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Increasingly unequal. Electoral participation and political inequalities in a context of decreasing unionization in Italy (1983-2018)

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Abstract. Turnout has become increasingly unequal in many advanced democracies over the last few decades. Disadvantaged social groups are found to exhibit lower turnout compared to their better-off counterparts. According to numerous scholars, this growing gap is mainly attributed to the weakening of mass organizations that traditionally appealed to socio-economically disadvantaged social groups, particularly trade unions. However, very few studies have investigated these trends in Italy, a country that has witnessed a significant decrease in electoral turnout since the late 1970s, and where the socioeconomic causes of this decline have not been systematically explored. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to analyse, first and foremost, whether electoral participation in Italy is becoming increasingly unequal. Then, it moves to explore the extent to which the turnout gap between individuals with low and high socio-economic status (SES) could be moderated by both de-unionization and trade unions' membership. By utilizing a dataset that combines 10 waves of the Italian National Election Study (1983-2018), the paper demonstrates that the turnout gap between low and high SES individuals has substantially widened over the last decades. Furthermore, it suggests that while the overall turnout gap is at least partially affected by the strength of trade unions in the country, trade unions still seem to be able to mobilize their members, particularly among lower social groups. This finding underscores the potential of trade unions to continue playing a role in equalizing turnout.

Keywords: turnout, electoral participation, trade unions, socio-economic status, political inequalities, Italy.

INTRODUCTION

Democratic theory postulates that citizens should be given the same opportunities to voice their own interests and preferences, and that the latter should be equally weighted by the political system (Dahl 1971, 2008). At least formally, the electoral process guarantees this democratic ideal to be fulfilled. The very basic principle of one person-one vote gives each eligible citizen the chance to express her own preferences in the political process, while at the same time allowing the political system to give full consideration to citizens' stances. More realistically, however, not all citizens take part to the electoral process. To be true, this might not be necessarily a problem (actually, some degree of abstentionism could also be desirable for democratic systems, see Rosema 2007), to the extent abstentionism is evenly distributed across different segments of society.

Alarmingly enough, however, turnout in many advanced democracies has grown unequal in the last decades, thus meaning that specific social groups (with specific characteristics and interests) are increasingly failing to show up to the polls (e.g., Gallego 2015). This is in particular true when considering citizens with a lower socio-economic status (Gallego 2010, 2015). This trend has been often associated to the weakening of those mobilisation institutions which traditionally appealed to lower strata of society (Alford 1963; Verba & Nie 1972; Rosenstone & Hansen 1993; Verba *et al.* 1978). Amongst these, trade unions have been given a special attention, since these organisations have traditionally worked to integrate and mobilise lower social classes (Verba *et al.* 1978; Gray & Caul 2000; Radcliff & Davis 2000; Leighley & Nagler 2007; Flavin & Radcliff 2011), in fact playing as turnout equalisers. Accordingly, if trade unions are strong enough to carry out successful mobilizing strategies, their activities should favour the participation of socio-economically disadvantaged groups and thus reduce the turnout gap.

To the best of our knowledge, no study so far has systematically tested this argument in Italy, a country which experienced a steady and dramatic decrease of electoral turnout since the end of 1970's.[1] This paper attempts to fill this void by primarily analysing whether voter turnout is becoming increasingly unequal along the lines of socio-economic status (SES) in Italy. Second, it explores whether and to what extent the SES based turnout gap is affected by the strength of trade unions. Finally, it assesses whether, in a context where trade unions are losing members as well as legitimacy (e.g., Visser 2006; Culpepper & Regan 2014), they are still able to play a role as turnout equalisers.

The primary hypothesis is that, as turnout declines, socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals should participate less compared to their better-off counterparts. If this was the case, then this should imply that a relevant share of the turnout decline should be driven by increasing political inequalities. Furthermore, borrowing from mobilization theories of voter turnout, this paper explores the extent to which this trend might be mitigated by the role played by trade unions.

Understanding whether in this context turnout decline is unevenly distributed across different social strata is extremely relevant for several reasons. First, if socio-economic disadvantaged groups vote increasingly less compared to those who are better off, this means that what Lijphart referred to as unequal participation (1997) is on the rise. Political inequalities harm the health of a democratic system, as they imply that alienated groups would not receive a fair representation of their interests by the political system (Lijphart 1997; Verba *et al.* 1995). And in fact, political systems tend to be more responsive to the participative sectors of society, that is to say those groups which regularly show up to the polls (Franko *et al.* 2016; Bennet & Resnick 1990; Martin 2003). Second, despite the limited generalisability, the focus on the Italian case offers the chance to test existing theories in a country which has suffered from an intense downward trend of turnout, and where the underpinnings of this trend have not been sufficiently investigated yet. This is all the more relevant, given that the same kind of explanations might not be equally applicable in different contexts. The reasons behind declining turnout in one country, might not be the same as the ones found in other countries. As an example, generational explanations of turnout decline perform quite poorly in accounting for the turnout decline in Italy (see Tuorto 2018), although they are considered extremely valuable in other contexts (see e.g., Blais & Rubenson 2013; Kostelka & Blais 2021). This calls for the empirical testing of different theories within specific countries. Finally, understanding the reasons at the base of the decline of voter turnout is a necessary first step which might help policy makers to elaborate policies which might reverse the trend.

Relying on survey data collected by the Italian National Election Study (ITANES) from 1985 to 2018, our empirical analysis shows that the turnout gap between low and high socio-economic groups has dramatically increased already starting from the '80s. Most relevantly, this increasing gap is almost exclusively driven by decreasing levels of turnout among non-unionised socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, it shows that, on the whole, de-unionization is negatively associated with the turnout gap.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section specifies the theoretical framework of the analysis and lay out the empirical hypotheses of the paper; data and methodology are presented in the third section, while empirical findings are discussed in the fourth section; conclusions follow.

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[1] For a notable exception, but in more limited time frame, see Scervini & Segatti (2012).

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS, TURNOUT DECLINE, AND THE ROLE OF MOBILIZATION

Do low SES groups vote progressively less than high SES groups?

Classic studies on political participation have extensively focused on examining the association between social stratification and voter turnout, widely confirming the relationship between socio-economic status and individual voter turnout. This connection was first postulated by the SES (i.e., socio-economic status) model of political participation (Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba *et al.*, 1978; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba *et al.*, 1995) and subsequently confirmed by numerous studies worldwide, until recently (e.g., Milbrath *et al.*, 1977; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Bartels, 2008; Gallego, 2009; Nevitte *et al.*, 2009; Gilens, 2012; Anderson & Beramendi, 2012; Armingeon & Schädel, 2015): less-educated individuals with lower incomes and occupational status tend to participate significantly less compared to their more affluent counterparts.

While the SES model quickly became the standard for predicting political participation, more uncertain have been the various arguments that have attempted to explain why a different distribution of material and symbolic resources among different social groups account for significant disparities in political participation. A fundamental (and, by now, widely accepted, see e.g., Nevitte *et al.*, 2009) contribution in this regard came from Brady *et al.* (1995), who supplemented the traditional SES model with what is known as the resource model of participation.

The fundamental idea of the model is that political participation (broadly defined) is a challenging endeavour that necessitates individuals to allocate various resources, encompassing cognitive, economic, and time-related aspects. These resources are stratified based on the socio-economic status of individuals (Brady *et al.* 1995). Individuals with higher socio-economic status (i.e., those who enjoy high levels of income, better occupational status, and higher levels of education) have been consistently found to be more likely to vote, donate money to political campaigns, be involved in political groups and associations, and have their interests better represented, either in conventional politics or through interest groups and lobbies (e.g., Schlozman *et al.* 2012). This is because individuals with high SES possess a greater number of resources that reduce the costs of political participation. In brief, high SES citizens are more likely to be endowed with those material, cognitive, and symbolic resources that allow them to follow the complexities of politics, understand better the political process, gather and process autonomously political information, and develop a stronger sense of internal and external efficacy. All these elements together facilitate the participation into politics, reducing the costs of voting. For low SES people, instead, the costs of voting are relatively higher, something that traditionally hampered their involvement into politics.

In the heydays of mass politics, the adverse impact of resource scarcity among lower social groups was partly alleviated by the consolidation of mass organizations and parties (in particular, class-based parties such as socialist, social-democratic, and communist parties). These parties, in fact, directly appealed to socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. (Alford 1963; Lipset & Rokkan 1967; Bartolini & Mair 1990[2007]; Gallego 2010). And indeed, at least until the 80's, electoral participation in Western Europe was only partially influenced by the socio-economic position of voters (Armingeon & Schädel, 2015). This is because lower social groups were mobilized by specific agents of mobilization (Verba *et al.*, 1978; Gray & Caul, 2000).

In their attempt to mobilize disadvantaged social groups, these organizations (in particular the parties of the left) also relied on a network of collateral associations which, beyond the political arena, acted as agents of socialization for the lower social classes, providing a sense of belonging and a common ideological terrain which served as an engine for mobilisation (Duverger 1954; Lipset & Rokkan 1967; Kirchheimer 1966). Amongst the others, trade unions have played a major role in defending the interests of the working class (Gallego 2010), also promoting voter turnout of less advantaged social groups (Leighley & Nagler 2007).

In line with the mobilisation approach to political participation (e.g., Verba *et al.* 1978), the role of these organisations is then key to explain individual turnout, in particular among lower social classes: individuals participate when they are asked to, when they are mobilised by organisations which provide them with information and cues facilitating the act of voting, and thus reducing the barriers to participation (Brady *et al.* 1995). And all this should be even more relevant for lower social classes, as the latter are the ones that depends on cues more than higher social classes (Armingeon & Schädel, 2015). At the same time, mass organizations can facilitate (as in the case of the working-class movement) the participation of lower social strata by providing a sense of common identity, solidarity, and shared interests which can produce strong incentives for group mobilization. The participation gap between lower and higher social groups should be then reduced when the costs of voting for lower classes is subsidized by this kind of organizations.

It follows that the incentives for participation for lower socio-economic groups should be reduced to the extent the mobilising agents of these social groups are in decline (i.e., no longer able to appeal to this specific segment of the society). Evidence, in this respect, has shown that both parties of the left and trade unions are in fact facing hard times in the Western world. The literature on class voting has by now demonstrated that in many Western European countries class-bloc parties have lost their appeal towards the working class and that, more generally, the left is no longer able to massively mobilize its traditional electorate (Clark & Lipset 1991; Evans & Tilley 2012, 2017). Along the same lines, trade unions' membership in Europe has declined over time (Ebbinghaus & Visser 2000) and, as unionized labour force declined, the capacity and legitimacy of trade unions as important players in the policy making process has declined as well (e.g., Culpepper & Regan 2014: 723).

We thus expect that political inequalities based on socio-economic status should be on the rise, with lower social groups turning out progressively less than their better off counterpart over time. More formally:

> H1: The turnout gap between higher and lower social groups should be on the rise.

Are trade unions still able to mobilise lower social groups?

While based on the existing literature we expect that socio-economically based political inequalities should be on the rise, this expectation explicitly assumes that this trend is, at least in part, due to the weakening of those mass organizations which appealed to lower social groups. In this respect, a particular attention should be given to the role of trade unions, given their traditional role as mobilising institutions of lower social classes (Flavin & Radcliff 2011, p. 633).

There are at least two different perspectives that one should consider when looking at the relationship between trade unions and turnout: one referred to unionisation strength, intended as an aggregate-level variable; and the other, instead, referred to individual unions' membership. Unionisation strength concerns the aggregate association between turnout and the strength of trade unions in a given context, as measured, for example, by trade union density. In this respect, several scholars have shown that turnout in the aggregate is higher in those countries where unionisation rates are higher (e.g., Gray & Caul 2000; Radcliff & Davis 2000). This implies that unionisation has an effect on turnout that goes beyond the mobilisation of trade unions members. This might be due to the fact that, for example, during an electoral campaign, strong trade unions might be able to target and mobilise also non-members whose interests are however aligned with those of trade unions' members, and which are advocated for by trade unions. Or, the defence of specific interests made by trade unions could trigger a counter-reaction on the side of those who are opposed to the advocated interests and who might decide to go to the polls to avoid that pro-union parties could win the elections. However, since the bulk of trade unions' members (and sympathisers) was drawn in the past from lower socio-economic groups (Flavin & Radcliff 2011), the shrinkage of trade unions' membership should affect turnout more severely among lower social groups.

In relation to unions' membership, instead, we refer to the individual-level effect on turnout which might be produced by the individual membership (due, for example, to socialization processes within the organisation). Traditionally, trade unions' members have been found to vote more compared to non-union members. One of the mechanisms underpinning this pattern is the one postulated by the civic voluntarism model, suggesting that membership in associations (be them political or not) allows citizens to gain those skills which enhance political involvement (i.e., knowledge about politics, political interest, etc.) and consolidate a habit of voting. In addition, trade unions favoured the political involvement of members by defending and voicing their interests. In this sense, trade unions worked as participation equalizers, as they compensated the lack of politically relevant resources of low SES members. In this regard, recent studies have shown that individual membership in trade unions is in fact still a good predictor of political attitudes as well as political behaviours. Trade unions' members are, for example, still more likely to support redistributive policies (e.g., Mosimann & Pontusson 2022), although this depends on the type of trade union. Along the same line, working class voters have been found to be less likely to abstain, if members of a trade union (e.g., Renwald & Pontusson 2021).

However, the association between unionization and equal turnout was particularly relevant in the past, when the bulk of trade unions' members was made up by working class people and when trade unions were mostly focused on the defence of class interests. However, the internal composition of trade unions has changed in the last decades: there is evidence showing that the decline of unionization in Europe has been mostly concentrated among the working class (Visser 2006; Gallego 2015) and that, today, unions' members are, on average, as educated as the general population (Gallego 2015). If this is true, the mobilizing efforts of trade unions might be no longer directed to low SES citizens only; from a rational point of view, they would rather try to please the interests of a more heterogeneous membership.

The question then is whether, in a context of declining and changing composition of unions' membership, trade unions are still able to play a role as participation equalizer. On the one hand, one could expect that, given the broader range of interests expressed by a more heterogenous base, trade unions should be willing to mobilize the interests of both low and high SES groups. If then trade unions' membership had a positive effect on turnout, this should be the same across different social groups (that is to say, a relatively small capacity to close the turnout gap) (Leighley & Nagler 2007; Gallego 2015). On the other, however, we could still expect that any effect of trade unions' membership on turnout should be stronger among low SES groups in the first place, as these are the groups that, more than any other, need information and politically relevant skills to get engaged in politics.

If it is true, then, that there are good reasons to suppose that de-unionisation might have contributed to the decline of turnout among lower classes, this does not mean that trade unions have automatically ceased to mobilize their own members (especially low SES ones). On the one hand, de-unionization might have reduced the overall pool of voters potentially mobilised by trade unions in the aggregate (especially among lower social classes); on the other, trade unions might have maintained their mobilising capacity among their own members (and, maybe, especially among low SES members, who are more in need of politically relevant resources).

On this basis, we advance two expectations. First, if the SES-based turnout gap is a consequence of the weakening of trade unions, we should then expect that unionisation strength (in the aggregate) should be negatively associated with the turnout gap between higher and lower socioeconomic groups. Second, despite the increasing weakness of trade unions, the latter should be still able to influence and, possibly, mobilise at least their own members (in particular, among low SES individuals), thus acting as turnout equalisers between lower and higher socioeconomic groups. More formally:

> H2: The higher the de-unionisation rate, the larger the gap between higher and lower socioeconomic groups.
> H3: The turnout gap between higher and lower socioeconomic groups should be moderated by trade unions' individual membership.

THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

Since the first democratic election after WWII and up to the end of the 70s, electoral participation in Italy has been among the highest in the Western world (Figure 1) (Corbetta & Schadee 1982, Mannheimer & Zajczyk 1982; Caramani 1996). With an average of over 90% throughout this period, the turnout even reached almost 100% in some territories (Tuorto 2018). On the one hand, these high levels of turnout for a country that has always scored poorly in terms of civic culture (Almond & Verba 1963), is to be attributed to the diffused perception of the vote as a moral duty among citizens (e.g., Mannheimer & Sani 2001). On the other, high turnout levels were a product of the specific features of the Italian political system, such as the structure of the political competition, the presence of compulsory voting (although only formally), the proportional nature of the electoral system (e.g., Corbetta & Parisi 1987, 1994; Corbetta & Schadee 1982; Caramani 1996). In particular, the period between 1946 and 1992, also known as the First Republic, was marked by extreme levels of polarization of the party system (Sartori 1976). Party competition between the two major parties of the Italian political system (i.e., the Christian Democratic Party (DC) and the Communist Party (PCI)) reflected a system of social fractures in which the class cleavage was flanked by (and to a certain extent overlapped with) the religious cleavage. The profound lines of divisions between the Christian Democrats and Communists (which clearly reflected deep societal conflicts) had favoured the consolidation of Catholic and Communist subcultures in specific areas and regions of the country, something that undoubtedly had relevant implications in terms of mobilization (e.g., Tuorto 2018). Both parties were able to consolidate strong socio-political allegiances with specif-

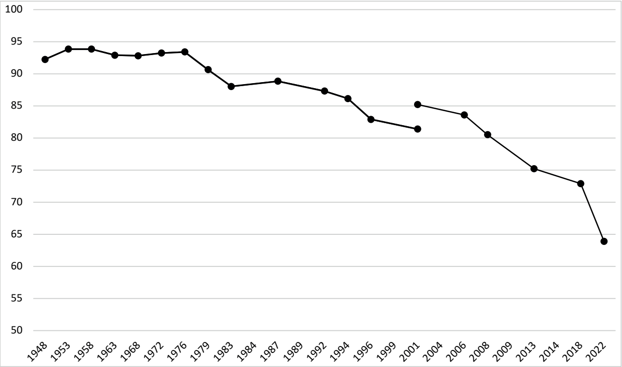

Figure 1. Electoral turnout in Italy. *Source*: Italian Centre for Electoral Studies. *Note*: In the period 1979-2001 Italian voters abroad were included in the computation of turnout.

ic social groups which were massively mobilized at each election. This also allowed to bring to the polls those segments of the society which were traditionally more difficult to be mobilized (e.g., lower SES groups).

Starting from the general elections of 1979, however, the level of electoral participation started to plummet, although at different paces over time (e.g., Corbetta & Parisi 1987; Mannheimer & Sani 2001; Cerruto 2012). Throughout the ‘80s, turnout declined somehow slowly: in 1979 the turnout was 90.6% (almost 3 percentage points lower compared to the previous elections of 1976); at the end of the ‘80s, electoral participation decreased up to 88.8% in the general elections of 1987. The declining trend became much more steeper during the 90’s, also as a consequence of conjunctural factors. Amongst the others (see Tuorto 2018), the most relevant one was the transition from the First to the Second Republic (starting from 1994 on). The end of the First Republic was in fact marked by the massive corruption scandal of Tangentopoli (i.e., Bribesville), which discredited the established political parties and broke down the party system which ruled Italy since the end of WWII. The delegitimation of the Italian political system that followed, produced disaffection towards conventional politics among voters, something that contributed to accelerate the decline of electoral turnout. Since the beginning of the Second Republic turnout has steadily declined until the last general election of 2022, when turnout reached its lowest level (63.9%).

In part, this negative trend has been considered as the product of changes occurred on the demand side. Some scholars have pointed to the demographic changes of the Italian society, arguing that as the Italian population got older, the proportion of voters who might have been more prone to abstention (due, for example, to illness) has increased (e.g., Mannheimer & Sani 2001). Others, instead, have mostly referred to cultural changes which have invested the Italian society (e.g., Mannheimer & Sani 2001; Raniolo 2007). Generational approaches, for example, postulate that younger generations, socialised in a context of increasing affluence and well-being, might have developed post-materialist values, something that should predispose them to prefer more fluid and less hierarchical forms of political participation than voting (Inglehart 1977; Dalton 2006, 2007). At the same time, they might be characterized by a more cynical and detached approach to institutional politics and more conventional forms of political participation. However, empirical evidence has shown that the generational approach has only a limited explanatory capacity of the negative trend of turnout in Italy (see Tuorto 2018).

A second line of thought, instead, has prevalently focused on the supply side of politics, positing that the decline of turnout should be mostly imputed to the fact that parties and other traditional agents of political mobilisation have progressively lost their capacity to remain in touch with voters (Corbetta & Parisi 1987, 1994), something that spurt increasing levels of apathy and discontent among citizens (Cerruto 2012).

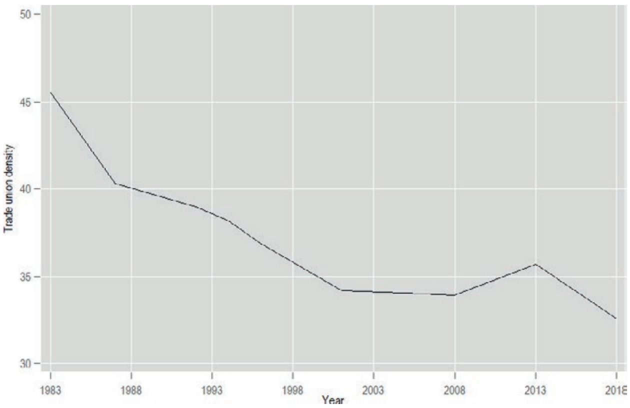

Figure 2. Trade union density in Italy, 1983-2018. *Source*: OECD.

In this paper, we borrow from this latter approach, in fact hypothesising that the decline of turnout is, at least in part, due to the demobilisation of lower socio-economic groups, and that the latter is associated with the weakening of mobilising agents which traditionally appealed to these segments of the society. In Italy, this weakness is well visible from the decline of class voting and the reduced appeal of the class left on lower social classes (e.g., Bellucci 2001) as well as from the decline of unionisation rates. The latter are unequivocally depicted in Figure 2, which reports the trend of trade union density in Italy for the period 1983-2018 (the period covered by our study, see below). In 2018 the unionised labour force in Italy constituted 32.6 of the total number of employees, a figure that is 13 percentage points lower compared to what is observable in 1983, when the unionisation rate was 45.5%.

DATA AND METHODS

We test our hypotheses combining 10 waves of the Italian National Elections Studies (ITANES), starting from 1985 until 2018. On the whole, this longitudinal, individual-level dataset covers 10 national elections, starting from the general elections of 1983 (ITANES wave 1985) until the general elections of 2018 (ITANES wave 2018), with an overall number of observations which is 21,524. We excluded from the dataset the

ITANES waves conducted prior to 1985 for two reasons. First, from a substantive point of view, turnout decline in Italy became relevant starting from the '80s, while, as we have already argued above, in previous decades it was extremely high and without significant oscillation over time. Therefore, we take into considerations those waves which can reliably map the declining trend in the aggregate. Second, and from an operational point of view, we could not include in our analyses the ITANES waves collected before 1985 (and referring to the Italian general elections held before the 1980s), because of the numerical instability in some key variables for our analyses (for example, in 1983 the number of respondents falling in the higher education category (e.g., university degree) is problematically small, especially when including the variable in a multivariate model).

Typically, ITANES conducted post-electoral surveys in the aftermath of each general election. In some cases, however, the study has been enriched by a panel design, including both a pre- and a post-electoral survey. For all those ITANES waves which feature both a pre- and a post-electoral component, we have always kept the post-electoral one. A prospect of all the ITANES waves included in this study (with reference to the specific election covered by the ITANES wave and the relative sample size) is reported in Table 1.

Our dependent variable is the self-reported individual turnout at the general election. In all the waves included in our dataset, individual turnout is measured by the classical vote recall question. The variable is simply coded as a dichotomy, with 1=voted and 0=did not vote. No answers and those who did not recall whether they voted or not are excluded from the analysis. Given the dichotomous nature of our dependent variable, a series of logistic models are estimated to assess the effect of our independent variables on individual turnout. Self-reported turnout, however, is all but not unproblematic. Individual-level surveys, in fact, tend to overreport turnout, a bias that is mostly due to social desirability (Karp & Brockington, 2005). As a consequence, to avoid severe distortions in our estimations, we weighted our data based on official turnout figures.

Table 1. Prospect of the ITANES waves employed in this study.

ITANES Wave	Date of election	N
1985 (Post-electoral)	26/06/1983	2074
1990 (Post-electoral)	14/06/1987	1500
1992 (Post-electoral)	05/04/1992	1181
1994 (Post-electoral)	27/03/1994	2600
1996 (Post-electoral)	21/04/1996	2502
2001 (Post-electoral)	13/05/2001	3209
2006 (Panel post)	09/04/2006	1377
2008 (Post-electoral)	13/04/2008	3000
2013 (Post-electoral)	24/02/2013	1508
2018 (Panel post)	04/03/2018	2573

Our focal predictor is the socio-economic status of voters, as captured by their education level. We measured education as a dummy variable, with 0 including low educated respondents (holding primary education) and 1, instead, middle or high educated ones (holding secondary or tertiary education). Although SES is usually measured relying on different variables (i.e., education, income, and occupational class), in this paper we mainly relied on the educational level of the respondents, as this is in fact amongst the most powerful predictor of political participation (e.g., Schlozman *et al.* 2012) and, most relevantly, a structuring factor of the socioeconomic status of individuals, as both income and occupational class are, to some extent, dependent on educational attainment.

We are aware, however, that controversy does exist among political scientists in relation to how to interpret the positive association between education and turnout. While some scholars refer to education as a direct cause of political participation (i.e., education "teaches specific skills and knowledge" that foster political participation, Willeck & Mendelberg 2022: 90; see also Verba *et al.* 1995; Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980), others instead argue that the relationship between education and individual turnout is at best indirect, if not a spurious one, mostly produced by other factors related to education (most relevantly, political socialization among children) (see e.g., Langton & Jennings 1968; Nie *et al.* 1996). While we do not enter in this debate, we simply notice here that education is almost invariantly conceived as a key component of SES (see Willeck & Mendelberg 2022), although different theoretical models might conceptualize the relationship between SES, education, and participation in different ways (Willeck & Mendelberg 2022). Up to now, the studies investigating increasing participatory inequalities based on socio-economic conditions and employing education as a measure of SES are a multitude: Verba *et al.* (1995) and Brady *et al.* (1995) already conceived education as a fundamental component of SES, and they used education to assess the association between socio-economic status and political participation. Along the same lines, Gallego too (2010; 2015) relied on education to measure socio-economic disparities and their impact on political participation. More recently, Armingeon & Schädel (2015) explored the participatory gap between social groups in Western Europe using education as a measure for social position. As this paper directly contributes to this stream of literature, we preferred to maintain consistency and to use education as a measure of SES in our main analyses. However, we also replicated our models by relying on a measure of SES as derived from the occupational class of respondents.[2] The results of these analyses, reported in Appendix A, are consistent with our main findings.

As for our measure of trade union membership, we employed a dummy variable, coded as 1 if the respondent has ever been part of a trade union; the value of 0 is instead assigned to those who do not belong to any trade union. As for the overall strength of trade unions in the country, we used the trade union density in each election, as retrieved from the OECD data. This measure reports the proportion of the unionized labour force on the total number of employees.[3]

We also include controls for a set of standard predictors of individual turnout (see Smets & Van Ham 2013 for a review). We include gender as a dummy variable (1=Woman), to account for the fact that usually men are found to turn out at higher rates compared to women (Verba *et al.*, 1995). Age as well is a standard predictor of voter turnout. In particular, younger people are more likely to abstain, compared to mid-age voters. At the same time, the probability of turning out declines again in old age. To account for the curvilinear effect of age, we thus included a variable distinguishing different age-cohorts (18-34; 35-54; 55+). The variable is plugged into the models as a set of dummies (with the category 18-34 serving as a baseline), thus allowing us to control for the non-linear effect of age on turnout.

Following the mobilization model of political participation, beside the effect of trade unions' membership, we also consider the effect of church attendance, a variable which is hypothesised to be positively associated with individual turnout. Church attendance is measured on a 5-point scale, with 1= "Every week" and 5= "Never". A dummy variable is then included to control for political interest (1= "Very interested/Interested"; 0= "Not interested/Not at all interested"), as more politically interested people are more likely to turn out compared to not-interested ones.

As turnout in Italy varies considerably across regions (with northern regions usually turning out at higher rates compared to southern ones), we included as a control variable the geographical area in which the respondents live (North; Centre; South). This variable has been included as a set of dummy variables, with North serving as a baseline. We also took into consideration the delicate transition from the First to the Second Republic, and the political consequences produced by it, including a dummy variable distinguishing the elections held during the First Republic from those instead held during the Second Republic. Finally, the effect of time on turnout is captured by a linear term measuring the year of each election covered by our data.

RESULTS

Assessing the turnout gap between low and high SES groups

Our analysis starts by first assessing the average effect of education (our indicator of SES) on turnout. Model 1 in Table 2 reports the bivariate effect of education on turnout considering the pooled dataset.[4] Not surprisingly and in line with the SES model of participation, we found that better educated people, on average, participate more than those who are poorly educated. The logit coefficient for those holding a secondary or university degree indicates in fact that the log odds of turning out at the elections is significantly higher compared to those holding just elementary education (logit=0.504, p<0.001). This effect is further confirmed in Model 2, where besides education, we plugged in our models all control variables. Once again, results are consistent with existing evidence showing that better educated turn out at higher rates as compared to poorly educated people.[5] Furthermore, in line with the mobilization model of political participation, we find that the effects of trade unions' membership, church attendance, and political interest are all significant and in the expected direction. Specifically, members of trade unions, churchgoers, and politically interested individuals are more likely to go to the polls. We also confirm that people living in southern Italy are less likely to turn out compared to those living in northern Italy, and that turnout in the period of the Second Republic is, on average, lower compared to the First Republic. Finally, it is interesting to note that the effect for gender is negative and statistically significant, indicating that, on average, women participate less compared to men. As puzzling as this result might seem in light of a growing literature showing that the gender-related gap in turnout has decreased in many advanced democracies (e.g., Carreras 2018), our results are consistent with the existing literature demonstrating that, in the specific case of Italy, women are still less likely to vote compared to men (see e.g., Tuorto and Sartori 2021).

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[2] In particular, in our robustness tests we constructed a dummy variable, with 0 indicating manual workers and unemployed people, and 1 all the other respondents. Unfortunately, the same kind of replication was not possible with the income of respondents, as the variable was either not included in the dataset or it was measured inconsistently across different waves. This would have made the homogenisation of data over time more problematic and more prone to arbitrary choices.

[3] Data are available here: https://stats.oecd.org/OECDStat_Metadata/ShowMetadata.ashx?Dataset=TUD&ShowOnWeb=true&Lang=en

[4] Notice that in Model 1 we also included fixed effects for the ITANES wave to account for cross-time variations.

[5] The sample size in Model 2 is smaller compared to that in Model 1. This is due to the absence of some control variables in certain ITANES waves. In particular, trade unions' membership is missing in 1992, 1994, and 2008, and interest in politics is missing in 1992 and 1994. However, we conducted robustness tests by imputing missing values for these two variables, and the results align with the main findings presented in the manuscript (see Appendix B).

While these results are overall reassuring about the quality of our data, they do not tell us anything about the evolution of the turnout gap between higher and lower social groups. To assess whether and how this gap has changed over time, we estimated the effect of education on turnout as moderated by the effect of time. The results of these interactive models are presented in Models 3 and 4. In Model 3 we let the effect of education interact with a linear term for time, without including control variables (something that allows us to leverage the information coming from all the ITANES waves). In Model 4, instead, we include control variables. On the one hand, this allows to have a more accurate estimation of the effect of education on turnout over time, net of possible confounders. On the other, the inclusion of control variables reduces the number of available ITANES waves included in the analysis (as some controls are not consistently covered in all ITANES waves, see fn. 5). To ease the interpretation of the findings, we also present the results of Model 3 in graphical form in Figure 3. The latter displays the predicted probability of turning out for different education levels over time.

Looking at the figure, it is more than clear that starting from the ‘80s, turnout has decreased across all social groups. However, the decline for lowly educated people is staggering and much more pronounced compared to better educated people. While still in the 1983 election, low and high educated people voted at the same rates, the turnout gap between these two groups has steadily increased in the last three decades. In 1987, the probability of turning out of high educated people was 3 percentage points higher compared to low educated people; in the general election of 2018 it increased up to 12 percentage points. It is also interesting to notice that this trend started well before the collapse of the First Republic, thus suggesting that, although the transition from the First to the Second Republic might have accelerated the process, the latter was already unfolding in the years preceding the decomposition of the Italian political system in 1992. Furthermore, this finding is fully confirmed in Model 4, when control variables are included in the analysis. Overall, these results clearly lend support to our first hypothesis: the turnout gap between higher and lower socio-economic groups has significantly increased over time.

