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A new normal? The EP elections 2024 amidst old and new challenges. Special issue introduction

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Abstract. The special issue addresses whether recent electoral dynamics characterised by high levels of disengagement, a more polarized conflict, and the establishment of challenger parties as (potentially) governing parties, should be no longer seen as exceptional in themselves, but rather as symptomatic of a political competition that is in fact representing a 'new normal'. It focuses on the European Parliament elections 2024. These elections have provided us with an important opportunity to assess whether these dynamics will structure electoral competition also in the European arena as should be the case according to the second order model which predicts that EU elections are seen as less important than national elections by voters, parties and the media; and that the EU electoral arena is influenced by national party competition (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Or, contrary to the second order model, whether European elections will be played on a different playground compared to national elections. To this end, the special issue presents comparative contributions (but also case studies of particular relevance) capable of clarifying how the competition between parties is structured and which factors have influenced voters' choices at the ballot box.

Keywords: 2024 EP elections, EU party competition, EU voting determinants.

In 2019, the European Parliament elections took place amidst a turbulent political landscape. Just a few years prior, the United Kingdom had exited the European Union. In addition to this, the migration crisis, and the lingering effects of the Eurozone crisis, had propelled the rise of challenger parties, particularly right-wing populist parties, in several countries. However, the anticipated surge of challengers was rather modest in the end. While the European People's Party and Social Democrats lost their majority in the European Parliament for the first time since 1979, it was the Greens and Liberals who achieved the best results.

Fast forward five years. Just months away from the 2024 European Parliament election date, the stage once again seemed favourable for challenger parties. The aggression of a sovereign state (Ukraine) by Russia, the resurgence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with renewed fears of terrorist attacks in Europe, have effectively plunged the continent into a state of crisis, with the EU often uncertain or powerless in the face of these exter-

nal threats. At the same time, internal political dynamics within individual member States had shown a steady electoral strengthening of radical right-wing parties. In Italy, for example, Brothers of Italy (FdI), led by Giorgia Meloni and heir to the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI), had won the 2022 elections, leading to the formation of a centre-right government together with another right-wing populist party (League) and a centre-right party (Go Italy). More recently, in Portugal, the populist party Chega significantly increased its parliamentary representation after the March 2024 elections, asserting itself as a central player in the country's political landscape. In France, political competition seems by now articulated prevalently along the conflict between Macron and the radical-right Rassemblement National, which remains extremely competitive electorally. Furthermore, political conflict is becoming increasingly polarized almost everywhere in Europe, not only ideologically but also affectively, a clue that (despite the increasing levels of alienation from politics of large sectors of the society, as shown by the increasing levels of abstentionism across the Western world) political conflict is becoming more intense.

From a certain perspective, these dynamics could be seen as a continuation of what was already happening in 2019. The 2024 scenario could in some ways be the continuation of a process of consolidation of challenger political parties that could once again aspire to play a central role in the future of the member states and the European Union (especially in a turbulent international context, as described earlier). A consolidation that both the external environment and internal dynamics are contributing to accelerate. Against this backdrop, this special issue asks if these electoral dynamics characterised by high levels of disengagement, a more polarized conflict, and the establishment of challenger parties as (potentially) governing parties, should be no longer seen as exceptional in themselves, but rather as symptomatic of a political competition that is in fact representing a 'new normal'. By 'new normal' we refer here to a context of political competition in which previously exceptional dynamics – such as the structural presence of challenger parties, heightened polarization coupled with political disengagement, the extreme politicization of crises – have become routinized features of the electoral landscape. The term therefore captures the idea that these phenomena are no longer temporary deviations from a presumed stable order, but rather constitute the baseline conditions under which voters and parties now operate.

The special issue addresses this question by focusing on the European Parliament elections 2024. These

elections have provided us with an important opportunity to assess whether these dynamics are structuring electoral competition also in the European arena as should be the case according to the second order model which predicts that EU elections are seen as less important than national elections by voters, parties and the media; and that the EU electoral arena is influenced by national party competition (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Or, contrary to the second order model, whether European elections are played on a different playground compared to national elections. To this end, the special issue presents comparative contributions (but also case studies of particular relevance) capable of clarifying how the competition between parties is structured and which factors have influenced voters' choices at the ballot box.

Seddone et al. (2025) examine citizens' engagement within the digital arena of the 2024 European Parliament election campaign in Italy, offering strong evidence in support of the second-order framework. The study explores how the online visibility and contentious framing of EU actors and issues influenced users' interactions on social media by analysing the Facebook communication strategies of Italian party leaders. EU-related content is operationalized along three dimensions – Domestication, Vertical Europeanization, and Horizontal Europeanization – to assess their respective effects on engagement, measured through likes, comments, and shares. The results point to the centrality of Domestication in fostering engagement: posts that intertwined national and European elements consistently attracted higher levels of interaction, suggesting that citizens engage more readily with EU content when it is framed through a domestic lens. Conversely, posts focusing exclusively on Vertical Europeanization – that is, on EU institutions – were associated with lower engagement across all metrics. This pattern aligns with the second-order election theory (Reif and Schmitt 1980), which holds that European issues tend to be perceived as secondary unless domestically contextualized. The limited impact of Horizontal Europeanization further underscores the persistence of nationally anchored perspectives in online political discourse.

Turning to party competition, Carteny et al. (2025) study the effects of the polycrisis on differences in party competition between the 2019 and 2024 EP elections. Specifically, they ask if the salience and importance of key European issues increased in the 2024 EP elections compared to 2019. Have the positions of the political parties, in particular between Eurosceptic and mainstream parties, become more polarised? To address these questions, their special issue contribution examines whether and how Eurosceptic and mainstream par-

ties have emphasised different types of European issues during the 2024 EP elections compared to 2019, as well as their positioning towards these issues. Carteny et al. draw on 71 manifestos from nine European countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy and Spain), to study issue emphasis as well as the positions parties have taken on key European issues: polity, migration and environment. They find that the salience of the three key European issues has increased across the board. In addition, the positions of political parties on key issues show diverse trajectories. In the 2024 European Parliament election, far-right Eurosceptic parties have adopted less critical stances towards the EU polity and migration compared to 2019, probably to increase their chances of governing. In contrast, mainstream and far-left parties have tended to adopt more critical positions, especially on migration. The findings offer a more nuanced perspective on the phenomenon of polarisation. While there has been a decline in the polarisation of views on the EU polity issue, with mainstream and Eurosceptic parties becoming less ideologically distant from one another, the environmental issue has demonstrated a slight increase in polarisation due to varying degrees of negativity.

Notwithstanding this, the EU still played a significant role in shaping voters' party preferences in 2024. Focusing on the Italian case and drawing on original survey data combined with expert evaluations of party positions from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, Carrieri et al. (2025) examine the positional distance between voters and parties on the EU and its impact on vote choice. The 2024 European Parliament elections in Italy provide a compelling case for reassessing the relevance of EU issue voting in a country long marked by fluctuating Euroscepticism both among voters and parties. While second-order election theory traditionally suggests that European contests are dominated by domestic concerns, the mounting politicization of the EU – intensified by successive crises – has opened new avenues for issue-based voting. Italy, once firmly pro-European, has become a critical testing ground given rising anti-EU sentiment, the success of radical right actors, and the unprecedented presence of a government dominated by Eurosceptic forces (FdI and the League) during the 2024 elections. Results from the analyses show that EU issue voting significantly influenced electoral choices: citizens were more likely to support parties whose EU positions were closely aligned with their own. Importantly, this effect was not limited to Eurosceptic forces but extended across the entire political spectrum, benefiting both Europhile parties (PD, AVS, FI) and Eurosceptic ones (League, M5S, FdI). EU issue voting thus emerged as a

cross-cutting determinant of electoral outcomes, challenging the notion that it primarily advantages anti-EU actors. Moreover, and alternatively to the second-order model, these findings confirm that Europe mattered (once again), echoing evidence from other national contexts as well (Braun 2021; Carrieri et al. 2024).

That the economy matters for voting is a fairly uncontested matter. However, most studies on economic voting focus on the national level. Okolikj and Lewis-Beck (2025), in their special issue contribution ask what happens when the election operates on the supranational level, as is the case in European Parliament elections. Specifically, does the economic voter in a member state assigns the EU significant responsibility for national economic conditions in European Parliamentary contexts? The authors build on existing research by arguing that the strength of the economic vote is stable over time and space. Focussing specifically on the European Parliament elections of 2024, Okolikj and Lewis-Beck propose that the EU economic voting pattern will show no breaks from external shocks, such as the Great Recession or Brexit. Based on European Election Surveys from 2004 to 2024, and focussing on the six founding members (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands), the authors show that (positive) economic perceptions are a robust predictor of the incumbency vote also across European elections. This effect is stable across time and space. In fact, Okolikj and Lewis-Beck find that economic perceptions are the strongest predictor of the incumbency vote. Events such as the Eurozone crisis, Brexit, Covid, and the election of Donald Trump appear not to have influenced the economic vote. Hence, from an economic perspective, there is little evidence of a 'new normal': the strength and stability of economic voting remain remarkably robust, even in 2024.

A fifth paper by Castaldo et al. (2025) focuses on the issue of discontent and takes a deep dive into populism and affective polarisation, two of the most influential political phenomena of our time and key explanatory factors of today's politics and voting behaviour. Despite a vast political science literature on both populism and affective polarisation, the connections between these two concepts remain under-investigated. Both of them describe the conflict between ingroup ("us") and outgroup ("them") individuals. Nonetheless, although in the first case, the conflict pits the people against the elite, in the second case conflict occurs between party supporters and other parties (e.g., leaders, members). In their paper, Castaldo et al. ask a number of questions in relation to the rise of populists and affective sentiments. Specifically, they aim to uncover to what extent populism and affective polarisation affected voting behaviour in the

2024 European elections, and whether the two phenomena have a mutually reinforcing effect on voting. Focusing on the Italian context to shed light on the dynamics and effects that affective polarisation and support for populist parties produce on voting behaviour, they use new data from a dedicated survey conducted in Italy during the 2024 European elections. The findings show that that populism and affective polarisation have opposite effects on turnout. Affective polarisation increases the likelihood of voting, whereas at least certain forms of populism are negatively associated with turnout. This suggests that when individuals delegitimize the role of political representatives and perceive an unbridgeable divide between ordinary people and the elite, they are less likely to vote in elections. The authors observe a similar opposing relationship among the leading independent variables concerning voting preferences. Affective polarisation is significantly and positively associated with voting for parties that possess a strong identity and/or represent the more straightforward choice to prevent the victory of the “other” camp or out-group. Differently, anti-establishment populism is significantly related to voting for populist parties. A key contribution of the paper is in showing that although populism and affective polarisation may not be conflicting attitudes at the individual level, they do have opposing effects on voter turnout and vote choice.

