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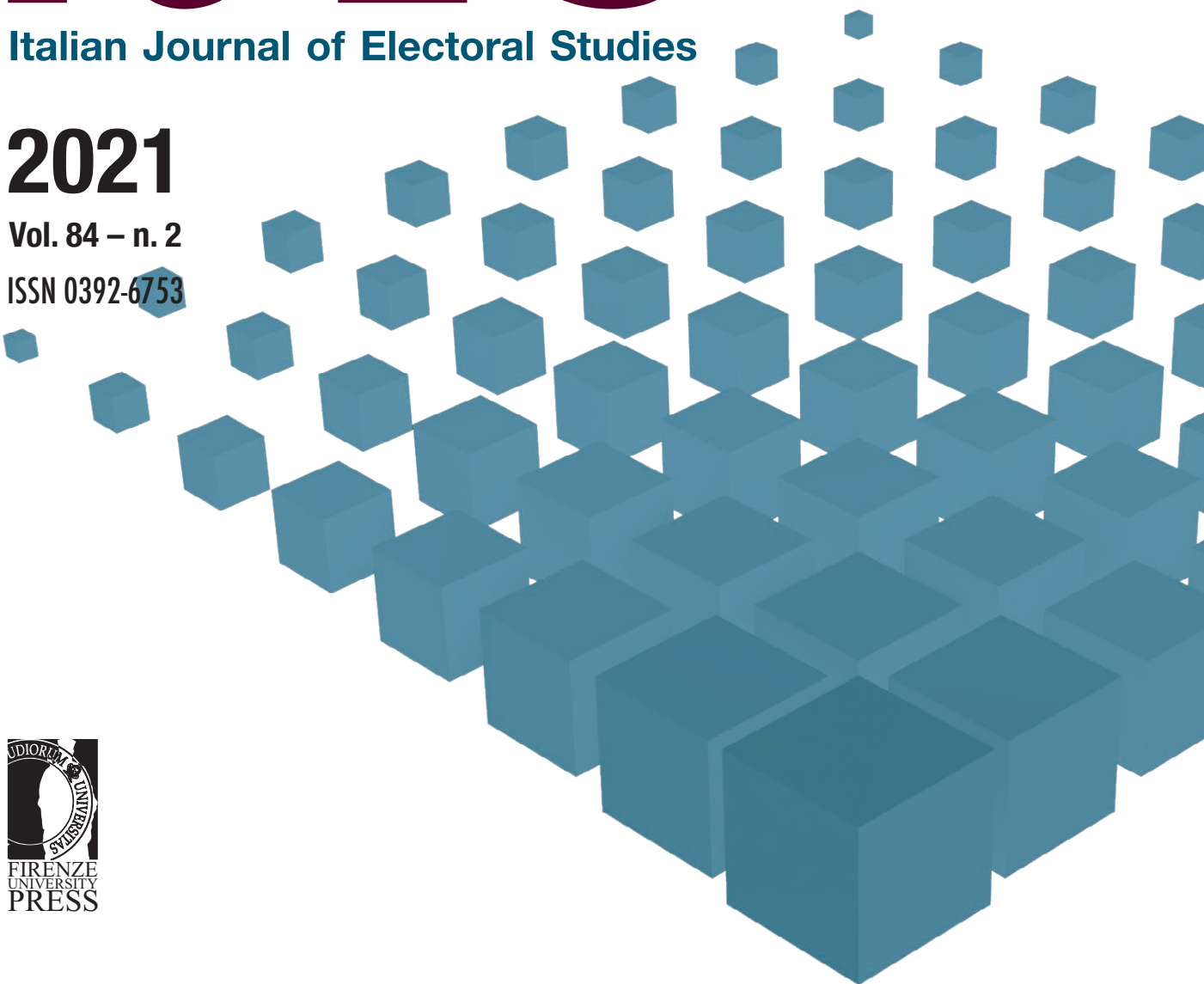
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## Italy in times of protest and negative voting: An introduction

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**Abstract.** The classic heuristics of voting behaviour have been eroded overtime especially in well-established democracies. Ideology, party identification, and social class have been gradually replaced by short-period factors. In particular, the personalization has represented an innovative variable that significantly contributes to explain voting behaviour. Cross-pressures between party identification, candidate assessments and issue preferences paved the way to the diffusion of protest voting, both against the élite and the system. In this respect, Italy represents a very interesting case from both a theoretical and an empirical point view considering the presence of protest parties and the important diffusion of anti-system movements which surfed the protest to consolidate their positions. The editors conceived this special issue aiming at analysing and measuring the impact of protest/negative voting in Italy between 2016 and 2020, a period in which protest parties and voters' discontent have significantly increased. Data presented by the different papers confirm, albeit under different perspectives, the relevance of this peculiar form of political behaviour.

**Keywords:** Italian referenda, negative voting, personalization of politics, protest voting.

### THE DECLINE OF STRUCTURAL DETERMINANTS OF ELECTORS' DECISION

Elections are decisive and crucial for democracy and the political system. However, the drivers of electoral behaviour have changed over time. The relationship between parties and voters/citizens has weakened, and in some contexts even dramatically. Due to the intertwined processes of social modernization, increasing de-ideologization, the weakening of parties' organizations, and the resulting partisan dealignment trend, individual short-terms factors have progressively replaced structural determinants of voters' decision. Voters nowadays are increasingly more likely to cast their ballots based on the assessment of candidates and party leaders, the evaluation of the economy, and the proposals put forward in the political campaign.

This move towards a disintermediated electorate has apparently resulted (also) in rising levels of negativity against incumbents, mainstream parties, and/or representative democracy altogether. Comparative analyses have

uncovered a long-term development of increasing distrust in political parties and leaders across the Western world (van der Meer, 2017). Moreover, a progressive weakening in party–voter linkages was amplified by, e.g., the decline of traditional ideologies, the decline of party membership, as well as the increase in electoral abstention (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Dalton, 1996). Voters’ loyalty to parties has dramatically decreased and most of the political systems faced a process of partisan dealignment, where short time factors have replaced the ideologically driven mass parties (Garzia et al., 2020). A diffused discontent towards parties and politics has grown, and also the democratic system has been challenged by a wave of protest and mistrust.

Among the consequences of this riding tide of political distrust, it has been observed a tendency among voters to increasingly dislike parties and candidates they do not support—while becoming more ambivalent toward parties they support. Available research shows that voters’ evaluation of their own parties and candidates is stable, yet voters have come to dislike their opponents more over time (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; Garzia and Ferreira da Silva, 2021a).

Against a background of increasing animosity towards political opponents, it comes as no surprise that an increasing amount of published electoral research has moved its attention away from the determinants of ‘voting for’ a party or candidate, to focus explicitly on the underlying reasons behind citizens’ choice to cast a ‘vote against’. Several labels have been used by previous scholarship to describe largely overlapping phenomena such as *protest voting* (Alvarez et al., 2018) or *anti-incumbent voting* (Thorson and Stambough, 1995). Indeed, early rational choice scholarship conceived negative voting as a special case of retrospective voting in elections involving incumbents (Kernell, 1977). The wear and tear of holding office increases the likelihood of discontent with presidential performance among voters, leading in turn to a higher rate of votes against the incumbent.

The intuitive value of this empirically testable proposition is however counterbalanced by its inability to account for negative votes cast against the challenger, nor about the very existence of negative voting in elections involving no incumbent. As aptly summarized by Fiorina and Schepsle (1989, 424) negative voting appeared as “an observed regularity with an as-yet uncertain explanation”.

Drawing from cognitive dissonance theory, a strand of psychological literature conceived negative voting as a rationalization mechanism among voters facing conflicting preferences between party identification, ideology and candidate assessments (Gant and Sigelman 1985;

Sigelman and Gant 1989). A more recent strand of scholarship has tackled the issue of negative voting through the lens of negative partisanship. The idea that hostility toward the out-group can develop independently from – and drive support for – the in-group is indeed at the core of the social identity perspective on negative voting (Medeiros and Noël, 2014; Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; Bankert, 2020). In parallel, research on the personalization of politics (Poguntke and Webb 2005; Passarelli 2015; Elgie and Passarelli 2019; Garzia et al., 2020) finds that negative attitudes toward the political out-group concern not only political parties but can also spill over to individual candidates (Barisione, 2017). Accordingly, evaluations of (out-party) candidates have been shown to also act as determinants of the vote, acting alongside positive (in-party) candidate evaluations (Garzia and Ferreira da Silva, 2021a).

Taking stock of the existing empirical literature, we follow Garzia and Ferreira da Silva (2021b, 2) and summarize the tendency towards negative voting as driven by three micro-behavioural components, “namely: (1) an instrumental-rational component characterized by retrospective performance evaluations and rationalization mechanisms; (2) an ideological component grounded on long-lasting political identities; and (3) an affective component, motivated by (negative) attitudes towards parties and candidates”.

#### PROTEST, NEGATIVE VOTING, AND DISTRUST: THE ITALIAN CASE

On the one hand, voting has become more and more oriented by factors related to the performance of the governments and, therefore, of the political activities of the parties supporting the executives in the parliament. On the other hand, voters seem to be keener to vote against the incumbents based on a retrospective evaluation. This widespread political behaviour has been labelled as ‘protest voting’, that is, a vote in favour of parties which are not expression of the ‘system’, and in which the electoral decision is barely focused on political attitudes but rather against the élite (Van Der Brug et al., 2000). In order to make the analysis clear it is important to distinguish between two kinds of protest.

The *elite discontent* concerns the incumbent government and the parties supporting it, as well as the executive performance. The second – *system discontent* – refers to democratic elements of politics such as parties, politicians, institutions, and the functioning of democracy. On this line of research, Bergh found that protest voting mainly reflected a reaction against politi-

cal elites, rather than against the political system itself (Bergh, 2004: 386). Objects of protest can be the regime, the political community, the system, the policies, or the political parties. It is possible then to indicate two main arenas on which ‘protest’ can be measured: (1) a vote against the establishment and (2) a vote unconnected to policy preferences. Therefore, in order to express their discontent, voters think to ‘send a message’ to the élite by supporting protest parties, which are not merely those in the opposition but rather the political forces who claim to represent the protest per se. Their agenda is often based on the rejection of the existing system, as well as on the harsh criticism towards the élite (political and economic) as well as against the incumbent.

The Italian case fits well the framework of analysis of the negative and protest voting for both theoretical and empirical reasons. For one thing, Italy does represent a relevant case of success of populist parties, which collected many protest votes also thanks to electoral campaigns based on the emphasis on the rejection of all the existing and established ruling class (Bergman and Passarelli 2016; Bergman et al. 2021). Protest parties and anti-system parties are well present in the history and in the recent past of the country. The electoral performance of these parties tests the importance of Italy in dealing with the analysis of the protest voting, as well as their relevance in disentangling conceptual aspects of the negative vote in general. The collapse of the party system in the early Nineties was at the same time started by protest parties and it paved the way to the emergence of new” protest parties. Voters more and more supported political forces who claimed to dismiss the old élite and to fight again corruption and the inefficacy of the incumbents. In 1994 a new populist party, Forza Italia, reached the first place in the general elections, together with the exploit of the sub-national xenophobic Northern League. The apex of the populist forces was in 2013 (Bellucci 2014; Passarelli and Tuorto 2014) when the protest voting gathered the highest percentages also thanks to the unexpected performance of the Five Star Movement who mostly claimed the protest both against the élite and the incumbents. Finally, in 2018 the two main populist parties obtained more than 50 per cent of the consensus, emphasising their protest trait and then making a governmental alliance. In fact, the Five Star Movement and the Lega Nord surfed the protest (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018).

The empirical analysis reported in this special issue clearly supports the relevance of the increasing presence of the negative voting as a factor explaining voting behaviour in the Italian context. Indeed, Italy seems to be a sort of natural laboratory where the impact of psychological determinants, context elements, and person-

alised campaigns have deployed their effects on the voters’ decision-making process. These attitudes have been detected in both national elections and in the constitutional referenda held in the last quarter of the century.

#### CONTENT OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The first paper of the special issue by Dario Tuorto moves from the aforementioned background of increasing dealignment and electoral volatility to investigate the emerging trend of *issue incongruency*. The presence of a new ideological conflict – the so-called liberal-authoritarian cleavage – emphasized the redefinition of the link between issue and voting preferences. Tuorto indicates that in the Italian case, even if distinct political spaces still exist, voters’ preferences are not always internally coherent and do not automatically reflect on the expected (propensity to) vote for a given party. An important finding in his analysis is that issue incongruency is more pronounced among voters oriented towards the centre-right parties, whereas relative openness on the issue ‘right for new families’ combines with a position of absolute closeness on the issue ‘immigration’. The author also investigates the contribution of the young people in such a dynamic, showing that they are not the first and the only responsible for the emergence of a less structured political space.

The paper by Matthew Bergman and Gianluca Passarelli zooms in on the very notion of ‘protest voting’ by looking at a relatively underexplored context: the Italian referenda of 2016 and 2020. While existing scholarship has repeatedly pointed to the notion that referenda provide voters with the chance to express their own policy preferences, Bergman and Passarelli argue that voters’ motivations could be (more) strongly shaped with satisfaction/dissatisfaction with incumbent governments’ parties and performance. By means of multi-variate regression analyses, they examine the relationship between economic discontent, satisfaction with the governing coalition and leaders, belief in the content of the reforms, and vote choice in the 2016 and 2020 referenda. Their results show that referendum-specific factors had the strongest predictive power followed by those related to government approval – thus pointing to the idea that referenda remain largely (though not exclusively) about the policy proposals on the table and regardless of their proponents.

In the third article of this special issue, Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini tackle the issue of institutionalization on behalf of formerly anti-establishment parties, who eventually gain strength and enter institutions. To do so, they rely on three crucial cases of par-



ties benefitting from protest voting as key driver of their electoral fortunes, i.e., in the authors' definition, "the three main protagonists of the 2016-2020 Italian populist wave: the Movimento 5 Stelle, the Lega Nord, and Fratelli d'Italia". They rely on ITANES (Italian National Election Study) panel data and measure the evolution of populist attitudes and protest drivers, as well as their connection with electoral flows and parties' strategic choices. Among the key findings, they highlight the decrease in populist attitudes among those M5S voters who remained loyal to their party throughout the window of observation. At the same time, their insightful analysis of electoral flows shows that voters remaining high on the populism score found a secure harbour further to the right, most notably Lega and FDI. If referenda are still largely about issues, electoral consensus remains largely about political representation. Some voters do change their positions as a result of their party's repositioning. However, many (if not the majority of) voters do change their party preference in line with those representing their opinions best.

The following article by Mauro Bortolotti, Claudia Leone and Patrizia Catellani takes it from here to expand our current knowledge on the determinants of populist support. While a large body of existing research has investigated the political and economic factors at the core of populist parties' success, they argue that much less empirical research has been devoted to the individual psychological factors associated with populist attitudes. The authors rely again on the ITANES 2016-2020 panel and the 6-item populism battery also employed by Bordignon and Ceccarini, and find most notably that populist attitudes are "strongly associated with psychosocial factors, such as nationalism, political efficacy, and conspiracist beliefs". Their analysis also adds on Bergman and Passarelli's by showing that populist attitudes have explanatory power in their own when it comes to vote choice at both the 2016 and 2020 referenda, even after controlling for voters' evaluation of the reform and political/attitudinal variables.

The final article of this collection, authored by Giuliano Bobba, Moreno Mancosu, Franca Roncarolo, Antonella Seddone and Federico Vegetti, explores the issue of electoral losers' bias. Voters are known to update their past perceptions and future expectations depending on whether their own party wins or loses the elections. In their paper, they investigate whether such a winner-loser effect conditions people's concerns about the Covid-19 pandemic. Beyond the conjuncture of the health problem affecting citizens' life, the paper indicates that voters losing elections do not change their concerns and fear of the future. Using pre-/post-election

panel data, authors show that losing an election (a regional one in the study) can affect citizens' outlook on future events so with potential consequences on affecting their behavior beyond the tradition schema of political belonging and proximity.

#### WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM THE ITALIAN CASE 2016-2020

The relevance of this special issue steams from two complementary aspects: theoretical and empirical. The cases investigated and their different approaches are mostly consistent with the negative voting framework. General elections and referenda in Italy show common patterns of voters' behavior mainly explained by a vote 'against'. The retrospective evaluation, typically necessary for casting a negative vote, has been at the core of the voters' behavior in Italy in the 2018 general elections and in two referenda in 2016 and 2020. The personalization of the vote, and, therefore, the possibility to cast a vote 'against' has been detected also in sub-national contexts. The discrepancy between voters' characteristics and their attitudes on issues and their vote for parties far from their values represented an increasing trend also in youth generation and confirms the weakening of long-term factors structuring the vote. All in all, the Italian case under investigation between 2016 and 2020 represents a very important case to enhance the quality and quantity of information about the negative voting. Data presented in this special issue are not only relevant for the Italian case per se but rather can be used to carry comparative analyses.

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## Il disallineamento tra orientamenti elettorali e posizioni sui temi: una questione giovanile o di famiglia politica?

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**Abstract.** The transformation of politics in contemporary democracies has led to the emergence of a new ideological conflict, alongside the traditional left-right scheme, described as liberal–authoritarian or cosmopolitan–nationalist cleavage (Kriesi et al. 2008; Hooghe and Marks 2002). This change brought to a redefinition of the linkages between issue and voting preferences, as many voters decide to support a party regardless of their positions on issues while voting for the same party. Within such framework, the contribute of the new generations to the growth of the electoral dealignment and volatility has been largely analysed (Miller et al. 1996; Franklin 2004; Plutzer 2002). Issue incongruency is part of the process. Young people are often considered to be tolerant and inclusive because they grew up under prosperous and secure conditions and developed post-materialist values of freedom, multiculturalism, progressivism (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Janmaat and Keating 2019). However, the perspective of left-cosmopolitans engaged in electoral politics contrasts with the image of economically-insecure left-behind group of young people who don't share the same progressive values (Bartle et al. 2020; Sloam and Henn 2019) and support right-wing political parties. What is still unknown is the extent to which extreme ideological traits and attitudes (e.g. negative discourses on immigration) combine with positions of openness on individual freedom. Likewise, the same contradiction can be found among left-wing voters who assume liberal position on economy or those economically left and culturally conservative. The article aims at analysing the relationship between issue positions and vote (propensity to vote). We test the hypotheses of a coherent vs incoherent ideological space by looking at the structure of voters' preferences on economic (State vs. free market) as well as cultural issues (individual rights, attitudes towards minorities, European integration) and the differences between young people and older component of the electorate. The analysis is focused on the Italian case. Data are taken from the 2020 Itanes survey.

**Keywords:** issue preferences, economic issues, cultural issues, young voters.

### 1. IL DIBATTITO SULLA TRASFORMAZIONE DELLO SPAZIO POLITICO

La letteratura sulla scelta di voto si è a lungo soffermata a studiare le preferenze degli elettori sui temi politici più controversi. L'assunto alla base

dei diversi approcci che prendono in considerazione le issues, in particolare i modelli spaziali (Downs 1957; Rabinowitz e MacDonald 1989), è che esista una congruenza tra posizione individuale e posizione attribuita al partito votato. A partire da questo confronto, e dal riconoscimento della congruenza, gli elettori decidono di votare la formazione che rende possibile un voto “corretto”, ossia corrispondente ai propri valori e alle proprie priorità (Lau e Redlawsk 1997; Lau et al. 2014). Secondo tale schema, i partiti propongono programmi politici chiaramente confrontabili tra loro, gli elettori scelgono in base alla vicinanza programmatica con i partiti e, se il voto avviene coerentemente con le posizioni espresse sui temi, si realizza una coincidenza tra preferenze individuali e piattaforme dei partiti (Kurella e Rosset 2018). L'aspetto problematico di questo meccanismo apparentemente logico e funzionale è che non risulta sempre possibile per l'elettore stabilire la connessione ipotizzata. In primo luogo, le caratteristiche dei partiti e del sistema politico possono produrre incongruenze molteplici che rendono meno facile il riconoscimento reciproco delle posizioni. Da ciò deriva, ad esempio, l'elaborazione di strategie di *reframing* funzionali a spostare l'attenzione da specifiche issue o a selezionarne solo alcune (Lefevre et al. 2019; Walgrave et al. 2014). L'incongruenza può derivare, poi, dal fatto che gli elettori dispongono di informazioni imperfette, che non consentono loro di accedere a tutti gli strumenti utili a conoscere le posizioni dei partiti per arrivare poi ad elaborare una scelta corretta (o più corretta di altre). Esiste, però, una questione più generale in grado di interferire sul processo di stabilizzazione della decisione di voto. Il riferimento è alla trasformazione dello spazio politico, delle dimensioni che lo costituiscono e, quindi, del modo in cui partiti ed elettori si vanno a collocare in questo spazio.

Per lungo tempo la distinzione sinistra-destra ha funzionato come unica o principale categoria utilizzata per la competizione elettorale (Fuchs e Klingemann 1990; Klingemann, et al. 1994; Knutsen 1995). All'interno di uno spazio politico unidimensionale le posizioni dei partiti sulle molteplici e potenziali linee di conflitto coincidevano sostanzialmente con le posizioni assunte sull'asse economico, quello che opponeva Stato e mercato, pubblico e privato. Gli elettori traducevano facilmente le preferenze in scelte di voto perché lo spazio era relativamente semplice da interpretare e da occupare (Pierce 1999; Louwerse e Andeweg 2020). Il polo progressista accoppiava aspirazione all'eguaglianza e pluralismo culturale (posizione *socialist-libertarian*), mentre il polo opposto enfatizzava l'economia di mercato e l'uniformità culturale (*capitalist-authoritarian*) (Hooghe et al. 2002). Da parte loro, gli elettori sceglievano il partito da vota-

re grazie alla presenza della bussola ideologica sinistra-destra, attraverso cui era possibile prevedere la posizione su tutti principali temi politici.

Il declino dei cleavages tradizionali (Dalton 1984; Franklin 1992; Franklin et al. 2009), intensificatosi a partire dagli anni novanta, ha determinato la rottura di questa relazione stringente soprattutto per quanto riguarda il legame tra classe sociale e voto. Pur non potendo ancora decretare l'irreversibilità del cambiamento in atto, è indubbio che lo spazio di competizione politica sia diventato via via più complesso, strutturato in dimensioni non sempre sovrapponibili, rispetto a cui gli elettori si posizionano in modo non definitivo. In particolare, numerosi autori hanno posto l'attenzione sull'emergere di una nuova divisione centrata sui temi culturali (Bornschier 2010; Kitschelt 2004), diversa da quella rappresentata in passato lungo l'asse secolare-religioso in quanto largamente disancorata da una base sociale di riferimento e dal posizionamento sinistra-destra. Per Hooghe e colleghi (2002), una polarità di questa nuova linea di divisione è stata occupata dalle formazioni della destra radicale (i partiti TAN, *traditional-authoritarian-nationalist*) che sponsorizzano posizioni di chiusura, mentre all'estremo opposto si collocano i partiti GAL (*Green-alternative-libertarian*) a favore dell'apertura. La contrapposizione si manifesta, secondo Bornschier e Kriesi, tra valori libertari e transnazionali da un lato, valori di difesa del nazionalismo e particolarismo dall'altro (Bornschier e Kriesi 2012).

Come evidenziato da questi autori, se negli anni settanta e ottanta il cambiamento politico era stato promosso dalla *new left* con l'irruzione nell'agenda politica dei temi ecologisti, sulla libertà di scelta in campo sessuale e sui diritti civili, negli anni più recenti è stata la destra a completare la disarticolazione dello spazio politico, per certi versi in reazione a questi cambiamenti. Mentre il conflitto distributivo sull'economia ha perso progressivamente rilevanza, una nuova polarizzazione è emersa attorno ai temi che hanno a che fare con i valori e con il concetto di comunità. Lo spazio politico bidimensionale alterato che si è andato a formare ha cambiato il significato della contrapposizione politico-ideologica (Kriesi et al. 2006; 2008). Sul piano economico, la divisione Stato-mercato ha incorporato la dimensione del protezionismo dal lato dello Stato e della competizione globale dal lato del mercato. Sul piano culturale, invece, i temi dell'immigrazione e dell'integrazione europea hanno accresciuto la loro salienza facendo lievitare i consensi e la reputazione dei partiti che li hanno cavalcati. Secondo diversi autori (Van der Brug e Van Spanje 2009; Hooghe e Marks 2002; 2018) è la contrapposizione tra i gruppi dei *winner* – élite, nuova classe media

di professionals e di creativi avvantaggiati dall'apertura dei mercati – e dei *losers* – operai, precari, componenti di middle class tradizionale spiazzati dalle trasformazioni economiche – ad avere reso la dimensione culturale decisiva nello scenario politico contemporaneo dei paesi occidentali.

Dal lato dei partiti, il cambiamento ha investito in primo luogo le formazioni mainstream. Socialisti e conservatori si sono orientati favorevolmente rispetto al mercato e alla globalizzazione, distinguendosi più sul piano culturale che su quello economico e rinunciando quindi a interpretare (e a innovare) questa dimensione del conflitto. L'effetto è stato il rafforzamento dei partiti *challenging* in tutte le direzioni politiche, dai Verdi alla *populist radical right* a nuove formazioni non connotate sul piano ideologico ma in grado di spostare l'attenzione su questioni non presidiate da altri attori.

Dentro questo scenario sono soprattutto i partiti populistici e della destra radicale ad avere conquistato spazio, nonostante la loro base elettorale sia divisa tra piccola borghesia che sostiene politiche liberiste e working class, spesso di provenienza socialista, più favorevole a politiche stataliste. Ed è proprio la compresenza di bacini di consenso alternativi a spiegare la progressiva sostituzione dei toni pro-mercato a favore di posizioni nazionaliste (Kitschelt 2004; Van der Brug 2009; Kurella e Rosset 2018). Per quanto riguarda i temi culturali, invece, le formazioni di quest'area politico-ideologica hanno espresso posizioni disomogenee, in alcuni casi di (parziale) apertura su singoli diritti e libertà individuali – ad esempio di difesa della democrazia liberale in chiave anti-islamica (Mudde 2007) – o che coniugano autoritarismo e richiesta di partecipazione diretta dei cittadini (De Lange 2007). Guardando al campo politico opposto, alcuni autori hanno evidenziato il potenziale di posizioni come quella del *left-authoritarianism* (statalismo sulle policies socio-economiche, conservatorismo sui valori), ancora poco coperte dai partiti di sinistra e potenzialmente strategiche per recuperare voti tra l'elettorato operaio e a basso titolo di studio (Van der Brug e Van Spanje 2009). Una contraddizione speculare si riscontra tra i partiti *left-libertarian* nella misura in cui sostengono il superamento del modello tradizionale di welfare, la parziale liberalizzazione del mercato del lavoro e la redistribuzione dei benefici a vantaggio delle nuove generazioni (Kitschelt 2004).

Il passaggio a una struttura più complessa dello spazio politico ha fatto sì che le preferenze sui temi culturali non dipendano più automaticamente dalla posizione sui temi economici (Kriesi et al. 2006). Gli elettori si sono trovati in una situazione di pressioni incrociate, con diversi partiti che rappresentano le loro preferenze

su più dimensioni e, quindi, non si adattano pienamente alle loro aspettative. Al tempo stesso, è cresciuta negli anni della crisi economica la salienza di temi come l'immigrazione e l'euroscetticismo, che hanno rafforzato le formazioni capaci di enfatizzarli strategicamente anche come *single issue* e allargare il consenso a elettori non connotati sul piano ideologico (Van der Brug e Fennema 2003; Werts et al. 2013; Dennison e Geddes 2019).

## 2. GIOVANI E DISARTICOLAZIONE DELLE POSIZIONI SUI TEMI COME MOTORE DEL CAMBIAMENTO POLITICO

In un quadro politico-elettorale in trasformazione grande importanza gioca il posizionamento dei giovani, non solo rispetto ai loro profili demografici ma anche rispetto agli atteggiamenti che esprimono, potenzialmente differenti da quelli delle altre classi di età. La frammentazione di posizioni che viene solitamente attribuita ai giovani deriva dal fatto che sono meno esposti a visioni ideologiche omogenee e compatte e, quindi, risultano più permeabili a messaggi provenienti da singoli temi e proposti da singoli partiti che ne fanno la loro bandiera. Il processo di de-ideologizzazione assume una dimensione generazionale nel senso che coinvolge soprattutto i giovani in quanto gruppo di elettori con meno esperienze e meno storia politica alle spalle, caratterizzati da status sociali più incerti e tendenzialmente più esposti alle influenze esterne (Plutzer 2002); quindi, con un'identità politica più debole (García-Albacete 2014). Se è vero che il voto è un'abitudine che si forma nel tempo (Franklin 2004) per poi stabilizzarsi sulla base di quello che si è costruito all'inizio della carriera elettorale, entrare sulla scena in una fase di grandi cambiamenti non può che influenzare l'identità politica nel senso dell'instabilità (Franklin e Wessels 2002), come avevano mostrato studi precedenti (Miller et al. 1996; Rubenson et al. 2004) e le note tesi sul cambiamento valoriale (Inglehart 1990; Welzel et al. 2003) e sulla crescita dei cittadini *apartisan* (Dalton 1984).

Nel caso italiano, queste riflessioni hanno assunto una particolare rilevanza a seguito dei bruschi cambiamenti dell'assetto partitico e delle maggioranze di governo, avvenuti a partire dal 2013, che hanno reso possibile l'espressione di preferenze di voto nuove per quegli elettori in uscita dai due poli e indisponibili a votare direttamente le formazioni del polo opposto (Schadee et al. 2019), ma anche per molti neo-elettori privi di riferimenti ideologici e di esperienze di socializzazione politica da cui attingere.

Alcuni studi sul voto dei giovani (Maggini 2016; Tuorto 2018) hanno mostrato che sono soprattutto le nuove generazioni a disaccoppiare le issue tra loro dando vita a combinazioni nuove. L'esposizione massiccia alle informazioni provenienti dai nuovi ambienti mediatici e il processo di emancipazione femminile hanno accresciuto l'importanza di questioni che si collocano lungo la linea di divisione materialismo-post-materialismo (ambiente, diritti delle minoranze, libertà di scelta nei comportamenti sessuali, ecc.), in grado di trasformare i significati stessi assunti dall'asse sinistra-destra. Questa opportunità di espansione dello spazio di voto GAL si è concretizzata con la presenza di opzioni politiche, come quella del voto al Movimento 5 stelle, in grado di accogliere flussi di elettori di diversa provenienza.

Altro tratto emergente – e per certi versi confliggente con gli orientamenti sin qui evidenziati – è la crescita della quota di elettori giovani che si collocano al centro anche se non votano partiti centristi tradizionali come i conservatori. Questo posizionamento riflette il rifiuto e l'estraneità dall'asse sinistra-destra e investe, ad esempio, il voto ambientalista in diversi paesi (Van Haute 2016), assumendo quindi una connotazione post-ideologica e riflettendo il processo più generale di disarticolazione delle posizioni politiche. Un discorso analogo vale per il M5S, il partito su cui si sono concentrate le preferenze giovanili nel 2013, che ha raccolto sin dall'inizio posizioni eclettiche e ambivalenti, non ispirate a un credo ideologico ed espressione di un "populismo di centro" (Colloca e Corbetta 2015).

L'allargamento degli orientamenti postmaterialisti ha determinato l'affermazione tra i giovani di atteggiamenti favorevoli all'apertura, alla tolleranza, al cosmopolitismo<sup>1</sup>. Diversi fattori spingono in tale direzione: la crescita del livello di istruzione, l'essere socializzati all'idea di Europa, la curiosità verso la mobilità e la conoscenza delle lingue. Tuttavia, la prospettiva di una generazione di neo-elettori progressisti e post-ideologici contrasta (o, meglio, si combina) con la presenza di ampie componenti del mondo giovanile a basso titolo di studio ed economicamente fragili, che votano formazioni populiste, nativiste e anti-immigrazione (Miller-Idriss 2018; Uba e Bosi 2021). Nel caso dell'Italia, la penetrazione elettorale dei partiti di destra tra i giovani risale già agli anni novanta, con il forte sostegno raccolto da Alleanza Nazionale (Tuorto 2018). I successi più recenti della Lega e di Fratelli d'Italia segnalano, al tempo stesso, il

consenso diffuso di orientamenti identitari e nazionalisti tra le nuove generazioni di elettori, ma anche una capacità di combinare posizioni diverse improntate, al tempo stesso, all'apertura e alla chiusura sui temi economici e culturali.

### 3. STRUTTURA DEL LAVORO, IPOTESI E VARIABILI

L'articolo si propone di ricostruire, con riferimento al contesto italiano contemporaneo, la relazione tra orientamenti di voto espressi dagli elettori e posizionamento sui temi politici.

Tre sono le ipotesi che muovono la nostra riflessione. La prima, di carattere più generale, sostiene che, coerentemente con quanto evidenziato dalla letteratura, gli elettori con preferenze di voto contrapposte tendano a distinguersi tra loro più sui temi culturali che su quelli economici. In particolare, i temi culturali maggiormente divisivi sono quelli che rimandano alla dimensione comunitaria-identitaria, e quindi all'immigrazione e all'integrazione europea.

La seconda ipotesi si riferisce alle differenze di età. In questo caso, assumiamo che siano soprattutto i giovani a manifestare incoerenza di posizione, in ragione del fatto che attingono a una cultura politica meno strutturata (sono entrati sulla scena in una fase di de-politicizzazione e de-ideologizzazione). Più che tra altri gruppi di elettori, ci attendiamo che tra i giovani l'indicazione della preferenza partitica sia scollegata rispetto al modo in cui interpretano le questioni che riguardano le libertà individuali, sociali, economiche.

Infine, come terza ipotesi, sosteniamo che a mostrare una struttura di posizioni meno congruente sui temi sia soprattutto l'elettorato giovanile dei partiti di centro-destra, che deve conciliare le dimensioni del cosmopolitismo, della tolleranza delle diversità e dei valori post-materialisti presenti nella cultura di massa delle nuove generazioni con spinte tradizionaliste, anti-immigrazione e nativiste egualmente diffuse all'interno di quell'area politica.

La variabile dipendente utilizzata per l'analisi è la posizione degli elettori sui temi politici. Le preferenze sull'economia si riferiscono a un solo item, quello relativo alla classica alternativa tasse-servizi (ridurre le tasse anche al costo di ridurre i servizi pubblici vs estendere i servizi anche a costo di aumentare le tasse), ordinato secondo un range di posizioni che va da 1 a 7 (1 massimo pro-mercato e 7 massimo pro-Stato). Per quanto riguarda le altre dimensioni, abbiamo preso in esame le seguenti questioni: famiglie: tutela e difesa del modello tradizionale di famiglia vs. riconoscimento delle nuo-

<sup>1</sup> Questo tratto è confermato dall'indagine Eurobarometro del 2019 (*How do we build a stronger, more united Europe? The views of young people*) su oltre 10.000 giovani di età compresa tra 15 e 30 anni. Si rimanda a: [https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2224\\_478\\_ENG](https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2224_478_ENG)



ve forme di unione familiare (scala 1-7); immigrazione: riceviamo troppi immigrati vs va bene come è adesso (scala 1-7); Europa: appartenenza alla UE è un bene vs. è un male (3 posizioni, con categoria intermedia “né un bene né un male”). Mentre la dimensione economica rimanda più chiaramente alla distinzione sinistra-destra, quella culturale può essere interpretata, seguendo la letteratura, in termini di contrapposizione tra autonomia individuale e fiducia nelle norme condivise collettivamente contrapposta a protezionismo, conservatorismo, populismo autoritario. Per semplificazione, applichiamo la stessa etichetta ideologica ai due assi e facciamo riferimento, anche sulla dimensione culturale, alla distinzione tra sinistra e destra, i cui significati si sono progressivamente estesi a temi diversi da quello economico originario (Van der Brug e Van Spanje 2009). Allo scopo di uniformare la metrica, le quattro scale sono state normalizzate (valori 0-10).

