M5S and the Lega) and amid a growing polarisation in party positions on a number of political issues, the European and regional elections of 2019-20 marked an important test for Italy. After presenting the results of the 2019-20 election cycle, the article investigates the most salient lines of party competition and the varying degrees of polarisation. Our analysis shows two kinds of polarisation: the first being the intra-coalitional polarisation which characterised the first Conte government; while the second, affecting the party system as a whole, is driven by the electoral rise of far-right parties.

Keywords: 2019 European elections, second-order elections, regional elections, Conte government, Salvini, Lega, M5S, government termination

Supra- and sub-national elections are usually considered to be of lesser importance than parliamentary contests, because of their more limited scopes and effects. An abundant literature on this subject suggests indeed that 'second-order' elections are, at most, a 'thermometer' for gauging the consensus behind the government and the strength of opposition parties (Reif and Schmitt 1980). However, at least for the Italian case, the 2019 European elections and the regional elections held in 2018- 2020 had, in different forms and ways, first-order effects on the stability of the national government. In the case of the European elections, the vote contributed to trigger a crisis and the first Conte government's collapse. Regional elections also had a significant impact on the life cycle of the national government, contributing to internal competition within the government coalition that progressively weakened the already fragile foundations on which the coalition between the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement, M5S) and the Lega (League) had been built (Giannetti, Pinto & Plescia 2020; Valbruzzi 2018).

In sum, both European and regional elections have had significant and profound consequences for the Italian party system. In particular, they provided the arena in which the coalition partners competed against each other to alter the equilibrium within the government. This competition set in motion a spiral of political polarisation, both inside and outside the coalition, and eventually led to the early termination of the populist alliance. Political polarisation is indeed a crucial concept to understand the recent evolution of Italian party politics after the 2018 general elections. As we will see, we apply it to two analytically distinct, but interconnected arenas, one within the government coalition and one in the party system at large.

The article is organised as follows. After a short description of the background to the elections, in the following section we set the stage for the analysis of the trends in party polarisation over the last few years, especially in relation to the results of the 2019-20 cycle of second-order elections, analysed in-depth in the fourth section. The fifth section deals with the evolution of polarisation along the most salient lines of competition that have emerged in the last decade. Then, we investigate the changes that have taken place in the Italian political space over the last ten years, with a particular focus on the transition between 2018 and 2019, after the formation of the first Conte government. Finally, we offer an overall assessment of the recent transformations of the party system and an evaluation of the experience of the populist coalition.

Setting the stage: party system evolution and government formation

The Italian party system has undergone significant changes over the last few years. Since 1994 and until 2013, ‘fragmented bipolarism’ was the most accepted phrase to describe the format of Italian party competition (D’Alimonte 2005). Two broad coalitions¹ competed to control the majority, both in the national parliament and in sub-national arenas. In 2013 this equilibrium was altered by the birth and immediate electoral success of the M5S (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013), transforming the bi-polar into a tri-polar competitive environment.

On 4 March 2018 the general elections confirmed the tripolar scheme, but the resulting government cut across the centre-right bloc. Giuseppe Conte, an unknown lawyer with no previous political experience, was appointed Prime Minister in June 2018, after a long negotiation. The cabinet was supported by an original alliance between two fully-fledged populist parties (the Lega and M5S)². As said, the participation of the Lega in the coalition implicated the split of a long-lasting centre-right bloc; it also signalled the successful transition of the Lega from a regionalist party based in the North of Italy to a nationwide party, with a clear far-right, nativist and ‘sovereigntist’ ideological positioning, as the name change itself suggests – from Lega Nord (Northern League) to Lega.

Beyond Conte, the two key people within the cabinet were the two Deputy Prime Ministers Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini. The former was the leader of the M5S and minister for Welfare; the latter was the secretary of the Lega and minister of Interior affairs. Their appointments signalled a sort of division of labour between the two leaders (and the respective parties): Di Maio would mostly take care of the implementation of a basic income – the flagship proposal of the M5S during the electoral campaign – while Salvini would mostly focus on immigration and ‘law and order’ policies.

From the outset the executive enjoyed widespread support, as unanimously recorded by opinion polls. The ‘honeymoon’ period did not decline after a few months; indeed, after one year the positive evaluations of the government and its prime minister remained above 50 per cent. However, the perspectives of the two parties supporting the government were remarkably different. While the Lega was blessed with favourable polls (above 30 per cent of voting intentions), the M5S was not able to take advantage of government participation, with polls indicating a sharply declining support (around or below 20% of voting intentions), thus suggesting a reversal of the balance between the two parties when compared to the elections of the previous year. After a year in office in which the two allied parties competed to get the coalition’s golden share, both polarising their tones and themes, the European elections confirmed the overturning of the balance of power between the coalition partners. Thus, within a few months, the first Conte cabinet fell

¹ A ‘centre-left coalition’ was built around the progressive PD (Partito Democratico - Democratic Party), both on its left (e.g., Free and Equals) and right (e.g., +Europe, Europe Green) and other minor local or personal lists. The PD resulted from the merger of the post-communist Democratic Left, and the parties of the leftist heirs of the Christian Democrats. The ‘centre-right coalition’ refers to the alliance formed by the Lega, FI (Forza Italia – Go Italy!) and FdI (Fratelli d’Italia - Brothers of Italy), in addition to other local or personal lists presented in the regional elections. Between 2008 and 2014 FI merged with Alleanza Nazionale to form the PDL (Popolo della Libertà - People of Freedom).

² There is broad agreement in the literature on the inclusion of these two parties in the category of ‘populist’ parties. While the definition of the (new) Lega as a right-wing, radical right, authoritarian, nationalist, exclusionary populist party is not called into question (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Passarelli and Tuorto 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2018), the connotation of the M5S as a specific type of populist actor is more problematic. Over time, M5S has been defined as a ‘centre populist’ party (Vassallo and Valbruzzi 2018), a ‘valence populist’ party (Zulianello 2020), a case of ‘post-ideological’ (Manucci and Amsler 2018; Colloca and Corbetta 2015), ‘polyvalent’ (Pirro 2018) ‘eclectic’ (Mosca and Tronconi 2019) and ‘techno’ (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2018) populism or, simply, as the expression of ‘civic populism’ (Lanzone and Woods 2015). Beyond the many different adjectives, though, there is a substantial agreement on the populist nature of the party and on its non-extreme position in the political space.

(August 2019) and a second government was formed (September 2019) with the main centre-left party Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD) taking the place of the Lega in the alliance with the Five Star Movement. The experiment of the populist alliance thus ended its short journey, mainly as a consequence of the results of the European elections, and was replaced by another original collaboration between parties with a long history of hostile relations. In the following pages we will show how the distribution of parties within the political space may justify the transition from one coalition to the other, beyond what some observers have seen as the thoughtless decision of a single leader, namely the Lega secretary Matteo Salvini, during the summer of 2019.

In addition to the European vote, the life-cycle of the first Conte government was also marked by another type of second-order election which had a major impact on the cabinet's chances of survival, at least in two respects. On the one hand, the regional elections triggered a process of internal competition within the government that progressively weakened the already weak bases on which the coalition between the M5S and Lega was created (Giannetti, Pinto & Plescia 2020; Valbruzzi 2018). On the other hand, with the electoral success of the Lega in many regional elections between 2018 and 2019, the centre of gravity of the coalition – and, consequently, of the entire party system – has shifted increasingly to the right of the political space. These results created a precarious asymmetry between the consensus obtained by the parties in the 2018 legislative elections and the consensus recorded, at the local level, in the more recent regional competitions. This new equilibrium between the Lega and M5S also helps to explain the early termination of their government.

However, the regional elections, especially those held in Emilia-Romagna and Calabria at the beginning of 2020, had national consequences even after the break-up of the populist coalition that supported the first Conte government. In fact, these local elections were transformed by the leader of the Lega into a sort of personal referendum, in an attempt to bring down the new national government that had taken office in September 2019. The defeat of the candidate of the Lega in Emilia-Romagna halted the series of victories of the centre-right coalition at regional level and, at the same time, provided a longer and more stable time horizon to the incumbent cabinet.

Defining and measuring polarisation

Polarisation is defined as the spread of parties (or candidates, or voters) along a relevant dimension of political conflict. Most often this refers to a generic left-right dimension (Sartori 1976; Dalton 2008; Powell 2010), but nothing prevents the same measure from being adopted on different dimensions or policy issues. In political science literature the importance of polarisation is often stressed, as are its perils, in evaluating the format and functioning of party systems, or even the stability of democratic regimes. In his classical study of political parties, Giovanni Sartori (1976, pp. 131–145) pointed to ideological polarisation as the main force shaping the dynamics of party systems as centripetal or centrifugal. In some cases this leads to what he calls 'polarised pluralism', where parties emphasise their diverging ideological stances and attract voters on increasingly extreme positions, thus hollowing out the centre of the political space. In highly polarised systems, parties are less inclined to compromise and their rhetoric aims to delegitimise competitors as a danger for democratic institutions themselves. In any democratic regime, parties in government are the expression of a partisan choice of voters, and at the same time they temporarily manage neutral institutions, appointing their personnel to the highest bureaucratic positions. This unavoidable tension between a partisan and a neutral-institutional component of democracies is heightened if parties have radically different preferences and value orientations. In such cases any alternation in parliamentary majorities will

be perceived as a fundamental threat to the political system itself, rather than a physiological change of governmental policy programmes (Enyedi 2016, p. 214).

Party polarisation is also considered to have problematic consequences for the elite-citizen linkage. In the first place, higher polarisation between parties in parliament is associated with lower congruence between the median voter and government, both in new and old democracies (Powell 2010); in turn, this is likely to mean lower levels of trust in government. Second, a climate of reciprocal delegitimation and distrust between the main parties leads to decreasing support for democratic institutions from those who did not vote for governing parties. In the literature, this is sometimes referred to as the problem of 'losers' consent' (Anderson et al. 2005). Losers 'consenting' to their electoral loss and recognising the winners as legitimate, although temporary, holders of political power is crucial for long-term democratic stability. Finally, recent evidence has shown that the emergence of radical parties, and thus increasing polarisation in representative institutions, causes polarisation to increase also at the level of voters. This happens because supporters of the newly represented radical party feel legitimised to adopt even more extreme ideological positions; moreover, after a radical party enters parliament for the first time, voters identifying with the opposing parties will react by moving towards the opposite ideological extreme. These effects have been detected both in the short term (i.e. surveying voters' opinions during an electoral campaign and soon after elections) and in the long term (i.e. years and decades after a radical party has entered parliament for the first time) (Bischof and Wagner 2019). However, it is worth pointing out here that in this article we analyse and measure polarisation exclusively at the party- or elite- level, and not at the voter- or public-level.

