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EU issue voting in the 2024 European elections in Italy: is the sleeping giant awake?

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Abstract. The recent period has been characterized by intense politicization of the EU, particularly amid multiple crises, with challenges to the EU's legitimacy met by flourishing pro-EU resilience. In this context, Italy stands out as a particularly informative case, where anti-EU sentiment and political entrepreneurship have reached unprecedented levels and may have contributed to the electoral success of certain parties. Yet questions remain about the impact of EU issue voting in this country. This article addresses the issue through an analysis of the 2024 European Parliament elections. Using a combination of original data from a mass survey conducted on the occasion of these elections and of expert survey data from CHES, we examine the positional distance between voters and parties on the EU and we relate it to voting. We show that EU issue voting played a significant impact on the vote choice of Italians.

Keywords: EU issue voting, 2024 European Elections, Italy, political parties, voters.

INTRODUCTION

The recent period has been characterized by intense EU politicization, marked by increased EU salience, polarization of EU attitudes, and mobilization of actors defending or opposing the EU (Hutter and Grande, 2014; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019). In this context, concerns about the EU's legitimacy have been met with echoes of pro-EU resilience in public debates. The EU has shifted from a bureaucratic policy field rarely contested by political actors to a highly polarized and salient issue within European party systems (Hooghe and Marks, 2009; De Vries and Hobolt, 2012). The consequences of such politicization remain, however, largely disputed. In general, parties' intensified contestation of the EU has produced an overall effect on voters, reinforcing EU issue voting at the domestic level (De Vries, 2007), a process described as "whereby individual preferences over European integration directly influence voting choices in national elections" (De Vries, 2010: 92). Yet more research is needed to understand its implications, particularly whether not only Eurosceptic parties but also mainstream ones capitalize on EU issue voting, and whether competition over the EU rewards electorally more the Eurosceptic (Beaudonnet and Gomez, 2024) or the pro-European segment of the spectrum (Carrieri et al., 2025).

In this context, Italy represents an interesting case where the impact of EU politicization can be seen under a magnifying glass. The country has experienced an increase in EU politicization, with anti-EU sentiments and political entrepreneurship reaching unprecedented levels (Conti et al., 2024), contributing to the electoral success of radical Eurosceptic parties (Conti et al., 2022). This can also be understood as a consequence of a major trigger of EU politicization—the multifaceted crises affecting the EU since the early 2010s (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019)—with Italy at the center of several crisis events (see Capati et al. 2024; Serricchio, 2018). Despite public opinion being forced, in a crisis context, to recognize the extent to which Europe matters in emergency situations, and despite divisions created by EU-led policies to address crises, there remain doubts about the real impact of EU issues on electoral competition.

Although party-based Euroscepticism has grown in scope in Italy, it has often appeared a typical stance of opposition parties aimed at attracting support in view of elections rather than a coherent governing platform. Indeed, all major Eurosceptic parties have alternated in the Italian government and, when in government, they have systematically softened their EU stance (Carrieri and Conti, 2022; Conti and De Giorgi, 2011). Indeed, it was shown that in Italy when Eurosceptic parties assume government office, they tend to lose their electoral advantage on EU issues—probably as a consequence of dilution of their anti-EU stance—compared with Europhile parties and with Eurosceptic parties in opposition (Angelucci and Carrieri, 2023). Thus, the stance of Italian (Eurosceptic) parties may prove incoherent overall, its impact on voting may be ephemeral in the long term and closely associated with government-opposition status.

Our analysis of the Italian case stems from a novel setting that allows to test the importance of EU issue voting under new lenses. Since 2022, Italy has had an unprecedented government, for the first time led and dominated by radical right parties (Garzia, 2023). These parties (Brothers of Italy, the League) held clear Eurosceptic stances in the past, especially when they were in the opposition (Donà, 2022; Passarelli and Tuorto, 2022). With the occasion of the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections, we find a unique opportunity not only to assess the relevance of the transnational cleavage (Hooghe and Marks, 2018) and, more specifically, of EU issue voting in this country, after a sequence of crises fracturing the European political system across multiple, simultaneous rifts (Zeitlin et al., 2019). We also have the opportunity to verify the validity of previous findings in the literature about Eurosceptics losing electoral advantages on EU issues when they join government (Taggart

and Szczerbiak, 2013; on the Italian case see Angelucci and Carrieri, 2023). With these goals in mind, this work addresses the following questions pertaining to EU issue voting in the 2024 EP elections. *Has the EU motivated the Italians' vote choice, are citizens more likely to vote for a party when they are closer on the EU issue? Have those Italian parties with a more distinguishable (yet extreme) position on the EU been more likely to attract voters? Finally, have the effects of EU issue voting been stronger for the pro- or the anti-EU half of the spectrum?*

Using a combination of original data from a mass survey conducted for the 2024 EP elections and of expert survey data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), we examine the positional distance between voters and parties on the EU and we relate it to the vote choice of Italians in the 2024 EP elections. We show that the EU has substantially motivated the vote choice of Italians in these elections and that citizens are more likely to vote for a party when they are positioned closer to each other on the EU. We also show that the EU issue voting mechanism has mobilized different segments of voters (Europhile, Eurosceptic and in between), with its effects rewarding both the pro- and the anti-EU half of the spectrum. This evidence on the spread of EU issue voting in one of the EU's founding countries and largest members can be of relevance for scholars of Italy, scholars of electoral behavior, and anyone interested in EU politicization and the domestic politics of the EU.