Moving to voters on the left, Improta and Mannoni (2025) explore the motivations of voters who supported the Greens and Left Alliance (*Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra*, AVS) in the 2024 European Elections in Italy. Specifically, they investigate whether the rapid increase in popularity of AVS was primarily driven by ideological alignment, policy positions on salient issues, candidate appeal, leaders’ character, or other factors. Leveraging original online survey data ($n = 147$), combined with more detailed qualitative evidence obtained through interviews, Improta and Mannoni delve into the primary motivations for voting AVS. The quantitative analysis of survey data suggests that these motivations revolve around ideological alignment, particularly with environmentalism, social justice, and left-wing values. AVS is seen as the only genuine left-wing option by many, contrasting with other political options. The party’s coherence, radical stance, and trust in candidates further bolster its appeal. The analysis of the interviews confirmed the combination of ideological commitment and issue-based considerations. While respondents differed in the specific concerns they prioritized, their pathways to AVS show a high degree of internal consistency. AVS was rarely perceived as a first-choice party in absolute terms but rather as the only viable

option within the existing political landscape. A recurring theme across the interviews was the perception that AVS remained the only political force in Italy that still adhered to leftist principles without compromise. Although AVS remains a minor player in Italian politics, its performance in these elections suggests an opening for more radical left-wing positions within the Italian party system. Whether this momentum can be sustained in future national elections will depend on AVS’s ability to consolidate its support base and attract new voters, particularly those encouraged by its recent electoral gains.

Rather than pointing to a wholesale transformation of European electoral politics, the contributions to this special issue suggest a more nuanced picture in which continuity and change coexist. Challenger parties – particularly those on the radical right – are no longer episodic protest actors but have become central, credible contenders for government. In fact, party competition is evolving in nuanced ways: radical-right Eurosceptic parties have moderated their positions on EU polity and migration, arguably to appear as viable governing forces, while mainstream and far-left parties have in some cases become more critical. Polarization itself appears issue-specific, with conflict on environmental issues intensifying while ideological distance on EU polity has narrowed – even though the EU issue remained a key determinant of voting behaviour in the 2024 EP elections. At the same time, political competition is increasingly polarized along affective lines, producing deeper emotional divides between camps. Yet, this ‘new normal’ operates alongside enduring mechanisms of the ‘old normal’: while the EU issue has become increasingly relevant for voting behaviour, citizens continue to engage with it primarily when framed through a domestic lens. At the same time, economic voting remains robust and stable, confirming that the basic logics of democratic accountability continue to structure voter choice. This hybrid equilibrium is also reflected in voters’ strategic behaviour: as the Italian case of AVS illustrates, while new issues such as the environment have entered into voters’ considerations at the ballot box, some choose genuinely leftist parties not as their first preference but as the most effective counterweight to less-preferred alternatives – an instance of spatial competition dynamics well known since Downs (1957). What emerges, therefore, is not a rupture but a reconfigured competitive landscape where crisis politics and the consolidation of challenger parties have become routine features, interacting with stable behavioural patterns.

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Politicization and domestication of European issues: Italian citizen engagement on social media during the 2024 European election campaign

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Abstract. The second-order election (SOE) paradigm suggests that citizens generally perceive European elections as less important than national ones. However, recent research shows that European Union (EU) politicization has increased the salience of its institutions and policies in national political debates. This growing prominence is often accompanied by contentiousness, marked by critical and negative tones from political actors and the media. Moreover, progressive expansion of EU competencies has blurred the line between domestic and European politics, fostering the normalization and domestication of EU issues. This paper investigates how Italian citizens engaged with social media during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign. Specifically, it examines whether politicization and domestication influenced citizen engagement – measured through likes, shares, and comments. Analytically, the paper utilizes original data comprising the complete set of Facebook posts published by the leaders of the five principal Italian parties during 2024 EP elections. Our results suggest that Domestication may represent a driver for social media engagement compared to Europeanized contents. Negative sentiment is confirmed to be a factor eliciting users' interaction with social media contents, but when applied to EU related issues the interaction produces mixed results.

Keywords: election campaign, European Parliament elections, Italy, party leaders, social media.

INTRODUCTION

The theory of second-order elections posits (SOE) that citizens are used to interpret European Parliament (EP) electoral contests as less salient, with lower stakes than national political elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). This perception tends to reduce voter turnout and encourages voters to prioritize domestic concerns – even in EU-level elections (Boomgaarden et al., 2013). From the perspective of political communication research, scholars have

examined the rhetoric and communication strategies employed by political actors, voter perceptions of key issues, and the nature of media coverage during European Parliament elections (i.e., Gattermann, 2013; De Vreese et al., 2006). This literature converges on the idea that issue and actor visibility strongly shapes perceived importance. Consequently, an increase in visibility and salience is associated with a heightened perception of importance at the individual level (De Vreese et al., 2006). This is especially relevant to the SOE framework, as the past decade has seen both deeper European integration and rising salience of EU political actors. The advancement of the European integration process has deepened the interaction between domestic and European levels of governance, leading to significant overlaps in the areas where national and European Union (EU) institutions exercise their competencies (Hooghe and Marks 2009; 2019). This has contributed to generating tensions and driving processes of politicization of the EU, fueling sovereignist and populist demands and rhetoric (Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2013; Kneuer 2019), as a result, quite frequently, the assimilation of the EU within domestic political routines is accompanied by a pronounced sense of contentiousness (Pirro et al., 2018). In addition, as confirmed by the COVID-19 health crisis and the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine (Mudde, 2024), global crises have underscored the central role of European institutions also in domestic political agenda (Braun and Grande, 2021). In this evolving context, political actors have increasingly prioritized EU-related issues in their communication and political strategies (Silva & Proksch 2022; Lehmann 2023). This growing visibility has been enabled by fluid and transnational media environments – especially social media platforms, which amplify EU visibility and facilitate cross-border public debate among member states (Ruiz-Soler 2020; Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2019; de Zúñiga, 2015).

Building on this, the study explores whether – and to what extent – the online visibility and contentious framing of EU actors and issues shaped citizen engagement on social media during the 2024 European Parliament elections, focusing on the Italian case. Specifically, we analyze the Facebook communication strategies of Italian party leaders to assess how the salience of EU topics – operationalized as Domestication, Vertical Europeanization, and Horizontal Europeanization – affects user engagement, measured via likes, comments, and shares. The article is structured as follows: the next section presents the theoretical framework; the following outlines the research design, data, and coding procedures; and the third section reports the empirical findings. The conclusion discusses the main results and their implications.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Reif and Schmitt's (1980) Second-Order Election (SOE) model has long provided the dominant lens through which European Parliament (EP) elections are interpreted – portraying them as low-salience contests, often instrumentalized by voters to express approval or disapproval of their national governments. As a consequence, turnout tends to be lower, and electoral choices are primarily driven by domestic rather than European considerations. Yet, recent transformations in both the political and media landscapes have begun to challenge this paradigm.

Indeed, scholarly literature underscores that the EU has become significantly more prominent in domestic public spheres across member states (Risse, 2015), potentially elevating EP elections importance in the eyes of voters and altering typical electoral dynamics (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). The broadening of policy domains shared between EU institutions and national governments – further accelerated by transnational crises such as the financial downturn, migration waves, and the COVID-19 emergency – has intensified the interaction between domestic and supranational political systems (Crespy et al., 2024). This, in turn, has significantly amplified the visibility of the EU as a political actor (Meijers, 2013; Statham & Trenz, 2012; 2015; Nicoli et al., 2024). The increasing visibility of the EU in domestic political arenas is often seen as a necessary condition – or at least a facilitating factor – for legitimizing the Union and its policies, thus narrowing the gap between EU institutions and European citizens (Koopmans & Statham, 2002; Monza & Anduiza, 2016).

This trend is conceptualized in the literature as the Europeanization of public spheres, understood as the progressive integration of EU-related content into national political agendas (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004). Europeanization manifests in two distinct forms. Vertical Europeanization channels communication between national actors and supranational EU institutions, foregrounding Brussels-level bodies and their representatives. Horizontal Europeanization describes the transnational circulation of political messages and narratives among member states, whereby national public spheres intersect and confer joint visibility on the same issues – an effect that becomes especially pronounced during cross-border crises. Paradoxically, the more European issues are embedded within domestic debates, the more they become sites of political contestation. In this sense, Euroscepticism has actively contributed to the Europeanization of national public spheres (Dutceac Segesten & Bossetta, 2019a; 2019b). Eurosceptic parties

frequently shape public debate by attributing blame to European institutions and critically addressing EU policies and procedures. By granting visibility to Eurosceptic voices, media attention – despite the negative framing – contributes indirectly to the Europeanization of public discourse (i.e., Caiani & Guerra, 2017; Boomgaarden et al., 2013). Moreover, media narratives often frame Euroscepticism both as a pan-European trend and a nationally rooted phenomenon, reinforcing the salience of such debates through mechanisms of Horizontal Europeanization – whereby EU-related concerns circulate and gain traction across member states (De Wilde et al., 2014; Gattermann & Vasilopoulou, 2016). The intersection of visibility and contention is encapsulated in the concept of politicization, which reflects how increased engagement with European matters transforms them into central issues of domestic political conflict (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; De Wilde & Zürn, 2012), reinforcing the idea of a subordinate role of EU politics. As a result, EU affairs are often reframed through a national lens that privileges domestic priorities, turning technocratic matters into politically charged topics – precisely as posited by the SOE paradigm (Alt et al., 2023).