When it comes to the measurement of party polarisation, two issues must be addressed, namely, the way in which polarisation is operationalised and what source is employed to locate parties in the political space. We will discuss these issues in turn.

One way to operationalise the concept of polarisation is to observe the distance between the two most extreme parties along a political dimension.³ This offers an intuitive measure of the range of options available to voters on that dimension, as the mere existence of an extreme party provides voters with the possibility of choosing to be represented by an actor located at one extreme spot of the political space. In the opposite case (no extreme parties available), voters can only choose among moderate options, or abstain. Budge and McDonald (2006) and Andrews and Money (2009) are among the authors opting for this measure. The obvious downside of such operationalisation is that it fails to take into account differences in the electoral success of extreme parties. However, it seems plausible to assume that, other things being equal, a large party at the extreme spot of the ideological axis will have more say in government formation and policy formulation than a small one. The author that first introduced this operationalisation is Russell Dalton (2008). Instead of just looking at the range of partisan options, he suggests that party positions are weighed by their electoral size. His index of polarisation is thus conceptually similar to a measure of the standard deviation of a distribution.

Russell Dalton's Polarisation Index (PI) is defined as follows:

$$PI = \sqrt{\sum_i v s_i [(p_i - \bar{p})/5]^2}$$

³ A review of different approaches to the concept and operationalisations of party polarisation, as well as its determinants, is available in Curini and Hino (2012).

where vs_i is equal to the vote share of party i expressed in percentage, p_i is the position of party i in the considered dimension of the political space and \bar{p} is the average position of parties on the same dimension. Political dimensions are all operationalised as ranging from zero to ten, and the division by five is an arbitrary adjustment to centre the index on the 0-10 scale. The resulting index can assume values from zero to ten. It is equal to zero if all parties are located on the same point of the scale and equal to ten if parties are perfectly split between the two extreme positions.

While most studies dealing with the issue of polarisation focus on the left-right dimension, in sections 4 and 5 we will observe polarisation in the Italian context for a number of different issues. We do not deny the importance of the left-right alignment for parties and voters. On the contrary, this remains a meaningful shortcut for actors to understand and communicate their political stances (de Vries, Hakhverdian & Lancee 2013; Freire 2008). Nonetheless, focusing on some individual issues allows us to include in the picture several nuances that cannot be compressed into a single dimension. Furthermore, in the last decades, several new issues (from immigration to European integration) have gained relevance that do not necessarily overlap with the classical economic meaning of the left-right divide. These issues have often been taken into account to explain the rise and electoral success of new radical right and populist parties, and thus we believe they are worth examining to describe party polarisation in a country like Italy where populist parties dominate the political landscape. Finally, the share of voters that are not able to or indeed openly refuse to position themselves on the left-right axis is normally higher for populist parties than for mainstream ones. Indeed, in the Italian case 7.1 per cent of M5S voters and 8.6 per cent of Lega voters refused to position themselves on the left-right dimension in 2016, compared to 2.3 per cent of voters for the Democratic Party and 1.1 per cent of voters for Forza Italia (Mosca and Tronconi 2019, p. 1266). Whether this is a consequence of a deliberate strategy of populist parties to blur their positions on economic issues (Rovny 2013), or an increasing difficulty of citizens to make a synthesis of party positions on different topics, we think it is advisable, whenever possible, to look beyond the left-right dimension and focus instead on specific issues.

Political scientists use different tools to infer the position of parties in the political space. In the following pages we will rely upon expert survey data, collected by the Chapel Hill research group for European parliament elections and by several Italian research groups for Italian general elections.⁴ These data have the advantage of being available for many successive elections (at national and European level) in the same format and with identical or similar question wording, so that accurate longitudinal analyses of party positioning are possible not only for the left-right axis but also for other issues.⁵ Other options suffer from limitations that would not allow this kind of analysis. Survey data, such as those collected by the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) or by the Italian National Election Study (ITANES) projects do not cover European elections and the questions available from these studies are not always compatible with those of the European Election Study. The Comparative Manifesto Project is another source, sometimes used to estimate party positions. Beyond the discussion on the suitability of this tool to infer party positions or rather the salience of issues (e.g. Gabel and Hubert 2000), in the Italian case there are occasions on which parties

⁴ For European elections data, see Bakker et al. (2012), Bakker et al. (2020) and Polk et al. (2017). All data are available from <https://www.chesdata.eu/>. For Italian general elections of 2008 data are available from <http://www.luigicurini.com/scientific-publications.html> (see Curini and Iacus 2008). For 2013 and 2018 elections we use data from Di Virgilio et al. (2015) and Giannetti, Pedrazzani & Pinto (2018). We have harmonised the data in order to have all scales ranging from zero to ten.

⁵ Details on the operationalisations of each dimension are available in the online Appendix, Annex 1.

did not issue an electoral manifesto (e.g. the Lega 2019) or in which coalition manifestos are issued instead of party manifestos (e.g. the centre-right coalition in 2006).

A country moving to the right

Regional elections

Before analysing the electoral results of the latest cycle of regional elections (which formally started with the elections for the renewal of the Sicilian Regional Council in 2017)⁶ and their effects on the overall level of polarisation of the Italian party system, it is useful to provide a general overview of the balance of political power in the Italian regions before the elections (see Table A1 in the online Appendix available at [ADD LINK]). Until 2015, the centre-left coalition led by the PD was in power in 16 regions, the centre-right controlled three regions and the remaining two were in the hands of two regional-based political parties (Union Valdôtaine and the Südtiroler Volkspartei). Starting from 2017, nearly 30 million Italians have been called to renew the legislative assemblies and presidencies of 15 regions, including the two autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano. This sequence of local elections has brought about a complete reshuffle in the composition of the executive power at regional level. Indeed, the 15 regional competitions were won in most cases (11 out of 15) by a candidate from the centre-right coalition and only in two regions by the centre-left (Lazio and Emilia-Romagna). As is shown in Figure 1, today the balance of power at regional level has completely reversed vis-à-vis the situation prior to 2015: the centre-right controls a majority of regional executives (13 out of 21), while the centre-left is in power in a minority (6) of regions. The centre-right alliance dominated by the Lega virtually controls all the Northern regions and, especially thanks to the strengthening of Salvini's Lega and the radical right-wing Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI), also governs in other regions in the South (Abruzzo, Calabria, Basilicata, Sardegna and Sicilia). Furthermore, it is important to note that the largest Italian party after the 2018 general elections (M5S) does not rule any Italian region, thus confirming its enduring organisational weakness at the local level (Tronconi 2018). This is an aspect that we will explore when we discuss the 2019 European elections.

Before proceeding to analyse the results of the 2019 regional elections, it is useful to take a brief look at the turnout in regions that have voted since 2017 (see Figure 2). Turnout decreased in almost all regional elections compared to the previous electoral cycle (Tronconi 2015), with the exception of the very last round of regional elections held in 2020 (Calabria and Emilia-Romagna). The most significant decrease was observed in Molise (-9.4 percentage points) and in the autonomous province of Trento (-9). Among the various factors that may explain the variation in turnout levels, the electoral calendar should be taken into account, in particular the possibility that the regional vote occurs at the same time as a nationwide consultation (such as general or European elections). In this case, as shown by the turnout in Lombardia, Lazio and Piemonte, where elections were held at the same time as other national elections, electoral participation was significantly higher than the average.

It should also be added that in the regional elections held in 2019, the trend in turnout shows a positive upward direction, especially in Sardegna and Basilicata, where electoral participation compared to the previous round increased, respectively, by 1.4 and 5.9 percentage points. Even in these circumstances, although there was no overlap with other national elections, we can assume the existence of a 'mobilisation

⁶ The 15 ordinary statute regions voted on the same day from the first elections in 1970 until 2000. The de-alignment of the electoral calendar took place as a consequence of several early elections started in the early 2000s.

effect' resulting from the electoral campaign in sight of, or shortly after, the European election. Instead, the sharp increase in turnout observed in the 2020 regional elections held in Emilia-Romagna and Calabria is probably due to two distinct factors. First, the absolute uncertainty of the results before the vote, especially in Emilia-Romagna where, according to the opinion polls conducted before the election, the margin of victory between centre-left and centre-right was less than 3 percentage points. Second, the strategy adopted by the leader of the centre-right, Salvini, was crucial in turning these regional 'second-order' elections into a momentous political occasion with possible first-order consequences for the survival of the new incumbent government formed by M5S and PD.

When it comes to election results, three aspects need to be discussed. The first one refers to the progressive growth of Salvini's Lega within the centre-right coalition and, more generally, in the Italian party system. As we have seen above, the centre-right coalition has not only managed to wrest control of many regions away from the centre-left, but in this series of victories the predominant role has been played by the 'new' state-wide Lega. If we look at the data included in Table 1, we can see the incremental growth in the electoral support for this party, especially since 2018. In the 15 regional elections under examination here, the Lega was, on average, the largest party, with electoral returns around or above 30 per cent in the northern regions (Lombardia, Friuli Venezia-Giulia, Piemonte). In addition, for the first time in its history, Salvini's party secured double-digit results in some southern regions, becoming the largest (Abruzzo) or the second largest party (Basilicata). In any case, the electoral and political strengthening of the Lega confirms the balance of power within the centre-right coalition that had already emerged after the 2018 general elections, which had placed Berlusconi's FI (Forza Italia – Go Italy!), for the first time, in a minority status.

