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# Protest against the politicians: Vote switching in the Italian 2016-2020 constitutional referenda

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**Abstract**. Referenda provide the opportunity for voters to express political economic protest and provide additional ways to support parties they vote for in elections. Alternatively, referenda also provide voters a chance to express their policy references in a way that does not affect which party will lead the government. The rejection of the 2016 Italian Constitutional referendum by 60% of voters and the approval the 2020 Italian Constitutional Referendum by 70% of voters could be a result of changing political economic conditions, influences related to partisanship and party leadership, or a change in approval of the reforms contained within the referendum. The article examines these possibilities in turn and then in a multivariate analysis. First, the overall change in economic discontent, satisfaction with the governing coalition and leaders, and belief in the content of the reforms between 2016 and 2020 will be examined. We also examine the how voters of each of the parties in the 2018 general election shifted on these variables. Then individual level analysis of consistent voters and switchers will assess the relative strength of partisanship, economic, political, and referendum-specific factors in convincing voters to switch their vote. We find that referendum-specific factors had the strongest predictive power followed by those related to government approval. Voters approved of the contents that would reduce the number of politicians in Italy and used the referendum to express support or displeasure with the incumbent's policy programme. Our results contribute to the studies on second-order elections where voters are allowed for greater expressive preferences.

**Keywords:** Italy, referendum, economic voting, vote switching.

## TWO ITALIAN REFERENDA

In 2016 and again in 2020, Italians voters were asked to vote on constitutional changes to its electoral system. Both referenda included clauses that would reduce the size of the Italian legislature. In 2016 the referendum was rejected by a net 59%-41%. In 2020, however, Italians approved the referendum 70%-30%. This result begs the question, what led Italians to switch their vote in support of this referendum.

This article compares the context of the 2016 to the 2020 referendum. We then review the major explanations for why voters might switch their votes: partisanship, perceived economic conditions, government performance, or

evaluations of policy. Partisan patterns of attitude shift between 2016 and 2020 are then discussed. While Italian politics had been stable up through the 1990s, thereafter, voting decisions has often been dominated by short-term factors in voting. Referenda voting, however, allows for a unique expression of voter preferences, disconnected from who might later govern the nation. Multinomial logistic regression analysis suggests that partisanship and approval of contemporary government policies had a role in voting decisions. In particular, a general shift in favour of the prime minster and government policies moved the baseline towards favouring the 2020 referendum. Once controlling for this general shift, our evidence suggests that voting on the content in these 'second-order' referenda elections, beyond partisan identification, was the strongest individual-level predictor of a switched vote from opposition to the referendum to favouring them. Voters supporting the idea of reducing the number of politicians in Italy were decisive in this referendum.

CONTEXT AND CONTENT OF THE REFERENDA

A constitutional referendum about the reduction of the size of the Parliament was held in Italy in 2020. The reform was largely supported by voters (70%) so that the new Parliament will have 400 deputies and 200 senators instead of 630 and 315 respectively. The reduction of the size of the Parliament was one of the proposed changes included in a previous referendum held in 2016, which voters rejected. The 2016 proposal was advanced by then Prime Minister Matteo Renzi of the centre-left Partito Democratico, which saw a joint reaction of all other parties against its proponent as Renzi pledged to resign if the measure failed, scholarship has identified a strong current of a protest vote against an unpopular incumbent as an explanation for its failure (Bergman and Passarelli, 2021; Ceccarini and Bordignon, 2017). While advanced by the governing parties, no party or politician explicitly staked their career on the outcome. Prime Minister Conte's approval in 2020 was also much higher than that of Renzi in 2016[1].

In 2019, the Partito Democratico (PD) and the populist Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) made an alliance to form a new government[2]. As mentioned above, the reduction of the size of the parliament was among the proposals of the PD-sponsored 2016 referendum; it also formed a key campaign issue for M5S in the 2018 elec-

tion, so it was easy enough for the two parties to converge on the "Yes" to the approval of that constitutional reform. At the same time, the opposition parties of the right (Lega, Fratelli d'Italia), with populist elements of their own, felt it difficult to oppose the proposal that in voters' eyes would reduce the privileges of the ruling class (553 MPs voted yes to the law and 14 abstained). Thus, while the 2016 referendum faced broad partisan opposition, the major parties in 2020 were all tacitly, if not explicitly, in favour of the reform[3].

The content of the referenda also differed. While both referenda discussed decreasing the size of parliament, the 2016 referendum also included specific measures that would alter the balance of power between the federal and regional governments and the perfect bicameralism between the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. The referendum did not allow for separate votes on each reform, such that voters at cross-pressured due to their different opinions might have had a difficult time basing their vote on the contents of the referendum. In contrast, the 2020 referendum was a simple dichotomous yes/no vote.

From these descriptions it is clear there might be a variety of reasons that Italians rejected the 2016 referendum, but then switched to support the 2020 referendum. Those driven by protest against Renzi in 2016 might not have felt the same motivations in 2020, in fact, they might have supported the Conte government. Similarly, the party constellations opposing the 2016 referendum (nearly all parties) did not align as such in 2020. The content of the referendum also was altered, and displeasure with the non-legislature size related elements might have made voters apprehensive to support the 2016, but left no qualms in supporting the 2020 referendum. Therefore, the 2020 referendum is both uniquely similar yet distinct from the 2016 experience. The rest of this paper produces hypotheses that can explain voters' motivation for switching their vote.

A PARTY-MOTIVATED REFERENDUM VOTE

Party loyalty "matters a great deal" when it comes to voting in referenda (Marsh, 2017). The complexities

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[1] Data presented later in this paper also substantiates this.
[2] After the M5S and the far-right Lega party dissolved their own coalition.

[3] While the governing coalition parties were in favor of the referendum and the opposition parties did not campaign against it, as the referendum encapsulated popular anti-party attitudes (Bergman et al., 2020) as a protest against the ruling class, there was still opposition from smaller parties. With a smaller parliament, there is decreased likelihood that the smaller parties would be able to gain representation (Li and Shugart, 2016). Mid-sized parties (Forza Italia) and smaller parties of the left, right, and center were more ambivalent in their support (Garavoglia, 2020).

related to political decision making and opinion formation can be simplified for voters should they take cues from party elites on policy views, judgements, opinions, and preferences (Bullock, 2011; Jacobs, 2018). Party sponsorship can help citizens from their political opinions (Kam, 2005), and motivated voters may feel compelled to alter their vote to theirs of their party (Petersen et al., 2013). For example, in EU referenda, over sixty percent of voters support their party's position (Hug and Sciarini, 2000). Swiss voters also have been found to align their preferences to those of their parties (Colombo and Kriesi, 2017).

Voters also receive political information from party leaders, who often take specific positions in televised debates, on social media, or reported in newspapers (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). In the 2016 referendum, individuals that supported the governing parties were more likely to support the referendum (Bergman and Passarelli, 2021). The dominant scholarly explanation for the 2016 rejection of the referendum is that voters voted along party lines (Ceccarini and Bordignon, 2017).

While Renzi's Partito Democratico were the main proponents of the 2016 reform, the party took a more ambiguous stance on the 2020 referendum. We might expect these partisans to switch their support away from passage. On the other hand, Movimento Cinque Stelle campaigned on decreasing the number of the parliamentarians in 2018 and made the passage of a constitutional amendment contingent on its electoral coalition with the Partito Democratico. Here, we would expect these partisans to switch from opposition to support. Similarly, while all parties besides the Democratic Party opposed the 2016 referendum, the 2020 opposition Lega and Fratelli d'Italia supported the reform. Should voters follow their preferred parties, we would also expect their voters to switch their votes. The reason that the 2020 reduction in number of parliamentarians needed popular approval was due to the objections of several senators after the passage of the legislation in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Most of the objecting senators belonged to the smaller parties, who feared loss of representation in subsequently smaller chambers: Forza Italia, Italia Viva, and the Mixed Parliamentary Grouping including Piu Europa, Azione, and Liberi e Uguali[4] affiliates.