The transnational nature of social media makes them particularly suited to fostering Europeanization, as they enable cross-border communication and the exchange of political ideas beyond the limits of traditional media (Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2019; Ruiz-Soler, 2020). By connecting diverse national publics, they allow citizens and political actors to engage with issues in other EU countries, fostering a sense of shared identity and mutual understanding and contributing to the emergence of a shared European public sphere (Risse, 2011). Furthermore, even when social media environments are conducive to populist and Eurosceptic anti-elite narratives against the EU, they contribute to enhance mechanisms of Vertical Europeanization (Dutceac Segesten & Bossetta, 2019a). Recent studies further indicate that the domestic dimension remains a key driver in shaping citizens' attention to European issues on social media platforms (Heidenreich et al., 2022). Likewise, Bene et al. (2022) show that posts centered on national topics consistently generate higher engagement levels than those focused solely on European content. Social media thus play a critical role in amplifying the visibility and salience of EU-related themes in the digital public sphere. Given that conflict and controversy drive virality (Trilling et al., 2016), social media platforms provide a fertile ground for politicization. Content framed in negative or confrontational terms tends to capture users' attention and elicit strong emotional reactions, thereby increasing engagement and circulation (Jost et al., 2020). Algorithmically

curated environments prioritize reactive content, incentivizing emotionally charged or divisive posts that are more likely to trigger interaction and diffuse rapidly (Wollebæk et al., 2019). Aware of this logic, political actors strategically adapt their messaging to optimize user engagement (Bossetta, 2018). The politicization of EU-related issues fits seamlessly within this logic, as emotionally charged narratives – particularly those emphasizing conflicts between national sovereignty and EU governance – tend to resonate with Eurosceptic audiences (Boomgaarden & De Vreese, 2016). Such dynamics are especially salient in Eurosceptic rhetoric, where leaders rely on negative framing and blame attribution to mobilize support and differentiate themselves from political competitors (De Wilde et al., 2014; Dutceac Segesten & Bossetta, 2019a; 2019b). However, although Vertical and Horizontal Europeanization structure the presence of European matters within national debates – through interactions with EU institutions and cross-border exchanges of political issues among member states, respectively – these dynamics alone do not determine how such issues are domestically perceived or contested (Petithomme 2010). This is where Domestication comes into play. Rather than presenting EU affairs as detached supranational concerns, domestication embeds them within national political narratives, often assigning direct responsibility to the EU for domestic developments (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). Far from reducing the relevance of EU issues, this reframing enhances their resonance by aligning them with domestic agendas and rhetorical logics (Statham & Koopmans, 2009). Domestication typically unfolds through two complementary mechanisms: first, by linking EU policies to their concrete implications for national sovereignty, governance, and public policy; second, by embedding European topics within domestic political competition, where they are refracted through partisan agendas, media framing, and public opinion dynamic (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). Through this mechanism, EU-related issues become more accessible and relatable for national audiences, yet simultaneously they become vulnerable to politicization (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014). In doing so, national actors may frame European matters either as strategic opportunities or as externally imposed constraints (De Wilde and Zürn, 2012). Although this process can enhance the domestic salience of European matters, it may paradoxically reinforce perceptions that EU affairs are subordinate or secondary to national political concerns. Social media platforms further intensify these dynamics: within these digital arenas, emotionally framed content – especially when anchored in national contexts – tends to attract greater public attention (Heiss et al.,

2019). Accordingly, when European issues are domesticated within social media narratives, they tend to resonate more strongly with national audiences. This interaction between national and European frames not only enhances the salience of EU-related content but also fosters higher levels of user engagement and participation. Building on this premise, we expect that social media posts blending national and European political elements will generate higher engagement than those exclusively centered on European content, as domestic framing tends to resonate more effectively with citizens. This expectation leads to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Social media posts that combine elements of both national and European politics elicit greater engagement than those referencing only European politics

Distinguishing between Vertical and Horizontal Europeanization provides a valuable framework for understanding which types of EU-related content drive citizen engagement. As suggested by Hypothesis 1, EU topics framed through a domestic perspective are more likely to engage the public, given their clearer policy implications and greater emotional resonance. By the same logic, we expect Vertical Europeanization to generate higher engagement than its horizontal counterpart.

This expectation rests on the notion that EU institutions and leaders gain greater visibility and perceived relevance when situated within national political debates. Vertical Europeanization connects supranational governance directly to domestic contexts, thereby enhancing the salience of EU actors and increasing the likelihood of user engagement (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004; Bene et al., 2022; De Wilde et al. 2022). Citizens are more likely to engage with content that links EU institutions to national policymaking, as such connections are perceived as more immediate and personally consequential. Notably, vertical Europeanization aligns closely with dominant populist and Eurosceptic narratives, which often portray EU institutions as remote, bureaucratic, and intrusive (Bossetta, 2018; Trilling et al., 2016). Framing the EU as an external force limiting national sovereignty evoke strong emotional reactions and fuels polarized debates. Since emotionally charged and contentious content is favored by social media algorithms (Jost et al., 2020), such narratives are more likely to gain visibility and stimulate online engagement. In contrast, Horizontal Europeanization tends to elicit lower engagement, as political events in other EU member states are often seen as less directly relevant to national audiences. Although transnational issues may attract attention during crises or when used as comparative references, they typically receive limited media coverage and trigger

weaker emotional responses (Bene et al., 2022). Consequently, posts focused on Horizontal Europeanization are less likely to spark online debate or provoke strong user reactions. Accordingly, we formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Social media posts emphasizing Vertical Europeanization will generate higher engagement than those focusing on Horizontal Europeanization.

DATA & METHODS

Case study

This exploratory study examines Italy as a strategically relevant case for analyzing social media engagement during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign. The Italian context is particularly instructive, due to a recent reconfiguration in how European issues are framed in both political discourse and media coverage, whereas increased salience is coupled with greater contentiousness and domesticated narratives (Cremonesi et al., 2019; Bobba et al. 2025). From an electoral perspective, Italy has witnessed a marked surge in support for Eurosceptic and populist parties, signaling a clear break from the traditional model of permissive consensus (Conti et al., 2020). Concurrently, European issues have become increasingly prominent in both public debate and party agendas. Italy is also notable for its high levels of social media penetration and for the extensive use of these platforms by political actors as tools for direct, unmediated communication. Populist parties, in particular, make intensive use of social media to disseminate content and mobilize engagement – often leveraging anti-elite narratives targeting EU institutions (Bobba, 2019). These dynamics render Italy a particularly compelling case for investigating how European issues are framed and received on social media platforms. Our empirical analyses draw on a dataset collecting Facebook direct communication by the leaders of the main Italian political parties during the 2024 European election campaign: Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia – Brothers of Italy), Antonio Tajani (Forza Italia – Go Italy), Matteo Salvini (Lega Salvini Premier – Lega for Salvini Premier), Giuseppe Conte (Movimento 5 Stelle – Five Star Movement), and Elly Schlein (Partito Democratico – Democratic Party). The analysis covers the period from April 20 to June 9, 2024 – spanning from the candidate list submission deadline to election day – comprising a total of 642 posts.

Our decision to focus on Facebook is motivated, first, by the availability of specialized analytical tools –

such as CrowdTangle – that allow for precise and systematic data collection on content characteristics and engagement metrics¹. Second, the choice is justified by Facebook’s enduring prominence and broad penetration across the Italian social media landscape. Although the digital ecosystem is constantly evolving and new platforms are increasingly integrated into political communication strategies, Facebook continues to host the largest follower communities among Italian leaders and parties (Reuters Institute, 2024). Thus, it provides an optimal analytical environment for this study, enabling comprehensive examination of engagement dynamics arising from leaders’ direct communications during electoral campaigns. Additionally, its digital architecture – marked by curated content and greater temporal persistence – renders it a reliable proxy for general public opinion compared to alternative platforms (Dutceac Segesten & Bossetta, 2019b).

We employed quantitative text analysis to guide the content classification. Our strategy adopts an actor-centered approach that prioritizes the identification of institutional referents – whether national, European, or transnational. This choice is grounded in a theoretical perspective that conceptualizes Europeanization as a shift in the locus of political authority and visibility, rather than a change in policy topics (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004; Statham & Trenz, 2015). Accordingly, we developed a comprehensive three-tiered dictionary designed to systematically capture relevant communicative markers in party leaders’ Facebook posts. The first tier catalogues national-level references, including major domestic political actors and institutions: members of Parliament (Chamber and Senate), Italian MEPs, cabinet ministers, undersecretaries, and the President of the Republic; as well as official titles of ministries, executive agencies, and non-elective public bodies (e.g., INPS), and regional governors. The second tier encompasses European-level references, covering the main actors and institutions of EU politics. These include the names of sitting European Commissioners and the Presidents of the Commission, Council, and Parliament; formal titles of EU institutions (e.g., European Parliament, Council of the EU, Court of Justice, Committee of the Regions); and references to Directorates-General, EU agencies, and other supranational entities. The third tier captures cross-national references by including the names of prime ministers (or equivalent heads of government) from the other twenty-six EU member states, the five

largest parties in each country – identified based on vote share in the most recent European elections – and the names of their current leaders. Drawing on this lexicon, we classified posts into three categories, identified by dichotomous variables: Vertical Europeanization, comprising references solely to EU-level institutions or actors; Horizontal Europeanization, encompassing mentions of political figures, parties, or issues from other member states; and Domestication, referring to posts that combine European references with national political dynamics. To assess sentiment, we employed SentITA – a dictionary-based classification tool that measures both the polarity and intensity of positive and negative sentiment. Unlike full-text assessments, SentITA operates at the sentence-segment level, enhancing accuracy by capturing nuanced sentiment variations. For each post, we computed the average positive and negative sentiment scores (Pelosi 2015)². Our dependent variables are the engagement metrics provided by CrowdTangle for each post: Likes, Comments, Shares, and Reactions. Each of these reflect a different degree of involvement and interaction with social media content (Bossetta et al, 2017), for each of them, we ran negative binomial regression models against the same set of independent variables. The independent variables include three dichotomous measures capturing Domestication, Vertical Europeanization, and Horizontal Europeanization. The models incorporate negative sentiment as a continuous variable. Given the substantial variation in posting frequency among the party leaders, we included a control variable accounting for the party leader’s account posting the content³. (See Table 1 for descriptives).

² To ensure the reliability of our empirical strategy, we validated the dictionary by applying it to a sample of Facebook posts published by Italian political leaders during the 2019 European Parliament election campaign. This subset of posts was manually coded by two independent coders, following criteria consistent with the theoretical framework of the three dimensions of Europeanization: Vertical Europeanization, Horizontal Europeanization, and Domestication. In addition to validating the classification of Europeanization categories, we also compared the negative sentiment orientation assigned by the coders with the results produced by the automated procedure. The high level of agreement observed across both dimensions – categorisation and sentiment – confirms the reliability of the proposed analytical tool, minimizing the risk of false positives. Further details on the validation procedure and reliability indicators are provided in Table 1A in Appendix.