Secondly, it is important to observe the electoral trend of the Five Star Movement, that is, as the largest party, in terms of votes on the national territory, in both the 2013 and 2018 parliamentary elections. Unlike the Lega, the M5S has suffered from a constant erosion of votes in regional elections, especially in the period following the formation of the coalition government with the Lega. The data would suggest that this party has persistently failed to take root and organise itself effectively at a sub-national level. The M5S is and remains mainly a 'virtual' party or, more precisely, a digital organisation (Gerbaudo 2018): it can be seen as national software with a weak organisational hardware at the local level, made of local assemblies with no supra-local coordination (Lanzone and Tronconi 2015). From this perspective, the M5S is the antithesis of the classic, but increasingly evanescent, mass-based party of the twentieth century. This specific nature of the M5S makes it particularly suitable to compete in first-order national elections and leads to a scattered ability to contest local elections, depending on the existence and rootedness of its local organisations and availability of viable candidates. However, difficulties arise when competing at regional level, where no organisation is currently in place.⁷ For this reason, the electoral behaviour of the M5S can be described as an 'accordion' widening or narrowing in relation to the territorial level of competition.

In addition to this 'structural' deficiency, linked to the organisational nature of the M5S, there exists another, more contingent difficulty, which concerns the decision of the party to enter government for the first time in its short history and its internal competition with the Lega. As we will also see in relation to the results of the European elections, the 'cost of governing' seems to have damaged the M5S alone, while Salvini's party has been hitherto rewarded both by the polls and the voters. However, the combination of these two elements

⁷ Although this might change in the near future, as the party leadership announced the birth of regional coordination bodies during the summer of 2019.

– first governmental experience and its intrinsic ‘digital’ nature – seem to have severely damaged the ‘5 star party’ (Ceccarini and Bordignon 2018).

Finally, the third aspect concerns the centre-left coalition and, more specifically, the PD. Although it lost in 13 of the 15 regional elections from 2017 to 2020, the PD emerged, in terms of votes, as the runner-up in seven cases, surpassing the M5S. From this point of view, if the previous cycle of regional elections in 2010-2015 had marked the strengthening of a multipolar party structure (Tronconi 2015), in this cycle we have seen a small reversal trend towards a more bipolar pattern of inter-party competition, with the centre-right facing the centre-left alliance.

To sum up, the regional elections strongly rewarded the centre-right coalition and, within it, its increasingly dominant actor, that is, Salvini’s far-right Lega. If we focus only on the 5 regional elections held in 2019 (Abruzzo, Sardegna, Basilicata, Piemonte and Umbria), there has been a sharp increase of the Lega. At the regional level, the Lega had never exceeded 15 per cent of the votes: a level just grazed in 2010, when elections were held in Piemonte, Lombardia and Basilicata. The comparison between the 2019 regional results and those of the previous electoral cycle is absolutely telling: in 2014 the Lega collected, on average, about 4 per cent of the votes, while in 2019 it received almost 30 per cent (see Figure A1 in the online Appendix). This is a significant increase, especially in light of the fact that it corresponds, to a large extent, with the decision to form an ‘innovative’ coalition government in tandem with another populist party.

In this sense, Salvini’s party has been ‘blessed’ by the new experience in government. It has allowed Salvini to obtain great media visibility and to dominate the election campaign, setting the agenda on preferred issues, from a position of strength. This trend, largely linked to the sharp growth of the Lega, was not limited to regional electoral races, but was further strengthened by the vote in the 2019 European elections.

The 2019 European Elections

On 26 May, almost 28 million people turned out to renew the 73 members of the European Parliament. Compared to the 2014 EU elections, electoral participation fell by 2.6 percentage points (from 58.7 to 56.1). Incidentally, this downward trend contrasts with what has occurred, at the aggregate level, in all other EU member states, where the turnout for the first time since 1979 has witnessed an increase of more than 8 percentage points, going from 42.6 per cent to 50.8 per cent. As Figure 2 (above) shows, turnout in European elections has always been lower than in general elections, on average by about 10 percentage points. Yet in 2019 the second-order effect hit a record high: the distance in the turnout between general and European elections reached 16.8 percentage points, the largest difference ever.

In addition to the data on participation, the 2019 European elections in Italy were also characterised by a high level of electoral volatility, both in terms of time and space. Indeed, the 2019 elections were the second most volatile since 1979 until today, surpassed only by the 1994 ‘critical’ elections. What is more, the Italian electorate remains one of the most mobile or ‘available’ to change among all Europeans. In 2019, only in the United Kingdom, which was forced to manage the complex Brexit affair, and in Slovakia was there a higher level of electoral volatility than in Italy. In a comparative perspective, Italy is much more mobile from an electoral point of view than both the other West European countries (where the average value of the volatility index stops at 19.7) and those of Central and Eastern Europe, where volatility remains stable at about 28 (see Figure A2 in the online Appendix).

In short, compared to other European electorates, Italians are less active but more mobile. This means that Italian voters are less and less actively involved in the European elections, but those participating are largely available to frequently change their party preferences. Also for this reason, it is interesting to observe which parties have been rewarded and which punished by the 'fickle' vote of the Italian electorate. On the basis of the overall electoral results (for the full details, see Table A3 in the online Appendix), there exist only two parties that can be described as winners of the European elections: Salvini's Lega and Fdi led by Giorgia Meloni. These are two radical right parties which, in the recent definition given by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2018), fall into the category of 'authoritarian populists'.

The recent victories of the centre-right alliance are due to these two political forces that have increased votes both in absolute and percentage terms. Compared to 2014, these two far-right parties have gained a total of more than 10 million votes, while in relation to the 2013 general election the growth corresponds to more than 3.5 million additional voters. The most significant increase is certainly that of the Lega, which after just a year in government has virtually doubled its votes, rising from 17.5 per cent in 2018 to 34.3 per cent in 2019. In parallel to the electoral success of Salvini's party – the most voted for party across the EU states – we have observed at the same time the halving of the electoral support for the Five Star Movement. Di Maio's party received almost 11 million votes in the last general election (equivalent to 32.2 per cent) and after a year in government it had lost some 6 million voters (-15 percentage points). As a result, the balance of power within the coalition government was completely overturned: before the EU elections, the M5S was the leading partner, but afterwards, on the basis of the new electoral consent, Salvini appeared in a position to set the agenda of the executive.

While the 'second-order election' model has been confirmed with regard to the decline in electoral participation, particularly in relation to the 2018 national vote, the assessment is more complex with regard to the electoral sanction of the governing parties. In fact, according to the model, the European elections are usually considered a sort of mid-term electoral test by which to judge the mandate of the cabinet in office. And this mid-term evaluation has usually been negative for the incumbent government. If we apply this model to the 2019 Italian scenario, it is worth noting that, on the whole, the governing parties have been strengthened by the European vote, increasing their vote share from 49.7 per cent in 2018 to 51.4 per cent (see Figure A3 in the online Appendix). Thus, there was no electoral 'cost of governing' overall, but rather some small electoral gain. However, looking at the figures of the two parties taken individually, a significant difference emerges. For the Lega the exercise of executive power has been a profitable investment, while for the Five Star Movement it was a rather risky bet, and indeed electorally harmful.

The victory of the Lega and, to a lesser extent, of Fdi came largely at the expense of Berlusconi's personal party (Forza Italia), support for which has halved compared to both 2018 and 2014. As the analysis of electoral flows (Pritoni and Vignati 2019) has shown, a substantial portion of Berlusconi's supporters do not participate in the European elections, but another equally substantial part (about a fifth of Forza Italia's former electorate) decided to support the Lega. This outflow of votes from Forza Italia has also contributed to moving the centre of gravity of the Italian political space further to the right.

As for the PD, the interpretation of the results is twofold. If the comparison is made with 2014, when the PD was the most voted for party on a European scale reaching 40.8 per cent of the votes (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2014), then the electoral balance-sheet is clearly negative: -5 million votes, that is, -18 percentage points. On the contrary, when comparing the figures for 2019 with those of the 2018 general election, the results for the PD look positive, with a 3.7 percentage point growth. Compared to the 'historic' defeat suffered in the

general election of the previous year, in 2019 the PD managed to stem the electoral haemorrhage towards other parties, especially the M5S, and to consolidate its hardcore of voters.

As we have seen, in 2019 the great mobility of Italian voters rewarded Salvini's Lega, which – in a little over a year – went from being the third to the first Italian party in terms of votes. This result has also radically transformed the Italian electoral scene, which has now entirely lost its well-known stability. This transformation is evident from the data included in Figure 3, which shows, for each province, the parties that obtained the most votes in 2018 (on the left) and 2019 (on the right). After the general elections, Italy was split roughly in half, with the centre-south dominated by the Five Star Movement and the north mostly controlled by the Lega. The traditional 'red belt' is now enclosed within a small number of provinces along the central Apennine mountain stretch.

With the 2019 European elections the scenario changed completely. The Lega is now the most voted for party in almost all the provinces of the centre-north and has also managed to expand its electoral base in many areas of the south, which was almost unthinkable only a few years ago. In terms of distribution of support along the national territory, the Lega emerges as a national party or, at least, the party whose distribution of votes is the most 'nationalised' throughout Italy. This is yet another indicator of the ideological transformation imposed by Salvini on his party: it was to become less and less regionally-based and increasingly oriented to the rhetorical defence of the national interest (Albertazzi, Giovannini & Seddone 2018). With the expansion of the Lega in the south, the predominance of the Five Star Movement in these areas has inevitably been reduced. Now the M5S is the main political force only in some southern provinces, especially in Sicilia, Campania, Calabria and Puglia. In relation to this new electoral geography, the increasingly restricted territory of the Italian 'red belt', now encapsulated between some provinces of Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany (especially in the urban areas), is further confirmed by the results of the 2019 European elections.

To conclude, the 2017-2020 cycle of regional and European elections returns a picture of a country that, from a political and electoral standpoint, has clearly shifted its centre of gravity to the right. This is not so much due to the victory of the centre-right per se, especially at the local/regional level, but due to the success of the two most radical parties within the bloc, namely, the Lega and the FdI. It is this 'extreme' component of the centre-right alliance that now controls almost two thirds of the votes and has therefore outvoted the more moderate component linked to Forza Italia, whose electoral decline is strictly linked to the weakening of the leadership of its founder-owner Silvio Berlusconi.