Table 2. Logistic regression. DV: Self-reported turnout.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Main effects				
Education: High vs Low	0.504^{***}	0.378^{***}	-21.99^{**}	-39.61^{***}
	(0.0410)	(0.0535)	(7.560)	(9.871)
Time fixed effects	Yes	No	No	No
Time (Linear term)		-0.0345^{***}	-0.0415^{***}	-0.0468^{***}
		(0.00327)	(0.00244)	(0.00445)
Trade Union Membership (1=Yes)		0.663^{***}		0.654^{***}
		(0.0687)		(0.0687)
Age class				
18-34		*Baseline*		*Baseline*
35-54		0.418^{***}		0.410^{***}
		(0.0575)		(0.0576)
55+		0.0644		0.0644
		(0.0604)		(0.0607)
Sex (1=Female)		-0.217^{***}		-0.225^{***}
		(0.0475)		(0.0476)
Interest in politics (1=Yes)		0.796^{***}		0.792^{***}
		(0.0555)		(0.0555)
Church attendance		-0.224^{***}		-0.229^{***}
		(0.0169)		(0.0169)
Region				
North		*Baseline*		*Baseline*
Centre		0.0684		0.0738
		(0.0644)		(0.0645)
South		-0.238^{***}		-0.235^{***}
		(0.0511)		(0.0512)
Second vs First republic		-0.221^{*}		-0.0462
		(0.0927)		(0.101)
Interaction terms				
Education * Time			0.0112^{**}	0.0199^{***}
			(0.00377)	(0.00493)
Constant	1.933^{***}	71.08^{***}	84.32^{***}	95.48^{***}
	(0.0680)	(6.485)	(4.879)	(8.831)
N	21147	13863	21147	13863
Pseudo R^2	0.025	0.079	0.022	0.080

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Does unionization affect the turnout gap?

As anticipated above, one of the factors behind this trend might be linked to the weakening of those mobilizing agents which traditionally appealed to lower

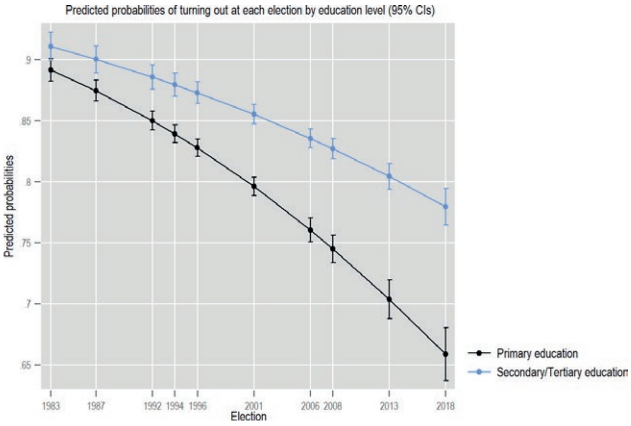

Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of turning out by education level (95% CIs). *Note*: estimates are derived from Model 3, Table 2. *Note*: A replication of this analysis, employing occupational class as a measure of SES, is reported in Table 1A and Figure 1A of Appendix A.

classes. Amongst these, trade unions have certainly had a prominent role. If this assumption is correct, then we should find that the turnout gap between low and high educated people should be associated with the strength of trade unions. Specifically, we should expect that the gap between high and low educated voters should be lower when trade unions are stronger.

We tested this hypothesis using as our dependent variable the predicted turnout gap, as obtained by the estimation of a series of bivariate logistic models in each single ITANES wave. We then plotted the turnout gap against our measure of trade unions' strength (i.e., trade union density). The association between the two variables is reported in Figure 4. The y-axis reports the gap in turnout as obtained by the estimated log-odds of turning out of high educated people vs low educated people in each election. The x-axis, instead, reports the trade unions density in correspondence to each election. The relationship between the two variables, as expected, is negative, thus showing that as trade-union density decreases, the socio-economic gap in turnout significantly increases (Pearson's R correlation is equal to -0.8, p<0.001). In particular, the turnout gap between high and low educated people remains a significant one as long as trade unions appear relatively weaker, while it becomes not significant, from a statistical point of view, when the trade unions density increases.

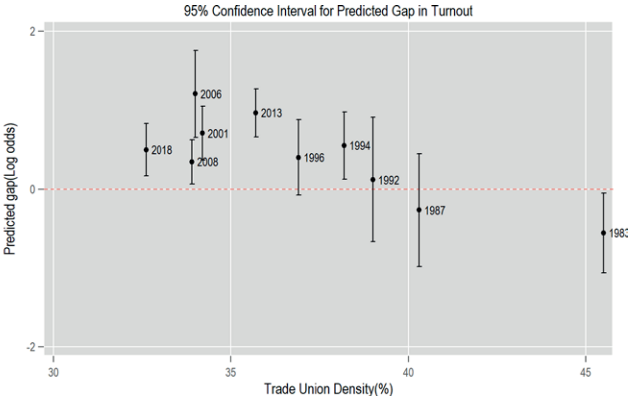

Figure 4. Association between trade union density and the predicted turnout gap between high and low educated people (95% CIs).

We are aware that these results do have limitations. First, the number of observations we are using here is small (N=10); second, and perhaps most importantly, the association between trade union density and the turnout gap might be the result of the common trending over time of the two variables (i.e., trade union density decreases over time while the turnout gap increases over time, following a similar, although in different directions, trend). We tend, however, to rule out this possibility. First, when looking at Figure 4, we notice that the association between trade union density and the turnout gap does not follow a linear trend over time (this is true in particular after the 90's); second, the association between time and the turnout gap is lower and less significant (R=0.7; p<0.05) than the association between trade union density and the turnout gap (R=-0.8; p<0.01); finally, when we regress the turnout gap on trade union density and time separately, we observe an explanatory capacity of trade union density which is higher as compared to time (65% and 54% of variance explained respectively).

Of course, these results are far from demonstrating any causal relationship between unionization and the turnout gap, and other factors should be controlled for, which cannot be included in this analysis (e.g., institutional factors, party strategies, social transformations, just to name a few). However, while we cannot establish a causal relationship between unionization and the turnout gap, we interpret these results as providing some evidence which corroborate our hypothesis: the turnout gap between low and high educated people tend to increase as unionization decreases.

And yet it moves…?

While the turnout gap between low and high educated people seems to be connected to de-unionization, it is still to be verified whether trade unions are still able to favour turnout equalization. Following our H3, we expect that trade union members should participate more as compared to non-trade union members and that the decline of turnout should be less pronounced among

Table 3. Logistic regression. DV: Self-reported turnout.

	Model 5
Main effects	
Education: High vs Low	-43.37^{***} (10.39)
Time fixed effects	No
Time (Linear term)	-0.0443^{***} (0.00454)
Trade Union Membership (1=Yes)	37.98 (20.62)
Age class	
18-34	*Baseline*
35-54	0.415^{***} (0.0578)
55+	0.0767 (0.0608)
Sex (1=Female)	-0.213^{***} (0.0476)
Interest in politics (1=Yes)	0.801^{***} (0.0556)
Church attendance	-0.230^{***} (0.0169)
Region	
North	*Baseline*
Centre	0.0775 (0.0646)
South	-0.228^{***} (0.0512)
Second vs First republic	-0.0705 (0.102)
Interaction terms	
Education * Time	0.0219^{***} (0.00518)
Education*Trade union membership	19.28 (28.53)
Trade union membership* Time	-0.0185 (0.0103)
Education*Trade union membership*Time	-0.00984 (0.0142)
Constant	90.51^{***} (9.025)
N	13863
Pseudo R^2	0.082

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

unionized people belonging to lower social classes. In other words, membership in trade unions should reduce the turnout gap between lower and higher social classes.

We test this hypothesis estimating a logistic regression model, where we let education interact with both time and trade union membership in a three-way interaction (Model 5, Table 3). We estimate this model including control variables, exactly as we did in Table 2, Models 3 and 4. To make the results more easily understandable, we plot the predicted probability of turning out for different levels of education sorted by trade union membership (Figure 5). From Figure 5, we first observe that the probability of turnout among non-unionized and low-educated people declines significantly more over time compared to non-unionized and high-educated individuals (left-hand panel). This results in an increasing participatory gap between non-unionized citizens with high and low education levels. The same pattern does not emerge when considering the unionized SES groups (right-hand panel). In this case, there is no clear divergence in the turnout trends between lower and higher social groups, indicating that the decline in turnout for unionized low SES groups follows the same pace as that of unionized high SES groups. Second, we can see that turnout declines more rapidly among non-unionized and low SES individuals, not only compared to non-unionized and highly educated people but also in comparison to both unionized high and low SES individuals.

All in all, these results confirm our third hypothesis, showing that the decline of turnout among lower socio-economic groups is in fact moderated by their union membership. In other words, unionization is still able, according to our data, to provide incentives for participation among lower social classes, something that in fact tends to favour a more equal political participation.

CONCLUSION

While voter turnout has been decreasing in Italy for nearly four decades, it has remained unclear whether this decline has been accompanied by a rise in participatory inequalities. In this paper, we directed our efforts toward understanding two key aspects: first, whether unequal participation is indeed increasing, and second, the extent to which this trend can be (at least in part) attributed to the influence of trade unions.

Relying on survey data taken from the Italian National Election Studies, our empirical analyses showed that indeed the decline of turnout in Italy is, at least in part, driven by a disproportionate decline of turnout among lower social classes. In other words, turnout is becoming increasingly unequal in Italy. While in the early ‘80s, low and high social classes participated in the elections at almost the same rate, as time passed, the gap between these two groups has signifi-

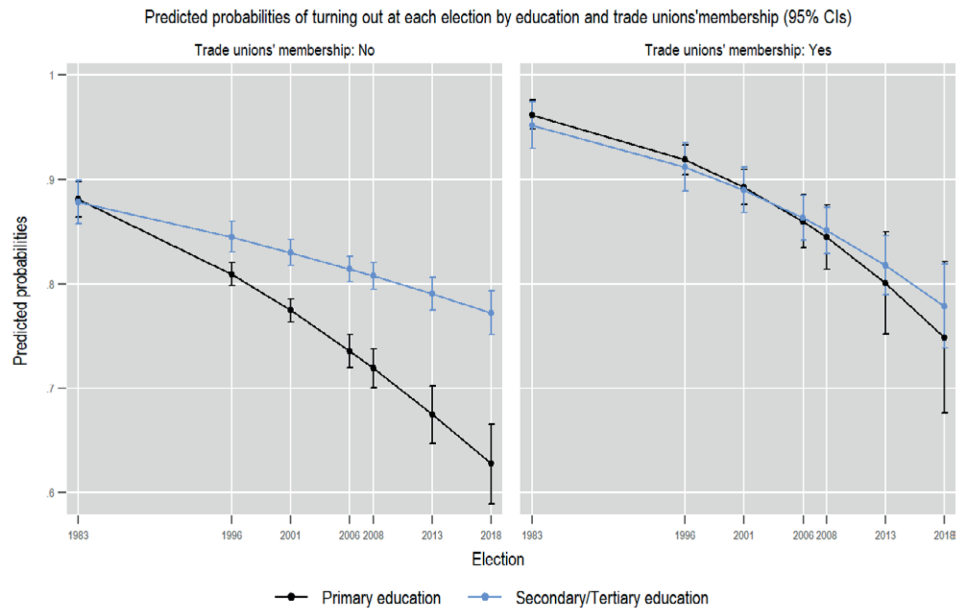

Figure 5. Predicted probabilities of turning out at election by education level and trade unions' membership (95% CIs). *Note*: A replication of this analysis, employing occupational class as measure of SES, is reported in Table 1A and Figure 2A of Appendix A.

cantly increased. In this perspective, Italy is not different from other advanced democracies where turnout has been shown to have grown unequal over time (see e.g., Armingeon & Schädel, 2015).

In trying to understand the factors that might explain this increasing gap, we focused our attention on the role played by trade unions, which are traditionally considered key actors for the mobilization of low SES groups. In this respect, we provided some evidence supporting the idea that de-unionization is among the factors behind increasing turnout inequalities. At the same time, we have shown that, even though de-unionization is associated with an increase in the turnout gap, trade unions are still able to provide incentives for electoral participation that are apparently higher for low SES groups compared to high SES ones. In other words, in a context where trade unions are losing members as well as their legitimacy, they are still able to play a role as turnout equalizers.

Taken as a whole, these results lead us to emphasize four key points for reflection. First, electoral participation in Italy is becoming increasingly unequal, as demonstrated by the growing influence of socioeconomic status (SES) in explaining electoral participation. This rise in political inequalities might, in turn, result in a decreased representation of the interests of lower social classes. This is alarming, considering that, at least normatively, representative democracy is built on the principle of equal participation and representation for all citizens in the democratic process.

Second, the increasing weight of SES in determining electoral participation suggests that one of the reasons for the dramatic decline in voter turnout in Italy is the growing and relatively greater reluctance of lower classes to take part in the electoral process. Part of the story is related to the weakening of those mobilization agents that traditionally appealed to lower social classes. However, further research is certainly needed to understand other factors that might explain why turnout is becoming more unequal.

Third, and related to our previous point, a potential check on the unequal growth of participation comes from the mobilization role played by organizations and associations active in society. In line with the mobilization approach to political participation, our data clearly show that if individuals are members of a trade union, citizens from lower social classes participate at the same level as those from higher social classes. This data suggests that associations such as trade unions are still able to provide information and skills that are functional for mobilizing their members, particularly when these members come from lower social groups. It is indeed the lower social classes that have a greater need for (and are more receptive to) the mobilization efforts of trade unions.

This also explains why, and this is our fourth point of reflection, the decline in trade union density might translate into a greater participatory gap between lower and upper classes. Because it is the lower classes that are most affected by the lack of cues, information, and skills coming from associations, the decline in membership in these organizations will have an asymmetric effect on different social classes, particularly affecting those classes with a greater need for guidance in the political process.

More in general, and besides the direct implications for the Italian context, our findings testify to the critical importance that political and non-political associations can have for the well-being of a democratic regime. The formal right to vote alone does not prevent the consolidation of patterns of participatory inequalities that clearly contrast with the crucial democratic principle that citizens' preferences should be equally weighted by the political system. As long as specific social groups lack those relevant skills necessary to activate them politically, the role played by associations that can compensate for the lack of these skills remains a crucial ingredient for the well-functioning of a democracy. From this perspective, future research as well as political decision-makers should focus their efforts not only on identifying formal mechanisms that can curb the detachment from democratic life (clearly epitomized by the decline of political participation in many advanced democracies) but also on identifying courses of action that can revitalize the associational life of a democratic society.

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When a woman asks a sexist constituency to be voted: was Giorgia Meloni's gender an advantage, a disadvantage or an irrelevant factor in the 2022 Italian general election?

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Abstract. In this study, we investigated whether Giorgia Meloni's gender was an advantage, a disadvantage or an irrelevant factor in the 2022 Italian general election. Using datasets from two election surveys conducted with two quota samples of the adult Italian population, *N*s = 1,572 (ITANES dataset) and 1,150 (COCO dataset), we predicted the vote in the election as a function of participants' gender, beliefs about gender and their interaction, controlling for the key sociodemographic and political variables. Two multinomial logistic regression revealed that gender and beliefs about gender were neither additively nor multiplicatively associated with the vote. We therefore conclude that Meloni's gender did not affect the outcome of the 2022 Italian general election.

Keywords: gender, gender beliefs, general election, vote choice.

INTRODUCTION

The 2022 election was the first in the 74-year history of the Italian Republic in which a woman had a concrete chance to win a parliamentary election and thus be appointed as the first minister. And that is exactly what happened: after winning the election, Giorgia Meloni, leader of Fratelli d'Italia, became the first Italian female prime minister, to the head of a right-wing government.

Given that few women have been elected to or are active in Italian politics, this innovation was highlighted by the media. In the debate that followed, many right-leaning journalists and commentators provocatively pointed out an interesting paradox: Meloni's appointment represented an important breakthrough in a male-dominated and conceived field such as politics, especially in Italy (Cavazza & Pacilli, 2021), but came from the unexpected side of the political field, i.e. the relatively more sexist political culture of the right. Indeed, right-wing conservative parties typically tend to favour more traditional gender roles (e.g. Cassese & Holman, 2017) and people who are characterised by high levels of sexism are more likely to support right-wing ideologies and to vote for conservative parties (e.g. Christopher & Mull, 2006; de Geus *et al*., 2022). In contrast, left-leaning progressive parties are more likely to espouse gender-egalitarian ideologies and tend to attract fewer sexist voters (e.g. Beckwith, 2000). For these reasons, it is not particularly surprising that Fratelli d'Italia has the lowest percentage of women in the current parliament, and that Meloni's government has the lowest percentage of women in the last decade.

This apparent contradiction is not new: some other notable cases of female political leaders coming from the (centre) right of the political spectrum (e.g. Marine Le Pen in France and Angela Merkel in Germany), as well as the cases of three female prime ministers brought to power in the United Kingdom by the Conservative Party (Margaret Thatcher, Theresa May and Liz Truss), have been analysed (e.g. Berthezène & Gottlieb, 2019; Mushaben, 2022). Several studies specifically examined the relationship among female leadership, charisma and gender issues in the populist radical right (e.g. Geva, 2020; Meret *et al*., 2016; Snipes & Mudde, 2020). We argue that a social psychological approach that takes cues from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) and the literature on the effects of sexism in politics (e.g. De Geus *et al*., 2022) is well-suited to help understand the electoral dynamics that characterised the 2022 general election in Italy.

In this context, we aimed to investigate whether the fact that Fratelli d'Italia had a female leader was an advantage, a disadvantage or an irrelevant factor in the 2022 Italian general election. All three possibilities seem plausible. Meloni's gender might have been a disadvantage, as the typical right-wing voter might prefer a conservative party coherently led by a man to a conservative party innovatively led by a woman. Indeed, the former would be more consistent with his/her beliefs about gender than the latter. Therefore, a negative relationship between traditional beliefs about gender and Meloni's party choice could be expected. Consistent with this, previous studies have shown that in political contests where women run, the influence of sexism on voting decisions is stronger than in contests without women (Cassese & Barnes, 2019; Valentino *et al*., 2018).

However, in the 2022 Italian general election women might have seen an opportunity to support a leader who embodies women's conquest of a traditionally male domain. This would be consistent with the social psychology literature on social identity (Tajfel, 1981), that is, 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his[/her] knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership' (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). According to this literature, people tend to exhibit an intergroup bias that aims to favour the social categories to which they belong in order to bolster their self-esteem. Against this backdrop, women might be induced to vote for a female candidate regardless of their political views, in order to favour the ingroup defined by their gender. Accordingly, previous research has shown that social identity dynamics are systematically at play in the political arena (e.g. Abrams & Emler, 1992; Pacilli *et al*., 2016). In particular, a meta-analysis of 67 survey experiments recently found support for the gender affinity hypothesis (i.e. women prefer female candidates, Schwarz & Coppock, 2022). Moreover, a woman's leadership role may have widened her constituency by attracting the less sexist voter segments despite her membership in a relatively sexist cultural group, as beliefs about gender may play an important role in candidate evaluations and in voting decisions (Deckman & Cassese, 2021). In Italy, the gender gap in politics (i.e., women are more conservative than men) narrowed starting from 1968 and disappeared in the 2006 general election (Corbetta & Cavazza, 2008). However, the possibility of electing a woman to the highest office in government may have pushed female voters back to the conservative side. This happened for example in France, where Marine Le Pen succeeded in closing the so called 'radical right gender gap' and attracted the vote of women who were traditionally less prone than men to this political offer (Mayer, 2022). This is consistent with other findings showing that in the case of populist radical right parties (such as Meloni's party), a female leader is able to mitigate the threat posed by her their (too) though masculine image (e.g. Ben-Shitrit *et al*., 2022; Meret *et al*., 2019). From this perspective, Meloni's gender may have been an advantage in the 2022 Italian general election.

However, there is also a third possibility. Overall, Meloni's gender may have been an irrelevant factor in the 2022 Italian general election. The absence of associations between the voter's gender and sexism, on the one hand, and his or her voting decision for or against Meloni's party, on the other, could be the effect of a truly weak relevance of the leader's gender (e.g. Cassese & Barnes, 2019). Moreover, such null associations could be the result of a relative balance between the advantages and disadvantages of a right-leaning woman as a political leader. From this perspective, the two effects above could cancel each other out.

In this study, we compared these three reasonable predictions (Meloni's gender was an advantage, a disadvantage or an irrelevant factor in the 2022 Italian general election).

THE PRESENT STUDY

In the 2022 general election, right-leaning voters in Italy were able for the first time to choose between parties that differed not only in their political programme, but also in the gender of their leader. What role, if any, did voters' gender and sexism play in this political choice? To answer this question, we analysed data from two different election surveys and examined whether Meloni's gender played a role (positive or negative) or was irrelevant, controlling for voters' main sociodemographic variables and ideological leanings.

Method

We analysed data from two independent election studies conducted on two quota samples of the adult Italian population. The first study was a two-wave survey conducted by ITANES (ITAlian National Election Studies, www.itanes.org). Data for the pre-election wave were collected between September 5 and 24, 2022, using a rolling cross-sectional design; data for the post-election wave were collected between October 12 and 15, 2022. A total of 1,572 respondents participated in both waves. The second study was a post-election survey conducted as the 7th wave of the COCO (COnsequences of COvid-19) project (https://www.dippsicologia.unito.it/do/progetti.pl/Show?_id=9fxo). Data were collected between October 13 and 24, 2022, from a sample of 1,150 people. Both surveys were conducted online.

In both datasets, we predicted participants' voting behaviour, which was recoded into a 4-category variable: 1 = the participant voted for a non-right-wing party (Azione, Italia Viva, Movimento 5 Stelle, Partito Democratico or + Europa con Emma Bonino), 2 = the participant voted for Fratelli d'Italia, 3 = the participant voted for another right-wing party (Lega Salvini premier or Forza Italia Berlusconi president) and 4 = the participant did not vote or did not cast a valid vote. We excluded from the analyses the participants who voted for the minor parties and who have not answered the question of how they voted. Table 1 reports the *N*s of these variables in the two datasets.

As independent variables we used participants' gender (1 = woman, 0 = man), beliefs about gender and their interaction, calculated after recoding the 0s at the first into -1s and centring the second. The proxy measures for beliefs about gender available in the two datasets were different. In the ITANES dataset, the following 5-category item (borrowed from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems questionnaire: see www.cses.org) was available: 'Policies to increase the representation of women in politics have gone too far'. In the COCO data set, the following 4-category item was available: 'Under the guise of equality for women, men are actually being discriminated against' (Zehnter *et al.*, 2021). We coded these two items so that high scores expressed high levels of traditionalism in gender beliefs.

Because women are less socially advantaged then men, we partialled out the role of the other main indicators of social (dis)advantage. Thus, in the regressions we controlled for respondents' age and years of education. Moreover, we partialled out participants' political orientation, measured with the following 11-category item (1 = 'extreme left', 11 = 'extreme right') from the European Social Survey item (see www.europeansocialsurvey.org): "In politics, people often refer to 'the left' and the 'the right'. Thinking about your political opinions, how would you place your views on this scale?".

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the study variables and Table 3 their bivariate correlations.

RESULTS

The results of the two data sets agreed well (see Table 4). Two multinomial logistic regressions (we used participants who did not vote or did not cast a valid vote as the reference category) showed that, despite of the often-discussed weakening of the importance of the traditional left-right distinction (e.g. Bauer *et al.*, 2017; Cavazza *et al.*, 2022), Italians' political orientation was the most important predictor of their vote in the 2022 election. The other control variables did not show strong associations with the vote, except for age, which showed a positive association with voting for a non-right-wing party and for Fratelli d'Italia (in the COCO dataset, the first association was not significant, but in the right direction). In addition, there were significant or trending associations between education and the likelihood of voting for Fratelli d'Italia and for a non-right-wing party. More interestingly for our research objectives, participants' gender was not associated with their voting decision. The same was true for their sexism and for the interactions between gender and sexism.

In addition to the analyses presented above, we conducted five parallel analyses. In the first set, we used as the reference category the participants who voted for a non-rightist political party. In the second set, we used only participants' gender or sexism as predictors, with-

Table 1. Frequency of the dependent variable.

	ITANES (ITAlian National Election Studies) data set	COCO (COnsequences of COvid-19) data set
Vote for a non-rightist party	438	446
Vote for Fratelli d'Italia	134	175
Vote for another right-wing party	91	150
Did not cast a valid vote	190	179
Participants excluded from the analysis	719	200
Total	1,572	1,150

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the study variables.

	ITANES (ITAlian National Election Studies) data set		COCO (COnsequences of COvid-19) data set	
	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*
Woman	.51	.50	.51	.50
Sexism	1.62	1.21	2.02	.90
Woman*sexism	-.09	1.21	-.24	.86
Age	50.43	22.33	46.66	15.62
Years of education	11.66	3.47	14.26	3.49
Rightist political orientation	4.94	3.01	6.78	2.86
Vote for a non-rightist party	.51	.50	.39	.49
Vote for Fratelli d'Italia	.15	.36	.15	.36
Vote for another right-wing party	.10	.31	.13	.34
Did not cast a valid vote	.22	.41	.33	.47

Note. When a dummy variable is concerned, the 'mean' is the proportion, on a 0-1 range, of the 1 category. In the ITANES dataset, sexism was measured using the following item:'Policies to increase the representation of women in politics have gone too far'. In the COCO dataset, it was measured using the following item: 'Under the guise of equality for women, men are actually being discriminated against'.

Table 3. Bivariate correlations between the study variables.

	1.	2	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Woman	-	-.07**	.01	-.00	-.05	-.01	-.05	.10**	-.06	.04
2. Sexism	-.27***	-	-.02	-.02	-.02	.30***	.10**	.16***	-.22***	.06
3. Woman*sexism	.01	.00	-	.01	-.04	.02	.01	.04	-.07	.04
4. Age	-.04	.03	.03	-	-.32***	.05	.11***	.01	-.01	-.09*
5. Years of education	-.08**	.04	-.06*	-.26***	-	-.16***	-.06	-.06	.17***	-.10**
6. Rightist political orientation	-.06	.26***	-.02	.00	-.05	-	.45***	.37***	-.58***	.00
7. Vote for a non-rightist party	-.07*	-.07*	-.00	-.01	-.20***	-.48***	-	-.15***	-.44***	-.23***
8. Vote for Fratelli d'Italia	-.05	.08**	.02	.13***	-.12***	.41***	-.15***	-	-.36***	-.19***
9. Vote for another right-wing party	.04	.03	-.04	.00	-.11***	.29***	-.14***	-.08***	-	-.55***
10. Did not cast a valid vote	.08*	-.02	.02	-.09**	-.18***	-.07	-.23***	-.13***	-.12***	-

Note. The parameters from the ITANES dataset are presented in the cells above the principal diagonal and those from the COCO dataset in the cells below it. In the ITANES dataset, sexism was measured using the following item:'Policies to increase the representation of women in politics have gone too far'. In the COCO dataset, it was measured using the following item: 'Under the guise of equality for women, men are actually being discriminated against'. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

Table 4. Vote prediction.

	ITANES (ITAlian National Election Studies) data set			COCO (COnsequences of COvid-19) data set		
	Vote for a non-rightist party *B* (*SE*)	Vote for Fratelli d'Italia *B* (*SE*)	Vote for another right-wing party *B* (*SE*)	Vote for a non-rightist party *B* (*SE*)	Vote for Fratelli d'Italia *B* (*SE*)	Vote for another right-wing party *B* (*SE*)
Constant	.02 (.76)	-7.62*** (1.90)	-6.04*** (1.29)	.60 (.82)	-7.31 (1.13)	-3.56*** (1.04)
Woman	.09 (.12)	-.27 (.17)	.35 (.19)	-.01 (.14)	.02 (.16)	.25 (.16)
Sexism 1	-.11 (.11)	-.15 (.15)	.06 (.15)			
Sexism 2				.07 (.16)	-.10 (.19)	-.10 (.19)
Woman*sexism 1	-.20 (.10)	-.11 (.14)	-.27 (.15)			
Woman*sexism 2				.06 (.15)	.20 (.18)	-.01 (.19)
Age	.02*** (.01)	.04*** (.01)	.02 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.03** (.01)	.01 (.01)
Years of education	.08 (.04)	.12* (.05)	.05 (.06)	.10* (.04)	.07 (.05)	.00 (.05)
Rightist political orientation	-.21*** (.05)	.70*** (.09)	.63*** (.09)	-.16** (.05)	.69*** (.08)	.51*** (.07)
Cox & Snell's pseudo R^2		.46			.40	
Nagelkerke's pseudo R^2		.51			.44	
McFadden's pseudo R^2		.27			.21	

Note. Sexism 1: 'Policies to increase the representation of women in politics have gone too far'. Sexism 2: 'Under the guise of equality for women, men are actually being discriminated against'. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

out adding their interaction. In the third, we added the interactions between gender and sexism on the one hand and political self-placing on the other. In the fourth, we added the interactions between gender and sexism on the one hand and political interest on the other. Finally, in the fifth, we added the interactions between gender and sexism on the one hand and age on the other. All the results we obtained (available upon request from the corresponding author) were essentially analogous to those we presented.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we analysed the role of voters' gender and sexism in Giorgia Meloni's success in the 2022 general election and proposed three reasonable alternative hypotheses. First, Meloni's gender could have been a disadvantage, as a female candidate led a right-leaning party, which is at odds with the relatively high gender traditionalism of right-leaning voters (Cassese & Barnes, 2019; Valentino *et al.*, 2018). However, Meloni's gender might also have been an advantage, as it may have led female voters to seize the opportunity to support a woman in a traditionally male-dominated field, consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978, 1981). Finally, Meloni's gender may have been irrelevant, because, although it was a highly innovative element in Italian politics, it was a truly secondary factor in voters' electoral decisions (e.g. Cassese & Barnes, 2019) or because the processes that led to Meloni's gender being an advantage or a disadvantage cancelled each other out.

Analyses conducted on two independent datasets confirmed the third prediction: when the role of the other main indicators of social disadvantage was partialled out, Meloni's gender was an irrelevant factor in the 2022 Italian general election. Voters' gender and gender beliefs were not directly or interactively associated with their voting decisions. As expected, the results could be due to a number of factors, not least the fact that gender and sexism were not salient aspects of campaign rhetoric, or to the intervention of some moderating factors related to the salience of voters' gender identity at the time of the election. Unfortunately, our data could not help reveal the mechanism that led to this irrelevance. Its analysis could be an interesting task for researchers who want to get to the bottom of the processes that led to the epochal results of the 2022 Italian general election.

Until the 1980s, politics in Western countries was characterised by a gender gap: Women voted more conservatively than men (e.g. Almond & Verba, 1989; Lipset, 1960). In Italy, this phenomenon persisted even longer than elsewhere and disappeared only in the 2006 general election, presumably as a result of the radical reduction of the relative disadvantage between men and women in terms of occupational status and education, as well as their differences in terms of religiosity (Corbetta & Cavazza, 2008). The 2022 general election was a very important opportunity to resurrect this divide, given the high probability of an electoral victory by a female candidate from the right. However, our results show that Meloni's gender did not trigger a resurgence of the gender gap, as women were no more likely than men to vote for her party than for the other parties. Does this result evidence the irreversibility of the end of the gender gap or is it an artefact due to the contingency of the 2022 Italian elections (a female candidate asking sexist voters to vote for her)? The answer to this question presupposes an election with a leftist female candidate prime minister who wants to be elected by non-sexist voters.

Regardless of the irrelevance of her gender in relation to the election, Meloni quickly sought to overshadow her success as a woman after winning the election, for example, by using male generic terms in reference to herself and typically wearing male-style suits. At first glance, this decision might be seen as detrimental, as people who do not behave accordingly to gender role expectations tend to worsen the impression others have of them (e.g. Courtemanche & Connor Green, 2020). In particular, female politicians seem to suffer the worst sanctions when they violate gender role expectations (Schneider *et al.*, 2022). However, it will be interesting to see if Meloni's style could, on the contrary, solidify her success, as a masculine leadership style, even when embodied by a woman, does not pose a threat to the *status quo* and thus could reassure her conservative constituency. In this sense, the 'leaders-not-ladies theory' (Brooks, 2013) suggests that women in politics are not seen primarily as members of their gender category, but as part of the category of politicians. A direct test of this idea might be interesting.

As is often the case, there were some limitations to this study, most notably the fact that standard items measuring sexism (e.g. Glick & Fiske, 1996) were not available in the datasets we used. New studies with more convincing sexism measures are needed to substantiate our findings. On a positive note, however, we obtained converging results from two independent data sets. This speaks to the robustness of the results. Despite the above limitation, thus, we believe that our results help shed light on how and under what conditions women's active participation in politics is accepted and encouraged by public opinion.