*H1 (Partisan Vote): Voters whose parties switched their position on the referenda were likely to mimic elites and switch their vote as well.*

## THE ECONOMIC VOTE

Relying on party cues is not the only way that voters come to their decisions. Those focused on the complexities of voting and the mental processes needed to understand the political, social, and economic impact of a vote choice note that voters oftentimes use cognitive shortcuts (Fiske and Taylor, 1991) of their electoral context. The voting decision can be simplified by relying upon easily accessible kinds of knowledge (van der Brug et al., 2018). In the Italian case, economic evaluations have been found to have a stronger impact than social cleavages like class and religion when it comes to the vote (Lewis-Beck, 1990). This 'economic vote' hypothesis argues that voters that assess the economic condition to be positive or improving vote in support of the government and those holding negative economic assessments vote in opposition to the government. Furthermore, when attribution is clear, the economic vote has an even stronger effect (Bellucci, 2014). the governing Partito Democratico was the clear driver of the 2016 referendum while in the 2020 referendum, the Movimento Cinque Stelle was the main party behind it. At the time of the 2020 referendum, both of these parties were in government, so an economic vote in could likely play a role. Analysis of the 2016 referendum has also indicated that those holding negative assessments of the economy were more likely to vote against the referendum and not be in favour of its contents (Bergman, 2020; Leininger, 2019); provinces with higher youth unemployment were also less supportive of the referendum (Pasquino and Valbruzzi, 2017). In a sense, then, the economic vote can both be one of voter apprehension about a new policy during troubling economic times (Bowler et al., 1998), as a an opportunity to vent dissatisfaction with the government (Leininger, 2019) and lodge a protest vote (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018), or alternatively, as way to show support during times between parliamentary elections.

*H2 (Economic Vote): Voters based their referendum vote on their assessment of the economy. Those who's economic assessment differed between 2016 and 2020 were more likely to switch their vote.*

Figure 1 examines the distribution of opinions on the economy by ITANES survey respondents grouped by their 2018 partisanship[56]. The most positive assess-

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[4] Liberi e Uguali also had ideological opposition to the reforms contained within.

[5] Respondents were asked their economic assessment retrospectively, prospectively, and of their family. Responses ranged from "much better" to "much worse". These scores were averaged together and reversed such that the variable ranges from 0 "much worse" to 4 "much better".

[6] Appendix table 1 displays the precise difference as well as if the difference is statistically significant
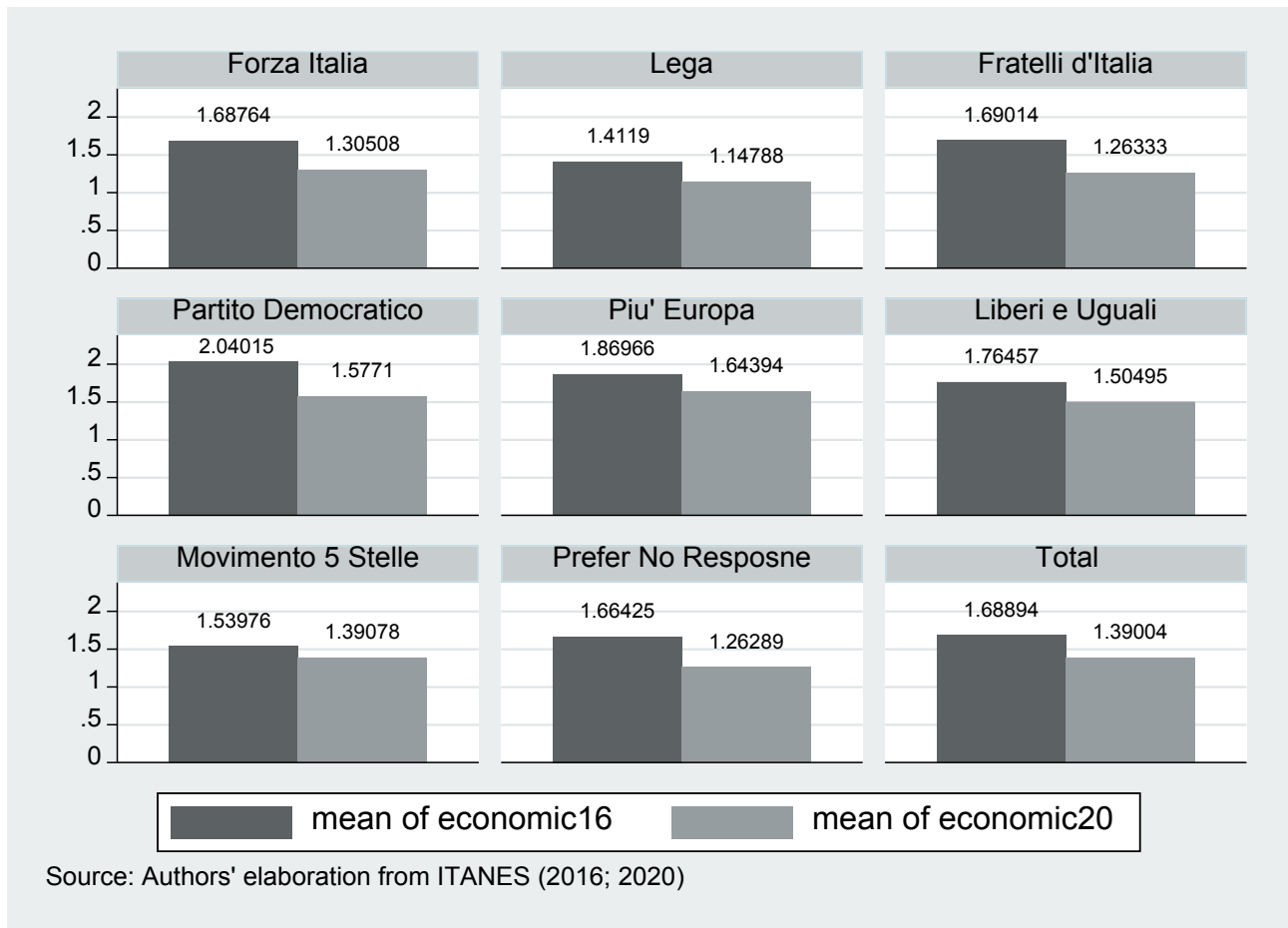
**Figure 1.** Economic assessments by party (0-4).

ments of the economic situation were had by members of the Partito Democratico in 2016. Recall, at this time the party held the prime ministership. All partisans had a less favourable outlook of the economy in 2020 than 2016. The referendum occurred during the Coronavirus pandemic and Italy was in the process of receiving recovery funds from the European Union. Theoretically, this negative shift in economic perceptions should have depressed the chance of referendum passage. However, the economic vote is not the only potential explanation of why Italians might have shifted to favour the referendum.

### REFERENDUM VOTING AS A REFERENDUM ON GOVERNANCE

Beyond the economic vote, another referendum voting heuristic is one of relying on an assessment of the current government. This perspective holds referen-

dum voting to be little more than a vote on the popularity of the government (Franklin et al., 1994)**.** As mentioned above, the 2016 Italian referendum in particular was highly politicized and personalized by party leaders (Pasquino and Valbruzzi, 2017). Assessments of the referendum might then take on a government versus opposition type dynamic (Marsh, 2017). Voters might express their 'elite discontent' by voting against the proposals of those elites who produce unpopular policies as a matter of protest (Bergman and Passarelli, 2021). Previous analysis on the 2016 referendum has identified a strong correlation between voter's assessment of the government's policies and their referendum vote (Bergman, 2019).