³ To further account for potential sender effects, we estimated alternative models incorporating interaction terms between individual party leaders and the variables capturing Vertical Europeanization, Horizontal Europeanization, Domestication, and Negative Sentiment. As illustrated in the plots reported in the Appendix, some variation across leaders is observable; however, none of the interaction effects reach statistical significance. Based on these findings, we retained more parsimonious model specifications excluding interaction terms.

¹ CrowdTangle was a platform owned by Meta that enabled the collection of social media data for research purposes, but it was discontinued by Meta on August 14, 2024. <https://transparency.meta.com/it-it/researchtools/other-datasets/crowdtangle/>

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Likes count	642	5010.039	6490.607	73	66238
Comments count	642	1572.914	1999.675	19	15489
Shares count	642	686.569	1083.723	4	14401
Reactions count	642	951.218	1292.638	9	12107
Domestication	642	0.107	0.31	0	1
Vertical Europeanization	642	0.226	0.418	0	1
Horizontal Europeanization	642	0.069	0.253	0	1
Negative Sentiment	642	0.135	0.154	0	0.919
FdI -Giorgia Meloni	642	0.101	0.302	0	1
FI -Antonio Tajani	642	0.03	0.17	0	1
Lega – Matteo Salvini	642	0.494	0.5	0	1
M5S – Giuseppe Conte	642	0.202	0.402	0	1
PD – Elly Schlein	642	0.173	0.378	0	1

ANALYSES

As shown in Table 2, *Vertical Europeanization* dominates the narrative, accounting for an average of 22.6% of posts, while *Domestication* (10.7%) and *Horizontal Europeanization* (6.9%) appear significantly less central. This suggests that most leaders framed the EU primarily in terms of top-down constraints or conflicts, rather than through national reinterpretation or cross-border references. Notably, communication styles and thematic focus vary across leaders. Matteo Salvini and Giuseppe Conte stand out for both the volume and intensity of their campaigns. Salvini, the most active with 317 posts, maintains a strong emphasis on Vertical Europeanization, while Conte pairs a similarly high focus on this theme with the highest share of Domestication – reflecting a strategy that blends EU critique with national reframing. Antonio Tajani, despite posting the least, concentrates more than 30% of his limited content on Vertical Europeanization. Giorgia Meloni and Elly Schlein adopt a more restrained approach. Meloni shows minimal interest in Domestication and only a moderate focus on Vertical Europeanization. Schlein, while engaging more with EU-level frames, notably excludes any reference to Horizontal Europeanization, underscoring a selective framing of Europe-related content.

Patterns of engagement

Table 3 presents four negative binomial regression models estimating the effects of these frames on engagement, operationalized through likes, comments, shares, and reactions. These findings are further contextualized

through Figure 1, which visualizes the average marginal effects and associated uncertainty for each type of framing across these four forms of interaction. A clear and consistent pattern emerges. Posts that adopt a Domestication frame – blending EU issues with national political contexts – are more likely to stimulate user engagement. The coefficients for this frame are positive across all models and statistically significant for comments, shares, and reactions, indicating a robust association. While the coefficient for likes, despite positive, does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. These results support Hypothesis 1, confirming that users are more likely to engage with EU-related content when it is rendered contextually relevant and emotionally resonant through national framing. The marginal effects plotted in Figure 1 further reinforce this interpretation: although some confidence intervals overlap with zero, the point estimates for domesticated content remain consistently above the baseline, especially for comments and reactions – engagement forms typically associated with stronger expressive intent. In contrast, Vertical Europeanization – content referring directly to EU institutions or supranational actors – shows a clear negative association with engagement. The models indicate significantly lower expected counts for likes, comments, and reactions, while the effect on shares is not statistically significant. These results suggest that content centered on EU-level actors tends to dampen, rather than encourage, user interaction. Figure 1 corroborates this pattern, with marginal effects for vertically Europeanized posts trending clearly downward, particularly in the comments and reactions models. This contradicts Hypothesis 2, which anticipated higher engagement based on the growing visibility of EU institutions in

Table 2. 2024 EP Campaign: focus of European issues.

	Domestication (%)	Vertical Europeanization (%)	Horizontal Europeanization (%)	N
Meloni (FDI)	3.1	12.3	6.2	65
Tajani (FI)	10.5	31.6	5.3	19
Salvini (Lega)	7.9	22.1	7.9	317
Conte (M5S)	23.1	30.8	10.8	130
Schlein (PD)	9	18.9	0	111
Total	10.7	22.6	6.9	642

Table 3. 2024 EP election campaign – Negative Binomial Regression.

	Likes			Comments			Shares			Reactions		
	Coef.	St.Err.	Sig	Coef.	St.Err.	Sig	Coef.	St.Err.	Sig	Coef.	St.Err.	Sig
Domestication	1.169	0.177		1.398	0.21	**	1.247	0.167	*	1.408	0.231	**
Vertical Europeanization	0.768	0.079	**	0.761	0.079	***	0.955	0.089		0.647	0.075	***
Horizontal Europeanization	1.122	0.164		0.98	0.147		1.079	0.141		0.79	0.129	
Negative Sentiment	0.857	0.196		3.559	0.853	***	2.773	0.586	***	2.539	0.678	***
Party Leaders (ref.cat. Meloni)	1	.		1	.		1	.		1	.	
Tajani (FI)	0.286	0.064	***	0.18	0.042	***	0.061	0.012	***	0.284	0.072	***
Salvini (Lega)	0.29	0.034	***	0.259	0.031	***	0.284	0.03	***	0.278	0.037	***
Conte (M5S)	0.751	0.101	**	0.385	0.053	***	1.852	0.223	***	0.437	0.066	***
Schlein (PD)	0.192	0.026	***	0.133	0.018	***	0.178	0.022	***	0.158	0.024	***
Constant	12055.23	1327.043	***	3995.107	454.946	***	877.188	87.052	***	2465.366	304.115	***
lnalpha	-0.31	0.05		-0.25	0.05		-0.515	0.052		-0.071	0.05	
Pseudo r-squared	0.021			0.024			0.068			0.019		
Akaike crit. (AIC)	11990.187			10497.363			8991.714			9908.826		
Number of obs	642			642			642			642		
Bayesian crit. (BIC)	12034.833			10542.009			9036.36			9953.472		

*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.1

national debates. Finally, Horizontal Europeanization – involving references to political actors or events in other member states – shows no statistically significant effects across any engagement metric. This suggests that, outside moments of heightened transnational salience, such content rarely triggers meaningful interaction among users.

DISCUSSION

The EU is increasingly embedded in domestic public and political discourse, leading to the incremental assimilation of European issues into national narratives, policy agendas, and political competition (Bellamy & Kröger, 2016; De Vries & Van de Wardt, 2011). As European integration deepens, a growing number of national

policies fall under the influence of EU-level decisions, reinforcing interdependence between domestic and European agendas (Knill, 2001). However, this overlap generates tensions: while European issues gain relevance, they are often framed through nationalistic or adversarial lenses by domestic political actors, emphasizing conflicts over sovereignty and national interests (Hooghe & Marks, 2018).

This study examined how Italian political leaders' emphasis on European issues shaped social media engagement during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign, focusing on Facebook interactions. Relying on a quantitative text analysis based on a three-tiered actor-based dictionary and sentiment detection, we categorized posts into Domestication, Vertical Europeanization, and Horizontal Europeanization, and assessed their effects on likes, comments, shares, and reactions.

Marginal effects of EU topic

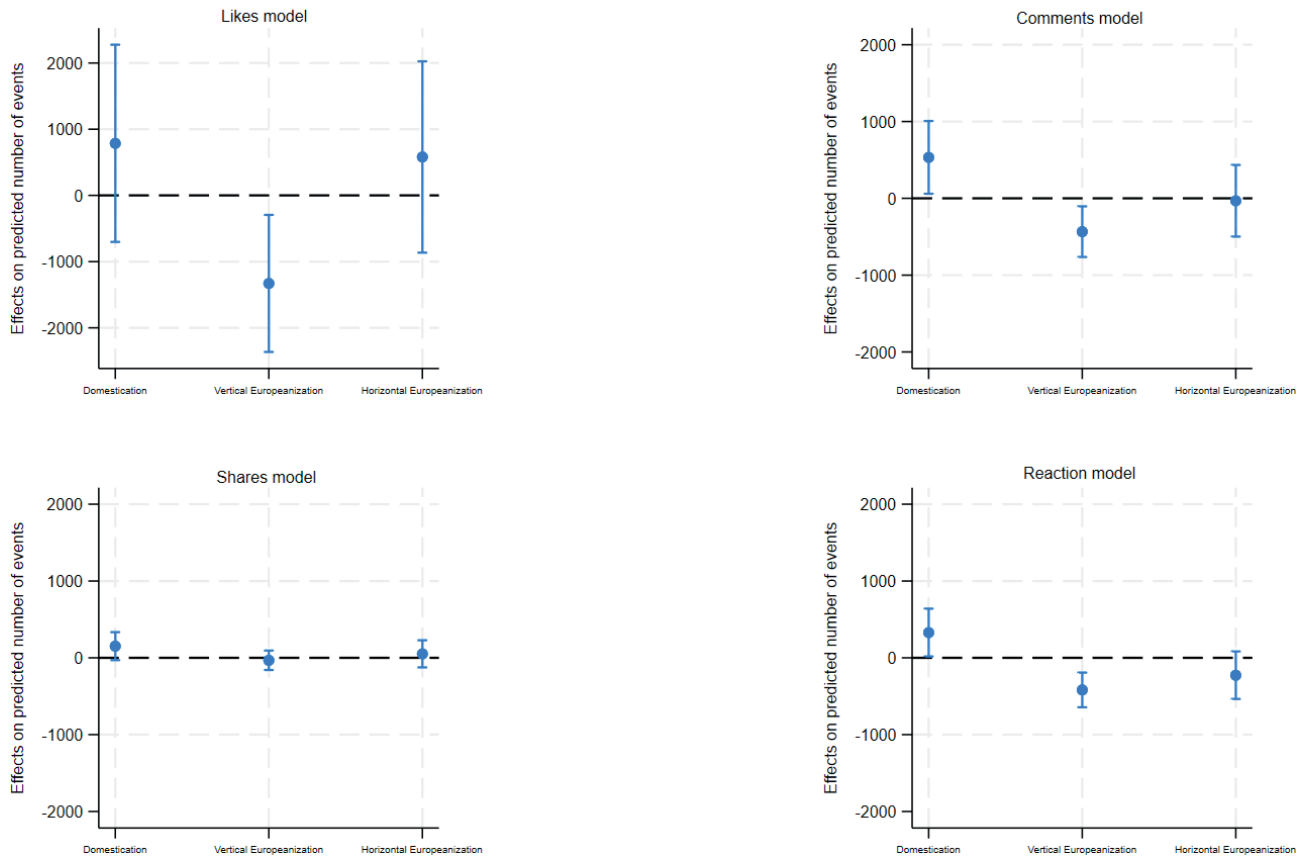


Figure 1. Marginal effects of EU Focus on engagement metrics (Likes, Comments, Shares and Reactions) – 2024.