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This is not US: measuring polarization in multiparty systems. A quasi-replication study

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Abstract. In the last decade, affective polarization (AP) has become an increasingly salient topic in both public discourse and political science. Several different measurement instruments have been developed to empirically capture this phenomenon. With the rising interest that affective polarization is now also enjoying in Europe, it has become of the utmost importance to assess what these different measures capture, and to what extent their application travels to different contexts. In this study we test several AP measures on a student population with various European nationalities. We assess their overlap and effectiveness in mapping AP, to help future research working towards greater empirical clarity, and making informed choices on which kind of measures to include in questionnaires and data collections. The results indicate that, while different items usually produce different point estimates and sometimes different answer patterns, the measurement of affective polarization appears relatively indifferent to the choice of items.

Keywords: affective polarization, measurement, methodology, political behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

Affective polarization refers to "view[ing] opposing partisans negatively and copartisans positively" (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015, p. 691), or "hostility between rival political partisans" (Huddy & Yair, 2020, p. 1). The topic has attracted a lot of scholarly attention in the last ten years. Most of these studies are based in the United States, where affective polarization (hereafter AP) was first observed and studied. This great interest is likely due to the very detrimental potential consequences of AP for societal cohesion and democratic health (McCoy and Somer, 2019; Iyengar *et al.*, 2018; Mason, 2018b).

The idea of democracy is that different worldviews compete for citizens' consent, and peacefully alternate in response to that consent. But as Lipset (1959) noticed: "Inherent in all democratic systems is the constant threat that the group conflicts which are democracy's lifeblood may solidify to the point where they threaten to disintegrate society" (p.83). Some degree of elite polarization may be beneficial to offer voters clear cues activating the heuristics that lead to the decision to vote (also known as *sorting*) (Russo *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, high levels of AP in the public can increase political participation (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018; LeBas, 2018; Levendusky, 2010). However, as Mason (2018b) argues, the *reasons* to participate in politics matter, and high levels of mass AP might lead to increased intergroup animosity, hampering democratic processes by discouraging compromises, and even leading to an escalation of conflict. In sum, affective polarization can harm the basic principles of a well-functioning democracy (Iyengar *et al.*, 2019; Mason, 2018b; McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018), reaching the solidification of democracy's blood that Lipset (1959) feared.

The detrimental consequences of AP have already urged many scholars to try to capture this phenomenon empirically, and several measurement instruments have been developed in the last decade (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). AP is a broad concept, and so far, it has been operationalized in several ways. The attention to measurement instruments is thus critical for the development of the field. Druckman and Levendusky (2019) investigated how different measures relate to one another in the US. Their results show that the feeling thermometer, traits evaluation and trust measures are highly correlated, and that only social distance measures (that is, the willingness of interacting with other party's supporters on several levels) can be considered really different (for a more detailed review of the available operationalizations, see the section *Measurement of affective polarization* below). They also found that voters rate party elites more negatively than party supporters. In short, all three most used measures effectively capture affective polarization among Americans, and researchers can pick the most appropriate one in accordance with their research question(s).

As part of the rising scholarly attention to AP in Europe, some of these measures have also been employed in research in European contexts (e.g., Knudsen 2020 Harteveld, 2021; Harteveld, Mendoza, & Rooduijn, 2021; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021, Van Erkel & Turkenburg 2022). However, this raises the question of whether these measurements, which were developed and aimed to measure affective polarization in the US, work equally well in the culturally and institutionally diverse context of Europe. Our study aims to contribute to answering this question.

On the one hand, items that are applied to a different context still pick up on fundamentally similar mechanisms. A wealth of studies has convincingly shown that AP is ingrained in the fundamental human need to distinguish between in- and out-groups (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Mason, 2018b; Tajfel *et al.* 1971), and it could well be that these mechanisms are nearly universal. If so, items should travel easily to different contexts. However, prominent differences exist between the US and European settings, as well as between different European societies. Notions of (and even the very words) 'liking', 'trusting', feeling 'warm', or wanting to 'avoid' somebody are highly specific to cultural contexts. Considering that the social psychology literature recommends caution in making assumption about the functioning of attitudes across contexts (see Hogg & Smith, 2007), it is pivotal to empirically test whether this assumption holds. Recently, Gidron *et al.* (2022), following this very same argument, provided a validation for the party feeling thermometer in a multi-party system (Israel), and found that thermometer scores reflect sentiment towards party supporters, and demonstrated that they go hand-in-hand with preferences for social distance and discrimination in economic games. In this paper we follow the logic of Druckman and Levendusky (2019) and investigate how different operationalizations of AP (not only the feeling thermometer) operate vis-à-vis one another on a sample of European university students drawn from different nationalities. If items perform similarly across this sample, and similarly to the US context, it is reasonable to assume they have strong cross-cultural applicability.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section we offer an overview of the current AP measurement and operationalizations. Then, we briefly discuss why these measurement instruments might lead to different patterns in Europe. Finally, following Druckman and Levendusky (2019) we perform a test of how these measurements perform in respect to one another by testing them on a student sample. Our aim is to help future research making informed choices when deciding which measures of affective polarization to include in questionnaires.

MEASUREMENTS OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Measurements of AP range from measurements based on respondents' general attitudes or affect towards others to measurements assessing social distance or actual behaviour. Respondents are usually asked to rate their feelings or give their opinion on their political ingroup and outgroup, and afterwards the presence and size of a 'gap' in affect is scrutinized (Reiljan, 2020). In US-based research this generally concerns asking people how they feel about Republicans and Democrats (Iyengar *et al.*, 2012; Lelkes, 2016). In a European context, these questions are asked about all parties (Wagner, 2021) or a selection of (the largest) parties (see e.g., Westwood *et al.*, 2018).

Before moving to more concrete operationalizations, we point out that measurements have been employed to evaluate **objects** at different levels. Most commonly, such scales have measured affect towards abstract parties (such as 'The Democratic Party' or 'Alternative for Germany'; Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018; Mason, 2015), but they have also been used to measure affect towards leading politicians or candidates (Garrett *et al.*, 2014; Ondercin & Lizotte, 2020) whilst the comparative use of both thermometers at the same time is quite rare (Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). Although the use of items targeting elites or abstract actors is widespread, these measures have also been subject to criticism. For instance, Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan (2018) have shown that thermometers may (at least partially) lead researchers to misinterpret disdain for a specific party with what in fact is disdain for parties per se (anti-system voters). Relatedly, Kingzette (2021) conducted an experiment which shows how citizens tend, on average, to dislike the leaders of a party more strongly than its supporters. Druckman and Levendusky (2019) also find that it is important to exercise caution in phrasing the object of affective polarization. Their research shows that asking about 'Republicans' and 'Democrats' in the abstract makes people think about elites, rather than their fellow voters. It is therefore important to specify the object of polarization that is asked about, especially since the level of affective polarization can differ strongly dependent on whether questions refer to a party, a party elite, or voters of a party (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Duffy, Hewlet, McCrae, & Hall, 2019; Iyengar *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, in multiparty systems too, affective polarization is increasingly measured using items asking for evaluations of supporters of parties (Harteveld 2021; Kekkonan & Ylä-Anttila 2021; Van Erkel & Turkenburg 2022).

The most commonly used affect measures are the **'like-dislike'** scale and the '**feeling thermometer'** (Duffy *et al.*, 2019; Gidron, Adams, & Horne, 2018; Iyengar *et al.*, 2012; Reiljan, 2020; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Wagner, 2021). The former measure asks respondents to indicate their affect on a scale ranging from "dislike" to "like", and is for instance included in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) (Reiljan, 2020). The related feeling thermometer presents participants with a 0-to-100 point scale ranging from 'cold and negative' to 'warm and positive'. The American National Election Studies (ANES), which are often used by scholars studying AP in the US, have long since included a thermometer scale to measure partisan affect (Iyengar *et al.*, 2012). While this long timespan brings large benefits, thermometers have some weaknesses. Individual differences are likely to play a big role in interpreting feeling thermometers, with some people having a warmer "baseline" than others (Wilcox, Sigelman, & Cook, 1989). Lastly, the translation of the thermometer question from the US, where Fahrenheit is commonly used, to Europe, where Celsius is the more familiar temperature scale, potentially influences results, but this has, to our knowledge, not yet been scrutinized in research.

Other scholars have intended to arrive at a measure of affect by analyzing **trust** in (supporters of) different parties (Druckman *et al.*, 2018; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Duffy *et al.*, 2019). This generally entails asking respondents to indicate on a scale how much they trust others. A more elaborate way to measure trust-levels, which goes beyond the measure of general attitudes or affect, is the use of "trust-games". Trust-games assess the extent to which participants are willing to donate or risk money they would otherwise receive themselves to co-partisans, while simultaneously withholding money from opposing partisans (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Research from the US and the UK has found that stereotypes, trust ratings, and feeling thermometers are strongly correlated (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Duffy *et al.*, 2019). Although trust measures and trust-games are both interesting strategies, it is important to remark that they fundamentally different in at least two aspects. First, trust scale capture an attitude, whilst trust games capture a behaviour. As psychological literature has long established, although (imperfectly) connected these two levels are conceptually distinct (Chaiklin, 2011). A second important aspect is that indeed trust-games do not solely capture trust, but also cooperation and civility, and they are used to investigate how trust is affected by different factors, such as social norms, culture, and cognitive reflection (Gong & Liu, 2021).

Yet another approach has been to ask respondents which **traits** describe the different parties and/or party-supporters (Almond & Verba, 1963; J. N. Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Duffy *et al.*, 2019; Iyengar *et al.*, 2012). The traits respondents can choose from are both positive and negative and usually include attributes such as patriotic, closed-minded, intelligent, hypocritical, selfish, honest, open-minded, generous, and mean. Usually, scholars are not interested in the distinct content but rather the valence of these traits. An often-heard criticism to this measure is that it may be strongly biased by social desirability concerns. Respondents might hesitate to call someone selfish or unintelligent, which are quite harsh judgements. A noteworthy alternative to circumvent social desirability concerns is presented by scholars employing a version of the Implicit Association test (IAT) in addition to directly asking respondents to rate their feelings about others (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

As a very extreme form of negative feelings, polarization research has recently started examining how individuals **dehumanize** members of their out-groups as a phenomenon connected to AP. According to Kteily and colleagues (2015), individuals' dehumanization of others is a natural consequence of the distinction between in- and out-groups. As AP induces in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination, it facilitates aggressive attitudes, intentions and even behaviours (Moore-Berg, Hameiri, & Bruneau, 2020). Multiple researchers have found partisans from both ends of the political spectrum to dehumanize the other (Martherus *et al.*, 2019; Moore-Berg *et al.*, 2020). Despite this close association between dehumanization and affective polarization, Martherus *et al.* (2019) argue that dehumanization is conceptually and empirically distinct from AP – or at least from the first facet of AP, general attitudes. To investigate this unique concept, scholars have used different measures of dehumanization, the more blatant being Kteily *et al.*'s (2015) visual dehumanization scale, which asks people to grade the humanity of others on a visual "ascent of man" scale.

Another category of AP-measures looks at **social distance** between people. This is also referred to as *social polarization*, *behavioral intentions* or the *level of intimacy* (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Duffy *et al.*, 2019). Rather than measuring attitudes, behavioral measures aim to determine the degree of AP based on how comfortable individuals are with forming intimate social bonds with members of their own and other parties. Hence, AP is high when respondents avoid social contact with individuals on basis of their political – partisan – identity and low if this is not the case (Duffy *et al.*, 2019). Different commonly used scenarios include individuals forming friendships (Duffy *et al.*, 2019; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016), discussing politics (Duffy *et al.*, 2019; European Election Studies, n.d.), or having a son or daughter marrying someone from a certain party (Almond & Verba, 1963; Duffy *et al.*, 2019; Iyengar *et al.*, 2012). Klar *et al.* (2018) argue that the social distance measure conflates a dislike for out-party members with a dislike for partisanship, and show that oftentimes people simply seem to want to avoid talking about politics in general, regardless of political color of the conversation partner. Prior research also shows that, in the United States, indicators of general attitudes, like thermometer scales, have only a weak relationship with measures of social distance (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Duffy *et al.*, 2019), implying that, possibly, these measures capture different concepts.

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION MEASUREMENTS IN CONTEXT

There are several reasons for which applying AP measures developed in the US context in European multiparty systems should not be considered as a completely unproblematic operation. The first one is methodological: respondents might express more gradual evaluations in contexts with more than two parties, which might lead to more divergence in item responses. The second reason, linked to the previous one, pertains to the fact that voters in a multiparty system are faced with not only multiple choices, but with different scenarios linked to these different choices (e.g., regarding coalition formation). In the US, elections are a zero-sum game. This is also demonstrated by the fact that those who do not like Democrats, are likely to be Republicans and vice versa, as in the US, 85-90% of voters feel close to or identify with one of these two parties (Petrocik, 2009).

But what about a multiparty system? There, even liking a party (to a certain extent) cannot be interpreted as being a steady supporter of that party. In contrast to the US, voters can easily switch from one party to another without necessarily crossing an ideological divide and might dislike a party for strategic reasons or based on some current coalition arrangement. This prominent difference between the US and European countries also shapes a different social context, in several respects. First, in a multiparty system the relationships among voters, party supporters and sympathizers are more nuanced and can be influenced by a variety of factors not only at the individual, but also at the systemic level (e.g., coalitions, signals among parties; Horne *et al.*, 2022). Second, in each country, there are different divides across which the preferences can be aligned: the traditional ideological left-right one, but also linguistic, territorial, cultural divides (see also Westwood *et al.*, 2017). And, as Hogg and Smith (2007) remark, the social context is a very important factor in shaping attitudes and identities because "group-defining attitudes are more likely to be reflected in behaviours when people identify strongly with a group" (p.120). Third, research has observed that in multi-party systems there are a number of other less stable and long-standing factors that can affect the relationship between voters and parties, such as issue preferences (Bartle & Bellucci, 2009), leader evaluations (Garzia, 2013) and past voting behavior itself (Thomassen, 1976; Thomassen & Rosema, 2009). For all the reasons discussed, it seems clear that strong identification with a (social) group linked to a party is way more likely to happen in the US rather than in a European multiparty system.

In sum, we have reason to think that affective polarization could be influenced by the social and institutional context. With the rising scholarly interest that AP is currently enjoying in Europe, it becomes relevant to understand how AP measures perform one vis-à-vis the other in this quite different social and institutional setting. Our study sets out to test exactly that.

METHOD

Rationale

Research suggests that, when a construct is still unknown and not directly observable (as is the case for AP in Europe), the best strategy is to develop a multi-item instrument (see e.g., Fayers & Hand, 2002). However, this comes at the expenses of the length of the questionnaire, which is also a pivotal aspect. In order to understand whether, as Druckman & Levendusky (2019) found in US, some measures are comparable for European-based repondents as well, we developed a questionnaire including many of the aforementioned measures: (1) the feeling **thermometer** (Iyengar *et al.*, 2012)**;** (2) **like-dislike scores** (Wagner, 2021)**;** (3) **trust** (4) **dehumanization**; and (5) different levels of **social distance** (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016).

Of course, including all these different operationalizations in the same study might create convergence in the answers, if only out of a consistency motivation. This means that we might overestimate similarities between answers. However, it is important to note that respondents filled out an entire battery (consisting of up to 9 parties, dependent on country) for one particular outcome variable before moving on to the next, which was presented on a new screen. This means that it would require quite some cognitive strain to remember all the exact answers provided on a previous screen.

Data collection

This survey was employed in a convenience sample of international students from nine different European nationalities at Maastricht University (UM) in the Netherlands in December 2020 and January 2021. According to the QS World University Ranking 2019, the student population of UM (about 18,000 students) is the 8th most international in Europe, with more than 50% of the students coming from other countries – a feature that serves particularly well in this case, as national background is a key element. Despite the obvious limitations due to the population composition (truncated demographics and high education), we consider the Maastricht University setting to be a suitable environment to test the functioning of several questions (e.g., the ones related to parties in each country) and to highlight potential pitfalls and country differences, both methodologically and substantially. The European nationalities most-represented in the student population of UM are Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and the United Kingdom. Therefore, respondents were only eligible for participation in the survey if they had one of these nationalities, as well as eligibility to vote in the country of nationality.

In our survey, of the 423 respondents who started, 327 completed 100% of the survey. 15 respondents were dropped because they did not fit nationality demands, were not eligible to vote, or did not pass the attention check question. This leaves us with a total of 312 respondents (115 male; 193 female; 5 non-binary) with a mean age of 22 years old (18 min; 43 max). 70.93% of respondents reported to be BA students, 25.56% were MA students, and 3.51% is following another type of education (e.g., just finished a degree, or doing a premaster). The distribution of the different nationalities is presented in Table 1.

Student samples started being widely used in explorative research in the 60s. The use of non-representative student samples has often been criticized especially because of their lack of generalizability potential (Benz & Meier, 2008; Brewer & Gros, 2010, p. 167; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Sears, 1986). Especially Sears (1986) expressed concerns with regard to differences between students and

Table 1. Percentage of respondents per nationality.

Nationality	% Respondents
Belgium	8.63
[Flemish]	[5.81]
[Walloon]	[2.45]
Germany	32.91
Greece	5.11
Italy	12.46
The Netherlands	21.73
Poland	6.71
Spain	2.56
France	7.67
The UK	2.24

non-students. However, recent research by Krupnikov *et al.* (2021) found that "much of the empirical research on the use of convenience samples suggests that the results obtained using these samples often replicate the results obtained with probability samples" (p. 179). All in all, as Cappella and Jamieson (1997) pointed out, the problem boils down to the fact that "students are different in education, ideology, political knowledge, experience and age from the voting public or the population as a whole" (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). However, if for some characteristics such as age and political sophistication, the student sample cannot estimate an effect comparable to the general population, for others it is a viable choice. Aarøe (2011) conducted an experiment on a student sample of Danish university students and found the sample to be representative compared to the broad public with regards to important characteristics such as political interest, predispositions, and voting behaviour (Aarøe, 2011). Representativeness aside, note that our interest lies not in producing point estimates of some quantity in the population (say, the percentage of Belgians being affectively polarized), but rather in correlations between items. These are likely less impacted by the composition of the sample. Finally, using a student sample comes with two main advantages. First, we could assume a high level of education and administer a quite long and detailed survey with overall minor concerns about respondents' ability to focus for a long span of time (the questionnaire took about 30 minutes). Second, administrating such a long questionnaire in several countries would have been extremely expensive, which is additionally challenging given that the final objective was of a methodological nature. Although coming with the downside of not allowing very specific intra-country analyses due to the small number of respondents, the fact that several nationalities are represented in this data collection limits the risk that the results are country-specific.

Measurements

Affective polarization

Regarding the object of polarization, all AP questions were asked about party *supporters*. In addition, items were repeated for the prominent politicians of these parties in the case of the like dislike, trust, and the feeling thermometer batteries. A particular partisan group (supporters and prominent politicians) was included in the survey if they were represented in a country's national parliament at the time this survey was fielded. Moreover, for countries with a large number of parties in the national parliament, a (large) selection of the biggest and most extreme parties was included. For these decisions, experts on the different countries were consulted. The maximum number of parties included for one country in the survey is nine, which is the case for both Spain and the Netherlands. An overview over the parties selected for each country is attached in Appendix A.

To measure affective polarization, we included different ways of asking respondents about their general attitudes and feelings. First, respondents were asked to use a 0-10 scale to respectively indicate their degree of **dislike** (0) or **like** (10) towards both voters and leading politicians. Measuring like-dislike for both voters and elites can give researchers insights into whether there is a difference between the so so-called vertical and horizontal dimensions of affective polarization, were the first one pertains to polarization towards the elites, and the second to the one towards fellow citizens (see Harteveld, 2021). However, as we found a high correlation (0.835) between the two measures (as many before us – see for instance Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Harteveld 2021), we decided to focus on the horizontal dimension of affective polarization, which is the one originally conceived by Iyengar and Westwood (2015) ("view[ing] opposing partisans negatively and copartisans positively" – p. 691) and Huddy and Yair (2020) ("hostility between rival political partisans" – p. 1).[1] We then continued to ask them about their **trust** (0, or not at all, to 10, completely) towards both types of objects. Evaluating trust in political actors, such as politicians or government institutions, can shed light on how perceptions of trustworthiness influence voting decisions. High levels of trust may lead to increased support, while distrust can result in opposition. Subsequently, respondents filled out a **thermometer scale** (0 cold-100 warm) for those groups. This provides a quantitative measure of emotional responses, which can be used to understand how emotional affinity or hostility affects voting choices. To measure **dehumanization**, we used Kteily *et al.*'s (2015) measure of dehumanization and asked respondents to place the voters of the different parties in their country on a scale using the "ascent of man" picture (see Appendix B). Understanding the extent of dehumanization can reveal the impact of negative campaigning on voter attitudes and behavior. If voters perceive opponents as less than human, it can lead to more hostile and divisive political environments. To assess **social distance**, we included questions on how comfortable or uncomfortable respondents would be in different social relationships with voters of certain parties (0-10 scale). Social distance questions give us a direct indication of the so-called horizontal polarization in a given context.

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[1] For examples of studies focusing on affective evaluation of leaders see Barisione (2017) and Bordignon (2020).

All these measures, especially when compared from context to context can help us understanding the extent to which countries encounter similar dynamics. Questions were asked about relations with different degrees of closeness, namely having a romantic relationship; being close friends; being loose acquaintances; having a close friend being in a romantic relationship with someone. In contrast to the like-dislike, trust and thermometer questions, the dehumanization question and the social distance question were not asked for political leaders, only for party supporters. This decision was based partly on the practical concern of an overly lengthy survey, and partly on the fact that social scenarios involving leading politicians may not be very realistic.

Some prominent measures were not included in our questionnaire, among which party feeling thermometer scale and a traits battery. The main reason for these exclusions was practical. The questionnaire was already very long compared to current recommendations for online surveys, and both these questions require a substantial amount of additional time to be answered. Furthermore, both these measures were found to be highly correlated with the voters feeling thermometer (Iyengar *et al.*, 2012; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Gidron *et al.*, 2022). Finally, aggregate measures based on traits are multi-item measures that are not so easily compared with our other scales.

Connected concepts

To map respondents' political identity, **partisanship** was measured by asking respondents what party they feel closest and what party they feel most distant to. (Almond & Verba, 1963; Iyengar *et al.*, 2012; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). Three questions were asked to measure respondents' **political interest**. We asked respondents how interested they are in politics, how closely they follow what goes on in government and politics, and how often they discuss politics and current affairs with others (ESS, 2018).

Procedure

The survey was administered in Qualtrics and disseminated through student Facebook-groups and in-class promotion. Participation was voluntary.. Participation was incentivized: at the end of the survey participants could leave their email address to partake in a lottery in which one gift voucher of 100 euros and four gift vouchers of 50 euros were allotted and were thanked for their participation. Until twenty years ago there was a quite broad consensus about the fact that lottery incentives did not significantly impact survey participation (Church, 1993; Singer, Hoewyk, & Maher, 2000; Warriner *et al.*, 1996). However, it has since been shown by using web-based surveys with student samples that lottery incentives increase both participation and completion rate (Bosnjak & Tuten, 2003, p. 215; Cobanoglu & Cobanoglu, 2003, p. 485; Laguilles, Williams, & Saunders, 2011, p. 549; Porter & Whitcomb, 2003, p. 403). For instance, Porter and Whitcomb (2003) found that the amount of the incentive decreases after a certain. They experimented with different amount of money ranging from $50 to $200, and found that the marginal effect of participating decreased substantively after $50.

Firstly, respondents read a short introduction and were asked for their informed consent. In the introduction, we asked respondents to act as a political expert on their country of origin and informed that they would only be eligible for participation in the survey if they hold citizenship in Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, or the United Kingdom. They were furthermore warned that the survey could be repetitive and asked to still answer each question carefully. We informed the students that the survey was a long one, as previous literature found that it is important to make respondents aware of the duration in advance in order to minimize dropping (Galesic & Bosnjak, 2009; Hansen, 2007).

After the intro, respondents answered filtering questions on their nationality and eligibility to vote. Eligible respondents answered AP-questions on general attitudes, social distance, and dehumanization. After this, respondents saw an attention check for which they had to move the slider in the question all the way to the right. Next, respondents answered the different questions on partisan identity and political interest and lastly some questions on socio-demographic characteristics.

Analysis

In order to properly investigate and contrast the different AP measures in the different countries, the dataset was reshaped and stacked, to arrive at a triadic data structure. This means that for each respondent, the dataset contains as many observations as there are parties in their country times five (the amount of AP measures used). Hence, there is an AP score for every respondent-party-measure combination. For a respondent from France, for instance, the dataset would contain 35 observations, as seven parties are included for France and five AP measures are used. The advantage of this setup is that is allows to predict answer patterns by features of the respondent, measure, and party simultaneously.

The thermometer and dehumanization scores were recoded to a 0-10 scale, to match the other measurements, and, to prevent respondents from simply repeating their answers, scales were occasionally reversed so that higher scores indicate more negative evaluations.

Our analysis proceeds as follows. First, we aim to establish whether answer patterns differ systematically between measures, countries, and targets. We do so through a descriptive analysis (step 1) and a formal test in a multivariate model (step 2). After doing so, we proceed to assess if the items reflect a single construct or multiple constructs. For this, we use explanatory and confirmatory factor analyses (step 3) and predict the different subsets that come out of it (step 4).

RESULTS

Different measures, different answers?

Step 1: Descriptives

Before moving to our main analyses, Figure 1 below presents the mean scores for all measures, for three types of parties: the party the respondent indicated they feel closest to (the partisan question); the one they feel furthest from; and all others ('not closest, not furthest'). Figure 2, in addition, shows the distribution of scores on the different measures for respondents' most and least liked group of other voters. As noted, all variables were rescaled to 0 to 10, with higher scores indicating more negative evaluations.

Clearly, all measures pick up on a difference in evaluation between the respondents' closest and furthest (as well as all other) parties. Note that these differences are very substantial: up to 8 points on the 11-point scale. Importantly, the items 'liking', 'trusting', or 'having warm feelings towards' a political outgroup all yield quite similar scores. This suggests that the actual wording of the scale extremities is not crucial, as long as they refer to some form of affective evaluation. By contrast, the social distance scores differ in their point estimates from the first three items as well as between themselves: envisaging a romantic engagement with an outgroup member yields similar average scores as the first three measures, whereas imagining a close acquaintance from the outgroup does not trigger such a negative response. While this is not surprising, given that the different items are developed to reflect different levels of intimacy and hence to differentiate 'easier' from 'harder' items, it is still important to note that some yield a nominal

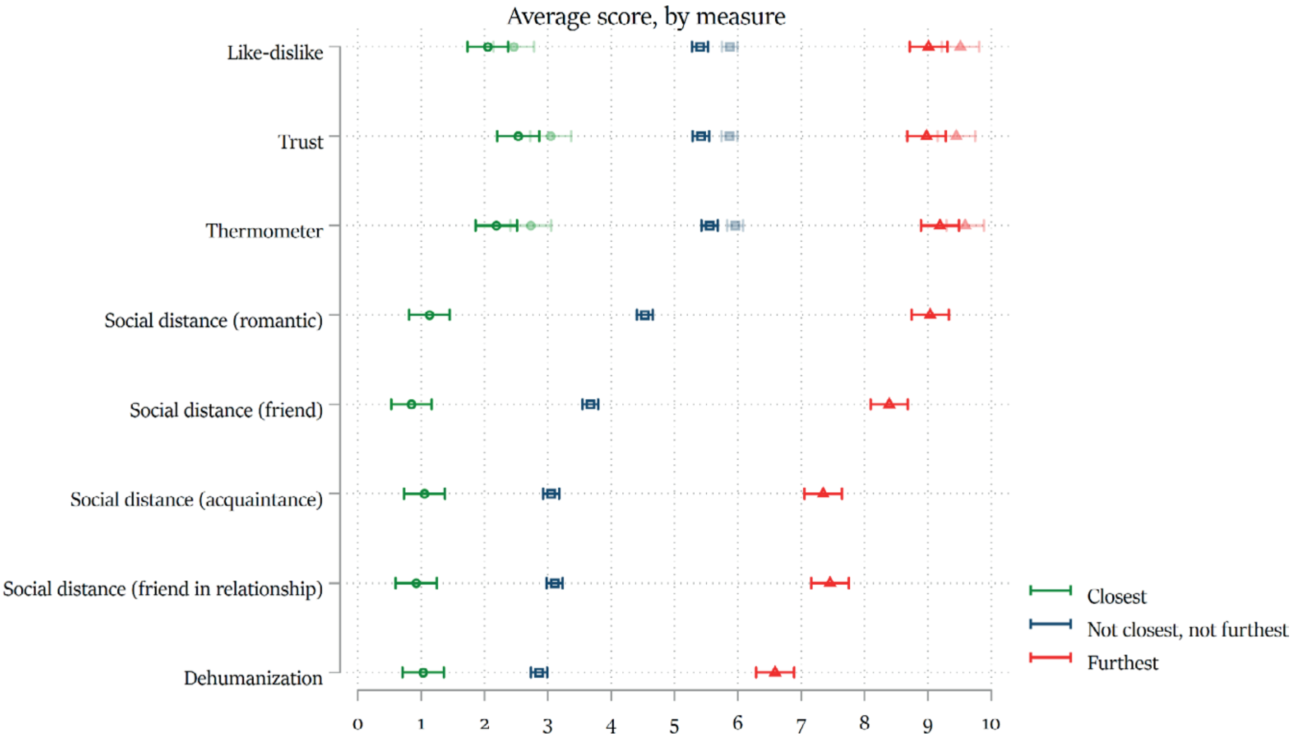

Figure 1. Average scores of the different measures. Note: higher scores denote more negative evaluations; all items rescaled 0-10; faint markers denote evaluations of politicians. With 95% confidence intervals.

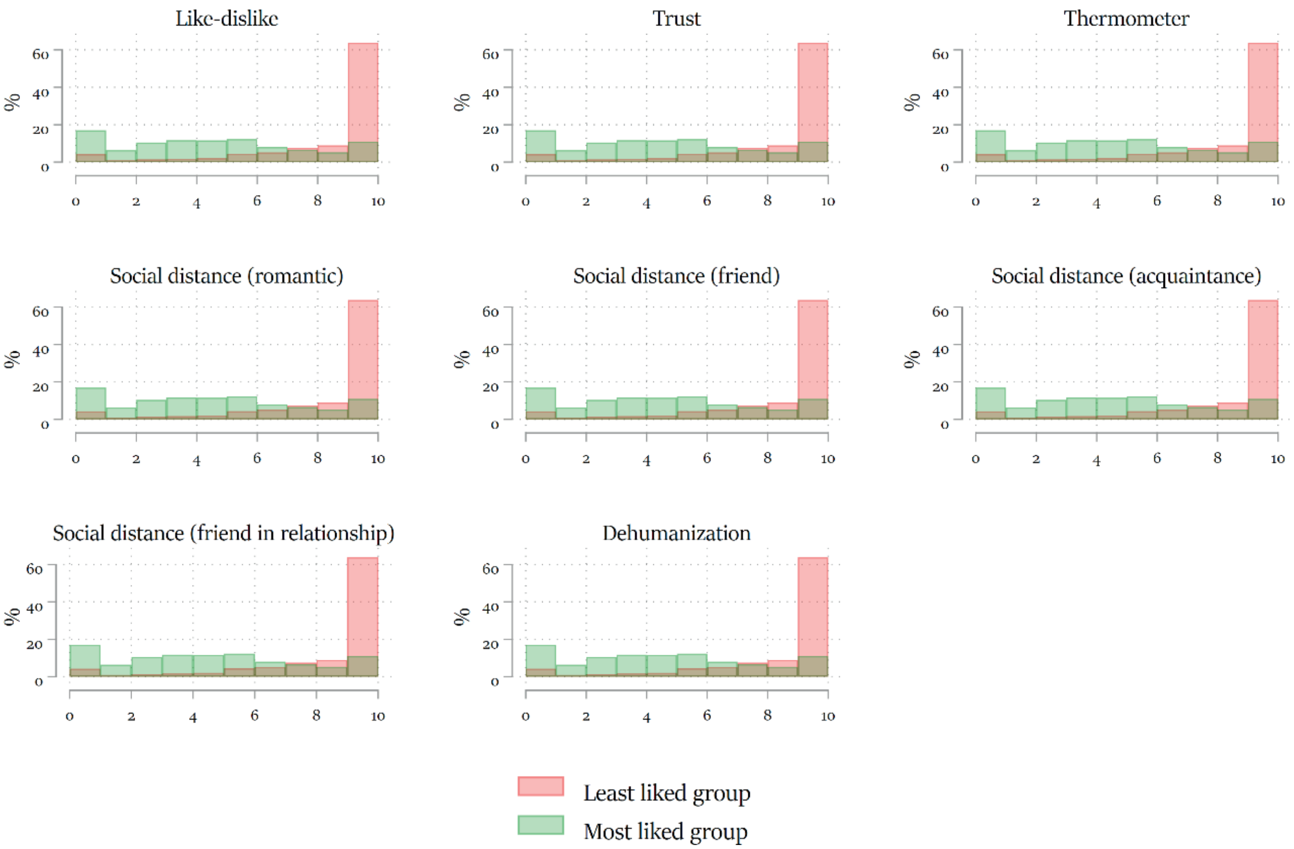

Figure 2. Distribution of scores for the different measures. Note: all items rescaled 0-10; based on scores toward voter groups.

distribution similar to the affective scales and some to the dehumanization measures. We can also notice that for the three attitudinal measures (like-dislike, trust scale, and thermometer), the scores stay consistently higher. They start to decrease with the behaviour measures (social distance), and in function of the distance the respondent has with the social object (in this case a person). They then further drop with another attitudinal question (dehumanization), but a very extreme one.