If one adds to this the substantial 'freezing' of the centre-left electorate compared to 2018 and the gradual erosion of electoral support for the eclectic populism represented by the M5S, the shift to the right of the Italian electorate is even more evident. Moreover, never before had the (Northern) Lega been so strong in Italian history, reaching the peak of electoral support in 2019 (see Fig. A3 in the online Appendix). Taking into account the success of FdI, it is possible to say that about 40 per cent of Italian voters have supported political platforms strongly oriented towards the neo-nationalist, 'sovereignist' and radical right pole. If and how this change in Italian electoral behaviour has triggered a process of ideological polarisation in the party system is the focus of the following sections.

Polarisation over a decade: an overview

In this section we analyse the evolution of polarisation of the Italian party system along the left-right dimension and along several additional issues from 2008 to 2019. This period covers three national and three European elections (2008, 2013, 2018 and 2009, 2014, 2019 respectively). We are thus able to trace the development of polarisation through time in different political settings. The 2008 and 2009 elections took place in a bipolar environment, where the newly founded PD and PDL, respectively centre-left and centre-right parties, were the main competitors. In 2013 the unexpected success of a new actor, the M5S, transformed the political landscape into a tripolar format. Finally, in the aftermath of the 2018 elections saw the breakup of the centre-right coalition and the birth of a populist government as a result of the establishment of an unprecedented coalition between M5S and the Lega (Valbruzzi 2018; Pasquino 2019). In 2019 and before its early termination in mid-August, this original political experiment faced its first nationwide electoral test on the occasion of the European elections.

We analyse the evolution of party polarisation along five policy issues, beyond the general left-right positioning of parties. The economic dimension of competition is captured by the traditional choice between high public spending on services (and a high level of taxation) and low taxation (and fewer services). The 'social' dimension corresponds to higher or lower support for liberal lifestyle policies regarding issues such as homosexual marriage or abortion. The following three policy areas concern the preference for more or less restrictive policies on immigration, the support for environmental protection, and the support for an increased transfer of authority to the European Union. In order to have a point of reference, in Figure 4 we compare the values of polarisation (according to the Dalton Index described above) for the Italian case with the average polarisation of the 2009, 2014 and 2019 European elections for 14 West European countries, for which data are available on the same issues.

As a general pattern, polarisation in the Italian party system along the dimensions chosen for this analysis is not dramatically different from the Western European average, although on all policy areas Italian values are higher than Western European ones in 2019, which was not the case in the previous EU elections. As far as the longitudinal trend is concerned, the general pattern is a decrease of polarisation in 2013-2014 compared to the 2008-2009 values, and then a rise in 2018 and especially in 2019. This is evident in the case of left-right, the economic dimension and immigration, while the social dimension and environment display a somewhat more erratic trend. Again, the trend over the European dimension follows a different and opposed line.

How can we make sense of these divergent trends? The general decrease of polarisation in 2013-2014 can plausibly be attributed to the emergence and success of a party, the M5S, with an overall 'centrist' approach to many issues (Mosca and Tronconi 2019), especially on economic affairs and immigration, but not on the environment and especially the EU. As far as Europe is concerned, the changing economic conditions caused a sudden redefinition of party positions. In 2013-2014 the financial crisis and the following austerity measures made the European integration issue far more contentious than it had been in Italy, and several parties moved towards the eurosceptic pole of the axis, including the M5S, which at that time was proposing a referendum on leaving the common currency. The debate about Italy's position within the EU did not stop in the following years. Europe continues to be a relatively contentious issue in Italy and a return to a situation of uncontested support for increased transfer of powers to supranational institutions seems unlikely in the near future. Nonetheless, the most eurosceptic positions were abandoned by 2018, and no party today is proposing an outright exit from the EU or the euro.

Beyond the different polarisation trends of the policy issues considered, it must be underlined that in 2019 the level of polarisation increased for all issues except for the environment. This can be attributed to the simultaneous increase in the share of votes for the Lega and the decrease for the M5S, as discussed above. This is an unsurprising trend given that the Lega holds radical positions on most issues, while the M5S is a 'moderate' (or, better, median) party on virtually all policies. In the next section, we will turn our attention to this transformation of the political space as a consequence of the different electoral trajectories of the parties that have given birth (and death) to the first Conte government.

The changing political space

What are the effects of a populist government on the political system as a whole? Should it be considered as business as usual, a 'regular' government, or does the peculiar nature of its members affect the stability and performance of the party system? To address these questions, in this section we will analyse the changes that have taken place in the political space over the last ten years, with a focus on the transition between 2018 and 2019, in particular after the formation of the first Conte government, as there were no further nation-wide electoral tests after the 2019 European elections. In addition to the dimension that divides parties along the traditional left-right continuum, we will examine party positions on the European integration issue and on the dimensions of social liberalism and economic interventionism as the main sources of policy divergence within the Conte 1 cabinet, possibly justifying its termination.

Let us begin, therefore, by observing the transformations of the political space along the first two dimensions of competition, that is, the generic left-right axis and European integration. The first aspect to be stressed is that, before the M5S gained national significance, the relationship between the two dimensions had the predictable and well-known 'inverted U' form (Hooghe, Marks & Wilson 2002). This implies that extreme parties (both from the left and the right) lean towards euroscepticism, whereas mainstream parties are generally more supportive of the European project.

In the case of Italy, the same inverted U-curve can be observed for the 2008 general elections and the 2009 European vote (Figure 5). The situation changed and became more complex from 2013 on, when the M5S stood out as the main actor in the party system. Its indefinite ideology and, in turn, its median location in the political space (Mosca and Tronconi 2019) no longer conformed to the traditional association between the left-right ideological dimension and support for European integration. This peculiar configuration lasted until 2019, with an increasing divergence between the pro- and anti-EU party blocs.

Although in 2018 the M5S had already begun to soften its most radical anti-EU positions, it is still located at the bottom of the figure, where the Lega also belongs. The European dimension still provided a meeting ground for the post-electoral alliance that gave birth to the first Conte government. However, the two parties further diverged on this issue in 2019. The decision of the M5S to support Ursula von der Leyen's nomination as president of the European Commission (July 2019) in contrast with the Lega's choice to oppose it, confirmed the existence of separate strategies.

On the left-right axis positions have always been more distant, and this has not changed with the two parties sharing power. In a way, intra-government competition has fostered the gradual separation of its two populist components. A growing divergence was indeed evident between the Lega, insisting on restrictions to immigration and proposing a flat-tax fiscal reform, and the M5S, whose flagship proposal was the institution of a basic income, which became a reality in January 2019.

In Figure 6 we unpack the ideological dimension into its two main components: the economic one (state versus market) and the cultural one, involving traditional or progressive values in terms of social lifestyle. In general, a double channel of political polarisation emerges from the analysis of the transformation of the political space after the formation of the first Conte government. The first channel operates within the cabinet and has progressively separated the two allies. This polarisation has taken place mainly along the economic dimension, with the two governing parties supporting different (if not opposing) policy agendas: a neo-liberal fiscal policy for the Lega and a sort of social-oriented, Keynesian interventionism for the Five Star Movement. Another source of policy differentiation comes from social issues such as LGBT rights, same-sex marriage, gender equality or abortion. These policies were purposely excluded from the coalition agreement (*Contratto di governo*) between the Lega and M5S because, as Figure 6 makes clear, the positions of the two parties have been and remain distant. The distance further increased in 2019, in particular because of the radicalisation of Salvini's party on those issues concerning the defence of traditional values and so-called 'natural' families. Not by chance, the climax of the conflict was reached in early Spring 2019, when the Lega decided to support the much debated right-wing World Congress of Families in Verona, whereas Luigi Di Maio decried that event as a 'celebration of a new Middle Ages'.

For about a year, a patina of populist and protectionist rhetoric managed to keep the two government partners together, but eventually the divergences over economic measures and traditional lifestyle values (in addition to the strategic choices of the individual parties) prevailed, leading to the termination of the government in mid-August 2019. It is questionable whether this pattern of policy-polarisation within the cabinet emerged simply as a result of the populist nature of the two parties or rather as a more common by-product of a coalition cabinet. As known, the empirical evidence on coalition bargaining and termination in Europe suggests that around a quarter of the post-war coalitions were terminated because of policy conflict between the incumbent parties (Laver and Shepsle 1998; Damgaard 2008). A kind of conflict that, in some cases, may originate from 'informative public opinion polls or shared expectations about electoral outcomes that provide each party with information about what would happen if an election was held today' (Diermeier and Stevenson 1999, p. 1052). As we know, even second-order elections can play this 'informative' role. Moreover, in the case under examination these policy conflicts were exacerbated by the existence of an electoral calendar that encouraged policy differentiation even among parties that were allied at national level, but competed against each other at subnational and supranational levels. Nevertheless, our conjecture is that the frequency as well as the intensity of such conflicts skyrocket when both parties in power share a populist mentality. And this is especially true when two distinct but coalesced types of populist parties compete over the definition of 'the people' they appeal to.

If economic issues have separated the cabinet parties, the 'populist government' as a unified actor has leveraged on migration, and partially, European integration issues to raise the overall level of political polarisation. In a strategic manner, the governing parties (and the Lega in a more effective, methodical way) have used identity issues (external border control, fight against migration, recovery of the national culture, challenge to the EU as the driving force behind the multicultural project, etc.) as a tool to strengthen their identity and widen their electoral base. And they did so by resorting to the classical repertoire of the populist rhetoric that pitted a 'pure' people against an all-encompassing and 'corrupt' establishment.

From this point of view, the Italian case of a fully-fledged populist government provides further evidence for the assumption that 'as soon as populist parties rise to power, they are always intent to step up polarisation to unprecedented degrees' (Pappas 2019, p. 341). However, since the first Conte government was a populist *coalition*, polarisation has not proceeded exclusively outwards, that is, towards the 'enemies' of the

government/people, but it has also had an impact inwards, triggering a dynamics of policy divergence between the two parties in power that eventually led to the termination of the executive.