La variabile indipendente è la “preferenza di voto”, ossia la propensione o disponibilità futura a votare i diversi partiti. La domanda rimanda a una scala di probabilità che va da 0 a 10 (10 esprime la certezza di votare un determinato partito e 0 la certezza di non votarlo). Tra le diverse probabilità presenti abbiamo preso in esame quelle relative ai principali partiti: Lega (LN), Fratelli d’Italia (FdI) e Forza Italia (FI) per il centro-destra, Partito Democratico (PD), Liberi e Uguali (LEU) e Movimento 5 stelle (M5S) per l’area opposta. A differenza della scelta di voto, l’utilizzo della PTV consente di considerare più propriamente tutte le opzioni che si prefigura l’elettorato riferite a una dimensione futura. Inoltre, permette di includere anche i partiti minori che difficilmente raggiungerebbero la numerosità campionaria di risposte con la domanda diretta sul partito votato. Ai fini dell’analisi ci limitiamo a considerare le singole propensioni, senza valutare in modo incrociato le disponibilità a scegliere più formazioni, e consideriamo come elettorato potenziale di un dato partito tutti i soggetti che indicano una disponibilità elevata di votarlo (da 8 a 10 sulla scala).<sup>2</sup>

Tra le altre variabili esaminate, l’età funziona da controllo. Le fasce considerate sono tre: 18-40, 41-60 e più di 60 anni. Il primo gruppo, dei più giovani, presenta una soglia superiore spostata in avanti rispetto ad altri studi. Questa decisione è derivata dalle esigenze di garantire un’elevata numerosità del sotto-campione e un

equilibrio numerico tra i gruppi di età prescelti. Si giustifica, inoltre, dalle particolari caratteristiche dei giovani italiani e dalle loro transizioni familiari posticipate che fissano il raggiungimento della piena età adulta ben oltre i 30 anni<sup>3</sup>. Per quanto riguarda, infine, la fonte dati abbiamo utilizzato il dataset dell’indagine Itanes sull’opinione pubblica e il referendum costituzionale (rilevazione con tecnica CAWI). Le interviste sono state condotte nel settembre 2020 su un campione di partecipanti a un panel di intervistati nel 2016, 2018 e 2019. L’analisi si concentra esclusivamente sui dati del 2020; il numero di casi complessivo è compreso tra 1.600 e 1.700.

#### 4. RISULTATI

Il primo passaggio per comprendere come gli italiani si autorappresentano lo spazio politico è quello di rilevare le loro posizioni sulle issues e collegarle con gli orientamenti di voto. Il vincolo sempre più incerto tra elettori e partiti fa ritenere che questo legame si sia alterato, che le questioni chiave del dibattito pubblico vengano interpretate dagli elettori sulla base di valutazioni autonome, non collegate tra loro e non sempre guidate da un quadro politico-ideologico coerente riconducibile alla distinzione generale sinistra-destra.

I grafici riportati in fig.1 confermano parzialmente questa lettura. Due sono le tendenze che emergono. Innanzitutto, le posizioni assunte dagli elettorati potenziali dei vari partiti sull’economia risultano tutte racchiuse all’interno di un range piuttosto ristretto e concentrato attorno al centro della scala. Al crescere delle propensioni di voto per un dato partito gli orientamenti si spostano verso la polarità “più mercato e meno tasse” per chi sostiene i partiti di centro-destra e verso quella opposta favorevole all’intervento pubblico per gli elettori del centro-sinistra. Tuttavia, i due blocchi restano abbastanza vicini (non oltre le 2 posizioni di differenza sulla scala 0-10), distinti ma non contrapposti. Analogamente, l’elettorato del M5S esprime un posizionamento centrale tra liberismo e statalismo, senza mostrare alcuna evoluzione specifica (fig.1). Questa convergenza conferma, quindi, quanto già riscontrato a livello internaziona-

<sup>2</sup> Gli elettori potenziali identificati in questo modo (posizioni 8-10 della scala) tendono a segnalare un solo partito come scelta più probabile. La percentuale di chi indica analoga disponibilità a votare anche altro partito risulta sempre bassa (inferiore al 10%) ad eccezione degli elettori potenziali di Lega e Fratelli d’Italia che si sovrappongono in circa un quarto dei casi.

<sup>3</sup> L’articolo si concentra esclusivamente sulle differenze riconducibili al ciclo di vita (confronto tra fasce di età) e non prende in considerazione né l’effetto generazione né quello dovuto al periodo. Questa decisione deriva dalla natura dei dati utilizzati, che non consentono di ricostruire le risposte delle diverse coorti lungo un periodo elettorale ampio, né di considerare l’impatto degli eventi generali, di contesto, nelle varie fasi storiche. A prescindere da questi limiti dell’analisi, il disallineamento tra scelte di voto e posizione sui temi è un fenomeno relativamente recente (o comunque accentuatosi negli anni recenti) che rende in ogni caso incompleta un’analisi per generazione.



le sulla scarsa tenuta del cleavage economico tradizionale, sia per i partiti mainstream sia per quelli sfidanti (Kitschelt 2004).

Per quanto riguarda i temi culturali la differenziazione è maggiore. Le posizioni su famiglia ed Europa risultano divisivi, mentre sull'immigrazione prevalgono orientamenti complessivamente contrari sebbene con sfumature all'interno del campione. Rispetto alle *constituencies* di Lega e FdI, il bacino di elettori potenziali di FI si distingue per una minore rilevanza delle posizioni pro-chiusura. Nell'altro campo la situazione è speculare: forte sostegno ai diritti per le nuove famiglie e per l'integrazione europea tra gli elettori del PD e di Leu, che contrasta con il posizionamento intermedio degli elettori del M5S (Fig. 1). Provando a sintetizzare questi primi risultati, non emergono elementi sufficienti a supporto dell'ipotesi di una disarticolazione complessiva dello spazio politico italiano, mentre appare confermata la prevalenza delle divisioni culturali su quelle economiche e anche l'esistenza di un'area di elettori, riconducibile al M5S e a FI, che appare più fluida nelle sue scelte.

Rispetto a questo quadro generale, come si collocano i giovani? Che tipo di profili politici esprimono? In che termini sono diversi da quelli del resto della popolazione? Per rispondere a questi interrogativi abbiamo calcolato i punteggi medi sulle issue degli elettori potenziali dei diversi partiti (quelli che hanno espresso una propensione a votarli superiore a 7 sulla scala 0-10) distinte per fascia di età (Tab. 1). In generale, i giovani appaiono più orientati verso le polarità pro-Stato e pro libertarismo-apertura, con differenze contenute e che si colgono principalmente nel confronto con la fascia dei 41-60enni. L'età sembra contare assai poco per l'elettorato potenziale della Lega e di FdI, tra cui prevale una compattezza di posizioni in linea con l'orientamento ideologico dei due partiti. Unica eccezione riguarda il tema famiglie, su cui si riscontrano posizioni di apertura più accentuate tra i giovani. Ma su questo tema è soprattutto l'elettorato di Forza Italia a distinguersi, con punteggi nettamente più favorevoli tra la componente giovanile (6,2) rispetto a quella adulta (4,0) e agli over 60 (3,7). Guardando all'area politica opposta, la dinamica cambia. Tra gli elettori del PD e di Leu posizioni di apertura sui temi culturali e di sostegno allo Stato in economia riguardano in primis la fascia di età anziana, poi i giovani e decisamente meno i 41-60enni, la categoria che esprime la maggiore discontinuità con gli orientamenti tradizionali del centro-sinistra. Per quanto riguarda l'elettorato dei 5 stelle, infine, non emerge alcuna differenza riconducibile all'età. Nel complesso, anche l'ipotesi di una maggiore incoerenza del voto giovanile non trova pieno riscontro. Solo sul tema famiglie emergono posizioni significativa-

mente diverse da quelle del resto dell'elettorato e tali da travalicare gli orientamenti di voto (in questo caso, del voto a destra).

L'analisi sin qui condotta ha interessato le singole tematiche, senza considerare l'articolazione complessiva delle posizioni. Abbiamo osservato in precedenza che un indicatore di cambiamento dello spazio politico è proprio la destrutturazione dell'allineamento sui temi. Il riferimento è, ad esempio, ad elettori che si collocano a destra sull'economia ma sono favorevoli all'immigrazione o, al contrario, che sono a sinistra sull'economia e sentono l'immigrazione come un problema. Un discorso analogo può essere sostenuto riguardo ai diritti delle nuove famiglie o e all'apertura-chiusura sull'Europa. Il passaggio ulteriore è quindi quello di costruire un indice sintetico che tenga conto di tutte le singole issues, classificate come coerenti o incoerenti sulla base della loro connotazione politica-ideologica. Per posizioni di sinistra sono stati considerati i punteggi 5-7 delle scale su economia, famiglie e immigrazione e la categoria di risposta "l'integrazione europea è un bene". La posizione di destra si riferisce ai punteggi 1-3 delle prime tre scale e alla categoria "l'integrazione europea è un male". Abbiamo infine trattato separatamente le categorie intermedie di ogni item (punteggio 4 delle prime tre scale e categoria di risposta "l'integrazione europea non è né un bene né un male") associandole a un profilo di centro o neutro. Il punteggio massimo dell'indice così costruito raggiunge il valore 4 nel caso di posizioni tutte allineate lungo la stessa direzione, fino a un punteggio minimo di 2 (massima differenza con solo due posizioni uguali). Nella tab.2 compare la distribuzione dei punteggi per classi di età senza alcun riferimento alla propensione di voto per i partiti. Lo scopo è infatti quello di capire se e come i temi si combinano tra loro e, solo in un secondo momento, di confrontare i diversi elettorati.

Un primo risultato da sottolineare riguarda l'incidenza di posizioni "congruenti". La quota di rispondenti le cui preferenze risultano tutte allineate lungo la stessa polarità è poco meno di un quinto del totale (17,8%), con percentuali maggiori tra i giovani (20,4%) rispetto alla fascia di età adulta (15,1%). Si tratta, in questo caso, di un dato inatteso derivante da una forte differenziazione interna: a risultare allineate sono, infatti, le posizioni di sinistra (tutte e 4 le issue a sinistra: 14,5%) e solo in minima parte quelle di destra (4,6%). Questa caratteristica si ritrova anche nella categoria della "prevalenza" (3 posizioni su 4 nella stessa direzione). Complessivamente, i "congruenti" o "prevalenti" a sinistra corrispondono al 28% tra i 18-40enni e ad appena il 18% tra i 40-60enni che, al contrario, mostrano una percentuale più eleva-

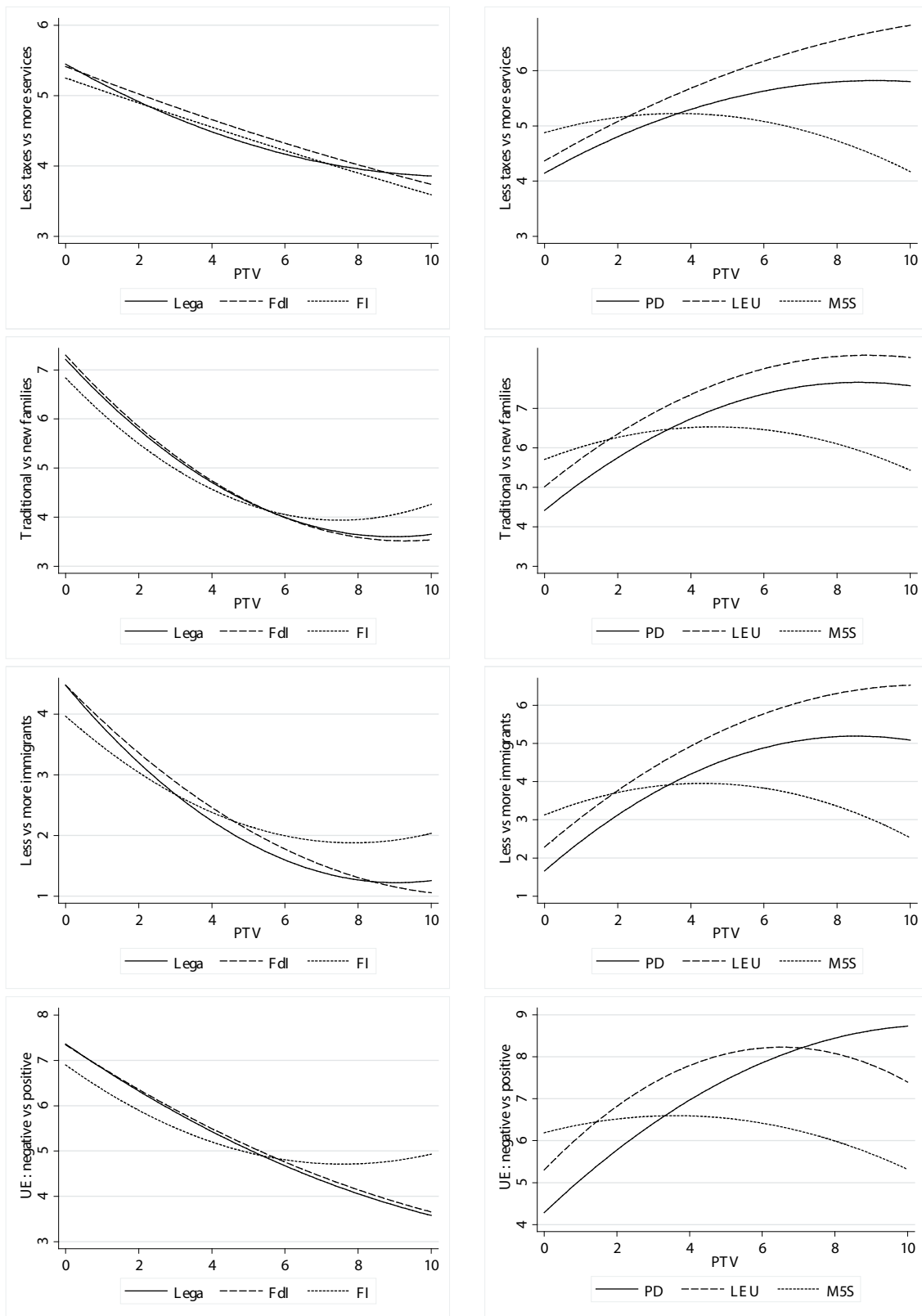


Figura 1. Posizione sui temi economici e culturali in base alla propensione di voto. Nota: Le scale di posizioni sui temi (asse Y) sono state trasformate da 1-7 a 0-10. La propensione di voto (asse X) va da 0 a 10. Fonte: Itanes 2020.

**Tabella 1.** Punteggi medi di posizione sui temi per età e propensione di voto.

	Economia					Immigrazione					
	18-40	41-60	Over 60	Tot	Test F (sig.)	18-40	41-60	Over 60	Tot	Test F (sig.)	
Lega	4,1	3,6	4,2	3,9	1,6 (.198)	Lega	1,4	1,2	1,1	1,3	0,3 (.716)
FdI	4,6	3,3	4,3	3,9	5,2 (.006)	FdI	1,4	1,1	1,0	1,2	0,4 (.645)
FI	4,4	3,7	3,1	3,8	0,4 (.643)	FI	2,7	1,6	1,7	1,9	1,2 (.308)
PD	6,2	5,4	6,0	5,8	2,1 (.123)	PD	5,6	4,5	5,6	5,3	4,8 (.009)
Leu	6,4	5,8	7,3	6,5	3,9 (.025)	Leu	6,0	5,3	7,0	6,2	3,2 (.047)
M5S	4,9	4,2	4,0	4,3	1,3 (.281)	M5S	2,5	2,8	2,8	2,7	0,1 (.875)

	Famiglie					Europa					
	18-40	41-60	Over 60	Tot	Test F (sig.)	18-40	41-60	Over 60	Tot	Test F (sig.)	
Lega	4,3	3,4	3,6	3,6	0,9 (.306)	Lega	3,4	3,7	4,0	3,7	0,4 (.673)
FdI	4,0	3,2	3,8	3,5	1,4 (.257)	FdI	4,0	4,0	3,7	3,9	0,2 (.835)
FI	6,2	4,0	3,7	4,4	2,9 (.056)	FI	5,5	5,1	4,8	5,1	0,1 (.852)
PD	8,1	7,6	7,6	7,7	0,5 (.577)	PD	8,3	8,4	8,9	7,6	1,5 (.218)
Leu	7,9	7,4	8,7	8,1	1,6 (.215)	Leu	7,5	7,3	8,7	8,0	1,7 (.194)
M5S	6,2	5,8	4,8	5,7	2,5 (.086)	M5S	5,5	5,9	6,0	5,8	1,1 (.873)

*Nota:* I punteggi sui temi sono calcolati su scale normalizzate (0-10). Per ogni partito vengono riportati i punteggi del sottocampione di elettori che hanno indicato un'elevata propensione di voto per il partito (posizioni da 8 a 10). Il test F si riferisce alla differenza tra le medie delle diverse classi di età per partito.

*Fonte:* Itanes 2020.

**Tabella 2.** Profili di posizione sui temi in base all'età.

	18-40	41-60	Over 60	Tot
Congruenza (4 su 4)	20,4	15,1	19,1	17,8
Posizioni di sinistra	14,5	7,1	13,3	11,1
Posizioni di destra	4,6	6,5	5,0	5,5
Posizioni di centro	1,3	1,5	0,8	1,2
Prevalenza (3 su 4)	31,2	37,0	39,4	36,4
Posizioni di sinistra	13,8	11,5	15,5	13,5
Posizioni di destra	13,2	19,1	18,9	17,6
Posizioni di centro	4,2	6,4	5,0	5,3
Incongruenza (2 su 4)	48,4	47,9	41,5	45,8
Tot	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0
N	455	738	645	1838

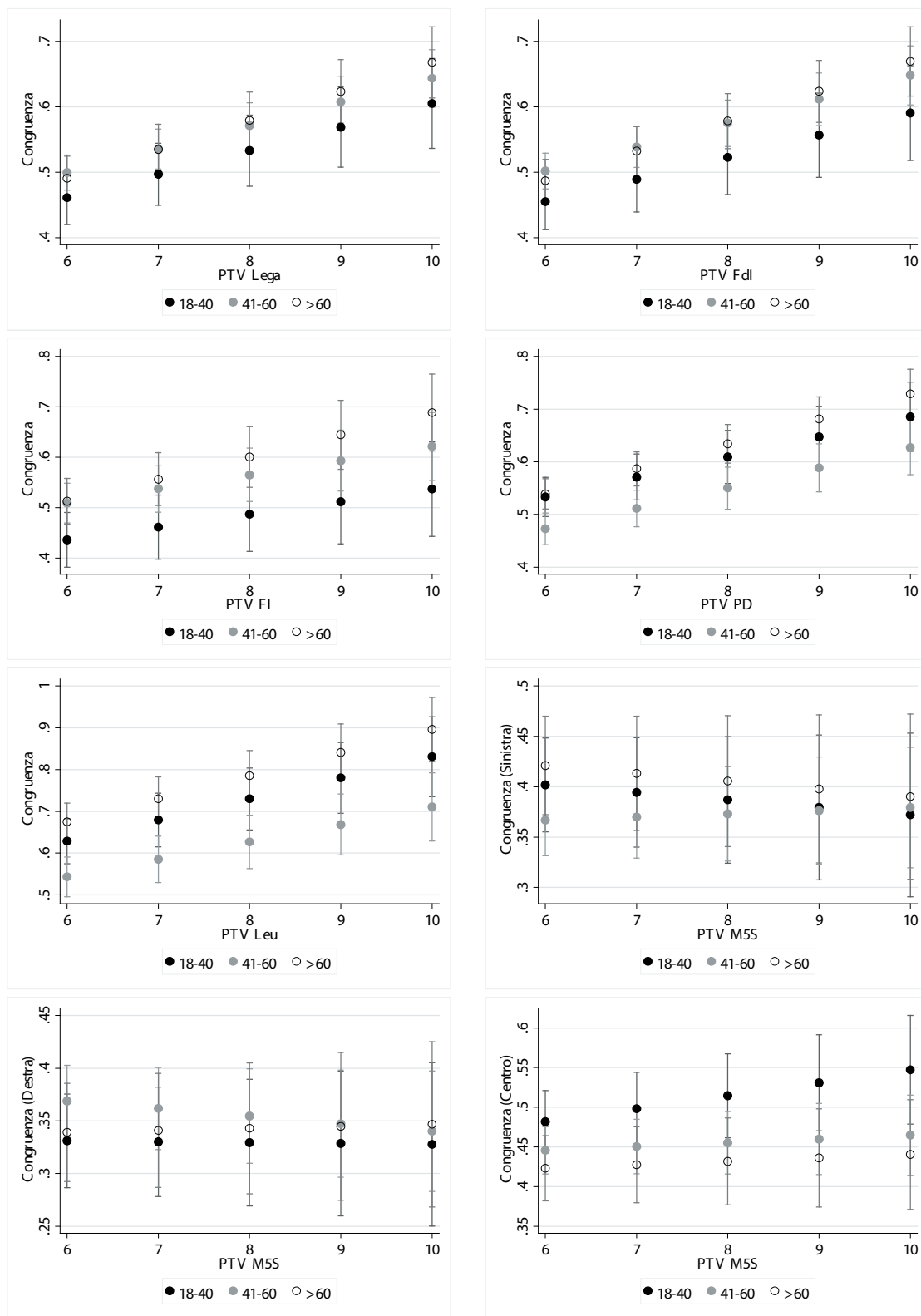
*Nota:* Per congruenti si intende 4 punteggi su 4 orientati nella stessa direzione (destra, sinistra o centro). Posizioni a destra: punteggi 1-3; posizioni a sinistra: punteggi 5-7; posizione di centro: punteggio 4. Prevalenti: 3 punteggi su 4 orientati nella stessa direzione. Incongruenti: al massimo 2 posizioni orientate nella stessa posizione. Temi: economia, famiglia, immigrazione, Europa.

*Fonte:* Itanes 2020.

ta di allineati totalmente o parzialmente su posizioni di destra (26%) (Tab. 2).

Le differenze tra giovani e adulti si possono cogliere anche confrontando le sequenze più ricorrenti di posizioni sui temi (dati non riportati in tabella). I giovani tendono a collocarsi più frequentemente a sinistra sull'economia e sulla famiglia e ad occupare posizioni di centro invece che di destra sul tema immigrazione. Altri profili diffusi sono quelli "a sinistra su famiglia ed Europa, al centro o a destra su economia e immigrazione" e "a sinistra sui temi culturali, al centro su economia". Al contrario, tra gli adulti prevalgono le combinazioni "destra su economia, famiglia, immigrazione, centro su Europa" e "sinistra su economia, famiglia, Europa, destra su immigrazione", o anche "destra su economia, immigrazione ed Europa, sinistra su famiglie". È evidente come sia soprattutto il tema immigrazione a spingere a destra anche quando le altre posizioni risultano di sinistra o al centro.

Come ultimo passaggio dell'analisi abbiamo collegato questi risultati agli orientamenti di voto. In fig.2 compaiono i valori predetti di congruenza sulle issues ottenuti attraverso regressioni lineari in cui la variabile dipendente è il punteggio stimato dall'indice (min-max congruenza, range normalizzato 0-1), la variabile indipendente la propensione al voto (scala 0-10), mentre la



**Figura 2.** Congruenza sui temi in base alla propensione di voto e alla classe d'età. Punteggi predetti. Nota: Le figure riportano i punteggi di *issue congruence* stimati dalle regressioni lineari per le tre fasce di età al variare della propensione di voto (punteggi di PTV riportati: da 6 a 10). Fonte: Itanes 2020.

classe di età è il fattore inserito nell'interazione (con le altre variabili sociodemografiche genere, zona di residenza, condizione occupazionale, titolo di studio presenti nei modelli come controllo). Abbiamo lanciato singole regressioni corrispondenti alle propensioni di voto per i diversi partiti: Lega, FdI, FI, PD, Leu, M5S. Mentre per i primi tre partiti l'indice di congruenza è stato calcolato sulla base delle posizioni di destra, per PD e Leu abbiamo considerato le posizioni di sinistra. Nel caso del M5S sono state effettuate regressioni distinte con l'indice di coerenza a sinistra, a destra e al centro, in ragione della particolare collocazione ideologica dell'elettorato del partito. Le figure riportano l'andamento dei punteggi a partire dalla propensione di voto con punteggio 6 fino al massimo di 10.

Si può notare, innanzitutto, una tendenza che interessa elettorati politicamente contrapposti: al crescere della propensione di voto aumenta linearmente anche il grado di coerenza sui temi. La compattezza di posizioni è elevata tra gli elettorati del PD (punteggi da 0,5 a 0,7 su un massimo di 1) e di Leu (da 0,6 a 0,8), ma anche quelli di Lega e FdI raggiungono valori rilevanti (0,5-0,6) (Fig. 2). Un secondo risultato riguarda le differenze di punteggio in relazione all'età. Tra i rispondenti orientati verso i partiti del centro-destra, i giovani rappresentano sempre la categoria meno coerente. Nel caso di FI il divario è particolarmente ampio, sia perché gli anziani sono particolarmente allineati a destra, sia per la maggiore apertura dei giovani sui temi della famiglia e dell'integrazione europea. La stessa anomalia di posizioni non si riscontra tra gli elettorati del PD e Leu: i punteggi di coerenza sono elevati e seguono da vicino quelli dell'elettorato anziano. Non trova quindi conferma, all'interno di quest'area politica, la tesi del disallineamento dei giovani, mentre è nella fascia di età intermedia che si registra una maggiore discontinuità, dovuta soprattutto alle posizioni sull'immigrazione (alta incidenza di contrari) e sull'economia (molte posizioni centriste invece che stataliste).

Un discorso a parte va fatto, ancora una volta, per l'elettorato del Movimento 5 stelle che, assieme a quello di FI, mostra l'andamento più incerto. Se per FI la spiegazione è il gap di età (giovani ideologicamente fluidi, anziani compatti a destra), nel caso del M5S la questione è più complessa. I punteggi di congruenza sui temi risultano sempre bassi (circa la metà di quelli del resto del campione), sia considerando come riferimento l'allineamento a sinistra sia quello a destra. Tenendo conto delle caratteristiche del partito e dell'anomalo posizionamento sull'asse sinistra-destra già rilevato in altri studi (Colloca e Corbetta 2015), abbiamo riportato graficamente anche i punteggi di coerenza rispetto alle posizioni neutre, cor-

rispondenti alle categorie centrali di ogni issue<sup>4</sup>. Mentre nel campione complessivo il peso di questi profili è irrilevante (cfr. Tab. 2), nel caso del M5S al crescere della propensione di voto per il partito aumenta il punteggio di congruenza "centrista" per i giovani (da 0,45 a 0,55). Questa relazione, anche se debole, indica un'attitudine specifica dell'elettorato pentastellato a collocarsi su posizioni non estreme rispetto ai temi politici analizzati. E il fatto che tale caratteristica interessi solo i giovani sta a segnalare una modalità peculiare di interpretare il cambiamento: non attraverso il disallineamento di posizioni tra le issue (alcune di sinistra, altre di destra), ma attraverso il non posizionamento.

## 5. CONCLUSIONI

L'articolo intendeva testare, con riferimento al quadro politico italiano del 2020, quanto le posizioni dei cittadini sulle questioni divisive del dibattito pubblico fossero organizzate in modo coerente e se questa coerenza si riflettesse anche in orientamenti di voto "corretti", ossia per quei partiti più vicini sul piano ideologico e in grado di rappresentare meglio le preferenze degli elettori nel loro complesso. Sullo sfondo di queste riflessioni c'è il dibattito, ampiamente sintetizzato nel paragrafo iniziale, sul declino dei cleavages tradizionali e l'emergere di nuove linee di divisione (quali appunto l'asse dell'apertura-chiusura), in grado di attraversare lo spazio politico tagliando le preferenze elettorali. Nell'articolo ci siamo posti, poi, la domanda su quanto le differenze di età abbiano contribuito ad alternare il legame tra elettori, temi e scelte partitiche.

L'analisi ha evidenziato la presenza di spazi politici distinti. Gli elettorati disponibili a votare partiti collocati in schieramenti opposti mostrano ancora posizioni diverse tra loro sulle principali questioni discusse nel dibattito pubblico. Per quanto riguarda l'età, il contributo fornito dai giovani al processo di destrutturazione dello spazio politico appare complessivamente ridimensionato. Il grado di coerenza sui temi è simile a quello delle altre classi di età. Emerge, inoltre, un'interessante differenza tra gli elettorati: mentre tra quelli vicini ai partiti di centro-sinistra i giovani mostrano una certa compattezza e una chiara collocazione lungo le polarità peculiari dell'area politica (su tutti gli item eccetto, parzialmente, per l'immigrazione), nel campo opposto (o quantomeno in una parte di questo campo e su alcune

<sup>4</sup> Le posizioni neutre sui temi corrispondono al punteggio 4 delle scale 1-7. Come nei casi precedenti, l'indice di coerenza di centro va da 0 a 1, con 0 che corrisponde a nessuna risposta neutra sui temi e 1 a tutte le risposte neutre.

dimensioni) il contributo della componente giovanile spinge verso l'allentamento dei confini.

Questa differenza tra elettorati e tra gruppi di età apre a una questione importante che riguarda non solo le preferenze individuali ma anche le strategie dei partiti. Un elettorato fedele, in grado di allineare correttamente le proprie posizioni e interpretare correttamente le posizioni delle varie forze politiche rappresenta una risorsa o un limite per partiti che tentano di allargare il proprio bacino tradizionale di consensi e/o creare uno nuovo mai intercettato prima? Diversamente, un elettorato meno coerente risulta anche più volatile, stabilisce legami meno stabili con i partiti? Tali interrogativi si connettono evidentemente con la questione generazionale di cui ci siamo occupati nell'articolo. Mantenere una coerenza di posizioni può essere un fattore determinante per la scelta di voto (e anche per la decisione di andare a votare) se si guarda agli elettori anziani, socializzati nella politica dei grandi partiti, e probabilmente anche agli elettori di mezza età che hanno vissuto il bipolarismo della Seconda repubblica. Tra i giovani, invece, la situazione appare differente. È soprattutto nel campo del voto a destra che si pongono le questioni più interessanti. L'emergere di (alcune) posizioni moderatamente di apertura, in particolare rispetto ai temi delle famiglie e dell'Europa, sta a segnalare la presenza di una seppur minima complessità di dimensioni dentro il polo del cosiddetto autoritarismo culturale. Il rifiuto dei diritti delle minoranze espresso dalla spinta anti-immigrazione non risulta incompatibile con l'affermazione delle libertà personali, di cui l'estensione dei diritti alle nuove unioni familiari è una delle espressioni. Per i partiti dell'area di (centro) destra l'incoerenza giovanile su alcuni temi è il riflesso di una cultura progressista che tende a generalizzarsi e ad uscire dai suoi confini politico-partitici tradizionali. Al contrario, nel campo opposto è l'elettorato adulto a distanziarsi dal "seminato" coniugando orientamenti di segno contrastante tra loro e rispetto alla linea storicamente espressa dai partiti di riferimento. Resta un dato da confermare, con studi più approfonditi: il profilo della destra italiana, dopo la fase di successi negli anni novanta, non appare forse sufficientemente attrattiva per un vasto ambito di giovani a cui potrebbe non bastare la nettezza di posizioni sul tema immigrazione espresso dalle due formazioni più rappresentative, la Lega e Fratelli d'Italia.

A completamento di queste riflessioni è necessario richiamare nella discussione il caso del M5S. Di questo partito è nota la capacità di incorporare ampie fasce di voto giovanile (come è avvenuto clamorosamente nelle elezioni del 2013). Se è vero che i giovani ne rappresen-

tano una constituency importante, i dati evidenziano anche come manchi ad essi un tratto ricorrente della politica giovanile, ossia il radicalismo. Al contrario, sono proprio i giovani del M5S a manifestare posizioni indistinte su tutti i temi, con la parziale eccezione dell'estensione dei diritti alle nuove famiglie. Questo tratto anomalo può rappresentare al tempo stesso un elemento di forza e di debolezza. Invece di alimentare la contrapposizione sui valori, come avviene tra i partiti sfidanti in tutta Europa, l'elettorato giovanile del M5S assume un profilo poco delineato e sempre coperto sul piano ideologico-valoriale, riproducendo una caratteristica già riscontrata da tempo rispetto al posizionamento sinistra-destra. C'è da considerare, però, che l'analisi qui presentata non ha trattato la questione dell'antipolitica su cui potrebbe riversarsi il portato di radicalismo che non trova espressione sugli altri temi.