The paper is structured as follows: firstly, we review the main contributions on core mechanisms behind EU issue-voting and situate the main hypotheses guiding our work within the broader literature; subsequently, we discuss the data, operationalization of variables and methodology; finally, the empirical results are presented, followed by some conclusive remarks that summarize the main findings of our work and discuss their theoretical relevance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

The classical approach to the study of EP elections comes from second-order election (SOEs) theory (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). In a nutshell, this theory postulates that EP elections are less important than those national elections considered first-order (FOEs) which decide what matters most for a political system—i.e. who governs a country. As such, the theory postulates that EP elections are mainly used by parties and voters to obtain desired outcomes for national governance, such as sanctioning or rewarding the incumbent. At the individual level, this implies that EU issues should play only a marginal role in influencing voting choice in SOEs.

By contrast, a ‘Europe Matters’ perspective contends that EP elections are characterized by a certain degree of ‘Europeanness’ (Braun, 2021) and that European issues have increasingly influenced voting behavior in this electoral contest (Hobolt and de Vries, 2016; Carrieri et al., 2025), including in the Italian case (Serricchio, 2014). Indeed, this alternative theoretical framework contends that EP elections are increasingly not secondary; they possess an independent identity in which political conflict over Europe is more salient than in national elections. Although turnout tends to be lower in EP elections, participation may be driven by distinct motivations. Several scholars (Hix and Marsh, 2007; Clark and Rohrschneider, 2009; Hobolt et al., 2009) have argued that the traditional left-right axis has greater explanatory capacity in competitions for national parliaments/cabinets, while the general pro/anti-EU dimension plays a key role in the European arena/elections. Over time, European parties have become more vocal and responsive on EU issues, with both explicit Eurosceptic parties and pro-integration Europhile parties mobilizing voters (Pareschi et al., 2023). Recent analyses suggest that in some EP elections, voters have mobilized not only in opposition but also in support of the EU—an effect that intensified after Brexit when the risk of EU disintegration became salient (Carrieri et al., 2025). From this perspective, EU issue voting may assume renewed importance especially in EP elections.

Italy appears to be a paradigmatic case for testing whether, in the most recent round of European elections, EU issue voting played a significant role. It is a country with a very pro-European historical background but, over time, it has experienced a change, possibly a partial reversal, in attitudes towards the EU. As it was common in crisis-hit countries (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019), the economic and social crisis, EU rules and especially the so-called ‘austerity season’ spurred a rapid rise of Euroscepticism, both in public opinion (Teperoglou and Belchior, 2024) and the political system at large. In the multiple crises that have hit Europe (such as the Euro crisis or the migrant crisis), Italy has always been at the forefront, eliciting polarized reactions both in public opinion and among different political forces (Conti et al., 2020). Against a backdrop of distrust and scepticism towards the EU among Italian public opinion, parties – especially the emerging ones¹ – have accentuated the EU conflict to capitalize on it (Carrieri and Angelucci, 2022).

Moreover, the electoral emergence of a variety of parties with a clear populist orientation targeting EU

elites and institutions (Caiani and Graziano, 2016; Conti et al., 2022; Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2018; Pirro and Van Kessel, 2018) has also created an escalation of Eurosceptic sentiments. The vote choice for these Eurosceptic parties reflects a growing disenchantment and negative public attitudes towards the EU (including views of the EU as a crisis manager). This pattern is often interpreted as part of the Europeanization of national politics, reflected in anti-EU mobilization among voters (Torcal and Rodon, 2021). In Italy, EU attitudes are not the sole determinants of votes for parties such as the Five Star Movement, the League (*Lega*), and Brothers of Italy; explanations typically involve multiple factors, and Eurosceptic parties have not always maintained coherent EU positions. Nonetheless, EU attitudes have demonstrably affected voting, notably in the 2018 Italian general elections (Conti et al., 2022). Drawing from the literature, our first hypothesis (*EU issue voting hypothesis*) aims to test the impact of Europe on the voting choice of the Italians. Theoretically, this hypothesis helps assess the evolving influence of the EU on voting. For the 2024 EP elections in Italy, we thus hypothesize:

H1: The closer citizens were aligned with parties on the EU issue, the more likely they were to vote for that party.

Since research shows that, comparatively, the 2019 European elections signaled a relative revenge of the pro-European voter (Carrieri et al., 2025), we question whether this is a persistent path and a tendency that could be confirmed also in 2024. This question is particularly salient given the Eurosceptic orientation of the Italian government at the time of the elections, with two coalition parties (The Brothers of Italy and the *Lega*) belonging to the Eurosceptic EP party groups (the Conservatives and Reformists and the Patriots for Europe, respectively), which may have contributed to mobilize anti-EU sentiments among voters. Precisely for this reason, building on recent literature, our second hypothesis (*Europhile issue voting*) seeks to analyze EU issue voting for individual parties in detail, considering, specifically, the two different sides of the spectrum and if the pro-EU half received greater electoral rewards. In this regard, we aim to test the following hypothesis:

H2: EU issue voting rewarded Europhile more than Eurosceptic parties.