Although respondents from different country contexts provide different mean scores, in general, the patterns between the items are similar. In other words, all items deliver the same impression of the level of affective polarization in a context, and there is no clear evidence that some items yield very context-specific answers. For an overview of the average scores on the different measures by country, see Appendix C.

Step 2: Modelling the answers

To put the patterns suggested by Figures 1 and 2 to a formal test, Figure 3 below presents a regression model predicting respondents' score in the triadic data by characteristics of the measure, party, and individual. Put differently, we regress the variable containing all AP scores a respondent has given (for all parties and all measures) on the different types of measures, the different countries, the targets and the relation to the party. Again, these analyses confirm that asking a 'like-dislike', trust, or thermometer scale yields no significant difference. Social distance questions generally produce evaluations that are up to 2 points more positive. The scores handed out by respondents socialized in different political systems also differ markedly, with Greek respondents showing most negativity and Walloon respondents least. Items targeting politicians rather than voters get somewhat more negative scores too, but only to a limited extent.

One construct or many?

Step 3: Factor analysis

The similarities in some of the answer patterns – especially between like, trust, and thermometers, as well as between some of the social distance items – beg the question whether the various measures tap into the same

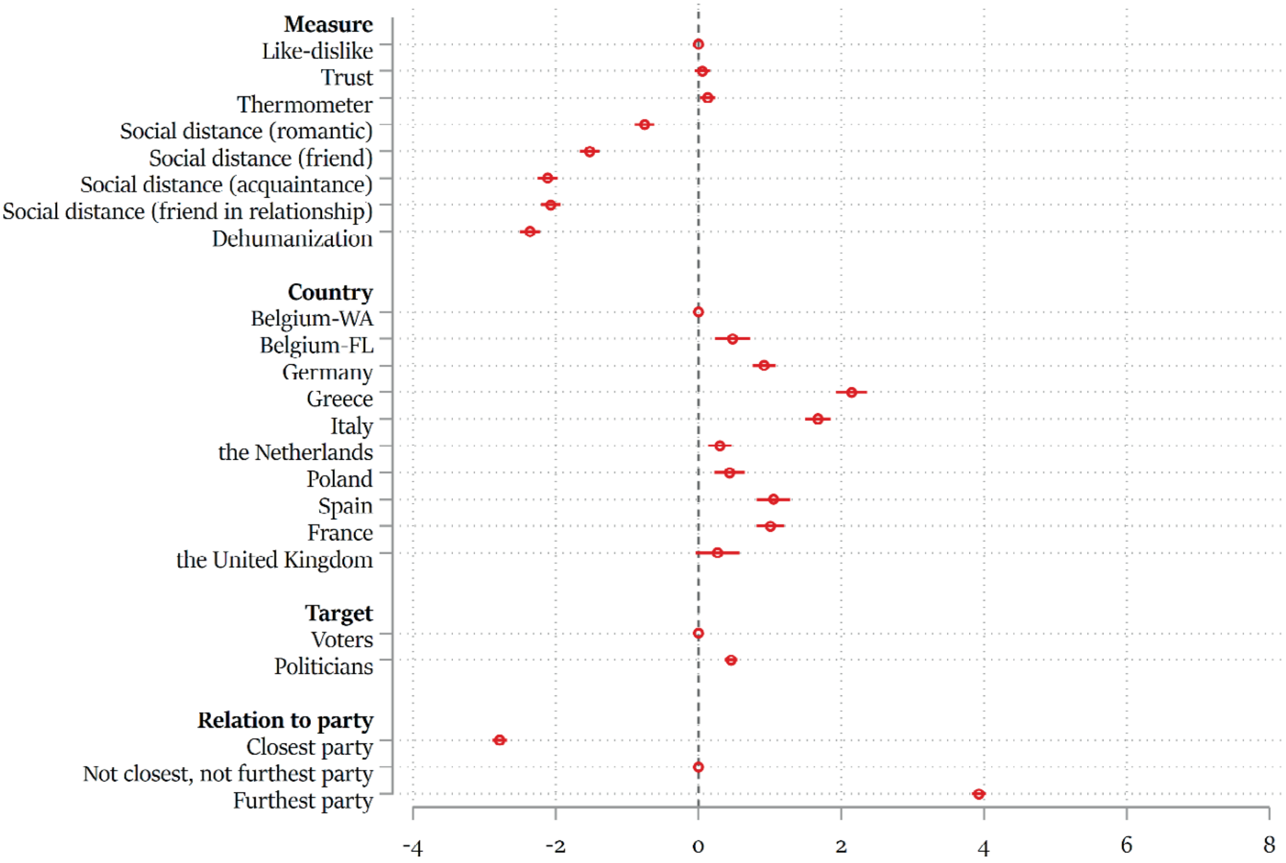

Figure 3. AP scores predicted by measure, country, target, relation to party. Note: Coefficients with 95% confidence bars. Reference categories are the open circles on the 0-line without confidence bars. Higher scores denote more negative evaluations.

construct or separate ones. This section therefore contains the result of an explanatory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Because the party under evaluation will often matter more than the measure used, we restricted this factor analysis to the party the respondent feels furthest from.

An EFA of the eight different measures shows a strong Eigenvalue of over 4 for the first factor, and an Eigenvalue of 0.79 for the second. An investigation of the two-factor structure (Table 2) suggests that *like*, *trust*, and *therm* share a factor with the other items (with strong loadings except for dehumanization), and, in addition, a weak of their own (which is not shared by the others). Still, Table 2 strongly suggests that all items tap into a shared underlying factor to a very substantial degree.

To obtain a formal test, we proceeded by estimating different CFA models in turn, reported in Table 3. In the first model, all items were modelled to follow from a single latent construct. This model does not fit the data very well compared to the usual cut-off points of 0.05 for good and 0.08 for acceptable fit. An investigation of modification indices (Mis) suggests that the most important sources of misfit are strong residual correlations between *like-dislike*, *trust*, and *thermometer*. In a second model, we loaded those on a separate construct. This improves the model fit but still not to a satisfactory degree. The MIs suggest one source of misfit is residual correlation between the items *social distance romantic* and *social distance friend*, as well as *social distance acquaintance* and *social distance friend in a relationship* (the two more distant relations). Providing these with separate constructs leaves us with dehumanization, which as a single item cannot be loaded on its own latent construct. We therefore leave it out of the model third model. At RMSEA=0.086 this one starts to reach an acceptable fit. The remaining MIs suggest that *trust* also loads on the dimension of the ‘intimate social distance’. However, for theoretical reasons (the separation of affective responses and social distance intentions) we consider that it is most fruitful to think of the eight items to span four different but highly correlated clusters: *affective scales* (like, trust, and thermometer), *intimate social distance* (*romantic* and *friend*), *non-intimate social distance* (*acquaintance* and *friend in a relationship*), and *dehumanization*.

Table 2. Explanatory factor analyses.

Variable	Factor 1	Factor 2	Uniqueness	Variance
Like/dislike	0,75	0,34	0,33	0,67
Trust	0,56	0,48	0,46	0,54
Thermometer	0,72	0,38	0,34	0,66
Social distance (romantic)	0,77	-0,15	0,39	0,61
Social distance (friend)	0,82	-0,30	0,25	0,75
Social distance (acquaintance)	0,84	-0,23	0,25	0,75
Social distance (friend in relationship)	0,78	-0,36	0,26	0,74
Dehumanization	0,49	0,06	0,76	0,24

Table 3. Confirmatory factor analysis.

Model	Description	RMSEA
1	All eight items load on one latent construct	0.222
2	Separate latent constructs for (1) *like*, *trust* and *therm* and (2) all others	0.128
3	Separate latent constructs for (1) *like, trust and therm*, (2) *social distance romantic* and *friend*; (3) *acquaintance* and *friend in relationship*. Drop *dehuman*	0.086

How do these various (sets of) indicators relate to each other? Table 4 shows that there is a very strong correlation (0.88) between the two types of social distance latent constructs, and a moderately strong one between the social distance latent constructs and the affective scales (0.62-0.64). The observed item of dehumanization correlates only weakly (<0.47) with either of those. In short, although differences exist between the two suggested social distance constructs, for practical purposes it is reasonable to collapse them and to distinguish between the categories of affective scales, social distance, and dehumanization.

Step 4: Who differentiates?

The analysis above suggests that a distinction can be made between three categories of items, but at the same time shows correlations between those categories to be strong – to the point that the EFA does not pick up on their differences. Still, it might be that this differentiation appears weaker because not all respondents make the distinction between measures and between targets (voters vs politicians). In particular, it is likely that politically interested individuals do so more clearly. If this were to be the case, then it might still pay off to use multiple items to study the subgroup of the politically interested.

To test this expectation, we interacted the different measures, as well as in the case of the affective scales the different targets with political interest in the triadic dataset. This test shows that among the politically interested the answer patterns for the dehumanization item differ significantly from the affective scales, compared to respondents scoring lower on political interest. No interaction was found between political interest and the target. Figure 4 visualizes these models. It shows clear main effects: the more politically interested, the more negative respondents are, in line with the literature. Furthermore, affective scales and politicians evoke more negative scores than the other measures and voters. However, the dehumanization items do not depend on political interest as much as the others. As a consequence, politically interested voters make stronger distinctions between affective measures and social distance on the one hand and dehumanization on the other. However, the interaction is not very substantive, and given that most scholars' interested will lie with less extreme forms of political outgroup bias, we conclude that answer patterns are relatively similar regardless of political sophistication.

CONCLUSIONS

The literature on affective polarization is thriving, and important strides have been made to conceptualize and operationalize this concept. Affective polarization measures are valuable tools for comparative research into the determinants of voting behavior. They provide a deeper understanding of the emotional and attitudinal aspects of politics, helping researchers navigate the com-

Table 4. Correlation coefficients between the three latent scales and dehumanization item.

	Affective scales (like, trust, thermometer)	Intimate social distance	Non-intimate social distance	Dehumanization
Affective scales (like, trust, thermometer)	1.00			
Intimate social distance	0.64	1.00		
Non-intimate social distance	0.62	0.88	1.00	
Dehumanization	0.44	0.39	0.47	1.00

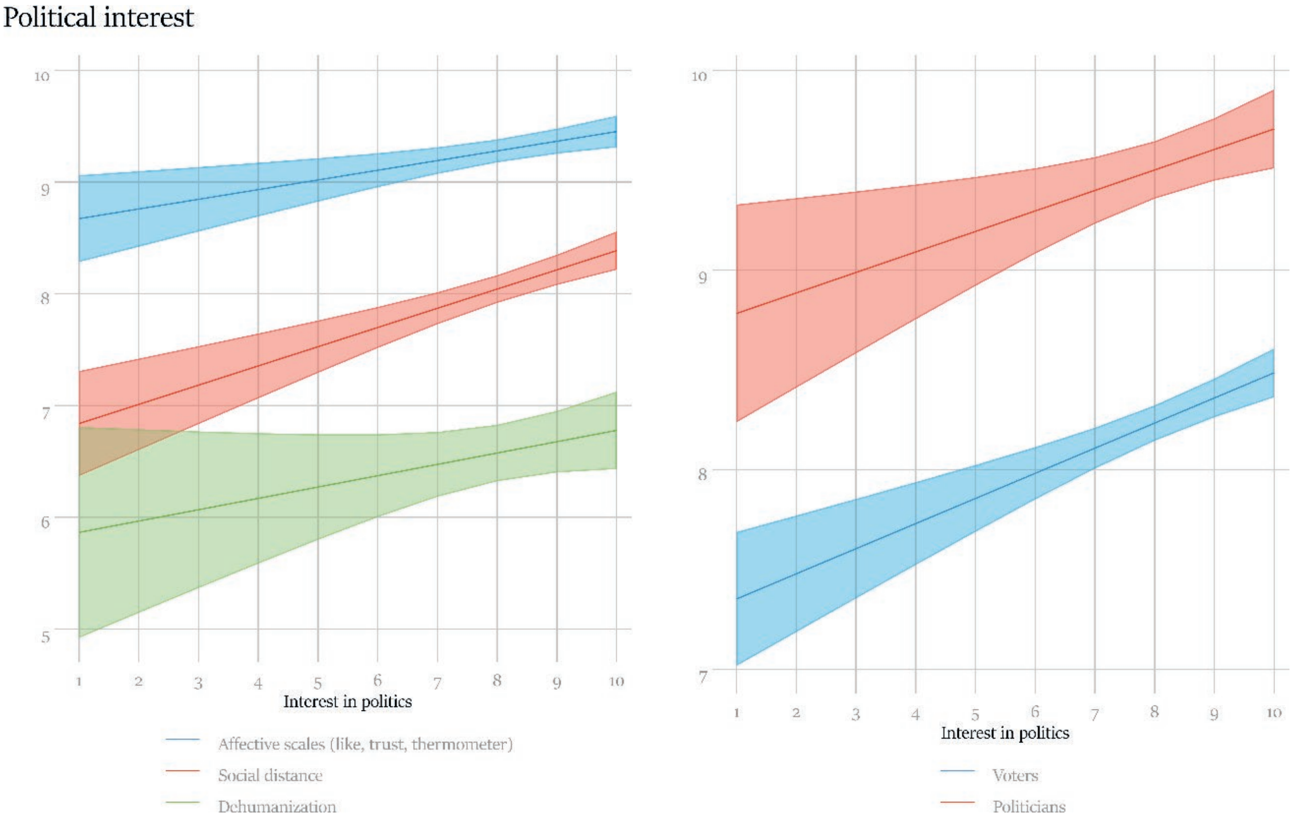

Figure 4. Interaction with political interest.

plexities of electoral dynamics and political behavior in various contexts. However, deciding which operationalization to employ among the several that are available. The aim of our paper is to understand how all these measures relate to one another. The choice of which operationalization to employ needs to be informed by theoretical choices, the research question, and the overall design of the research. Yet, with an increasing number of new original data collections, having some indication of these constructs performed in comparison to one another becomes pivotal in making an informed choice.

In this paper we have used a sample spanning students with nine different European national backgrounds to investigate whether different types of measures reflect different concepts or whether they are simply different variations of the same measurement. In a seminal contribution, Druckman and Levendusky (2019) conducted a similar test on an US-based sample. However, the differences in the setting and dynamics between the US and European countries – including the diverging role of political identities, the more gradual evaluations that are possible in multiparty contexts, and different meanings attributed to the words and behaviours mentioned in item wordings – call for an empirical test. Our aim is to contribute to the understanding of affective polarization and its measurement by assessing how citizens socialized in different multiparty contexts interpret and use these different types of measurements. Our analysis allows for the formulation of a number of conclusions.

First, all types of items produce strong differences between respondents' 'in-party' and 'out-party', up to 8 points on the 11-point scale. In a way, any item involving an evaluation of the out-party will produce highly differentiated answers that differ much more between parties than between items. In other words, studies aiming to capture affective polarization with a broad brush might be relatively free to use any of the instruments suggested in the literature.

Second, it is striking that – for all practical purposes – respondents did not differentiate in their '[dis]like', '[dis]trust' or 'warm [cold] feelings' towards political outgroups. This is noteworthy because these operationalizations stem from different traditions in the study of political behavior and are often argued to capture different phenomena – for instance, thermometers being more 'affective' than 'dislike'. Of course, the design of the study (which involves within-person comparisons of batteries) is likely to create a convergence of answers.

Still, it is noteworthy that respondents did provide quite dissimilar answers on some of the other scales. Hence, it seems justified to conclude that items that involve some affective evaluation of outgroups (with positively and negatively valanced terms on the extreme) will produce very similar point estimates.

Third, the various social distance items produced different point estimates (as expected, depending on intimacy). They also produce slightly different response patterns, but, for practical purposes, can be usefully combined into a single indicator, which in turn correlates moderately strongly (around .63) with the affective scales. This is in line with previous literature, which tends to move towards approaching social distance as different from, although related to, affective polarization proper (Klar *et al.*, 2018). Dehumanization stands out as a very different phenomenon, correlating only weakly with the others, and having somewhat different predictors.

Fourth, also in line with previous literature (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019), politicians receive lower sympathy than voters. Using items based on abstract entities or even explicitly mentioning politicians will therefore yield higher observed levels of affective polarization than items describing average voters. Still, the correlates of both types appear roughly similar, which suggests items about politicians can be used with some caveats to study the antecedents of affective polarization as a horizontal phenomenon.

Fifth, we found little reason to worry that the items operate very differently across different contexts. Admittedly, our student sample is not representative and still relatively homogeneous in terms of political socialization. Still, it is telling that, while we found strong differences in mean scores – students with a Greek nationality providing scores that are more than 2 points more negative than the least polarized group, the Belgians – we found little evidence that response patterns to individual items differed between countries.

All in all, these results bears good news to the existing and future practice of operationalizing affective polarization. The choice of scale appears less influential than might be expected given the relevant differences between the US and Europe as well as between European national contexts. This is especially true when using items that contain a negatively and positively valanced endpoint of the scale. This suggests that scholars studying affective polarization in multiparty systems can rely on a single battery (one item for reach party), which strongly reduces the survey space needed to measure this concept in fragmented political landscapes. Still, from a theoretical point of view, there seem to be several reasons suggesting to employ the largely used like-dislike scale only when other, more precise and definite operationalizations do not fit the purpose of the research. As discussed, in multiparty systems, the reasons and the implications of (dis)liking a party are broader than in a two-party system, making inferences about negative affect less clearcut. Future research could explore how the measurements under study operate in diverse contexts by assessing what citizens have in mind when evaluating political outgroups (Druckman *et al.*, 2022).

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Do parties adjust their policy proposals to the political context? A study of election promises during the 2022 Italian general election

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Abstract. This paper investigates towards which policy issues Italian political parties oriented their commitments in the run-up to the 2022 parliamentary election. Do parties make more promises in salient domains? Or, do they prioritise those issues in which they enjoy ownership? To answer these questions, we created a novel dataset that contains 3,992 election pledges made by Italian political parties in the 2022 electoral campaign. By looking at the programmatic policies included in the campaign manifestos of the main political parties and coalitions during the last general election, we find that Italian parties seem to compete around the same issues. In particular, in 2022 a large share of election promises was devoted to economic and social matters. Although the Ukrainian war, the resulting energy crisis, and the implementation of EU-funded investments were the backdrop to the 2022 electoral campaign, Italian political parties do not seem to prioritise these issues.

Keywords: election promises, 2022 Italian election, policy issues, issue salience, parties.

The strategic emphasis placed by political parties on specific policy domains constitutes a pivotal aspect of party competition. Political actors can direct their attention to political issues on which they are deemed competent (Petrocik, 1996), or they can intercept citizens' demands on issues perceived salient by the electorate (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Klüver &Spoon, 2014). Whether party competition is interpreted as a top-down process or conceived according to a bottom-up perspective, the political science literature has extensively explored the importance attributed by political parties to key policy issues (Green-Pedersen, 2007) alongside their attempt to prioritise the implementation of those policies on which they were most engaged during an electoral campaign (Bevan et al, 2011; Hobolt & Klemmemsen, 2005).

In this article, we explore the emphasis attributed by Italian political parties to specific policy issues through the analysis of parties' election commitments contained in their programmatic manifestos before the 2022 general election. Differently from issue salience studies which usually employ Manifesto Project data – and therefore look at the whole text of party programs (Wagner & Meyer, 2014; Abou-Chadi et al, 2020; Spoon & Klüver, 2015; Green-Pedersen, 2007) – or parliamentary speeches (Hobolt & Klemmemsen, 2005), the focus of this paper is on election promises. Talking about something and making concrete promises on a specific issue are two different things and, as such, require a different commitment and effort from parties. When a party, for instance, discusses an issue at length in its campaign manifesto, parliament, or the media, this does not automatically mean that the party takes some sort of commitment to act or even just prioritise that specific policy domain in its governing agenda. It might just address the existence of a problem and explain the state of the art of the legislation as well as passing judgements on previous actions or competitors' positions. Campaign programs, for instance, do not merely include policy proposals, but also 'lots of rhetoric' (Harmel, 2018, p.235). Whereas, when a party pledges to adopt a specific measure or attain a certain goal, it takes a concrete commitment that it is then expected to keep if elected. While it is harder to hold partisan actors accountable for what they talk about during the electoral campaign, there is a direct and immediate link between promising and acting in the chain of representation. As the Downsian model of representative democracies and Mansbridge's (2003) promissory representation theory suggest, parties are elected on the basis of their policy proposals, among other things (Artés, 2011; Naurin et al, 2019). Voters, in turn, will assess the work of the incumbents at the polls according to their ability to fulfil their mandate (Matthieß, 2020). As a result, formulating a new promise does not come cheap: Differently from merely addressing one new topic, making an additional pledge means that the party should truly commit to enacting it (or at least trying to). In this light, this paper captures the actual commitments that Italian parties make in the run-up to the 2022 election and the policy issues in which they engage themselves. Accordingly, we manually selected all manifesto statements that correspond to a campaign promise. The resulting sample includes 3,992 pledges within the campaign programs of the main six political parties and two pre-electoral coalitions competing in the 2022 Italian general election.

This study contributes to the literature on party competition and party responsiveness. By examining parties' electoral commitments, we show that political conflict and parties' mutual interactions are structured around the same policy domains, with parties' engagements devoted mainly to economic-related issues. Furthermore, we provide empirical evidence of the limited role played by the political context that formed the backdrop to the 2022 election in influencing the distribution of parties' electoral pledges on the most salient issues. The COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of EU-funded investments in the ecological transition, the war in Ukraine and the resulting energy crisis, did not lead to an increase in parties' commitment towards environmental issues and to a more marked engagement in the energy and defence sectors. At the same time, examining the congruence between voters' priorities and the share of promises made in different policy sectors, we show that the election promises included in the 2022 parties' manifestos only partially respond to the electorate's concerns.

The analysis of electoral promises contributes to better clarifying parties' electoral dynamics in several aspects. First, it allows us to grasp the differences between political actors with regard to their ideological positioning on specific issues. By proposing divergent solutions to the same problem, political actors signal not only the degree of importance attributed to that specific issue but also their ideological placement (Green-Pedersen, 2007). Second, the analysis of election promises allows for predictions about what a political party will do once in power. The selective salience attributed by political actors to certain issues affects the content of governing agreements and the decision-making process of coalition partners (Harmel, 2018). Finally, the analysis of electoral promises can serve as a proxy for assessing the degree of accountability of political parties. A political party that does not keep its electoral promises can be punished by voters who can use this information to evaluate its performance (Matthieß, 2020).

PLEDGE MAKING IN THE LITERATURE

To tackle the question of which election pledges parties make, it is essential to first understand why political parties decide to make these promises. Aside from electoral purposes, campaign promises fulfil various functions in representative democracies (Håkansson & Naurin, 2016; Naurin et al, 2019). First of all, they are instruments through which parties can convey their position on different issues to the electorate. A party is expected to promise to achieve a certain goal or adopt a specific measure in line with its ideological stance (Naurin et al, 2019). As the promises contained in election manifestos mirror parties' policy preferences, citizens are presented with a clearer choice on election day. They are made aware of what different candidates commit to doing if elected, their priorities, and aims. At the same time, looking at pledge fulfilment rates, the electorate can assess and, hence, evaluate governments' past performances and their ability to deliver on their electorate mandate (Matthieß, 2020). Election promises are also important for intra-party dynamics, as manifestos are often the outcome of compromises and concessions between party factions (Harmel, 2018), and for coalition building. In those countries in which governments are formed by two or more political forces, as is the case in Italy, promises can be either the result of bargaining between partners of a pre-electoral coalition sharing a common platform (Moury & Timmermans, 2008) or 'a basis for negotiation' for prospective alliances (Håkansson & Naurin, 2016). Political parties are, thus, driven not only by policy but also vote and office-seeking motivations when formulating their policy proposals (Naurin et al, 2019).

Existing studies on pledges are mainly concerned with political parties' capacities to carry out their electoral commitments (Artés, 2011; Naurin et al, 2019). Very few studies examine which promises parties actually make. In the volume edited by Naurin, Royed, and Thomson (2019) about pledge fulfilment in twelve countries, a whole chapter is devoted to the topic. They suggest that parties make different types of promises depending on their position in the previous legislature (in government or opposition) and their party family: Incumbents, for instance, are found to take more commitments to preserve the existing situation ('status quo' promises) compared to opposition parties (Naurin et al, 2019). Similarly, in his analysis of pledge fulfilment in Spain, Artès (2011) shows that the socialist party (PSOE)'s manifestos included a higher percentage of expansionary promises while the Popular Party prioritised more restrictive measures. While these studies provide evidence that parties 'make substantively important pledges' (Naurin et al, 2019, p.294), they fail to systematically explore the issue areas of the promised policies. They do sometimes indicate the policy domains in which the highest amount of election promises are made[1], without, however, providing explanations or investigating this aspect more in-depth. As the aim of this paper is to explore the issues of the election promises in the 2022 Italian general election and, more specifically, whether parties adapt their policy proposals to the context in which the electoral campaign takes place, we complement pledge literature with insights provided by party and issue competition studies.

WHICH POLICY ISSUES DO PARTIES PRIORITISE?

Existing literature has long recognised that party competition results from a combination of two main strategies (Green-Pedersen, 2007; see also Abou-Chadi et al, 2020). On the one hand, parties compete by taking different stances on the same issues (positional competition). According to this approach, parties promote the adoption of policy measures that are somehow different to the ones advertised in their competitors' election programs in the same policy domain (Abou-Chadi et al, 2020). On the other hand, the so-called issue competition literature underlines that parties' agendas also differ in the emphasis given to different policy domains (Dolezal et al, 2014; Green-Pedersen, 2007). Regardless of their policy preferences, some politicians might discuss more questions related to social benefits or social and civil rights, while others might centre their interest around immigration and security matters. A third approach to party and electoral competition prefigures an alternative mechanism for conceiving the interactions between parties and voters. According to the theory of valence politics, candidates compete by claiming possession of reputational resources that allow the attainment of those policy goals that are largely advocated by the electorate, i.e. *valence issues* (Stokes, 1992).

In this study, we build on issue competition literature for one main reason: It is easier to observe a change in the emphasis attributed to a variety of policy domains in manifestos presented in two subsequent elections rather than a shift in party position. It is true that even avoiding a salient issue could harm the party's image (Sides, 2007). Nevertheless, shifts in policy positions are electorally riskier as they are usually frowned upon by the party base (Tavits, 2007).

There are several reasons behind parties' choice to focus on one issue instead of another and, hence, to make more promises in a specific policy domain. First of all, political parties are expected to pay more attention to currently salient problems. Clearly, party manifestos have to refer to the issues, concerns, and challenges that are salient at the time of the election for citizens (Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016) and receive quite intense media coverage (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010). In other words, parties should *ride the wave* of public interest. As the theories of party responsiveness have long underlined, parties' programmatic agenda should reflect social problems and their constituencies' concerns (see the theoretical discussion in Spoon & Klüver, 2015). This argument is based on the assumption that voters would sanction those politicians that they perceive as distant and indifferent (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Sides, 2007).

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[1] See, for instance, some country chapters in Naurin *et al.* (2019), Artés' paper on Spain (Artés, 2011), or the study on pledge fulfilment in the United States and Britain (Royed, 1996).

As a result, parties' campaign proposals should provide policy responses to the issues deemed as the most relevant by the electorate and the new challenges that arise.

Parties' choices do not, however, occur in a vacuum. One party alone cannot establish around which issues the electoral competition is played. Instead, partisan actors have to also respond to the matters raised by their competitors. As the concept of party-system agenda developed by Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) well summarises, when a party increasingly discusses a certain topic, it forces all other parties to take a stand on it as well.[2] An issue can therefore become salient when an external event or even another party in the system bring it to the forefront of the governing agenda. Following this reasoning, the election promises made by different parties for the same electoral campaign are expected to deal with a similar range of issues.

Furthermore, all parties should make more commitments in the policy domains on which they enjoy ownership and are capable of credibly claiming competence (Petrocik, 1996). Parties compete by strategically manoeuvring the emphasis attributed to specific policy domains for which they ought reputational advantages in the eyes of the electorate. In this perspective, partisan actors are likely to dwell on the policy issues they own in their speeches, their agenda, and their manifestos (Petrocik, 1996). Concerning this last point, drawing on Manifesto Project data on 17 countries, Wagner and Meyer (2014) show that election programs are largely focused on the issues the party owns. Dolezal *et al.* (2014), employing another dataset (the AUTNES), come to the same conclusion in the case of Austria. As issue ownership is obtained, among other things, by past government performance – what Petrocik calls 'the record of the incumbent' (Petrocik, 1996, p.827) – making promises in those sectors can make parties gain more credibility and, hence, support.

Nevertheless, this approach is not necessarily a mutually exclusive framework for the analysis of party competition. With its reference to the reputational component of the party/candidate, the idea of issue ownership indirectly relates to valence politics. A recently developed theoretical framework that incorporates position and valence within the same paradigm is the issue yield theory (De Sio & Weber, 2014). According to this approach, political parties should emphasise those policy domains with a high yield. In other words, they should prioritise the issues that offer the opportunity to expand electoral consensus beyond the party's constituency whilst minimising the risk of eroding existing support. For this to happen, these policy domains must be shared by both the party's voter base and the electorate at large and must be those on which the party is perceived as most credible. Several studies have investigated parties' strategies and issue opportunities in recent European country-specific elections relying on the issue yield theory (see inter alia Franzmann et al, 2020; Plescia et al, 2020). These scholarly contributions highlight that in recent national elections, political parties – rather than prioritising ideological coherence – have been tailoring their campaign agendas and, thus, their electoral commitments to focus on those issues that have proven to be electorally rewarding, based on the aforementioned risk opportunity assessment (De Sio & Weber, 2020).

In addition to riding-the-wave and issue ownership arguments, parties are more inclined to highlight a specific issue if the issue is divisive (*positional issues*; Spoon & Klüver, 2015; Green-Pedersen, 2007). As the positional competition argument maintains, one of the easiest ways in which parties differentiate themselves in the electoral campaign is by taking different stances on the same issues. This strategy is of course only successful when the electorate is polarised around the issue under consideration or, at least, when there is not a broad consensus among voters. In a comparative long-term analysis of nine European countries, Spoon and Klüver (2015) distinctly show that parties' manifestos are increasingly focused on immigration and European integration in those periods when voters' preferences on those issues are more conflictual.

THE XVIII LEGISLATURE: FROM MULTIPLE-SYSTEMIC CRISES TO ELECTION

The XVIII legislature in Italy (2018-2022) was marked by an unstable and complex political climate that saw three highly heterogeneous coalition governments alternate in office (see Chiaramonte, 2023; Garzia, 2022). The results of the parliamentary elections held on March 4, 2018, did not produce a clear winner, with no political party or pre-electoral coalition obtaining a majority of seats in both houses of parliament.

The Five Star Movement (M5S) secured the highest percentage of vote share, garnering almost 33% of votes in the Chamber of Deputies. Among the centre-right allied parties, the League (L) emerged as the winner of the elections. After three months of negotiations, the Five Star Movement and the League agreed to form a government led by Giuseppe Conte. The government program was characterised by a strong focus on social issues, with measures aimed at introducing unemployment benefits and reforming the pension system, but also included stricter measures to counter irregular immigration.

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[2] We are talking here about the main parties that compete in the political arena. The situation might be different when it comes to parties' responses to issues raised by niche parties (see Meguid, 2008).

The coalition agreement between the Five Star Movement and the League was nevertheless short-lived. In September 2019, Matteo Salvini tried to bring down the government with a motion of no confidence against the Prime Minister. Salvini's attempt to call for an early election, however, foundered as a coalition agreement between the M5S and the left-wing Democratic Party (PD) allowed for the formation of a new government, led again by Giuseppe Conte. The Conte II government had to face the health and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which harshly hit the country in the spring of 2020. The government adopted a series of measures to contain the spread of the virus, including a national lockdown and safety protocols in all economic sectors. Moreover, the Conte II government initiated the definition of an EU-funded plan (the National Recovery and Resilience Plan – PNRR), which includes investments in infrastructure, digitalisation, and ecological transition.