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## APPENDICE

**Tabella 1.** Modelli di regressione multipla. Variabile dipendente: issue congruency (a destra).

	LN			FdI			FI		
	Coef. B	St.err.	Sign.	Coef. B	St.err.	Sign.	Coef. B	St.err.	Sign.
Eta:									
18-40	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
41-60	0,038	0,021	0,074	0,031	0,022	0,157	0,055	0,023	0,015
>60	-0,020	0,023	0,390	-0,038	0,023	0,101	-0,036	0,024	0,141
PTV LN (0-10):	0,036	0,004	0,000	0,034	0,004	0,000	0,025	0,006	0,000
Eta*PTV:									
18-40	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
41-60	-0,000	0,005	0,997	0,003	0,005	0,615	0,003	0,007	0,667
>60	0,008	0,005	0,117	0,012	0,005	0,031	0,019	0,007	0,008
Genere	-0,012	0,014	0,364	-0,002	0,014	0,873	-0,010	0,015	0,510
Zona geopolitica	-0,010	0,005	0,768	-0,008	0,003	0,567	-0,002	0,000	0,866
Titolo di studio	-0,011	0,003	0,000	-0,013	0,003	0,000	-0,017	0,003	0,000
Condizione occupazionale	0,006	0,016	0,707	0,006	0,016	0,720	0,010	0,017	0,553
Costante	0,321	0,040	0,000	0,322	0,040	0,000	0,386	0,043	0,000
Adj R-squared	0,226			0,224			0,117		
N	1636			1636			1636		

**Tabella 2.** Modelli di regressione multipla. Variabile dipendente: issue congruency (a sinistra).

	PD			Leu		
	Coef. B	St.err.	Sign.	Coef. B	St.err.	Sign.
Eta:						
18-40	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
41-60	-0,063	0,026	0,015	-0,033	0,024	0,165
>60	-0,051	0,029	0,083	0,017	0,026	0,517
PTV LN (0-10):	0,038	0,005	0,000	0,051	0,006	0,000
Eta*PTV:						
18-40	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
41-60	0,000	0,006	0,936	-0,009	0,007	0,241
>60	0,009	0,006	0,097	0,005	0,007	0,510
Genere	-0,013	0,015	0,364	0,002	0,015	0,879
Zona geopolitica	0,003	0,001	0,654	-0,009	0,002	0,754
Titolo di studio	0,019	0,003	0,000	0,019	0,003	0,000
Condizione occupazionale	-0,005	0,017	0,758	-0,012	0,017	0,487
Costante	0,219	0,043	0,000	0,230	0,043	0,000
Adj R-squared	0,233			0,194		
N	1636			1636		

**Tabella 3.** Modelli di regressione multipla. Variabile dipendente: issue congruency (a sinistra, a destra, a centro).

	M5s (sin)			M5s (des)			M5s (cen)		
	Coef. B	St.err.	Sign.	Coef. B	St.err.	Sign.	Coef. B	St.err.	Sign.
Eta:									
18-40	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
41-60	-0,099	0,027	0,000	0,076	0,026	0,003	0,033	0,023	0,139
>60	0,021	0,028	0,457	-0,009	0,027	0,750	0,013	0,024	0,576
PTV LN (0-10):	-0,007	0,005	0,155	-0,001	0,005	0,864	0,016	0,004	0,000
Eta*PTV:									
18-40	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
41-60	0,011	0,006	0,100	-0,006	0,006	0,302	-0,012	0,005	0,033
>60	0,000	0,007	0,965	0,003	0,007	0,683	-0,012	0,006	0,045
Genere	-0,001	0,016	0,947	-0,018	0,015	0,252	0,013	0,014	0,339
Zona geopolitica	-0,010	0,005	0,432	-0,006	0,005	0,432	-0,01	0,004	0,497
Titolo di studio	0,024	0,003	0,000	-0,019	0,003	0,000	0,000	0,003	0,927
Condizione occupazionale	-0,022	0,019	0,246	0,007	0,018	0,690	-0,006	0,016	0,881
Costante	0,337	0,047	0,000	0,463	0,045	0,000	0,370	0,040	0,000
Adj R-squared	0,046			0,028			0,033		
N	1636			1636			1636		





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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 of 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 minister 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<sup>1</sup>.

In 2019, the Partito Democratico (PD) and the populist Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) made an alliance to form a new government<sup>2</sup>. 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<sup>3</sup>.

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

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>1</sup> Data presented later in this paper also substantiates this.

<sup>2</sup> After the M5S and the far-right Lega party dissolved their own coalition.

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<sup>4</sup> affiliates.

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

<sup>4</sup> Liberi e Uguali also had ideological opposition to the reforms contained within.

## 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 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<sup>5</sup>. The most positive assess-

<sup>5</sup> 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".

<sup>6</sup> Appendix table 1 displays the precise difference as well as if the difference is statistically significant

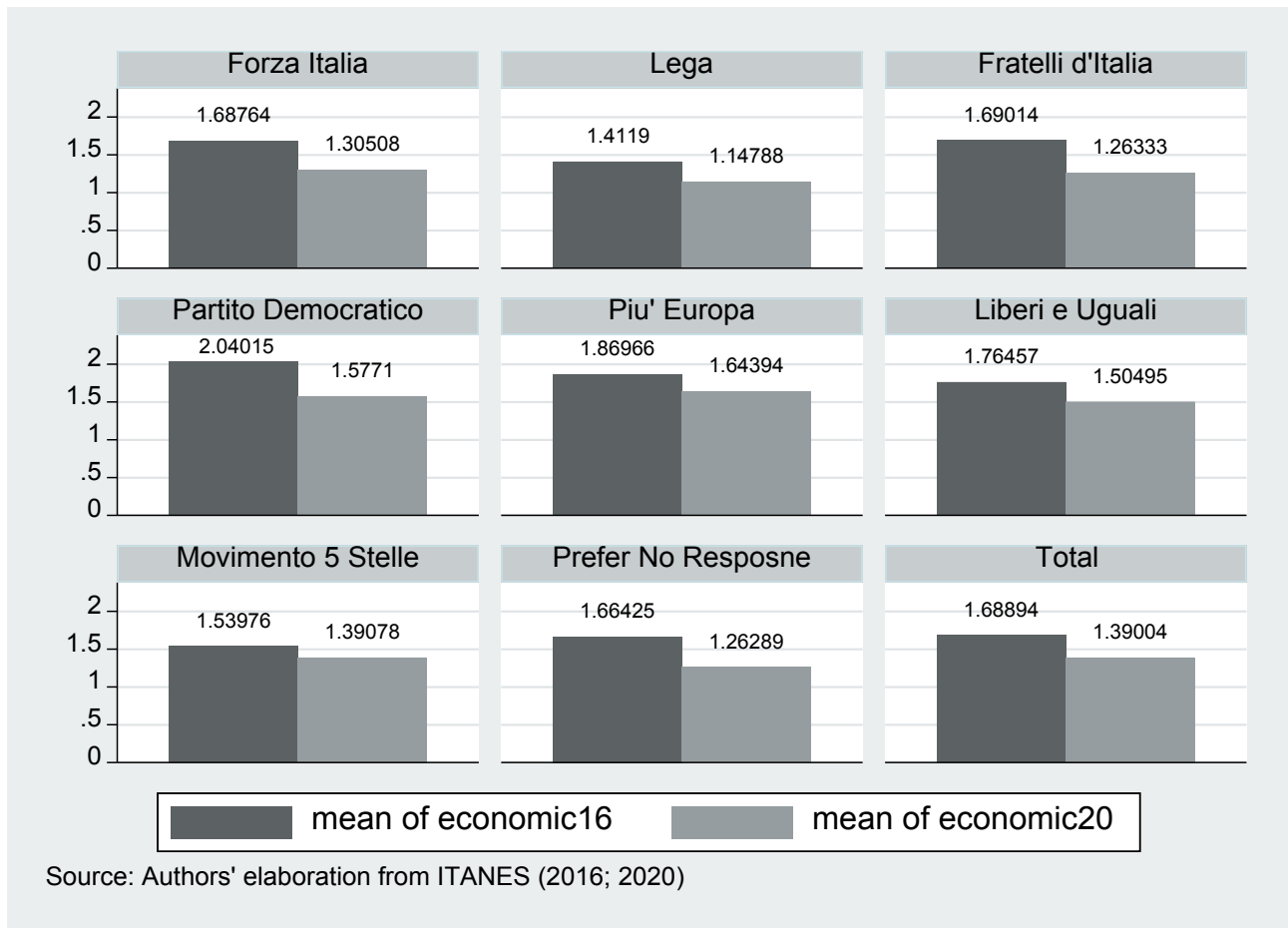


Figure 1. Economic assessments by party (0-4).

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.*

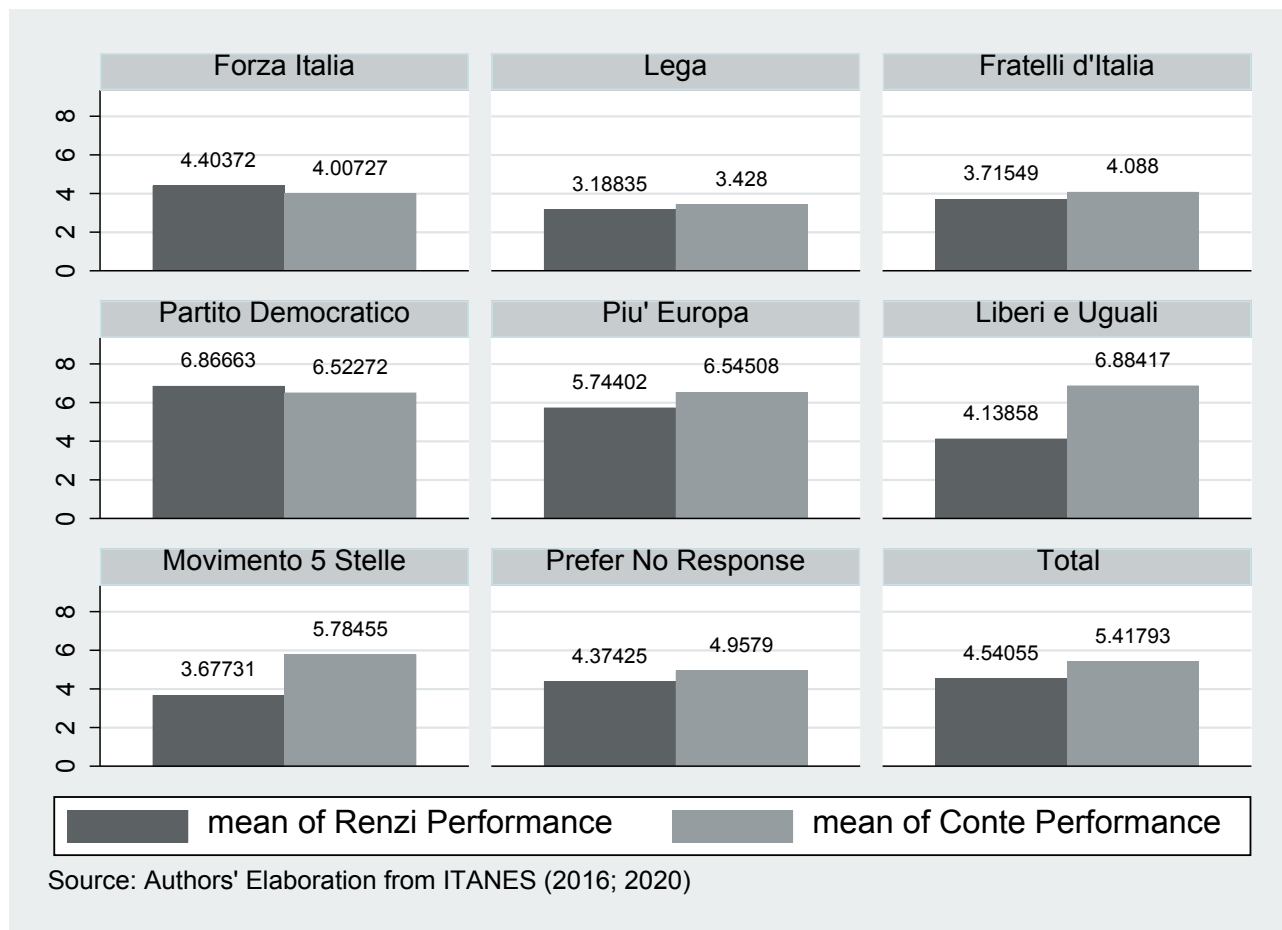


Figure 2. Government assessments by party (1-11).

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<sup>7</sup>. 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<sup>8</sup> 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

<sup>7</sup> Indirectly, this also is a vote to limit the influence of smaller legislative parties should they be unable to gain representation.

<sup>8</sup> Bergman (2019) characterizes reform-outcome motivations as ‘referendum-specific factors’. We use this term here.



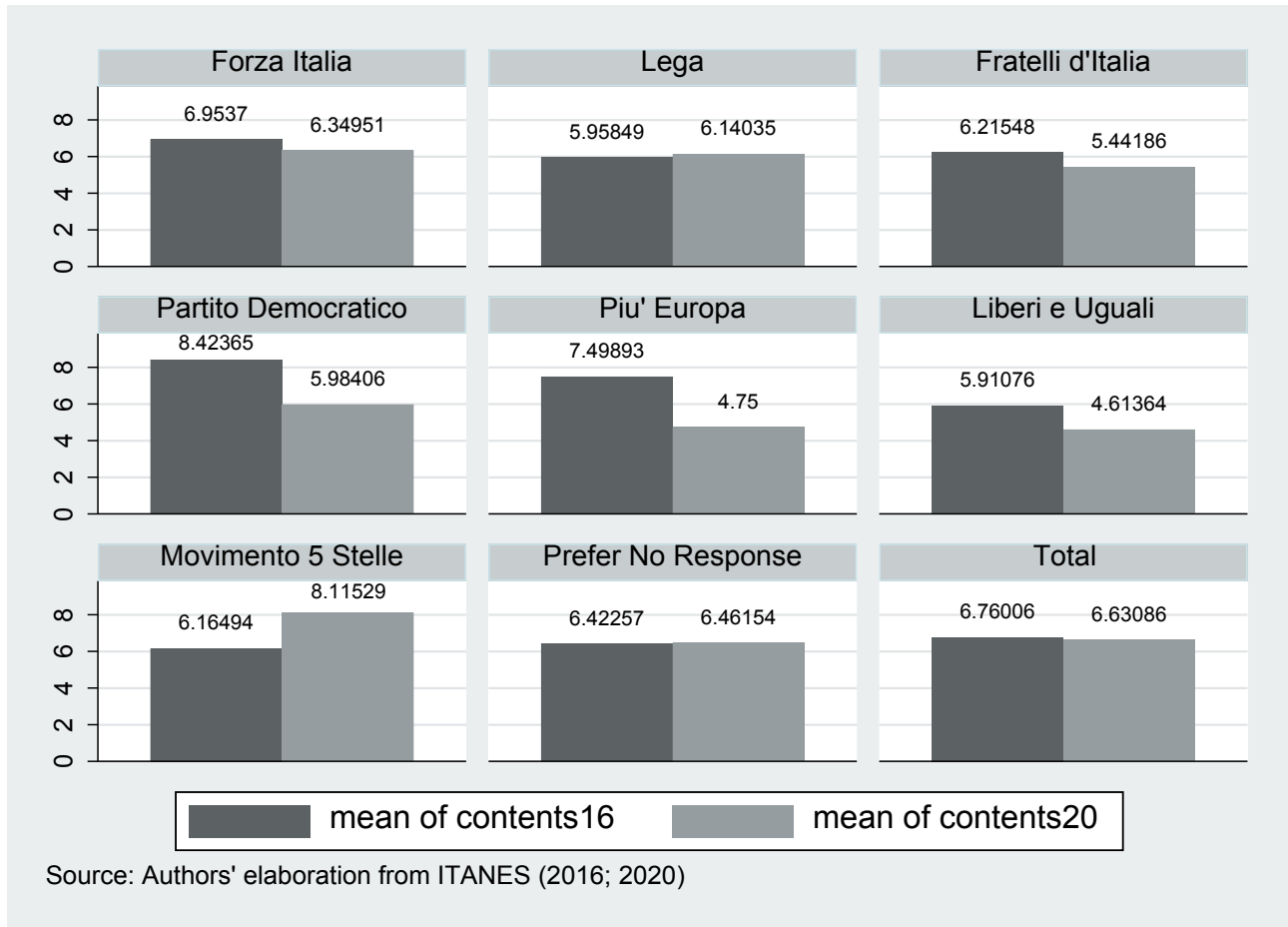


Figure 3. Reform policy assessments by party (1-11).

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 (Abramowitz

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.*



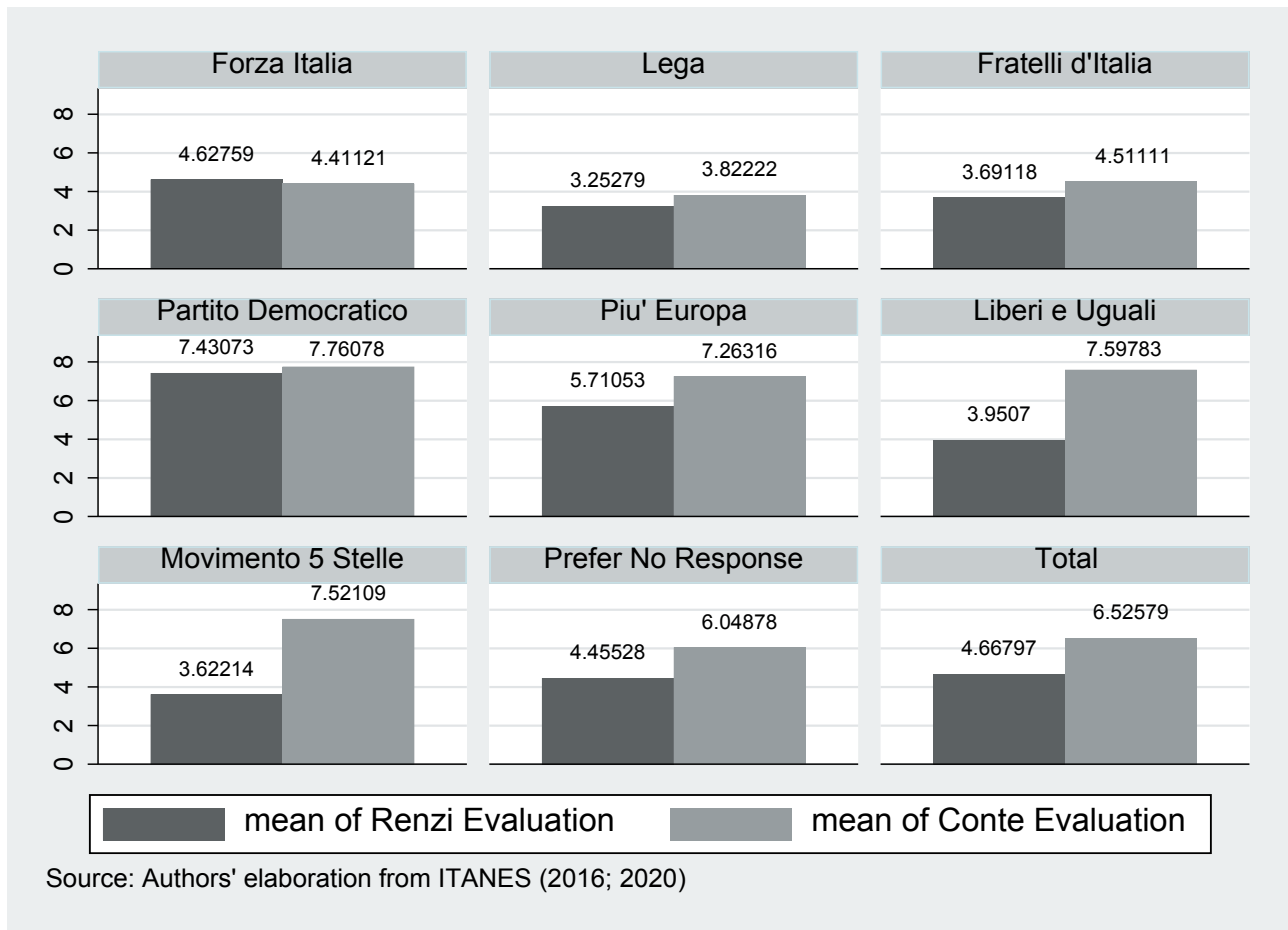


Figure 4. Leadership evaluation by party (1-11).

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.

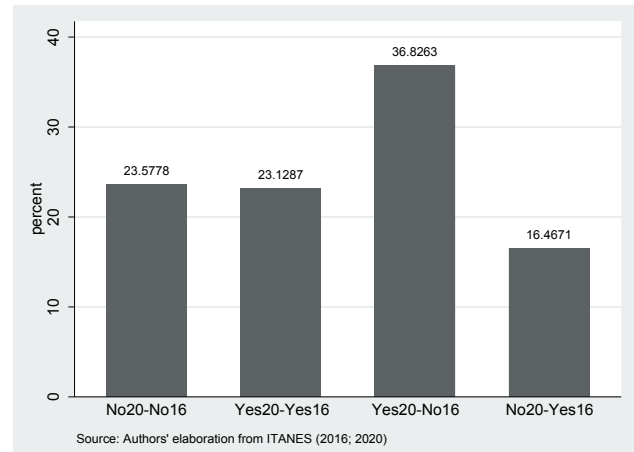
#### MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

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
$\Delta$ - Economic	-0.056 (-0.13)	-0.119 (-0.13)	-0.089 (-0.2)
$\Delta$ - Govt Performance	0.077 (-0.16)	-0.603*** (-0.16)	-0.468* (-0.22)
$\Delta$ - Referendum Content	-1.619*** (-0.15)	-1.153*** (-0.14)	-3.239*** (-0.23)
$\Delta$ - Leader Evaluation	-0.138 (-0.15)	-0.214 (-0.14)	-0.458* (-0.2)
FI	0.034 (-0.13)	-0.074 (-0.15)	0.096 (-0.26)
Lega	0.136 (-0.17)	-0.221 (-0.19)	-0.102 (-0.34)
FdI	0.076 (-0.13)	-0.062 (-0.14)	0.004 (-0.23)
PD	0.004 (-0.27)	1.145*** (-0.25)	1.526*** (-0.39)
M5S	-0.551** (-0.21)	-0.035 (-0.22)	-0.016 (-0.43)
PE	0.147 (-0.19)	0.412* (-0.19)	0.685** (-0.25)
LeU	0.371* (-0.15)	0.01 (-0.2)	0.416 (-0.28)
PartitoPico	0.297* (-0.14)	0.297 (-0.16)	0.641** (-0.22)
age	-0.165 (-0.14)	-0.303* (-0.15)	-0.276 (-0.19)
female	0.023 (-0.11)	-0.005 (-0.11)	0.235 (-0.16)
education	0.118 (-0.13)	0.021 (-0.13)	0.192 (-0.18)
cons	0.275 (-0.17)	0.409* (-0.17)	-2.138*** (-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 " $\Delta$ -" 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			

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



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

into one of 4 categories<sup>9</sup>: 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<sup>10</sup>. As noted in the previous sections, we create

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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 their 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<sup>11</sup> and first-differenced, with greater values indicating more positive feelings in 2020. Partisanship variables and controls of age, gender, and education<sup>12</sup> 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.

**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	<b>31.7%</b>	<b>17.6%</b>	34.6%	16.1%
Fratelli d’Italia	30.6%	19.3%	33.2%	16.9%
Partito Democratico	<b>6.3%</b>	<b>50.4%</b>	<b>15.4%</b>	<b>28.0%</b>
Movimento Cinque Stelle	<b>14.6%</b>	<b>28.1%</b>	<b>38.2%</b>	19.0%
Più Europa	<b>13.4%</b>	<b>36.7%</b>	<b>18.1%</b>	<b>31.8%</b>
Liberi e Uguali	<b>38.0%</b>	<b>13.9%</b>	<b>25.4%</b>	22.7%
PartitoPico	<b>26.1%</b>	24.9%	<b>20.0%</b>	<b>29.0%</b>

Source: Elaboration from Table 1.

Bold indicates a significant  $p < .05$  impact of variable on outcome.

<sup>11</sup> 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 Griethuisen et al., 2015). This method of normalizing additive indices has been used before in studies of Italian voting behaviour (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Indicating if a respondent has graduated college or not.

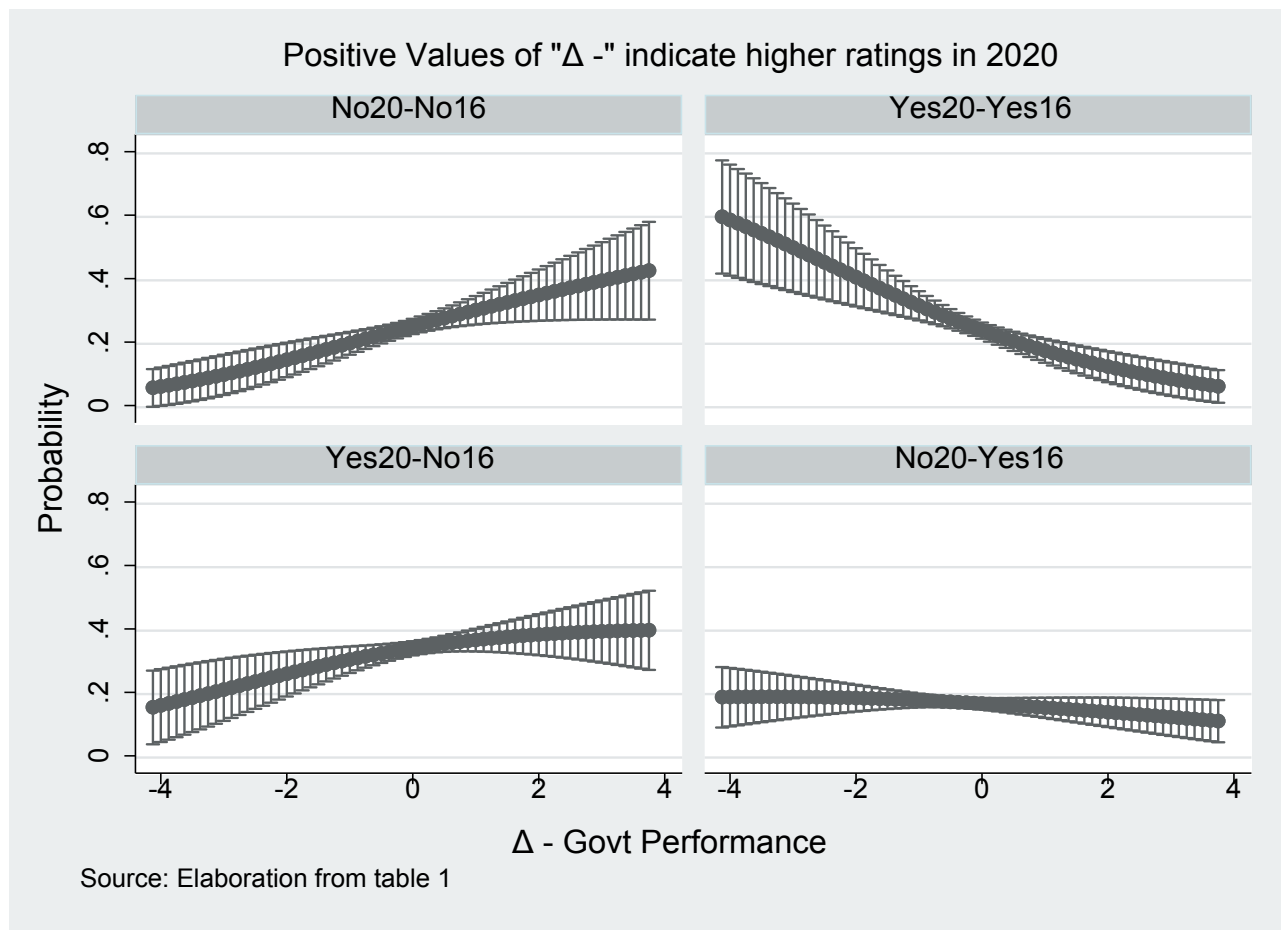


Figure 6. Predictions varying change in assessment of government performance.

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-

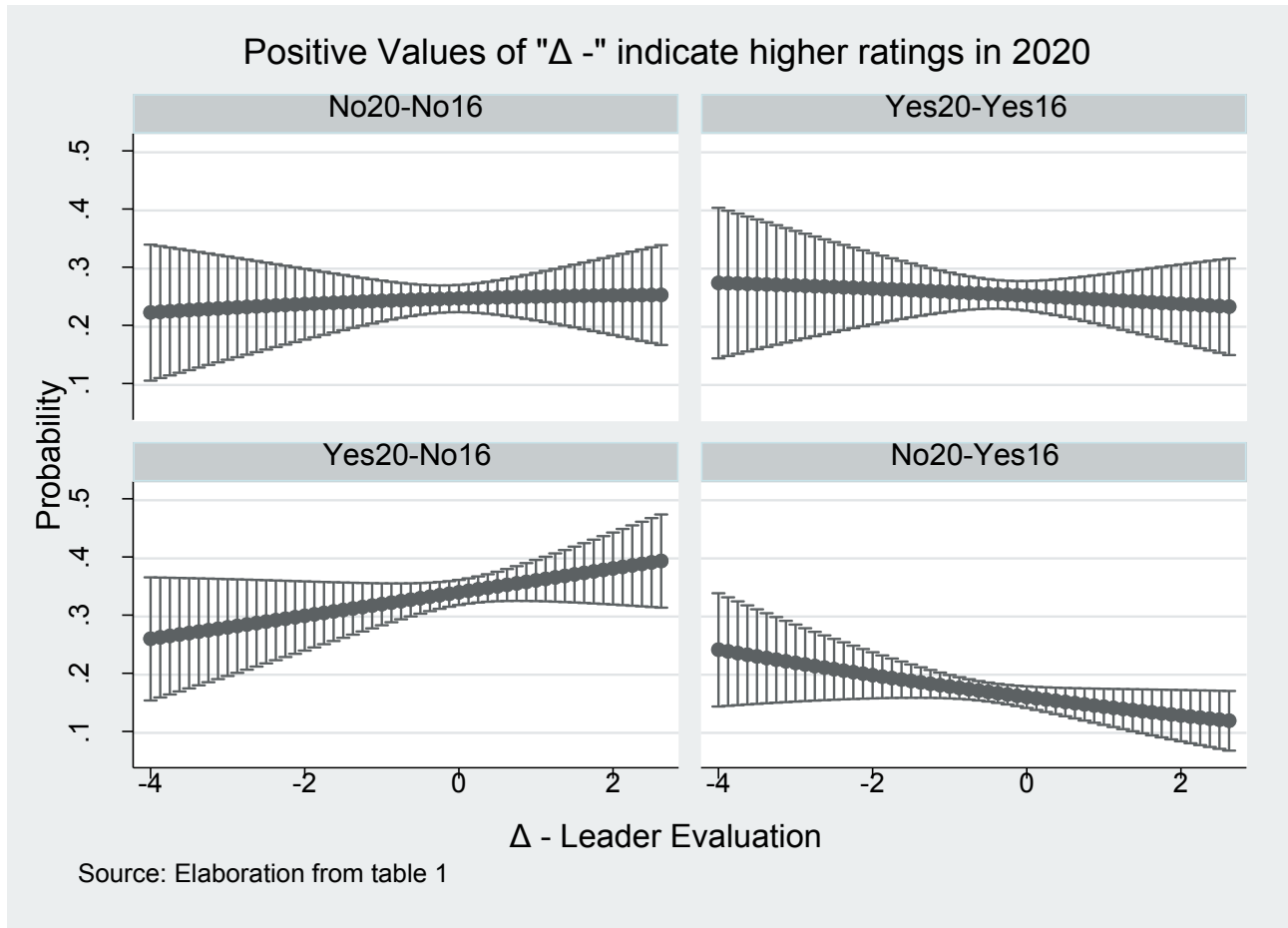


Figure 7. Predictions varying change in government leader evaluation.

tistical effect, which supports the findings of other scholars who have performed 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

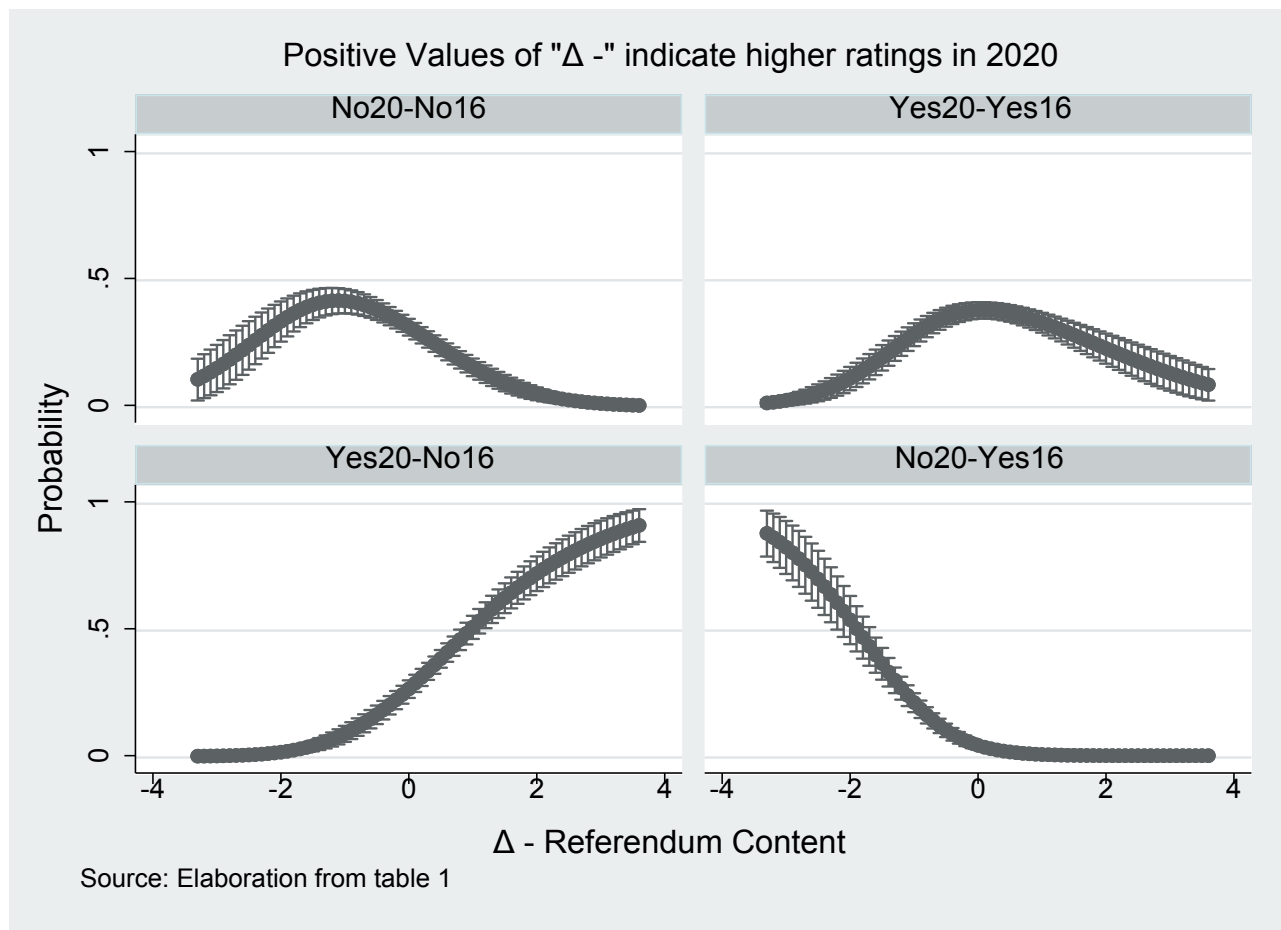


Figure 8. Predictions varying change in assessment of referendum content.

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+				



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## Where has the protest gone? Populist attitudes and electoral flows in Italian political turmoil

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**Abstract.** What happens when anti-establishment political actors gain strength, enter institutions, and even become the new establishment? To what extent are their electoral profiles and the demands behind them normalised by the system? This article uses ITANES surveys to investigate voters' reactions to the different paths taken by the three main protagonists of the 2016-2020 Italian populist wave: the M5S, the Lega, and FDI. In particular, it uses panel data to study the evolution of populist attitudes and protest drivers, as well as their connection with electoral flows and parties' strategic choices. The most striking change concerns the redefinition of the political outlook of 5-star voters, who have significantly reduced their populist stances. However, the transformation of the M5S into a government party produced significant outflows of voters who already in 2016 expressed greater resentment towards political elites. These dynamics have largely favoured parties of the populist right – the Lega and then especially FDI – which have preserved or even reinforced their (electoral) profile as anti-establishment parties.