DATA AND METHODS

Thanks to an original public opinion survey conducted for the 2024 EP elections in Italy, we have an

¹ It was the case of the League for Salvini, the Five Star Movement and Brothers of Italy during their emerging phase (Carrieri and Conti 2022).

opportunity to test whether, and how, EU issues have been relevant to Italians' vote choices. Specifically, to assess the impact of EU issue voting, we use both individual-level (public opinion) and party-level survey data. At the individual level, a dedicated survey conducted within the PRIN 2022 Project 'Whither Sovereignty? Italy and Pan-European Perspectives' captures citizens' attitudes towards European integration as well as their voting preferences. This CAWI survey was fielded by SWG in the week after the 2024 EP elections and is based on a representative sample of the Italian adult population (N = 3,431).

At the party level, we make use of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES 2023 - UKRAINE, Jolly et al., 2022), which provides estimates of party EU positions and other relevant dimensions based on assessments made by experts. The analysis includes the main Italian parties (those that surpassed the 4 percent vote threshold and thus gained representation in the European Parliament): Brothers of Italy (FDI), *Lega*, *Forza Italia* (FI), the Democratic Party (PD), the Five Star Movement (M5S), and the Green-Left Alliance (AVS). Our mass questionnaire captures voters' position on the issue of European integration on a scale ranging from 0 (European integration has already gone too far) to 10 (European integration should be further developed).² At the same time, CHES makes available the party positions on the issue of European integration based on a similar scale. Indeed, experts were asked to rank the parties on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly opposed to European integration) to 7 (strongly in favour of European integration). Based on information from both levels, we present a figure illustrating the EU average positions of parties and their voters (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 compares the EU party position with the mean EU position of those having reported in the survey voting for a given party. To compare voter positions in the mass survey with party positions in the expert

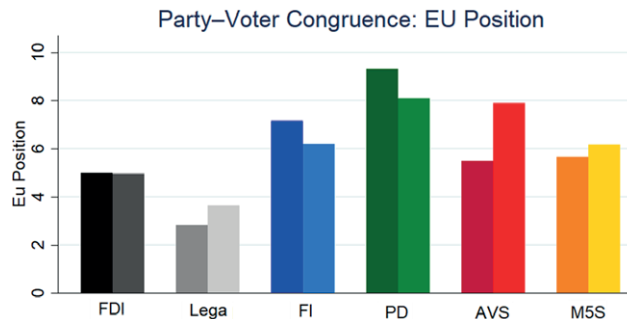


Figure 1. Party/voters EU positions and congruence. For each party, the left column indicates the party's position, and the right column indicates the corresponding voter position.

survey, we rescaled the values to a range from 0 to 10. According to the public opinion survey, voters of the incumbent parties (FDI, FI, *Lega*) overall hold more lukewarm positions on the EU than those of opposition parties (PD, M5S, AVS). There are important differences though. Whereas voters of FDI locate around the mid-point of the scale, this is not the case of voters of FI whose position is well above the mid-point. Thus, within the government coalition, we find a remarkable division between Eurosceptic and pro-European voters. Within this coalition we find, at the same time, the most Eurosceptic constituency (*Lega*) in the entire party system, pro-European voters (FI), while voters of the largest party in the coalition (FDI) fall in between the above two. Instead, voters of opposition parties fall well above the mid-point of the scale. The constituencies of PD and AVS emerge as the most Europhile of all, followed by those of the M5S. Thus, as a whole the voters backing opposition parties are much more pro-European than the voters backing the governing parties.

Party-level positions appear overall congruent with those of their voters, with some relevant exceptions. This appears in line with Marzi and Pareschi (2025), who showed that, for more than thirty years and until 2016, Italy displays a comparatively tighter alignment between elected elites and the public, both on the pro-European and Eurosceptic sides, compared to other countries. Our results confirm and update their findings to the most recent EP elections in 2024.

More precisely, all party positions appear congruent with those of their voters in terms of direction – pro- or anti-EU – this reflects in a position above or below the mid-point of the scale. FDI shows a near perfect positional match between the party and its voters. However, AVS does not appear as much congruent. In this case, the party position (just above the mid-point of the scale) is more cautious than that of its voters who instead

² We know that the EU dimension has a multifaceted nature, with several works differentiating between EU polity/constitutive issues and EU policy issues (Bartolini, 2005; Braun et al., 2016; Schmitt, 2008). On the one hand, the EU constitutive or polity issues account for the core features of the EU's political system, such as EU membership, competences and legitimacy of the EU institutions. On the other hand, EU policy issues relate to how the EU institutions should exercise their competences in day-by-day policymaking on a set of areas (environment, economy, immigration, etc.), though they often do so in cooperation with national governments (Braun et al., 2016). Our measure, the only one available in the individual-level dataset, substantially overlaps with the EU polity/constitutive issue. It is a measure that was consistently adopted by works assessing the effect of the EU distance on the PTVs (De Vries, 2007; De Sio et al., 2016). Therefore, we do not identify additionally potential nuances in the positions concerning the EU policy-making and if parties/voters express support or opposition towards the ways the EU institutions are governing.

prove way more pro-European. It will be interesting, at this point, to test the effect of the different degrees of party-voter convergence on voting.

Our dependent variable is the vote choice for each of the analysed parties in the 2024 EP elections, according to the declarations of vote in our post-electoral public opinion survey. This dependent variable enables us to develop logistic regression models for the analysis of voting determinants and to display logit coefficients. Notably, to test the effect of Europe on the vote choice for the Italian parties, we perform a two-fold set of empirical steps. In the first step, we analyse the direct impact of voters' pro-/anti-EU attitudes on the electoral choices. Thus, the independent variable is the individual self-location on a pro-/anti-EU scale, which vary from 0 (*European integration has already gone far too far*) to 10 (*European integration should be further developed*). This empirical test allows to capture the attitudes of each party electorate towards Europe and if these affect or not voting behaviour. Unlike the EU distance variable (see below), individual self-location directly gauges whether pro-EU or anti-EU attitudes condition party choice.