*H3 (Government Performance): Voters based their referendum vote on their assessment of the incumbent government's policy. Those whose government approval differed between 2016 and 2020 were more likely to switch their vote.*
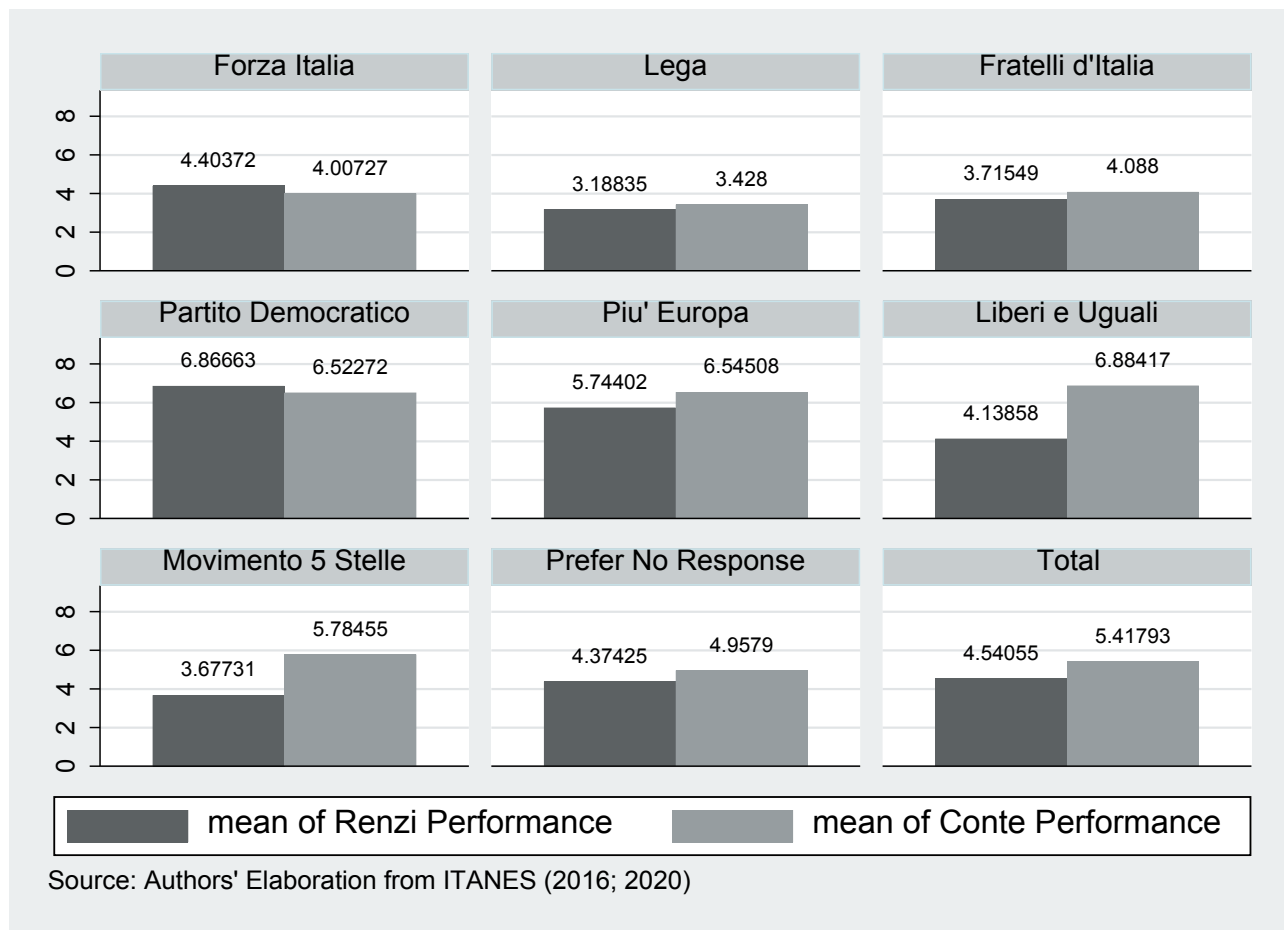
**Figure 2.** Government assessments by party (1-11).

Figure 2 examines the distribution of opinions of government performance by ITANES survey respondents. Respondents were asked their assessment of government policies in five policy areas on a 1-11 scale. For Renzi's performance in 2016, respondents were asked their opinions of regional economic policy, the Jobs Act, immigration, education reform, and tax reduction. For Conte's performance in 2020, respondents were asked their opinions of local economic conditions, the economic response to COVID, immigration, COVID lockdowns, and tax reduction. These scores were averaged together. In general, respondents were more favourable of Conte's policy performance than Renzi's. This effect might have counteracted the economic effects discussed above. With the exception of Partito Democratico and Forza Italia voters, Italians all increased in their approval of government policy. These effects were most pronounced for Movimento 5 Stelle and Liberi e Uguali voters. Together, these two-party groupings alone account for 35% of Italians.

EXPRESSIVE VOTE SWITCHING

Not all political issues fall on a left-right or government-opposition spectrum (Thomassen, 2012). Bakker et al suggest that European elections serve as instances where this might come to the fore, and voters might abandon parties they supported in previous national elections (Bakker et al., 2018). When voting in national elections, voters' choice is motivated by their preferred governing coalition (Bargsted and Kedar, 2009; Duch et al., 2010). On the other hand, European elections have been classified as 'second-order' (Hix and Marsh, 2007; Reif and Schmitt, 1980), as the outcomes of these elections do not affect domestic government formation or policy making. If voters have little interest in the issues at hand, they might follow their assessments of government policy or use partisan cues (Marsh, 2017). However, more than half of Italians have rated their attention to the referendum campaign as "somewhat" or "a lot" (Bergman, 2020; ITANES 2016; 2020).

The outcomes of referenda often do not affect domestic government formation or policy making. When political issues are not easily absorbed into traditional party left-right competition, the linkage between citizens and parties may become frayed (De Vries and Marks, 2012).

This leaves referendum voting free from strategic actions on behalf of voters. A voters own values may serve as the basis for a referendum vote (Svensson, 2002). With this perspective, each voter has an ideal point on the issues contained within the referendum and if the policies contained within the referendum bring governance closer to that ideal point, the voter will support the referendum (Hobolt, 2007).

The contents of the 2016 referendum focused on a large-scale transformation of the Italian political economy. In revising a third of the articles of the Italian constitution, the influence of minor and opposition parties would be reduced, the federal structure of the country would have been transformed, and the bicameral nature of executive accountability and legislation would be eliminated. The 2020 referendum focused on just one reform: reducing the number of politicians in the legislature by one-third. A vote in favour of the 2016 referendum could potentially result in a transformation of Italian politics. A vote in favour of the 2020 referendum would be voting to reduce the number of politicians in the country[7]. Such a protest vote "(a) against the establishment and (b) not driven by policy preferences" (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018: 31) would be quite in line with the high and increasing levels of distrust for parties that Italians have expressed over the past two decades (Bergman et al., 2020).

*H4 (Referendum-Specific[8] Factor Vote): Voters based their referendum vote on their assessment of the contents of the referendum. Those whose assessment of the reforms differed between 2016 and 2020 were more likely to switch their vote.*

Figure 3 examines the distribution of opinions of the policies in the referendum by ITANES survey respondents on a 1-11 scale from negative to positive. In 2016, respondents were asked their opinions on the reduction in the number of senators, the reduced role for the Senate, the centralization of policy-making in energy and infrastructure sectors, and the lowering of quorum requirements for abrogative referenda. These

scores were averaged together. In 2020, they were simply asked if they agreed with the reduction in the number of senators and deputies. As compared to the other two assessments, there is the least overall movement on overall opinions of the referendum. Only those voting for the Movimento Cinque Stelle in 2018 had any noticeable increase in support for the referendum. Meanwhile, those who voted for the PD and smaller parties that might lose representation with a smaller legislature (Piu` Europa and Liberi e Uguali) had noticeable reductions in their favourability of the terms of the referendum.

## USING REFERENDA AS A VOTE ON LEADERSHIP

The growing impact of political leaders has noted by many as a crucial element of contemporary politics. The growing emphasis on centralization of electoral campaigns, party organization, and government resources in the hands of party leaders have been labelled as the 'personalisation' of political competition (Garzia, 2014; Lobo and Curtice, 2015; Poguntke and Webb, 2005). The role of political leaders on voting decisions has been examined in a variety of contexts. Just as party sponsorship can help citizens form political opinions (Kam, 2005), so to can party elites (Bullock, 2011). Leadership cues can compel citizens to support the positions of the former (Petersen et al., 2013), as individual opinions about policy proposals have been shown to change when they are provided information about party positions (Kam, 2005).