In 2021, one of the governing parties, Italia Viva (IV), under the leadership of former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, withdrew its support for the executive. The crisis occurred because of divergences in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's economic policies in response to the crisis. After consultations with the leaders of political parties, the President of the Republic appointed Mario Draghi as the new Prime Minister. The Draghi government, in office since February 2021, continued to manage the health crisis and its severe repercussions on GDP growth and unemployment rate. The government had to also face the consequences of the crisis sparked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The growth of energy costs and the debate on sending weapons to Ukraine characterised the last months of the government and exacerbated tensions among coalition partners. In particular, the M5S expressed growing criticism of the deployment of arms and the economic measures aimed at sustaining the economy and the Italian companies grappling with the ongoing energy crisis. After losing the support of the M5S, followed by the decision of the League and Go Italy (FI) to exit the governing coalition, Mario Draghi resigned, and the President of the Republic called for early elections in September 2022.

In the aftermath of the early dissolution of the XVIII legislature, the electoral context assumed a four-pole configuration (Garzia, 2022). Brothers of Italy (FdI), emerging as the favoured party in the pre-electoral polls, formed a coalition with two of the main partners of the Draghi government, the League and Go Italy. On the left camp, the three key players who challenged the centre-right coalition were the Democratic Party, united with More Europe (+E), the Greens and Left Alliance (AVS), the Five Star Movement, and the coalition formed by Action and Italy Alive (A-IV).

EXPECTATIONS

As discussed in the theoretical section, existing literature suggests that political parties should orient their emphasis towards those issues that hold greater salience. The premature end of the Draghi government and the resulting electoral campaign took place in a political context in which energy, defence, and environmental issues dominated the public debate. In the analysis conducted in this study, we formulate our expectations by focusing primarily on these policy domains to further explore the potential link between the political context and electoral promises. Rising gas prices resulting from the energy crisis, the allocation of resources designated by the PNRR for ecological transition investments, and the war in Ukraine represented an opportunity for these dimensions to acquire renewed attention. These issues also became a top priority for voters, who expect parties to position themselves and propose solutions to these current problems. In their study of the evolution of pledge-making, Håkansson and Naurin (2016) show that parties are increasingly making a large number of promises on the issues that voters deem as the most important. Pre-electoral individual data from the 2022 CISE/ICPP survey (data presented in Improta et al, 2022) portray that the key priorities for the Italian electorate in 2022 concern valence issues. For example, 92% of respondents support the need to guarantee adequate energy costs, 90% support the fight against unemployment, whilst 82% consider the need to reduce global warming a top priority. At the same time, some questions about the environment, the management of the energy crisis, and foreign policy are highly divisive, providing the opportunity for political parties to differentiate their political offering from their competitors. In fact, on these issues, voters' concerns are expressed through support for alternative policy goals. On the environment, voters are divided on the trade-off between environmental protection and economic growth, whilst, in foreign policy, the electorate is divided on the economic sanctions against Russia and the provision of arms. Based on these premises, our main expectation is:

> *Proposition 1*: In 2022, Italian political parties devoted a high share of promises towards issues related to the environment, defence, and energy sectors.

Nevertheless, other factors can help us explain why parties decide to prioritise one issue instead of others. Firstly, being in government or opposition might affect political parties' electoral engagement (Schumacher et al, 2015). We, therefore, posit that the inter-party dynamics that characterized the XVIII legislature will also be reflected in the policy areas towards which Italian political parties oriented their commitments.

We first look at the main opposition party during the Draghi government, Brothers of Italy. Throughout the entire mandate, FdI sharply criticised the government's action, especially regarding the economic measures adopted to deal with rising gas prices, and has repeatedly called for a redefinition of EU-funded PNRR. FdI's members were indeed no strangers to harsh statements directed at the previous government both in Parliament and in the media and at its 'failures' and 'inability' to solve the current main problems for citizens, as the ones struggling with paying utility bills. It is therefore reasonable to expect FdI to continue to highlight alternative policy solutions and focus its campaign promises on the energy sector. At the same time, during the electoral campaign, FdI's leader Giorgia Meloni, favoured at the polls, tried to depict herself as a viable governing candidate by, among other things, underlying her Atlanticism and support for the Ukrainian resistance. It follows that:

> *Proposition 2*: We expect Brothers of Italy to emphasise energy and defence-related promises in its electoral program.

Turning now to the parties that supported the Draghi government, we expect different trends depending on the party.

Until the end of the legislature, the Democratic Party has consistently showcased unwavering backing for the cabinet's priorities and agenda. The party solidly stood in support of Ukraine and was in favour of the measures taken by the Draghi government to deal with the adverse effects of the energy crisis. It can be therefore anticipated that the Democratic Party would opt for a programmatic agenda in line with these measures. However, policy proposals in continuity with Draghi's energetic policies could be electorally risky. As the Draghi government's measures did not effectively solve all existing problems, resulting in citizens still grappling with the negative repercussions of the energy crisis during the electoral campaign, we might expect the PD to downplay these issues in its program to avoid being held accountable for this negative performance (see Schumacher et al, 2015). At the same time, from its privileged position as an opposition party, FdI managed to successfully make energy-related issues its own, making it harder for the PD to defend its stances. Our third expectation is:

> *Proposition 3*: We expect the Democratic Party to emphasise energy promises less while committing to a high extent to the defence sector.

All other three main parties supporting the Draghi government (M5S, L, FI) have adopted a critical attitude towards some of the policies implemented during his mandate. The Draghi cabinet faced significant criticism from the Five Star Movement primarily due to its handling of the energy crisis, its decision to send weapons to Ukraine, and the (perceived) lack of environmental policies, which was the first step that led to the government's resignation and early election (Garzia, 2022). The M5S should consequently emphasise its alternative policy proposals during the electoral campaign. At the same time, as Conte tried to position his party within the new multipolar configuration (Garzia, 2022), M5S is expected to highlight its pacifist and environmental stances in order to differentiate itself from the PD-led centre-left bloc. It follows that:

> *Proposition 4*: We expect the Five Star Movement to devote a large number of promises to the environment, energy, and defence.

The League and Go Italy faced electoral setbacks due to their involvement in the grand-coalition government, with their voter base shifting towards FdI (Chiaramonte, 2023), eventually leading them to exit the governing coalition. In light of the various criticisms directed at Draghi's agenda and at its powerlessness to prevent energy costs from escalating, they should not propose policy measures in line with the previous cabinet. At the same time, they are expected to not pay too much attention to alternative energy policy proposals for two reasons. They may, firstly, decide to minimise their commitment towards energy-related matters to avoid appearing less credible as being former members of the government. Secondly, being part of the centre-right electoral coalition, they need to differentiate themselves from the partners in order to increase their vote share and, thus, their relevance in the alliance. While FdI is expected to focus more on energy issues, L and FI should emphasise other policy domains, such as reforms to the tax system or control over immigration. Concerning defence-related matters, both L and FI had a pro-Russia and, more importantly, a pro-Putin history, hard to forget and even harder to reconcile with the need to take a clear stand on the Russian-Ukrainian war. We propose that:

Proposition 5: We expect the League and Go Italy to emphasise less defence and energy promises.

Finally, considerations on issue ownership lead us to expect single-issue parties to campaign mostly on their key policy area. In particular, we expect:

Proposition 6: The Green and Left Alliance to have the highest share of electoral pledges related to environmental issues.

DATA

For this paper, we collected data on campaign promises included by Italian parties and coalitions in their election programs and, more specifically, the topics touched on by these promises. Differently from other studies that look at speeches (Hobolt & Klemmemsen, 2005), press releases (Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016; Meyer & Wagner, 2016) or party manifestos (Wagner & Meyer, 2014; Abou-Chadi et al, 2020; Spoon & Klüver, 2015; Green-Pedersen, 2007), we aim to explore the issues (and their shifts) in which parties concretely engaged themselves in front of their rank-and-file voters and the general public during the last election. Accordingly, we argue that, in addition to exploring what partisan actors talk about and discuss in any election campaign, it is also important to consider the actual policies they promote and the policy domains to which they commit themselves.

Politicians can convey their promises to the electorate through different platforms, from public rallies and interviews to campaign speeches and political debates. In this analysis, we focus on the promises written down in the policy programs presented during the electoral campaign. While the policy proposals put forward in oral declarations could also be the result of a spur-of-the-moment reply to a comment or an attack, or the expression of a personal preference of a single politician, election programs are programmatic documents whose drafting process usually involves a discussion between the different party officials, parliamentary actors, core supporters, experts, and interest groups (Dolezal et al, 2012; Harmel, 2018). Manifestos and the election pledges contained in them can be therefore argued to be the expression of the official party line and its policy preferences.

To identify all the election pledges contained in the campaign manifestos, we manually select all the statements that correspond to a pledge. To this end, we employed Royed's (1996) definition, which is the one commonly used by the pledge literature: A promise is thus 'a commitment to carry out some action or produce some outcome, where an objective estimation can be made as to whether or not the action was indeed taken or the outcome produced' (Royed, 1996, p. 79). To be considered as a 'pledge' a sentence (or a paragraph) should (1) refer to a policy measure the party wants to adopt or a goal to attain, and (2) its fulfilment should be testable (see Naurin et al, 2019). The majority of the promises selected are introduced by expressions such as 'we want to', 'we plan to', 'we need to', and 'we will adopt', or contain terms like 'we will achieve' or 'our goal is'. The final version of the dataset leaves out also several international policy proposals. Indeed, the fulfilment of promises such as '[we will promote] a European common army'[3] is not due to governments' willingness, the presence of financial and political resources, nor a favourable institutional context. Several additional factors play a major role in the international and European context. The success (or the failure) of these proposals cannot be directly ascribed (or blamed) to the Italian government. Additional information on the data collection process can be found in the Appendix.

Overall, for the 2022 election, in this study, we analyse 3,992 pledges included in the campaign programs of the eight main competing parties and/or coalitions (Table 1). As Action and Italy Alive decided to run in the election together and to promote a joint agenda, the coalition manifesto is the only document analysed for both parties. Similarly, the Greens and the Italian Left both rallied around the program presented by their pre-electoral coalition. Since the aim of this analysis is to also observe differences in issue engagements between parties, for all other political forces, we look at the election programs of individual parties even when an electoral alliance was formed. Brothers of Italy, Go Italy, and the League, for instance, deposited a shared program for their centre-right coalition[4], but here we only focus on the manifestos written by each coalition partner.

Election promises were then grouped depending on the type of policy issue they refer to. Categories were created on the basis of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) codebook for Italy. Differently from the Manifesto Project, whose primary goal is to assess parties' ideological preferences, the coding rationale behind the CAP is to identify the actual content of the sentences. Each promise was classified according to the policy dimension addressed, not the instrument or its goal. In this way, these categories capture the issues of the proposals promised by the different parties/coalitions during the election campaigns. Examples are provided in

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[3] Promise included in the FI's manifesto.

[4] Parties competing in the general elections have to send to the Minister of the Interior their policy programme (https://dait.interno.gov.it/elezioni/trasparenza)

Table 1. The number of promises included in each election manifesto by party for the 2022 general election in Italy.

Party/Coalition	Acronym	Number of Promises
Green and Left Alliance	AVS	461
Democratic Party	PD	434
More Europe	+E	368
Five Star Movement	M5S	163
Action-Italy Alive	A-IV	540
Go Italy	FI	352
League	L	1120
Brothers of Italy	FdI	554
	Total	3992

the appendix. The original 21 categories of the CAP have been recoded into 17 policy issues (Appendix 1).

RESULTS

Policy issues of the promises in the 2022 election campaign

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of promises made by the eight parties and coalitions analysed grouped by policy issue. The horizontal line indicates the average percentage for each policy domain.

By looking at pledges, the most salient issue in the 2022 Italian general election was by far the economy, with little less than 20% of the total number of election engagements dealing with the country's economy, the labour market, the tax system, the public budget, the commerce, the industrial and business sector. Among all parties, M5S, PD, and FdI had respectively the highest percentage of economic promises, with up to a quarter of the overall policies and goals promised related to the economic and financial sector. While the proportion of Go Italy's and A-IV's economic promises hovered around the average, the League and More Europe focused less than their main competitors on this policy issue. The Greens-Left Alliance addressed the economic sector only with 12.2% of its total number of campaign promises.

The second policy domain in which Italian parties engaged themselves during the electoral campaign of August-September 2022 is related to social, health, and welfare issues. Overall, 14.0% of the total promises analysed were included in this category. In this case, excluding the Five Star Movement, the percentage of social promises differs less according to the party or the coalition than economic promises: Italian parties seem to all pay a similar level of attention to social issues. It is particularly noteworthy that the lowest percentage of social promises (9.8%) is found for the M5S since Conte had run his electoral campaign focusing on fighting inequalities, preserving the *Reddito di Cittadinanza* (citizenship income), and implementing other social measures. However, while promises related to these questions were included in the M5S's electoral program, the party devoted a lot of space also to other issues, such as security, agriculture, transportation, and education matters.

Issues related to the justice system, security, and civil and penal code (see the category Law and Order) had an average percentage of 10.5 points, which makes them the third most-discussed topic within the 2022 campaign. Looking at Figure 1, there is a marked difference between parties and within parties on the same side of the political spectrum. Specifically, being usually classified as a more right-wing issue, we would have expected right-leaning parties to commit to law and security policies measures and aims more than left-leaning ones. However, this only applies to the League, and, to a lesser extent, Go Italy. While the League had the highest percentage of law-and-order promises made (14.1%), the second largest percentage corresponded to +E (13.0%). The level of pledges in the FdI's manifesto fell considerably short of the average (8.5%), a rate similar to the M5S's one (8.6%). It is particularly noteworthy that the main right-wing candidate in the 2022 election (Meloni's FdI) did not prioritise these types of issues in its program, but rather favour other matters such as the economy, social issues, education, government and administrative concerns.

Following the riding-the-wave approach, our expectation is that, since the election was held right in the middle of an energy crisis and that the political debate was dominated by rising energy costs, proposals for dealing with the crisis and becoming independent from the Russian gas, and the inevitable criticisms towards past government actions (Chiaramonte et al, 2023; Improta et al, 2022), parties should have increased the emphasis on those promises as well. Instead, only 6.5% of the total number of pledges pertained to energetic issues. The topic was particularly salient for the League and AVS, whose percentages of 9.6% and 8.7%, respectively, exceed by far the average rate. The percentage of energy promises by FI was at the average level (6.3%), but for FdI and, especially, M5S and PD it remained far below (4.9%, 3.7%, and 2.5% respectively). Differently from our expectations, FdI had a very low share of energy promises (Proposition 2) and FI and L made significantly more promises in this sector than we anticipated (Proposition 5). The low attention to these promises by PD is, on the contrary, consistent with our assumption (Proposition 3).

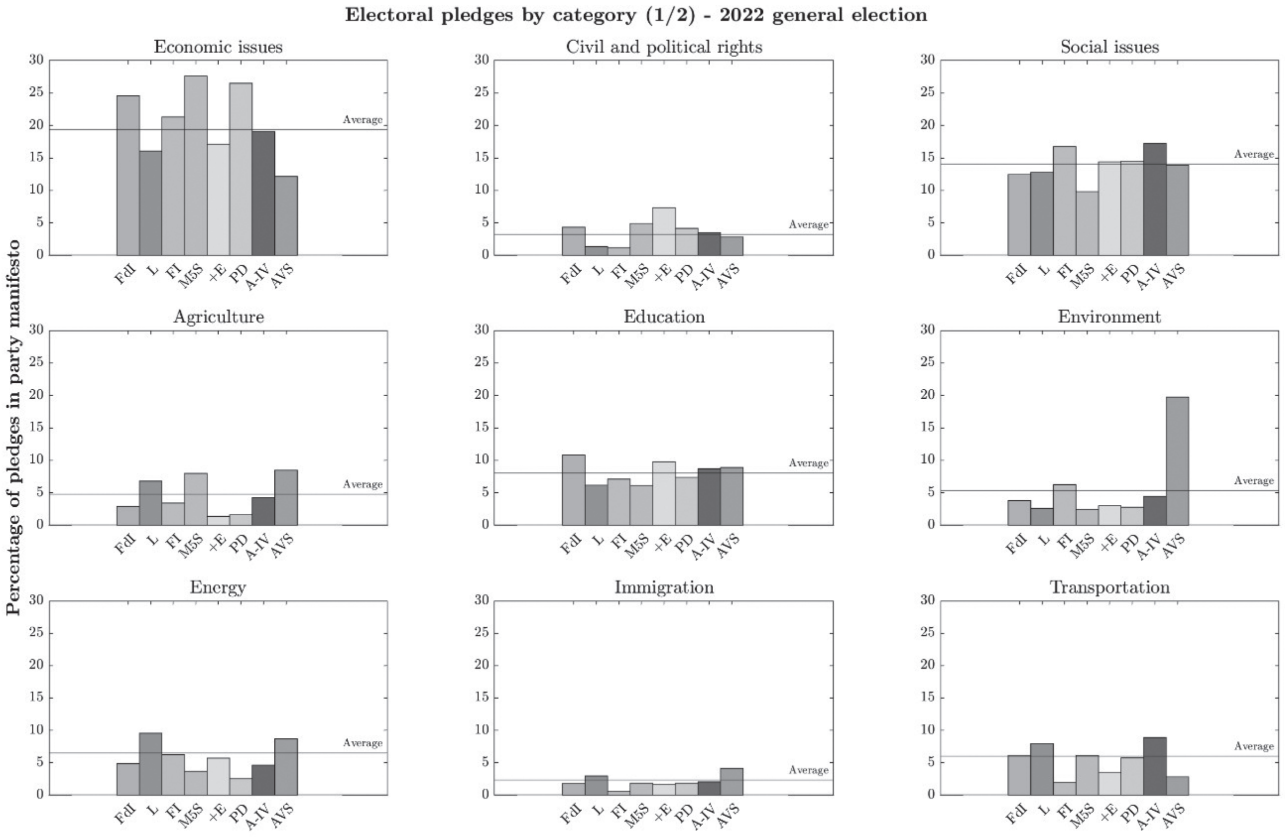

Figure 1a. Percentages of promises by policy issue in the 2022 Italian general election.

A similar discussion can be made for environmental promises. The need to fight global warming was listed among the top priorities for Italian voters in the 2022 general election (Improta et al, 2022). However, once again, except for FI (6.3%) and – in accordance with our expectation (Proposition 6) – the Greens-Left alliance (19.7%), all remaining parties did not devote too much attention in their manifestos to this issue: On average, only 5.4% of the policy proposals were related to the environment. In particular, the Five Star Movement does not seem to prioritise its environmental stances to differentiate its position from the centre-left coalition (see Proposition 4), while Go Italy appears to have emphasised this topic more than its coalition partners.

Defence is another policy domain to which we would have expected Italian party manifestos to pay more attention given that the Russian invasion of Ukraine and discussions on providing weapons to Ukraine were a central part of the 2022 political campaign (Chiaramonte et al, 2023; Improta et al, 2022). Instead, Figure 1 shows very low percentages of defence promises in each party manifesto analysed (0.9% on average). Only one defence promise ('No to the arms race') was included in the M5S's program, while PD and +E had not even made a single promise related to this policy dimension. Taken together, these data do not corroborate our expectations regarding defence promises: FdI, PD, and M5S did not make more promises than FI or L in the defence sector (see Propositions 2, 3, 4, and 5).

All main Italian parties seem to place particular emphasis on education and government issues in their 2022 programmatic agenda. Immigration, civil and political rights, transportation, housing, technology, international affairs, agriculture, public resources, and culture are among the policy domains in which Italian parties committed less in the last general election.[5]

In short, Figure 1 shows that Italian parties emphasised economic, social, and security issues in their election programs. While differences exist among parties, environmental, energy, and defence promises did not receive the share of attention we expected. If we look at the average data, pledges related to energy issues came only sixth on the list of priorities, the environment eighth, and the defence second to last. Conclusions do

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[5] Additional comments on these issues can be found in the Appendix.

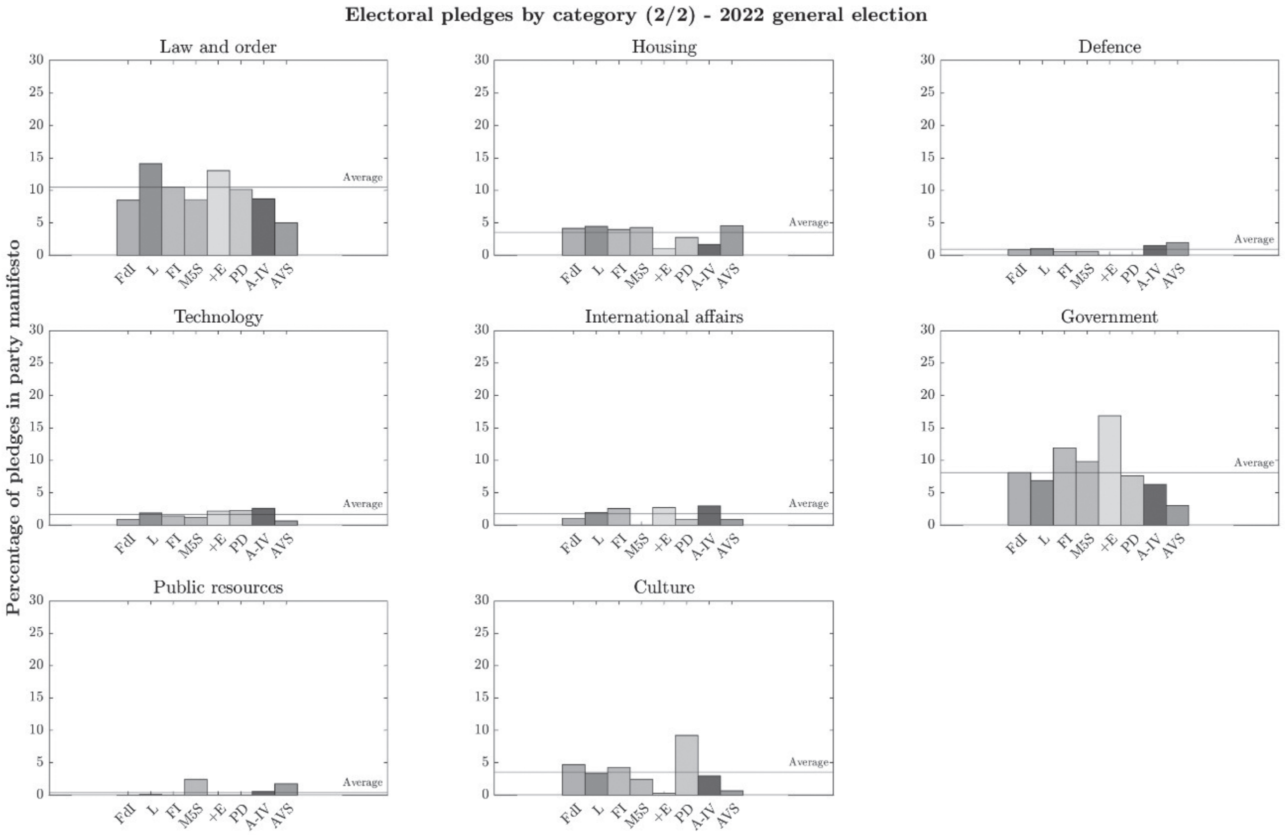

Figure 1b. Continued (Caption shown in Figure 1a).

not change when single parties are considered. Except for the Green and Left Alliance, the vast majority of campaign proposals made by the main competitors in the 2022 Italian general election are not related to the energy crisis, the environment, or the conflict in Ukraine.

Socio-economic questions are the key aspects around which the electoral competition is played. One might assume that the negative repercussions on the state of the economy and labour market generated by the war in Ukraine, the European sanctions against Russia, and the consequent inflationary pressures – which come on top of ongoing socio-economic distress triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic – have spurred parties to increasingly commit in these sectors. It is striking, however, that, in addition to economic and social issues, Italian parties emphasise other policy domains, such as security, government, education, and infrastructures, which appear to have nothing to do with the current situation of the country. In contrast to our main expectation, the vast majority of commitments parties take do not seem to be related to the issues that were widely discussed during the electoral campaign or that were considered most salient by citizens.

There might be two possible explanations for this finding. The first one could be related to the different functions of party programs. As discussed in the theoretical section, parties write their electoral manifestos to fulfil different purposes, from attracting votes to providing a unitary platform for the party and a coherent governing agenda for elected officials (Harmel, 2018; Dolezal et al, 2012). Election promises are not only made with the main goal of reflecting voters' concerns and preferences and providing answers to the most salient problems. To cite an example, the issue of the introduction of a presidential system in Italy was the only government-related question that received some attention from citizens during the 2022 election, but it was by far not among their top priorities (see data in Improta et al, 2022). Nevertheless, many promises pertaining to the political system, public administration, bureaucracy, and federalism were included in parties' manifestos. Parties are used to include these types of policy proposals in their programs, even though they are not the issues voters are most concerned about. A similar discussion can be made for matters related to security and judiciary powers. Also in this case, other goals – e.g. parties' desire to implement some reforms that are deemed important (Naurin et al, 2019) – might push partisan actors to take on many commitments in not so (at least, apparently) salient policy areas.

A second potential reason explaining the low emphasis paid to key proposals could be attributed to substantial differences among the policy domains under consideration. Education-related promises, for instance, deal with primary and secondary education, universities, academic research, teachers and professors; In other words, sectors in which parties can put forward alternative policy measures and goals, and in which office-holders have more power to act. In other policy domains, on the other hand, the concrete policy options and/or the possible goals might be limited, because solutions have a more technical rather than political nature, or because decisions have to be made at a non-domestic level. As a result, parties might always devote less space to these types of promises in their manifestos. We should not indeed forget that, whatever reason pushes parties to include certain policy proposals within their program, at the end of their mandate they are evaluated for their capacity to fulfil their promises, among other things (Matthieß, 2020).

It is important to acknowledge that a specific issue (i.e. defence) might only apparently seem less important when we restrict our assessment to comparing the number of promises in that particular sector with the electoral commitments made in high-priority policy areas (i.e. economy). To rule out this possibility, in the next section, we compare the share of promises made in one sector with the promises made by the same political parties in the same sector during the electoral campaign of 2018. In this way, we can investigate whether, even though the environmental, energy, and defence pledges did not receive the emphasis we expected, their share increased from the previous campaign.

Electoral promises in 2018 and 2022: A comparison

In this section, we compare the percentage of promises made in 2022 with data from 2018 (Appendix 2). We consider the main five parties that contested both elections (Figure 2). Differently from the previous analysis, we merely focus on the issues that received more attention in 2022 (namely economic and social issues, law and order, and government), plus the three issues we expected to be salient (environment, energy, defence). Unlike in 2022, environment, energy, and defence-related issues did not dominate the 2018 electoral competition, which, in turn, was primarily centred around immigration and EU matters (Giannetti et al, 2018).

First of all, Figure 2 illustrates that, as in the case of 2022, during the 2018 electoral campaign the higher share of promises made by parties was related to economic and social matters.[6] In both cases, Italian parties seem to prioritise these types of commitments, though almost all parties increased the space for socio-economic promises in their manifestos in 2022. The average percentage of parties' engagements devoted to the country's economy in 2022 (18.1%) was slightly higher than the average level of electoral promises recorded in 2018 (16.7%). All parties, except for the League, which decreased from 16.5% to 16.1% of its total number of campaign promises, enhanced the share of electoral pledges related to the economic and financial sector, with PD and M5S showing the most marked increase. A similar trend is observed for the percentage of promises devoted to social, health, and welfare issues (14.0% in 2022 vis-à-vis 10.2% in 2018, on average). In this case, only FdI decreased the percentage of promises related to social issues from 14.4% to 12.5%. According to these data, we can infer that Italian parties mostly focus on committing to enacting policies or reaching specific outcomes related to the national economy, employment, domestic commerce, industry, health, welfare, and social matters, regardless of the external situation and context.

After showing that socio-economic promises occupied a central position in parties' manifestos in both elections, we now turn to explore whether the share of commitments made in the environmental, energy, and defence sectors increased in 2022 compared to 2018.

Data clearly reveal that in 2022 parties are less committed to environmental issues than in 2018, on average (see Appendix). While the percentage of environmental promises has only slightly decreased for the Democratic Party, the steepest decline is recorded for the Five Star Movement and the League. The M5S, which since its early formation presented itself as an environmentalist party (Pirro, 2018), drastically reduced the emphasis paid to this issue: Its percentage of environment promises dropped from 21.4% in 2018 to 2.5% in 2022. Similarly, the League which devoted 9.4% of its electoral promises to environmental issues in 2018 reduced its commitment to just 2.6% in the 2022 election. Brothers of Italy presented a slightly higher percentage in 2022, but the only party to substantially increase its share of promises dedicated to the environment compared to 2018 is FI: Its share of promises rose from 0.8% to 6.3%.

Similarly, in light of the war in Ukraine, we would have expected Italian political parties to pay more attention to defence promises in the 2022 election. However,

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[6] Data on the promises made during the election of 2018 are provided in Appendix 3.

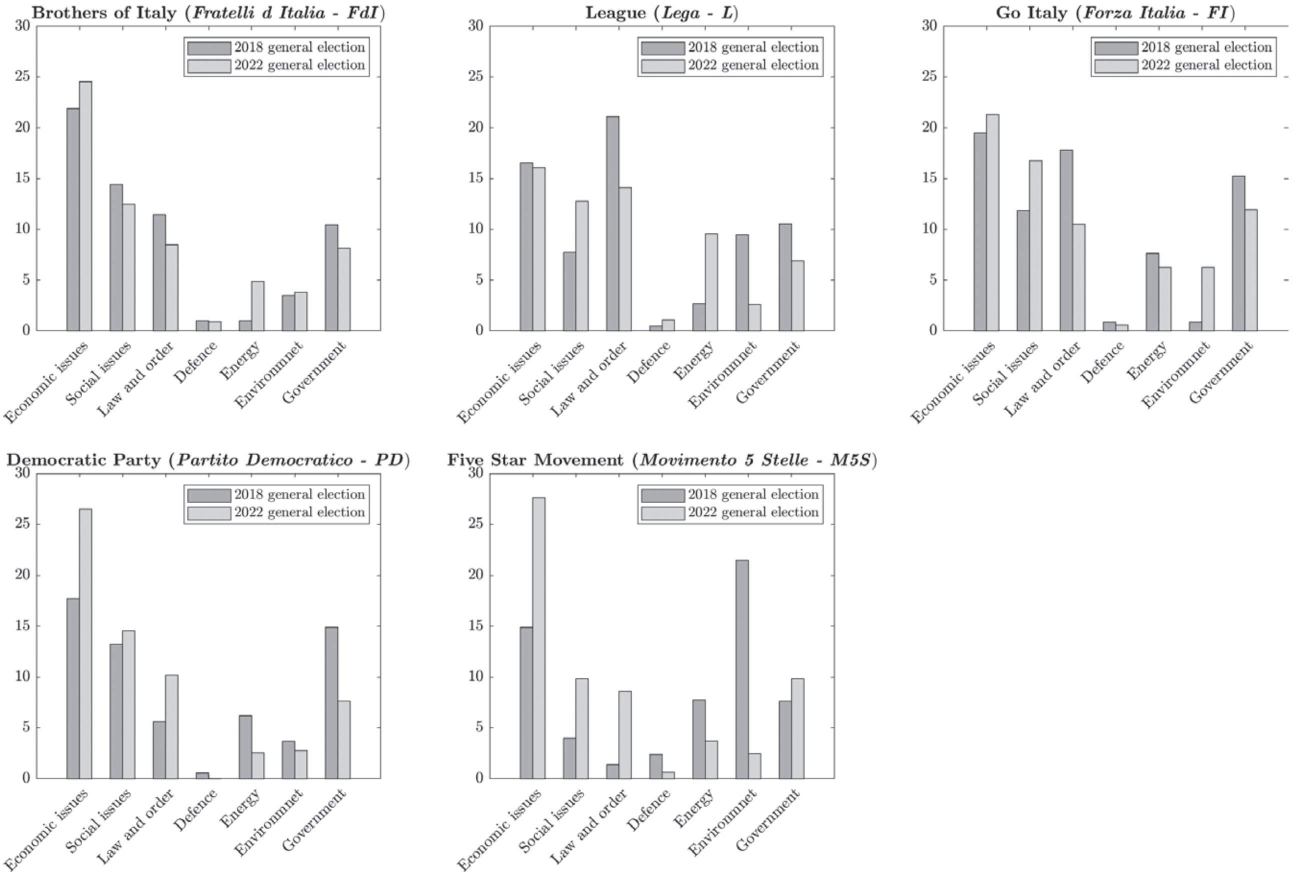

Figure 2. A comparison of the percentage of promises related to different policy issues for the 2018 and 2022 Italian general elections. Data are grouped by party.

their average percentage in 2022 (0.9%) is even lower than in 2018, when the share of defence promises was 1.0%. It is even more surprising that the parties most in favour of providing military support to Ukraine through the provision of arms dedicated little space to defence promises in their electoral programs. Whilst FdI slightly reduced its commitment from 1.0% to 0.9%, the PD dedicated no promises to the defence issue in its 2022 electoral program (while in 2018 it devoted 0.6% of its total number of electoral promises to this topic). The reduction in the M5S's commitment, which dropped from 2.4% to 0.6%, can be interpreted in light of the growing criticism expressed by the party regarding the deployment of arms to Ukraine. Only the League slightly increase the percentage of promises related to defence issues.