In the second step, we test the effect of EU positional distance between individual voters and parties. By relying on the spatial logic of voting behaviour (Downs, 1957), the EU distance was calculated as an absolute difference (city-block distance) between party and voter positions on the EU integration dimension. This distance variable captures citizens' congruence or discrepancy with the party EU stances. As the two scales – individual-level one (from 0 to 10) and party position one (from 1 to 7) – were differently measured, we rescaled them as to develop an 11-point scale, ranging from 0 to 1. This normalization procedure allows us to achieve a straightforward interpretation of our dyadic distance, ensuring that these different scales could be expressed on a comparable metric. Such a transformation is standard in cross-scale analyses and helps to avoid biases that could arise from different units of measurement (see for example Carrieri et al., 2025). To confirm an effect of voter-party EU distance on vote choice, the distance coefficient would have to be significant and negative, because as the distance between a voter and party X decreases, the vote for party X should increase.

We should note, at this point, that parties do not only compete on European integration by adopting different positions on EU, but also by assigning different degrees of salience to the EU-related topics. Parties may choose to attach salience on a certain issue if they perceive to own an electoral advantage on it or, instead, they may decide to dismiss an issue if their opponents are likely to benefit from it (Budge and Fairlie, 1983; Pet-

roci, 1996; Bélanger and Meguid, 2008). Several works identified a significant moderating role of EU salience on EU issue voting, showing that it enhances voters' self-perception of positional closeness to parties. According to De Vries (2010), by increasing the salience ascribed to the European integration topic, parties were able to strengthen the impact of EU issue voting. Similarly, Carrieri et al. (2025) found that EU salience holds a significant moderating role on EU issue voting, with its effect improving over time with increased EU politicization. However, as the salience is a party-level variable, it cannot be included in our models, which estimate the effect of EU distance on vote choice. Nonetheless, to integrate the party-level salience variable, in the Appendix we show a generic model estimating the propensity to vote (PTVs) for all parties, obtained stacking the data matrix by multiplying each individual observation for each party (see: Appendix, Table A4).

As for the control variables, we include citizens self-location on the left-right dimension to account for the effects of this important heuristic on voting behavior, which comparative research has shown can overpower EU attitudes in elections. For example, in a cross-national analysis of seven countries' national and EP elections in 2014, Torcal and Rodon (2021) found the left-right effect to be larger than the effect of the EU integration dimension. The left-right position is measured on a self-location scale ranging from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). In the Appendix, we include a robustness check that reiterates the analysis also controlling for the party-voter distance on immigration³. Finally, we included the following socio-demographic in the analyses: gender, age, education level and geographical zone.⁴

ANALYSIS

Table 1 shows a logistic regression model in which the independent variables are citizens' self-placements regarding the left-right axis and EU attitudes. Thus, the model analyzes how self-placement on the left-right axis and on EU influenced the vote choice of Italians in the 2024 EP elections.

Regarding self-placement on the left-right axis, the results are in line with expectations. The greater the citizens' self-placement to the right of the spectrum, the

³ For the individual level, we used the question "Are you personally opposed to or in favor of a policy of openness toward immigration?" found in the mass survey; for the party level, we used the question "Where did political parties stand on IMMIGRATION in 2024?" found in CHES 2024.

⁴ Further information on the variable operationalization is provided in the Appendix.

Table 1. Determinants of Italian voting choices during the 2024 EP Elections.

	Model 1.1 FDI	Model 1.2 Lega	Model 1.3 FI	Model 1.4 PD	Model 1.5 AVS	Model 1.6 M5S
Female	-0.304* (0.129)	0.091 (0.185)	-0.072 (0.195)	0.218* (0.0955)	0.251 (0.135)	-0.003 (0.127)
Age (18-34)						
35 – 44	0.511* (0.257)	-0.668 (0.366)	0.342 (0.381)	0.499** (0.175)	-0.496* (0.219)	0.016 (0.207)
45 – 54	0.886*** (0.231)	-0.381 (0.307)	-0.103 (0.385)	0.698*** (0.168)	-0.589** (0.220)	-0.127 (0.201)
55 – 64	0.564* (0.238)	-0.256 (0.302)	0.397 (0.354)	0.643*** (0.164)	-0.457* (0.204)	-0.472* (0.210)
Over 64	1.088*** (0.217)	-0.303 (0.281)	0.737* (0.319)	0.797*** (0.149)	-0.959*** (0.193)	-0.556** (0.187)
Education	0.0296 (0.0271)	-0.0448 (0.0397)	0.0193 (0.0417)	-0.0000848 (0.0206)	0.0706* (0.0301)	-0.0598* (0.0279)
Zone (Northwest)						
Northeast	0.00506 (0.182)	0.446* (0.223)	0.216 (0.276)	-0.0187 (0.136)	0.119 (0.198)	-0.459* (0.231)
Center	0.165 (0.189)	-0.527 (0.282)	0.0267 (0.300)	-0.224 (0.137)	0.151 (0.190)	0.523** (0.184)
South	0.273 (0.181)	-1.127*** (0.311)	0.182 (0.280)	-0.0103 (0.137)	-0.109 (0.203)	0.569** (0.182)
Islands	0.148 (0.236)	-0.627 (0.406)	0.390 (0.341)	-0.475** (0.183)	0.247 (0.244)	0.971*** (0.208)
Left/Right	6.616*** (0.347)	5.485*** (0.492)	4.074*** (0.452)	-3.318*** (0.235)	-5.327*** (0.403)	-2.120*** (0.284)
Eurosceptic/pro-European	-0.441* (0.205)	-1.546*** (0.282)	0.624 (0.325)	2.041*** (0.200)	1.026*** (0.284)	-1.092*** (0.219)
Constant	-5.834*** (0.457)	-4.697*** (0.633)	-6.316*** (0.684)	-1.840*** (0.316)	-1.425*** (0.430)	-0.109 (0.383)
N	2685	2685	2685	2685	2685	2685
Pseudo R ²	0.309	0.288	0.109	0.168	0.189	0.071