The findings underscore the pivotal role of Domestication in driving engagement. Posts that integrated national and European political elements consistently generated higher interaction levels, especially in terms of comments, shares, and reactions. These results support Hypothesis 1 and reinforce the argument that citizens engage more with EU-related content when it is framed through a domestic lens that makes it affectively resonant and politically accessible (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004; Voltmer & Eilders, 2003).

By contrast, posts centered exclusively on Vertical Europeanization, which focus solely on EU institutions, show a negative association with engagement across all metrics, and the coefficients are statistically significant in three of the four models. These results contradict Hypothesis 2 and suggest that a focus on EU-level actors alone may reduce engagement, possibly due to a perceived distance between EU institutions and citizens' daily concerns. This interpretation aligns with the second-order election thesis, which posits that European

issues tend to be perceived as secondary unless domestically contextualized (Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt, 2005). The negligible impact of Horizontal Europeanization further highlights the dominance of national perspectives in social media discourse. The lack of significant engagement suggests that cross-national issues and interactions between EU member states do not strongly resonate with Italian social media users, potentially due to a weak shared European identity or the complexity of cross-national issues (Risse, 2011).

A particularly salient finding is the strong association between negative sentiment and heightened engagement. Posts with higher levels of negativity generated more comments, shares, and reactions, though they had no significant effect on likes. This indicates that critical or conflict-laden content triggers stronger cognitive and emotional responses, prompting users to interact more actively. These results align with existing research on the virality of negativity in digital discourse (Trilling et al., 2016; Jost et al., 2020). The lack of impact on likes may suggest a reluctance

to publicly endorse negative content, highlighting a more selective use of this specific engagement metric.

While this study provides insights into the interplay between European issue framing and social media engagement, several limitations warrant consideration. First, the classification strategy adopted in this study privileges precision over recall, especially in the case of more complex or hybrid categories such as Vertical Europeanization and Domestication. This conservative approach favors analytical robustness and minimizes false positives, yet it may also lead to an underestimation of the true incidence of these frames. As a result, some relevant content may be overlooked, potentially limiting the model's sensitivity to the full spectrum of framing strategies. In line with this consideration, the exclusive focus on Facebook may constrain the generalizability of the findings, as different social media platforms have varying user demographics and interaction patterns. Future research could extend the analysis to include platforms like Twitter, Instagram, or emerging networks to capture a more comprehensive picture of online engagement behaviors. Moreover, the study concentrates on Italian political leaders, which may limit the applicability of the results to other national contexts with different political cultures and attitudes toward the EU. Comparative studies involving multiple EU member states could enrich our understanding of how national contexts influence the effectiveness of Domestication and Europeanization strategies in social media communications. Additionally, the analysis relies on a dictionary approach to classify posts, focused on references to political actors and institutions rather than policy topics. While this strategy allows for systematic identification of Europeanization dimensions, it does not fully capture the substantive content or thematic framing of the messages. Examining topics and policy issues could provide deeper insights into how leaders construct and communicate European relevance. A more granular content analysis of the thematic frames adopted – beyond actor-based references – would allow researchers to explore the issue salience, rhetorical framing, and policy domains involved in the process of domestication and Europeanization. This remains a promising direction for future research. Furthermore, as the study is limited to the election campaign period, it represents only a snapshot in time. Longitudinal research could examine whether these engagement patterns persist beyond elections and how they evolve in response to significant political events or shifts in European integration. Engagement metrics such as likes and shares, while useful as proxies for interaction, remain semantically ambiguous, they do not necessarily reflect user approval or support and may also indicate irony, dissent, or attention driven by controversy.

This ambiguity introduces a layer of interpretive complexity that should caution against reading these metrics as straightforward indicators of alignment or endorsement. In future research, greater differentiation among forms of engagement – and integration of qualitative cues – may help disentangle the varied motivations underlying user interaction. A further limitation concerns the role of senders as key drivers of engagement. Beyond disparities in posting volume – which are addressed analytically – political leaders differ markedly in credibility, public visibility, and perceived polarization. These characteristics likely influence user interaction in ways that transcend content framing. High-profile or polarizing figures may systematically attract greater engagement, regardless of how Europeanization is articulated in their posts. Accounting for these dynamics more comprehensively – through ex ante measures such as follower base or average visibility – would significantly enhance the interpretive clarity of future analyses.

Finally, while the present study adopts a theoretically grounded and systematically validated actor-based classification, it does not account for the thematic content or policy substance of the posts. This approach privileges visibility and referential structure over rhetorical or issue-based framing. As such, it captures only one dimension of political communication. Future research would benefit from complementing this perspective with topic-oriented or discourse analytical methods capable of uncovering how European issues are substantively framed, which topics prevail, and how these may vary across parties, countries, or time.

The study set out to explore how distinct modes of Europeanization condition patterns of citizen engagement within the digital arena of a European Parliament election campaign. By applying an actor-centered classification and sentiment analysis to the Facebook posts of Italian party leaders, it offers novel empirical insights into the dynamics of EU visibility in digital environments. The results highlight the communicative effectiveness of Domestication, suggesting that EU-related content becomes more engaging when rooted in national contexts. In this regard, our findings contribute to the literature by reinforcing the explanatory power of the Second-Order Election framework and by underlining the importance of frame hybridization as a mechanism for enhancing resonance and visibility in the digital public sphere.

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Party competition on European issues in the 2024 EP elections

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Abstract. Recent developments have turned European integration from a “sleeping giant” into an active political issue. The Maastricht Treaty politicized Europe in national and European Parliament elections. Cross-border crises, like migration and environmental challenges, have further increased the importance of coordinated EU responses. Moreover, an entirely new family of Eurosceptic parties has emerged and consolidated over the past decade. Given that one of their main aims is to challenge and criticise the European Union (EU), Eurosceptic parties have a particular interest in European issues – the European polity as well as major European policies. Against this background, this paper examines whether and how political parties have emphasised these issues during the 2024 EP elections, compared to 2019, and contrasting Eurosceptic and mainstream parties. Drawing on annotated data from the 2019 Euro-manifesto project, we fine-tune transformer-based deep learning multilingual models to detect parties’ salience and positions on European polity and policy issues in nine countries during the 2024 EP elections. Our analyses show that the salience of European issues has increased on average, in particular for the EU polity. In terms of positions, we detect a pattern of increasing negativity of mainstream parties on European policy issues, such as migration and the environment, whereas Eurosceptic parties (in particular of the far-right) appear to have become less negative on the EU. In sum, our results suggest an increasing relevance of EU-wide issues, with different patterns of polarisation.

Keywords: party competition, European Parliament elections, large language models, European integration.

1. INTRODUCTION

Several recent developments have transformed European topics into important political issues for party competition in elections, thus turning the issue of European integration from a sleeping giant – using the well-known metaphor by Cees van der Eijk and Marc Franklin (2004) – into an active volcano. An important factor has been the fact that the European Union (EU) entered a truly contested period following the Maastricht Treaty, which led to the politicisation of Europe in both national and European Parlia-

ment (EP) elections (Braun & Grande 2021; Hutter et al. 2016; Costa Lobo 2023). Moreover, multiple crises have increasingly transcended borders in recent years, necessitating a coordinated response from national governments. In such contexts, the ability of European institutions to provide the necessary coordination therefore becomes more important than ever, particularly in areas such as migration and environmental policy. In line with these two major developments, mainstream parties, which are typically known for supporting stronger EU institutions, emphasise the need to deepen European integration, including potential treaty changes, to deal with the international crises. Meanwhile, Eurosceptic parties take the opposite approach, promoting a more divisive narrative and standing against further integration and specific Europe-wide policies. Accordingly, in the two recent rounds of EP elections – in 2019 (Braun & Schäfer 2022; Braun & Carteny 2024) and 2024 – European issues seem to have had the potential to shape party competition (Hartland et al. 2025).

An additional major driving force in this development was the consolidation of Eurosceptic parties all over Europe and at different levels of governance in this period. Previous evidence shows that the rise of Eurosceptic parties has affected party competition in Europe, particularly with regard to European issues (Meijers and Rauh 2016; Meijers 2017; Williams and Ishiyama 2018; Adam et al. 2016; Maier et al. 2021; Braun et al. 2020; Braun and Grande 2021; Turnbull-Dugarte 2021; Beaudonnet and Gomez 2024). Moreover, we can observe important variations when we differentiate between European polity and policy issues, and left and right party competition (Braun and Carteny 2024). The success of Eurosceptic parties affects the issue salience and position of mainstream left parties on the EU polity, for example. In addition, higher levels of support for far-right Eurosceptic parties affect the position of mainstream right parties on EU cultural policy issues, while mainstream left parties seem largely unresponsive to the success of Eurosceptic parties on EU economic policy issues.

In view of these findings and the fact that European issues (a) are more than the often studied EU integration issues and (b) need to be conceptualised at least as EU polity and EU policy issues, we are interested in three types of European issues: EU integration, the environment, and migration. Beside criticising the EU polity, Eurosceptic parties propose alternative approaches particularly for the migration issue, which can be interpreted as the most salient theme in Europe and thus a highly prominent topic for party competition (Grande et al. 2018; Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019; van der Brug et al. 2015). This is, to a lesser but increas-

ing extent, true for the environmental issue (Puleo et al. 2024). Our analysis considers whether political parties emphasise these critical issues as well as the positions they take. We provide empirical insights on whether European issues in the 2024 EP election campaign played a more important role than in the 2019 campaign, and whether differences in salience and positions between mainstream and Eurosceptic parties have grown during the intervening years.

Accordingly, we seek to study the differences in party competition between the 2019 and 2024 EP elections, addressing the following research questions: *Did the salience and importance of key European issues increase in the 2024 EP elections compared to 2019? Have the positions of the political parties, in particular between Eurosceptic and mainstream parties, become more polarised?* To address these questions, this paper examines whether and how Eurosceptic and mainstream parties have emphasised different types of European issues during the 2024 EP elections compared to 2019, as well as their positioning towards these issues.