**Keywords:** Italian political system, institutionalisation, populism, anti-establishment parties, electoral behaviour.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

What happens when anti-establishment political actors gain strength, enter institutions, and even become the new establishment? To what extent are their electoral profiles and the demands behind them *normalised* by the system? The rise of challenger (populist) parties in many established democracies has renewed interest in such questions in recent years. These parties have been able to tap into a widespread democratic malaise which translates into protest voting, challenges mainstream parties, and often rewrites the patterns of party competition. Their success and potential access to government positions have been seen both as a threat to democratic polities and as a way of channelling the discontent with unanswered social demands into the political system.

From Guglielmo Giannini's *Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque* (Common Man's Front) over the '40s to Silvio Berlusconi's personal party since the '90s,

Italy already had a long tradition as a populist laboratory (Tarchi 2015). The last decade, however, has brought renewed attention to the Italian case given the strength and composite nature of its new populist wave (Caiani and Graziano 2016), rewarding different anti-establishment parties at different times. The constitutional referendum of 2016 and 2020 mark two crucial steps in this process, as has occurred in other established democracies (Uleri 2002; Qvortrup 2018). In 2016, the post-ideological M5S (Movimento 5 Stelle – Five-Star Movement) and the right-wing Lega were the main opposition parties and part of the large and heterogeneous coalition opposing the constitutional reform promoted by Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and his PD (Partito Democratico – Democratic Party). They were also the main interpreters of the Italian «populist zeitgeist» (Mudde 2004), which would enable them to ‘win’ the 2018 general election and give birth to the self-defined ‘government of change’ (2018-2019).

Four years later, the M5S was the main supporter of a new reform downsizing the parliament by a third. At the same time, it was the main governing party. On the other side, the Lega was the main opposition party. Matteo Salvini’s party had left the government, calling for early elections, after its resounding success at the 2019 European election. Meanwhile, another radical right party, Giorgia Meloni’s FDI (Fratelli d’Italia – Brothers of Italy), was gaining momentum in the polls.

The different paths of these three parties provide a unique observatory to assess if (and how) voters react to the different roles assumed by challenger parties with respect to the majority-opposition line of division. This article uses panel data to investigate the electoral distribution of populist attitudes and protest drivers in the 2016-2020 timeframe. The longitudinal research design makes it possible to study the evolution of the profiles of these parties’ electorates concerning the analysed dimensions, linking them to electoral flows in a highly volatile electoral market.

This approach enables testing whether the access to government positions was accompanied by a (partial) mitigation of protest elements in the political outlook of challenger parties’ electorates, or whether it was matched, on the contrary, by an outflow of ‘critical voters’ who found new challengers ready to channel their resentment. The next section provides the theoretical framework adopted in this article. The third discusses the relevance of the Italian case for the study of these phenomena. The following two sections introduce the research hypotheses (section 4) and the research design (section 5). The next three sections present the results: section 6 briefly reconstructs the electoral evolution

of the three challenger parties between the two constitutional referenda and provides the electoral flows to explain such changes; section 7 provides a descriptive account of the signs of social and political malaise in the party electoral profiles between 2016 and 2020; and section 8 links such changes to party flows, using multinomial logit models. The final section summarises the main findings and discusses the main clues for understanding the rapid evolution of the Italian political system.

## 2. WHEN ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT ACTORS BECOME THE NEW ESTABLISHMENT

Different but partially overlapping concepts have been used to describe the recent rise of challenger parties that have contributed to the rapid evolution of party systems in old and new democratic polities. Populism is probably the most recurrent and crosscutting category in today’s readings of the transformations of politics at the global level (Meny and Surel 2002; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2007; Diamanti and Lazar 2018). In Mudde’s renowned ideational conceptualisation, populism has two main components: *people-centrism* and *anti-elitism* (Mudde 2004). These two dimensions combine themselves and reinforce each other in populists’ view. They translate into the idea that people’s place in society should be restored through the release of the popular ‘general will’, freed from the obscure and tentacular influence of different kinds of elites.

People’s enemies may assume different ‘faces’ – according to different conceptions of the people – but political oligarchies and mainstream parties are almost always ideal (and privileged) populist targets.

Although significant ‘degrees’ of populism are increasingly exhibited by different political actors – both old and new parties, both government and opposition – populism remains primarily a powerful strategic weapon in the hands of opposition forces.

Populist parties often present themselves as anti-establishment parties, channelling the protest towards political elites originating from a mix of widespread social, cultural, and political malaise affecting contemporary democracies (Inglehart and Norris 2016; Morlino and Raniolo 2017).

A large strand of literature has linked their success to the effects of globalisation, particularly in economic and cultural terms (Angelucci and De Sio 2021, Crouch 2020). Their constituents have been described as the «losers of globalisation» (Kriesi et al. 2006) and of the recurrent crises of the globalised world: from the Great



Recession of 2008, to the refugee crisis of 2015, to the most recent Covid-19 pandemic. Issues such as economic dissatisfaction and stagnating living standards, identity, and fears generated by migration flows, combined with the role of technology and social media communication in particular (Mounk 2018), have often been identified as major factors fuelling votes in favour of challenger parties. It was in the increasing *void* between the demos and party democracy (Mair 2013) that these political forces became the ideal electoral outlet for disappointed, disillusioned, ‘critical’ voters. These social components choose them to give voice to their protest against established political actors and their ‘system’, considered far away from their own interests and demands.

Populist actors’ attacks do not involve only national institutions; they have European institutions and the EU membership itself as ideal targets. In their views, European authorities and the European bureaucracy are considered close to the great powers of the globalised world. For these reasons, the EU is blamed for the consequences of globalisation on (ordinary) citizens’ living standards and its failure to tackle the issues related to it. Moreover, European institutions are often seen as a limitation of national democracy, depriving citizens of their right to *decide* for themselves. For these reasons, populist actors often call for a recovery of national sovereignty through an exit from the EU (or from the eurozone).

The dynamics outlined above open up important questions about the effects of populism on democratic systems and the key mechanism of *representation*. However, they also open up questions about the effects of the political system on populist actors. When they enter democratic institutions and access government positions, populist parties have the opportunity to translate their ideas into political decisions. They can tackle the social issues that favoured their rise. They can bring their innovative drive into the system, trying to change its rules and formal arrangement. However, they are also influenced by their new position and by the role they assume. The contact with institutions often *normalises* and *institutionalises* them.

There is a steadily expanding strand of literature addressing the theme of populists in power (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart 2016). This article will not analyse the changes induced by ‘the system’ on populist parties in terms of their political message, internal organisation, or communication style. Instead of looking at these dimensions, it will focus on their constituency and their voters’ attitudes, studying their evolution given the institutional roles assumed over time. The main aim is to assess if and how access to government roles by challenger parties is

accompanied by a redefinition of the populist attitudes of their electoral base. The analysis will focus on a specific country in a specific time window: Italy between 2016 and 2020.

### 3. THE ITALIAN BACKGROUND

Since the early 1990s, Italy has become an extraordinary laboratory for the study of populism (Tarchi 2015; Caiani and Graziano 2016). The advent of Berlusconi and Berlusconi’s centre-right has provided scholars with plenty of empirical material to study populism and populism in power. However, the end of Berlusconi’s era (Ceccarini, Diamanti and Lazar 2012) and a new political transition have paved the way for the advent of new populist actors, who have largely altered the Italian political scene and its bipolar arrangement (Diamanti and Natale 2014).

In this process, a central role has been played by one political actor in particular: the M5S (Corbetta and Gualmini 2013; Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013; Biorcio and Natale 2018). With its post-ideological (or multi-ideological) approach, the movement party founded by the former comedian Beppe Grillo (2009) has been able to redefine the old centre-right vs centre-left duopoly. Maybe the most interesting feature of Grillo’s political creature regards its ability to combine a wide array of different populist messages, solutions, and host ideologies. Nevertheless, the most recent phase has also witnessed the emergence of populist actors with a more ideologically delimited populist profile. Matteo Salvini has been able to transform the old regionalist LN (Lega Nord – Northern League) into a radical right, nationalist, and anti-immigration populist party (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018). Giorgia Meloni, a former member of the post-fascist AN (Alleanza Nazionale – National Alliance), has been able to bring her FDI – founded in 2013 as a Berlusconi’s PDL splinter party – to ‘lead’ the European Conservatives and Reformist Party. Although representatives of the Lega and FDI participated in centre-right coalition governments in the past, both centre-right parties, as well as the M5S, fiercely opposed all the grand coalition governments that Italy has had since 2011.

In 2016, all three parties were part of the large and composite political front opposing Prime Minister Renzi’s constitutional reform in the referendum on 4 December. Renzi himself, as the secretary of the main centre-left party and the head of government, had tried to embody a sort of *soft populism*, initially obtaining wide support from public opinion (Bordignon 2014; Ventura 2015). Renzi had also tried to assign a populist



'meaning' to some popular contents of his reform, seeking to transform the vote for it into a personal plebiscite. However, by the end of 2016, his star had largely eclipsed: his government, his party, and his leadership epitomised the establishment itself in a climate of growing social resentment and anti-establishment feelings. The resounding defeat in the referendum would become the prologue to what would happen a year and a half later, in the general election of March 2018.

The incumbent PD and its centre-left coalition suffered another bitter defeat, while the M5S and the Lega were the main winners of the 2018 parliamentary election. The two parties contested the election on different sides of a still tripolar competition. The M5S won almost a third of the vote. Salvini's new Lega achieved the best result in its long history (17%), establishing itself for the first time as the leading party in the centre-right area.

This result was described as a populist fest, paving the way to the birth of a populist yellow-green<sup>1</sup> government (Bellucci 2018). After months of political deadlock, the two parties reached an agreement to form a self-defined «government of change», led by the previously unknown jurist Giuseppe Conte (Pasquino 2019). The success of the new populists in power has been explained as the result of a social, cultural, and political malaise connected to different factors: the lingering effects of the economic crisis on the middle- and lower-class households; the fears produced by international migration and multi-ethnic society; and the widespread dissatisfaction regarding the functioning of state institutions and the conduct of a political class seen as elitist and self-referential (Barisione, Bellucci and Vezzoni 2018; Emanuele and Paparo 2018; Chiaramonte et al. 2018; Bordignon, Ceccarini and Diamanti 2018).

The economy was one of the main themes characterising the 2018 electoral campaign and citizens' priorities (Valbruzzi 2019). The success of the M5S and the southernisation of its 2018 electoral map have been linked to the party's ambitious plan to tackle economic conditions – and poverty in particular – through its «citizenship income» project. Immigration was another theme characterising the campaign and, in particular, a central theme of Salvini's platform. The success of the Lega and its expansion towards central and even southern regions have often been associated with its leader's constant and flamboyant anti-immigration rhetoric, and then with his closed-borders policies as the minister of the interior in the Conte I cabinet.

The European Union and the euro currency have also been important issues, continuously discussed in

the political and public debate in recent times (Bellucci and Conti 2012). Over time, a relevant distinction between pro-/anti-European parties has taken shape (Conti 2014). Eurosceptic positions have been expressed, at different times and with different degrees, by all three populist parties analysed in this article. The Lega has explicitly expressed itself in favour of an Italian exit from the eurozone in the past. The M5S has often maintained an ambiguous position on this point, stating on several occasions that the decision should be up to the citizens through a referendum.

The Conte I cabinet would be in office for just over a year. In fact, in the turbulent summer of 2019, Salvini would leave the government to try to capitalise on the extraordinary result of the European vote (34%) through early elections. However, his move would lead to the formation of a new *yellow-red* government supported by the M5S and the PD: the Conte II cabinet.

Thus, when considering the entire 2016-2020 timeframe, the three populist parties at the centre of this work followed different paths. The M5S reached and steadily maintained, since 2018, the government position. The Lega has been part of a government experience, then (unintentionally) returned to the role of main opposition party. Finally, FDI constantly continued to hold its opposition role.

As section 4 will recall, these different political trajectories were combined with different electoral trends. The constitutional referendum of September 2020, amid the pandemic emergency, closes the observation window. Strongly promoted by the M5S and justified by the (populist) objective of reducing the costs of politics, the reform, which reduces the number of MPs by a third, was approved by 70% of Italians.

#### 4. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Given the theoretical and historical framework discussed in the previous sections, and the peculiar empirical setting provided by the Italian case between 2016 and 2020, a series of (partially alternative) hypotheses can be formulated regarding the electoral evolution of Italian challenger parties.

H1. The first theoretical expectation is that access to government positions by challenger parties may contribute to attenuating populist orientations and protest drivers in the electorate. This trend may stem from psychological dynamics related to the relationship between electoral choices and orientation towards state institutions and government actors. However, it may also result from a change in (real or perceived) individual conditions, in

<sup>1</sup> Yellow (M5S) and green (Lega) were the traditional colours of the two government parties.

relation to the social and cultural issues that had oriented the vote choice. Regarding the first point, the change in government actors may contribute to varying the public image of the elites themselves, reduce the distance between citizens and the corridors of power, and foster a greater sense of inclusion for those social components that previously felt excluded from the political game. Regarding the second point, it is possible to speculate that access to the levers of power by (former) challenger parties implies that previously neglected issues have entered the agenda and are effectively translated into implemented public policies, or that citizens have, anyway, the perception that such issues are being considered by decision makers. This general hypothesis will be confirmed if the data allow us to observe the following:

H1a. A dampening of populist and anti-elite sentiments in the electorate at large.

H1b. An attenuation of feelings of social dissatisfaction concerning issues that had previously fuelled the protest against government actors, such as economic performances, immigration, and European integration.

H1c. An increased moderation in the political view of (former) challenger parties' voters.

H2. A partially alternative hypothesis is that access to government does not produce an attenuation of the attitudes of interest, but it rather produces a shift of voters expressing them in the direction of other parties which remain in opposition and become the new interpreters of protest. Whereas some challenger parties gain access to government, other actors may maintain or reinforce their profile as populist and protest parties. By doing so, they have the opportunity to collect citizens' dissatisfaction with new issues or questions that have not been (adequately) addressed yet. They can thus interpret the reactions of critical voters vis-a-vis the transformation of challenger parties into incumbent parties. This hypothesis will be confirmed if the data allow the following conditions to be observed:

H2a. The electorates of (new) opposition parties maintain or reinforce attitudes of distrust towards political elites and deep dissatisfaction with the way old and new social issues are addressed.

H2b. Significant shares of voters from (former) challenger parties who gained access to government positions maintain or reinforce their 'critical profile' and change their vote in favour of (new) challenger parties.

## 5. RESEARCH DESIGN

To test these hypotheses, this study uses ITANES (Italian National Election Studies) panel data, based on national samples of the Italian voting age population, interviewed by the polling firm SWG using the CAWI (computer-assisted web interviewing) method. Using the data sets provided by this project, it was possible

to isolate 1412 cases who were interviewed about their political and electoral orientations at four different time points: 1) before and after the 2016 constitutional referendum; 2) after the 2018 general election; 3) after the 2019 European election; and 4) before and after the 2020 constitutional referendum. Data from the 2018 ITANES pre-election survey, collected through a rolling cross-sectional design (5528 cases), are also used.

### *The dependent variable(s)*

The electorates of the main parties were identified using a question on the voting intention for 2016; a question on the voted party for the lower house (proportional part) in the 2018 parliamentary elections; a question on the voted party in the 2019 European elections; and an estimate of voting intentions for 2020.<sup>2</sup> The longitudinal design of the survey made it possible to reconstruct the overall vote flows in the 2016-2020 time window. This allowed for the creation of three typologies that – for each of the three challenger parties – identify four groups: *Loyal party voters* (those who were classified as voters of that specific party in both 2016 and 2020), *Outgoing party voters* (those who were classified as voters of that specific party in 2016 but not in 2020 – they were categorised as voters of another party or as part of the grey area of uncertain voters and potential abstainers), *Incoming party voters* (those who were classified as voters of that specific party in 2020 but not in 2016), and *Other voters* (those who were not classified as voters of that specific party both in 2016 and 2020). The sum of these four groups coincides with the entire electorate. These typologies are used as dependent variables in the models presented in section 8.

### *The independent variables*

Four sets of indicators were used to isolate the main dimensions of populism and the main protest drivers discussed in the previous sections.

<sup>2</sup> These estimates were obtained by combining a propensity to vote (PTV) battery and party identification. This procedure was necessary due to the absence of a specific question on voting intentions in the 2020 questionnaire. Voters were assigned to each electorate according to the highest PTV (on a scale of 0 to 10). Ties (with a PTV higher than 0) were then assigned according to the question on party identification. This strategy was preliminarily tested on 2016 data and showed good reliability of the estimates with respect to voting intentions. Moreover, the estimates obtained for 2020 were in line with the voting intention estimates provided, for the same period, by the main polling institutes, with differences of less than one percentage point for all the main parties: results can be provided upon request.

*Populism indices.* The questionnaire included a six-item battery suggesting six statements divided according to the two main theoretical components of populism. The first three referred to people-centrism attitudes: «MPs must follow the will of the citizens»; «Citizens, not politicians, should make the most important political decisions»; «I would rather be represented by an ordinary person than a professional politician». The remaining three regarded anti-elite attitudes: «The differences between the politicians and the people are greater than the differences within the people»; «Politicians talk a lot but do little»; «Making compromises in politics actually means selling out one's principles». Respondents were asked whether they «strongly agree», «somewhat agree», «neither agree nor disagree», «somewhat disagree», or «strongly disagree» with each statement. The six variables were recoded and used to compute two additive indices of people-centrism and anti-elitism, ranging from -2 to +2. Then, these two indices were averaged to compute a general populism index. Unfortunately, the ITANES panel did not include comparable populist measures for 2016 or the 2018 post-electoral survey. For this reason, the descriptive analyses presented in section 7 use data from the ITANES 2018 pre-electoral survey, while the multivariate models presented in section 8 use an alternative (but comparable) anti-elitism index, based on a (partially) different set of statements: «What people call compromise in politics is really just selling out on one's principles»; «Most politicians do not care about the people»; «Most politicians care only about the interests of the rich and powerful».

*People's assessment of the economy.* Two indices were computed to measure voters' positions on these topics:

- *Retrospective assessment of the national economy index.* The question asked respondents to evaluate the state of the national economy over the 12 months preceding the interview. The original five-point scale («gotten much better», «gotten somewhat better», «stayed about the same», «gotten somewhat worse», «gotten much worse») was transformed into a synthetic index ranging from -2 to +2;
- *Retrospective assessment of the household economy index.* The question asked respondents to evaluate the state of the household economy over the 12 months preceding the interview. The original five-point scale («gotten much better», «gotten somewhat better», «stayed about the same», «gotten somewhat worse», «gotten much worse») was transformed into a synthetic index ranging from -2 to +2;
- *Anti-immigration index.* The original questions asked respondents to position themselves on a sev-

en-point self-anchoring scale. The two extremes represented opposite opinions: «We could easily welcome many more immigrants»; «We receive too many immigrants». For the purposes of comparison, the final index was re-scaled to range from -2 to +2.

- *Euro-scepticism index.* The questionnaire included two questions regarding the respondents' evaluation of the European membership and European single currency, respectively. Both indicators were based on a three-point scale («a good thing for Italy», «a bad thing for Italy», «neither good nor bad»), and they were used to compute an additive index ranging from -2 to +2.

### *The models*

A series of multinomial logit regression models were fitted, considering as dependent variables, for each of the three parties (M5S, Lega, and FDI), the typologies described, with *Other voters* as a reference category. For each party, nine nested models were fitted, divided into three series:

- The L (lagged variables) series (1L, 2L, and 3L models) includes as independent variables the 2016 lagged variables (2018 for anti-elitism indices) measuring the main protest drivers and populist attitudes.
- The CS (change scores variables) series (models 1CS, 2CS, and 3CS) includes as independent variables the 2016-2020 change scores (2018-2020 for the anti-elitism indices) for the main protest drivers and populist attitudes.
- The CO (complete) series (1CO, 2CO, and 3CO models) provides the complete models that jointly include lagged variables and change scores for the main protest drivers and populist attitudes.

Within each series, the three models follow this scheme:

- Model 1 (1L, 1CS, and 1CO) includes the corresponding measures of anti-elitism as independent variables.
- Model 2 (2L, 2CS, and 2CO) adds to Model 1 the corresponding measures regarding the retrospective assessment of the national economy index, the retrospective assessment of the household economy index, the anti-immigration index, and the Euro-scepticism index. The choice of this sequence is linked to the characterisation of these attitudes as protest drivers, according to the theoretical framework adopted in this article.
- Model 3 (3L, 3CS, and 3CO) controls Model 2 for the respondents' self-placement on the ideologi-

cal left-right axis. The original 11-point scale was recoded into six categories: Left (0–2), Centre-left (3–4), Centre (5), Centre-right (6–7), Right (8–10), and Not-placed. This latter category, including people who refuse to place themselves on the traditional ideological axis, was considered as the reference category.

Finally, all models are controlled for the main socio-demographic variables:

- Gender, dichotomous variable (with men as the reference category).
- Age, linear (in years).
- Education, categorical variable with three categories: primary (reference category), secondary, and tertiary.
- Region, categorical variable with three areas: North (reference category), Centre (ex-Red Zone), and South and Islands.

## 6. 2016-2020: THE PROTEST GALAXY IN MOVEMENT

Taken together, the three anti-establishment parties analysed in this article significantly increased their support in the period between the European elections held in 2014 and the opinion polls conducted in October 2020, immediately after the constitutional referendum. From about three voters out of ten (31%), these forces ended up attracting the support of more than half of Italian voters (55%) in just a few, but vibrant, years.

As shown in Figure 1, the Lega, M5S, and FDI had very different political paths. During the 2014 European elections, Salvini's and Meloni's parties were then still minor, with rather little electoral support: FDI got 3.7% of valid votes, while the Lega received just over 6%. On the other hand, the M5S achieved a much higher electoral result (21.2%), although significantly below its vote share in the 2013 general election (25.6%) (Diamanti, Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013; ITANES 2013). However, this scenario would rapidly change over the following few years. A fluctuating trend characterised the voting intentions for the Lega and the M5S. Meanwhile, Meloni's party, after a phase of slight growth, showed a very sharp increase.

The M5S, which joined other parties on the 'No' front in the 2016 constitutional referendum (Ceccarini and Bordignon 2017), showed a leap forward of more than 10 percentage points between the 2014 European elections and June 2016 (when its potential votes reached 32.3%). Then, it stabilized at around 28% until the 2018 general election, when it reached its highest level of pop-

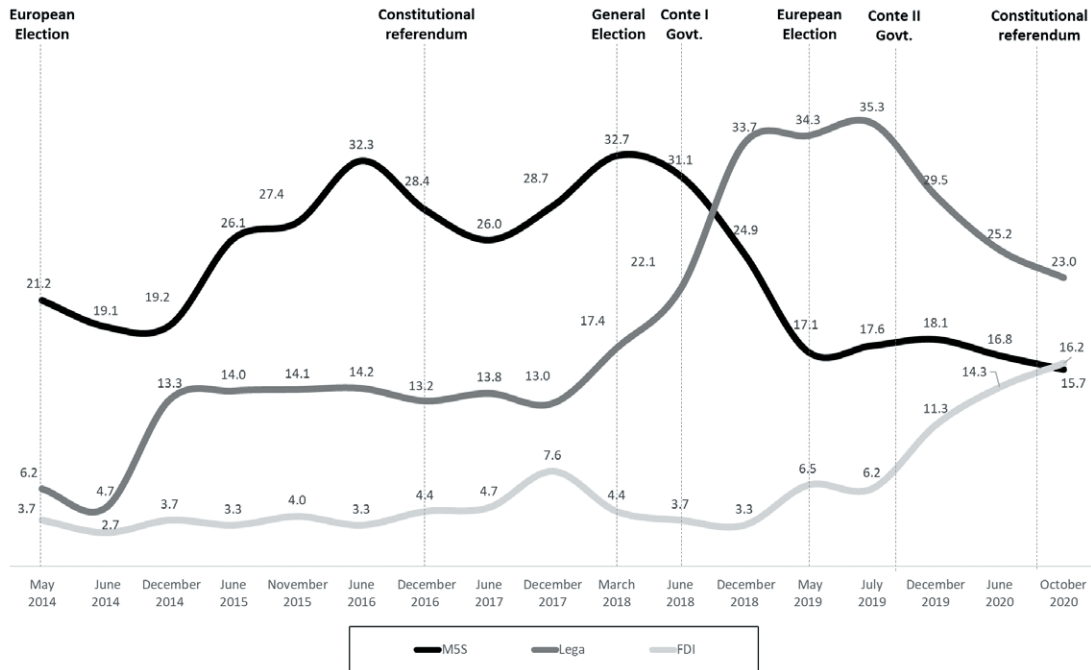
ular approval: 32.7%. Nevertheless, after this 'movement party' took over government responsibilities, a considerable loss of votes started to shape its electoral path. Following the more recent European elections, held in 2019, the M5S settled around 16-18%, just over half of the highest level of support ever achieved. This translated into a complex phase regarding its internal organisation and leadership.

The Lega's trend parallels that of the M5S until the 2018 general election (even though at a lower level). However, after that, things significantly shifted, as the M5S began to lose its votes, whereas the Lega started to gain increasing approval ratings. The Lega's secretary, Salvini, had assumed leadership after the party's defeat in the 2013 general election. He rapidly became the architect of the party's success and profound shift: from a 'territorial' party, the old LN turned into Salvini's national Lega.

After having signed the «Contract for the government of change» (May 2018) with the 5-Star leader, Di Maio, and having served as minister of the interior in the Conte I cabinet, Salvini decided to leave the *yellow-green* alliance in August 2019, after the unprecedented result obtained at that year's European election. Following that, however, the Lega began to lose citizens' support. It decreased to 23% within a single year (October 2020). This dynamic seemed to favour the other right-wing party, FDI, which did not take up any office in the Italian government over the considered timeframe.

Considering the electoral flows between 2016 and 2020, relevant dynamics can be detected (Table 1). The most notable of these relates to the votes outflowing from the M5S. The portion of the 'Loyal' voters between 2016 and 2020 was around 32%, a very low number when compared with the loyalty shown by the electoral bases of the Lega and FDI – respectively 62% and 70%. Confirming the multi-ideological nature of this party, outflows followed multiple directions during the analysed timeframe – just like inflows between 2012 and 2013 (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013). Particularly significant during this phase, however, appeared to be the component of former M5S voters – 31% – heading towards centre-right. A very slight minority (4%) chose FI. However, Berlusconi's party cannot be considered a 'pure' anti-establishment political force – not any longer, at least. Many of them switched to FDI (11%) and, in particular, to the Lega (16%). The 'elective affinities' shared by a relevant component of the electoral base of the M5S with Salvini's Lega (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2016) seem to have translated into concrete vote flows. The «government of change», formed together by the two anti-establishment parties, seems to have benefited





**Figure 1.** Electoral trends for M5S, FDI and Lega: 2016-2020 (%). Source: Demos & Pi surveys.

first and foremost Salvini's Lega at the expense of the M5S.

As for the electoral flows within the two right-wing parties, the results also show that the Lega and FDI have jointly been able to drain a significant component of FI voters: more than 40%. However, Meloni's party has also been able to attract a significant component of the Lega's voters, and this trend is confirmed if we zoom in on 2019-2020 flows (Table 2): as much as 23% of the Lega's (large) 2019 electorate switched to FDI in 2020.

## 7. TRACING POLITICAL AND SOCIAL MALAISE IN THE EVOLUTION OF PARTY PROFILES

Given the political and electoral trajectories of the three challenger parties analysed in this article, it will be interesting to understand how these different routes, institutional roles, and related political communication contents reflected on the orientations of their electoral bases and of the Italian public opinion at large. This section of the article will descriptively analyse the evolution of populist orientations and protest drivers in the Italian electorate in general and among the voters of the five main parties. The next section uses the multinomial logit models introduced earlier to test the relationship between these orientations, their evolution, and vote flows in the 2016-2020 timeframe.

### *Populism: people-centrism and anti-elitism*

When comparing voters' orientations in 2020 with the pre-electoral scenario in 2018, the most striking change concerns the general decrease of all the populist measures considered in this study. This is apparent both when considering the trend of the basic indicators (Table A.1 in the Appendix) and when looking at the synthetic indices provided by Figure 2. The overall populism index drops from 0.88 to 0.58. The anti-elitism index declines from 0.95 to 0.74 and the people-centrism index from 0.81 to 0.42.

The electorates of the three challenger parties confirm the expected profile, generally displaying above-average figures. These results clearly distinguish them from the voters in general and the PD electoral base in particular. FI voters show, at least in some cases, figures similar to those of the challenger parties. However, their paths were very different during the 2016-2020 timeframe. In fact, the most surprising drops regard the M5S on all indices (Figure 2). As for the people-centrism index, the M5S experienced the most significant decrease, while remaining above average. In the case of the anti-elitism index, the party even fell above the average, whereas the Lega and FDI maintained values above those of the entire electorate and, in particular, not far from those recorded on the eve of the previous general elections.

**Table 1.** Estimate of electoral flows 2016-2020 (%).

2020 voting intentions estimate	2016 voting intentions								
	Sinistra Italiana	PD	M5S	FI	Lega	FDI	Other	Abst. / NR / DK	ALL
LeU	26	3	3				3	3	3
PD	31	55	9	3		5	16	12	17
+Europa	2	3	1				6	4	2
M5S	3	5	32	5	1		9	9	12
FI			4	37	3		1	4	6
Lega	2	8	16	19	62	4	9	11	17
FDI	1	3	11	23	22	70	15	10	13
IV	1	6	1	3	2		1	2	2
Azione		3	1	1	1		2	2	2
Other/not predicted	34	15	21	9	9	21	38	44	27
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
n. cases	72	272	338	92	142	44	42	410	1412

Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).

**Table 2.** Estimate of electoral flows 2019-2020 (%).

2020 voting intentions estimate	2019 voting intentions									
	Oth. Left	PD	+Eu	M5S	FI	Lega	FDI	Other	Abst. / NR / DK	ALL
LeU	32	7	4	1					2	3
PD	21	64	19	6	3	2		9	14	17
+Europa	4	1	33	1	1	1		12	2	2
M5S	9	5	2	54	2	3	2	9	11	12
FI			1	7	49	3			4	6
Lega	1	2		5	6	57	6	7	8	17
FDI	2		6	5	22	23	71	8	9	13
IV	6	5	7	3		2	5		1	2
Azione	2	3	11	1	5		2		1	2
Other/not predicted	22	13	16	17	13	10	14	55	48	27
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
n. cases	78	314	48	222	72	282	62	29	305	1412

Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).

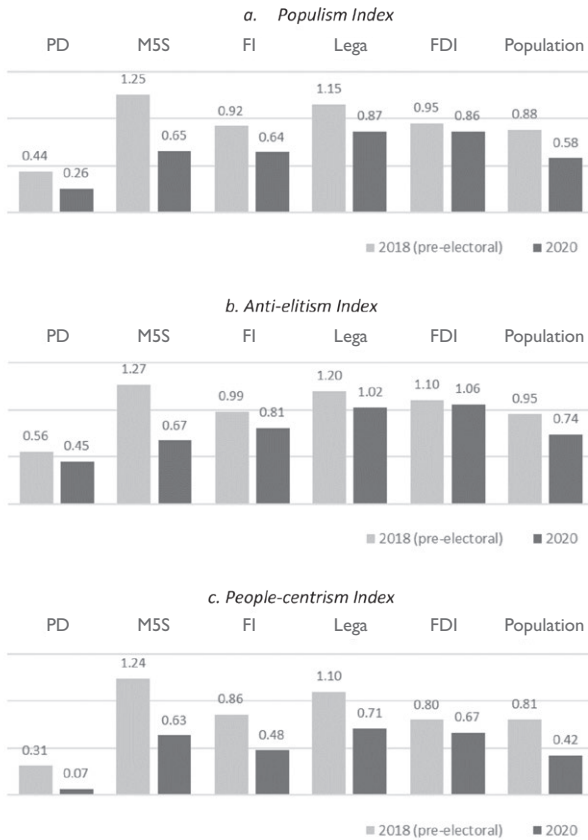
### *Economy assessment and protest voting*

The economic landscape also seems to have changed radically when observed through the lenses of voters' assessments at the beginning and at the end of the observation period. In the autumn of 2020, voters expressed a significantly worse (retrospective) opinion on the state of the national economy than in 2016: the index dropped from -0.54 to -1.14. It should be noted, however, that this largely reflects the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. It should also be stressed that the evalu-

ation of the economic decline was less negative when referring to the household economy: the corresponding index dropped from -0.39 to -0.46.

Again, there are significant differences in the evolution of the electorates of the three challenger parties, particularly regarding their assessments of the national economy. Whereas in 2016 the most critical evaluations were those expressed by the electorate of the Lega and the M5S, in 2020, the latter scored the highest value among the main parties and in any case above the general average. In other words, the 2020 electorate of M5S,



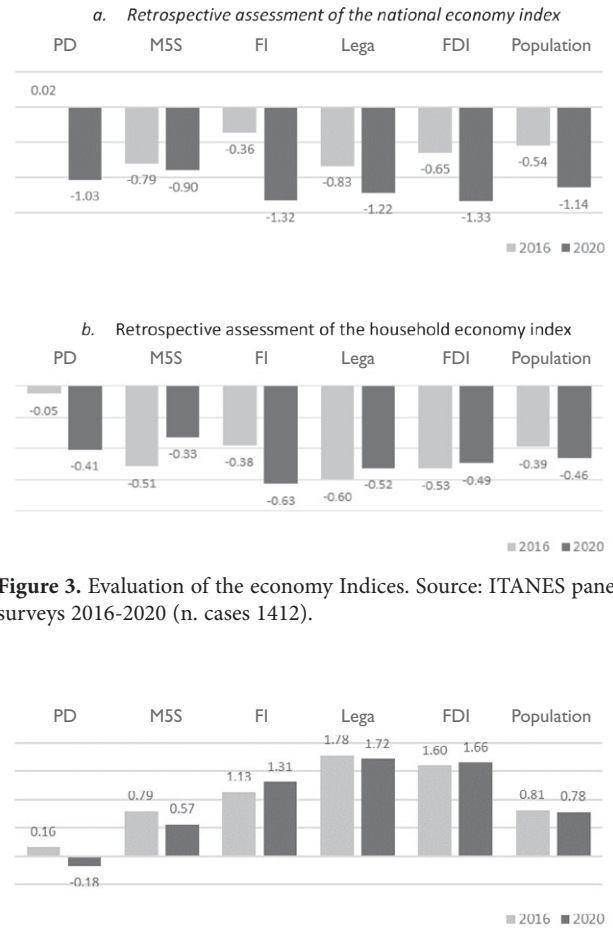


**Figure 2.** Populism indices. Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).

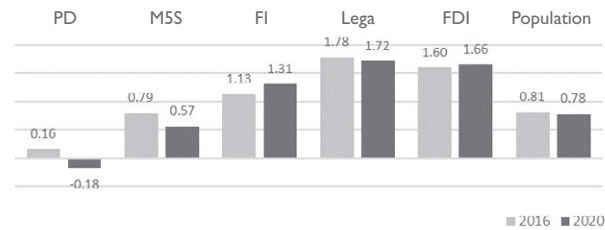
while observing a deteriorating picture and scoring a lower figure than in 2016, was the one that registered a greater *resilience* of the Italian economy. It should also be noted that the M5S was even the party for which the index of retrospective assessment of the household economy improved the most. In contrast, centre-right parties – the Lega and FDI, again together with FI – displayed the lowest values on both indices in 2020. Even in the frame of a new phase of economic uncertainty, access to government and the possibility of implementing the policies contained in the party’s programme seemed to have radically altered the opinions expressed by those who (in different moments) voted for the M5S.