Instead of calling early elections, the end of the Conte government led, somewhat surprisingly, to a new coalition between the M5S and the PD, with Giuseppe Conte remaining in office as the Prime Minister. Does this about-turn have a rationale in terms of policy space or is it just the result of the short-term tactical calculation of the political actors? An answer to this question is possible on the basis of the figures we have already discussed. The M5S and PD clearly have different agendas as far as the European Union and immigration are concerned (see Figure 5 above, and Figure A4 in the online Appendix). On the other hand, they virtually occupy the same position of the political space on the environment (Figure A5 in the online Appendix) and on the left-right axis.

When we observe the two main components of the ideological dimension (Fig. 6 above) the similarities are once again confirmed both on the economic and on the socio-cultural axes. While we do not have data points beyond the 2019 EU elections, some recent developments seem to show that the two coalition partners may find a (precarious) common ground on European and immigration issues. We have already seen that the M5S has softened its anti-European stance when supporting (in July 2019) the candidacy of Ursula von der Leyen as the President of the European Commission. On that occasion the party voted together with the PD and differently to the Lega. On immigration, the M5S-PD coalition agreement only included a general statement about the need for a reform of the Dublin Regulation, determining the asylum policy within the Union, and a reference to amending the decrees on security passed by the first Conte government with a strong support from the Lega and its leader Matteo Salvini. After eight months in office, however, the new coalition has not taken any concrete steps in this field. Tones have certainly been softened by comparison to the Salvini era, but the actual policy has remained unchanged, both in terms of management of the Mediterranean route of illegal migration, and in terms of asylum policy for migrants already present on the Italian territory.

Summing up, the peculiar Italian case of a short-lived populist coalition triggered the dynamics of elite polarisation that has affected, directly and indirectly, the functioning of the entire party system. This happened for two reasons. On the one hand, we have observed a pattern of polarisation coming from within the cabinet, specifically from the competition between two populist parties over the definition and the boundary of the 'people'. Even though both the Lega and M5S shared the same populist rhetoric, they have relied – and still rely – on different populist messages. The Lega's message is more exclusionary and nativist; the M5S is more antipolitical. Since the 'people' for the populists is a homogenous category that by definition rejects any internal division, the power sharing between two different populist parties set in motion a spiral of polarisation that eventually led to the resignation of the first Conte government. In this context, the regional and European elections provided a stage for this internal polarisation to emerge and escalate.

On the other hand, the overall level of polarisation of the Italian party system has been affected by the gradual strengthening of two radical right parties (the Lega and FdI) at the expense of other mainstream parties. As seen above, the 2019-2020 cycle of European and regional elections saw a further increase in the electoral support for the most extreme parties in the centre-right coalition. Not only has this trend moved the Italian party system further to the right, but it has also contributed to widening the ideological gulf between the relevant parties, especially along non-traditional dimensions of party competition (i.e., EU integration or social issues, as shown in Figures 5 and 6 above).

The combination of these two patterns of polarisation (inside and outside the cabinet), together with the fact that the centre of the political space is currently occupied by a 'challenger' populist party (M5S), makes the life of every cabinet more uncertain and the functioning of the party system more insecure.

Conclusion

A country moving to the right. This is the image of Italy after the 2019-20 cycle of regional and European elections. In both elections, the winning parties were, in fact, those located on the far right of the political spectrum. First and foremost, Salvini's Lega virtually doubled its votes compared to the 2018 general elections and, as the major partner of the centre-right coalition, won many regional contests. Secondly, FdI, a descendant of the post-fascist Italian Social Movement, performed well, almost doubling its votes compared to previous electoral rounds. These two parties, firmly placed in the conservative tradition of the centre-right, have two ideological traits in common: nativism and 'sovereignism'. Their rhetoric and policy platforms are characterised by open hostility towards foreigners and they view the EU with strong scepticism, describing it as a bunch of political elites hampering the 'general will' of the people/nation. To a certain extent, the M5S shared this critical position towards the EU until 2014 (when it proposed a referendum on the euro). Since then, however, it has watered down its euroscepticism, to the point of joining the main euro-parties in their support for Ursula von der Leyen as president of the European Commission in July 2019.

Within this framework, the electoral trajectory of the Lega is absolutely astounding. Founded as a regionalist, anti-establishment movement, Salvini brought about a radical change to his party (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018), making it a relevant nation-wide actor within just a few years. As we have seen, in the latest European elections the Lega turned out to be the largest party in terms of vote share, not only in Italy but also in the entire European Union.

The two most striking aspects of the Lega's success are, first, the speed with which Salvini turned a party on the brink of the abyss into the first Italian party, and second, the way it widened its electoral base while in power. Contrary to the empirical evidence focusing on the 'cost of governing' (especially in time of crisis) (Narud and Valen 2008; Bosco and Verney 2012), for the Lega the decision to join the government was not a penalty but an electoral blessing. Furthermore, the Lega managed to gain electoral support by forming a cabinet with another populist party in its first experience in government: the Five Star Movement. This party paid the cost of inexperience and suffered the biggest electoral losses and, in just a year, went from being the first to the third Italian party. In short, while the Lega confirmed its ability to survive (and thrive) both in opposition and in government, the M5S proved to be unable to play effectively on both sides. The transition from uncompromising opposition to compromise-prone government has hitherto been deleterious for the M5S. It is difficult to say if the new coalition with the PD will be more or less electorally dangerous for the M5S, but it is clear that a party programmed to mobilise anti-establishment protest is in dire straits when it becomes the establishment itself.

At any event, the combination of these two elements (i.e. victory of the Lega and defeat of the M5S in the 2019 round of elections) has had two main consequences. The first consequence directly concerns the parties in power: the populist coalition was not able to withstand the impact of the centrifugal pulls stemming from the harsh intra-coalition competition. In the second Conte government the intra-coalition policy divergence seems to be lower on some issues, and has been downplayed or put aside on others, at least in the first

months. In the Italian experience, the short-lived populist coalition shows that polarisation is key to the electoral success of populist actors but may turn out to be a shortcoming when they accept, in alliance with other populist parties, the challenge of government.

The second consequence affected the overall functioning of the party system. Because of the expansion of the Lega and its ideological radicalisation, in 2019 political polarisation increased in all dimensions of competition, gradually hollowing out the centre of the political space. Obviously, it is still too early to determine whether this situation will persist or not, especially in a context characterised by high electoral mobility and instability. What is certain, for now, is that volatility and polarisation are two indicators of a party system that is anything but stable and solid.

References

- Albertazzi, D., Giovannini, A. & Seddone, A. (2018) “No regionalism please, we are *Leghisti!*” The transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the leadership of Matteo Salvini’. *Regional & Federal Studies*, vol. 28, no. 5, pp. 645–671.
- Albertazzi, D. & McDonnell, D. (2015) *Populists in Power*, Routledge, Abingdon.
- Anderson, C., Blais, A., Bowler, S., Donovan, T. & Listhaug, O. (eds) (2005) *Losers’ Consent: Elections and Democratic Legitimacy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Andrews, J.T. & Money, J. (2009) ‘The spatial structure of party competition: party dispersion within a finite policy space’. *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 805–824.
- Bakker, R., de Vries, C., Edwards, E., Hooghe, L., Jolly, S., Marks, G., Polk, J., Rovny, J., Steenbergen, M. & Vachudova, M.A. (2012) ‘Measuring party positions in Europe’. *Party Politics*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 143–152.
- Bakker, R., Hooghe, L., Jolly, S., Marks, G., Polk, J., Rovny, J., Steenbergen, M. & Vachudova, M.A. (2020) ‘2019 Chapel Hill expert survey. Version 2019.1’, available on chesdata.eu. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
- Bickerton, C.J. & Invernizzi Accetti, C. (2018) “Techno-populism” as a new party family: the case of the Five Star Movement and Podemos’. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 132–150.
- Bischof, D. & Wagner, M. (2019) ‘Do voters polarize when radical parties enter parliament?’ *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 63, no. 4, pp. 888-904.
- Bordignon, F. & Ceccarini, L. (2013) ‘Five stars and a cricket. Beppe Grillo shakes Italian politics’. *South European Society and Politics*, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 427–449.
- Bosco, A. & Verney, S. (2012) ‘Electoral epidemic: the political cost of economic crisis in Southern Europe, 2010–11’. *South European Society and Politics*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 129–154.