Standard errors in parentheses.

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

greater their probability of voting for the parties of the governing coalition (especially for FDI). As for the opposition forces, the more a voter self-places to the left, the more likely is to vote for AVS, PD and M5S, as in these cases the coefficients are negative (i.e., toward 0=extreme left) and statistically significant. Hence, left-right self-location proves to be a fundamental determinant of vote choice, a finding that does not need much interpretation.

What is more relevant to our study is that, even when the voters' left-right self-location is considered, the EU turns out to be statistically significant in explaining the voting choice for the different Italian parties. Figure

2 plots the marginal effects of the EU self-placement on vote choice by party. It shows that respondents who self-identify with more Eurosceptic positions are more likely to vote for the *Lega* and the M5S, with both coefficients proving highly significant and negative, reflecting the Eurosceptic orientation of these parties' electoral bases (0 = European integration has already gone far too far). The effect of individual-level Euroscepticism on FDI's vote is also significant. The vote choice of Eurosceptic voters for the *Lega* appears to be coherent with the party stance on Europe, thus showing a substantial match between demand and supply in this case. However, the Euroscep-

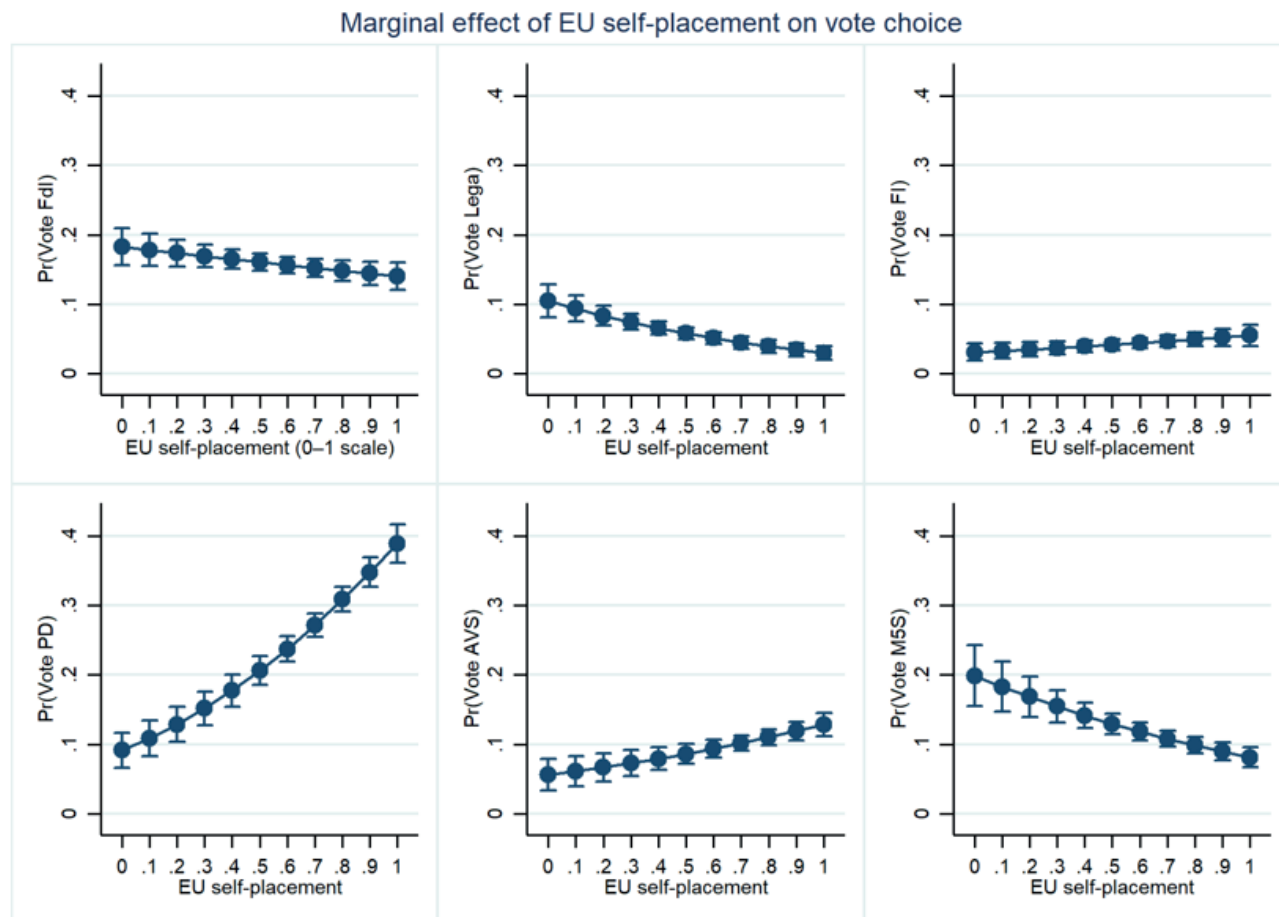


Figure 2. Marginal effect of EU self-placement on vote choice by party.

tic vote for M5S is far from a perfect match, given a party position around the mid-point of the scale (Fig. 2). This suggests that this party with a past Eurosceptic connotation (Carrieri and Conti, 2022) keeps mobilizing a segment of voters on the Eurosceptic side of the spectrum.