While someone's partisanship might serve as one motivation, partisan identification is a complex process. Identifying with a party does not capture all of the relevant party attachments (Mughan, 2015). Parties do not campaign on television (Poguntke and Webb, 2005), make speeches, or livestream rallies on social media, but their leaders. Partisanship is a long-term factor in voting behavior. In contrast, the appeal of party leaders is a short-term factor. Short-term factors, such as the character of the current party leader, have become increasingly dominant in the contemporary era of partisan dealignment (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). It requires fewer cognitive resources (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993) to simply follow the directives of a political leader. "By delegating their decisions to 'like-minded experts', citizens reduce the costs of collecting information on, for example, the technical details of the policy and of analysing its effects" (Petersen et al., 2013: 832).

The role and the impact of the leaders is an important driver of both preferences and voting behavior, both within the Italian context and in democratic polities more broadly In the Italian case, attitudes towards

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[7] Indirectly, this also is a vote to limit the influence of smaller legislative parties should they be unable to gain representation.
[8] Bergman (2019) characterizes reform-outcome motivations as 'referendum-specific factors'. We use this term here.
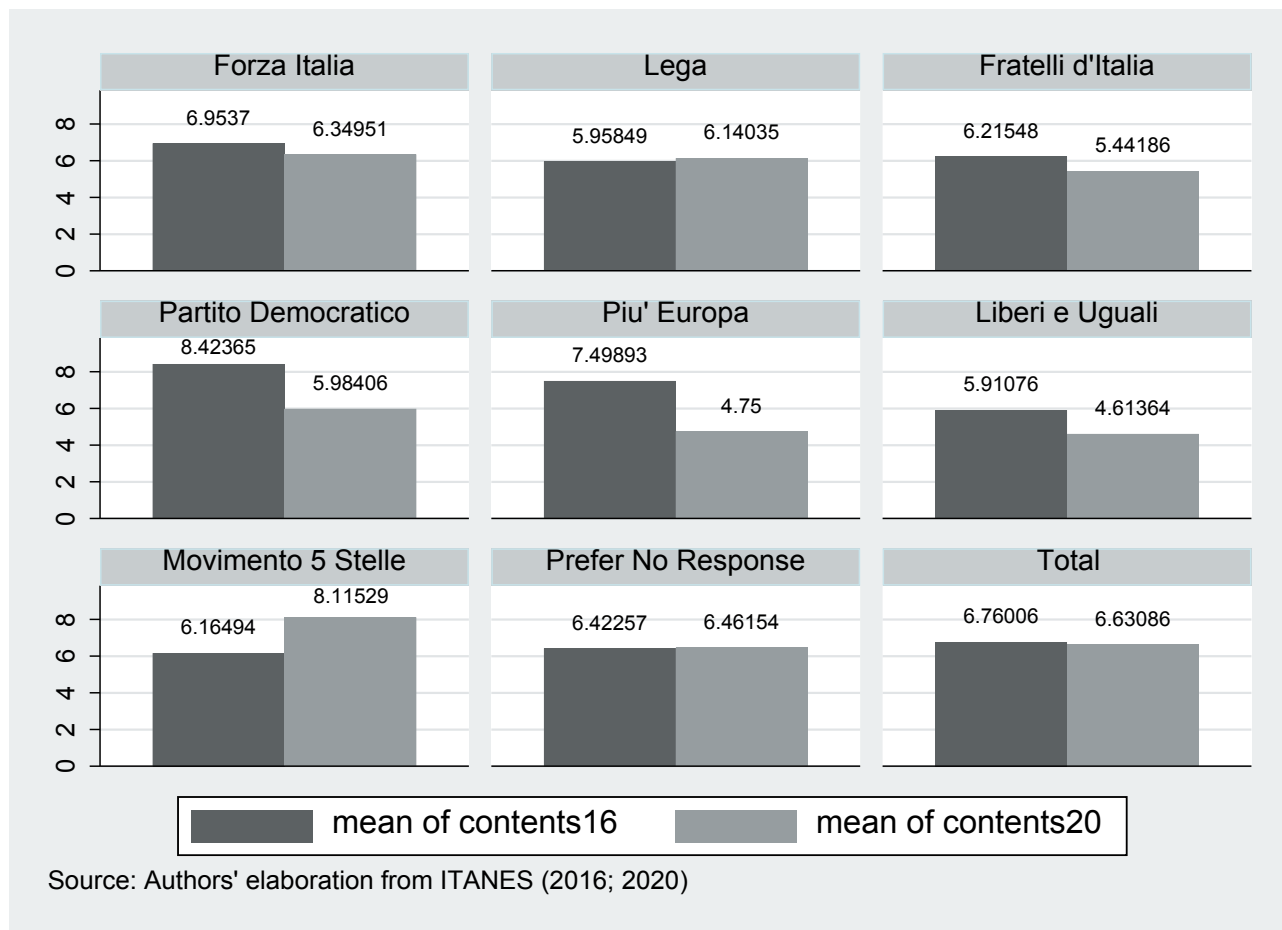
**Figure 3.** Reform policy assessments by party (1-11).

leaders are closely related to issue assessments (Bellucci et al., 2015). Specifically in the context of the referenda, the role of the leaders and personalisation represent an important heuristic, especially if the electoral outcome of the referendum is associated to one of the proponents. In 2016, the Italian prime minister deliberately put at the stake his own political career with the will of the people: promising he would resign if the "No" option had prevailed.

In this line, recent contributions on negative voting are helpful to better frame the electoral behavior in the case of a referendum. Garzia and Silva (2021) show that negative voting is driven by an instrumental–rational component characterized by retrospective performance evaluations, an ideological component grounded on long-lasting political identities, and an affective component, motivated by attitudes toward parties and candidates. Relevant to the study at hand, negative personalisation, could serve as a similar motivation as negative partisanship does in US voting behaviour (Abramow-

itz and Webster, 2018), in that voters are motivated by instrumental antipathy towards one outcome, rather than sincere support of their vote choice. In sum, we can expect party leaders have an independent effect on referendum voting. The Italian case might be an ideal case for such an affect given that partisan volatility is high and previous work has identified an independent effect of opinions of party leaders on voting in Italy (Barisione, 2009; Bellucci et al., 2015; Bergman, 2021; Garzia, 2017; Garzia and Viotti, 2011). As discussed above, Renzi's personalization of the referendum campaign and agreeing to hold the referendum as part of the government agreement that installed Conte could make support for these leaders indistinguishable from support for 'their' referendum.