In terms of data, we draw on annotated data from the 2019 Euromanifesto project (Reinl and Braun 2023) and use this to fine-tune transformer-based deep learning models. With these fine-tuned models, we then classify the topic and stance of each sentence in these documents, from which we estimate party salience and positions on European polity and policy issues in nine EU member states representing Central, Northern, Southern and Eastern Europe (Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain).

Based on this procedure, we provide descriptive evidence for the salience attached to three key issues – EU integration, the environment, migration – by European parties, as well as their positions. Our findings show that, compared to 2019, the salience of European issues increased significantly in the 2024 election campaigns, particularly concerning the EU polity. However, the level of emphasis varies across topics, with migration and environmental issues showing less consistent patterns of salience increase. In terms of positions, Eurosceptic parties, particularly those on the far right, have become less critical of the EU polity and migration, while mainstream and far-left parties exhibit more negative stances on migration. On environmental issues, a general shift towards more negative positions is evident across all party types, reflecting growing contestation over EU green policies. Our findings demonstrate both the growing relevance of European issues and the evolving polarisation among political parties on these critical topics, and highlight the challenges ahead for coordinated European responses to international crises.

2. STATE OF THE ART AND THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

Our main research questions are: *Did the salience and importance of key European issues increase in the 2024 EP elections compared to 2019? Have the positions of the political parties, particularly between Eurosceptic and mainstream parties, become more polarised?* To answer these and related questions, we review the scholarly literature on elections to the European Parliament (EP) and the relevance of European issues.

Why should we expect that the salience of key European issues has increased and positions have become more polarized in the 2024 EP elections? First of all, political issues are important in electoral contests (Aardal and Wijnen 2005). Policy preferences are considered a prerequisite for democratic political systems (Macdonald et al. 1991). Even for the particular case of EP elections, which have for a long time been characterised as second-order contests (Reif and Schmitt 1980), this is true in the aftermath of the ‘permissive consensus’ over European politics (Eichenberg and Dalton 2007), the awakening of the ‘sleeping giant’ (van der Eijk and Franklin 2004), the new period of ‘constraining dissensus’ (Hooghe and Marks 2009), and in particular the politicisation of Europe (e.g., Costa Lobo 2023; Hutter et al. 2016). All of this has transformed EP elections into contests where European issues finally played an important role. This has been shown for past elections (e.g., de Vries 2010; Jurado and Navarrete 2021; Braun 2021; Carrieri 2024; Maier et al. 2021; Rapp 2024; Schäfer 2021) as well as for the most recent 2024 election to the EP (Hartland et al. 2025). Complementing this literature, Hix and Cunningham (2025) demonstrate that while the 2024 contest still bore the hallmarks of a second-order national election, the usual anti-government penalty was patchy and party-family effects flipped, with mainstream centre-right lists outperforming and the radical left slumping. Mudde (2024) adds that far-right parties nevertheless gained roughly a quarter of the vote – matching 2014 and 2019 – yet remain split across three groups, curbing their ability to convert electoral gains into cohesive parliamentary power. Together these findings suggest that the 2024 EP elections combined heightened issue salience and partisan polarisation with a weakened, more uneven second-order logic, making national dynamics and parliamentary fragmentation central to understanding the outcome.

European issues are complex and difficult to define, given the diverse interpretations and meanings associated with EU-related topics. Previous research has shown that focusing solely on one aspect of Europe – particularly without explicitly addressing the EU polity,

meaning the debate over advancing or opposing European integration – provides a highly distorted view of party competition within the EU (Braun et al. 2016). To address this, we adopt a broader conceptualisation of EU issues that captures their complex and multifaceted nature in the way that was suggested theoretically a long time ago (Bartolini 2005; Thomassen and Schmitt 1997, 1999; Schmitt 2008). This approach recognizes that EU polity matters – referring to the institutional and procedural foundations of the EU – are just as important to party competition as concrete policy issues such as the economy, migration or social policies. In our opinion, three European issues in particular have been heavily debated in recent times in European politics, and therefore are expected to matter not only in the 2019 but also in the 2024 EP elections: EU integration, the environment, migration (but see also Braun and Schäfer 2022; Hartland et al. 2025).

The issue of European integration is still a matter of debate in view of the fact that we can observe an ongoing consolidation of Euroscepticism throughout Europe at all levels of governance. With this consolidation of Eurosceptic parties, party competition has become more European and more critical towards European integration (Braun and Carteny 2024). Euroscepticism has evolved over time from a quasi-pathology to a persistent and mainstream phenomenon shaping Europe (Vasilopoulou 2013; Usherwood and Startin 2013; Brack and Startin 2015; Leconte 2015) that is “here to stay” (Treib 2021). In addition to the European integration issue and at least since the mid-2010s, the migration issue has been among the most salient themes in European party competition (Grande et al. 2018; Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019; van der Brug et al. 2015). It was not only a salient topic, but also produced distinct positions among different party families between the 2019 and 2024 EP elections. Although migration was not among the key topics in the 2019 EP election campaign itself, it had the power to mobilise the voters (Braun and Schäfer 2022) and the compromise solution shortly before the 2024 EP elections at the EU level – the EU pact on migration and asylum – brought the topic back onto the public agenda and made it more salient and polarized again. A recent study shows that citizens concerned with migration issues evaluate parties based on the prominence they give to these issues during the 2024 EP election campaign (Hartland et al. 2025). An additional political issue which was debated in Europe in this phase was the environmental issue. It was strongly related to the success of Green parties in the 2019 EP elections (Pearson and Rüdiger 2020), together with the prominence of the “European Green Deal” among European Commission

President Ursula von der Leyen's top priorities, but also related to school strikes and the "Fridays for Future" protest movement. Between the 2019 and the 2024 EP elections, environmental protection as well as climate change mitigation lost some visibility and public support. Moreover, just before the 2024 EP elections, widespread farmer protests across Europe challenged the "European Green Deal". This, however, brought environmental issues back into the public spotlight. Again, for this issue, it has been shown recently that citizens concerned with the environment evaluate parties based on the prominence they give to these issues during the 2024 EP election campaign (Hartland et al. 2025).

Drawing on the above-discussed recent debates and developments concerning the EU's polity and policy challenges, we expect the salience of EU-related issues to persist – and even intensify – during the 2024 European Parliament elections compared to 2019. This heightened salience is likely to be especially pronounced in relation to EU-level policy issues.

H1: The average party emphasis on key EU issues increased between 2019 and 2024.

H2: Salience increased more for EU policy issues (migration and environment) than for the EU polity.

Political parties are supposed to respond to such key European policy issues in their EP election campaigns – this is particularly true for Eurosceptic parties, who benefit even more from emphasising European issues, but it is equally true for mainstream parties. Eurosceptic parties have more strategic reasons than others to highlight European issues. Eurosceptic challenger parties have been characterised as "issue entrepreneurs" that have ultimately emphasised the issue of EU integration – a topic that some view as having been long neglected by mainstream parties (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015; Green-Pedersen 2012; Hobolt and de Vries 2015; Lefkofridi 2020). Eurosceptic parties were thus presumed to benefit the most in terms of votes by emphasising all kinds of EU-related issues. However, once mainstream parties began to realise that they could also benefit from emphasising EU-related issues (galvanised in part by the success of some Eurosceptic parties across the bloc), they also started to put more emphasis there. Hence, mainstream parties first followed de-emphasising strategies (Rovny 2012) and are now following the strategy of moving towards the challenger party (policy convergence), an accommodative strategy to draw voters away from the Eurosceptic challenger parties (Meguid 2005). In recent times of consolidated Euroscepticism, this has eventually resulted in an overall higher salience of EU polity issues as well as a more critical position

towards EU integration, also in the case of mainstream parties (Braun and Carteny 2024).

H3: Party positions of mainstream and Eurosceptic parties became less polarised on the EU polity issue between 2019 and 2024.

Although the specific research literature on the impact of Eurosceptic parties on overall party competition is still somewhat mixed (see for example Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2016), more general accounts suggest that parties tend to respond to other parties' positional shifts and past performances (Adams 2012). In addition, research based on European party competition has shown that mainstream parties adjust both their issue salience and strategic positioning in relation to "challenger" parties (Abou-Chadi 2016; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2018). In more recent times this has ultimately resulted in more critical positions towards the EU migration issue, also in the case of mainstream parties (Braun and Carteny 2024). When it comes to the environment, we would expect here also a decreasing polarisation, mainly due to a less supportive stance on environmental policies from mainstream parties. First, we might expect a thermostatic effect (Wlezien 1995, 2004). As policies go in the direction of public opinion preferences, the latter tend to shift towards the opposite direction. In turn, parties might then align with the new perceived public opinion preferences. Thus, the European Green Deal might have triggered, on average, less positive public opinion preferences on pro-environmental policies, which might have then informed party positions on the environment in 2024, especially those of mainstream parties. Second, we might expect that farmers' protests, in addition to increasing public discontent about energy costs, might have drawn mainstream parties towards less supportive stances, as the perceived median voter moves towards more critical positions.

H4: Party positions between mainstream and Eurosceptic parties became less polarised on EU policy issues (migration and environment) between 2019 and 2024.