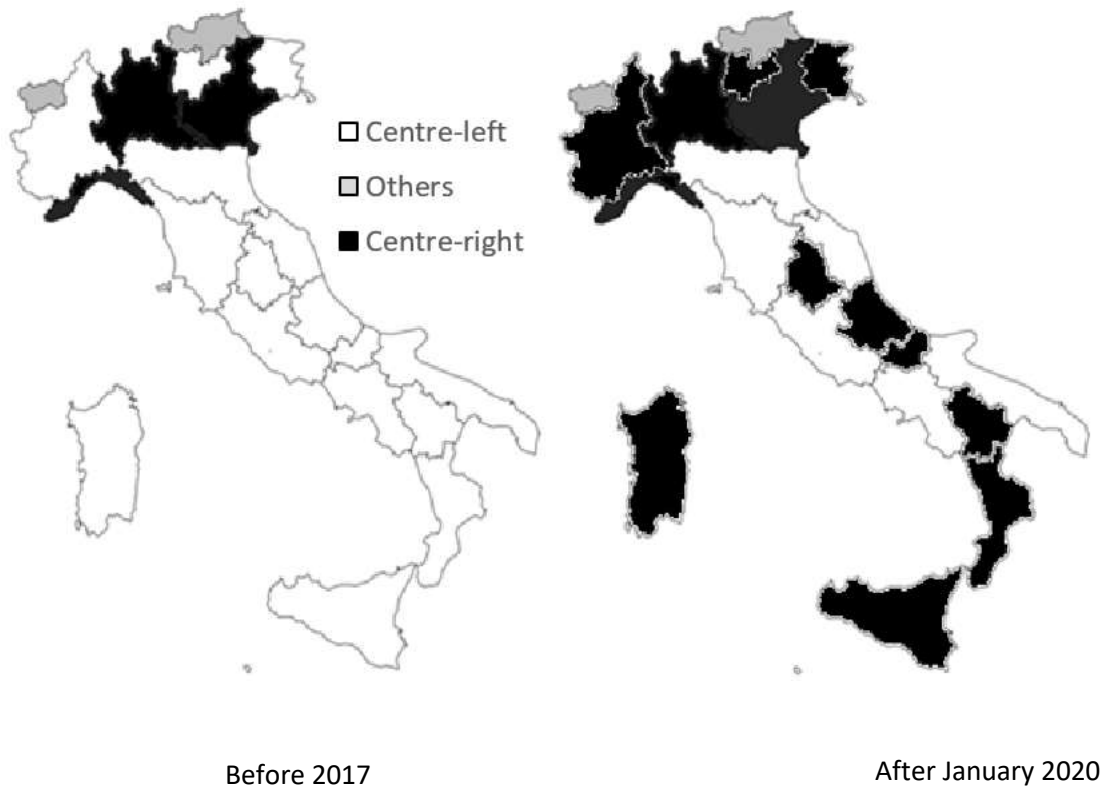
- Budge, I. & McDonald, M.D. (2006) 'Choices parties define: policy alternatives in representative elections, 17 countries 1945–1998'. *Party Politics*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 451–466.
- Ceccarini, L. & Bordignon, F. (2018) 'Towards the 5 Star Party'. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 346–362.
- Colloca, P. & Corbetta, P. (2015) 'Beyond protest: issues and ideological inconsistencies in the voters of the Movimento 5 Stelle', in *Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement. Organisation, Communication and Ideology*, ed F. Tronconi, Ashgate, Farnham, pp. 195–211.
- Curini, L. & Hino, A. (2012) 'Missing links in party-system polarization: how institutions and voters matter'. *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 74, no. 2, pp. 460–473.
- Curini, L. & Iacus, S. (2008) 'Italian spatial competition between 2006 and 2008: a changing party system?' paper presented at the annual meeting of the Italian Political Science Association, Pavia, 4-6 September.
- D'Alimonte, R. (2005) 'Italy: a case of fragmented bipolarism', in *The Politics of Electoral Systems* eds M. Gallagher & P. Mitchell, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 253–276.
- Dalton, R.J. (2008) 'The quantity and the quality of party systems. Party system polarization, its measurement, and its consequences'. *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 41, no. 7, pp. 899–920.
- Damgaard, E. (2008) 'Cabinet termination in Western Europe', in *Cabinets and Coalitions Bargaining: The Democratic Life Cycle in Western Europe*, eds K.W. Strøm, W.C. Müller & T. Bergman, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 301–326.
- de Vries, C.E., Hakhverdian, A. & Lancee, B. (2013) 'The dynamics of voters' left/right identification: the role of economic and cultural attitudes'. *Political Science Research and Methods*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 223–238.
- Di Virgilio, A., Giannetti, D., Pedrazzani, A. & Pinto, L. (2015) 'Party competition in the 2013 Italian elections: evidence from an expert survey'. *Government and Opposition*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 65–89.
- Diermeier, D. & Stevenson, R.T. (1999) 'Cabinet survival and competing risks'. *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 43, no. 4, p. 1051-1068.
- Enyedi, Z. (2016) 'Populist polarization and party system institutionalization: the role of party politics in de-democratization'. *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 63, no. 4, pp. 210–220.
- Freire, A. (2008) 'Party polarization and citizens' left—right orientations'. *Party Politics*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 189–209.
- Gabel, M.J. & Hubert, J. (2000) 'Putting parties in their place: inferring party left-right ideological positions from party manifestos data'. *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 94–103.
- Gerbaudo, P. (2018) *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy*, Pluto Press, London.
- Giannetti, D., Pedrazzani, A. & Pinto, L. (2018) 'The rising importance of non-economic policy dimensions and the formation of the Conte government in Italy'. *Italian Political Science*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 27–44.
- Giannetti, D., Pinto, L. & Plescia, C. (2020) 'The first Conte government: "government of change" or business as usual?' *Contemporary Italian Politics*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 182–199.

- Hooghe, L., Marks, G. & Wilson, C. J. (2002) 'Does left/right structure party positions on European integration?' *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 35, no. 8, pp. 965–989.
- Lanzone, M.E. & Woods, D. (2015) 'Riding the populist web: contextualizing the Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy'. *Politics and Governance*, vol. 3, no. 2, p. 54.
- Lanzone, M.E. & Tronconi, F. (2015) 'Between blog, social networks and territory: activists and grassroots organization', in *Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement. Organisation, Communication and Ideology*, ed F. Tronconi, Ashgate, Farnham, pp. 53–73.
- Laver, M. & Shepsle, K.A. (1998) 'Events, equilibria, and government survival'. *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 42, no. 1, pp. 28–54.
- Manucci, L. & Amsler, M. (2018) 'Where the wind blows: Five Star Movement's populism, direct democracy and ideological flexibility'. *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 109–132.
- Mosca, L. & Tronconi, F. (2019) 'Beyond left and right: the eclectic populism of the Five Star Movement'. *West European Politics*, vol. 42, no. 6, pp. 1258–1283.
- Mudde, C. & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017) *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Narud, H.M. & Valen, H. (2008) 'Coalition membership and electoral performance', in *Cabinets and Coalitions Bargaining: The Democratic Life Cycle in Western Europe*, eds K.W. Strøm, W.C. Müller & T. Bergman, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 369–402.
- Norris, P. & Inglehart, R. (2018) *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Authoritarian-Populism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Pappas, T. S. (2019) *Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Pasquino, G. (2019) 'The formation of the government', in *The Italian General Election of 2018: Italy in Uncharted Territory* eds L. Ceccarini & J.L. Newell, Palgrave, Basingstoke, pp. 297–315.
- Pasquino, G. & Valbruzzi, M. (2014) 'Il Partito Democratico: Renzi #staisereno', in *L'Italia e l'Europa al bivio delle riforme: le elezioni europee e amministrative del 2014*, eds M. Valbruzzi & R. Vignati, Istituto Carlo Cattaneo, Bologna, pp. 115–126.
- Passarelli, G. & Tuorto, D. (2018) *La Lega di Salvini: estrema destra di governo*, Il Mulino, Bologna.
- Pirro, A. L. P. (2018) 'The polyvalent populism of the 5 Star Movement'. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 26, no. 4, pp. 443–458.
- Polk, J., Rovny, J., Bakker, R., Edwards, E., Hooghe, L., Jolly, S., Koedam, J., Kostelka, F., Marks, G., Schumacher, G., Steenbergen, M., Vachudova, M. & Zilovic, M. (2017) 'explaining the salience of anti-elitism and reducing political corruption for political parties in Europe with the 2014 Chapel Hill expert survey data'. *Research & Politics*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 1–9.
- Powell, B. G. Jr. (2010) 'Party polarization and the ideological congruence of governments', in *Citizens, Context, and Choice* eds R. J. Dalton & C. J. Anderson, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 197–213.

- Pritoni, A. & Vignati, R. (2019) 'Turnout, preferential voting and vote flows in the E.U. Election'. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, vol. 24, no. 5, pp. 691–715.
- Reif, K. & Schmitt, H. (1980) 'Nine second-order national elections: a conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results'. *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 3–44.
- Rovny, J. (2013) 'Where do radical right parties stand? Position blurring in multidimensional competition'. *European Political Science Review*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 1–26.
- Sartori, G. (1976) *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Tronconi, F. (2015) 'Bye-bye bipolarism: the 2015 regional elections and the new shape of regional party systems in Italy'. *South European Society and Politics*, vol. 20, no. 4, pp. 553–571.
- Tronconi, F. (2018) 'The Italian Five Star Movement during the crisis: towards normalisation?' *South European Society and Politics*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 163–180.
- Valbruzzi, M. (2018) 'When populists meet technocrats. the Italian innovation in government formation'. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, vol. 23, no. 4, pp. 460–480.
- Vassallo, S. & Valbruzzi, M. (2018) 'I partiti della Grande Recessione contro i partiti della Grande Depressione. Un nuovo *cleavage* o un'altra bolla?' *Stato e mercato*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 87–116.
- Zulianello, M. (2020) 'Varieties of populist parties and party systems in Europe: from state-of-the-art to the application of a novel classification scheme to 66 parties in 33 countries'. *Government and Opposition*, vol. 55, no. 2, pp. 327–347.

Tables and Figures

Figure 1 Regional elections in Italy (political situation before and after the 2017-2020 electoral cycle)



Source:

Minister of Interior Affairs.

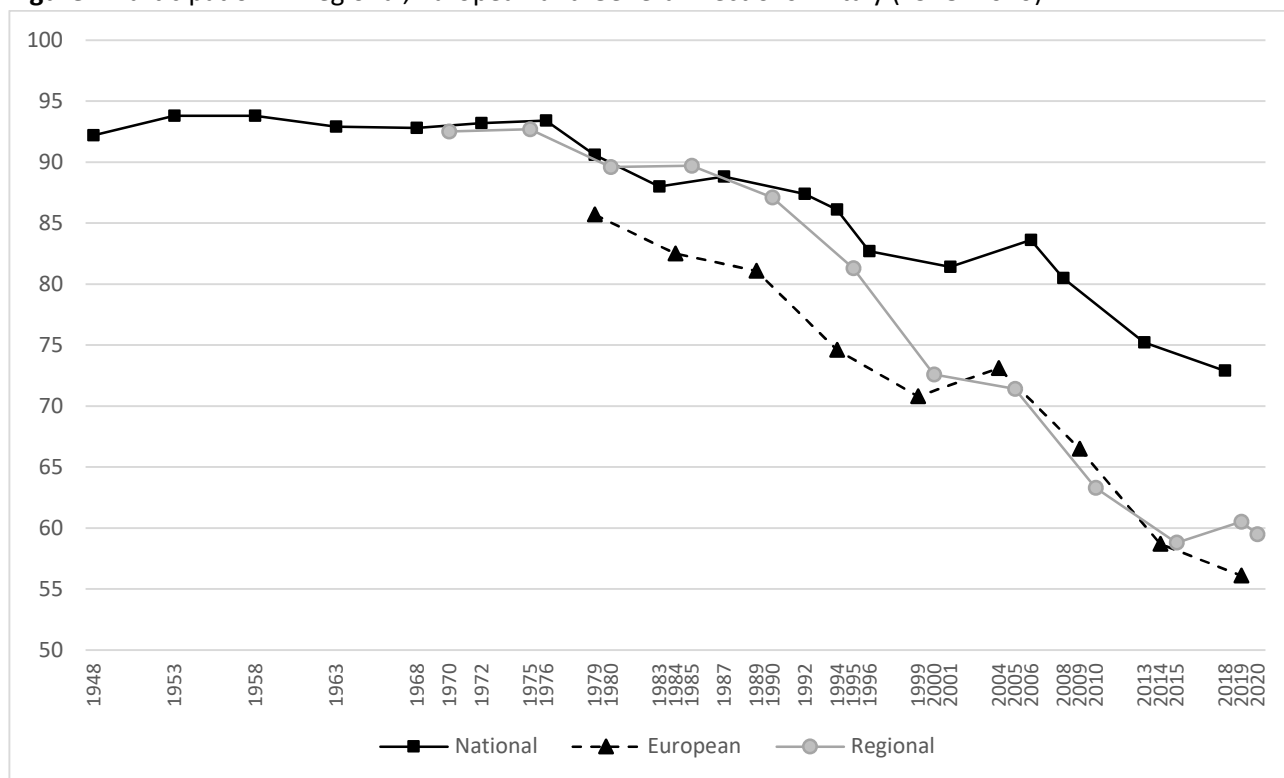
Table 1 *Vote for the Main Lists Competing in the Proportional Arena of Regional Elections, 2017-2020 (%)*