*Xenophobic attitudes*

In contrast to the attitudes analysed so far, the anti-immigration index reveals great stability in xenophobic attitudes over the four years considered. The overall figure remained around 0.80, with a slightly lower value in 2020. The distribution among the main electorates also confirms the traditional ideological connotation of



**Figure 3.** Evaluation of the economy indices. Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).

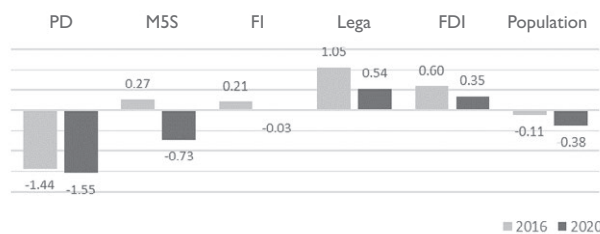


**Figure 4.** Anti-immigration index. Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).

these attitudes, especially high among voters of centre-right parties compared with those of the centre-left. In particular, the highest values are those collected among the Lega and FDI voters. The index remained around the average for the M5S, confirming the composite nature of its electorate, which translates into an electoral base with different – sometimes divergent – views. It is, however, important to underline that, for the M5S voters, the value of the index in 2020 fell below the general average. This means that the attitudes expressed by the party’s electoral constituency have become more moderate on this point.

*Europe: the EU and the euro*

The Euro-scepticism index reported in Figure 5 clearly displays how anti-European attitudes generally mitigated between 2016 and 2020, decreasing from -0.11 to -0.38. This change can be read, in turn, as an effect



**Figure 5.** Euro-scepticism Index. Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).

of the pandemic emergency and the role assumed by the EU as a provider of aid and resources to the countries (including Italy) under greatest strain.

On the centre-left side of the political spectrum, the PD confirmed – through the attitudes expressed by its electorate – its support for the EU. However, Euro-scepticism remained quite high among the Lega’s supporters – although it decreased from 1.05 to 0.54 – and FDI’s voters – decreasing from 0.60 to 0.35. Nevertheless, the most striking change regards, once again, the attitudes expressed by M5S voters, which changed direction and moved towards a higher degree of European openness. Their index dropped from 0.27 to -0.73. This change can be read as a potential effect of the cabinet position assumed by the party during the analysed timeframe.

Summarizing the findings presented in this section, ITANES data enabled a reconstruction of the evolution and distribution of populist attitudes and protest drivers during the turbulent 2016-2020 political phase. The findings indicate the change that occurred within the M5S electoral base. Those voters seem to confirm, in their attitudes, the ‘normalisation’ of the party process already highlighted by other studies (Tronconi 2018). Considering the dimensions analysed in this study, the M5S electorate was closer to those of other anti-establishment parties in 2016. After about a couple of years in office, the ‘anti’ element, widely shared among the party voters in the months leading up to the general election, seemed to have largely depleted.

However, regarding both the electorate in general and the party voters, the analyses conducted so far could only provide ‘static pictures’, taken at the beginning and end of the timeframe: in 2016-2018 and 2020. Yet, in light of what emerged in section 6, we know that these components of the electorate strongly changed in size and internal composition during the four years considered. The multivariate analyses presented in the next section will provide a more dynamic picture by linking the indices used in this section with vote flows.

## 8. POPULIST ATTITUDES, PROTEST DRIVERS, AND VOTERS’ FLOWS

The multinomial logit models presented in this section follow the scheme presented in section 5, using the three typologies related to the 2016-2020 vote flows of the three challenger parties as dependent variables. The interpretation of the results of these models is always complex, as it involves fitting multiple equations, the parameters of which must be read considering the reference categories of both the dependent variable and the independent variables (when these latter are categorical). The parameters  $b$  can be transformed into  $\exp(b)$  and interpreted as relative risk ratios (RRRs): for the models presented in this paper, this would be the ‘relative risk’ – the equivalent of odds ratios in binary logit models – of falling into one of the three identified groups (Loyals, Outgoing, or Incoming) for each party electorate (M5S, Lega, and FDI) over the reference category (consisting of all the other voters), for a given value of one independent variable relative to its reference category – or for a one-unit increase, in the case of continuous predictors – holding all other variables constant.

In this instance, however, it was chosen to identify relevant relationships focusing on the sign and significance of the  $b$  parameters – reported in Tables A.2-10 in the Appendix – and to make the interpretation easier through the heatplots presented in Figures 6-8. Using the full model (3CO), the probabilities of belonging to each class of the dependent variable (Loyals, Outgoing, Incoming, excluding the reference category) were estimated at different combinations of the independent variables, at the initial (2016-2018) and final (2020) moments of the timeframe.<sup>3</sup> Then, the difference between the above probability and the overall population mean was calculated. These differences were then represented using heatplots.<sup>4</sup> Colours shading to black highlight the most significant positive variations, in terms of percentage points. Colours shading to white, on the other hand, signal negative variations.

Because all the (original<sup>5</sup>) indices presented in this article have a scale ranging from -2 to +2, the resulting heatplots are 4 by 4 planes. These planes can be seen as ‘maps’, and the patterns identified on them can be read as follows:

- The (generally) homogeneous grey indicates the absence of relevant relationships between the varia-

<sup>3</sup> Estimated probabilities were obtained as average response using Stata’s *Margins* function.

<sup>4</sup> Jann, B. (2019). *heatplot*: Stata module to create heat plots and hexagons plots. Available from <http://ideas.repec.org/c/boc/bocode/s458598.html>.

<sup>5</sup> The change scores range from -4 to +4.

- ble in question or its change over time and the probability of belonging to the group of voters.
- Patterns developing on the North-South axis (N→S or S→N: quadrant I-II vs quadrant III-IV) or on the East-West axis (E→W or W→E: quadrant II-III vs quadrant I-IV) indicate significant relationships with the variable in question at the beginning or end of the timeframe.
  - Patterns developing on the South West-North East diagonal (SW→NE or NE→SW: quadrant I vs quadrant III) indicate relationships with the variable in question that are confirmed over the time period considered.
  - In the same fashion, patterns developing on the North West-South East diagonal (NW→SE or SE→NW: quadrant II vs quadrant IV) signal relationships between (positive or negative) variations of the variable in question and the probability of belonging to the analysed group of voters.

These are the main results suggested, for the three parties, by the joint analysis of the regression parameters and the heatplots.

#### *The Five-Star Movement*

*Loyals.* First, it is important to stress that the sequence of nested models reveals no significant relationship between the ‘relative risk’ of being a loyal M5S voter (over the 2016-2020 period) and anti-elitist feelings. However, the likelihood of belonging to this group is significantly associated with other protest drivers. It increases among people who, at the beginning of the time interval, formulated a negative (retrospective) assessment of the state of the national economy but changed their evaluation over the four years considered – or at least perceived more resilience on this dimension – recalling that the overall index revealed a marked deterioration in the overall sample. In fact, the heatplot displays both a N→S and a NW→SE pattern, although the parameter measuring the impact of change is not significant for this predictor when controlling for its starting level (in Model 3CO). However, a remarkable change characterises their view of the EU: the probability of falling into this component of the electorate increases as a function of improvements in the assessments of European institutions and reaches its highest level among people (on the ‘South-Eastern’ corner of the plot) who have reversed their judgement.

*Outgoing.* Anti-elitism is, on the contrary, a key element characterising vote outflows from the M5S. The ‘relative risk’ of belonging to this group of voters (over the reference category) increases especially among those

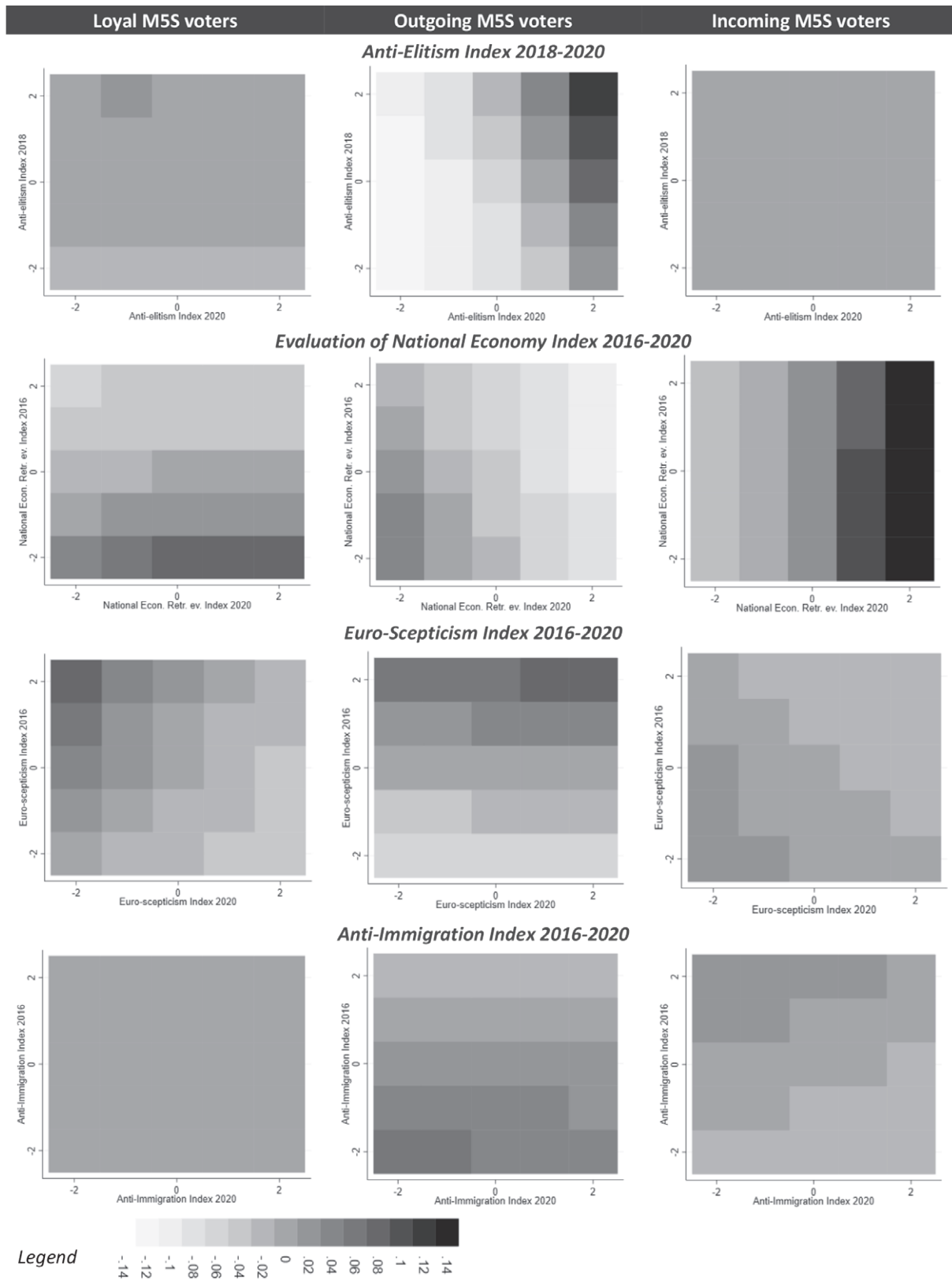
who, already in 2018, scored high on the anti-elitism index and maintained or strengthened this attitude over the following years: this is confirmed both by the sequence of models constructed and by the diagonal pattern (SW→NE) of the heatplot. Euro-scepticism is another factor that increases the probability of falling into the group of those who quit the M5S. In this case, the SW→NE pattern of the heatplot is complemented by a N→S pattern, which underlines the importance of critical feelings towards European institutions in 2016. As in the case of loyal M5S voters, outgoing flows are also favoured by critical assessments of the national economic performance, but not with its change over the four-year period analysed. Finally, there is a negative relationship with xenophobic attitudes, which, however, disappears after controlling for ideological self-placement. This reflects two elements: on the one hand, the well-known ideological heterogeneity of the M5S electoral base and consequently the diverse opinions on divisive issues in the political debate; on the other hand, it underlines the relevance of other evaluations, as described above, that led to leaving this political force.

*Incoming.* The analyses do not reveal any significant relationship between the ‘relative risk’ of being an M5S incoming voter and anti-elitism, even when the corresponding indices are controlled exclusively for socio-demographic variables. Two attributes seem to increase (significantly) the likelihood of falling into the group of M5S incoming voters: a (retrospective) positive assessment of the national economy and, in general, a low degree of Euro-scepticism. The heatplot also seems to disclose an association with high but decreasing levels of xenophobia, even though this relationship is not statistically significant according to the multinomial logit models.

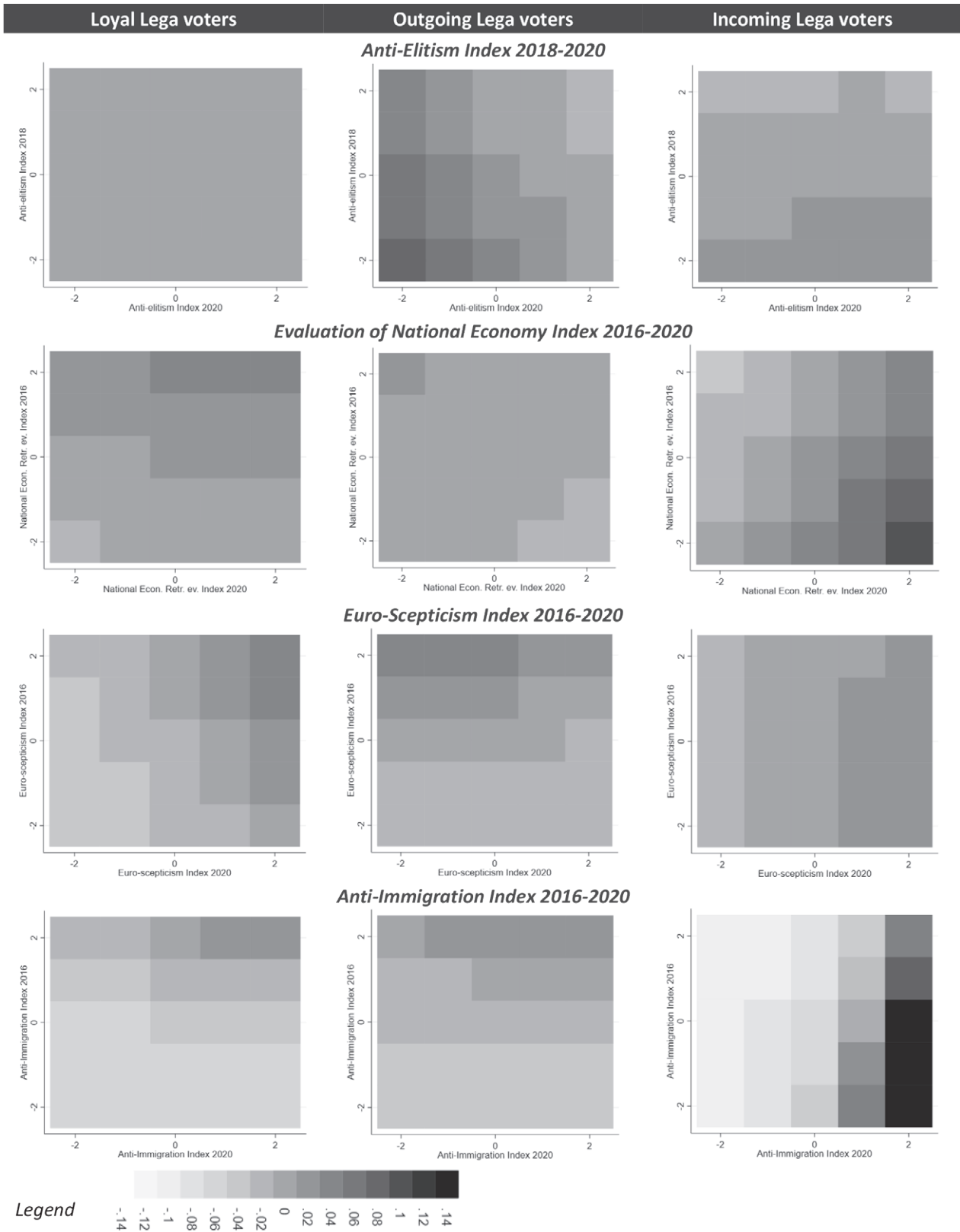
#### *The Lega*

*Loyals.* Consistent with the themes that have most characterised the party’s political battles in recent times, the likelihood of a stable vote for the Lega increases especially among those who show high levels of xenophobia and Euro-scepticism. For this last factor, the relationship with the increase in the 2016-2020 period is also significant. Although a certain (positive) relationship emerges with both economic satisfaction and anti-elite attitudes, it tends to disappear, or becomes statistically not significant, in the final model (3CO).

*Outgoing.* Although at lower levels, even in the case of outgoing Lega voters, there is an association with closed attitudes towards immigration and criticism of the EU, particularly when these were expressed at the



**Figure 6.** Differences between average probabilities of group membership (estimated through Model 3CO) and population means, at different levels of key predictors at different times – Five Star Movement. Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).



**Figure 7.** Differences between average probabilities of group membership (estimated through Model 3CO) and population means, at different levels of key predictors at different times – Lega. Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).



beginning of the observation period. Interestingly, the ‘relative risk’ of falling into this group (over the reference category) displays an inverse relationship with anti-elitism: the likelihood of falling into the group of voters who left the Lega increases – other variables being equal – among those who show a lower and decreasing degree of anti-elitism. This suggests that a less critical judgement of the political establishment is an element that pushes (ex-)Lega voters to no longer identify with this party and the narrative proposed by its leader, and then to move towards other political forces.

*Incoming.* As suggested by the NW→SE pattern of the heatplot, the probability of being an incoming voter of Salvini’s party increases especially among those who, in 2020, developed strong (and growing) feelings of apprehension about migration. Although the sequence of models reveals some relationship with (growing) anti-elite sentiments and Euro-scepticism, in the final model, the effect of these factors tends to be overshadowed by the attitudes towards immigration. Finally, the diagonal NW→SE pattern of the heatplot reveals an association with improving judgements about the state of the national economy: this is confirmed by the corresponding parameters of the models in the CS series, although their significance disappears in the complete series (CO).

#### *Fratelli d’Italia*

In the case of FDI, outgoing voters were aggregated to the reference category, as their sub-sample was too small.

*Loyals.* Loyal voting for FDI is weakly associated with anti-elitism only in Model 1CO, but this relationship is not significant when the anti-immigration and Euro-scepticism indices enter the model. Both attitudes are positively associated with the likelihood of a (stable) vote for FDI, but they lose their significance after controlling for ideological political self-placement, which in the case of FDI loyals has a strong right-wing connotation. The latter result is consistent with the legacy of traditional right-wing, nationalist parties from which FDI descends.

*Incoming.* On the other hand, there seems to be a closer relationship between anti-elitism (and its growth over the 2016-2020 period) and the incoming vote for FDI (Model 1L, 1CS, and CO). Again, however, these predictors are not significant when controlling for the other variables, in particular anti-immigration attitudes, whose magnitude increases the probability of voting for Meloni’s party. Finally, the heatplot shows a weak relationship with critical evaluations of the national economy, which, however, do not emerge as significant in the multivariate models.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

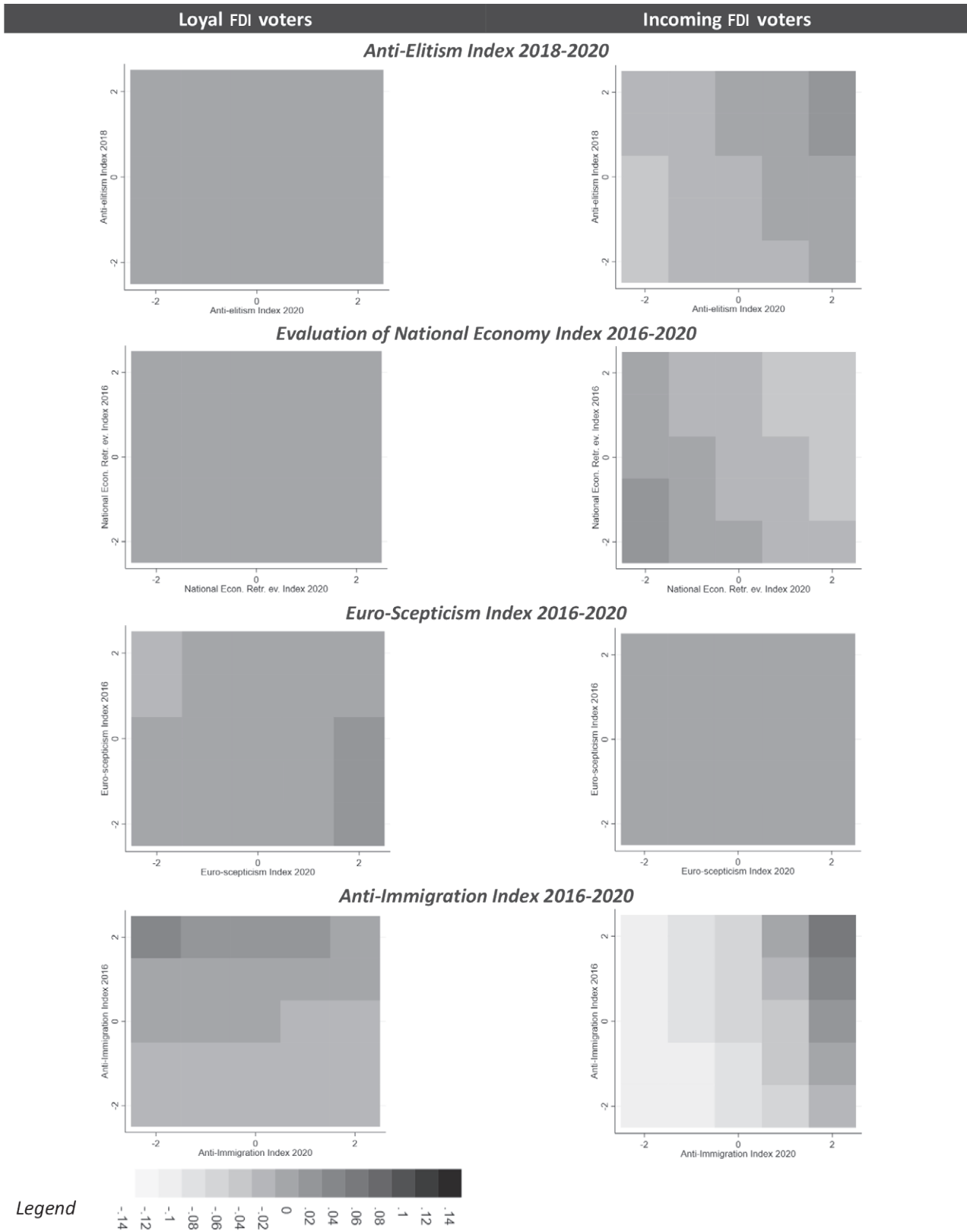
In the hectic phase between the two recent constitutional referenda (2016-2020), Italy has witnessed profound changes in the configuration of its political system. The elements of protest that fuelled the populist wave have also been largely reshaped. Some of its interpreters have had stable access to government roles since 2018. Others have remained in (or returned to) opposition, proposing themselves as new catalysts for protest linked to persistent and new social issues. The outbreak of the pandemic has changed citizens’ perspective on the role of the state and European institutions,<sup>6</sup> but it has also opened up new issues, which, starting from the health emergency, have already ‘infected’ other areas of social life – the economy in particular.

ITANES surveys were used in this article to investigate voters’ reactions to the different paths taken by the protest actors, focusing on the three political forces that have most proposed themselves as protagonists of the Italian populist *zeitgeist*: the M5S, the Lega, and FDI. In particular, to study the evolution of voters’ populist attitudes and protest drivers, and their connection with electoral flows and parties’ strategic choices, panel data were used. The results, although conditioned by some methodological limitations, enable provision of at least partial answers to the research questions at the heart of this work. The main empirical evidence provided by the analyses can be summarised as follows.

1. Both of the main (alternative) hypotheses formulated in section 4 are at least partially confirmed, although providing a more nuanced picture. The access to government by populist parties – the M5S and, in the initial phase, the Lega – has certainly contributed to softening populist orientations in the Italian electorate. All indices of populism used in this study indicate a sizable reduction over the four years of observation (H1a). This shift also coincided with the emergence of a more favourable approach with regard to European institutions. However, Hypothesis H1b is only partially confirmed: sentiments of social discontent related to key issues such as immigration and the economy have certainly not waned. In fact, dissatisfaction with the state of the national economy – and, to a lesser extent, with the household economy – was significantly higher at the end of 2020 than four years earlier. The framework in which these changes have taken place should not be underestimated. In fact, the consequences of Covid-19 represent an intervening variable that inevitably conditioned the dynamics studied in this work. In particular, the growth

<sup>6</sup> See the 2020 Edition of the Demos-La Repubblica Report on the Italians and the State: <http://www.demos.it/rapporto.php>





**Figure 8.** Differences between average probabilities of group membership (estimated through Model 3CO) and population means, at different levels of key predictors at different times – FDI. Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).

of popular approval towards the political elites and the attenuation of Euro-scepticism can be at least partially explained by a «rally 'round the flag» effect (Mueller 1970). However, the health emergency also fuelled economic uncertainty and temporarily (partially) overshadowed the immigration issue.

2. At the same time, the expectations associated with Hypothesis H1c have only been partially confirmed. One of the most striking changes revealed by the results concerns the redefinition of the political outlook of the M5S electorate, which significantly reduced its anti-elite attitudes. It was actually the party that experienced the deepest metamorphosis during the observation period: a protest party rapidly transformed itself into a government party. In the fall of 2020, its voters were the least critical of Italy's economic performance. They ranked below average in terms of xenophobic attitudes. Moreover, positive opinions about the role of the EU prevailed in their view. The opposite was found just a few years earlier, in 2016. The process of a difficult (and still incomplete) institutionalisation of the movement's elites has then coincided with a redefinition of the perspectives of the electoral base. However, it has also coincided with a halving of the party's electoral attractiveness.

3. The results of the multivariate models presented in section 8 provide important insights into this process. It was the 5-Star voters who already expressed higher levels of anti-elitism and Euro-scepticism in the 2016-2018 phase – and maintained (or strengthened) these attitudes over the following four years – who mainly left the party. Although loyal M5S voters were not significantly characterised by anti-elitism over the analysed timeframe, their views were marked by a significant reduction of critical evaluations about the state of the economy and about the role of the EU. On the contrary, anti-elite sentiments and feelings of dissatisfaction connected to the main protest drivers were largely maintained by the voters of right-wing parties, which were the main recipients of vote outflows from the 5-Star electorate. Multinomial logit models reveal that both the loyal and incoming components of centre-right challenger parties were more characterised by a strong ideological view and consistently oriented towards issues such as xenophobia and Euro-scepticism. However, both parties – and especially FDI after 2019 – have also grown thanks to their appeal to components of the electorate sensitive to anti-elite criticism. Thus, both Hypotheses H2a and H2b also find important confirmation in the analyses. At the end of 2020, the Lega and FDI presented themselves not only as the hard-line opponents of the Conte II cabinet, but also as the main collectors

of the feelings of discontent spread in the country. The Lega was able to maintain its profile as an anti-establishment party even during its participation in the government majority that supported the Conte I cabinet. It was this strategy – combined with Salvini's exuberance and (social) media appeal – that allowed the party to double its votes between 2018 and 2019, while the (unexpected) return to opposition coincided with a reversal in this electoral trend. On the contrary, Meloni's party has been able to preserve its challenger profile. From 2019 onwards, it was the only party that could claim its persistent and fierce opposition to all governments since 2011. This has allowed FDI to considerably increase its electoral appeal. This was mainly at the expense of its centre-right allies. However, FDI has also been able to attract a substantial part of the fluctuating protest area not strictly linked to a specific party.

These findings offer important clues for scholars of challenger parties and their electoral appeal. At the same time, they suggest relevant insights into an unprecedented political season that Italy (among other European countries) has been facing. In early 2021, the fall of the Conte II cabinet led to the formation of a new government led by the former President of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi. His cabinet was supported by all major parties. All except FDI, consistently with the choices made by Meloni's party during the previous ten years. As in the past, Salvini's Lega maintained its two-faced profile, as a political force both 'fighting and in government'. Meanwhile, the most disruptive political actor of the previous decade, the M5S, was continuing its long and difficult process of 'normalisation' and 'institutionalisation'.

To conclude, the evolution of the political landscape and the pandemic emergency have favoured a partial redefinition of voters' orientations. The populist wave softened between 2016 and 2020, but the area of potential protest remained large, mobile, and ready to head in different directions. The (social and economic) consequences of Covid restrictions could widen this further. This might enlarge the space for old and new political actors willing (and prepared) to interpret it.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## APPENDIX

**Table A.1.** Populism indicators (% of respondents who strongly or somewhat agree with each statement in 2020; 2018 pre-electoral data in parentheses).

	PD	M5S	FI	Lega	FDI	Pop.
People-centrism indicators:						
MPs must follow the will of the citizens	71 (82)	85 (90)	84 (87)	86 (91)	84 (86)	75 (83)
Citizens, not politicians, should make the most important political decisions	27 (36)	45 (70)	38 (58)	50 (69)	48 (61)	38 (54)
I would rather be represented by an ordinary person than a professional politician	21 (27)	47 (77)	31 (50)	43 (60)	46 (43)	34 (51)
Anti-elitism indicators:						
The differences between the politicians and the people are greater than the differences within the people	53 (52)	57 (77)	61 (68)	69 (73)	67 (66)	58 (64)
Politicians talk a lot but do little	76 (73)	75 (91)	82 (84)	88 (91)	92 (88)	81 (83)
Making compromises in politics actually means selling out one's principles	29 (39)	45 (71)	58 (62)	58 (71)	64 (71)	45 (56)

Source:

- ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412)
- ITANES pre-electoral rolling cross-section survey 2018 (n. cases 5528)

**Table A.2.** Multinomial Logistic Models (Dep. Var. M5s Typology 2016-2020; Reference category: Other).

	Model 1L						Model 2L						Model 3L														
	Loyal		Outgoing		Incoming		Loyal		Outgoing		Incoming		Loyal		Outgoing		Incoming										
	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.									
Intercept	-1.480	.520	**	-1.328	.392	***	-3.257	.678	***	-1.570	.549	***	-1.618	.411	***	-3.370	.711	***	-1.149	.570	*	-1.432	.425	***	-2.991	.719	***
Gender: female	-.767	.226	***	-.347	.154	*	.456	.260		-.808	.228	***	-.359	.156	*	.483	.264		-.975	.236	***	-.460	.160	**	.446	.270	
Age	-.015	.007	*	-.011	.005	*	-.005	.009		-.016	.007	*	-.009	.006		-.007	.009		-.016	.008		-.012	.006	*	-.006	.009	
Education: secondary	-.486	.261		.207	.205		.144	.341		-.399	.270		.372	.211		.072	.348		-.408	.276		.334	.213		.089	.352	
Education: tertiary	-.345	.358		-.073	.294		.339	.447		-.241	.374		.210	.303		.214	.460		-.235	.383		.109	.310		.261	.465	
Region: Centre (ex-red zone)	-.810	.539		-.033	.240		.402	.391		-.831	.540		-.020	.244		.366	.392		-.984	.544		-.130	.249		.291	.397	
Region: South and Islands	1.068	.239	***	.253	.164		.662	.284	*	1.024	.243	***	.179	.168		.726	.289	*	.963	.246	***	.122	.170		.685	.292	*
National Econ. Retr. ev. Index 2016										-.488	.140	***	-.267	.103	**	.034	.173		-.490	.140	***	-.263	.105	*	.019	.173	
Household Econ. Retr. ev. Index 2016										.142	.157		-.071	.112		-.148	.194		.127	.162		-.084	.115		-.111	.198	
Anti-Immigration Index 2016										-.139	.095		-.148	.070	*	.073	.115		-.083	.097		-.068	.073		.067	.121	
Euroscepticism Index 2016										.007	.083		.232	.059	***	-.249	.101	*	.074	.087		.320	.062	***	-.240	.106	*
Anti-elitism Index 2018	.159	.121		-.413	.092	***	.048	.146		.088	.126		.334	.095	***	.067	.151		.143	.130		.351	.097	***	.092	.153	
L-R self-placement: Left																			-.144	.334		.678	.243	**	-.1049	.484	*
L-R self-placement: Centre-Left																			-.458	.383		.396	.269		-.384	.404	
L-R self-placement: Centre																			-.002	.379		.264	.294		.201	.393	
L-R self-placement: Centre-Right																			-.403	.320		-.230	.261		-.562	.417	
L-R self-placement: Right																			-.2396	.580	***	-.845	.262	**	-.1263	.531	*
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	Cox & Snell .064 Nagelkerke .079 McFadden .040						Cox & Snell .100 Nagelkerke .123 McFadden .063						Cox & Snell .142 Nagelkerke .175 McFadden .091														

Note: Sig. indicates the level of significance; \* p &lt; 0.05; \*\* p &lt; 0.01; \*\*\* p &lt; 0.001.

Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).

Table A.3. Multinomial Logistic Models (Dep. Var. M5s Typology 2016-2020; Reference category: Other).