*H5 (Leadership Evaluation): Voters based their referendum vote on their assessment of the current prime minister. Those whose incumbent approval differed between 2016 and 2020 were more likely to switch their vote.*
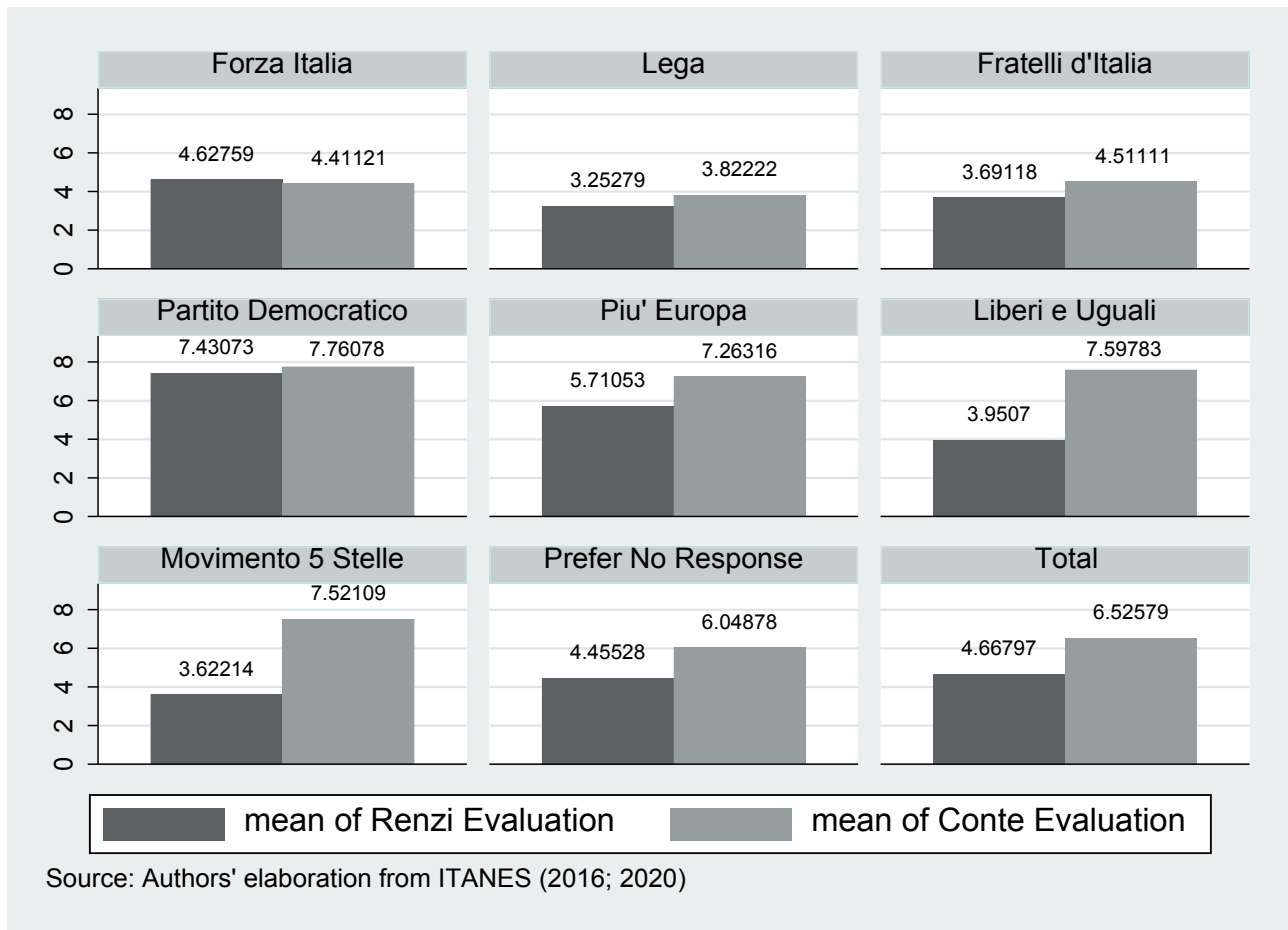
**Figure 4.** Leadership evaluation by party (1-11).

Figure 4 examines the distribution of judgements on Renzi in 2016 and Conte in 2020 by ITANES survey respondents on a 1-11 scale from negative to positive. As compared to the other three assessments, here there is the greatest overall shift in evaluations between the referenda – almost a full 2 points. Almost all partisans were more in favour of Conte than Renzi. Even those voting for the *Partito Democratico* judged Conte in higher regard than Renzi. Unsurprisingly, those voting for the Movimento 5 Stelle held Conte in greater esteem, though so too did members of smaller left-leaning parties.

Taken together, these aggregate changes only the shift in leader evaluations support the shift in national trends of voting between the referenda. The contents of the second referendum was slightly less favourable of the first and Italians had a greater negative assessment of the economy. There was, however, a positive shift in overall feelings towards the government's policies such that if second-order effects dominated in the eyes of voters, this could have provided the necessary shift. Also worth

noting is that voters for the Movimento 5 Stelle were also those who displayed characteristics that made them more likely to support the second referendum. Their partisanship was a statistical predictor in their non-support of the 2016 referendum (Bergman and Passarelli, 2021). Encompassing around 30% of respondents/voters, this group might have been enough to swing the referendum. The strong effect of voters overall judging Conte more favourably than Renzi cannot be ignored. We now turn to multivariate analysis to assess which of these factors (partisanship, economic vote, assessment of government performance, a referendum-specific vote, or leadership evaluations) had an effect at the individual level on encouraging Italians to switch their vote choice.

## MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

We now turn to testing our hypotheses on the individual-level. To do this, we employ the use of panel sur-

**Table 1.** Multinomial regression estimates of voting decision.

|  | No20-No16 | Yes20-Yes16 | No20-Yes16 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Δ - Economic | -0.056 | -0.119 | -0.089 |
|  | (-0.13) | (-0.13) | (-0.2) |
| Δ - Govt Performance | 0.077 | -0.603*** | -0.468* |
|  | (-0.16) | (-0.16) | (-0.22) |
| Δ - Referendum Content | -1.619*** | -1.153*** | -3.239*** |
|  | (-0.15) | (-0.14) | (-0.23) |
| Δ - Leader Evaluation | -0.138 | -0.214 | -0.458* |
|  | (-0.15) | (-0.14) | (-0.2) |
| FI | 0.034 | -0.074 | 0.096 |
|  | (-0.13) | (-0.15) | (-0.26) |
| Lega | 0.136 | -0.221 | -0.102 |
|  | (-0.17) | (-0.19) | (-0.34) |
| FdI | 0.076 | -0.062 | 0.004 |
|  | (-0.13) | (-0.14) | (-0.23) |
| PD | 0.004 | 1.145*** | 1.526*** |
|  | (-0.27) | (-0.25) | (-0.39) |
| M5S | -0.551** | -0.035 | -0.016 |
|  | (-0.21) | (-0.22) | (-0.43) |
| PE | 0.147 | 0.412* | 0.685** |
|  | (-0.19) | (-0.19) | (-0.25) |
| LeU | 0.371* | 0.01 | 0.416 |
|  | (-0.15) | (-0.2) | (-0.28) |
| PartitoPico | 0.297* | 0.297 | 0.641** |
|  | (-0.14) | (-0.16) | (-0.22) |
| age | -0.165 | -0.303* | -0.276 |
|  | (-0.14) | (-0.15) | (-0.19) |
| female | 0.023 | -0.005 | 0.235 |
|  | (-0.11) | (-0.11) | (-0.16) |
| education | 0.118 | 0.021 | 0.192 |
|  | (-0.13) | (-0.13) | (-0.18) |
| _cons | 0.275 | 0.409* | -2.138*** |
|  | (-0.17) | (-0.17) | (-0.32) |
|  |  |  |  |
| N |  | 949 |  |
| Pseudo R-square |  | 0.4358 |  |
| Log-pseudolikelihood |  | -726.108 |  |
| Source: Authors' elaboration from ITANES (2016; 2020) |  |  |  |
| Voting Yes20-No16 (modal outcome) is the base category |  |  |  |
| Positive values of "Δ -" indicate higher ratings in 2020 |  |  |  |
| All variables normalized |  |  |  |
| p<.05*; p<0.01**; p<0.001*** |  |  |  |

LEU: Liberi e Uguali; PD: Democratic Party; M5S: Five Star Movement; FI: Forza Italia; FdI: Fratelli d'Italia; PE: Piu Europa; base is no party vote in 2018



Source: Authors' elaboration from ITANES (2016; 2020)

**Figure 5.** Categories of respondents in sample.

vey data provided by ITANES. The ITANES panel in particular is superior to other studies of vote switching in that it does not rely upon voter recall of voting decisions. Instead we use the actual reported vote of the respondent at the time of the interview. Our key interest lies in vote switchers. As such, we categorize voters
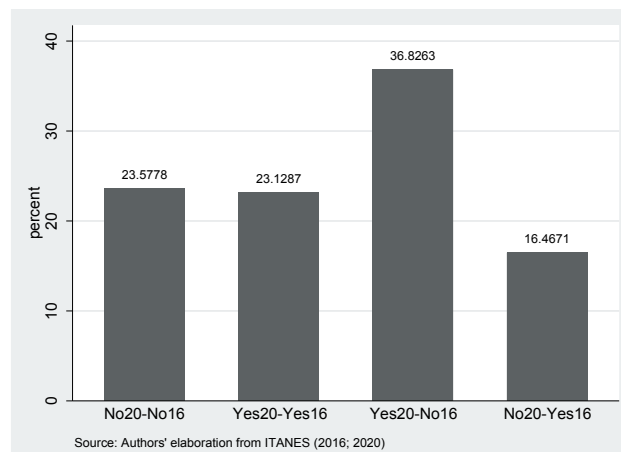
into one of 4 categories[9]: Voting against the referendum twice, voting in favour of the referendum twice, switching from voting against the referendum to voting in favour, and switching from favouring the referendum to voting against. Figure 4 identifies how many of the panel respondents fit into each category of our dependent variable. While the number of respondents that voted consistently 'yes' and consistently 'no' are roughly equal at just under a quarter of the sample, more than a third of respondents shifted their vote from 'no' to 'yes', which is more than double that shifted from 'yes' to 'no'. Which of the aforementioned variables that distinguished these voters is the purpose of the multivariate analysis.