3. DATA, MEASUREMENT, AND METHODS

For obtaining our estimates of the salience attached by parties to EU-wide issues in the 2024 EP elections, and their positions on these issues, we used quantitative text analysis tools for two classification tasks applied to party manifestos. Party manifestos remain one of the primary sources for empirical analyses of party competition because they are officially sanctioned texts that

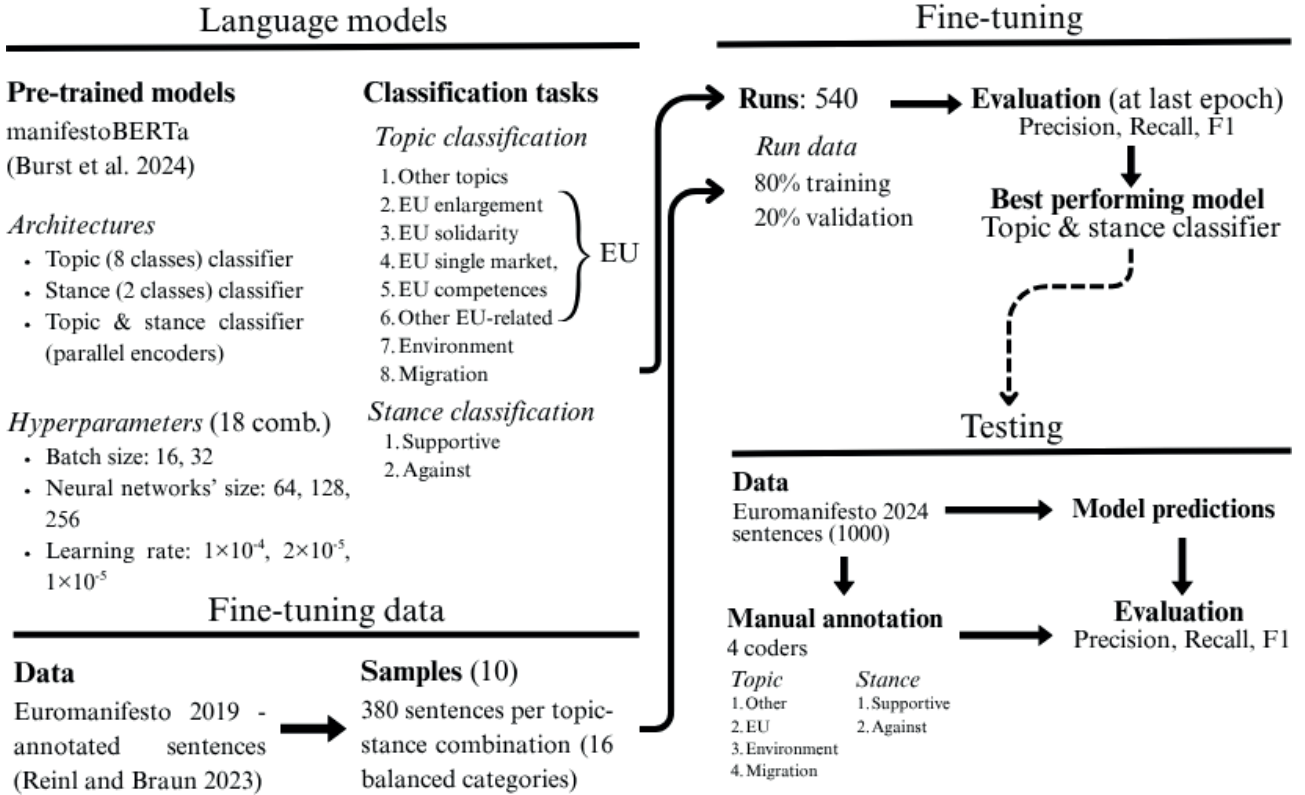


Figure 1. Topic and stance classification workflow.

document the compromises reached within party elites and specify the policy priorities a party chooses to present to the electorate. Although few citizens read these documents and their use requires labour-intensive coding that is prone to different degrees of misclassification (Mikhaylov et al. 2012), these documents still represent an unmatched data source for investigating party competition. First, manifestos are widely used – among other sources – by journalists, pundits, and commentators to inform the electorate at large about party priorities and preferences. Second, the longitudinal availability and cross-national coverage of manifestos provide unmatched leverage for tracking shifts in issue salience and ideological positioning (Braun 2023). Because of this we rely on said documents to estimate our quantities of interest – party issue salience and positions.

Returning to the classification tasks, the first consists of predicting eight thematic classes in the 2024 EP manifesto corpus at the sentence-level. Of these, five are EU-related categories (EU enlargement, EU solidarity, EU single market, EU competences, and other EU-related topics), two relate to migration and the environment, and a residual category for all the remaining topics. The second task consists of predicting the stance of the sen-

tence (Burnham 2024), namely the classification of each sentence as either supportive of or against the sentence topic. To obtain these predictions, we fine-tuned a pre-trained transformer-based deep learning model for multiclass classification, the manifestoBERTa (Burst et al. 2024). This model is an adapted version of the XLM-RoBERTa (Conneau et al. 2019), fine-tuned on approximately 1.7 million annotated statements contained within the Manifesto Corpus (Lehmann et al., 2024). This model was configured in three versions according to the prediction tasks. In particular, we used (a) a classifier for the topics, (b) a classifier only for the stance, and (c) a multi-task classifier for the parallel classification of both topics and stance (see Figure 1).

For training, we utilised 210 manifestos comprising 91,563 quasi-sentences across 25 languages. The data preparation for the models' fine-tuning¹ involved the

¹ Fine-tuning refers to the adaptation of models pre-trained on massive unlabelled corpora – typically through tasks such as masked language modelling – to specific downstream tasks. In our case, we implement two distinct fine-tuning processes. The first, focused on topic classification, can be viewed as domain adaptation, since the model is trained to perform the same task – classification – on a different distribution of topics. The second, centred on stance detection, falls under task trans-

creation of 10 different data samples selected using random seeds, sampling 380 sentences for each of the eight classes selected for training our models, of which half used a positive stance and half negative. These sentences were divided into 80% for training and 20% for validation. To further optimise model performance, various configurations were tested, such as batch sizes of 16 and 32, and hidden state sizes of 64, 128, and 256, and learning rates equal to 0.0001, 0.00002, and 0.00001. Finally, we employed an early stopping method for determining the number of steps for fine-tuning the model (setting the maximum limit at 20) based on the loss score for each iteration. As a result, during the fine-tuning phase, 540 individual runs (180 for each classifier) were conducted to identify the best-performing configurations. For each model, the configurations with the highest F1 scores were then selected for further analysis. This selection ensured that only the most accurate models, as measured by their ability to predict correctly across classes and stance, were used in subsequent testing and prediction phases.

To create a testing dataset, we first selected a random sample of 1000 German sentences from the EP 2024 German party manifestos of the six largest parties (AfD, CDU/CSU, FDP, Greens, Die Linke, and SPD).² These samples were then annotated by two teams of two research assistants trained for the task, with half of the sample (500 quasi-sentences) twice coded by the first team and the other half twice coded by the second team. After a few rounds of annotation, we reached good inter-coder reliability scores (Batch 1 Krippendorff's Alpha = 0.814, Batch 2 Krippendorff's Alpha = 0.712), thus avoiding low inter-coder reliability – a widespread issue for manifesto research (Mikhaylov et al. 2012; Gemenis 2013). We thus used our best-performing BERT model (topic and stance classifier) to estimate class predictions on the same set of sentences annotated by our RAs, selecting for each sentence the class with the highest probability in the model output. Then, we calculated F1, recall, and precision scores.³ The model performed well, with a macro F1 for topic classification of 0.713, and a macro F1 for the

stance classification of 0.878 (see Tables 1 and 2). While the model performs well in most categories, it struggles with classifying EU polity-related sentences – likely due to the broad and diverse semantic space associated with this class. We proceed to use this model for further predictions; however, caution is warranted when interpreting results related to the EU polity category.

Following testing, the selected model was used to produce predictions across the broader EM2024 dataset. This dataset includes 71 manifestos from nine European countries: Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Spain. The selection of these countries was mostly driven by data availability. We selected only those EU national contexts for which we were able to collect the manifestos of all the relevant parties published at the time of the EP 2024 elections.⁴ Nevertheless, the heterogeneity of this sample, which includes countries from different regions of the Union, allows us to speculate on the broader dynamics and characteristics of party competition in Europe. Finally, we identify Eurosceptic parties, in particular far-right and far-left parties, by relying on the classification of the PopuList dataset (Rooduijn et al. 2023).

To address our research questions and test our hypotheses, we rely on visualisations of the data distribution and point estimates, followed by multivariate regression models. Our quantities of interest are the salience attached to a given topic by a specific party and the position of the party on that topic in a specific election. Thus, for estimating these quantities we aggregate our sentence-level predictions at the document (manifesto) level. To estimate salience, we simply rely on the proportion of sentences dedicated to a specific topic relative to the total number of sentences. The second quantity is estimated using Lowe and colleagues' (Lowe et al. 2011) logit scaling technique, namely the natural logarithm of the ratio between the sentences dedicated to a topic classified as supportive of the topic and the sentences for the same topic classified as against the statement – plus a numerical constant in the numerator and denominator to avoid non-numerical estimates. In the aggregate, we first compare the average salience that parties attach to the EU, migration, and environmental issues and the average positions that parties take on these issues in 2019 and 2024.⁵ Then we analyse the distribution of party-specific differences in issue salience and positions for those parties that participated in both the 2019 and

fer, as it requires the model to learn a different but related task.

² To test the performance of our model across languages, we performed additional tests relying on the EM 2019 data (Reinl and Braun 2023) not used for fine-tuning our model. Our analyses show that the model performs well across the national contexts and languages analysed here. See the supplemental information, Appendix E.

³ Precision, recall, and the F1 score are standard metrics for evaluating classification models. Precision indicates the proportion of true positives among all predicted positives, while recall (or sensitivity) reflects the proportion of true positives identified among all actual positives. The F1 score is the harmonic mean of precision and recall, providing a single measure that balances the trade-off between false positives and false negatives.

⁴ The list of manifestos is available in the supplemental information, Appendix B.

⁵ Our dataset includes 67 party manifestos for the 2019 EP elections, and 82 for the 2024 EP elections.

Table 1. Best model F1 scores on test for topic categories.

Class	Tn	Fp	Fn	Tp	Precision	Recall	F1
EU	1,250	322	134	294	0.442	0.788	0.566
Migration	1,806	53	30	111	0.689	0.819	0.748
Environment	1,605	90	61	244	0.746	0.856	0.797
Other	704	170	410	716	0.881	0.637	0.740
Macro					0.673	0.775	0.713

Legenda: Tn = True negative; Fp = False positive; Fn = False negative; Tp = True positive.

Table 2. Best model F1 scores on test for stance categories, by topic.

Class	Tn	Fp	Fn	Tp	Precision	Recall	F1
EU	63	29	33	303	0.913	0.902	0.865
Migration	32	7	14	88	0.926	0.863	0.875
Environment	17	12	33	243	0.953	0.880	0.893
Macro					0.931	0.882	0.878

Legenda: Tn = True negative; Fp = False positive; Fn = False negative; Tp = True positive.

2024 EP elections.⁶ We compare these issue salience measures by contrasting mainstream and Eurosceptic parties.⁷ Finally, we test these patterns using multivariate models at the party level. Given the interval nature of our dependent variables – issue salience, positions, and their variation over time – we use general linear models (GLM) with an identity link function (i.e., linear regression models). Given that each party is embedded in a specific party system, we then estimate clustered standard errors at the country level. Our quantities of interest in this case are the expected salience and position values by party type. To compute these values, we rely on the simulation approach proposed by King and colleagues (King et al. 2000).