	Date	LEFT	PD	FSM	FI	Lega	FDI	UV/PATT/SVP/PSD'AZ
BEFORE THE FORMATION OF THE CONTE I GOVERNMENT								
Sicilia	11/2017	5.2	13.0	26.7	16.4	5.6*		
Lombardia	3/2018	2.1	19.2	17.8	14.3	29.6	3.6	
Lazio	3/2018	3.5	21.2	22.1	14.6	10.0	8.7	
Molise	4/2018	3.3	9.0	31.6	9.4	8.2	4.5	
Friuli-VG	4/2018	2.8	18.1	7.1	12.1	34.9	5.5	
Valle d'A.	5/2018		5.4	10.4	2.9	17.1		19.3
DURING THE LIFE OF THE CONTE I GOVERNMENT								
Trento	10/2018	1.4	13.9	7.2	2.8	27.1	1.5	12.6
Bolzano	10/2018	0.6	3.8	2.4	1.0	11.1	1.7	41.9
Abruzzo	2/2019	2.8	11.1	19.7	9.1	27.5	6.5	
Sardegna	2/2019	3.8	13.5	9.7	8.0	11.4	4.7	9.9
Basilicata	3/2019		7.8	20.3	9.1	19.2	5.9	
Piemonte	5/2019	2.4	22.4	12.6	8.4	37.1	5.5	
AFTER THE CONTE I GOVERNMENT								
Umbria	10/2019	1.6	22.3	7.4	5.5	36.9	10.4	
Emilia-R.	1/2020	3.8	34.7	4.7	2.6	31.9	8.6	
Calabria	1/2020		15.2	6.3	12.3	12.2	10.8	
<i>Mean</i>		<i>2.8</i>	<i>15.4</i>	<i>13.7</i>	<i>8.6</i>	<i>21.3</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>21.5</i>

Source: Minister of Interior Affairs; websites of regions.

Note: * = In 2017 in Sicily Brothers of Italy and the League presented a joint list. Key to the table: LEFT (this label includes the main radical left-wing party, in particular The Left and Free and Equals), PD (*Partito Democratico*, Democratic Party), M5S (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, Five Star Movement) FI (*Forza Italia*, Go Italy), Lega (*League*), FDI (*Fratelli d'Italia*, Brothers of Italy), UV (*Union Valdôtaine*, Valdostan Union), PATT (*Partito Autonomista Trentino Tirolese*, Trentino Tyrolean Autonomist Party), SVP (*Südtiroler Volkspartei*, South Tyrolean People's Party) and PSD'AZ (*Partito Sardo d'Azione*, Sardinian Action Party).

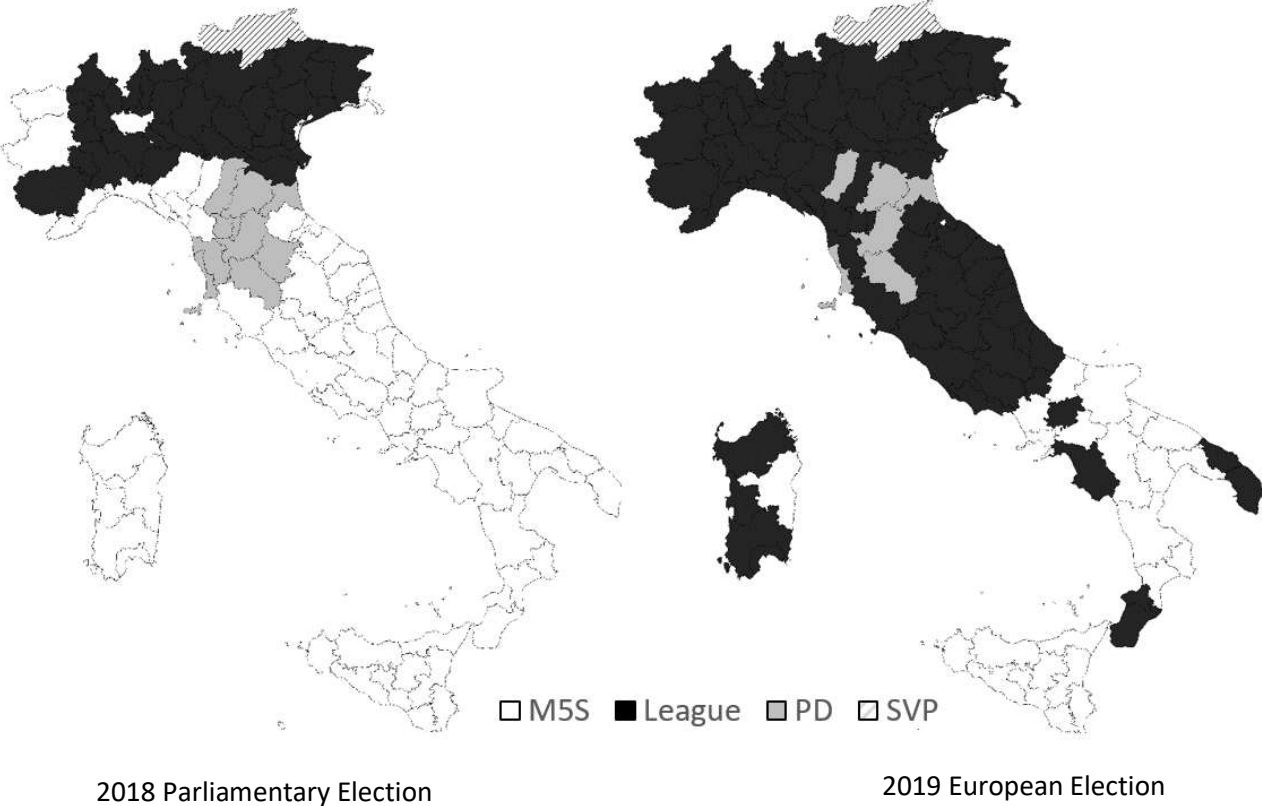
Figure 2 Participation in Regional, European and General Elections in Italy (1948–2020)



Source: Minister of Interior Affairs and Istituto Carlo Cattaneo.

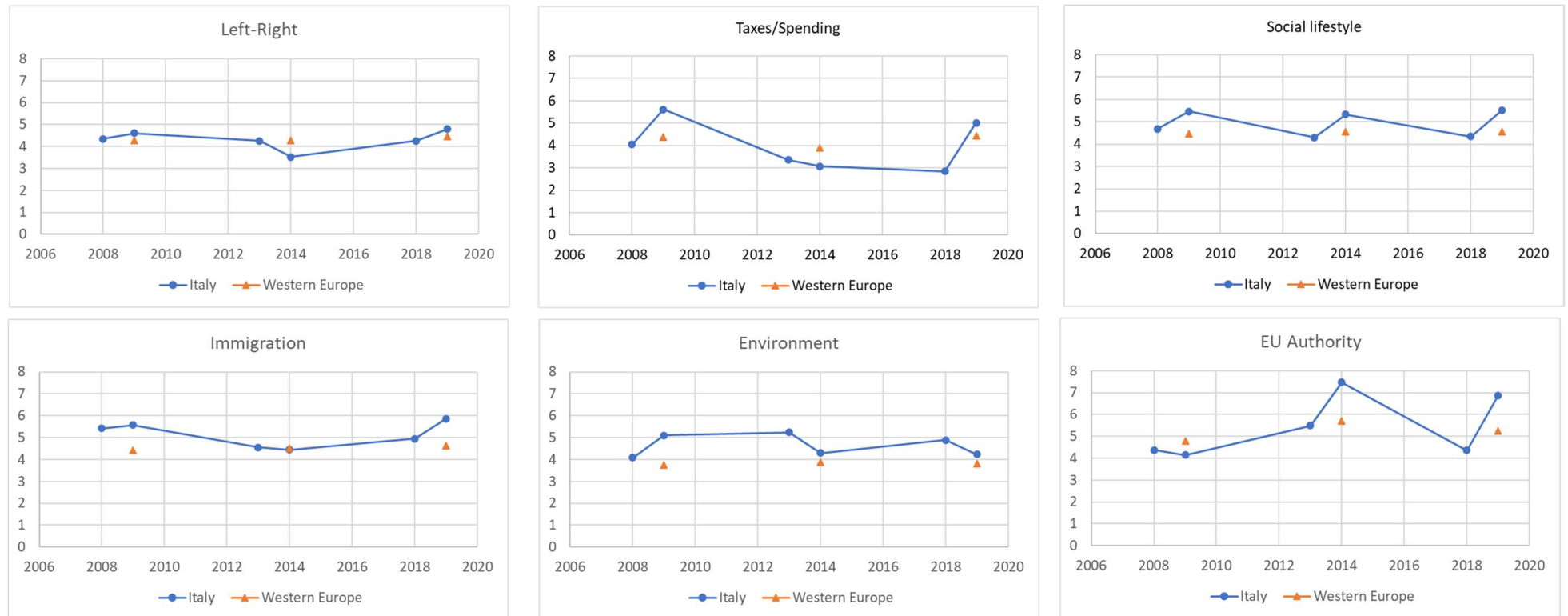
Note: All data refer to the 15 ordinary regions (Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio, Liguria, Lombardia, Marche, Molise, Piemonte, Puglia, Toscana, Umbria, Veneto). Data for 2015 refer to the 2013–15 cycle; data for 2010 refer to the 2008–11 cycle. See note to Table 2 for timing of regional elections in 2017 and 2019.