We operationalize our partisan hypothesis by noting which party a respondent voted for at the 2018 elections[10]. As noted in the previous sections, we create

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[9] Those who abstained from either vote were not included in this analysis. We encourage future researchers with interest in the political behaviour of abstainers to examine this topic more thoroughly.

[10] Forza Italia, Lega, Fratelli d'Italia, Movimento 5 Stelle, Più Europa, Liberi e Uguali, and PartitoPico (which indicates if a respondent voted for one of the smaller parties of the center and left: Potere al Popolo!, Noi con l'Italia – UDC, Civica Popolare, Italia Europa Insieme). We use this vote choice in order to see how actual partisans change thier minds between the two referenda. An alternative would be to use the party that voters felt closest to at the time of each referenda. The problem with this approach combined with the first-difference approach would be that we would need over 100 categories to capture each pair of respondent party associations. Furthermore, our hypotheses focus on partisans (as in those who vote for parties), as opposed to those who just feel close to one party or another at a particular moment in time. Thus for those theoretical (our research question on effects of partisan voting) and methodological (empty-cell problem) reasons, we have chosen this potentially heterodox approach. While our focus is on economic, performance-based, content-based, and personality-based motivations for referendum voting behavior, the question of how voters have changed their association with parties over this timeframe is certainly worthy of future research..

indices for economic vote, government performance, the content contained with the referendum, and leadership evaluations. Each of these scales is normalized[11] and first-differenced, with greater values indicating more positive feelings in 2020. Partisanship variables and controls of age, gender, and education[12] are also normalized for easy comparability of coefficients. As our dependent variable is categorical, we employ multinomial logistic regression. We display the results in two ways. First, a regression table (Table 1) compares all outcomes to the modal outcome of switching from 'no' in 2016 to 'yes' in 2020. Thus, any significant coefficient indicates that these vote switchers are statistically different from other outcomes. Next, we calculate the probabilities that specific partisans have on whether they were more or less likely to switch their vote (Table 2). We display predicted probabilities of our scales graphically.

Overall, the partisan effects are mixed. The first row of Table 2 highlights the base prediction of voting decisions from our analysis. The following rows indicate a partisan's likelihood of being in each of the categories. Bold is used into indicate those cases whereby a party vote served to alter the mean probability of referendum voting. First looking at Forza Italia voters, we see little difference of these voters from the overall sample average. This comes a slight surprise given Forza Italia's opposition to both referenda. Also coming as a surprise, even though Lega opposed the 2016 referendum but supported the 2020 referendum, their voters tended to be overrepresented in those that opposed both referendums and underrepresented in those that approved of both referenda. Lega voters switched from 'no' to 'yes' at about the same rate as the national average. Fratelli d'Italia took a similar position on the referendums as Lega, though again we see patterns mimicking the sample average.

Those voting for the Partito Democratico and Movimento 5 Stelle stand out as cases in which their partisanship could aid in the prediction of how they would vote in the referendums. Given as the Partito Democratico supported both referenda, especially Renzi's in 2016, we can see that these voters are overrepresented in supporting both referenda, with the greatest percentage supporting both referenda of any party, and overrepresented in supporting the 2016 referendum but not supporting

the 2020 referendum. As suggested Movimento 5 Stelle voters being the having the greatest changes in opinion of government performance and leadership evaluation, it is unsurprising to see this group overrepresented among those who switched from 'no' to 'yes'. As both referenda contained anti-establishment reforms, it is also unsurprising to see M5S voters overrepresented in voting 'yes' for both referenda and underrepresented in those who voted 'no' twice.

Liberi e Uguali voters were the most likely to vote against both referenda, least likely to support both referenda, and less likely to switch from 'no' to 'yes' along with the national trends. Other smaller party voters were also less likely to switch from 'no' to 'yes' and more likely to switch from 'yes' to 'no', indicating that these partisans might be following their party's signals to reject a policy that might harm their representation in the long run.

What stands out among our independent variables is the explanatory power of the Referendum-Specific Content vote hypothesis and the Government Performance hypothesis, the lack of impact of economic factors, and the diminished role of leadership evaluations than other studies have attributed to referendum voting in Italy. Figure 6 graphs the effect that believing the Renzi government had greater performance as compared to believing the Conte government had greater performance. Those strongly favoring Renzi {more negative numbers} were more likely to vote 'yes' on both referenda. On the other hand, those favouring Conte were predictably more likely to switch their vote from 'no' to 'yes'. It can also be noted that those favouring Conte over Renzi were also more likely to vote against both referenda.

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[11] The Cronbach's scale reliability coefficient for these variables is as follows Economic2016 (.71), Economic2020 (.61), GovtPerformance2016 (.94), GovPerformance2020 (.90), Content2016 (.84). None of these fall below an accepted value for reliability of 0.6 (van Griethuijsen et al., 2015). This method of normalizing additive indices has been used before in studies of Italian voting behaviour (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018).

[12] Indicating if a respondent has graduated college or not.

**Table 2.** Predicted Voting Decision by Party in 2016 and 2020 referenda in Italy (%).

|  | No20-No16 | Yes20-Yes16 | Yes20-No16 | No20-Yes16 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Overall | 24.3% | 24.9% | 34.0% | 16.8% |
| Forza Italia | 26.0% | 20.0% | 34.5% | 19.6% |
| Lega | **31.7%** | **17.6%** | 34.6% | 16.1% |
| Fratelli d'Italia | 30.6% | 19.3% | 33.2% | 16.9% |
| Partito Democratico | **6.3%** | **50.4%** | **15.4%** | **28.0%** |
| Movimento Cinque Stelle | **14.6%** | **28.1%** | **38.2%** | 19.0% |
| Più Europa | **13.4%** | **36.7%** | **18.1%** | **31.8%** |
| Liberi e Uguali | **38.0%** | **13.9%** | **25.4%** | 22.7% |
| PartitoPico | **26.1%** | 24.9% | **20.0%** | **29.0%** |