As for the other side of the spectrum, a pro-European vote is clearly visible and highly significant for the PD and AVS (see: Fig. 2): the more the voters lean toward pro-European positions, the more they are inclined to vote for these two parties. This alignment appears congruent with the PD's stated stance, but not with AVS, whose voters are more pro-European than the party itself. Finally, EU attitudes are just slightly below ($p=0.055$) our levels of statistical significance in the vote for FI and show a positive correlation between pro-EU attitudes and voting for this party. Beyond these differences,⁵ that in some cases testify to a non-perfect

match between the EU positions of parties and those of their voters, remains a question: which parties have capitalized on EU issue voting the most, based on their positional closeness with voters?

We now move the analysis a step forward, from the impact of pro-/anti-EU attitudes (Table 1) to the impact of EU positional distance on voting (table 2). Table 2 shows logistic regression models where our independent variable is the party-voter distance on the EU. The logistic coefficients are statistically significant for all the analyzed parties, again confirming the importance of the EU in the voting choice of Italians in the 2024 EP elections. As shown in Figure 3, for almost all cases the coefficient is negative as we expected, the closer a voter's position is to a party's EU stance, the more likely the voter is to support that party; conversely, greater

⁵ As a test of robustness, we re-ran the models in table 1 once without the Eurosceptic/pro-European factor and another time without Left-Right (see Appendix). Despite displaying more limited explanatory

power, as it was easy to expect, the models including Eurosceptic/pro-European confirm the statistically significant relationships shown in Table 1 (with the only exception of the M5S whose coefficient turned out as not significant).

Table 2. Determinants of Italian voting choices during the 2024 EP Elections with EU party-voter distance.

	Vote FDI	Vote Lega	Vote FI	Vote PD	Vote AVS	Vote M5S
Female	-0.305* (0.129)	0.0959 (0.183)	-0.0863 (0.196)	0.211* (0.0955)	0.263 (0.136)	-0.0162 (0.127)
Age (18-34)						
35 – 44	0.507* (0.256)	-0.683 (0.361)	0.361 (0.383)	0.497** (0.175)	-0.494* (0.220)	0.0335 (0.207)
45 – 54	0.899*** (0.231)	-0.389 (0.304)	-0.0605 (0.386)	0.706*** (0.168)	-0.602** (0.220)	-0.0771 (0.201)
55 – 64	0.634** (0.237)	-0.176 (0.297)	0.484 (0.356)	0.654*** (0.164)	-0.476* (0.205)	-0.384 (0.209)
Over 64	1.117*** (0.216)	-0.342 (0.279)	0.817* (0.321)	0.804*** (0.149)	-0.981*** (0.195)	-0.480* (0.187)
Education	0.0243 (0.0270)	-0.0598 (0.0394)	0.0187 (0.0421)	-0.000245 (0.0206)	0.0788** (0.0298)	-0.0743** (0.0278)
Northwest						
Northeast	-0.0101 (0.182)	0.415 (0.220)	0.202 (0.278)	-0.0172 (0.136)	0.114 (0.198)	-0.463* (0.231)
Center	0.164 (0.189)	-0.501 (0.279)	-0.00141 (0.302)	-0.222 (0.137)	0.147 (0.190)	0.521** (0.184)
South	0.248 (0.181)	-1.152*** (0.309)	0.127 (0.281)	-0.0223 (0.137)	-0.122 (0.203)	0.560** (0.182)
Islands	0.0636 (0.237)	-0.762 (0.403)	0.284 (0.343)	-0.490** (0.183)	0.242 (0.246)	0.888*** (0.208)
Left/Right	6.884*** (0.337)	5.912*** (0.483)	4.238*** (0.444)	-3.345*** (0.235)	-5.375*** (0.390)	-1.819*** (0.280)
EU Distance FDI	-1.176*** (0.353)					
EU Distance Lega		-2.299*** (0.513)				
EU Distance FI			-2.327*** (0.533)			
EU Distance PD				-2.526*** (0.248)		
EU Distance AVS					1.174** (0.430)	
EU Distance M5S						-1.819*** (0.395)
Constant	-5.909*** (0.431)	-4.860*** (0.630)	-5.486*** (0.623)	0.282 (0.273)	-1.034** (0.395)	-0.417 (0.365)
N	2685	2685	2685	2685	2685	2685
Pseudo R ²	0.312	0.280	0.128	0.171	0.185	0.070

Standard errors in parentheses.