Figure 3 Largest Party by Province in the 2018 General and 2019 European Elections in Italy



Source: Minister of Interior Affairs

Figure 4 Trends of Dalton's Polarization Index in Italy and Western Europe (2008-2019)

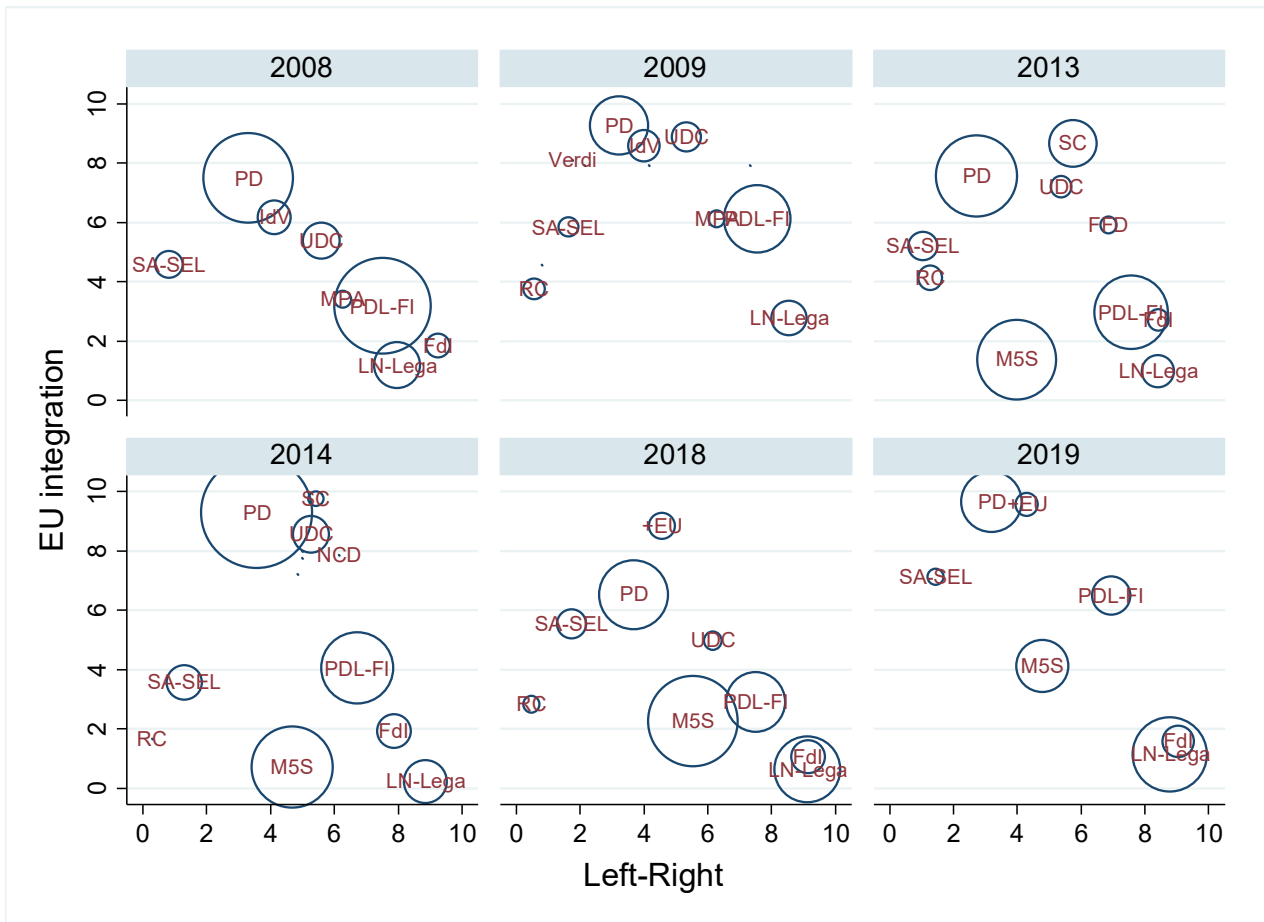


Source: Authors' elaboration on several expert surveys. For 2008: Curini and Iacus (2008). For 2009, 2014, 2019 (both Italian and Western European data): Bakker et al. (2012; 2020); Polk et al. (2017). For 2013: Di Virgilio et al. (2015). For 2018: Giannetti et al. (2018).

Note: Polarization Index values are calculated on the basis of Russell Dalton's formula discussed in the text. Western European countries are: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden and UK.

Theoretically, Dalton's Index of Polarizations can range from 0 to 10. See text for details.

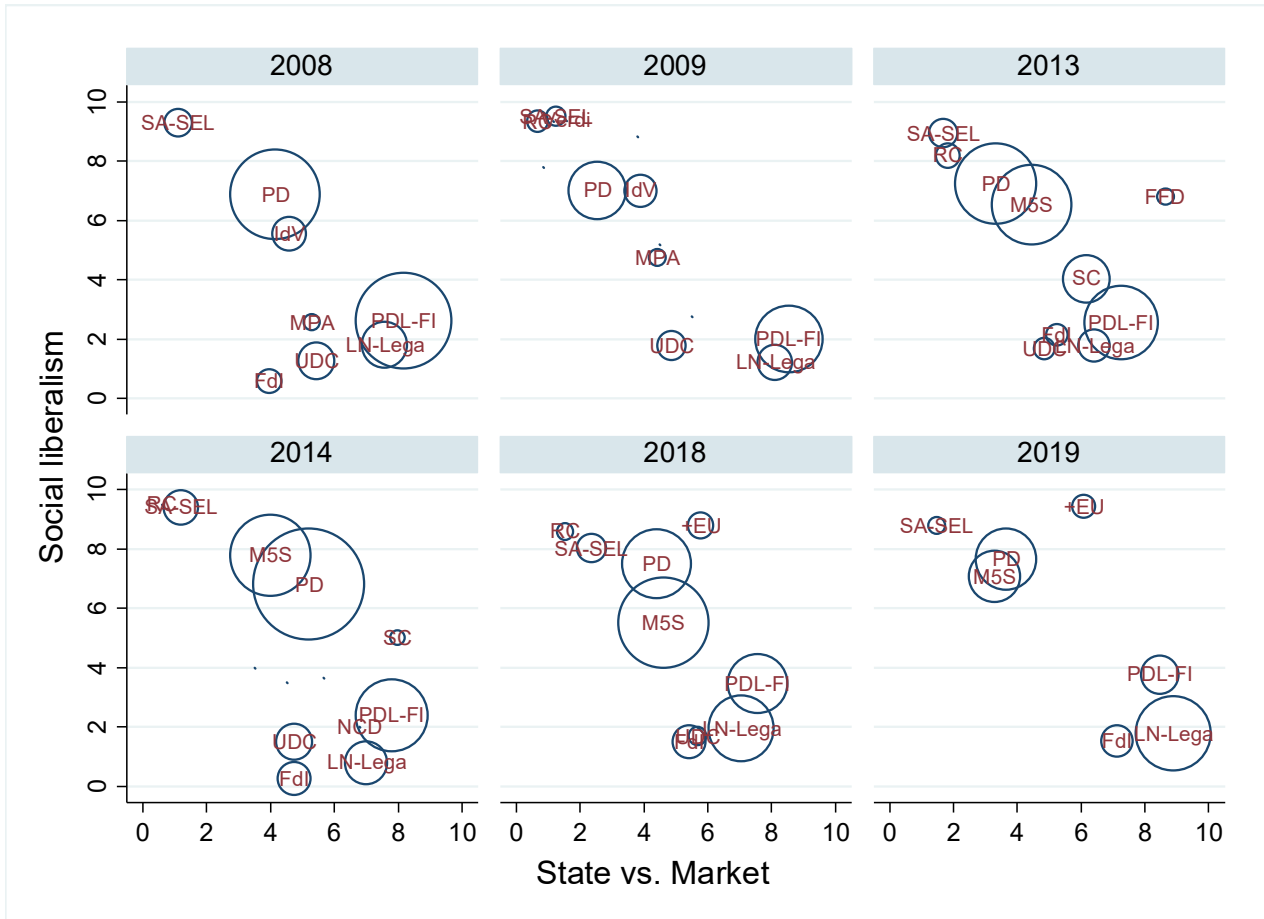
Figure 5 Political Space in Italy (Left-Right and European Integration Dimensions), by Election Year



Source: Authors' elaboration on several expert surveys. For 2008: Curini and Iacus (2008). For 2009, 2014, 2019: Bakker et al. (2012; 2020); Polk et al. (2017). For 2013: Di Virgilio et al. (2015). For 2018: Giannetti et al. (2018).

Note: Left-Right scale ranges from 0 (Left) to 10 (Right). EU integration scale ranges from 0 (opposes EU integration) to 10 (favours EU integration).

Figure 6 Political Space in Italy (Economic and Social Dimensions), by Election Year



Source: Authors' elaboration on several expert surveys. For 2008: Curini and Iacus (2008). For 2009, 2014, 2019: Bakker et al. (2012; 2020); Polk et al. (2017). For 2013: Di Virgilio et al. (2015). For 2018: Giannetti et al. (2018).

Note: State-Market scale ranges from 0 (favours State) to 10 (favours Market). Social liberalism scale ranges from 0 (opposes liberal policies) to 10 (favours liberal policies).