	Model 1CS			Model 2CS			Model 3CS		
	Loyal	Outgoing	Incoming	Loyal	Outgoing	Incoming	Loyal	Outgoing	Incoming
	B s.e. Sig.	B s.e. Sig.	B s.e. Sig.	B s.e. Sig.	B s.e. Sig.	B s.e. Sig.	B s.e. Sig.	B s.e. Sig.	B s.e. Sig.
Intercept	-1.398 .522 **	-1.235 .386 **	-3.218 .679 ***	-1.455 .535 **	-1.246 .388 **	-3.153 .688 ***	-.885 .558	-.985 .402 *	-2.664 .703 ***
Gender: female	-.749 .225 ***	-.291 .152	.458 .259	-.784 .229 ***	-.284 .154	.376 .262	-.903 .237 ***	-.342 .156	.312 .268
Age	-.015 .007 *	-.009 .005	-.005 .009	-.013 .007	-.009 .005	-.004 .009	-.014 .008	-.011 .005 *	-.005 .009
Education: secondary	-.504 .262	.202 .204	.135 .342	-.423 .269	.217 .206	.224 .346	-.457 .276	.171 .207	.214 .351
Education: tertiary	-.374 .359	-.092 .292	.322 .447	-.231 .368	-.043 .295	.465 .455	-.287 .380	-.106 .299	.463 .464
Region: Centre (ex-red zone)	-.801 .539	-.086 .239	.409 .391	-.813 .542	-.080 .240	.357 .393	-1.007 .546	-.171 .244	.219 .399
Region: South and Islands	1.074 .239 ***	.296 .163	.657 .284 *	1.004 .242 ***	.267 .164	.577 .287 *	.923 .246 ***	.209 .166	.522 .291
National Econ. Retr. ev. Diff. 2020-2016				.300 .104 **	.090 .077	.336 .128 **	.351 .105 ***	.117 .078	.384 .129 **
Household Econ. Retr. ev. Diff. 2020-2016				.126 .135	.056 .094	.023 .161	.130 .140	.069 .096	.011 .166
Anti-Immigration Diff. 2020-2016				-.013 .098	.078 .071	-.159 .120	.005 .098	.099 .072	-.135 .120
Eurocepticism Diff. 2020-2016				-.277 .093 **	-.141 .067 *	-.010 .108	-.289 .095 **	-.155 .067 *	-.010 .111
Anti-elitism Index Diff. 2020-2018	-.108 .122	.128 .085	-.090 .144 .530	-.057 .122	.131 .086	-.061 .141	-.051 .125	.160 .087	-.077 .143
L-R self-placement: Left							-.105 .330	.453 .229 *	-.860 .473
L-R self-placement: Centre-Left							-.553 .378	-.040 .255	-.162 .394
L-R self-placement: Centre							.099 .382	.175 .286	.398 .394
L-R self-placement: Centre-Right							-.323 .320	-.286 .255	-.495 .416
L-R self-placement: Right							-2.322 .575 ***	-.540 .252 *	-1.420 .527 **
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	Cox & Snell .053 Nagelkerke .065 McFadden .032			Cox & Snell .076 Nagelkerke .093 McFadden .047			Cox & Snell .112 Nagelkerke .138 McFadden .071		

Note: Sig. indicates the level of significance; \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01; \*\*\* p < 0.001.  
Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).

Table A.4. Multinomial Logistic Models (Dep. Var. M5s Typology 2016-2020; Reference category: Other).

	Model 1CO			Model 2CO			Model 3CO		
	Loyal	Outgoing	Incoming	Loyal	Outgoing	Incoming	Loyal	Outgoing	Incoming
	B s.e. Sig.	B s.e. Sig.	B s.e. Sig.	B s.e. Sig.	B s.e. Sig.	B s.e. Sig.	B s.e. Sig.	B s.e. Sig.	B s.e. Sig.
Intercept	-1.455 .525 **	-1.665 .404 ***	-3.219 .680 ***	-1.414 .572 *	-1.942 .433 ***	-2.985 .724 ***	-.997 .594	-1.751 .447 ***	-2.529 .736 ***
Gender: female	-.771 .226 ***	-.357 .155 *	.464 .261	-.816 .233 ***	-.369 .158 *	.477 .269	-.972 .242 ***	-.470 .162 **	.478 .278
Age	-.015 .007 *	-.013 .005 *	-.005 .009	-.018 .008 *	-.013 .006 *	-.005 .009	-.017 .008 *	-.016 .006 **	-.003 .010
Education: secondary	-.500 .262	.269 .208	.140 .342	-.487 .278	.323 .214	.064 .356	-.476 .284	.294 .216	.090 .360
Education: tertiary	-.359 .360	.033 .297	.326 .448	-.385 .383	.126 .309	.240 .468	-.346 .392	.054 .314	.292 .473
Region: Centre (ex-red zone)	-.807 .539	-.133 .244	.408 .391	-.840 .545	-.104 .250	.324 .397	-1.005 .549	-.192 .254	.226 .402
Region: South and Islands	1.069 .239 ***	.267 .165	.659 .285 *	1.027 .246 ***	.189 .170	.583 .295 *	.961 .250 ***	.134 .173	.526 .298
National Econ. Retr. ev. Index 2016				-.475 .181 **	-.460 .144 **	.571 .226 *	-.423 .184 *	-.422 .148 **	.623 .230 **
Household Econ. Retr. ev. Index 2016				.402 .202 *	-.037 .140	-.215 .238	.370 .204	-.059 .144	-.178 .242
Anti-Immigration Index 2016				-.119 .117	-.261 .086 **	.076 .134	-.065 .120	-.145 .090	.079 .141
Eurocepticism Index 2016				-.114 .097	.176 .068 *	-.313 .118 **	-.046 .102	.257 .071 ***	-.330 .128 **
Anti-elitism Index 2018	.150 .150	.800 .120 ***	-.022 .186	.136 .174	.734 .134 ***	.117 .205	.185 .179	.749 .136 ***	.103 .207
National Econ. Retr. ev. Diff. 2020-2016				.089 .140	-.273 .115 *	.659 .164 ***	.135 .143	-.237 .118 *	.741 .169 ***
Household Econ. Retr. ev. Diff. 2020-2016				.337 .173	.004 .115	-.080 .207	.323 .176	0.016 .117	-0.111 .215
Anti-Immigration Diff. 2020-2016				-.090 .112	-.093 .086	-.130 .134	-.056 .114	-.022 .091	-.114 .134
Eurocepticism Diff. 2020-2016				-.333 .108 **	-.042 .076	-.196 .131	-.303 .111 **	-.017 .078	-.222 .137
Anti-elitism Index Diff. 2020-2018	-.018 .151	.620 .117 ***	-.104 .181	.057 .169	.559 .131 ***	.103 .203	.071 .172	.568 .133 ***	.062 .204
L-R self-placement: Left							-.125 .343	.671 .248 **	-1.258 .497 *
L-R self-placement: Centre-Left							-.549 .387	.409 .273	-.555 .418
L-R self-placement: Centre							.070 .387	.135 .297	.212 .407
L-R self-placement: Centre-Right							-.356 .326	-.241 .264	-.608 .431
L-R self-placement: Right							-2.295 .582 ***	-.878 .267 **	-1.353 .539 *
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	Cox & Snell .084 Nagelkerke .104 McFadden .052			Cox & Snell .141 Nagelkerke .174 McFadden .091			Cox & Snell .181 Nagelkerke .223 McFadden .119		

Note: Sig. indicates the level of significance; \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01; \*\*\* p < 0.001.  
Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).



Table A.5. Multinomial Logistic Models (Dep. Var. Lega Typology 2016-2020; Reference category: Other).

	Model 1L			Model 2L			Model 3L																				
	Loyal	Outgoing	Incoming	Loyal	Outgoing	Incoming	Loyal	Outgoing	Incoming																		
	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.															
Intercept	-1.834	.538	***	-2.252	.672	***	-2.090	.451	***	-4.240	.696	***	-4.133	.806	***	-2.568	.476	***	-5.085	.753	***	-5.626	.946	***	-2.663	.486	***
Gender: female	-.103	.216		.337	.274		.187	.177		-.066	.232		.320	.285		.159	.180		0.246	.249		0.647	.299	*	0.232	.183	
Age	.000	.008		-.001	.009		.006	.006		.007	.008		.004	.010		.009	.006		0.009	.009		0.003	.011		0.011	.007	
Education: secondary	-.167	.260		-.205	.320		-.212	.210		.196	.281		.077	.335		-.054	.215		0.132	.303		-0.087	.355		-0.036	.218	
Education: tertiary	-.779	.449		-1.191	.634		-.878	.368	*	-.179	.482		-.681	.658		-.644	.375		-0.395	.510		-1.095	.684		-0.663	.379	
Region: Centre (ex-red zone)	-.616	.331		-.369	.384		.134	.251		-.594	.352		-.333	.400		.163	.255		-0.296	.374		0.031	.421		0.213	.258	
Region: South and Islands	-1.418	.266	***	-1.357	.342	***	-.423	.194	*	-1.522	.281	***	-1.495	.354	***	-.460	.199	*	-1.490	.297	***	-1.490	.367	***	-0.452	.201	*
National Econ. Retr. ev. Index 2016										.156	.157		.105	.187		-.053	.119		0.157	.171		0.139	.202		-0.054	.119	
Household Econ. Retr. ev. Index 2016										-.124	.168		.015	.208		.158	.137		-0.203	.182		-0.094	.222		0.161	.140	
Anti-Immigration Index 2016										1.214	.210	***	1.035	.221	***	.298	.088	***	0.964	.205	***	0.825	.217	***	0.247	.089	**
Euroscepticism Index 2016										.592	.097	***	.558	.117	***	.240	.067	***	0.482	.106	***	0.493	.124	***	0.200	.069	**
Anti-elitism Index 2018	.267	.130	*	-.115	.156		.071	.102		-.041	.138		-.357	.161	*	-.035	.106		-0.064	.147		-0.334	.170	*	-0.033	.107	
L-R self-placement: Centre/Centre-Left/Left																			-0.567	.529		0.703	.678		-0.496	.245	*
L-R self-placement: Centre-Right																			1.360	.413	***	2.630	.597	***	0.458	.258	
L-R self-placement: Right																			2.288	.362	***	2.942	.576	***	0.282	.273	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	Cox & Snell .053 Nagelkerke .069 McFadden .037			Cox & Snell .193 Nagelkerke .251 McFadden .146			Cox & Snell .262 Nagelkerke .341 McFadden .207																				

Note: Sig. indicates the level of significance; \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01; \*\*\* p < 0.001.

Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).

Table A.6. Multinomial Logistic Models (Dep. Var. Lega Typology 2016-2020; Reference category: Other).

	Model 1CS			Model 2CS			Model 3CS																				
	Loyal	Outgoing	Incoming	Loyal	Outgoing	Incoming	Loyal	Outgoing	Incoming																		
	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.															
Intercept	-1.788	.532	***	-2.389	.675	***	-2.155	.451	***	-1.714	.538	**	-2.409	.688	***	-2.360	.457	***	-3.402	.642	***	-4.399	.859	***	-2.601	.474	***
Gender: female	-.078	.217		.322	.274		.196	.177		-.095	.218		.335	.275		.243	.182		.254	.238		.690	.290	*	.322	.185	
Age	.001	.008		-.001	.009		.006	.006		.001	.008		-.001	.010		.009	.006		.010	.008		.001	.010		.014	.006	*
Education: secondary	-.181	.260		-.189	.320		-.203	.211		-.077	.265		-.214	.326		-.085	.217		.102	.295		-.238	.354		-.027	.220	
Education: tertiary	-.803	.448		-1.157	.634		-.858	.368	*	-.656	.453		-1.144	.640		-.738	.376	*	-.593	.493		-1.366	.673	*	-.642	.382	
Region: Centre (ex-red zone)	-.709	.333	*	-.425	.387		.073	.252		-.737	.336	*	-.437	.388		.078	.259		-.476	.368		-.039	.412		.155	.263	
Region: South and Islands	-1.389	.267	***	-1.364	.342	***	-.411	.195	*	-1.445	.269	***	-1.418	.345	***	-.523	.201	**	-1.481	.285	***	-1.462	.358	***	-.549	.204	**
National Econ. Retr. ev. Diff. 2020-2016										.244	.111	*	.156	.140		.234	.093	*	.131	.122		.061	.149		.208	.094	*
Household Econ. Retr. ev. Diff. 2020-2016										.065	.140		-.133	.171		-.111	.117		.061	.146		-.072	.174		-.127	.118	
Anti-Immigration Diff. 2020-2016										0.333	.112		-.064	.134		.550	.085	***	-.025	.127		-.131	.147		.526	.087	***
Euroscepticism Diff. 2020-2016										.151	.096		-.193	.117		.114	.080		.131	.101		-.201	.122		.114	.081	
Anti-elitism Index Diff. 2020-2018	.339	.125	**	.343	.155	*	.289	.099		.346	.123	**	.363	.157	*	.276	.102	**	.236	.135		.254	.166		.240	.103	*
L-R self-placement: Centre/Centre-Left/Left																			-1.210	.517	*	.046	.670		-1.703	.241	**
L-R self-placement: Centre-Right																			1.261	.392	**	2.597	.586	***	.389	.257	
L-R self-placement: Right																			2.610	.345	***	3.214	.569	***	.429	.272	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	Cox & Snell .061 Nagelkerke .080 McFadden .043			Cox & Snell .100 Nagelkerke .130 McFadden .072			Cox & Snell .234 Nagelkerke .304 McFadden .182																				

Note: Sig. indicates the level of significance; \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01; \*\*\* p < 0.001.

Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).

Table A.7. Multinomial Logistic Models (Dep. Var. Lega Typology 2016-2020; Reference category: Other).

	Model 1CO									Model 2CO									Model 3CO								
	Loyal			Outgoing			Incoming			Loyal			Outgoing			Incoming			Loyal			Outgoing			Incoming		
	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.
Intercept	-2.277	.557	***	-2.461	.684	***	-2.382	.464	***	-4.471	.735	***	-4.390	.839	***	-3.578	.519	***	-5.236	.786	***	-5.756	.982	***	-3.597	.529	***
Gender: female	-.119	.218		.305	.274		.168	.178		-.013	.236		.361	.287		.209	.188		.261	.252		.659	.302	*	.239	.191	
Age	-.002	.008		-.002	.010		.005	.006		.008	.009		.008	.011		.013	.007		.012	.009		.006	.011		.015	.007	*
Education: secondary	-.109	.263		-.179	.321		-.181	.212		.324	.283		.128	.340		.137	.224		.236	.304		-.096	.365		.128	.224	
Education: tertiary	-.683	.452		-1.138	.635		-.806	.370	*	.022	.490		-.609	.662		-.440	.386		-.234	.518		-1.059	.692		-.452	.389	
Region: Centre (ex-red zone)	-.743	.337	*	-.430	.387		-.063	.254		-.577	.361		-.285	.405		.205	.272		-.333	.385		.078	.427		.228	.275	
Region: South and Islands	-1.437	.268	***	-1.375	.342	***	-.439	.196	*	-1.492	.286	***	-1.449	.357	***	-.436	.208	*	-1.491	.302	***	-1.467	.370	***	-.441	.209	*
National Econ. Retr. ev. Index 2016										.349	.218		.124	.262		.127	.168		.274	.233		.113	.278		.126	.169	
Household Econ. Retr. ev. Index 2016										-.170	.198		-.106	.240		.083	.166		-.215	.214		-.204	.263		.089	.168	
Anti-Immigration Index 2016										1.434	.246	***	1.182	.243	***	.928	.142	***	1.126	.246	***	.907	.244	***	.888	.144	***
Euroscepticism Index 2016										.700	.113	***	-.560	.131	***	.191	.078	*	.600	.123	***	.512	.140	***	.171	.079	*
Anti-elitism Index 2018	.754	.169	***	.153	.200		.410	.133	**	-.146	.194		-.573	.221	**	-.158	.154		-.206	.212		-.598	.243	*	-.145	.156	
National Econ. Retr. ev. Diff. 2020-2016										.160	.165		.041	.205		.223	.128		.096	.177		-.025	.218		.228	.129	
Household Econ. Retr. ev. Diff. 2020-2016										-.066	.168		-.230	.203		-.071	.139		-.014	.177		-.163	.211		-.082	.140	
Anti-Immigration Diff. 2020-2016										.538	.206	**	.331	.193		1.152	.145	***	.368	.203		.184	.197		1.115	.147	***
Euroscepticism Diff. 2020-2016										-.395	.124	**	.005	.140		.141	.090		.354	.126	**	.008	.144		.129	.090	
Anti-elitism Index Diff. 2020-2018	.814	.172	***	.433	.200	*	.543	.132	***	-.031	.191		-.272	.217		-.037	.150		-.101	.208		-.372	.238		-.032	.150	
L-R self-placement: Centre/Centre-Left/Left																			-.451	.535		.764	.685		-.366	.253	
L-R self-placement: Centre-Right																			1.320	.417	**	2.575	.604	***	.220	.266	
L-R self-placement: Right																			2.199	.368	***	2.969	.586	***	0.087	.283	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	Cox & Snell .080 Nagelkerke .103 McFadden .056						Cox & Snell .259 Nagelkerke .337 McFadden .204						Cox & Snell .314 Nagelkerke .408 McFadden .256														

Note: Sig. indicates the level of significance; \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01; \*\*\* p < 0.001.

Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).

Table A.8. Multinomial Logistic Models (Dep. Var. FDI Typology 2016-2020; Reference category: Other).

	Model 1L						Model 2L						Model 3L					
	loyal			Incoming			loyal			Incoming			loyal			Incoming		
	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.
Intercept	-5.536	1.005	***	-2.450	.440	***	-7.431	1.164	***	-3.586	.494	***	-8.441	1.317	***	-4.013	.520	***
Gender: female	-.625	.386		-.518	.176	**	-.731	.391		-.591	.180	**	-.539	.407		-.453	.186	*
Age	.027	.013	*	.009	.006		.031	.013	*	.014	.006	*	.033	.014	*	.014	.007	*
Education: secondary	.228	.516		-.087	.211		.462	.524		.119	.218		.562	.547		.114	.226	
Education: tertiary	1.060	.608		-.476	.343		1.520	.625	*	-.112	.355		1.652	.677	*	-.167	.367	
Region: Centre (ex-red zone)	.083	.591		.043	.266		.157	.601		.097	.273		.470	.624		.274	.284	
Region: South and Islands	.269	.400		.023	.185		.460	.408		.187	.192		.791	.430		.315	.200	
National Econ. Retr. ev. Index 2016							-.111	.256		-.087	.119		-.107	.276		-.081	.121	
Household Econ. Retr. ev. Index 2016							.100	.288		.011	.132		.040	.296		-.030	.139	
Anti-Immigration Index 2016							1.050	.310	***	.615	.104	***	.678	.305	*	.496	.104	***
Euroscepticism Index 2016							.293	.149	*	.129	.067		.098	.158		.084	.071	
Anti-elitism Index 2018	.184	.212	.387	.274	.101	**	-.050	.215		.109	.105		.006	.224		.144	.108	
L-R self-placement: Centre/Centre-Left/Left													-.1535	1.278		-.442	.300	
L-R self-placement: Centre-Right													1.060	.832		1.348	.263	***
L-R self-placement: Right													2.534	.724	***	.813	.270	**
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	Cox & Snell .022 Nagelkerke .037 McFadden .025						Cox & Snell .089 Nagelkerke .151 McFadden .105						Cox & Snell .148 Nagelkerke .251 McFadden .180					

Note: Sig. indicates the level of significance; \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01; \*\*\* p < 0.001.

Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).

**Table A.9.** Multinomial Logistic Models (Dep. Var. FDI Typology 2016-2020; Reference category: Other).

	Model 1CS			Model 2CS			Model 3CS											
	loyal	Incoming		loyal	Incoming		loyal	Incoming										
	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.						
Intercept	-5.609	.994	***	-2.421	.436	***	-5.585	1.021	***	-2.463	.436	***	-7.775	1.248	***	-3.336	.482	***
Gender: female	-.611	.387		-.493	.176	**	-.678	.392		-.489	.177	**	-.546	.411		-.357	.183	
Age	.027	.012	*	.011	.006		.028	.013	*	.012	.006		.034	.014	*	.015	.006	*
Education: secondary	.236	.515		-.085	.210		.321	.525		-.032	.213		.767	.564		.077	.224	
Education: tertiary	1.051	.604		-.488	.341		1.145	.619		-.402	.344		1.740	.684	*	-.258	.361	
Region: Centre (ex-red zone)	.017	.592		-.020	.267		-.048	.597		-.002	.268		.213	.641		.206	.280	
Region: South and Islands	.318	.400		.062	.185		.307	.402		.032	.187		.654	.422		.172	.195	
National Econ. Retr. ev. Diff. 2020-2016							.162	.191		.072	.087		.038	.210		.023	.091	
Household Econ. Retr. ev. Diff. 2020-2016							-.034	.250		.089	.111		-.078	.248		.085	.113	
Anti-Immigration Diff. 2020-2016							-.193	.179		.194	.081	*	-.265	.211		.149	.085	
Euroscepticism Diff. 2020-2016							.198	.165		.065	.077		.226	.165		.066	.079	
Anti-elitism Index Diff. 2020-2018	.396	.204		.208	.097	*	.379	.199		.198	.097	*	.221	.212		.157	.102	
L-R self-placement: Centre/Centre-Left/Left													-1.828	1.275		-.633	.293	*
L-R self-placement: Centre-Right													1.252	.824		1.415	.254	***
L-R self-placement: Right													2.933	.711	***	1.115	.262	***
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	Cox & Snell .022 Nagelkerke .037 McFadden .025			Cox & Snell .029 Nagelkerke .049 McFadden .033			Cox & Snell .124 Nagelkerke .212 McFadden .150											

Note: Sig. indicates the level of significance; \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01; \*\*\* p < 0.001.

Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).

**Table A.10.** Multinomial Logistic Models (Dep. Var. FDI Typology 2016-2020; Reference category: Other).

	Model 1CO			Model 2CO			Model 3CO											
	loyal	Incoming		loyal	Incoming		loyal	Incoming										
	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.	B	s.e.	Sig.						
Intercept	-6.130	1.041	***	-2.828	.455	***	-7.613	1.212	***	-4.277	.522	***	-8.678	1.370	***	-4.691	.553	***
Gender: female	-.658	.387		-.536	.177	**	-.743	.395		-.555	.183	**	-.592	.413		-.423	.188	*
Age	.026	.013	*	.009	.006		.032	.014	*	.012	.006		.035	.014	*	.013	.007	
Education: secondary	.286	.515		-.037	.212		.551	.526		.148	.221		.731	.560		.109	.228	
Education: tertiary	1.194	.609	*	-.369	.345		1.699	.638	**	-.048	.360		1.894	.700	**	-.137	.374	
Region: Centre (ex-red zone)	-.028	.596		-.045	.270		.130	.609		.175	.281		.335	.641		.292	.291	
Region: South and Islands	.299	.401		.037	.187		.484	.412		.270	.197		.766	.433		.369	.204	
National Econ. Retr. ev. Index 2016							-.089	.363		-.189	.167		-.168	.380		-.214	.168	
Household Econ. Retr. ev. Index 2016							.073	.341		.098	.159		.046	.361		.059	.165	
Anti-Immigration Index 2016							.968	.337	**	1.019	.144	***	.510	.339		.865	.147	***
Euroscepticism Index 2016							.389	.174	*	.060	.076		.206	.184		.020	.080	
Anti-elitism Index 2018	.709	.284	*	.636	.131	***	.057	.320		.126	.146		.146	.345		.183	.152	
National Econ. Retr. ev. Diff. 2020-2016							-.055	.279		-.137	.127		-.119	.297		-.152	.131	
Household Econ. Retr. ev. Diff. 2020-2016							-.001	.289		.140	.133		-.014	.300		0.151	.136	
Anti-Immigration Diff. 2020-2016							.028	.255		.784	.140	***	-.157	.267		.663	.142	***
Euroscepticism Diff. 2020-2016							.368	.193		.018	.088		.300	.194		.008	.090	
Anti-elitism Index Diff. 2020-2018	.857	.289	**	.603	.131	***	.160	.312		.094	.145		.190	.340		.135	.150	
L-R self-placement: Centre/Centre-Left/Left													-1.539	1.280		-.345	.303	
L-R self-placement: Centre-Right													1.120	.835		1.261	.265	***
L-R self-placement: Right													2.505	.729	***	0.716	.274	**
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	Cox & Snell .042 Nagelkerke .072 McFadden .049			Cox & Snell .121 Nagelkerke .206 McFadden .146			Cox & Snell .170 Nagelkerke .289 McFadden .210											

Note: Sig. indicates the level of significance; \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01; \*\*\* p < 0.001.

Source: ITANES panel surveys 2016-2020 (n. cases 1412).



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## Think different? Populist attitudes and their consequences on vote behaviour in the 2016 and 2020 Italian constitutional referenda

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**Abstract.** Following the rise of populist parties and leaders in the last decade, research has extensively investigated the political and economic factors that have driven some voters towards populism. Less research has been devoted to the individual psychological factors associated with populist attitudes, and to how those can influence political decisions, such as vote choice in an election or referendum. In this study, we analysed data from the 2016 and 2020 ITANES panel surveys, where populist attitudes were measured by a 6-item scale. Findings indicate that populist attitudes were associated with relevant psychosocial factors, such as nationalism, political efficacy, and conspiracist beliefs. Populist attitudes in turn explained part of the variance in vote choice at both referenda, after controlling for the evaluation of the reform and political orientation. Furthermore, we found that voters with strong populist attitudes were more likely to engage in motivated reasoning in the form of the biased evaluation of the foreseeability of the referendum results, making simplified and self-reassuring evaluations aligned with their vote choice. The discussion focuses on how populism as a political phenomenon can be rooted in relevant individual differences in the psychological features of voters.

**Keywords:** populism, referendum, hindsight bias, motivated reasoning.

The focus of the present paper is to investigate the role of populism in the two electoral turning points represented by the 2016 and 2016 Italian constitutional referenda, and to understand the key characteristics of populist voters across time and political developments, by highlighting the social psychological and cognitive features associated with voters' populist attitudes. By analysing data collected in correspondence with the two referenda by the ITANES panel survey, we investigated to what extent economic and political dissatisfaction, nationalism, political orientation, and conspiracy theory beliefs were associated with populist attitudes. We then tested our hypothesis that populist attitudes were a significant factor in vote choice at both elections, despite the different content of the two constitutional reform proposals, and the different political alignments occurring in the two electoral scenarios. Finally, we investigated for the first time the association

between populist attitudes and a cognitive bias, namely the hindsight bias, in order to test our hypothesis that populist voters differed from other voters not only in their vote choice at the 2020 referendum, but also in the way they retrospectively evaluated its outcome.

#### DEFINING AND MEASURING POPULISM

Defining populism has been a central issue in the recent academic debate. Populism adapts and changes in relation to the context in which it is expressed, being “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt élite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2007, p. 23). This definition covers two main themes of populism: one is its mutable relationship with ideology, and the other is the dualism of people versus élites as the cornerstone of its worldview and rhetoric, where the people are the oppressed and the élites are the oppressors.

As to the relationship between populism and ideology, over time populism has been associated with cultural and economic positions related to both the traditional right (e.g., nativism) and the traditional left (e.g., socialism), and populist movements have positioned themselves across the political spectrum, and sometimes outside it (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

As to the dualism of the people versus the élites, identification with a *pure people* is central in the creation and definition of populist movements (Mayer, Kaymak, & Justice, 2000), in contraposition with a *corrupt élite*. This in-group vs. out-group distinction is routinely used by populist leaders to provide followers with a distinct yet inclusive identity, which is key to the building and polarisation of consensus.

In parallel with the theoretical definition of populism, based on the analysis of populist leaders’ rhetoric, party manifestos and party platforms (Hawkins, 2009; Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn, de Lange & van der Brug, 2014; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011), there have been several attempts to develop an empirical measure of citizens’ support for populist ideas and beliefs, and delineate the characteristics of populist voters, identifying the features that distinguish them from the supporters of parties along the traditional political spectrum.

Early attempts (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2012; Hawkins, Riding & Mudde, 2012; Stanley, 2011) yielded mixed results in terms of measurement accuracy and predictive power (e.g., the association with support for popu-

list parties). Thereafter, Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014) developed a measure of populism as an attitude. A sample of 586 Dutch respondents were asked to report their agreement with 14 statements, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (I very much disagree) to 5 (I very much agree). After conducting a principal component analysis, Akkerman and colleagues (2014) selected 7 items to form a scale of populist attitudes. These items include statements referring to popular sovereignty (e.g., “The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions”), the contraposition between the people and the élites (e.g., “The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people”), and Manichean antagonism to an evil political élite (e.g., “Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil”). Participants’ scores on this scale were negatively correlated with measures of elitism and pluralism (Hawkins et al., 2012), and they were significantly higher among voters of left- and right-wing populist parties, as compared to voters of mainstream left- and right-wing parties. As the measure includes multiple dimensions, different approaches to its scoring have been proposed. Whereas most studies simply averaged the item scores into a single score representing a global indicator of participants’ populist attitudes, others (Wuttke, Schimpf & Schoen, 2020) argued that a non-compensatory scoring strategy may better reflect individual’s attitudes along the different dimensions of the construct, identifying as populist only those who score high in each and every dimension of the populist attitudes.

In addition to the Netherlands (Geurking, Zaslove, Sluiter & Jacobs, 2020), the scale developed by Akkerman and colleagues (2014) has been widely employed in studies conducted in several other countries, such as Belgium (Spruyt, Keppens & Van Droogenbroeck 2016), Chile (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2014), France (Vasilopoulos & Jost, 2020), Switzerland (Schulz et al., 2018), the U.S.A. (Oliver & Rahn 2016), and Italy (Cremonesi, 2019). The items included in the ITANES 2020 survey, and used in this study, were also based on this scale.

#### THE PSYCHOSOCIAL ANTECEDENTS OF POPULISM

Besides its definition and measurement, another main area of research on populism dealt with its roots in citizens’ political, economic, and social characteristics. A first cluster of studies has explored the so-called *economic anxiety hypothesis* (Hernandez & Kriesi, 2015; Rooduijn & Burgoon, 2018), according to which populism is related with negative economic conditions, such as those

arising from global financial crises. These generate economic insecurity and dissatisfaction among many citizens, and the difficult handling of these economic conditions further reduces citizens' trust in incumbent politicians, whether they are left- or right-wing oriented, and in the political system as a whole (Algan, Guriev, Papaioannou & Passari, 2017). This process creates fertile ground for the growth of populist parties, which tend to be outside traditional parliamentary majorities, in a position that allows them to blame the "corrupted élites" for unsatisfactory economic performances (Rooduijn, 2018), as well as to make generous and reassuring promises to the economically distressed voters.

Based on these assumptions, some studies have investigated whether individual perceptions of the economic outlook and insecurity are associated with support for populist parties and populist attitudes (Rothwell & Diego-Rosell, 2016). These studies, however, found only weak evidence of greater populism among individuals from low-income households than among individuals from more affluent backgrounds. Research in the area of political psychology analysed low external political efficacy, that is the perception of politicians and the political system not caring about citizens' opinions, as a potential mediating factor between negative economic evaluations and support for populist leaders and movements (Rooduijn, Van Der Brug & De Lange, 2016). This concept is also clearly related with the more general notion of political discontent (Passarelli & Tuorto, 2018; Van der Brug, 2003) that comes from the weak presence and the inconsistent responsiveness of political institutions, causing frustration and a loss of trust in traditional political parties.

Another set of studies have explored the so-called *cultural backlash hypothesis* (Inglehart & Norris, 2016), according to which populist attitudes are associated with the perception of a changing cultural (rather than economic) outlook, and the experience of citizens feeling "strangers in their own land" (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Inglehart & Norris 2016). In this case, populist attitudes are seen as a form of individual reactance to some cultural trends which have become mainstream in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as secularisation, globalisation, and multiculturalism. Whereas both centre-left and centre-right parties substantially accept these trends and incorporate them in their political agendas, populist leaders and parties propose themselves as defenders of traditional values, local economic interests, and native populations, adopting anti-diversity, anti-European (Bellucci & Serricchio, 2016), and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Immigration, seen as a threat to both economic security and cultural integrity (Stephan, Ybarra & Morrison, 2016), has been especially focused on by populist move-

ments (Mudde, 1999; Pettigrew, 2016), and several studies have identified significant associations between populism, ethnonationalism, and negative attitudes towards immigrants (e.g., Marchlewska et al., 2018).

Research in the area of political psychology has further investigated the implications of the cultural backlash hypothesis, looking for the psychosocial dimensions associated with ethno-nationalism and support for populist parties. This line of research has identified relative deprivation and collective narcissism as two main psychosocial factors underlying populist attitudes. *Relative deprivation* has been long studied in social psychology in the context of intergroup conflict (Walker & Pettigrew, 1984) and collective action. It is the belief that one's in-group receives less than rival out-groups, generating feelings of injustice and resentment towards said out-groups, not because of their objective material wealth, but because of the perceived uneven distribution of resources and status. Relative deprivation often applies to ethnic or immigrant minorities, which are targeted for the perceived undeserved benefits they receive from the States. In a study with Belgian participants, relative deprivation was found to be positively associated with populist attitudes (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). Similarly, in a study conducted in the USA (Marchlewska, et al., 2018), relative deprivation was found to be a positive predictor of vote for a populist candidate (i.e., Donald Trump). The same study also found an association between support for populist candidates and *collective narcissism*, defined as an unrealistic belief in one's in-group's greatness, contingent on external validation (de Zavala, Cichocka, Eidelson & Jayawickreme, 2009).

In our study, we considered a range of potential psychosocial antecedents of populism, in order to assess their association with populist attitudes measured in the ITANES 2020 survey. In particular, we included in our analysis participants' perception of the economy (both at the national and at the household level), and measures of internal and external political efficacy, to test the role of economic anxiety and political distrust in the development of populist attitudes. We then included two measures of participants' attitudes towards two key issues related to nationalism, namely immigration and membership in the European Union, to test their association with populist attitudes, as hypothesized by the cultural backlash hypothesis.

#### POPULISM, CONSPIRACISM AND COGNITIVE BIASES

In addition to the economic, political, and psychosocial factors discussed above, some research sug-



gests that populism may be also associated with certain shared beliefs, and the individual cognitive processes fostering them.

There is growing evidence of, and concern for, populist movements' and leaders' use of conspiracy theories to gain consensus (Castanho-Silva, Vegetti & Litvay, 2017; Hamelers, 2020; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Recent research has therefore started investigating whether supporters of populist parties are particularly attracted by this kind of narrations (Enders & Smallpage, 2019), and whether these narrations are particularly persuasive for individuals with certain worldviews and cognitive styles. Conspiracy theories are explanations of political or historical events that go against those commonly accepted by the political and media establishment, and argue for the existence of vast and powerful machinations that control social, political, and economic events in order to oppress the population, or parts of it (Douglas, Sutton & Chichoka, 2017). These elements of conspiracy theories appear to fit with populists' Manichaeism (Hawkins, 2009), and political and social distrust (Goertzel, 1994), as they reinforce the idea of the people being a candid and unaware victim of the deeds of an evil cabal of politicians and businessmen.

Research on the link between conspiracist beliefs and populist attitudes provides some insight into the tendency of populist voters to deviate from strictly objective and fact-based evaluations, in favour of simplistic narratives that are consistent with their prior beliefs (Catellani, 2020; Fiedler, 2021), thus suggesting that endorsement of conspiracist beliefs may be the result of motivated reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Past research on politically motivated reasoning (Jost, Hennes, & Lavine, 2013), in particular, has already shown that such phenomenon is present in voters throughout the political spectrum (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Flynn, Nyhan & Reifler, 2017; Kahan, 2016; Leeper & Slothuus, 2014; Lodge & Taber, 2013), and associated with certain individual characteristics, such as high levels of dogmatism and intolerance for ambiguity (Federico & Malka, 2018; Jost, 2017; Jost et al., 2013). These features, which have been attributed in the past to certain political groups such as extremists and conservatives, appear to be relevant also in defining populist voters. Therefore, it is possible that populist voters would frequently incur in cognitive biases and motivated reasoning when processing political information.