While the space reserved for both environmental and defence promises in 2022 parties' electoral programs is reduced compared to 2018, the same is not true for energy-related promises. In this case, the average percentage went from 5.0% in 2018 to 6.5% in 2022. This increase is, however, mainly driven by two right-wing parties, FdI and L, which significantly made a higher share of energy promises compared to 2018. The percentage of FdI's energy promises raised from 1.0% to 4.9%, while the League's passed from 2.7% to 9.6%. As expected, being critical of the Draghi government's energy policy and measures taken to deal with rising energy costs, the party led by Giorgia Meloni increasingly emphasised its energy-related proposals. PD, M5S, and FI all reduced the percentage of promises devoted to energy issues compared to 2018. Once again, the salience of the topic due to the energy crisis and price increase triggered by the invasion of Ukraine and the sanctions against Russia (Improta et al, 2022; Chiaramonte et al, 2023) does not seem to boost the emphasis attributed to the topic by Italian parties and, in particular, the share of energy-related policy measures promoted.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to examine the policy issues in which Italian parties concretely engage during the 2022 general election. To this end, we collected data on the pledges contained in those programs published by parties and pre-electoral coalitions. Overall, by looking at the issues of the policy proposals made during the electoral campaign, we find that Italian parties seem to compete around the same issues. Only in very few cases they show sharp differences in the emphasis attributed to different policy dimensions (see for instance the categories 'law and order' and 'government' in Figure 1). The economy is the issue in which all parties – with the exception of the Greens-Left Alliance – have taken more engagements. Social and health matters are the second key issues in the 2022 election campaign for almost all parties. For the League and More Europe, the share of social promises made is only lower than the one of law-and-order and government-related domains, respectively.

Issue emphasis is slightly different when it comes to the third most important issue. In this case, the parties analysed in this study do pay different attention to multiple policy domains. The program published by Action and Italy Alive, for instance, placed great emphasis on transportation, education, and law issues; Go Italy and the Five Star Movement on government and law; Brothers of Italy on education and law; and the Democratic Party on law and culture. In contrast with previous studies (Petrocik, 1996; Dolezal et al, 2014; Wagner & Meyer, 2014), political parties do not seem to increase the share of electoral engagements related to the issues they enjoy ownership in, at least as long as the topics of campaign promises are considered. Additionally, no policy domain stands out as a more left or right-wing issue or as a specific hallmark for one pre-electoral coalition. While FI and M5S both made a high share of promises covering the same policy areas, security measures and education matters are central in several manifestos across the political spectrum. Clearly, these findings do not suggest that ideologically-different politicians promote the same measures or that their policy positions are now closer, but rather that Italian parties do not seem to compete by taking commitments on a different range of topics. The case of AVS deserves a separate discussion. The programmatic agenda supported by the Greens, Italian Left, and other environmentalist political actors, in line with their issue ownership and priorities, mainly promoted policies dealing with environmental issues, renewable energies, sustainability, and zero-waste strategy.

In the theoretical section, we argued that, as parties compete in the election campaign by proposing policy solutions to the country's main problems and by responding to their electorate's concerns (Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016), their promises should primarily address salient issues. Since existing studies have already established that parties do indeed focus more on the issues voters deem as most relevant (Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016; Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994), we explored whether parties adapt their election promises to the socio-economic context as well. Data from Italian parties do not support this expectation. Even though the 2022 electoral race was marked by rising energy costs and the war in Ukraine, the percentage of promises related to the energy industry, the environment, and the defence sector was not very high and it even decreased compared to the 2018 election. Moreover, in contrast with our expectation – with only a few exceptions (i.e. energy promises made by FdI) – being in government or in opposition as well as strongly criticising past government's actions do not seem to affect election promises.

These findings seem to suggest that party competition dynamics in multi-party settings cannot be adequately framed only relying on the salience of the issues or considerations on the credibility political actors enjoy in the eye of the electorate. A potential explanation could come from the issue yield theory debate (De Sio & Weber, 2020). Political parties strategically avoid engaging in those issues that are not profitable from an electoral perspective. This could be attributed to the lack of a cohesive electoral base on specific issues, making it risky for political parties to address those concerns as it may result in internal divisions and a loss of existing electoral support. An alternative explanation could come from the nature of the sectors in which political parties engaged less than expected. The potential remedies to address the rising gas prices or the conflict in Ukraine, which were among the main concerns of the electorate, are surely influenced by decisions made at the supranational level. Thus, political parties find themselves with constrained opportunities to take action within their own country in these policy domains. Therefore, to avoid being punished by the electorate for failing to fulfil their election promises, parties might avoid committing themselves to these issues.

Clearly, in this study, we merely focus on the Italian case and especially on the last general election in Italy. However, we would expect to find similar dynamics in other European countries as well, given the centrality of matters arising from the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, and the EU-funded recovery package across Europe. Probably, if the prominent issues had been related to political domains where parties can implement tangible solutions at the domestic level, we might have achieved outcomes that align more closely with our expectations. By extending the analysis to encompass other multi-party systems, we can determine whether the observed pattern is unique to Italy and these specific policy areas or if it applies to other countries as well.

Results of this study contribute to both literatures on issue salience and party responsiveness. While previous research has provided evidence that parties devote a lot of attention in their annual parliamentary speeches (Hobolt & Klemmemsen, 2005), press releases (Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016), parliamentary questions (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010), and their campaign programs (Abou-Chadi et al, 2020; Green-Pedersen, 2007; Spoon & Klüver, 2015; Wagner & Meyer, 2014) to problems of utmost importance and, more specifically, to the issues they enjoy ownership in, the same is not true for election pledges. All in all, it is clear that talking about a relevant issue and making concrete commitments to adopt some policies or to achieve a specific goal are not the same thing and require different kinds of effort from political actors. Further research would therefore benefit from accounting for this difference and taking into consideration parties' policy proposals as well when investigating the issues political actors emphasise.

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Citizens' perceptions of policy, policy measures and trust in political institutions after the first wave of COVID-19

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Abstract. Crises bring both human consequences and political repercussions. COVID-19, like any other crisis, strained both European governments and public support for them. During the first wave of the pandemic, political trust was correlated with public adherence to infection containment measures in the major democracies. At the end of the first wave, how did public perceptions of COVID-19 measures and of measures introduced by institutions to protect health and the economy affect the bond of political trust between the governed and the governors? Using Eurobarometer data, we estimate the effects on political trust of the public's assessment of institutional performance, political output and policy. Applying various multilevel regression models, we show that, at the end of the first wave of the pandemic, political trust was positively affected by institutional performance and only partially affected public perceptions and the policy measures taken by governments to contain the spread of the virus.

Keywords: Europe, political trust, COVID-19, health, economy, public opinion.

INTRODUCTION

Have the performance of public authorities and the health and economic measures implemented by governments – and public perceptions of the latter – strengthened political trust? We explore this dynamic in the context of COVID-19 by analysing public political trust after the first wave of 2020, when European governments facing the pandemic crisis sought to implement national and regional measures in a context of radical uncertainty. Even today, the adoption of differentiated territorial approaches, with priority given to protecting people's health (Sabat *et al.*, 2020) and the economy, does not seem to have had the desired effects.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified debate on the appropriateness of measures adopted by public authorities (So *et al.*, 2020), and greater attention was given to trends in and the evolution of political trust. Research on political trust is typically framed by concerns about its decline (van der Meer, 2017). These fears, amid signs of crisis in various Western democracies, have prompted academic interest in this specific issue because political trust is crucial for political systems and the health of democracy. Trust is a belief in the dependability of other people, organisations or processes; it helps reduce uncertainty in a complex world and facilitates social order and cohesion. Furthermore, it allows citizens to delegate decision-making and reduces the complexity of governing, making it one of the most vital assets of democracies (Marien & Hooghe, 2011). From this perspective, political trust is key in times of crisis since it supports the successful implementation of radical measures and facilitates governance.

Studies that have analysed political trust during the COVID-19 pandemic have shown that this trust is associated with the intensity of the pandemic (Scharff, 2021) and public compliance with measures aimed at flattening the infection curve (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020). Despite strong public criticism of governments that limited freedom, lockdowns increased citizens' political trust, intention to vote for the party of the Prime Minister or President, and satisfaction with democracy (Bol, Giani, Blais & Loewen, 2021). During the pandemic, the sense of trust in institutions, according to some scholars, seemed to extend beyond the political space, also fuelling interpersonal trust in certain contexts (Easiasson, Sohlberg, Ghersetti & Johansson, 2021). For some scholars, the public tended during the pandemic to have greater trust in the institutions that managed the crisis, and this trust also tended to spill over to those not involved in such management (Baekgaard, Christensen, Madsen & Mikkelsen, 2020). Other studies found that emotions reduced the effect of trust in government but increased a propensity to accept restrictions on civil liberty among those who had little trust in government (Vasilopulos, Mcavay, Brouard & Foucault, 2021). Like emotions, perceived threats to health and the economy also tended to shape trust in government, the former more than the latter (Kritzinger *et al.*, 2021). Compared to the European average, lower levels of perceived stress and concern over the coronavirus were found in Portugal, Poland and Bulgaria. In contrast, Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland, Denmark and Lithuania reported higher than average stress levels (Lieberoth *et al.*, 2021).

At the end of the first wave of the pandemic, were political institutions able to respond to the expressed needs of their citizens? To what extent did political choices increase public satisfaction by favouring the consolidation of political trust? Unlike previous studies, we try to answer to above questions by looking at all EU countries at the end of the first wave (July–August 2020) when, as confirmed by other scholars, the emotions and anxiety of the public relating to lockdowns probably had less effect on their general assessment of institutional policies and performance. To that end, we adopt individual-level information related to citizens' assessment of institutional performance, their perception of government decisions during COVID-19, and institutional factors – such as institutional health and economic outputs – in addressing the spread of the pandemic. Following the institutional performance model, we claim that the public's evaluation of political performance, based on an assessment of institutional merit, is fundamental to political trust (Newton & Norris, 2000; Gustavsen, Asbjorn & Pierre, 2014). It is already known that citizens evaluate political performance as measured by the political success of institutions to implement policies and provide services that align with their own priorities. Where political actors and institutions achieve visible results, it is possible to predict that citizens will reward this positive performance with their confidence (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Conversely, we expect citizens to express low levels of institutional support, and consequentially to distrust political institutions, in the event of poor performance (Miller, 1974).

Thus, in terms of policies, decisions are more effective if public opinion believes that institutions are working on its behalf. However, we still lack a full understanding of what, according to public opinion, political institutions should have done and how appropriate it was to balance safeguarding public health with protecting the economy. On the one hand, restrictions on individual freedoms and productive activities made it possible to save lives. On the other, they resulted in substantial economic cost, at least in the short term. In contrast, less restrictive policies would have allowed a more rapid economic recovery but, at the same time, facilitated the transmission of the virus. The divergence between what individuals prefer and what maximises their well-being (Thaler, 2015) has undoubtedly made institutional decisions more difficult, and risks undermining the already tenuous relationship between governors and governed.

The pandemic crisis tested critical theories in the political trust literature. The main results of studies analysing the dynamics between political trust and COVID-19 reveal how political trust is influenced by timing (Altiparmakis *et al.*, 2021) – it increases in times of crisis and decreases, in some cases, immediately after the danger has abated, reaching previous average levels of political confidence (Kritzinger *et al.*, 2021). It follows different trends according to territorial contexts, beliefs, personal factors and exposure to COVID-19 (Devine, Gaskell, Jemmings & Stoke, 2021). Although the public appears to judge governments' actions by the spread of the virus rather than the type of policy adopted (Chen, Lee, Dong & Taniguchic, 2021), the procedures adopted by public authorities have generally been well-received by their local populations (Sabat *et al.*, 2020). Although the link between institutional performance and public trust placed in these institutions seems intuitive, it could in the context of a pandemic be significantly affected by measures introduced to contain the pandemic itself. Therefore, shedding light on the dynamics between performance and policies after the first wave of COVID-19 is an appropriate test of the theoretical and empirical stability of the determinants of political trust and may, moreover, provide an institutional orientation compass for future political decisions.

This paper uses Eurobarometer data from July to August 2020 to analyse the effects on political trust of public satisfaction with the performance of public authorities, and public perceptions of policy, specifically, policy choices related to health and the economy. The information collected in this dataset refers to the end of the first wave of the pandemic when levels of political trust had likely changed, and the public's assessment of institutions was less conditioned by the crisis. The main results obtained using multilevel regression techniques confirm a correlation between institutional performance and political trust, corroborating previous findings that satisfied citizens are more likely to support their public institutions. At the same time, a weak convergence between (individual) demand and (institutional) supply in times of pandemic can generate public discontent and a sense of institutional distrust, especially when considering measures related to the economy.

The article is structured as follows. The next section presents the theoretical backbone of political trust, and we then present our hypotheses. Thereafter, we discuss the data and methods used in the article before presenting our results. Finally, the last section offers a conclusion.

POLITICAL TRUST

Political trust is a topic frequently investigated (Faulkner, Aaron & Kyle, 2015). It is defined as public confidence that the political system, its institutions or its actors will 'do what is right even in the absence of constant scrutiny' (Miller & Listhaug, 1990, pp. 358). Scholars agree in defining political trust as a reflection of the public's assessment of a given entity, such as a political party, government or parliament (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). Similar to an assessment of institutional performance, where 'A trusts B with regard to x' (Hardin, 2002, p. 26), political trust is presented as a synthesis of the gap between the public's perception of how well political institutions should do and how well they are doing (Choi & Woo, 2016) and serves as a key psychological facilitator to governing effectively in times of uncertainty (Weinberg, 2020).

Paraphrasing Easton (1975), political trust is a form of support for the political system and its core values. It does not reflect agreement with specific policy decisions (Marien, 2011) but, rather, represents simultaneously the objects of both specific and diffuse support (Torcal & Montero, 2006; Bellucci & Memoli, 2012). By forming a connection between citizens and institutions, political trust promotes the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic government (Braithwaite & Levi, 2003). It expresses the functioning of political institutions (Thomassen, Andeweg & Van Ham, 2017) as a consequence of institutional performance. From this perspective, political trust thus presents itself as 'a central indicator of public sentiment underlying [the] political system' (Newton & Norris, 2000, p. 53), crystallising the state of the social contract assumed between citizens and their government (Dalton, 2017).

Political trust encompasses both a political attitude and a state of mind; it is a perspective that influences how people think and act (Hosking, 2014). Indeed, political trust influences the stability and efficiency of the political system and enables certain political behaviours (Bauer & Fatke, 2014). It is based on an expectation that the trust object can produce positive results (Levi & Stoker, 2000) and, thus, tends to be high when policies are deemed effective or when the public perceives a congruence between its expectations and policy outcomes (Rudolph & Evans, 2005). From this perspective, it acts as a heuristic (Rudolph, 2017), allowing people to decide whether to support new government policies or initiatives. It also represents an implicit 'psychological-democratic contract of trust' in which individuals extend their trust when they feel they receive sufficient benefit – whether material or non-material – from the system (Wroe, 2014, p. 92). Even when policies only benefit some of the public, political trust helps others to overcome their scepticism and give the government the benefit of the doubt (Macdonald, 2020, p. 3).

During the first pandemic wave, with some European countries facing an acute crisis, public support for key institutions seems to have increased (Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2022), due to the 'rally round the flag' phenomenon (Baekgaard *et al.*, 2020; Schraff, 2021). This trend was more evident in some countries, at least during the first wave of the pandemic (Esaiasson *et al.*, 2021) when insecurity drove the public to rely more on government institutions (Kestila-Kekkonen, Koivula & Tiihonen, 2022). In some countries, this effect was more subtle

(Bol, Giani, Blais & Loewen, 2021), while in others it weakened over time (Altiparmakis *et al.*, 2021) or was even wholly absent, as in France (Kritzinger *et al.*, 2021). In other words, levels of political trust were associated with the events of the survey period and were susceptible to variation depending on the events and the intensity with which these were felt by the public (Davies *et al.*, 2021). In this study, we looked at political trust in the period from July to August 2020, when the initial lockdowns had ended, the fears connected to the pandemic crisis had subsided, and citizens could probably evaluate with greater rationality and serenity the actions through which the first pandemic wave was addressed.

HYPOTHESIS

Political trust is vital in democracy. It is a prerequisite for guaranteeing the population's support for institutions (Easton, 1969) and is fundamental to maintaining the relationship between those governing and the governed (Devine, Gaskell, Jemmings & Stoke, 2021). Even in times of uncertainty, such as pandemic shocks, it continues to act as a glue, strengthening the relationship of the political class with the public (Weinberg, 2020). Schraff (2020), analysing the effects of the pandemic on political support, finds that the rise of COVID-19 infection rates increased political trust. Bangerter and colleagues (2012), studying the impact on political trust of the 2009 H1N1 epidemic in Switzerland, found that people displayed high levels of trust in the government during the early stages of the epidemic. Bol and colleagues (2021) found a similar trend when analysing fifteen EU countries: COVID-19-related lockdowns increased trust in government, at least in the short term. In contrast, Aksoy and colleagues (2020) found a negative impact of past exposure to epidemics on trust in government.

Although approaches to combating the coronavirus varied between countries, most citizens believed their government performed well in managing the outbreak (Pew Research Center, 2020) and appreciated its management of the pandemic (Goldfinch, Taplin & Gauld, 2021). A strong appreciation of institutional performance characterises countries such as Italy (Falcone *et al.*, 2020), where the pandemic crisis was particularly severe.

According to the reward–punishment approach, citizens tend to renew their trust in political institutions if the latter demonstrate positive performance. In this view, higher levels of satisfaction with the output of institutions or entities typically result in greater trust in them (Askvik, Jamil & Dhakal, 2011). Therefore, it is possible to hypothesise that at the end of the first COVID-19 wave:

> H1: Political trust increases when citizens are satisfied with the measures taken to fight the coronavirus outbreak (H1).

The success or failure of policies and the resulting political trust levels also depend on the measures taken by governments. During the first pandemic wave, governments imposed curfews and restrictions on social interaction with varying degrees of coercion (Hale *et al.*, 2020). Even Western democracies did not hesitate to impose draconian measures that limited human rights and paralysed economies (Cohen & Kupferschmidt, 2020). Strict health guidelines may have been the driving force that increased levels of public trust in political institutions such as governments (Quinn, Kumar, Freimuth, Kidwell & Musa, 2013). The same can be said of the economic measures adopted by institutions, although in some of the OECD countries most affected by COVID-19, such as the US, the UK and Italy, lockdowns had a profound impact on people's well-being, affecting the division of labour within the family and the propensity for collaboration (Biroli *et al.*, 2020).

Even if health policies were a prerequisite for trust in government (Christensen & Laegreid, 2005), the attempt to balance containment policies with other factors related to the national economy fuelled heated public debate on the adequacy or otherwise of such measures (So, Tiwari, Chu, Tsang & Chan, 2020). In countries where governments prioritised health protection, a few controversies excepted, the majority of the population seems to have supported the adoption of such policies (Lesschaeve, Glaurdic & Mochtak, 2022), with levels of support varying between states and according to specific policy measures (Sabat *et al.*, 2020). Conversely, in countries where governments favoured economic policies to protect the national economy and livelihoods, high mortality levels (Pierre, 2020) generated widespread public discontent. In summary, public approval of more significant state intervention to tackle the pandemic does not seem to extend to measures to protect the economy (Manoo & Palusàková, 2021).

According to the output-oriented performance model of regime support (Hobolt, 2012), trust in institutions is related to how citizens rate government responses to COVID-19 (Altiparmakis *et al.*, 2021). Even if the public tends to be more concerned with results than the policies implemented by their governments (Chen, Lee, Dong & Taniguchic, 2021), when institutional policy choices match their perceptions, they will support their political institutions. Given that during the first pandemic wave the public was more inclined to support health measures than economic ones (Oana, Pellegata & Wang, 2021), it is possible to hypothesise that:

H2a: As the public policy perception and policy output related to health increase, the level of political trust grows;
H2b: As the public policy perception and policy output related to the economy increase, the level of political trust declines.

METHODS, DEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

The hypotheses discussed in the previous section have been tested in 27 European countries using Eurobarometer survey data gathered between July and August 2020, focusing on three political institutions: parliament, national government and local government. Studies analysing political trust usually look primarily at the national government or parliament. Without taking a position in the debate on whether local or national government is more important, it is worth remembering that far more politicians are elected locally than nationally in all countries. Furthermore, during the pandemic, local government – the level of government closest to members of the public – was at the forefront of supporting national governments in the challenges faced in addressing lockdown-fuelled demands and the discontent of the public (Silva, 2022). In other words, a better empirical understanding of this phenomenon can be gained by including the local level in analyses of political trust. Thus, using a range of data concerning political trust in the three institutions mentioned above[1] and applying a polychoric principal component analysis, an index was obtained as a synthesis of analysed information (Table 1).[2]

Five main independent variables are used. The first expresses the public's general assessment of the choices made by the authorities to fight the coronavirus.[3] The second and third are represented by two dummy variables that describe public perception at the end of the first pandemic wave of the measures taken by the authorities to that point.[4] The last two are represented by additive indices expressing government responses in terms of economic and health policies designed to fight COVID-19. The first index records two economic measures – income support and debt/contract relief – while the second summarises five health measures: public information campaigns, testing policy, contact tracing, facial coverings and protection of the elderly.[5] This information enabled us to test the above hypotheses and assess how political choices regarding coronavirus, personal perceptions, and measures related to health and the economy affected political trust. The hypotheses were tested while controlling through the socio-demographic variables commonly used in the literature – gender, age and education (Lesscheeve, Glaurdic & Mochtak, 2021) and the political aspects related to political trust – trust in others (Bargsted, Oritz, Cáceres & Somma, 2022), ideology (Borbàth, Hunger, Hutter & Oana, 2022) and political efficacy (Adman & Strombland, 2011). Finally, we also consider the different countries, aggregating them by geographical area,[6] and the Gini index, because high levels of income inequality leave countries (Gozgor, 2022) and populations particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 (Finch & Hernandez Finch, 2020).

Political trust is a complex phenomenon influenced by numerous factors that tend to strengthen or weaken the nexus connecting rulers and citizens. While a decline in political trust may affect some political entities more than others, it is worth remembering that 'abrupt drops in political trust can be rapidly restored'

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[1] The question was 'I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or not trust it.' The answers included 'tend not to trust' (recorded as 0) and 'tend to trust' (recorded as 1). The 'don't know' responses were not considered in the analysis.

[2] The political trust index obtained (factor scores) ranges from 0 (absence of political trust) to 1.114 (maximum level of political trust).

[3] The question was as follows: 'In general, how satisfied are you with the measures taken to fight the Coronavirus outbreak by… – The public authorities in our community?' The variable was recoded as follows: 0 'not at all satisfied', 1 'rather dissatisfied, 2 'fairly satisfied' and 3 'very satisfied'. The 'don't know' responses were not considered in the analysis.

[4] The question was as follows: 'Thinking about the measures taken by the public authorities in (OUR COUNTRY) to fight the coronavirus and its effects, would you say that…?" The responses were coded as follows: 'these measures focus too much on health to the detriment of the economy' (recorded as 1); 'these measures focus too much on the economy to the detriment of health' (recorded as 2), and 'a balance has been reached' (recorded as 0). The 'don't know' responses were not considered in the analysis. To differentiate between the needs expressed by the public, we transformed the responses into two dichotomous variables. The first, reflecting a greater intervention on health, was recoded as follows: 0 'these measures focus too much on health to the detriment of the economy + a balance has been reached' or 1 'these measures focus too much on the economy to the detriment of health'. The second, which reflects a greater intervention on the economy, was as follows: 0 'these measures focus too much on the economy to the detriment of health + a balance has been reached' or 1 'these measures focus too much on health to the detriment of the economy'.

[5] We use the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (see https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/covid-19-government-response-tracker), which provides a cross-sectional and cross-temporal measure through ordinal variables. Since the interviews collected in Eurobarometer 93.1 (2020) were collected from 10 July 2020, the information relating to the two indices covers the period from 1 January 2020 to 9 July 2020. The economic policy index ranges from 0.797 to 1.824, while the health policy index ranges from 0.579 to 1.298.

[6] The 27 European countries have been aggregated into three geographical areas: *North and West* (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Sweden), *South* (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain), *East* (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia).

Table 1. Factor analysis.

	Political Trust
Regional and local public authorities	0.793
Government	0.940
National Parliament	0.944
Kaiser – Meyer – Olkin test	0.618
Barlett's Test (Sig.)	0.000
Eigenvalue	2.403
Cronbach's Alpha	0.748

Source: Eurobarometer 93.1 (2020).

(Zmerli & Van der Meer, 2017, p. 2) and much depends on the periods and countries considered.

Looking at the political trust between 2018 and 2020 (Fig. 1), we see that citizens' support for public institutions is above the European average in fewer than half the countries considered. With the advent of the pandemic, political trust increased significantly in some countries, especially those where the crisis was at its most intense. In contrast, in other countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, France, Luxembourg and Slovenia), it tended to decrease, probably because other factors also contributed to undermine the trust network between the public and its institutions.

At the end of the first lockdown, public levels of political trust divided Europe. While the pandemic crisis affected all EU member countries equally, its effects show an asymmetrical trend from north to south, amplifying the long-standing fragilities and weaknesses of the latter. The north–south contrast is very pronounced and is most likely affected by institutional management of the pandemic crisis.

In northern Europe we see strong public support for political institutions. For example, in Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden, citizens trust at least two out of the three institutions. Conversely, except for Malta and Portugal, where political trust is higher than the EU average, the most significant discontent is found in southern Europe, especially in Croatia, Bulgaria and Italy, where more than 53% of respondents do not trust any institution. This result is undoubtedly worrying if we consider that political trust has never been exceptionally high in Italy, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have created more significant problems. This result appears to underline the intuitions of Almond and Verba (1963), for whom Italy, even then, was characterised by a political culture of low trust.

Table 2 summarises the variables employed in the analysis by providing descriptive statistics.

ANALYSIS

Before proceeding with our analysis, it is crucial to recognise that our dataset is hierarchically organised, with

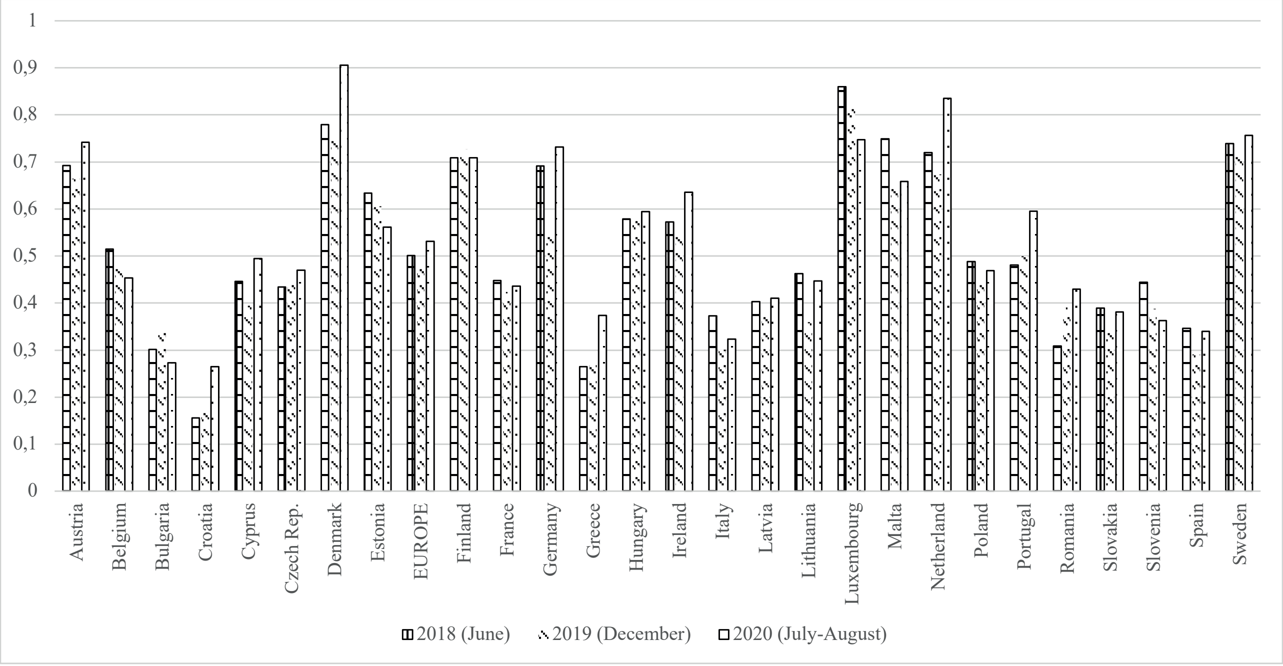

Figure 1. Political trust (factor scores). Source: Eurobarometer 91.5 (2018), 92.3 (2019), 93.1 (2020).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistic.

	Observations	Mean / %	St. dev.	Min	Max
Political trust	21,310	0.546	0.453	0	1.114
Lef-right scale	21,310	5.360	2.081	1	10
Age	21,310	51.233	17.456	15	99
Health measures	21,310	1.171	0.245	0.797	1.824
Economic measures	21,310	0.976	0.204	0.579	1.298
Gini index	21,310	31.014	3.845	24.63	41.28
Satisfaction with Public Authorities					
not at all satisfied	1,984	9.3			
rather not satisfied	4,243	19.9			
fairly satisfied	9,383	44.0			
very satisfied	5,700	26.8			
Political efficacy					
totally disagree	3,025	14.2			
tend to disagree	5,106	24.0			
tend to agree	8,297	38.9			
totally agree	4,882	22.9			
Citizens'perception of health measures					
balance-more economy	16,791	78.8			
more health	4,519	21.2			
Citizens'perception of economic measures					
balance-more health	13,871	65.1			
more economy	7,439	34.9			
Education					
no full-time education	233	1.1			
still studying	1,204	5.7			
14-15 years	2,360	11.1			
16-19 years	8,942	42.0			
20 years and older	8,571	40.2			
Social trust					
do not to trust at all	730	3.4			
tend not to trust	4,425	20.8			
tend to trust	14,450	67.8			
totally trust	1,705	8.0			
Gender					
man	9,935	46.6			
woman	11,375	53.4			
Geographic area					
North and West (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherland, Sweden)	8,303	39.0			
South (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain)	3,940	18.5			
East (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia)	9,067	42.5			

Source: Eurobarometer 93.1 (2020).

one level (respondents) embedded within another. Ignoring the multilevel character of the data could affect the validity of our estimations (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Steenbergen & Jones, 2002) by overstating their precision. To address these methodological concerns, we use a multilevel model that allows each observation to be correlated within countries. In this way, we include a random intercept at the country level in the analysis to capture national differences in the respondents' propensity to trust in political institutions that are not identified by the model's systematic (fixed) variables. This is the most appropriate method to consider both individual and national effects. What role does the public perception of institutional performance, health and economic policies play in explaining political trust? Table 3 reports the models we have estimated to answer this question. Model 1, a theoretical model – the so-called null model (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2008) – does not include Level-1 or Level-2 predictors and thus allows us to distinguish between individual and national levels in the total variance in our dependent variable. In this way, we can estimate the so-called intra-class correlation, ρ, a measure that tells us how much of the total variation in the political trust index can be explained solely by differences between national-election surveys. We find that approximately 16.4% of the difference in political trust can be explained simply by the fact that the respondents come from different countries. These results confirm the suitability of using multilevel analysis.

As expected, as levels of satisfaction with the measures taken by the authorities increase, public trust in political institutions also increases (Model 2). At the end of the first wave of the pandemic, institutional efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 appeared to be well-received by the public, supporting the notion that when institutions function well, they generate trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001) and consequently enjoy public support.

It is also true that levels of public trust increase when institutions meet the needs and requirements of the public. At the end of the first pandemic wave, the combined effect of public perception and political output – defined based on health and economic measures – only partially strengthened public trust in institutions. Political trust increases as health policy output increases among those who would like greater investment in health care (b=0.068; Model 3). Conversely, an inverse relationship is found when looking at the level of convergence between individual perceptions and measures relating to the economy (b=-0.058; Model 4). These results support the notion that the public, alarmed by the spread of the pandemic, tends to support its government's choices, even backing rigorous measures to protect public health (Oana, Pellegata & Wang, 2021) to the detriment of the economy. Thus, those political institutions that addressed the pandemic crisis by investing more in the health sector have been rewarded by public trust.