Source: Elaboration from Table 1.
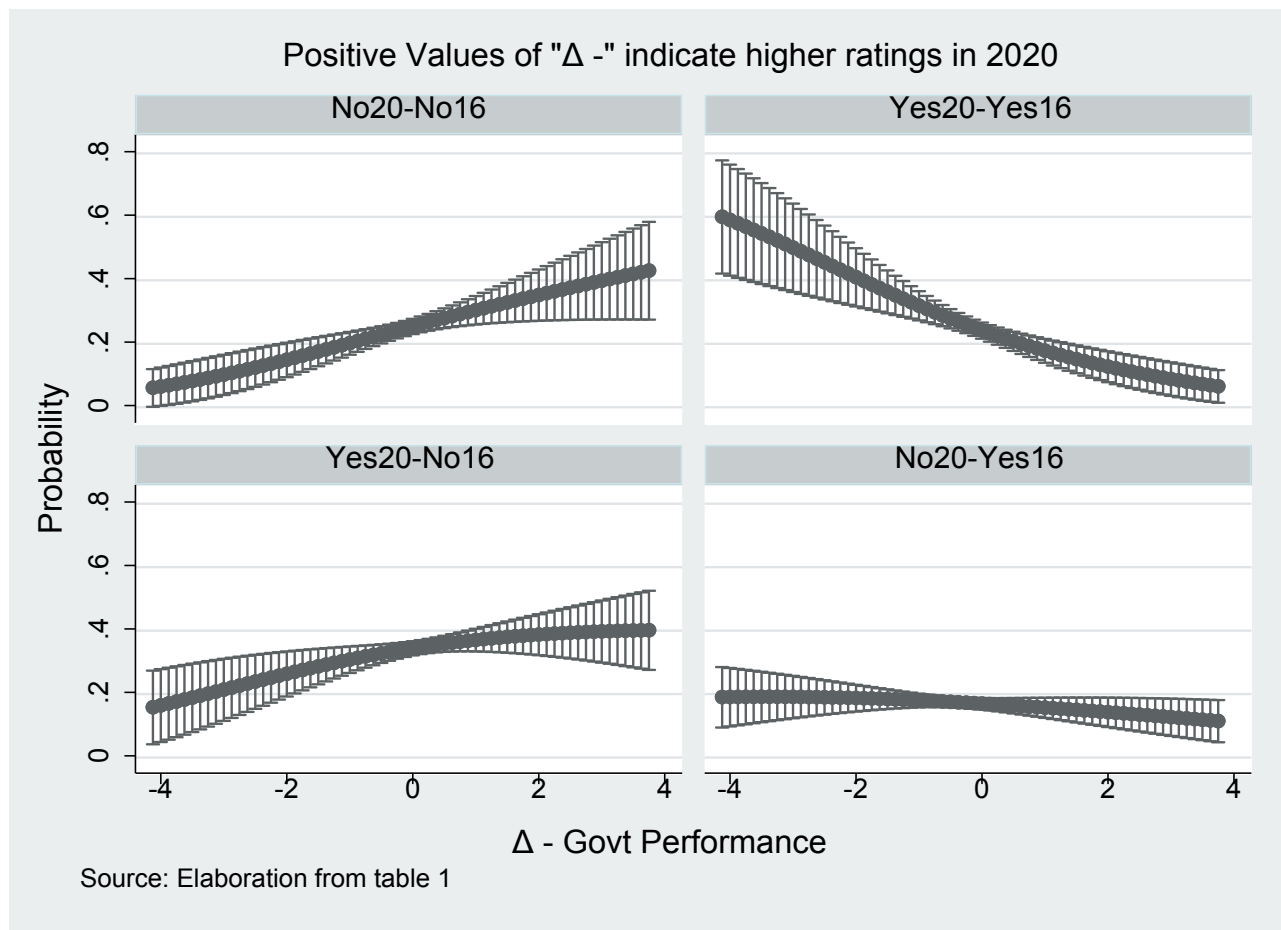Bold indicates a significant p<.05 impact of variable on outcome.

**Figure 6.** Predictions varying change in assessment of government performance.

It should be noted that these results are assessments of the government's policy performance, not the individual leadership evaluations. These results are holding constant respondent's judgements about the individual leaders themselves. While individual leader judgements might have shifted the country ecologically, at the individual level, opinions of leaders had little effect. Figure 7 displays the results that are associated with our *Leadership Evaluation* hypothesis. Leadership evaluations only play a role in distinguishing the modal vote switchers – those who favoured Conte more, switched to favouring his referendum – from the opposing vote switchers – those who favoured Renzi more, switched from supporting his referendum to rejecting Conte's.

Finally, the effects of *Referendum-Specific Content* are depicted in Figure 8. As indicated by the coefficients on table 1, here we observe the strongest predictive effects. Those who strongly favoured the content of the 2020 referendum to that of the 2016 referendum were highly likely to switch their vote from 'no' to 'yes' – with

a near 0% likelihood of voting the other way. The reverse situation is also apparent, with those favouring the content of the 2016 referendum over the 2020 referendum being highly likely to switch from 'yes' to 'no' – with a near 0% likelihood of voting the other way. Finally, in looking at the top row, it can be noted that those who equally favoured the content of both referenda were not likely to switch their votes.

On the contrary, favouring the content in both referendums would lead someone likely support the referendum both times. As expected, those who disfavoured the contents of the first referendum and then favoured the contents of the second referendum were likely to switch, and vice versa: those who favoured the contents of the first referendum and then disfavoured the contents of the second referendum. The only other variable that had a statistically significant effect across all models is the assessment of Renzi's government performance affecting the 2016 vote choice. While the strength of this variable is below that of a content-based vote, there is still a sta-
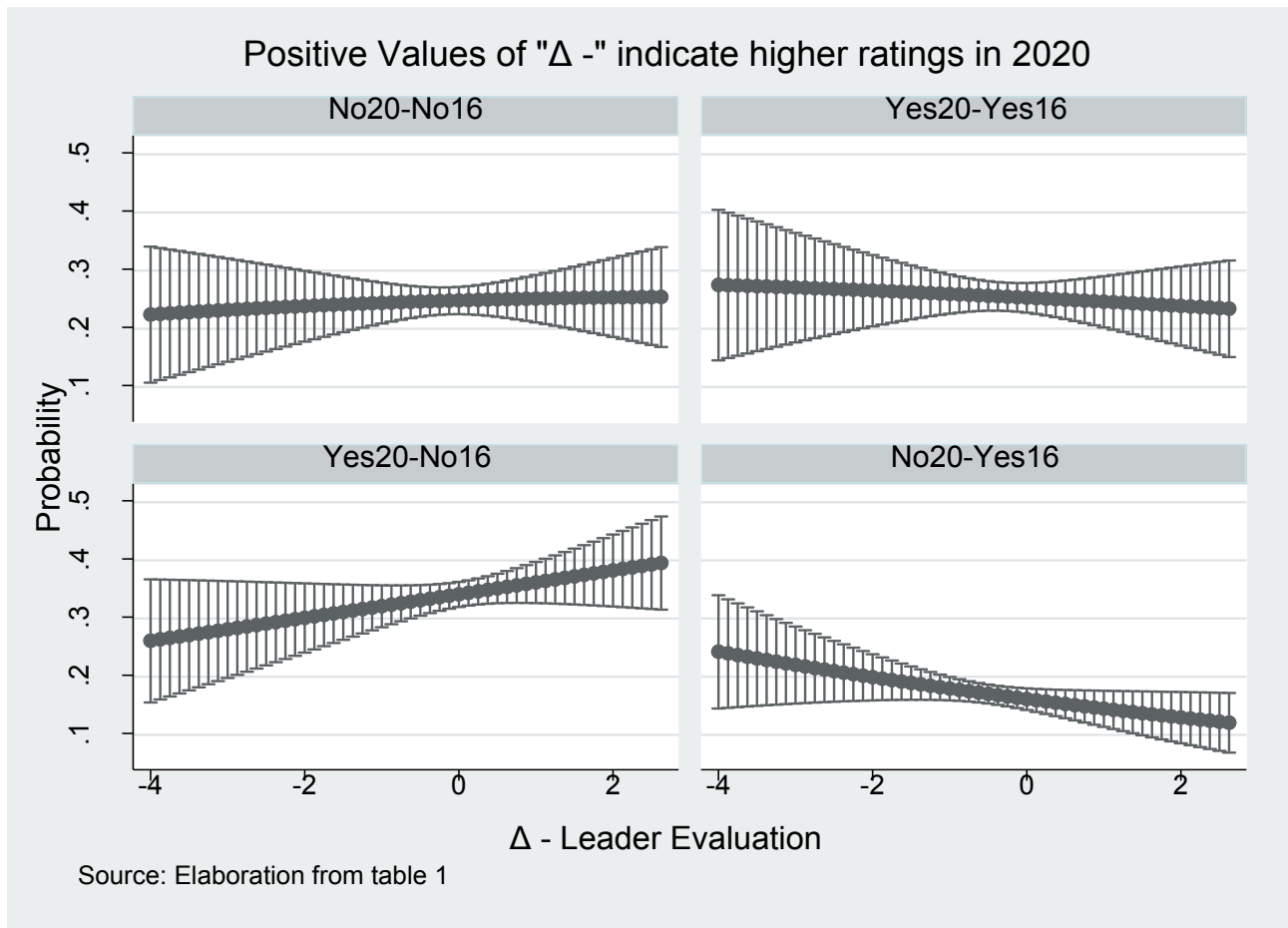
**Figure 7.** Predictions varying change in government leader evaluation.

tistical effect, which supports the findings of other scholars who have performance multivariate analysis on the 2016 election (Bergman, 2019, 2020; Bergman and Passarelli, 2021; Leininger, 2019).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article assessed potential explanations for why Italians rejected the 2016 constitutional referendum but approved the 2020 constitutional referendum. Five hypotheses were introduced. The first suggested that the shifting political coalitions in support of the referendum had a consequential shift on the actions of party's voters. The second suggested that voters used an economic voting heuristic in each of their voting assessments. The third brought up the notion of 'second-order' elections and hypothesized that Italian voters voted in a manner aligned with their opinions of the current governing coalition. The fourth suggested that because referendums

are not directly tied to policy-making, voters might have voted on their expressed opinions toward the reforms contained within. The fifth noted a potential independent effect that approval of government leadership could have had on voting decisions.