We focus here on one specific bias, the so-called hindsight bias (Fischhoff, 1975), which is known to commonly occur in political judgements, such as when discussing the outcome of an election (Bertolotti & Catellani, 2021; Blank, Fischer & Erdfelder, 2003). Generally

speaking, the hindsight bias is the tendency to retrospectively overestimate the likelihood of an outcome (Roese & Vohs, 2012), and it is experienced as the failure to correctly recollect past inaccurate predictions (the *memory distortion* component), the tendency to perceive the actual outcome as unavoidable (the *inevitability* component), and to overstate one's ability to predict it (the *retrospective foreseeability* component). This latter component has been found to be particularly affected by motivational factors, such as the desire to perceive the world as ordered and controllable (Markman & Tetlock, 2000; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Thompson, Armstrong & Thomas, 1998) and the desire to reduce ambiguity by reaching a sense of *cognitive closure* (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996), both of which are related to the already mentioned intolerance of ambiguity. Furthermore, research has found retrospective foreseeability to be related also to self-presentation concerns, that is the desire to put oneself (and one's relevant group, based on political, social, or national identification) in a positive light. As foresight and shrewdness are usually considered desirable traits to possess, individuals are inclined to claim that they had made correct predictions regarding the outcome of events (including elections), even when this was not actually the case (Mark & Mellor, 1991; Sedikides & Greg, 2008). They are also inclined to exaggerate or downplay the foreseeability of events depending on how they reflect on the image of their relevant group, such as their political party or movement (Louie, Curren, & Harich, 2000; Pezzo, 2011). When an event is deemed positive, as in the case of an electoral victory or a good performance of one's preferred party, individuals are more likely to consider it foreseeable. This biased evaluation appears to be mainly driven by an affective reaction to the outcome, namely, satisfaction (Bertolotti & Catellani, 2021). When, conversely, an event is deemed negative, as in the case of a political defeat or a poor electoral performance, individuals tend to distance themselves from it, deeming it unpredictable and unforeseeable (Louie, 1999; Mark & Mellor, 1991; Pezzo & Pezzo, 2007).

In this paper, we moved from the assumption that individuals with strong populist attitudes would be more prone than others to incur in this type of hindsight bias, and to accommodate their retrospective evaluations of referendum outcomes based on how they reflected on their own position, thus evaluating a victory as highly foreseeable, and a defeat as surprising. This result would be consistent with populists' preference for a simplified and extremized representation of reality over a more complex and nuanced one, as well as with their heightened need for confirmation of individual- and group-

level value, as indicated by research on populists' collective narcissism and relative deprivation (Marchlewska, et al., 2018; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016).

#### RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Using ITANES panel data from the 2016 and 2020 constitutional referenda, we investigated the antecedents of populist attitudes, as well as the consequences of those attitudes on vote choice and on the evaluation of the electoral results.

First, based on previous research on the economic, political, and psychological factors associated with populism and support for populist leaders and parties, we tested the strength and direction of the association between populist attitudes and economic perceptions (Rothwell & Diego-Rosell, 2016; Rooduijn & Burgoon, 2018), political efficacy (Algan et al., 2017) and attitudes, in particular regarding EU membership and immigration (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Stephan, Ybarra & Morrison, 2016), and political orientation (Geurkink, et al., 2020). We also included a relevant psychosocial factor in our model, namely belief in conspiracy theories (Castanho-Silva, et al., 2017). We therefore formulated the following set of hypotheses.

*Populist attitudes are negatively associated with participants' evaluation of the economic situation (H1a), political efficacy (H1b), and attitudes towards the EU (H1c) and immigration (H1d), whereas they are positively associated with right-wing political orientation (H1e) and belief in conspiracy theories (H1f).*

Second, we explored the role of populist attitudes in vote choice at the two constitutional referenda. Past research on vote choice on specific topics or issues has argued that when citizens struggle to fully understand the object of the ballot (De Angelis, Colombo, & Morisi, 2020), they look for heuristic cues that may help their decision-making task (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Lupia, McCubbins, & Popkin, 2000), such as partisan cues. We proposed that, in addition to the well-known and studied cues related to political orientation (Colombo & Kriesi, 2017), citizens may also rely on their populist attitudes when deliberating on political matters, such as in the case of a constitutional referendum. In particular, proposals presented as simple and clear-cut positions on political issues may resonate with the highly polarized and simplistic approach typical of populism. We therefore formulated the following hypotheses.

*Populist attitudes are an independent predictor of vote choice against the 2016 constitutional reform (H2a) and in*

*favour of the 2020 constitutional reform (H2b), in addition to, and independent from the evaluation of the respective reforms and political orientation.*

Third, we further investigated how populist attitudes influenced not only political decisions, but also the way citizens think of political events, such as the outcome of an election. In particular, we tested whether and how populist attitudes were associated with hindsight bias in the evaluation of the foreseeability of the 2020 referendum outcome. Past research (Bertolotti & Catellani, 2021) indicates that citizens' satisfaction with an electoral outcome can subtly bias their retrospective evaluations of the event, making desired outcomes appear more foreseeable than undesired ones. Since populist citizens appear to be easily prone to simplified and biased political evaluations, we expected them to experience stronger hindsight bias in the evaluation of the foreseeability of electoral results, as well. We therefore formulated the following hypotheses.

*The association between vote choice at the 2020 referendum and the retrospective foreseeability of the result is moderated by populist attitudes, resulting in increased foreseeability among more populist participants who had voted in favour of the reform (H3a) and conversely decreased foreseeability among more populist participants who had voted against the reform (H3b).*

#### THE CASE OF THE ITALIAN CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDA

In the present study, we analyzed the ITANES data collected before and after the 2016 and the 2020 referenda, in order to understand the individual and psychological characteristics of populist voters, and how they affected the outcomes of the two referenda, and voters' evaluation of them.

The 2016 and 2020 constitutional referenda were chosen for three key reasons.

First, the referenda were held away from major European, national, or local electoral competitions, and concerned matters outside the usual range of the electoral debate (e.g., parliamentary representation and legislative procedure). Therefore, we were able to test the impact of populist attitudes on political decision-making outside the scenarios where they have been typically investigated, which are often characterized by intense political campaigning, heightened salience of political and party identity, and a power imbalance between larger, traditional, and mainstream parties and smaller, up-and-coming, and radical populist movements.

Second, despite their atypicality, both referenda were political landmarks at the time they were held, raising them to the rank of “first order” elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). In 2016, the constitutional reform championed by the then Prime Minister Matteo Renzi was rejected by a large majority of voters (59.1%), an outcome that was interpreted as a sign of the declining popularity of Renzi and of his party (Ceccarini & Bordignon, 2017), and the growing strength of populist opposition movements (De Blasio & Sorice, 2019), in particular the Five Star Movement and the Lega Party, which would eventually form a parliamentary majority after the 2018 elections. The 2020 constitutional referendum was held in a further radically changed scenario. It was the first major election after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (having been postponed due to the initial outbreak in the spring of the same year), and after the two main populist movements had parted ways, with the Five-Star Movement forming a new centre-left majority, and the Lega becoming the leading force of a reconstituted centre-right opposition. At this time, the proposal was approved by an even larger majority of voters (69.96%) than those who had rejected the 2016 reform.

Third, the constitutional reforms of 2016 and 2020 reflected two different approaches to long-standing issues in the functioning of Italian political institutions, which may have had equally different appeal for populist (and non-populist) voters. The 2016 constitutional reform aimed at changing several elements of the executive and legislative systems, including the composition of the Senate, certain aspects of parliamentary procedure, the power balance between national and regional administrative levels. The implications of these changes were not easily accessible to all citizens, and discussion around the reform often revolved around complex technicalities of constitutional law. The 2020 constitutional reform, conversely, had a much more limited and straightforward aim, that is the proportional reduction of the number of elected representatives in the two legislative chambers (from 945 to 600). This had been a central issue in the populist agenda for decades, and one of the key points in the Five Star Movement’s platform.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

We analyzed data from four waves of the ITANES nationwide panel survey. The surveys were conducted before and after the 2016 and 2020’s constitutional referendums in Italy. The 2016 wave involved a representative sample of  $N = 3027$  Italian voters, the 2020 involved a

sample of  $N = 3355$ , of which  $N = 2041$  had participated to the 2016 waves.

### *Measures*

*Populist Attitudes.* A short six-item scale measured participants’ populist attitudes. The items, based on the Akkerman et al. (2014) scale, were the following: “Politicians must follow the citizens’ will” (1); “Citizens and not politicians should take the most important political decisions” (2); “The differences that exist between politicians and the people are greater than the differences within the people” (3); “I would prefer being represented by a common person rather than by a professional politician” (4); “Making compromises in politics means selling off your own principles” (5), and “Politicians speak too much and do too little” (6). The items were meant to tap into the three main dimensions of populist attitudes postulated by Akkerman et al. (2014), namely popular sovereignty (items 1, 2), the division between the people and the elite (items 3, 4), and Manichaeism (items 5, 6). Participants were asked to rate each statement on a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly agree) to 5 (Strongly disagree).

*Political Orientation.* Respondents were asked to position themselves on the left-right axis of the political spectrum: “When people talk about politics, they use the words “left” and “right” Here’s a row of boxes that goes from left to right. Considering your political views, what box would you choose?”. The possible answers were scored from 0 (Left) to 10 (Right), with the two further options “I don’t know” and “None of these”. A simple continuous index ranging from left to right was used in the main analyses, excluding participants who did not reveal their orientation. In an additional supplementary analysis reported in the Appendix (see Table A1), political orientation was recoded as a series of dummy variables representing participants on the extreme left (self-reported scores of 0-1), center-left (2-4), center (5), center-right (6-8), extreme right (9-10), and non-reported orientation (12-13).

*Economic Evaluation.* Participants were asked to evaluate the economic situation of their country: “According to you, the economic situation in Italy in the last year is...” and their family: “According to you, the economic situation of your family in the last year is...”, using a scale ranging from 1 (Much better) to 5 (Much worse).

*Political Efficacy.* Two items assessed people’s perception of internal political efficacy: “Sometimes politics seems so complicated that you don’t understand what is going on”, and external political efficacy: “People like me have no influence on what the government does”. Par-

ticipants had to report their agreement with each statement on a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree).

*Attitude towards the EU.* One item asked participants to express their judgement on the EU: "According to you, the fact that Italy is part of the European Union is", with three possible answers (1 = a good thing, 2 = a bad thing; 3 = neither a good nor a bad thing).

*Attitude Towards Immigration.* Participants were asked to position themselves on the issue of immigration: "Some people say we receive too many immigrants. Others say it's ok as it is right now. Others say we could easily welcome more of them. Where would you position your opinion?", on a 7-point scale (1= We receive too many immigrants; 7 = We could easily welcome more immigrants).

*Conspiracy Beliefs.* Participants were asked to rate the plausibility of 4 conspiracy theories, on a scale ranging from 0 (Not plausible) to 10 (Completely plausible). The items were the following: "The Moon landings never happened and their evidence was made up by NASA and the US Government"; "Vaccines destroy the immune system and expose it to several disease"; "The Stamina Therapy for neurodegenerative disease invented by Davide Vannoni has been boycotted by pharmaceutical companies"; "Aircraft spray chemical agents in the atmosphere as part of a clandestine programme led by political institutions".

*Evaluation of the Constitutional Reforms.* Participants were asked to evaluate the two constitutional reform proposals: "What is your judgement of the constitutional reform?", using a 11-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (Very negative) to 10 (Very positive).

*Referendum Vote Choice.* This item has been analysed both for the 2016 and 2020 referendum. Participants were asked to report their vote choice by two items, "What did you vote for in the 4 December Referendum?" in the 2016 post-electoral survey, and "What did you vote for in the 20-21 September Referendum?" in the 2020 post-electoral survey. The respondents had 4 possible answers: I voted yes; I voted no; I voted with a blank ballot; I did not vote.

*Hindsight bias.* In a section of the 2020 post-electoral survey, participants' opinion on the referendum results were assessed by one item asking participants "Before 21 September, many predictions were made about the result of the referendum. How much do you think it was foreseeable that 'yes' would win?". The answers were registered on a scale ranging from 0 (Not foreseeable at all) to 10 (Very foreseeable).

*Sociodemographic Characteristics.* Participants' basic sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age and level of education) were collected.

## RESULTS

### *Dimensional structure of populist attitudes*

As a preliminary step to our main analyses, we investigated the dimensional structure and reliability of the measure used in the ITANES panel survey. As described above, a shortened 6-item version of the scale originally proposed by Akkerman et al. (2014) was included in the survey, with 2 items investigating participants' attitudes along each of the three dimensions of popular sovereignty, the contraposition between the people and the elite, and Manichaeism. We performed confirmatory factor analyses for the postulated three-dimensional model of populist attitudes and for a simplified one-dimensional model. Overall, the fit indexes of the two models were very similar (see Table 1), indicating that neither model was clearly superior to the other. The three dimensions were highly correlated with each other,  $r(3259) > .500$ ,  $p < .001$ . Item saturations on the three dimensions were also similar (ranging from .580 to .876 for the sovereignty dimension; .642 to .733 for the anti-elitism dimension, and .515 to .711 for the Manichaeism dimension) to item saturations on the single factor (ranging from .498 to .870).

Based on Wuttke et al. (2020) discussion on the different scoring methods of populist attitudes scales, we computed two alternative scores reflecting compensatory and non-compensatory conceptual structures of populist attitudes. The first score was computed simply averaging the six items' scores into a single index. The second score was computed following the approach proposed by Goertz (2006), in two steps. First, we computed average indexes of the three dimensions of populist attitudes. Then we used the lowest of the three values as the global score. The resulting score represented the highest level of populism participants reported in all three dimensions simultaneously, thus resulting in significantly lower average scores,  $M = 2.01$ ,  $SD = 0.79$  vs.  $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ,  $t(2298) = 45.26$ ,  $p < .001$ . The two indexes, however, were very strongly correlated,  $r(2297) = .897$ ,  $p < .001$ . Based on these findings, in the main analyses we used the basic average index of the six items' scores as a simple unidimensional measure of populist attitudes (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77$ ).

### *Psychosocial antecedents of populist attitudes*

We entered the populist attitudes score as the dependent variable in a hierarchical linear regression model with six blocks of predictors: first, basic sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age, education),



**Table 1.** Goodness-of-fit indexes for two alternative models of the populist attitudes measures.

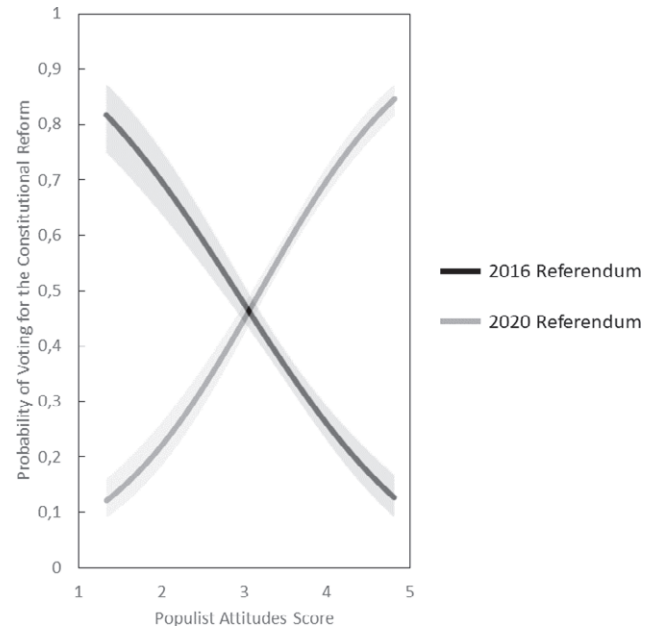
	Three-dimensional Model	Uni-dimensional Model
$\chi^2$ (df)	223.12* (6)	240.91* (9)
RMSEA	.11	.09
CFI	.94	.94
TLI	.86	.90
SRMR	.04	.04

\*  $p < .001$ .

second, economic evaluations (familiar and national), third, perceived political efficacy (internal and external), fourth, nationalistic attitudes (towards the EU and immigration), fifth, political orientation, and finally the score on the conspiracy theory beliefs scale. Results from the full model are reported in the Appendix, Table A1. Economic evaluations were negatively associated with populist attitudes, but only weakly and non-significantly,  $\beta$ s  $< .039$ ,  $t$ s  $< 1.56$ ,  $p$ s  $> .120$ , thus not supporting our H1a. Both internal,  $\beta = -.113$ ,  $t = 4.78$ ,  $p < .001$ , and external political efficacy,  $\beta = -.092$ ,  $t = 3.89$ ,  $p < .001$ , were negatively associated with populist attitudes, in line with H1b, as were attitudes towards the EU,  $\beta = -.067$ ,  $t = 2.75$ ,  $p = .006$ , and especially towards immigration,  $\beta = -.314$ ,  $t = 10.97$ ,  $p < .001$ , providing support also to H1c and H1d. Finally, the hypothesized (H1e) association with political orientation was not significant,  $\beta = .020$ ,  $t = 0.71$ ,  $p = .480$  (but see the Appendix and Table A1 for results of the analysis with recoded political orientation categories), and a positive and significant association with conspiracy theory beliefs was found,  $\beta = .201$ ,  $t = 8.05$ ,  $p < .001$ , thus supporting H1f<sup>1</sup>.

#### *Populism as a predictor of vote choice in the 2016 and 2020 referendum*

To assess whether populism would turn out to be a significant predictor of vote choice at the 2016 and 2020 referenda, we entered vote choice (coded 1 = yes; 0 = no) in two separate logistic regression models, with three predictors entered in a stepwise fashion: The evaluation of the proposed constitutional reform, political orientation on the left-right axis, and populist attitudes scores. Participants' vote choice at the two referenda was

**Figure 1.** Probability of voting in favour of the 2016 and 2020 Constitutional reforms as a function of populist attitudes.

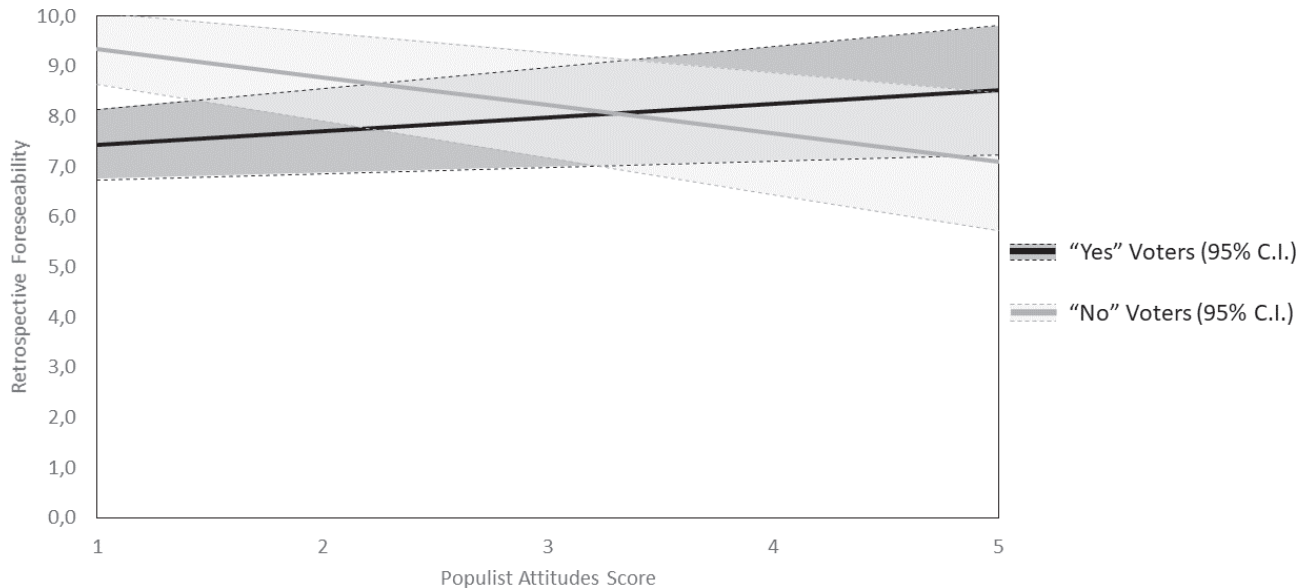
strongly predicted by their evaluation of the two constitutional reform proposals, and to a lesser degree by their political orientation (see Table A2 in the Appendix for the full model). Most importantly for the aims of the present study, populism was significantly and negatively associated with vote for the 2016 reform,  $B = -.544$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.58$ , and significantly and positively associated with vote for the 2020 reform,  $B = .264$ ,  $p = .020$ ,  $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.30$ , thus providing support to both H2a and H2b (Figure 1).

The results of the regression analyses therefore confirmed our hypothesis that populism would be a significant driver of vote choice in both the 2016 and 2020 referenda, providing voters with a potential cognitive shortcut when making a rather complex decision on whether to support or reject a constitutional reform. This process, quite common and accepted in the case of party affiliation and political orientation, can therefore be extended to populist attitudes, something that had not been empirically observed yet.

#### *Populist attitudes and hindsight bias*

The third aim of our study was to investigate whether populist attitudes would be associated with the tendency to incur in the hindsight bias, and specifically to report a biased, self-serving evaluation of the retrospective foreseeability of a referendum result. To test our

<sup>1</sup> The same analysis was performed using the alternative populist attitudes scores as the dependent variable. Results were overall similar, with the single but notable exception of the association between participants' attitude towards the EU and populist attitudes, which was no longer significant,  $\beta = .038$ ,  $t = 1.45$ ,  $p = .146$ .



**Figure 2.** Retrospective foreseeability of the 2020 referendum outcome as a function of vote choice and populist attitudes

hypothesis, we regressed reported retrospective foreseeability of the 2020 referendum outcome on vote choice (coded 1 for “yes”, -1 for “no”), populist attitudes scores, and the interaction between the two, using political orientation and the evaluation of the constitutional reform as additional covariates in the multiple regression model.

Results showed that vote choice did not have a significant effect on retrospective foreseeability,  $B = -0.024$ ,  $t = 0.34$ ,  $p = .736$ , whereas populist attitudes were negatively associated with it,  $B = -0.188$ ,  $t = 2.87$ ,  $p = .004$ . The interaction term between vote choice and populist attitudes was also significant,  $B = 0.417$ ,  $t = 6.86$ ,  $p < .001$ . No significant effects of political orientation or of the evaluation of the constitutional reform emerged,  $B_s < 0.031$ ,  $t_s < 1.43$ ,  $p_s > .154$ . A follow-up analysis of the conditional effects of populist attitudes on retrospective foreseeability for participants who had voted in support or against of the constitutional reform showed the predicted opposing trends. Whereas among the supporters of the winning (“yes”) side stronger populist attitudes were associated with higher retrospective foreseeability,  $B = 0.273$ ,  $t = 3.63$ ,  $p < .001$ , as predicted by H3a, among supporters of the losing (“no”) side stronger populist attitudes were associated with lower retrospective foreseeability,  $B = -0.566$ ,  $t = 6.69$ ,  $p < .001$ , as predicted by H3b. In other words, the more participants had strong populist attitudes, the more they tended to have biased, self-serving evaluations of the predictability of the referendum outcome. They reported it to be *more* predictable, when they personally agreed with the outcome, while they reported it to be *less* predictable, when they had originally hoped for a different outcome.

## DISCUSSION

Our study investigated the role of populist attitudes in the 2016 and 2020 Italian constitutional referenda, taking an in-depth look at the psychosocial and political antecedents of populist attitudes, and at how such attitudes not only influence political behaviour (i.e., vote choice), but also bias voters’ evaluation of political events, such as said referenda.

As to the first aim of our study, our analyses provided empirical support to most of the hypothesized associations between psychosocial and populist attitudes. Interestingly, political attitudes related with nationalism, and the attitude towards immigration in particular, were the strongest predictors of populism, whereas economic concerns was unrelated to it. This finding offers substantial evidence in favor of the “cultural backlash hypothesis” (Inglehart & Norris, 2016) as compared to the “economic anxiety hypothesis” (Hernandez & Kriesi, 2016), although the limited and specific geographic and temporal context in which our data were collected certainly calls for additional research in the future. Our findings confirm the idea that populism can be traced back to a multitude of factors that pertain not only to specific positions on political issues such as immigration and national sovereignty, but also to citizens’ perception of control (or lack thereof) regarding political institutions, as evidenced by the negative association with political efficacy, as well as the way of thinking about political events, as evidenced by the positive association with belief in conspiracy theories (Enders & Smallpage, 2019;



van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Future research might further investigate these dimensions, and also explore how different measures of populism (Akkerman et al., 2014; Castanho Silva et al., 2018; Schulz et al., 2018) and different scoring methods (Wuttke et al., 2020) might provide a clearer picture of the relationship between this construct and its antecedents. The additional analyses we conducted on a slightly different index of populist attitudes (based on Wuttke et al., 2020) suggest that different methods may uncover some variability in the relative importance of specific political positions (regarding EU membership, in our case) in the formation of populist attitudes.

As to the impact of populist attitudes on vote choice at the two referenda, we found that they did play a role in participants' vote, once accounted for their evaluation of the respective constitutional reforms and political orientation. In particular, our findings suggest that voters may have resorted, to some extent, to a "populist heuristic" when deciding whether to support the two constitutional reforms. In particular, voters' pre-existing populist attitudes seem to have driven them away from the rather complex and technical reform proposal of 2016, and have boosted support of the simple and very specific proposal of 2020. These findings might contribute to the ever growing literature on voters' use of cognitive shortcuts, anchors, and heuristics in political decision-making (Lau, Kleinbert & Ditonto, 2018), providing some insight on the intuitive rules used by populist voters.

Finally, our investigation of the cognitive underpinnings of populist attitudes provided some original and rather fascinating results. Analysing participants' bias in evaluating the foreseeability of election results, we found potential evidence of the cognitive factor connecting biased information processing, motivated reasoning and populist attitudes. In particular, our findings indicate that the stronger were participants' populist attitudes, the more likely they were to interpret the outcome of the referendum through the distorting lens of their expectations. More specifically, populist supporters of the constitutional reform saw the positive result of the referendum as more foreseeable than less populist fellow supporters, possibly reflecting their motivation to see the world as simple and orderly (Mark & Mellor, 1991), and to emphasize the merit of their success. We found the opposite trend among those who voted against the constitutional reform, as the more populist ones were more likely to see their defeat as unforeseeable, partially shielding themselves from the negative repercussions on self-evaluation of having just lost an election (Pezzo & Pezzo, 2007).

Our study has some relevant limitations due to its limited scope, as it is based on data from just two elec-

tions in a single country, and the relative novelty of several investigated constructs, such as populist attitudes, belief in conspiracy theories, and the retrospective foreseeability component of the hindsight bias. In particular, longitudinal and comparative studies might help clarifying the role of populist attitudes in voting decision, by looking at different contexts and situations, such as different types of election (Garry, Marsch, & Sinnott, 2005), and consider also the presence and relevance of partisan cues, and differences in media coverage of campaigns. As for the link between populist attitudes and the hindsight bias, these are among the first findings on this phenomenon in the political domain. Future studies might as well investigate it in other elections and contexts. Further research in more controlled, experimental scenarios might also help establishing a clear causal relationship between populist attitudes and this specific type of motivated reasoning. Nevertheless, these results might provide new and important insight on previously unexplored psychological differences among voters, and on how they influence the evaluation of relevant political events.

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## APPENDIX

**Table A1.** Multiple linear regression model of populist attitudes.

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
						LL	UL
(Constant)	4.37	.157		27.834	.000	4.058	4.673
Gender	0.03	.036	.021	0.931	.352	-0.037	0.105
Age	-0.01	.012	-.005	0.202	.840	-0.026	0.021
Education	-0.03	.008	-.096	3.970	.000	-0.045	-0.015
National Economic Evaluation	-0.03	.025	-.030	1.221	.222	-0.078	0.018
Family Economic Evaluation	0.01	.027	.004	0.164	.869	-0.048	0.057
Internal Political Efficacy	-0.10	.023	-.106	4.318	.000	-0.144	-0.054
External Political Efficacy	-0.12	.022	-.126	5.264	.000	-0.159	-0.073
EU Attitude	-0.06	.024	-.064	2.574	.010	-0.109	-0.015
Immigration Attitude	-0.12	.011	-.309	10.688	.000	-0.140	-0.096
<i>Political Orientation</i>							
Extreme Left	0.15	.064	.059	2.422	.016	0.029	0.280
Center	0.16	.065	.058	2.378	.018	0.027	0.282
Center-Right	0.03	.053	.019	0.640	.522	-0.071	0.139
Extreme Right	0.21	.073	.081	2.924	.004	0.070	0.357
Non-reported	0.17	.067	.066	2.523	.012	0.037	0.298
Conspiracy Theory Beliefs	0.07	.009	.204	8.116	.000	0.053	0.087

Note: an alternative indicator of political orientation was used in this analysis, as a series of dummy variables representing categorial political orientations (extreme left, center, center-right, extreme right, and non-reported) were entered in the model, with the numerically largest category (center-left orientation) as reference. Results showed that participants in the extreme left and extreme right categories were had stronger populist attitudes than those in the center-left category, as did those in the non-reported political orientation category. Unexpectedly, also participants in the center category reported having stronger populist attitudes, whereas no difference was found with participants in the center-right category.

**Table A2.** Logistic regression models of vote choice in the 2016 and 2020 referenda.

	2016			2020		
	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>p</i>
1 (Constant)	-2.992	.050	.000	-4.876	.008	.000
Evaluation of the reform	.433	1.542	.000	.818	2.267	.000
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.398		.000	.703		.000
2 (Constant)	-2.026	.132	.000	-4.955	.007	.000
Evaluation of the reform	.473	1.606	.000	.812	2.252	.000
Political orientation	-.184	1.203	.000	.008	1.008	.955
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.449		.000	.706		.004
3 (Constant)	-.460	.632	.170	-5.492	.004	.000
Evaluation of the reform	.475	1.609	.000	.796	2.216	.000
Political orientation	-.175	.840	.000	-.010	.990	.733
Populism	-.544	.580	.000	.221	1.248	.039
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.470		.000	.707		.039





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## Losers get sick? The effects of electoral defeat on perceptions of pandemic risk

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**Abstract.** Research in political behavior shows that citizens update their past perceptions and future expectations over several phenomena depending on whether their favorite party wins or loses the elections. This bias is explained by different psychological mechanisms triggered by individuals' attachment and trust in political parties. In this paper we investigate whether such a winner-loser effect conditions people's concerns about the Covid-19 pandemic. We leverage the occurrence of regional elections in six Italian regions in September 2020, right at the onset of the second wave of the pandemic in the country, to test whether supporting a candidate who won/lost the elections affects (1) people's fear to get sick with Covid-19, and (2) their expectation about the gravity of the upcoming second wave. Given that the public healthcare system in Italy is managed by the regions, we expect supporters of the losing candidate to lose trust in the region's ability to deal with the pandemic, hence increasing their personal concerns. We test this expectation using pre-/post-election panel data, and employing respondents from the other regions who voted at a concurrent referendum as a placebo group. Our results show that, while overall concerns tend to decrease from the first to the second wave, for elections losers they remain unchanged. This indicates that losing an election, albeit second-order, can affect citizens' outlook on future events in domains that are largely beyond political control.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, partisan bias, risk perception, 2020 Italian regional elections.

### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact in nearly every aspect of public and private life worldwide. In addition to dramatically modifying citizens' everyday routines, it has also had consequences in the social, economic, and political realm. On the one hand, some studies have suggested that the global health emergency has contributed to enhance the public support for incumbent governments, who took measures to face the pandemic crisis (Bol et al., 2020). On the other hand, several studies suggest that people have reacted to the pandemic emergency clinging on to their own preexisting beliefs (Calvillo et al. 2020). A relevant instance of this process is represented by the politicization of the crisis, and the asymmetric ways in which parti-



san supporters have responded to the pandemic. Recent research has demonstrated that parties and citizens, more than rallying around the flag and pursuing the most efficient possible strategy to exit the public health emergency, addressed the pandemic-related policies and public actions by applying a partisan frame (e.g., Druckman et al., 2020; Allcott et al., 2020). Likewise, people have largely aligned themselves to narratives proposed by their own favorite parties, accepting or refusing policy proposals and recommendations based on their partisan priors. Other literature suggests that even the reactions to government measures and restrictions have been affected by partisanship, meaning that citizens' behavior in terms of compliance can be explained by their previous political beliefs (Painter and Qiu, 2021; Grossman et al., 2020).

As Barrios and Hochberg (2020, 1) pointed out, “[e]ven when – objectively speaking – death is on the line, partisan bias still colors beliefs about facts”. This behavior is particularly puzzling since, as long as the level of emergency has escalated, people and parties have increasingly realized that the pandemic is a complex phenomenon, in which responsibilities of the political power, the economic elites, and the scientific community are blurred, and, thus, simple political answers are rarely effective *per se*.

Scholars dealing with partisanship and political behavior have emphasized that the *winner/loser status* might influence individuals' attitudes and beliefs (e.g., Martini and Quaranta 2019; Hansen et al., 2019). For instance, previous studies have found that people whose favorite party/candidate loses an election tend to predict a worse national economic performance, or to adjust their past evaluations, depicting a “better past” than they originally saw before the electoral loss (Quaranta et al., 2020). Likewise, literature emphasizes that losers in electoral competitions are generally less satisfied with democracy with respect to winners (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Hansen et al., 2019). These findings provide an example of the fact that partisanship represents an important driving force for people's beliefs and attitudes on several political and societal issues.

This study aims at expanding this stream of research by showing that the electoral winner/loser status can affect the evaluation of the potential risks that one can incur during a global pandemic. Precisely, we test whether being the loser or the winner of an electoral competition changes individuals' perceptions with respect to (a) the *societal risk*, namely the perception that the pandemic will worsen, and (b) the *individual risk*, namely the fear to be personally infected with COVID-19. Building on previous research on winner/loser effects, we argue that voters whose party lost

an election will be more likely to expect a suboptimal response to the health emergency in the future, leading to worsening expectations about the progress of the pandemic (and hence higher societal risk) and, in turn, a higher chance to get infected (higher individual risk).

We test our expectations by focusing on the 2020 Regional election cycle in Italy, which provides an excellent case study for our purposes given the particular institutional setting that Italy provides. According to the Italian constitution, regional governments are responsible (and accountable) for the public health care in their territory. For this reason, we expect regional elections – despite being *second-order* elections – to be extremely salient for what concerns the possibility of increasing/decreasing perceived risk during the pandemic. In addition, the regional elections held in September 2020 offer a further advantage for testing our expectations, as on the same date all Italian citizens were called to vote for a constitutional referendum. Because of both these institutional and situational characteristics, the Italian case in 2020 is ideal to estimate the change in perceived societal and individual risk for people who won and lost the election, and people who were not potentially subject to a change in regional government (this latter case representing thus a sort of placebo group in our research design).