In Model 5, all the previously analysed independent variables were reported. The levels of convergence between political outputs and individual preferences, while representing a litmus test for political institutions, reveal that public perception is affected by context and situation. At the end of the first wave of the pandemic, political distrust tended to decrease, thanks to public intervention in the health sector (Fig. 2), and the choices made by this sector, however rigorous and even questionable, appear to have been well-received by the public. More significant criticism from the public is evident, however, if we examine individual perceptions and measures relating to the economy (Fig. 3). Worsening living and economic conditions during the pandemic, probably in part a consequence of previous national economic policies, dragged even those who had previously enjoyed relative economic stability into poverty and deprivation. In all likelihood, the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities and created new ones, to which public institutions were only able to respond minimally during the crisis. Indeed, in areas where inequalities are more evident, the sense of distrust towards political institutions is greater (Fig. 4). This is the case in several eastern European (Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania) and southern European countries (Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy), where job-seekers and those with low or medium levels of education were more likely to experience a fall in income during the pandemic. In other words, it is in Southern and Eastern Europe that the sense of distrust is most evident. However, support for institutions tends to increase with age. This is particularly true for those who display higher trust, understand and are able to influence the political processes and, ultimately, have a right-wing ideological disposition.

At the end of the first wave, the decisions made by political institutions, especially in the health sector, were applauded by the public. The empirical findings appear to suggest that the degree of convergence between individual preferences and political results does not always guarantee institutional support, especially in times of crisis.

There are many reasons why some countries may have been hit harder than others. As our data demonstrate, differences in government policy responses explain some variation. However, these results should be treated with caution because they capture a first pandemic scenario, the evolution of which is linked to numerous factors that lie beyond the scope of this work. Future studies could investigate more deeply the connection between public need and political results – especially in those contexts in which crises have affected the stability of political regimes and the state of health of democracies (see Hellmeier *et al.*, 2021) – to shed light on how citizens help to support democratic consolidation.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has strained the trusted networks that connect the governed with those that govern. Following the

Table 3. Political Trust.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
Satisfaction with Public Authorities (not at all satisfied)										
rather not satisfied			0.066****	0.010	0.067****	0.010	0.064****	0.010	0.064****	0.010
fairly satisfied			0.282****	0.010	0.275****	0.010	0.277****	0.010	0.261****	0.010
very satisfied			0.381****	0.011	0.371****	0.011	0.372****	0.011	0.348****	0.011
Citizens’ perception of Health measures (balance and more economy)					-0.132****	0.031			-0.161****	0.031
Health measures					-0.108*	0.063			0.110*	0.064
Citizens’ perception of Health measures *Health measures					0.068***	0.025			0.058**	0.025
Citizens’ perception of Economic measures (balance and more health)							0.011	0.028	-0.013	0.028
Economic measures							-0.003	0.074	0.007	0.069
Citizens’ perception of Economic measures *Economic measures							-0.058**	0.027	-0.067**	0.027
Social trust (do not to trust at all)										
tend not to trust			0.024*	0.014	0.024*	0.014	0.023	0.014	0.023	0.014
tend to trust			0.178****	0.014	0.176****	0.014	0.178****	0.014	0.172****	0.014
totally trust			0.270****	0.017	0.267****	0.017	0.269****	0.017	0.263****	0.016
Political efficacy (totally disagree)										
tend to disagree			0.034****	0.008	0.034****	0.008	0.033****	0.008	0.033****	0.008
tend to agree			0.204****	0.008	0.202****	0.008	0.203****	0.008	0.198****	0.008
totally agree			0.272****	0.010	0.270****	0.010	0.270****	0.010	0.267****	0.010
Gender (man)			0.007	0.005	0.007	0.005	0.007	0.005	0.008	0.005
Education (no full-tile education)										
still studying			0.046*	0.026	0.045*	0.026	0.041	0.026	0.037	0.026
14-15 years			-0.009	0.025	-0.011	0.025	-0.011	0.025	-0.015	0.025
16-19 years			-0.031	0.024	-0.033	0.024	-0.034	0.024	-0.039	0.024
20 years and older			-0.004	0.024	-0.007	0.024	-0.007	0.023	0.014	0.024
Age			0.001****	0.000	0.001****	0.000	0.001****	0.000	0.001****	0.000
Left-to-right ideological placement			0.008****	0.001	0.008****	0.001	0.009****	0.001	0.008****	0.001
Gini index			0.079	0.051	0.101**	0.048	0.073	0.051	0.093*	0.049
Gini index* Gini index			-0.001	0.001	-0.002**	0.001	-0.001	0.001	-0.002*	0.001
Geographic area (North and West)										
South			-0.111***	0.040	-0.148****	0.042	-0.104**	0.042	-0.136***	0.043
East			-0.138****	0.036	-0131****	0.033	-0.134****	0.037	-0.125****	0.034
Costant	0.547****	0.035	-1.226	0.809	-1.677**	0.782	-1.093	0.825	-1.499*	0.798
Variance at Level 1	0.034	0.009	0.005	0.002	0.005	0.001	0.006	0.002	0.005	0.001
Variance at Level 2	0.171	0.002	0.126	0.001	0.126	0.001	0.126	0.001	0.125	0.001
N (Level 1)	21,310		21,310		21,310		21,310		21,310	
N (Level 2)	27		27		27		27		27	

Note:*p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01, ****p<0.001.
Source: Eurobarometer 93.1 (2020).

onset of the new coronavirus epidemic and its rapid spread, a state of emergency was declared in most countries. The first measures put in place were, on the whole, aimed at preventing and stemming the expansion of the contagion. Despite the difficulties associated with imposing multiple measures related to health, the economy and other public needs, the public remained satisfied with its institutions and, in return, offered its support in the form of trust.

Analysing the level of political trust at the end of the first wave of the pandemic, we find a divided Europe.

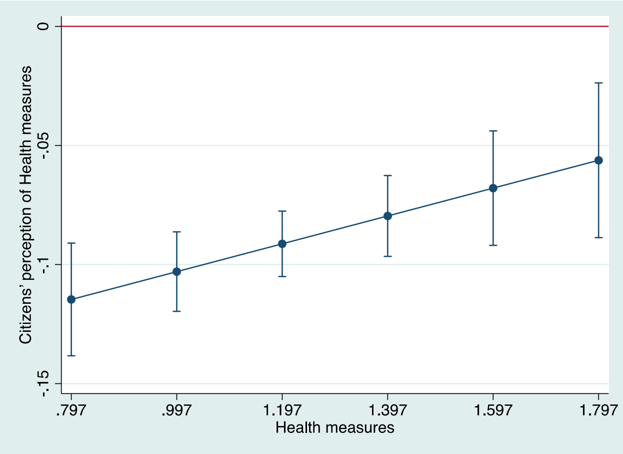

Figure 2. Marginal effect of Citizens' perception of Health measures on Health measures (with 95 % confidence interval).

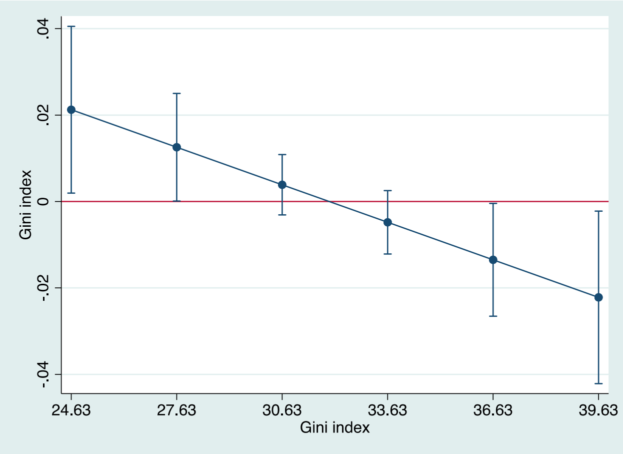

Figure 4. Marginal effect of Gini index on Gini index (with 90 % confidence interval).

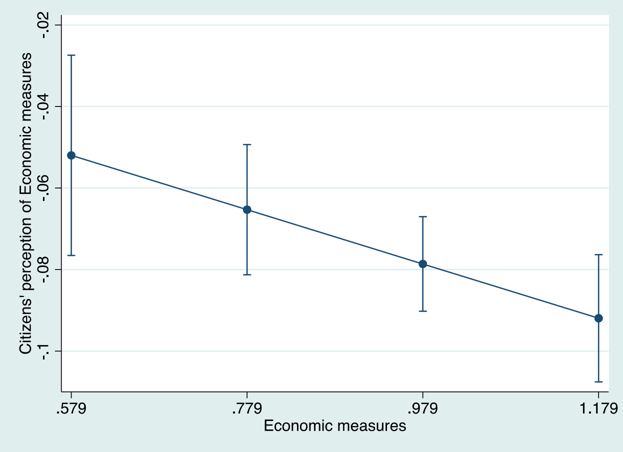

Figure 3. Marginal effect of Citizens' perception of Economic measures on Economic measures (with 95 % confidence interval).

Although the crisis affected all EU member countries equally, the effects reveal asymmetrical outcomes, amplifying the fragility of southern Europe. In the south, the health risks linked to the coronavirus are most evident and levels of political trust have never been stable. Here, the institutional choices and relative measures adopted to contain the spread of the virus appear to have been rewarded only partially in terms of political trust.

The adoption of various health and economic measures has only partially strengthened citizens' trust in institutions. The primary need to contain and counter the risks deriving from the spread of COVID-19, and the need to preserve economic activity (or some means of subsistence) were loudly approved in public opinion. Institutional efforts to meet the public's demands have significantly impacted trust levels. Measures relating to health are particularly well-received by the public, as confirmed by a decreasing sense of mistrust among those who requested them. In contrast, public reactions to the economic measures implemented by public institutions reveal an evident dissatisfaction and, consequently, a worsening of the fiduciary relationship.

Our article proposes two more general contributions. First, political trust is strongly linked to institutional performance. When institutions work for their citizens, satisfying their needs and requests, the public appreciates their efforts and supports its representatives by offering them political trust. Despite considerable uncertainty around the social impacts of COVID-19, political institutions have been able to address complex ethical issues and make political compromises where necessary, the nature of which have varied according to country and political context. Secondly, the measures taken by public authorities sacrifice neither health nor the economy for the sake of the other. Faced with an entirely new and unexpected pandemic crisis, the countries that managed to protect the health of their populations generally sought also to protect their economies (Hasell, 2020). However, interventions in the economic sphere, unlike those related to health, seem not to have met public expectations and have negatively affected political trust.

The data in our possession has some limitations. The information used in this work, collected by the Eurobarometer, is limited to 2020 only. In this sense, it was impossible to analyse the changes that characterised European public opinion after the first wave from a longitudinal perspective, as other scholars have done in a more limited number of countries. To understand the impact of COVID-19 recovery policies, we should also include measures focused on their perceived sustainability and identify satisfaction levels relating to policy outcomes and related processes. These aspects suggest that future researchers should build data panels able to broaden the academic debate and help political institutions better interpret public requests. Public consensus may thus grow despite the fact that strategies and measures introduced to counter the spread of the pandemic in some countries were questioned and criticised.

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"Weighed, not counted": territorial (mis)representation in Italian metropolitan council elections

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Abstract. Metropolitan cities were established by Italian Law no. 56/2014 (commonly known as the "Delrio Law") as a new level of government, replacing and redefining functions previously performed by provinces in selected major urban areas. One of their three key governing bodies is the metropolitan council, a representative assembly the members of which are elected via an indirect, second-level, proportional, list-based system in which the electorate comprises all sitting mayors and councillors from metropolitan city municipalities. The election mechanism applies a differential weighting scheme that reflects the population size of the municipalities in which voters serve as mayors or councillors. Using the outcomes of the metropolitan council elections held in the years 2021 and 2022 in eight metropolitan cities, this study highlights the variety of ways (many of which appear to be largely unintended) in which demographic weighting bestows significantly greater (and, arguably, unwarranted) power to larger cities' representatives, essentially disrupting the principles of territorial representation that the weighting scheme intended to embody. The study also focuses on how the legal framework for metropolitan council elections generates institutional instability via mandatory forfeitures and ensuing substitutions of seat vacancies. Finally, the author identifies potential adjustments to the electoral system – especially a proposal for the attenuation of disproportionate territorial representation via demographic weighting based on the so-called "square-root method".

Keywords: metropolitan council elections, electoral system, territorial representation, demographic vote-weighting, square-root vote-weighting.

1. INTRODUCTION

After a lengthy stage of development (see below), Italian Law no. 56/2014 (commonly known as the "Delrio Law") established "metropolitan cities" as a new level of government, replacing and redefining functions previously performed by provincial governments in selected major urban areas. One of their three key governing bodies is the metropolitan council, a representative assembly the members of which are elected via an indirect, second-level, proportional system in which the electorate (i.e., those having the right to vote) and the potential candidates comprise all sitting mayors and councillors from metropolitan city municipalities. The election mechanism applies a differential weighting scheme that reflects the population size of the municipalities in which voters serve as mayors or councillors. Using the outcomes of the metropolitan council elections held in the years 2021 and 2022 in eight metropolitan cities, this study highlights the variety of ways (many of which appear to be largely unintended by the Delrio Law) in which demographic weighting bestows significantly greater (and, arguably, unwarranted) power to larger cities' representatives, essentially disrupting the principles of territorial representation that the weighting scheme intended to embody. The study also focuses on how the legal framework for metropolitan council elections generates institutional instability and identifies potential adjustments of the electoral system – especially "square-root" weighting – that could attenuate some of its negative consequences.

Section 2 provides an overview of the metropolitan councils' functions and the voting rules that govern their election, with a particular emphasis on demographic weighting schemes. Section 3 briefly outlines the strictly "political" outcomes of the 2021-22 metropolitan council elections. The election outcomes pertaining to territorial features is the focus of Section 4, which examines the relationship between population size, on the one hand, and, on the other, voter turnout, list composition, candidacies' success and voters' degree of influence. Issues involving institutional sustainability are addressed in Section 5, which explores the intricate upshot of forfeitures and substitutions of metropolitan council seats. Section 6 illustrates a proposal for the attenuation of disproportionate territorial representation, via an implementation of demographic weighting based on the so-called "square-root method", and simulates the election outcomes that would have ensued from its adoption. Other proposals to improve the current metropolitan council election system are briefly discussed in Section 7. The last section develops some concluding remarks.

2. METROPOLITAN COUNCILS AND THEIR ELECTORAL SYSTEM

In 2014, the Italian Parliament enacted Law no. 56 (the so-called "Delrio Law", after Graziano Delrio, the minister of regional affairs who proposed it). Among its many measures, the law established 10 "metropolitan cities" ("metro cities", from now on) which replaced the provincial governments that hitherto had ruled over the same territories, thus finally implementing a level of local government introduced in a revision of the Italian constitution in 2001 and originally mandated by Law no. 142/1990 (Baccetti 2014; Forte 2014; Busso and Galanti 2015; Bolgherini et al. 2016). The enactment of the Delrio Law defined both metro cities and the remaining provinces as territorial administrative entities comprising "vast areas". The institutional simplification pursued by the reform was bolstered by the anticipated abolishment of the residual provinces, as envisaged within a general, wide-ranging proposal for revising the Italian Constitution; but that attempt faltered when voters rejected it in a referendum held in 2016 (Bull 2017; Fusaro 2017).

The Delrio Law directly establishes 10 metro cities (exclusively located in "ordinary statute" regions): Bari, Bologna, Florence, Genova, Milan, Naples, Reggio Calabria, Rome, Turin, Venice. The law also defines procedures for the creation of additional metro cities, namely acknowledging the ability of "special statute" regions (which enjoy a certain degree of administrative autonomy) to create additional metro cities; 5 have been established in this way (although some have not yet become operational), all located in the insular regions of Sicily and Sardinia: Cagliari, Catania, Messina, Palermo, Sassari.

Metro cities perform vital functions involving socio-economic development goals, including: formulation of 3-year strategic plans; general territorial planning (communications, service networks, infrastructure); organization of coordinated management systems for public services; transportation mobility, road systems, urban planning compatibility and consistency; promotion and coordination of socio-economic development (support for innovative business and research); promotion and coordination of computerization and digitization systems; tasks previously performed by provinces in the sphere of school networks and buildings and environmental protection; other functions assigned to them by regional governments (art. 1, clauses 44 e 46).

Metro cities perform their functions via three key organs. The *metropolitan mayor* is a post held *de iure* by the (elected) mayor of the metro city's capital (see below, Section 8, however, for a recent Constitutional Court ruling concerning the legitimacy of this provision). The *metropolitan conference* is an assembly, with advisory status, of all the mayors of the metro city's municipalities (*comuni*). The *metropolitan council* ("MC", from now on) is an elected assembly performing general direction and control functions; the electoral system shaping its composition is the main focus of this article.[1]

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[1] An example may help the reader understand: the *metropolitan mayor* of the metro city of Bologna is the mayor of the municipality of Bologna; the *metropolitan conference* of Bologna comprises 55 individuals,

The Delrio Law states that MC elections are to be held every five years, no later than 60 days after the inauguration of the capital city's municipal council. The electorate comprises all elected mayors and municipal council members of the metro city's municipalities (i.e., ordinary citizens do *not* participate in MC elections); thus, the MC is the end product of an *indirect, second-level voting system*.[2] Elections feature competing *lists*, each of which includes a number of *candidates* no fewer than half and no greater than the total number of contended MC seats; the latter are 14, 18 or 24, depending on the size of the metro city's population. All sitting councillors and mayors (with the obvious exception of the metropolitan mayor) are eligible to stand as candidates.

Individual voters cast a vote for one list and may express a single preference for one of the chosen list's candidates. Seats are proportionally distributed among the lists according to the d'Hondt method, but before this occurs voters' ballots undergo a *differential weighting* procedure – indisputably the electoral system's most distinctive feature. Each ballot is assigned a weight that is determined by the size of the population in the municipality where the voter serves as mayor or councillor (see Section 4).

Other provisions of the Delrio Law also exert considerable influence on the composition of MCs. If an elected metropolitan councillor ("MCer", from now on) *for any reason whatsoever* ceases to be a mayor/councillor in her municipality, she vacates her MC seat as well. In case of seat forfeiture, the former MCer is substituted by the unelected candidate (belonging to the same list) with the highest number of weighted preferences.

This electoral system engenders a bias – arguably an *unwarrantedly large* one – in favour of larger towns and especially the capital, as well as other dysfunctional (probably unintended) effects, for reasons that will be identified and explained in the following sections.

3. 2021-22 MC ELECTIONS: POLITICAL OUTCOMES

Six MC elections were held in Italy during 2021: Reggio Calabria (January 24); Venice and Bologna (November 28); Turin, Milan and Rome (December 19). Another two elections occurred in 2022: Naples (March 13); Genova (November 6). It would be interesting to dwell on a description of the political profile and outcomes of these elections, but constraints on the length of this article require brevity. Let it suffice to say that the political "supply" consistently offered "centre-right" and "centre-left" options, but also varied appreciably from one MC to another. In Genova (18 seats), only two lists (one centre-left, one centre-right) were presented. Venice (18 seats), Rome (24), Turin (18) featured three lists (the third being the Five-Star Movement's). In Reggio Calabria (14) and Bologna (18), four lists competed: in the former, there were one centre-right list, two centre-left ones and an additional list associated with a former mayor of Naples, Luigi De Magistris, featuring candidates predominantly originating from a single town; the latter featured two centre-right lists, a centre-left one and a "civic" list involving the Five-Star Movement. Five lists competed in Milan (24): three centre-right, one centre-left and a "civic" list. Naples (24) was an outlier, with 11 lists, with at least three centre-left and as many centre-right lists, plus five others.

In each of these elections, a clear political majority emerged, with 6 MCs going to the centre-left and 2 to the centre-right (Table 1). Each majority perfectly mirrored the winning list/coalition/mayoral candidate in the prior municipal elections in the capital city.[3] The centre-left ran multiple lists in 2 elections, which it won; the centre-right ran multiple lists in 3 elections and lost each of them. By and large, MC elections displayed a strongly bipolar dynamic, with the centre-right and the centre-left together achieving 90% of votes and 94% of seats, with modest results accruing to the Five-Star Movement and other "civic" lists. Naples is again an outlier: there 9 of 11 lists earned at least one seat, and the centre-right and the centre-left accounted for "only" 74.3% of the votes (and 19 of the 24 elective seats).

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i.e., all the mayors of the 55 municipalities making up the metro city; the *metropolitan council* of Bologna has 18 elected members. The metropolitan mayor presides over both the metropolitan conference and the metropolitan council.

[2] Some regional governments challenged the constitutionality of the indirect elections introduced by the Delrio Law, but the Constitutional Court upheld the law, highlighting the "total compatibility of a second-level electoral mechanism with the democratic principle" and arguing that the voting system in no way weakened the "representative and elective character of territorial government organs" (ruling no. 50/2015). A few years later the Constitutional Court reaffirmed the legitimacy of indirect elections, deemed as appropriate for pursuing the goals of institutional simplification and cost-cutting with respect to direct elections (ruling no. 168/2018). The Delrio Law *does* allow metro cities to amend their charters to introduce the direct election of the metropolitan mayor and the MC, but only within the context of a national law (yet to be enacted) and other exacting constraints (art. 1, clause 22).

[3] This was also the case in 14 of the previous 17 MC elections. The three exceptions date back to 2016, when the Five-Star Movement, which had won the municipal elections in Turin and Rome, and the De Magistris list, which had won in Naples, were incapable of achieving a majority in the subsequent MC elections due to their organizational weakness in non-capital towns.

Table 1. Political outcomes of the 2021-22 MC elections (majorities in bold).

	Weighted votes for lists (% values)				Elective seats***			
	Centre-right	Centre-left	Other	Total	Centre-right	Centre-left	Other	Total
Reggio C.*	35.4	**54.4**	10.2	100	5	**8**	1	14
Venice	**60.2**	34.7	5.1	100	**11**	6	1	18
Bologna**	27.5	**66.6**	6.0	100	5	**12**	1	18
Milan**	43.4	**49.3**	7.3	100	10	**13**	1	24
Rome	33.0	**58.0**	9.0	100	8	**14**	2	24
Turin	32.7	**59.2**	8.1	100	6	**11**	1	18
Naples*/**	20.4	**53.9**	25.7	100	5	**14**	5	24
Genova	**66.3**	33.7	-	100	**12**	6	-	18

* Centre-left with multiple lists / ** Centre-right with multiple lists.
*** In each of these MCs, the majority also enjoys an additional seat, i.e., the one occupied by the metropolitan mayor.

4. TERRITORY-RELATED OUTCOMES

As previously mentioned, perhaps the most distinctive feature of MC elections is the weighting of ballots on the basis of demographic size. More specifically, all municipalities are classified into nine brackets, and vote weights are determined in such a way as to guarantee that the total number of potential votes expressed by a bracket roughly reflects the incidence of that bracket's population on the total population of the metro city.

In principle, in each metro city 100,000 weighted votes are allocated proportionally among the 9 brackets according to the relative incidence of the population of the municipalities belonging to each bracket (excluding any municipalities placed into receivership) on the overall population. For example, if the municipalities belonging to a given bracket account for 20% of the metro city's population, 20% of the weighted votes are allocated to that bracket. Within each bracket, the corresponding weighting coefficient is determined by the ratio between the number of weighted votes allocated to the bracket itself and its total number of voters, i.e., mayors and councillors. In other words, each voter "represents", roughly, the same number of residents. (Since each coefficient is rounded *down* to the closest integer, the overall number of potential weighted votes is, in practice, slightly lower than 100,000.) This weighting procedure is then adjusted in two ways: no single municipality (as a rule, the capital) can generate more than 45% of all potential weighted votes; no single demographic bracket can generate more than 35% of all potential weighted votes.[4]

Table 2 displays the weighting coefficients applied in the 8 elections examined here, as well as the number of voters and municipalities involved in each election. For example, in the metro city of Rome, voters from a very small municipality (i.e., with less than 3,000 inhabitants) cast ballots each having a weight of 23; the weight increases as one moves to the higher brackets and reaches 918 for ballots cast by the mayor and municipal councillors from the capital of Rome. In Rome, an individual voter from the capital enjoys a voting "firepower" that is 230 times greater than that of a voter from a very small town (see "Capital / A-bracket ratio" row in Table 2). In other metro cities the imbalance is less extreme, but even in Reggio Calabria, Bologna and Genova, every capital city voter casts a ballot that is at least 40 times "heavier" than the one cast by a small-town voter. In other words, since votes and preferences are *weighed* rather than *counted*, the electoral efficacy of individual voters varies to a large extent as a function of town size.[5] To underscore the extent of this imbalance, consider the example of Milan: the lowest demographic bracket comprises 104 voters, that together can generate 520 weighted votes; a single voter from the capital generates, *all by herself*, 714 weighted votes.

Voters are, presumably, fully aware of their electoral efficacy[6] and behave correspondingly when they decide whether to participate in the MC election. As Figure 1 shows, voter turnout in each metro city tends

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[4] Every ballot pertaining to a specific bracket is tabulated separately from ballots relating to other brackets. This is done via colour-coded ballots, which is tantamount to having a distinct ballot box for each bracket.

[5] To be more precise, the weighting coefficient for any given voter is a function of three elements: town size (and therefore the corresponding demographic bracket), the overall population of all municipalities belonging to the same bracket, and the overall number of municipalities and therefore of mayors and councillors (i.e., voters) belonging to the same bracket.

[6] The weighting coefficients are published on the metro city's institutional website *before* the election.

Table 2. Ballot weighting coefficients and (theoretical) number of voters in the 2021-22 MC elections.

Demographic bracket (000s of residents)	Reggio C.*	Venice*	Bologna*	Milan*	Rome**	Turin*	Naples	Genova**
				Weighting coefficients				
A: < 3	23	30	21	5	4	4	6	26
B: 3-5	62	41	34	11	12	13	10	61
C: 5-10	99	74	57	20	23	26	20	110
D: 10-30	171	93	102	36	38	45	38	217
E: 30-100		227	192	63	79	81	70	
F: 100-250	1060						118	
G: 250-500		932	945					
H: 500-1,000						853	843	1097
I: > 1,000				714	918			
Capital / A-bracket ratio	**46**	**31**	**45**	**143**	**230**	**213**	**141**	**42**
No. of voters	1,055	713	833	2,089	1,737	3,867	1,493	835
Operational municipalities (+ receiverships)	86 (+11)	44	55	133	120 (+1)	311 (+1)	84 (+8)	67
				Number of potential voters				
A: < 3	560	22	51	104	548	2,179	33	449
B: 3-5	130	76	117	324	117	606	65	126
C: 5-10	182	129	247	507	260	389	260	117
D: 10-30	150	374	306	730	388	390	611	102
E: 30-100		75	75	375	375	225	450	
F: 100-250	33						33	
G: 250-500		37	37					
H: 500-1,000						41	41	41
I: > 1,000				49	49			
Total	1,055	713	833	2,089	1,737	3,830	1,493	835

Note: Corrective thresholds applied for demographic brackets > 35%* or single municipality > 45%**. The dotted line separates the coefficients applied to the capital city from those applied to other municipalities.

to increase as one shifts from the lower to the higher demographic brackets: practically all voters from the upper four brackets (municipalities with at least 100,000 inhabitants) go to the polls, whereas participation rates drop significantly among electorates expressed by smaller towns. This pattern is particularly marked in the North.[7] Naples is again an outlier: overall turnout was an extraordinary 96%.

Differential voter participation is, in all likelihood, an unintended (yet hardly unpredictable) effect of the electoral system. The same can be said about another consequence: whereas a bracket’s electoral *potential* weight is strictly determined by the Delrio Law, its *actual* weight is also affected by voter turnout. In so far as voters perceive (dis)incentives to vote and act upon them, the weighted vote distribution further *favours* larger towns. Table 3 sheds light on the make-up of each metro city’s population, potential voters, potential weighted votes, actual voters, and actual weighted votes (as well as candidates and electees, which will be discussed later). If one considers Turin, for example, the two least populated brackets (A and B) account for 17.0% of potential weighted votes but only 11.5% of actual weighted votes (–5.5 percentage points), due to relatively low turnout among the electorate of those two brackets; conversely, the most populous brackets (E to I) account for 54.6% of potential weighted votes and 60.4% (+5.8 percentage points) of actual weighted votes, due to relatively high turnout achieved in those brackets. Similar (albeit smaller) shifts in favour of voters from larger towns can be observed in each of the other MC elections.

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[7] Turin displays a particularly low turnout rate despite its having instituted 11 polling stations distributed throughout the metro city’s territory, in order to limit voters’ need to travel and thus encourage participation. Reggio Calabria also activated multiple (3) polling stations. All other metro cities examined here featured only one polling station, located in the capital city.

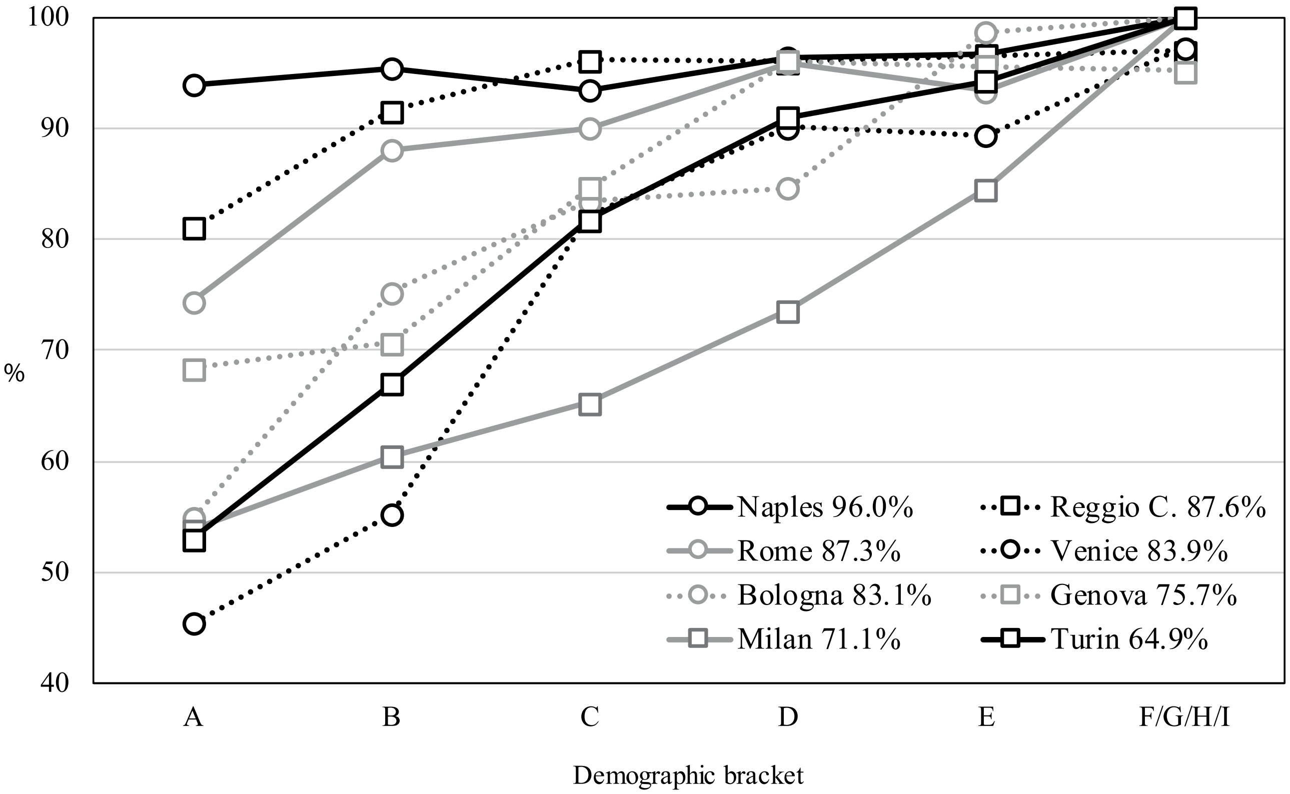

Figure 1. Voter turnout (valid votes for lists) by demographic bracket (percentage values). *Note*: In this chart (and in Table 3) the F, G, H and I brackets are collapsed into a single category, which contains just one municipality, namely the corresponding metro city's capital. The sole exception involves Naples, which, besides the capital (H bracket), also features Giugliano in Campania (F bracket).