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

distance reduces the likelihood of voting for that party. In the majority of the party cases, the distance variable coefficients display high significance, indicating the substantial level of party-voter congruence on Europe and its capacity to mobilize voters: this is especially the case of the Democratic Party (-2.526***), *Lega* (-2.299***), FI (-2.327***), M5S (-1.819***), and FDI (-1.176***). These results are confirmed even when controlling for the effects of left-right. Furthermore, we have included a robustness check where we replicate the models in Table 2 while controlling for immigration positional distance (Table A3 in the Appendix). The results hold, suggesting that the EU effect on voting is not confounded with positions on immigration.

In brief, EU positional distance is significant for vote choice across all parties, with the expected negative sign for all parties, except for AVS. In this latter case, the more distant voters are from the party regarding the EU, the more likely they are to vote for it. The party's unexpected electoral growth in 2024 and the underlying motivations of its voters warrant further investigation; the reversal of the EU-issue voting mechanism in AVS is particularly surprising and calls for explanation. Tentatively, we can highlight that in 2024, it appears that AVS attracted a large share of votes from former voters of the most Europhile parties in the country, i.e. PD (with an estimate of 27% of total AVS votes coming from this party, according to De Sio and Cataldi, 2024) and *+Europa* (with an estimate of 14% of total AVS votes coming from this party, according to YouTrend, 2024) that failed to achieve the threshold needed to gain representation. As a result, nowadays the party appears holding an electoral base way more pro-European than the party itself. This mis-alignment may represent a potential source of friction that needs to be monitored in the future. These vote shifts can probably be explained by the popularity of AVS candidates, according to many analyses a driving factor behind electoral support for this party.⁶ But, according to Improta and Mannoni (2025) voters were instead motivated by AVS's perceived ideological clarity and consistency, as well as by its prioritization of workers' rights, environmental protection, and international solidarity, rather than by individual candidates or leaders. More research is certainly needed to understand the motivations behind a Europhile vote for this party.

The results of the analysis provide us relevant insights concerning voting in the 2024 EP elections in Italy. In 2024, Italians appear to have voted in line

with their positional closeness with parties on the EU (Hypothesis 1 confirmed). Precisely, based on distance on the EU, voters rewarded parties with more pronounced pro-EU stances (e.g., PD, FI) as well as those with stronger anti-EU stances (e.g., *Lega*), and also parties occupying intermediate positions (e.g., FDI, M5S). Thus, the whole spectrum of EU positions proved electorally rewarding in 2024, with EU issue voting exerting a transversal effect across EU attitudes. This pattern is illustrated in Figure 3, where the EU distance shows a pronounced effect for the most Europhile party (PD) and statistically significant effects for the other parties spanning the entire EU spectrum. (Hypothesis 2 is thus only partially confirmed).

As noted above, AVS stands out as a maverick case: greater EU positional distance is associated with higher support among AVS voters. This is also surprising given that radical left-wing parties, such as AVS, are typically associated with greater support from Eurosceptic voters (Calossi, 2016; Wagner, 2022).

Everything considered, the mobilizing effect of the EU on the party-voter dyad appears meaningful, and EU issue voting confirms its significance for party competition and electoral behaviour in Italy. While our study does not test the full set of SOE expectations, the results suggest that the 2024 EP elections were likely less second-order than often assumed, with Europe forming a salient axis of competition that influenced citizens' vote choices. The findings may also shed light on Italy's relatively low turnout (48.3%). On the one hand, considering the impact of EU issue voting, EU positional closeness may have motivated many voters to participate in the elections. On the other hand, however, given the relevance of EU issue voting, it is possible that voters were not motivated to participate if their favorite party did not make the EU salient enough in its supply. In the Appendix (Table A4), relying on the measure of EU salience provided by CHES, we show a model that includes an interaction term between EU distance and EU salience, with its effects plotted in Figure A1. Our results indicate that EU salience significantly moderates the relationship between EU distance and party support – i.e. greater EU salience multiplies the effects of EU positional closeness – corroborating previous findings in the literature about the importance for parties to make the EU salient in their supply in order to mobilize voters. In general terms, our evidence may suggest that parties could benefit from integrating the EU more explicitly in their electoral strategies and make efforts to connect with the EU positions of their voters, if they want to aggregate voters in their favor and gain from EU issue voting. Whether parties have effectively done so through

⁶ Especially the candidacy of the Italian activist Ilaria Salis who was accused of assaulting far-right protesters in Hungary and facing for this reason a potential 20-year sentence in this country. If elected, she would be freed under MEP immunity.