Our hypotheses are tested using a panel survey observing the perceived societal and individual risk in a sample of Italian respondents before and after the regional elections held in six Italian regions in September 2020. In particular, we use a pre-post longitudinal design: attitudes toward risk perceptions are collected both before and after the elections, making it possible to assess the effect that winning or losing the regional elections has on the change in perceived risk. Our results show that the electoral losers tend to have higher perceived risk with respect to winners and non-exposed, and that the effect is stronger for societal risk perception. The article is organized as follows: section 2 discusses the recent literature investigating the linkage between COVID-19 pandemic and political attitudes, it details the case study and presents the hypotheses to be tested. Section 3 focuses on the research design, measures and variables, while the fourth section describes the analyses. The final section discusses the main findings and their contribution to the literature.

#### BACKGROUND. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND POLITICAL ATTITUDES

Recent political research has explored the association between political attitudes and reactions to

the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, some studies have investigated the impact of partisan biases on a number of attitudes and behaviors related to the pandemic (e.g. Allcott et al., 2020; Druckman et al., 2020; Grossman et al., 2020). By looking mainly at the US, studies have shown that, for instance, conservative people tend to perceive a lower risk of being infected by the new coronavirus (Barrios et al., 2021). Similar results, again based on the US case, are also found by Grossman et al. (2020). They found that government recommendations about reducing mobility were by far more effective in Democratic-leaning counties than in Republican-leaning counties, confirming the central role of partisanship in affecting individuals' propensity to engage in social distancing. Likewise, Painter and Qiu (2021) found, looking at geolocation data sourced from smartphones, that residents in Republican counties were less likely to align with government mandates in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Strictly related to this result, other findings demonstrate, by using the geotracking of several million smartphones per day, that citizens who voted for Donald Trump in 2016 were also less keen to observe social distancing compared to former Hillary Clinton voters (Gollwitzer et al., 2020). Finally, other studies have found that Republicans are less prone to get vaccinated against COVID-19 with respect to Democrats (Kreps et al., 2020).

This empirical evidence (mainly observational and US-based) is generally interpreted in the light of several political and communication-based mechanisms producing partisan biases both in normal conditions and in cases of emergency. All these studies highlight a strong effect of the partisan cues that citizens received. It is worth noticing that conservative politicians and commenters (including Donald Trump himself) have signaled, especially during the first wave of the pandemic, that the new coronavirus threat was largely overestimated by the scientific community. It is not surprising thus that Trump supporters have been more skeptical about the possible negative effects of COVID-19 and, thus, behaved in a less careful way compared to Democrats (Graham et al. 2020; Hill et al. 2020). Likewise, studies suggest that Republicans are also more prone to be concerned about the vaccines' campaign and to believe in different conspiracy theories about COVID-19, as a result of the Trump public statements downgrading the seriousness of the pandemic (Hornsey et al. 2020). Consistently, it is reasonable to expect that Democrats have been more likely to blame the former president for the COVID-19-related issues compared to Republicans. Scholars have argued

that, on the voters' side, the psychological mechanisms generating these empirical phenomena are related to partisan motivated reasoning (see Taber and Lodge, 2006). According to this process, when individuals evaluate new information, they are not much motivated to be accurate as they are to defend their pre-existing political preferences. To do so, citizens tend to accept and even actively look for information that is congruent with their own partisan beliefs, while they are more skeptical when they encounter incongruent information. As the aforementioned research shows, even in a dramatic situation such as a global pandemic, people prefer partisan consistency over accuracy.

Partisan biases also occur when people are asked to evaluate the responsibilities (or merits) of their government, and the COVID-19 emergency is no exception (Ward et al., 2020). By using different observational and experimental pieces of evidence in the US, Graham and colleagues (2021) demonstrate that partisan blame attribution has been particularly strong during the pandemic. Republicans exposed to positively-valenced information (e.g., successful actions aimed at reducing the new coronavirus spread) tend to attribute the responsibility to Trump. Conversely, when exposed to negatively-valenced information, they tend to exculpate him. Likewise, Democrats are significantly more likely to do the opposite, by blaming Trump for negatively valenced-information and attributing responsibility for positively-valenced actions to third parties (the healthcare system or other non-political institutions).

To our knowledge, however, these effects have been observed only at the national level, without looking at their possible local determinants. In other words, scholarship has focused on the relationship between COVID-19-related attitudes and behaviors and the political color of the national government. However, the COVID-19 outbreak has had very specific territorial features, both in terms of contagion rates (e.g. local variants) and with respect to the capacities of the healthcare system dealing with the emergency (e.g., pressure on intensive care units, hospital equipment). In this respect, local governments play (and have played) a crucial role in handling the emergency. Hence, it is of great importance to investigate whether local governments' political color can affect citizens' perceptions related to the pandemic. To answer this research question, in this study we leverage a research design based on the so-called "winner-loser effect" on citizens' perceptions. Precisely, we ask whether being among the winners or the losers of an election might predict people's expectations about the future development of the pandemic, and their concern for their own health.

### *Winner-loser electoral status and societal perceptions*

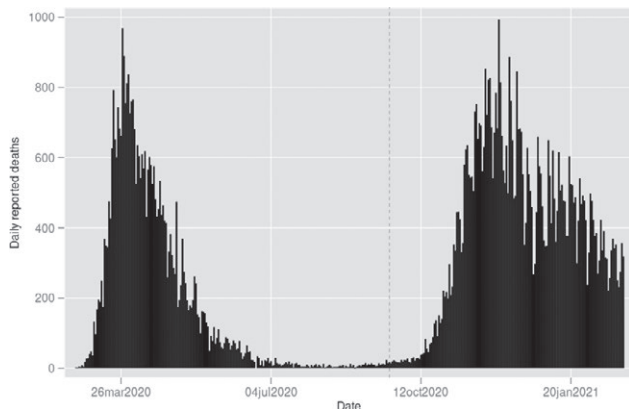
People witness reality from their own position in the social and political landscape, and it is quite straightforward to argue that different points of view contribute to shape citizens' perceptions of reality. For instance, a large strand of literature has investigated that evaluations of the economy might be biased by the education level, knowledge, interest in politics or partisanship (e.g., Bisgaard 2015; Enns et al., 2012; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008). Another strand of literature emphasized that the electoral status, namely, the fact of being a supporter of the *winner* or the *loser* of an electoral competition, might shape people's perceptions on different societal and political issues. The literature on the effects that electoral status has on several attitudes and behaviors is particularly broad. Voting for the winning or losing party in an electoral competition has been proved to affect people's perception of the country's economic performance (Anderson et al., 2005), with winners evaluating it more positively and losers more negatively. Other studies have also demonstrated that satisfaction with democracy decreases among those voters supporting politicians/parties losing the electoral competition (Blais and Gelineau, 2007; Chang et al., 2014; Martini and Quaranta, 2015; Dahlberg and Linde, 2017). Further implications concerning the electoral status models have been developed, among others, by Curini and colleagues (2012; 2015), who demonstrated that satisfaction with democracy is a function of both historical winner-loser records (namely, having been winner-loser for more than one election), and ideological proximity between voters and parties. Other studies have investigated more in depth the effects that electoral status might have on other dependents variables, such as efficacy (Curini et al., 2021; Davis and Hitt, 2019). Literature has also investigated the way in which people experience themselves as winner or loser of the electoral competition, finding that this latter is a combination of parties' performance expectations and actual electoral results (see, for instance, Plescia, 2019).

As it is possible to see, the literature has addressed in depth all the elements and concepts that produce the theoretical argument. The theory identifies two mechanisms that might explain this empirical evidence. The first relates to bounded rationality (Quaranta et al., 2020; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). Since people do not have enough information to predict efficiently the possible consequences of the victory of one party with respect to another, they rely on heuristics allowing them to form an opinion. Because of

mechanisms of selective exposure to political information, people's evaluations are still rational. They genuinely believe that opposing parties/leaders winning elections might lead to worse economic/democratic performances, and this is the case because their main sources of information are consistent with that opinion. A second mechanism centers around the emotional response to a possible victory/defeat of the electoral competition (Kunda, 1990; Leeper and Slothuus, 2014). In this case, the perceptions of the economic outcomes might be affected by the aforementioned motivated reasoning, which is driven by the disappointment over the defeat. Winning and losing – that is, being governed by the preferred party/leader or not – might affect people's need for cognitive consistency, providing strong cues leading to optimist/pessimist predictions of the economy. Finally, an additional element to take into account is *negativity bias*. A large amount of research (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2001; Soroka, 2014) has shown that negative information might be more effective in changing attitudes and behavior with respect to neutral/positive one. Consistent with this argument, research shows (e.g. Quaranta et al., 2020) that voters experiencing electoral defeat are more likely to see a decrease of their economic evaluation with respect to winners and non-voters.

This study starts from one main standpoint. We argue that pessimism following an electoral defeat (and, in a lesser way, optimism following an electoral victory) can be expanded outside the realm of economic and strictly political evaluations. We will thus test systematically whether being a winner or a loser in an electoral competition leads to more optimistic or pessimistic opinions concerning the possible risks related to the pandemic, and the concern to be personally infected.

Drawing upon the literature exposed above, we expect a mechanism that is a combination between the bounded rationality and the motivated reasoning arguments. We argue, indeed, that people losing the electoral competition are likely to expect a worse performance in handling the pandemic by who is in office. As a result, we expect that losers of an electoral competition will be more inclined to be pessimistic about future developments of the pandemic, while winners should be more optimistic. People experiencing a political opponent winning regional elections in a situation of pandemic crisis, indeed, have quite valid reasons to be concerned. The President of the Region has, as stressed above, a certain authority over the healthcare system: if one believes that a candidate is unfit to guide the region, the most immediate reaction to his/her victory will be to re-evaluate the potential risk that a possible new wave of the pandemic will be kept under control.



**Figure 1.** 2020 elections and pandemic data - death toll (the vertical line represents the election days).

### *Regional elections and constitutional referendum in Italy, September 2020*

The regional elections of September 2020 in Italy represent an ideal case for us to test our expectations. On September 20 and 21, Italian citizens were called to vote for a constitutional referendum for the reduction of the number of MPs in Italian Parliament. In addition, during the same round of voting, regional elections were held in six regions (Campania, Liguria, Marche, Puglia, Toscana, and Veneto). It is important to note that the end of September 2020 was a period of relative stability of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. At that time, the possibility of a second wave of the pandemic was still a matter of debate, and, while likely, it was not sure that the magnitude of a possible second wave would be similar to what happened in the first wave. Figure 1 shows the death tolls from a longitudinal perspective, allowing to better understand the phase in which the election took place (see the vertical dashed line representing the election days)<sup>1</sup>.

Regional elections are usually interpreted as second-order elections (SOE), namely, elections perceived by citizens and parties as less important. Accordingly, regional elections are usually characterized by low turnout levels if compared with general elections. Indeed, citizens are said to have fewer incentives to participate and, moreover, their preferences will merely reflect the preferences formed by looking at national politics (see Reif and Schmitt, 1980). However, some scholars have suggested that the SOE interpretative framework should not be generalized (Schakel and Romanova 2018; Dan-

doy and Schakel 2013; Mancosu and Vezzoni, 2018): literature has identified some contextual factors at the institutional level (e.g. electoral rules; the election cycle) that may contribute to shaping the perceived salience of regional elections (Dandoy and Schakel 2013). Italy, in this respect, represents a very privileged point of view. Scholars tend to agree that the SOE paradigm could explain many electoral and participative dynamics underlying Italian regional elections – especially in the First Republic (Bolgherini and Grimaldi 2017; Tronconi 2015; Tronconi and Roux 2009). Nonetheless, literature is also consensual in saying that, since the 1990s, the introduction of new powers and prerogatives at the regional level, the increase in regional autonomy, and the change of the electoral rules toward a higher prominence of presidential candidates, often supported by personal electoral lists, have emphasized the heterogeneity among regions, challenging the very idea of the SOE framework (Masseti 2018; Massetti and Sandri 2013; Vampa 2015). In the regional elections of 2020, these arguments are even more salient as, according to the Italian Constitution, the management of the public healthcare system is in the hands of the regions (Vampa 2021a; Vampa 2021b). The regional government, in other words, is entitled to handle healthcare policy, resulting in huge differences in regional healthcare performances in Italy (see for instance Nuti and Seghieri, 2014; Riganiti, 2021). The direct responsibility of the regional government in dealing with the health emergency makes these regional elections extremely salient (De Sio, 2020). In terms of political accountability, the regional elections of September 2020 have been an occasion for the citizens to choose, albeit indirectly, those who are responsible for the regional health policy, and thus for several pandemic-related policies (e.g., contagion prevention, restrictions, vaccines administration, etc.).

### *Hypotheses*

We expect that the winner/loser effect observed by previous literature, usually tested in the context of national economic/political predictions and evaluations, can be applied to voters' expectations about the performance of the healthcare system, under the responsibility of the regional government. As a consequence, voters supporting the defeated candidate might see the victory of the political opponent as an indicator of potential future negative performance. Given the regional responsibility over the health matters, a disappointing electoral outcome may eventually undermine the previously-planned responses to the pandemic. Accordingly, the first hypothesis reads as follows:

<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19-attributed deaths are based on the author's elaboration of Civil Protection data available at <https://github.com/pcm-dpc/COVID-19>



*H1. Evaluations of the pandemic risk at the societal level will be more optimistic among winners of the electoral competition with respect to losers.*

As discussed above, in an emergency context, regional healthcare systems are crucial in dealing with possible future waves of the pandemic. Although literature dealing with economic evaluations have rarely reported effects of electoral status on evaluation of citizens' personal lives, we hypothesize that, in this case, the loser status might also affect people's expectations about the impact of the coronavirus on their own health. Defeated voters might be more likely to consider that wrong policies carried out by an incompetent regional government will increase their own risk of being infected by the new coronavirus. Therefore, hypothesis 2 reads as follows:

*H2. Evaluations of the pandemic risk at the individual level will be more optimistic among winners of the electoral competition with respect to losers.*

#### DATA, VARIABLES, DESIGN

We test our hypotheses relying on the two waves collected in 2020 of the on-line panel of the Italian National Election Study (ITANES)-University of Milan. The first wave of the panel was collected during the election campaign for the 2013 General Elections. Each year, two waves of the panel have been collected, usually one before and one after the main electoral events of the year. The data collection also included the two constitutional referenda (held in 2016 and 2020) and the regional elections (held in 2015 and 2020) that took place over the period. Interviews were administered to respondents through CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) mode. Respondents have been selected from an opt-in community (maintained by SWG, a private Italian research company). All the waves of the panel aim at reproducing the quotas for age, gender, and geographical distribution of the Italian population. Our study relies on the last two waves of the panel, collected shortly before and after the Constitutional Referendum of 20-21 September 2020. Overall, respondents who have been interviewed in both the waves and produced non-missing responses were 2,932.

The phenomenon that we are interested in is the citizens' perception of the risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. We focus on two specific risk assessments: (1) the societal risk, namely the perception that the pandemic will improve or worsen in the near future at the national level; (2) the individual risk, namely the

self-assessed chance to contract the COVID-19 infection in the near future. We measure these two assessments using two survey items. The question used to observe societal risk perception asks the respondents how likely it is that there will be in the immediate future a pandemic wave similar to the one of March-April 2020. The answer categories range from 0 ("impossible") to 10 ("certain"). We have to keep in mind that the question has been asked around the elections, which were held on 20-21 September 2020, right in between the two pandemic waves. At that stage, in fact, the possibility of a second wave, although widely recognized as probable, was not certain. As Figure 1 reported above illustrates, the end of September coincides exactly with the final moments of the between-waves period. The second item assesses the individual risk perception, asking the respondents to state how likely it is that they will ever get COVID-19. As above, response categories were organized on a 0-10 scale, where 0 indicates "impossible" and 10 "certain". To be sure, the two indicators are to a certain extent related to each other. We can expect that, the more the pandemic is expected to hit the country violently in the following weeks/months, the more people will be likely to perceive the risk of being infected. However, the two indicators observe two different types of assessment, one (individual risk) more concrete and influenced by a plethora of individual factors not easy to observe, and the other (societal risk) more abstract and closer to a political evaluation.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, these two variables were observed before and after the elections, or in other words, people had to provide a risk assessment on the two dimensions before knowing for sure who would be the winner and who would be the loser. This allows us to observe the change in societal and individual risk assessment for each respondent individually, by calculating the crude difference between the post-election and the pre-election score.

The main independent variable of our interest refers to the winner/loser status of respondents after the election. In the post-election wave, people who reside in the regions holding the elections were asked which presidential candidate they voted for. This variable has been recoded into three categories, for three groups of voters: (A) the "placebo group", corresponding to voters residing in regions where there were no regional elections,<sup>3</sup> (B) the voters of the winning candidate at the regional

<sup>2</sup> In addition, we can also stress that the first-order correlation between the two variables is particularly low (Pearson's  $r = .20$ )

<sup>3</sup> In order to simplify the structure of the variable, people who declared to reside in the 6 regions in which regional elections were held and did not declare a vote for any presidential candidate were recoded as citizens who were not exposed to any regional election, and thus coded together with the placebo group.

election, and (C) the voters supporting the losing candidates at the regional election.

Our regression models (see below) also include a set of control variables such as gender, age, educational level (coded as “primary”, “secondary” and “tertiary” education), municipality size (divided in “under 10.000”, “from 10.000 to 100.000”, “over 100.000 inhabitants”), left-right self-placement (coded as “left”, “center-left”, “center”, “center-right”, “right”, and “not located”), geopolitical zone (subdivided in “north-west”, “north-east”, “center”, “south”, and “islands”), interest in politics (a 4-point scale going from “not interested at all” to “very interested in politics”), working conditions (a dummy variable with “Currently employed” and “Currently not employed” as answer categories), and party identification (a dummy variable assessing whether respondents perceive themselves to be “close” to a party or not).<sup>4</sup> Table A2 in the Supplementary material presents descriptive statistics of the variables involved in the analysis.

According to our hypotheses, once individuals get to know that their candidate won or lost the regional electoral competition, they will update their perceptions of societal and individual risk. We will employ a set of multilevel linear models to assess the effects of an individual’s winner/loser status on their change in risk perception<sup>5</sup>. In addition to the control variables, our main independent variable (the winner/loser status) allows us to assess the change in risk perceptions for the three groups (winners, losers, and not exposed to a regional election). Such a design gives us strong evidence about the mechanisms that lead to changes in the citizens’ attitudes towards the pandemic. Given the importance of regional variation in our design, in this study we opt for a multilevel random-effects model in which people are nested into regions.

<sup>4</sup> Given the specific focus of the paper, we did not include in the analyses any variable accounting for the referendum results. Nonetheless, as a robustness check, we tested the same models including a variable observing the winner/loser status of respondents for what concerns *the referendum*. The coefficient of this variable is not statistically significant. This is not surprising given the topic of the Constitutional referendum. Lacking any real implications for the management of the pandemic, there are no clear effects on the respondents’ expectations regarding the future of the pandemic. For further details, see Table A1 in the Supplementary Material.

<sup>5</sup> We employ a multilevel regression model because the data generating process that we assumed is intrinsically hierarchical, with individual differences being partly ascribable to differences in regional contexts. However, a multilevel model is not strictly necessary in our case: the Likelihood Ratio test of the multilevel model vs. linear regression produces a non-significant difference in model fit (this is true for both the empty and the complete model), meaning that the between-region variation is negligible in proportion to the overall variance. In this case, fitting a multilevel model is just a further theory-driven control, based on our assumptions on the data-generating process.

Overall, this estimation strategy resembles a difference-in-differences (DID) design (see Wooldridge, 2013). DID estimates the effects of treatments on a dependent variable by comparing the average change from  $t_0$  to  $t_1$  in the dependent variable. This modeling strategy relies on the assumption that the treatment that people receive after the referendum - “becoming” a winner or a loser - is comparable with an “exogenous shock”, not correlated with the evaluations in the pre-election wave. A violation of this assumption might be related to the expectations that voters have on the actual result of the elections. If it is obvious (or very likely) that a candidate will win the elections, voters might adjust their risk assessment already during the pre-election wave, leading to an underestimation of the effect. The bias, however, will reduce the possibility to observe a significant effect, producing a type II error (more conservative than the type I error).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows coefficients of the two models.

An interesting result is that almost no coefficients of the control variables have strong and significant effects on the change in risk perceptions (this is a naive corroboration of the fact that the design might be intended as a quasi-experimental one). Only people living in large cities tend to be more concerned about a second pandemic wave between the pre- and the post-election measurement. Further, the models present a significant (although quite small) coefficient related to left-right self-placement, interest in politics, and working conditions. Our variables of interest, on the other hand, are significant. For what concerns the perceived societal risk (namely, the probability of a second wave as harsh as the first one) supporters of the winning candidate have a negative coefficient with respect to the losers. This indicates that those respondents are “less certain” that there will be a second wave of COVID-19 infections in the near future than they were before the elections. Furthermore, our “placebo” group - namely, people living in regions where there were no regional elections - has a negative coefficient. In general, electoral losers after the elections tend to perceive a higher risk than both non-exposed to regional elections and winners. H1 is thus confirmed. The loser status, in other words, increases the negative outlook about the pandemic. The story is different when investigating individual risk perceptions (Model 2). In this case, indeed, the negative figure refers to respondents non-exposed to regional elections, and it is worth noticing that the coefficient is even smaller with respect



**Table 1.** Two multilevel regression models studying individual and societal pandemic risk in the future.

Dep. variable Indep. Variables	Model 1 Societal		Model 2 Individual	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Electoral status (ref. Loser)				
No regional election held	-0.28**	(0.12)	-0.19*	(0.10)
Winner	-0.35**	(0.14)	-0.14	(0.12)
Gender: Woman (ref. Man)	0.01	(0.08)	0.04	(0.07)
Age	0.00	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)
Education level (ref. Primary)				
Secondary	-0.08	(0.13)	-0.16	(0.11)
Tertiary	-0.09	(0.14)	-0.13	(0.11)
Municipality size (ref. Under 10k)				
10k - 100k	0.21**	(0.10)	0.08	(0.09)
Over 100k	0.27**	(0.11)	-0.00	(0.09)
Left-right self-placement (ref. Left)				
Center-left	0.14	(0.13)	0.01	(0.11)
Center	0.35**	(0.17)	-0.00	(0.14)
Center-right	0.12	(0.14)	0.12	(0.11)
Right	0.20	(0.17)	0.12	(0.14)
Not located	0.13	(0.17)	-0.11	(0.14)
Interest in politics	0.11**	(0.05)	0.06	(0.04)
Party identification (ref. not identified)	-0.04	(0.10)	-0.13*	(0.08)
Working conditions (ref. Employed)	0.18**	(0.08)	0.03	(0.07)
Geo-political zone (ref. North-West)				
North-East	0.02	(0.11)	-0.08	(0.09)
Center	0.01	(0.12)	0.08	(0.10)
South	-0.11	(0.12)	-0.07	(0.10)
Islands	-0.01	(0.13)	-0.10	(0.11)
Constant	-0.82**	(0.32)	-0.07	(0.27)
Lvl-2 var	0.00 ***	(0.00)	0.00 ***	(0.00)
Lvl-1 var	0.64***	(0.01)	0.43***	(0.01)
Observations	2,586		2,446	
Number of groups	20		20	

Standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

to Model 1). There is thus no significant difference between winners and losers, leading us to reject H2.

Linear predictions obtained from the two multilevel models, shown in Figure 2, provide a clearer picture of the change between the two waves among the three groups. As the figure shows, respondents supporting a losing party display no significant change between the first and the second wave in both models, implying that, on average, the election defeat did not

prompt them to update their individual and societal risk assessment.

Quite surprisingly, on the other hand, we find a general reduction in perceived risk on both domains in the placebo group, namely those respondents living in regions not having regional elections in that cycle. Given their non-involvement and their number (they are the largest portion of the sample), respondents in this group are to be regarded as the reference point, suggesting a general improvement of the individual and societal risk perceptions among Italian citizens in the second half of September 2020. This might be due to the fact that, from the second half of August through September, the number of new infected individuals reported daily had experienced a rise as compared to the summer, which nevertheless was not following an exponential growth curve. In other words, the fact that the growing spread of the virus was visible but (apparently) under control might have given all citizens a boost in optimism regarding how the next months could have looked like. In fact, it was from the beginning of October that the number of daily observed infections started growing exponentially.

Finally, we find that respondents in the winners group show a significant reduction in societal, but not in individual, risk perception. This suggests that winning the elections did lead to higher optimism, in the form of a lower concern about the societal risk related to the pandemic, but only to the extent that optimism was growing among *all* Italian citizens. The electoral winners of the regional elections of September 2020 observed in our sample do not look significantly different from the baseline, while the electoral losers do. This suggests that losing an election might have a stronger impact on citizens' attitudes and perceptions than winning, confirming the presence of a general *negativity bias* in the effect that electoral competitions can have on the citizens.

To be sure, this analysis presents some limitations. First, even though we controlled for the possible impact of the concomitant referendum – and found no significant effects – a possible alternative model could have included interactions between winners and losers of both regional elections and referendum. Unfortunately, the small size of the sample does not allow to run reliable analyses for tackling this dimension. Second, some of our inconclusive findings, such as the lack of significant difference between winners and losers on the individual risk perception, or the lack of significant difference between winners and the group of respondents from non-affected regions, might be due to the relatively low expectations about an electoral change in those regions. 2020 regional elections did indeed lead to quite unsurprising results: the margin between the

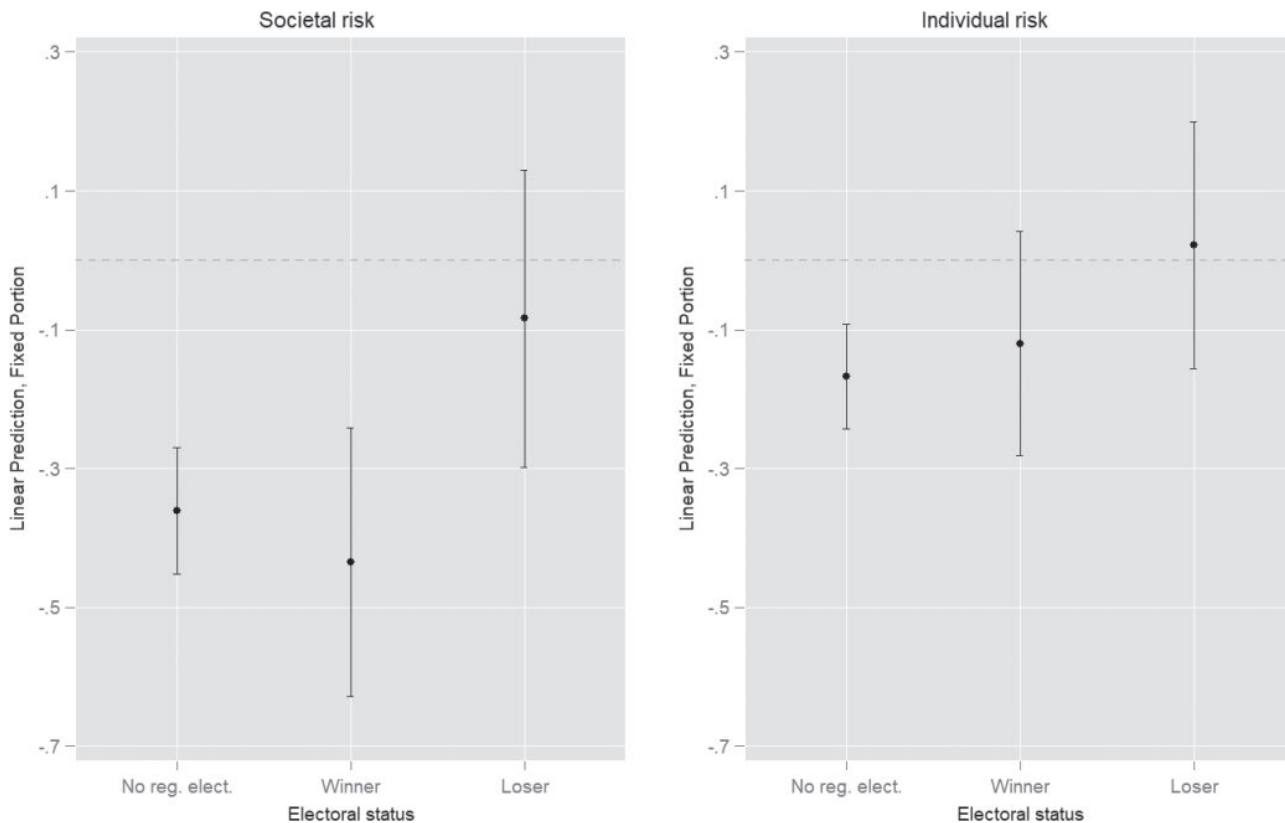


Figure 2. Linear predictions for models 1 (left panel) and 2 (right panel).

winner and the runner-up was quite large in most of the cases, and incumbent candidates have been all confirmed. It could be that pre-existing expectations about the elections results may have mitigated the effect on the respondents' concern about the pandemic. Finally, one could also argue that the relevance of the regional administration for the health care policy was not clear to all voters. This is something that we cannot control for in this study. However, we believe that in September 2020, about six months into the pandemic crisis, Italian citizens were exposed to this piece of information time and time again.

### CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed at providing further understanding of the ways in which partisanship is able to affect several aspects of citizens' lives and beliefs. Recent literature on the topic is fairly consensual in this respect: partisanship is a strong factor affecting citizens' attitudes in a variety of domains, political and non-political. Coherently, several studies have demonstrated that partisanship has been effective in shaping attitudes during the pandemic

(e.g., Druckman et al., 2020; Hornsey et al., 2020). In this paper we contend that an election could be conceived as a competition between different worldviews, proposals, and loyalty structures (Anderson et al., 2005). Once citizens vote for a certain party/leader, they have a number of (rational and emotional) expectations on the outcome of the election. Therefore, having voted for the winning/losing party or candidate may affect the expectations that one had before the election. This argument is supported by previous research on the effect that electoral winner/loser status has on economic views. Findings have shown that voters of losing candidates tend to perceive in a more pessimist way the future economic performance of their country with respect to those supporting winning candidates (see Quaranta et al., 2020).

By using panel survey data collected before and after Italian regional elections in September 2020, we assessed whether winner/loser status can affect people's view with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. We focused on this aspect for two main reasons. First, we maintain that the impact of winner/loser status can be applied to a larger bouquet of attitudes and behaviors, as the mechanisms driving the empirical evidence collected so far are quite general. Second, the second-order elections frame-

work should be applied cautiously when referring to 2020 Italian regional elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). We argue that the regional competitions had a lot at stake in 2020, given the pivotal role played by regional governments in handling the COVID-19 emergency. As regions are entitled to manage the health matters, who wins the regional elections is also responsible (and accountable) for the public health system in that territory, and thus for the measures and policies issued in response to the emergency. In short, if being a regional president is not trivial at ordinary times, it is even less in times of pandemic. The longitudinal results presented partially confirm our hypotheses. Indeed, we find that losers tend not to improve their perceived societal risk, while both winners and people in the control group (respondents living in those regions where regional elections were not held) do. This suggests that while *all* Italians were becoming more optimistic in that period, electoral losers did not. On the other hand, we do not identify significant differences between winners and losers for what concerns individual risk perceptions. This is somewhat consistent with previous studies that did not assess any relevant difference based on the electoral status in predicting individual economic outcomes.

In sum, and to conclude, this study contributed to the literature investigating the differences among winners and losers of an election, by extending the scope of this research beyond the classical economic dimension. With regard to the contribution to the literature of our work, findings demonstrate that electoral status is relevant in shaping attitudes and behaviors in a broad set of cases, and even in situations in which party cues might be hypothesized to be disregarded. This is the reason why investigating these mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic represents an extremely interesting case study in this respect. Likewise, these results – based on a non-US sample – could also contribute to a better understanding of citizens' attitudes towards vaccines or other restriction measures.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

**Table A1.** Two multilevel regression models studying individual and societal pandemic risk in the future (with referendum vote as a control).

Dep. variable Indep. Variables	Model 1 - Alt Societal		Model 2 - Alt Individual	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Electoral status (ref. Loser)				
No regional election held	-0.31**	(0.13)	-0.20*	(0.10)
Winner	-0.34**	(0.14)	-0.16	(0.12)
Gender: Woman (ref. Man)	0.01	(0.08)	0.06	(0.07)
Age	0.00	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)
Education level (ref. Primary)				
Secondary	-0.09	(0.13)	-0.21*	(0.11)
Tertiary	-0.11	(0.14)	-0.17	(0.12)
Municipality size (ref. Under 10k)				
10k - 100k	0.20*	(0.11)	0.06	(0.09)
Over 100k	0.25**	(0.11)	0.00	(0.09)
Left-right self-placement (ref. Left)				
Center-left	0.16	(0.13)	0.02	(0.11)
Center	0.36**	(0.17)	-0.04	(0.14)
Center-right	0.13	(0.14)	0.11	(0.12)
Right	0.23	(0.17)	0.15	(0.14)
Not located	0.10	(0.18)	-0.07	(0.15)
Interest in politics	0.13**	(0.06)	0.07	(0.05)
Party identification (ref. not identified)	0.00	(0.10)	-0.13	(0.08)
Working conditions (ref. Employed)	0.17**	(0.08)	0.02	(0.07)
Geo-political zone (ref. North-West)				
North-East	0.03	(0.11)	-0.08	(0.09)
Center	-0.01	(0.12)	0.12	(0.10)
South	-0.10	(0.12)	-0.07	(0.10)
Islands	0.02	(0.14)	-0.11	(0.11)
Referendum vote (ref. Yes)				
No	0.04	(0.09)	-0.02	(0.07)
NV/NA	0.23**	(0.12)	0.06	(0.09)
Constant	-0.93***	(0.33)	-0.06	(0.27)
Lvl-2 var	0.00 ***	(0.00)	0.00 ***	(0.00)
Lvl-1 var	1.91***	(0.03)	1.89***	(0.03)
Observations	2,484	2,349		
Number of groups	20	20		

Standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

**Table A2.** Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Min	Mean	Max	S.D.
Societal risk	-9	-0.34	9	1.9
Individual risk	-8	-0.14	7	1.6
Electoral status: No regional election held	0	0.75	1	0.44
Winner	0	0.15	1	0.35
Loser	0	0.11	1	0.31
Gender (ref. Male)	1	1.5	2	0.5
Age	18	51	90	17
Education level: low	0	0.11	1	0.31
Medium	0	0.46	1	0.5
High	0	0.43	1	0.5
Municipality size: Under 10k	0	0.2	1	0.4
10k - 100k	0	0.43	1	0.5
Over 100k	0	0.37	1	0.48
Left-right self-placement: Left	0	0.11	1	0.31
Center-left	0	0.32	1	0.47
Center	0	0.11	1	0.31
Center-right	0	0.25	1	0.43
Right	0	0.093	1	0.29
Not located	0	0.12	1	0.33
Party identification (ref. not identified)	0	0.76	1	0.43
Interest in politics	1	2.9	4	0.77
Geo-political zone: North-West	0	0.28	1	0.45
North-East	0	0.19	1	0.39
Center	0	0.18	1	0.39
South	0	0.23	1	0.42
Islands	0	0.11	1	0.32
Working conditions (ref. Employed)	1	1.5	2	0.5





# QO E I J E S

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