Ultimately, we find the strongest support for the *Referendum-Specific* hypothesis: lower support for the 2016 transformation of Italian politics as compared to the more narrow 2020 legislature reform that isolated the effects of protest vote against politicians is what led enough Italians to switch their vote in favour of reform. Additional aspects of this potentially protest-motivated vote can be found in the supplementary results of the *Leadership* hypothesis, which did a better job at explaining national-trends, but less so for individual voters. We also found support for the *Government Performance* hypothesis, suggesting that voters used their referenda vote as an opportunity to show support or opposition to the broader policies of the governing coalition. The *Partisanship* hypothesis was only validated for some parties, particularly the
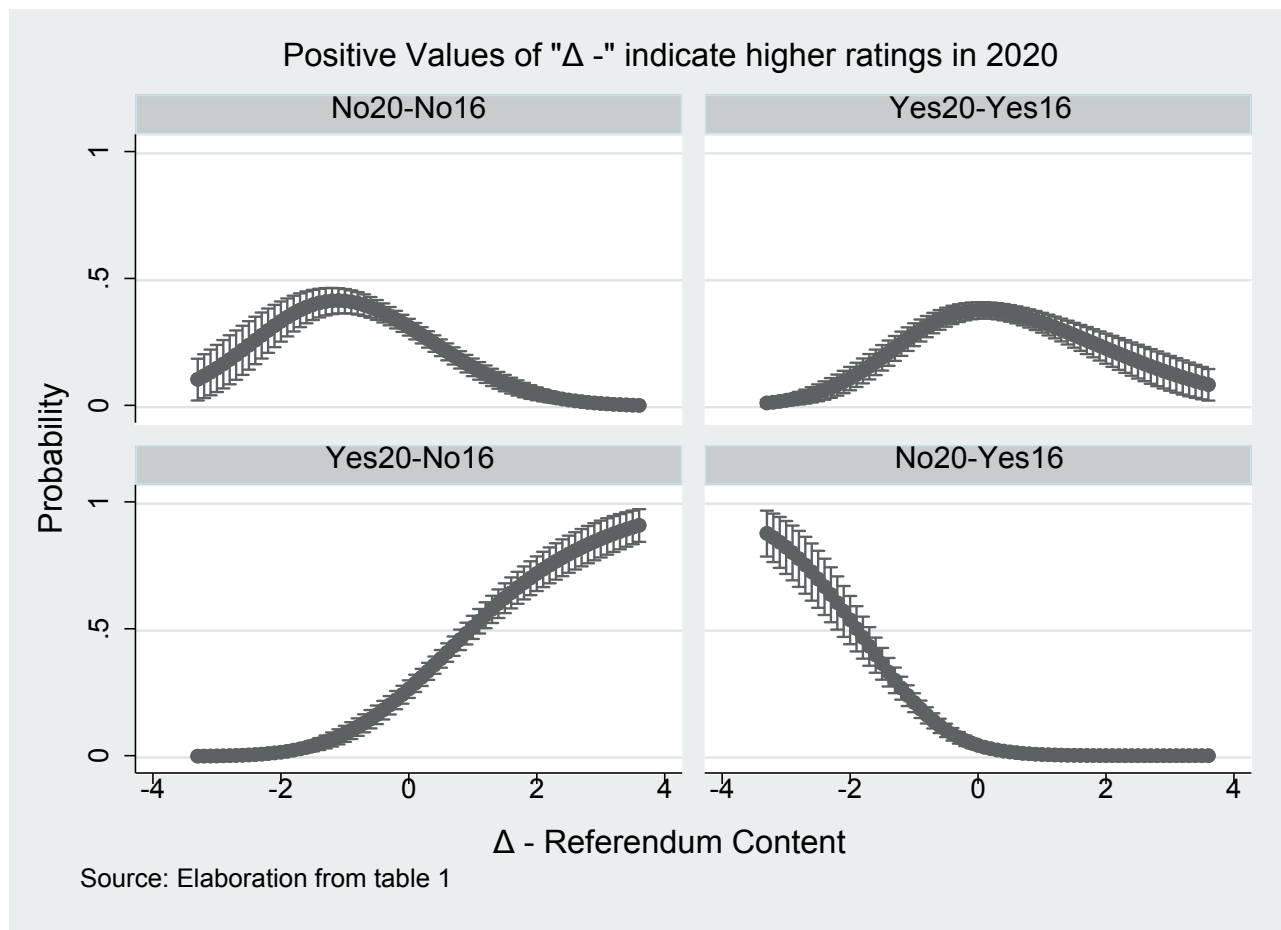
**Figure 8.** Predictions varying change in assessment of referendum content.

Partito Democratico, Movimento 5 Stelle, and the smaller parties, while we found little evidence in supportive of an Economic vote. These findings are in line with research focusing on the 2016 referendum (Bergman, 2019, 2020), which suggests that even though the political context had certainly changed in the four years between the referendums, motivations of vote choice might not have.

Future research should examine the potentially indirect effects of partisanship. Were voters attuned to partisan campaign messages or media? Did this result in diverging levels of expressed support for the reforms included in the referendum? Similarly, what effect did the simpler nature of the 2020 referendum have on voters? Perhaps the clear single-measure meant that voters need not rely on conflicting messages of the various aspects of the 2016 referendum (Bergman and Passarelli, 2021), especially given that the outcome of the 2016 referendum did in-fact have policy-making consequences in that the prime minister resigned after its defeat (Draege and Dennison, 2018).

While there has been much discussion of democracy in crisis and rising displeasure and distrust among European and Italian electorates (Bergman et al., 2020; Kriesi, 2020), a victory for expressive voting over distrusted parties ought to be something to potentially laud. The referendum offered Italians a means to express a general will without the destabilizing effect of populist forces in government, in other words, it allowed for direct democracy to meet the populist challenge (Matsusaka, 2020).

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APPENDIX

**Table 1.** Difference of Means Tests of Non-First-Differenced Non-Standardized Independent Variables

| Party | Economic Assessment | Government Assessment | Reform Policy Assessments | Leadership Evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Forza Italia | -0.38*** | -0.20 | -0.62+ | 0.09 |
| Lega | -0.27*** | 0.27+ | -0.04 | 0.50* |
| Fratelli d'Italia | -0.45*** | 0.31 | -.76 | 0.70 |
| Partito Democratico | -0.46*** | -0.39** | -2.57*** | 0.18 |
| Piu' Europa | -0.25* | 0.47 | -2.94*** | 1.24* |
| Liberi e Uguali | -0.23*** | 2.84*** | -1.14** | 3.74*** |
| Movimento 5 Stelle | -0.13*** | 2.16*** | 1.90*** | 3.91*** |
| Prefer No Response | -0.35*** | 0.86** | 0.03 | 2.26*** |
| Total | -0.28*** | 0.95*** | -0.19 | 1.94*** |
| Positive Values Indicate 2020 value greater than 2016 value | | | | |
| p<0.001***, p<0.01**, p<0.05*, p<0.1+ | | | | |