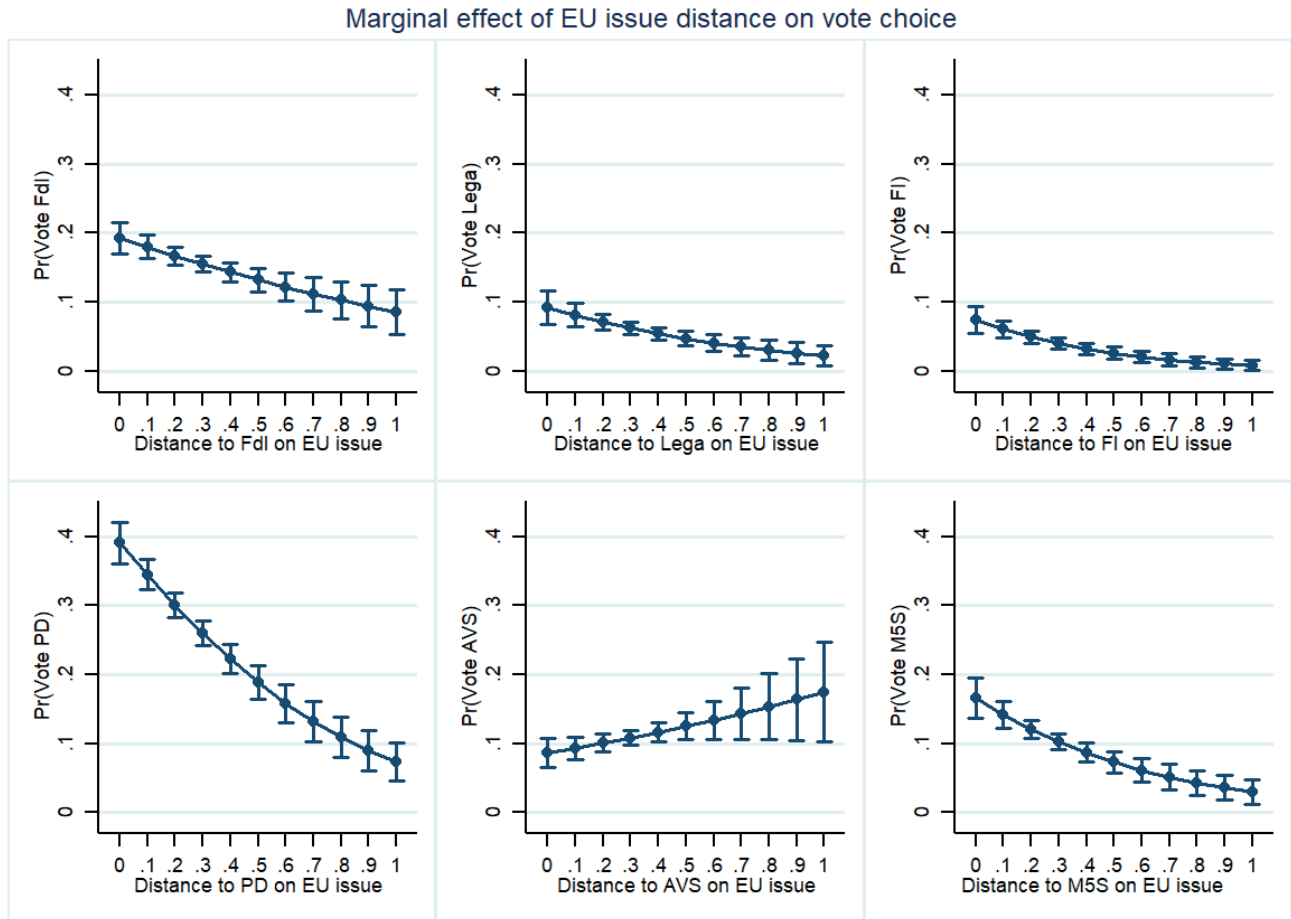


Figure 3. Marginal effect of EU distance on vote choice by party.

their communication strategies is an open question for future research.

CONCLUSIONS

Through the analysis presented in this paper, we document that in Italy the “sleeping giant” of the EU is awake and can influence voting choices and electoral outcomes. Our findings indicate that, on balance, EU issues motivated Italians’ vote choices in the 2024 European Parliament elections. In particular, voters were more likely to support a party when their positions on the EU were closer to those of the party. Although EU issue voting rewarded the most Europhile party (the PD) most strongly, the effects extended across the entire spectrum of positions, with closer EU alignment benefiting both pro- and anti-EU camps. The unique context of a government formed for the first time by radical-right parties with a Eurosceptic pedigree did not alter this

pattern. Contrary to some previous work (Angelucci and Carrieri, 2023), we did not find that Eurosceptic parties ceased to capitalize on EU issue voting once in government. On the contrary, we found that their voters are quite harmonized with the party position and that EU issue voting is relevant for these parties even when they are in government. Whether this pattern reflects a general feature of Brothers of Italy and *Lega* and whether incumbency made the party-voter dyad shift cohesively, cannot be determined from a single election; longitudinal analyses are needed to address this question. With our work, we were only able to document a transverse effect of EU issue voting on the Italian party system in 2024, mainly rewarding the Europhile PD, but with effects spreading on the entire party spectrum

We found evidence that in most cases the relationship goes in the expected direction, i.e. the greater party/voter positional closeness, the higher the likelihood to vote for that party. Only in the case of a small party (AVS), unexpectedly the relationship was reversed with

higher EU positional distance increasing the likelihood to vote for that party. This is the only party case where our metaphor about the “sleeping giant” awake could be overstated. As we discussed above, there may be specific reasons, linked to the profiles of its voters in these elections, that could explain a phenomenon that certainly needs to be monitored in the future.

Overall, our results suggest that parties would benefit from closer alignment of their EU positions with those of their constituents if they aim to mobilize support through EU issue voting. Our country-specific findings align with broader comparative work (e.g., Braun, 2021; Carrieri et al., 2025) on the relevance of Europe and the growing importance of EU issue voting in European elections. With respect to these past works, we show that in these most recent elections, the resurgence of a pro-EU mobilization seen in the aftermath of Brexit (Carrieri et al., 2025) may have stabilized, with EU issue voting rewarding all sides of the spectrum, particularly the most Europhile attitudes. This could be a sign of a counter-mobilization in response to electoral gains made by Eurosceptic parties in past national and EU-level elections and referendums in many countries, including Italy. Comparatively, it would be interesting to test if the same overarching effects of EU issue voting shown in Italy in 2024 can be confirmed in the broader context of all EU countries.

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