The preceding comments focus on the electoral efficacy of *voters* and its relationship with the territorial dimension of town size. But the selection of *candidates* and their success in getting *elected* also need to be addressed. As previously mentioned, in MC elections the candidate pool and the electorate coincide (except for the metropolitan mayor's obvious exclusion from the former); therefore, the composition of the candidate pool is reflected in the "potential voters" column of Table 3. If one compares the "potential voters" and "candidates" distributions in that table, it is clear that the being a mayor/councillor originating from a larger town (and especially one with at least 100,000 inhabitants) dramatically improves one's chances of being included in a candidate list; conversely, coming from a smaller town renders a candidacy relatively less likely. (Genova is a partial exception: the candidates' demographic distribution is not too dissimilar from the electorate's, and indeed the highest candidacy rate is recorded in the C bracket; Reggio Calabria also displays a comparatively high candidacy rate in the C bracket.) Running for a seat does not mean getting elected, of course: in the 8 MCs considered here, 515 candidates competed for 158 seats. In each MC election, candidates provided by the F-G-H-I brackets had a stronger than average probability of getting elected; this was especially true for Naples, Milan and Reggio Calabria. In general, candidates who were also capital city councillors expressed a superior electoral performance, with a likelihood of election 2-3 times greater with respect to other candidates (Turin and Genova, however, do not mirror this overall pattern). In most contexts, however, the bracket expressing the highest success rate (electees/candidates) was *not* the most populous one.

The influential impact of large city mayors and councillors, in other words, derives to a greater extent from their role as *voters* rather than from their being *candidates*. This emerges more clearly in Table 4, which develops a typology of candidates on the basis of two criteria: election vs. non-election and reception/non-reception of at least one preference from a capital city voter (CCV). Although support from at least one CCV is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for election, it is exceedingly beneficial. Overall, candidates receiving at least one preference from a CCV have a 76%

Table 3. Territorial profile of the 2021-22 MC elections (% values, column totals within each metro city = 100), by demographic bracket (000s of residents).

	Population	Potential voters	Potential weighted votes	Actual voters	Actual weighted votes	Candidates	Electees
Reggio C.							
A: < 3	12.6	53.1	12.9	49.1	11.1	40.4	28.6
B: 3-5	8.0	12.3	8.1	12.9	7.9	6.4	7.1
C: 5-10	17.8	17.3	18.1	18.9	18.5	21.3	14.3
D: 10-30	25.2	14.2	25.8	15.6	26.3	10.6	7.1
E: 30-100	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
F-G-H-I: 100+	36.4	3.1	35.1	3.5	36.2	21.3	42.9
Venice							
A: < 3	0.6	3.1	0.7	1.7	0.3	0.0	0.0
B: 3-5	2.8	10.7	3.1	7.0	1.9	0.0	0.0
C: 5-10	8.6	18.1	9.6	17.7	8.7	4.9	5.6
D: 10-30	41.9	52.5	34.9	56.4	34.8	56.1	44.4
E: 30-100	15.2	10.5	17.1	11.2	16.9	14.6	11.1
F-G-H-I: 100+	30.9	5.2	34.6	6.0	37.3	24.4	38.9
Bologna							
A: < 3	1.0	6.1	1.1	4.0	0.6	0.0	0.0
B: 3-5	3.7	14.0	4.0	12.7	3.3	4.1	11.1
C: 5-10	13.5	29.7	14.1	29.8	12.9	26.5	27.8
D: 10-30	30.0	36.7	31.3	37.4	29.1	38.8	27.8
E: 30-100	13.7	9.0	14.4	10.7	15.6	18.4	11.1
F-G-H-I: 100+	38.0	4.4	35.1	5.3	38.5	12.2	22.2
Milan							
A: < 3	0.6	5.0	0.5	3.8	0.3	3.9	8.3
B: 3-5	3.3	15.5	3.6	13.2	2.6	6.5	4.2
C: 5-10	9.5	24.3	10.2	22.3	7.9	16.9	12.5
D: 10-30	24.2	34.9	26.5	36.1	23.2	45.5	37.5
E: 30-100	21.5	18.0	23.8	21.3	24.0	19.5	20.8
F-G-H-I: 100+	40.9	2.3	35.3	3.3	42.0	7.8	16.7
Rome							
A: < 3	1.4	31.5	2.2	26.9	1.7	11.7	4.2
B: 3-5	0.9	6.7	1.4	6.8	1.3	5.0	4.2
C: 5-10	3.8	15.0	6.0	15.4	5.7	5.0	4.2
D: 10-30	9.2	22.3	14.9	24.5	14.9	15.0	20.8
E: 30-100	18.3	21.6	29.9	23.1	29.1	48.3	41.7
F-G-H-I: 100+	66.4	2.8	45.5	3.2	47.3	15.0	25.0
Turin							
A: < 3	9.5	56.9	8.9	46.4	5.4	15.1	5.6
B: 3-5	7.9	15.8	8.1	16.3	6.1	15.1	11.1
C: 5-10	9.6	10.2	10.4	12.8	9.6	13.2	11.1
D: 10-30	16.8	10.2	18.0	14.3	18.5	24.5	22.2
E: 30-100	17.4	5.9	18.7	8.5	19.9	20.8	38.9
F-G-H-I: 100+	38.8	1.1	35.9	1.6	40.5	11.3	11.1
Naples							
A: < 3	0.2	2.2	0.2	2.2	0.2	1.3	0.0
B: 3-5	0.7	4.4	0.7	4.3	0.6	2.6	0.0
C: 5-10	5.3	17.4	5.2	16.9	5.0	12.2	16.7
D: 10-30	23.5	40.9	23.4	41.1	23.1	35.3	29.2
E: 30-100	31.9	30.1	31.7	30.3	31.4	39.1	29.2
F-G-H-I: 100+	38.5	5.0	38.8	5.2	39.7	9.6	25.0

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

	Population	Potential voters	Potential weighted votes	Actual voters	Actual weighted votes	Candidates	Electees
Genova							
A: < 3	6.9	53.8	11.8	48.6	9.0	25.0	16.7
B: 3-5	4.5	15.1	7.7	14.1	6.1	18.8	16.7
C: 5-10	7.4	14.0	13.0	15.7	12.3	28.1	22.2
D: 10-30	12.7	12.2	22.3	15.5	24.1	18.8	33.3
E: 30-100	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
F-G-H-I: 100+	68.5	4.9	45.3	6.2	48.4	9.4	11.1

Table 4. Candidates by elected status and reception of support from capital city voters (CCVs).

	Elected candidates supported by CCVs	Elected candidates *not* supported by CCVs	Non-elected candidates supported by CCVs	Non-elected candidates *not* supported by CCVs	Total no. of candidates
Reggio C.	12	2	5	28	47
Venice	13	5	3	20	41
Bologna	13	5	4	27	49
Milan	21	3	7	46	77
Rome	18	6	5	31	60
Turin	17	1	5	30	53
Naples	19	5	9	123	156
Genova	18	0	3	11	32
Total	131	27	41	316	515

chance (between 68 to 86% in the elections considered separately) of getting elected, versus a mere 8% chance (0 to 20%) if they have no CCV backing. Genova's MC is an extreme example: *not even one* candidate was elected without a CCV's support.

So, as the Delrio Law intended, the elected representatives of larger towns, and especially of capital cities, have a greater say in shaping the MC: the latter is presided over by the capital city's mayor; CCVs enjoy robust firepower at the polling station due to demographic weighting (and the relatively small number of CCVs). But, perhaps beyond the legislators' intentions, CCVs' electoral efficacy is additionally enhanced by differential voter turnout. CCVs also have a higher likelihood of being included in candidate lists and being elected. In any case, support from at least one CCV is almost a prerequisite for a candidate's election, highlighting CCVs' overwhelming clout.[8]

The Delrio Law (art. 1, clause 30) states that "the metropolitan council is elected with a direct, free and secret vote", thus echoing the Constitution (art. 48): "votes shall be personal and equal, free and secret". The preceding analyses have provided ample evidence refuting the "equality" principle in MC elections (and, indeed, the Delrio Law does not cite equality). Yet, despite the significant advantages that the Delrio Law confers to voters from larger towns, the latter, and CCVs especially, are also subject to severe constraints – to wit, the "dark side" of being a powerful voter. Are CCVs' votes truly "free" and "secret"? In the 8 MC elections considered here, there are at least 5 instances of lists and 83 instances of candidates receiving exactly *one* vote/preference from a CCV. Since ballots are differentially weighted and election outcomes are reported separately for each bracket, there are plenty of opportunities to identify and control individual voter behaviour, especially among CCVs and, with a bit more effort, other brackets comprising a small number of municipalities.

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[8] The firepower of (most) CCVs is *further* augmented by another "latent" factor relating to the election system for municipal councils. The lists supporting the winning mayoral candidate enjoy a "majority premium" assigning them 60% of the seats in the municipal council if those lists earn at least 40% of the vote. The majority premium is applied to all municipal elections involving towns with at least 15,000 inhabitants, but in practice entails an *additional* disproportionate advantage, in terms of MC electoral efficacy, for the capital city's council *majority* CCVs. One could also mention another "latent" factor, which however exerts practical effects that are much more marginal. Municipalities that undergo receivership (*commissariamento*) do not have any mayors or councillors that can run as candidates nor vote in MC elections, and such municipalities are by definition *not* capital cities: if a capital city were to undergo receivership, there would simply be no MC election to speak of. In the 8 MC elections examined in this article, a total of 21 municipalities (almost all in the South) were simply omitted (see Table 2). (Receivership, pursuant to dissolution of a municipal government, occurs when the latter violates the Constitution or the law or cannot function due to a variety of reasons, including the resignation or forfeiture of a majority of councillors, failure to approve the municipal budget, infiltration by organized crime, and threats to public order.)

For example, in Reggio Calabria, the Territorio Metropolitano list, promoted by De Magistris, received just one vote from capital city voters, and just one capital city councillor was elected by Lista Civica La Strada, endorsed by De Magistris. There is no *proof* that the La Strada CCV voted for Territorio Metropolitano, but it does seem highly likely. In the same election, 8 candidates received exactly one preference. Similarly, in Turin, 12 candidates received exactly one preference from a CCV. Three of these candidates were presented by the Obiettivi Comuni list, i.e., the Five-Star Movement, which has precisely three members on the Turin city council. In the Naples MC election, Fratelli d'Italia and Territori in Azione each received one vote from CCVs, and just one capital city councillor is expressed by each of the corresponding parties in the capital city's council. Another 2 metropolitan lists received just one vote each from CCVs. Exactly one vote from a CCV was expressed for 7 candidates in Venice, 8 in Bologna, 17 in Milan and 11 in Rome. These are all situations in which, *if* the voting behaviour of CCVs was centrally coordinated, then it would have been easy for list promoters (and, indeed, in some cases, for *anyone*) to monitor and validate (non-)compliance.

5. INSTITUTIONAL (UN)SUSTAINABILITY

This section explores MCs' *institutional sustainability*, i.e., their ability to reach the end of their five-year mandate with a low rate of turnover among their members and without permanent seat vacancies. This might seem, at first glance, a minor concern, but the MC election system entails structural threats to institutional sustainability. As previously mentioned, if an elected MCer ceases to be a mayor/councillor in his home municipality, his MC mandate is automatically subject to forfeiture and the vacated seat is assigned to the unelected candidate (from the same list) with the highest number of weighted votes. Of course, there are many reasons why mayors and councillors abandon their MC seats: voluntary resignation, getting elected or nominated to other posts, early dissolution of their municipal council, and – unfortunately – even death. But these are, obviously, exceptional and largely unforeseeable events, that can affect any elected assembly. However, there is also another mechanism leading to seat forfeiture that is, so to speak, "built in" to the election system. An MC election is structurally and intimately linked to the capital city's municipal election: when the latter takes place, the former must follow (as a rule) within 60 days. However, some MCers come from municipalities that follow an election cycle that is *not* in synch with the capital's and are therefore subject to "guaranteed" forfeiture *before* the end of the MC's term.

For example, Rome's municipal elections, along with a few dozen other towns' belonging to the same metro city, were held in October 2021, and the MC election took place the following December. Barring exceptional events such as those described above, any MCers originating from the municipality of Rome or the other towns that held elections at the same time can expect to serve a full five-year mandate. But *most* towns in the metro city of Rome held their elections *earlier*, and any MCer coming from those towns *cannot* count on being able to serve a full five-year MC term. The Delrio Law, in its only concession to institutional sustainability, does provide a loophole: if an MCer whose municipal mandate is ending is re-elected to the post of mayor or councillor,[9] she gets to keep her MC seat.

Table 5 outlines the potential forfeiture situation. In almost all of the MCs examined here, only a minority of candidates and electees can expect to serve out a full-term.[10] In other words, the majority of elected MC members (95 out of 158, or 60%) are subject to "guaranteed" forfeiture before end of MC term and will need to vacate their seats if they are not immediately re-elected. One might think that this is not a particularly troubling circumstance, since there is a substitution procedure in place: initially unelected candidates fill vacated seats. However, the latter are also vulnerable to "guaranteed" forfeiture, and indeed they are at risk, with respect to initial MCers, *to an even greater*

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[9] Re-election ensuring one's continued MCer status can, counter-intuitively, occur in *any* municipality belonging to the metro city, even if the municipality is not the one that provided original access to the MC electorate and therefore even if re-election occurs in a different demographic bracket.

[10] Venice features an apparently more stable situation, but this is due to the fact that its MC election (November 2021) was significantly delayed by the Covid-19 emergency; in fact, its municipal election was held in September 2020. Therefore, the current MC should last less than four years, and this allows some MCers coming from towns with elections not held simultaneously with Venice's to serve out a full (albeit shorter-than-usual) term.

Table 5. Institutional sustainability in the MCs elected in 2021-22.

	Reggio C.	Venice*	Bologna	Milan	Rome	Turin	Naples	Genova
Candidates	47	41	49	77	60	53	156	32
- full term	18	22	8	25	18	14	43	6
Electees	14	18	18	24	24	18	24	18
- full term	8	12	6	12	8	6	8	3
Electees risking forfeiture	6	6	12	12	16	12	16	15
Losing candidates (potential substitutions)	33	23	31	53	36	35	132	14
- full term	10	10	2	13	10	8	35	3
- full term with > 0 votes	7	9	1	9	7	6	7	1
Potentially irreplaceable vacancies	1	0	10**	6**	8**	8**	3**	12**
Lists with potentially irreplaceable vacancies	1 of 4 (c-r)	0 of 3	3 of 4 (c-r & c-l)	1 of 5 (c-l)	2 of 3 (c-r & c-l)	2 of 3 (c-r & c-l)	2 of 9 (c-l)	2 of 2 (c-r & c-l)

* Venice with shorter term (municipal elections in capital city no later than autumn 2025).
** Dissolution of initial majority in case of non-re-election.

extent: 266 of the 357 unelected candidates (i.e., potential substitutes), or 75%, are due to complete their tenure in their home municipalities before the end of their MC's mandate.[11]

The number of potentially irreplaceable vacancies is hardly trivial: 48 out of 158 (30%), concentrated mostly in the MCs of Genova (12), Bologna (10), Rome and Turin (8 each). This problem is compounded by the fact that, of the 35 lists competing in the 8 MC elections examined here, 25 of them are "short", i.e., presented *fewer* candidates than the allowable maximum, which means that they have a greater likelihood of exhausting substitution possibilities. If the "guaranteed" forfeitures actually materialize, 13 lists out of 33 that earned seats will see their MC delegations shrink, and in 6 of the 8 MCs the initial ruling majority will evaporate (threatening the metro cities' governance capability). Of course, some of these "guaranteed" forfeitures will not actually occur, thanks to the re-election of sitting MCers in a municipal context, but experience shows (Gasperoni and Caporale 2021) that many will. In any case, it seems bizarre to entrust, as the Delrio Law does, MCs' institutional continuity to MCers' (uncertain and unpredictable) re-election to municipal councils. Moreover, as previously explained, such "guaranteed" forfeitures are not the only source of vacancies and institutional discontinuity.

One should keep in mind that MCers (including *future* ones, i.e., initially unelected candidates who will earn their seats due to others' forfeiture) who originate from the capital city are intrinsically *not* vulnerable to the type of forfeiture envisaged here: by definition, they will be able to keep their MC seats until the end of their MCs' five-year duration. This is arguably yet another privilege that the MC electoral system confers upon representatives of capital cities.

6. THE SQUARE-ROOT METHOD: A REASONABLE COMPROMISE?

The MC electoral system features many drawbacks, and therefore there are many ways in which it could be improved. The voting rules' most distinctive feature, as previously stated, is its *indirect, second-level* design relying on *demographic weighting*. This in part reflects Parliament's reasonable intention to avoid burdening the citizenry with yet another call to the polls, ensure governability, reserve a strong role for capital cities (and larger towns, in general) in metro city administration and, more generally, emphasize the centrality of *territory*. Nevertheless, demographic weighting and the extreme imbalance in weight coefficients dictated by the Delrio Law are a textbook example of how "certain individuals and territories often enjoy a higher degree of influence than their relative demographic weight of the polity would imply" (Beramendi et al. 2022, 1). Yet simply doing away with differential weighting would be a naïve solution (CCVs' incidence on the total vote would be reduced to a paltry 5% or less). Is there an intermediate approach?

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[11] Table 5 also reports the number of potential full-term substitutes receiving at least one preference: only 47 out of 357 (13%). In fact, 50% of non-elected candidates collected *no preferences at all*. Even if nobody expresses a preference for a given candidate, the latter remains eligible for substitution of forfeitures. Yet from a political standpoint, an individual who sits in an assembly after having received no support whatsoever in its election obviously raises an issue of political and representational legitimacy. As shown by Gasperoni and Caporale (2021), a handful of candidates garnering no preferences did end up occupying seats in MCs originally elected in 2016.

Shortly after World War II and the founding of the United Nations, Lionel S. Penrose developed such an intermediate approach. Discussing decisions made by majority vote in committees and within a more general reflection on the "arithmetic of voting", Penrose argued that "the power of the individual vote is inversely proportional to the square root of the number of people in the committee" (1946, 55). He then explored the ways votes could be allocated in a "federal assembly of nations": "would it be equitable for two nations of the relative sizes of China and Switzerland each to have one vote? On the other hand, would it be any fairer if the greater one had 100 times as many votes as the lesser, as would result from allotting voting power or membership in the assembly on a strictly 'per capita' basis? The answer seems to be that the number of votes (or members) which each nation contributes to an assembly of spokesmen should be proportional to the number of people whose opinions each spokesman probably represents. The number of people represented by the spokesman of each electorate has been shown to be proportional to the square root of the number of people who can vote" (1946, 55). Largely forgotten and then re-discovered by Banzhaf (1965) and Coleman (1971), the so-called "Penrose square-root method" fuelled a debate, a little more than 15 years ago, regarding voting rules within the European Union Council of Ministers (Życzkowski and Słomczyński 2004; Słomczyński and Życzkowski 2006; Ratzer 2006). The square-root method has seen use in some international scientific associations (Słomczyński and Życzkowski 2006, 3-4) and a few local political contexts (The Economist 2021) but has been largely ignored in practice.

Weighting ballots proportionally not to population size but to its square root would continue to give an advantage to larger groups over smaller ones, but the extent of the imbalance would be attenuated. In order to ascertain the potential effects of the square-root method, simulations of the MC elections have been developed. More specifically, Table 6 shows what happens when the square-root method is applied in two MC election scenarios: Turin, characterized by a comparatively high demographic incidence of smaller municipalities, and Rome, where conversely the capital city accounts for two-thirds of the metro city's population. The "Capital / A ratio" (already seen in Table 2) is a rough measure of territorial disparity and indicates how many potential voters in the A bracket need to be put together to counterbalance the electoral weight of a single CCV. In Turin, this measure is cut in half when the square-root method is implemented; in Rome it shrinks by two-thirds; in both cases CCVs continue to enjoy considera-

Table 6. Implementation of the square-root method in two MC elections.

Demographic bracket	% Pop.	% √ Pop.	Current vote weight	Square-root vote weight	% Current actual weighted votes	% Square-root actual weighted votes	Δ Actual weighted votes (% points)
Turin							
A	9.5	13.1	4	6	8.9	13.3	+4.4
B	7.9	12.0	13	19	8.1	11.7	+3.6
C	9.6	13.2	26	33	10.4	13.0	+2.6
D	16.8	17.4	45	44	18.0	17.4	−0.6
E	17.4	17.7	81	78	18.7	17.8	−0.9
F/G/H/I (capital)	38.8	26.5	853	646	35.9	26.9	−9.0
Total	100	100			100	100	
Capital / A ratio			213	108			
Rome							
A	1.4	6.2	4	11	2.2	6.1	+3.9
B	0.9	4.8	12	41	1.4	4.8	+3.4
C	3.8	9.9	23	38	6.0	10.0	+4.0
D	9.2	15.5	38	39	14.9	15.2	+0.3
E	18.3	21.9	79	58	29.9	21.9	−8.0
F/G/H/I (capital)	66.4	41.7	918	850	45.5	42.0	−3.5
Total	100	100			100	100	
Capital / A ratio			230	77			

Table 7. Political outcomes (list) of the implementation of the square-root method in the 2021-22 MC elections.

	Current (%)			Square-root (± percentage points)			Seat transfers	Capital / A weight ratio	
	Centre-right	Centre-left	Other	Centre-right	Centre-left	Other		Current	Square-root
Reggio C.	35.4	**54.4**	10.2	+0.2	−0.3	+0.2	1 centre-left → other centre-left	46	29
Venice	**60.2**	34.7	5.1	−0.7	+0.9	−0.2	1 Five-Star Movement → centre-left	31	4
Bologna	27.5	**66.6**	6.0	−0.4	−0.3	+0.7	None	45	9
Milan	43.4	**49.3**	7.3	+1.0	−1.1	+0.1	2 centre-left and centre-right → "civic" and other centre-right	143	18
Rome	33.0	**58.0**	9.0	−4.6	+5.2	−0.5	1 centre-right → centre-left	230	77
Turin	32.7	**59.2**	8.1	−0.3	+0.3	−0.1	None	213	108
Naples	20.4	**53.9**	25.7	−0.6	−0.4	+1.0	1 Five-Star Movement → centre-left	141	10
Genova	**66.3**	33.7	-	−0.5	+0.5	–	None	42	35

ble firepower. On the assumption that turnout would not change, the incidence of brackets A, B and C on weighted actual votes increases (compared to the current situation) in both contexts, and the incidence of brackets E to I decreases. In any case, the square-root method would, by and large, curtail the electoral firepower accruing to voters from larger towns without seriously challenging the key role of capital cities within the electoral system's framework.

Another interesting issue is whether the adoption of the square-root method would have any effect on the political outcomes of the MC elections. Again adopting the (unrealistic) assumption that voter turnout would remain the same and the (more realistic) assumption that the square-root method would not induce any voter to cast a ballot for a list that is different from the one actually chosen within the current system, Table 7 shows what would happen in terms of votes cast for the competing lists in each MC election. In 6 of the 8 elections, the majority would have a slightly smaller margin of victory (in terms of *weighted votes*), almost always by less than one percentage point. Rome is an exception: the majority would increase its margin of victory by more than 5 percentage points.

In three elections (Bologna, Rome and Turin) there would be no change in the overall *allocation of seats*. In each of two elections (Venice and Naples), the Five-Star Movement would relinquish a seat to the centre-left; in both cases the majority would remain untouched (strangely enough, in Naples the centre-left would be weaker in terms of weighted votes but stronger in terms of seats). In Reggio Calabria, one seat would shift from one centre-left list to the other, without changing the majority/minority balance. In Rome, the centre-right would yield one seat to the centre-left, further strengthening the latter's majority.

The MC election in Milan would feature the most significant change: besides the transfer of one seat from one centre-right list to another (within the minority), the centre-left would surrender one seat to the "civic" list, thus endangering the stability of the centre-left majority (which would control only 12 of the 24 elective seats), which is already vulnerable (as previously argued) to potentially irreplaceable vacancies. One could argue that this simulated outcome faithfully reflects the fact that the centre-left did not earn the majority of the weighted votes.

In each voting arena, unsurprisingly, implementation of the square-root method would appreciably reduce the "capital / A ratio" (although the contraction would be marginal in Genova, where the ratio's value was already rather small); in four contexts, the ratio would decrease by at least 80%. Although the changes envisaged here may not be particularly large, one can argue that the above-mentioned turnout assumption is unrealistic: if the square-root method were implemented, more voters from smaller municipalities would have a greater incentive to vote and list promoters would have a greater incentive to encourage wider participation.[12]

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[12] No square-root method simulations were attempted as regards the allocation of preferences among candidates on a list-by-list basis. It is highly probable that changing the ballot weights would lead to different behaviour as regards the expression of preferences for candidates.

7. OTHER TENTATIVE SOLUTIONS

The population size of voters' home municipalities is the *only* facet of "territory" that is contemplated (via demographic weighting) by the MC electoral system. And this study has developed evidence-based arguments showing that this confers an overpowering influence upon the capital city component of the candidate pool and, especially, the electorate. Other dysfunctional features of the voting rules have also been identified. Are there sensible changes that could be introduced to address these issues?

Perhaps the most impactful reform would be to base territorial representation not (or not only) on municipalities' mere population size, but on criteria reflecting socio-economic conditions. A metro city's municipalities could be grouped into a small number of districts, each sharing socio-economic traits and expressing similar needs (mountain communities vs. seaside communities; rural vs. urban communities; prevalence of manufacturing vs. service vs. agricultural sectors; proximity to mobility opportunities, health services, schools; and so on), *regardless* of their population size. Each district could have a certain number of pre-assigned MC seats, and their occupants could be voted for exclusively by mayors and councillors of municipalities belonging to the district. Such provincial zoning arrangements have already been largely identified and are used for various administrative purposes.

There are several other smaller-scale amendments, with correspondingly limited effects, that could be enacted. For example, rather than using resident *population* size to determine a municipality's bracket membership, one could use the size of its general *electorate*. This could shift some "weight" towards smaller towns, which tend to have a lower incidence of underage citizens, and away from larger ones. Moreover, population size includes residents who are foreigners, and their differential distribution among metro cities' municipalities could appreciably contribute to defining weight coefficients. To the extent that demographic weighting is maintained, the currently adopted correction thresholds (no municipality can express more than 45% of potential weighted votes, no bracket can express more than 35%) could be further lowered. Promoters of MC lists could be obliged to limit the number of candidates from capital cities or, more in general, higher demographic brackets, or, vice versa, include a minimum number of candidates from lower brackets.

In terms of institutional sustainability, the issues identified in the preceding section could be addressed in several ways. Firstly, and perhaps most simply, one could simply eliminate the rule entailing the forfeiture of MC seats when their occupants leave their elected roles in municipal governments. This consideration raises the question: does an MCer's legitimacy derive primarily from her being elected in her original municipal context, or from being chosen in subsequent MC voting? If the second option seems reasonable, so does the elimination of the cited rule. Secondly, if such forfeitures continue to be maintained, the minimum list length could be raised, at least to the number of contended seats, to strengthen any given list's ability to supply substitutes. In other words, promoters of an MC list could be obliged to nominate at least 14/18/24 candidates, rather than half that number. Indeed, to avoid the danger of "exhausted lists" and irreplaceable vacancies, the minimum number of candidates could be even *higher* than the number of seats in play: there is no patent downside to lengthening minimum and maximum list sizes. Thirdly, candidates receiving no preferences whatsoever (or another non-zero minimum threshold) could be barred from access to MC seats. Although it could aggravate the "exhausted list" problem, this measure would also, possibly, motivate list promoters to encourage their electorates' to distribute their preferences among a wider number of candidates.

8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The legal framework governing any election can be interpreted as an institution exerting two primary effects on participation and voting: it provides *opportunity structures* and shapes *information costs* (Peters 2018). Italian MC elections, and their use of demographic weighting, are an effective example of this interpretative approach. MC elections, as regulated by the Delrio Law, are conducted via an indirect, list-based system heavily shaped by demographic weighting. Larger towns, especially capitals, tend to be governed by established party organizations, giving them a clear advantage, right from the beginning, in expressing the political "supply", i.e. lists and candidates. Smaller towns, which more typically rely on local grass-roots dynamics and competition among "civic" lists, intrinsically face greater obstacles to creating attractive MC lists. In fact, MC list formation is indisputably characterized by the persistence of traditional party identities.

Centralized coordination of both list formation and, especially, voter behaviour is clearly incentivized by the MC electoral system. In all of the capital cities (and, indeed, in all towns with at least 100,000 residents), municipal councils comprise just a few dozen MC voters (see second half of Table 2) who – by design – account for a significant share of electoral firepower; it is predictably easier for established political actors to organize lists, recruit candidates and coach voters. (In order to be included in an MC election, a list must be formally supported by 5% of potential voters, i.e., in the metro cities examined here, by at least several dozen to almost 200 individuals.) Smaller councils need to coordinate a much larger number of voters, distributed among a much higher number of socially and geographically diverse towns, to attain a minimal threshold of efficacy. It is not surprising that MC elections are accompanied by a low degree of public visibility; campaigns essentially consist of activities aiming to mobilize voters and provide them with behaviour guidance that takes place behind closed doors.

The patterns emerging from weighted ballots cast within each list strongly suggest that the expression of preferences in favour of individual candidates is, again, highly co-ordinated, especially among CCVs. For most lists, the distribution of preferences indicates a high level of awareness among "heavy" voters of the considerable power they wield: one need only examine turnout patterns, the quasi-obligation to attain CCV support in order to be elected, the fact that most candidates supported by CCVs receive at most two preferences from them, and the high incidence of "token" candidates (mostly women[13]) with no preferences at all.

MC elections, in other words, display suboptimal performance from the standpoint of general election quality criteria, such as provision of effective representation, accessible and meaningful elections, generation of stable and efficient governance, accountability, opposition oversight and voter anonymity. Many of the dysfunctional features of the MC electoral system had emerged in the previous elections (Gasperoni and Caporale 2021), and some of them could have been addressed (at least in the construction of the candidate lists) in the 2021-22 cycle – but they were *not*: the institutional and political learning curve has been remarkably flat.

The need to amend the metro city governance structure has nonetheless attained some visibility, due to a decision handed down by the Constitutional Court (ruling no. 240/2021), which underlines the probable unconstitutionality of the Delrio Law's provision that "automatically" assigns the post of metropolitan mayor to the mayor of the metro city's capital. This measure entails a lack of representation and political responsibility towards citizens residing in towns that are not the capital (and who therefore have no say in the election of the capital's mayor). The Court, however, did not go as far as to express a formal judgment of constitutional illegitimacy and preferred to merely admonish Parliament and call for a suitable legislative intervention (De Donno 2022).

A variety of bills aiming to overhaul the Delrio Law have been presented in the current Italian Parliament, spurred into action mainly by the Constitutional Court's ruling and the need to address the uncertain status of the provincial level of government in light of the negative outcome of the 2016 constitutional referendum. The proposed laws offer an array of novel amendments to the current system. The most recurrent measure involves the direct election of the both the metropolitan mayor and the MC, a solution that substantively represents a return to the prior provincial election system (and could be motivated merely by the will to generate additional selective incentives to distribute among party activists); the direct election of the MC would undoubtedly mean foregoing some of indirect voting's indisputable advantages (less cumbersome procedures, lower expenditure, potentially more competent voters). Other proposals pertaining to election norms would extend the Delrio system for selecting provincial presidents (indirect election, demographic weighting) to metropolitan mayors and introduce the option of double gender preferences in MC elections. None of the potential amendments currently being discussed in Parliament directly addresses the problems identified in this article, nor pays any attention to the issue of demographic weighting, nor involves the possible remedies laid out in the previous two sections.

A compromise that *does* preserve both demographic weighting and the conferral of greater powers to larger towns is the "square-root method" explained in Section 6. The simulations developed there show that this alternative scheme would attenuate the current imbalance and introduce non-radical changes in the political outcomes. The positive changes could arguably be more marked if turnout were to be positively affected by square-root weighting. More generally, however, the square-root method and the bulk of parliamentary bills under discussion seem to subscribe acritically to a problematic, latent, yet crucial assumption of the Delrio Law: municipalities having roughly the same population size

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[13] A critical issue *not* addressed in this article is *gender representation*. The Delrio Law requires each list to include no more than 60% of candidates of the same sex. Operational only since 2017 and clearly aimed at promoting the election of women in MCs, the measure has not been particularly successful: simply including women in candidate lists does not *guarantee* their election. Of the 33 lists competing in the 8 MC elections examined here, all (obviously) satisfied the requirement, but only 6 of them featured an equal number of men and women (or more women than men) among their candidates. Only 13% of female candidates (none in Reggio Calabria, just one in Naples) were elected. The *majority* of female candidates received *no preferences at all*, and over two-thirds of candidates receiving no preferences were women, suggesting that the inclusion of women among MC candidates is little more than an empty symbolic gesture (see Caporale 2017; Caporale and Gasperoni 2016).

(and potentially *nothing else* in common) comprise a viable, interest-based community. It bears repeating: MC elections implement just one criterion (municipalities' population size) in their operational definition of territorial representation.

The 8 MCs that lie at the heart of this article have jurisdiction over a variety of important policy areas and host (according to the 2011 census used for determining demographic weights) a population of over 15 million people, who deserve better.

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