4. RESULTS

Comparing the salience estimates for 2019 and 2024, some patterns are immediately apparent. The EU polity issue appears to be the most salient of the three considered and the one most affected by such an increase. For this issue, we estimate an increase of around 0.2 points on the salience scale – i.e., an increase of around 20 points in the percentage of manifesto sentences devoted

to this issue – compared to 2019.⁸ When it comes to migration and the environment, the picture is less systematic, but still relevant. Indeed, for the environment, the results suggest a statistically significant increase ($p < 0.05$) in the importance of this issue for non-Eurosceptic and far-right parties. For the others, we observe important increases between 2019 and 2024, but they are not consistent – i.e., not statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

In terms of positions, the picture is less straightforward (see Figure 2, x-axis). Eurosceptic parties, especially the far right, seem to have become less negative about the EU polity. Minor differences can be observed for the other parties. On the issue of migration, we observe minor changes, including a less negative stance on this issue by far-right Eurosceptic parties in 2024 compared to 2019. The issue on which we observe a more consistent pattern is the environment, for which we see a general movement towards less positive positions between 2019 and 2024, in particular for mainstream and far-left Eurosceptic parties.

Although these results are informative, an open question remains: do these aggregate estimates reflect changes in issue salience and positions, or do they reflect

⁶ By “issue salience”, we refer to the salience attached by political parties to a specific issue. By “issue position”, we refer to the position taken by a given political party on one of the issues under investigation.

⁷ We avoid comparisons by country and party type because of the relatively small number of parties of each type (especially Eurosceptic parties) in each polity.

⁸ Nevertheless, it is important to exercise caution when interpreting this category, as it represents the one in which our classifier has demonstrated the poorest performance in terms of precision (see Table 1). Specifically, the proportion of true EU-related sentences among the predicted ones was relatively low, which could lead to an overestimation. Nonetheless, we performed additional validity checks and found that misclassification constitutes a minor issue, mostly distributed at random. This makes us confident about the general pattern found in our data.

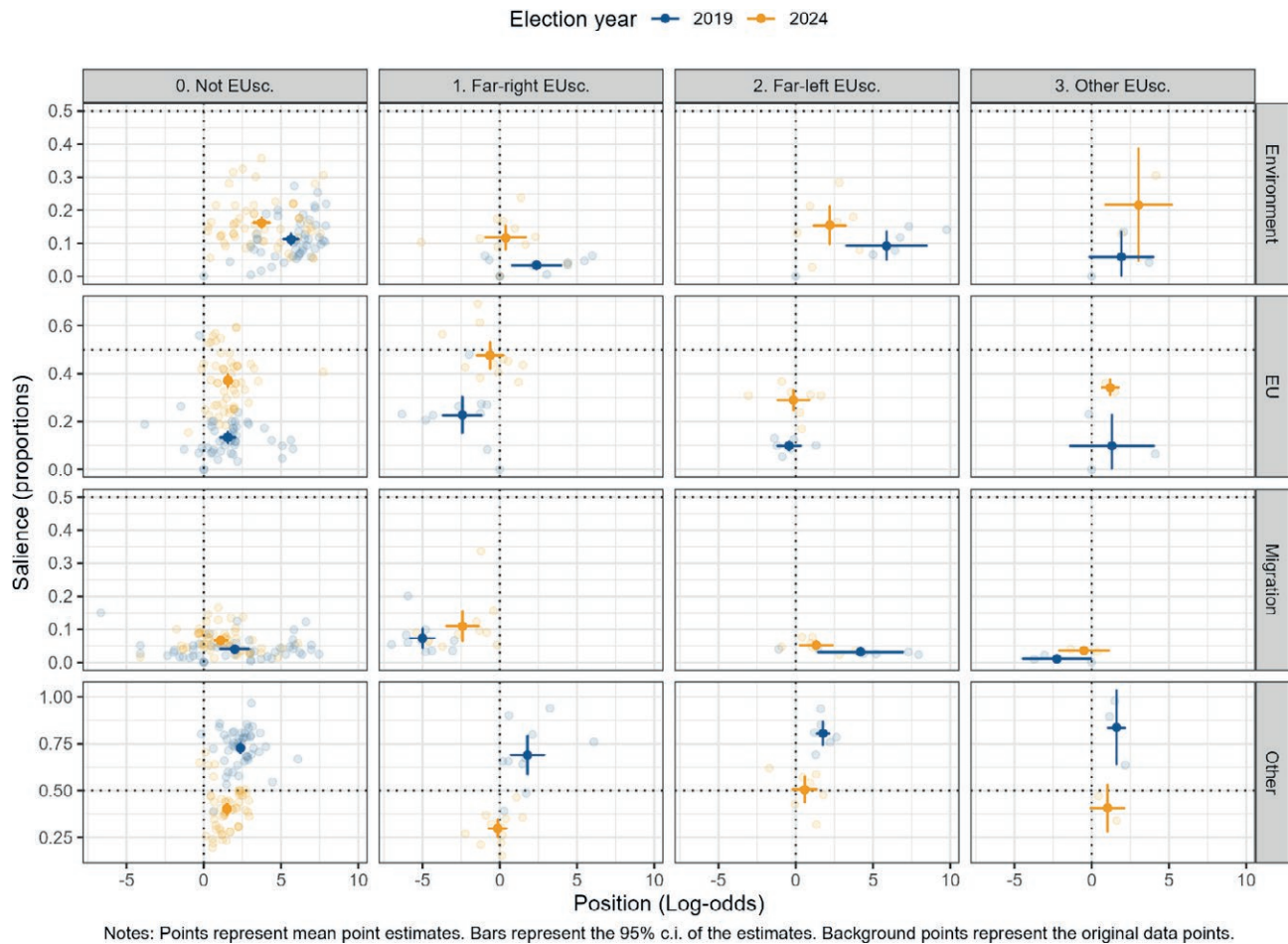


Figure 2. Party issue salience and position, by party type and election year.

the entry of new actors who have reshaped the political landscape in their respective political systems? To test this hypothesis, we examine the intra-party changes in salience and position between 2019 and 2024 for those parties that participated in both EP elections. However, we exclude from the analysis two Eurosceptic parties that are not included in the far-right and far-left groups, due to the limited number of observations.

What we find is a picture that is consistent with the patterns seen earlier. In terms of salience, we again see a fairly consistent increase for all issues, but particularly for EU polity (see Figure 3, left panel). In terms of positions, we see similar patterns to those in the aggregate (see Figure 3, right panel). When considering the issue of migration, mainstream and far-left parties are mostly more negative in 2024 than they were in 2019. The exception is far-right Eurosceptic parties, which have become slightly less negative over the five years and thus show mostly positive position change values. When looking at

the issue of EU polity, mainstream parties are on average rather stable and Eurosceptic parties, especially the far-right, are more positive than they were in 2019. Finally, looking at position changes on the environmental issue, we see a rather consistent movement towards more negative positions for all parties, especially the far-right.

To further test these patterns, we employ multivariate regression models, regressing our salience and position change variables on our three-party types (mainstream, far-right, and far-left Eurosceptic parties), and including dummy variables at the country level to account for unobserved heterogeneity at the country level.⁹ Also in this case we consider party-level variation, thus we include in our analyses only parties that participated in both 2019 and 2024 EP elections.

Despite the limited number of observations (ranging from 56 to 59) and the relatively high number of covari-

⁹ For the regression tables see Appendix A.

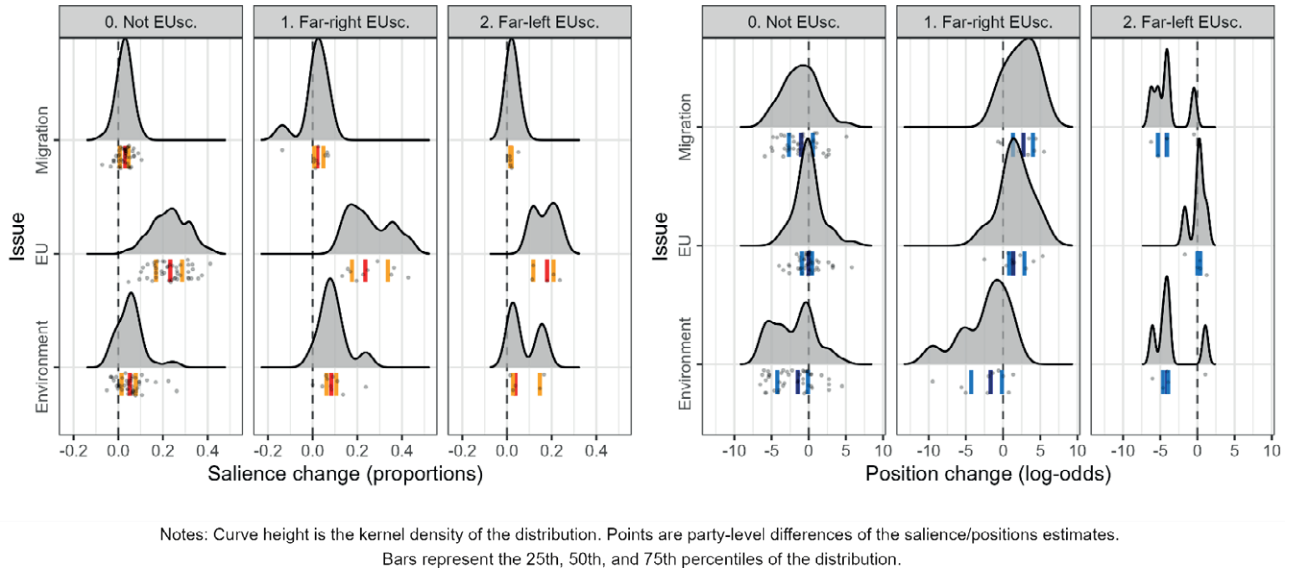


Figure 3. Party issue salience and position change (2019-2024), by party type.

ates, the results largely corroborate the observations made previously (see Figure 4). The simulated change in our salience measures is positive across all issues, but is stronger for the EU polity issue, followed by the environment, and finally by migration (see Figure 4, left panel). The magnitude of change for each issue is similar between mainstream and Eurosceptic parties, with the partial exception of the EU polity, for which far-left Eurosceptic parties increased the salience less than mainstream and far-right Eurosceptic parties.

The simulated change in position also exhibits the same patterns observed previously (see Figure 4, right panel). The results indicate a shift towards more critical stances on migration for mainstream and far-left Eurosceptic parties, accompanied by a change towards less negative positions for the far-right. With regard to the EU, positions have undergone only a slight alteration, with the exception of those held by far-right parties, which now appear less critical than they did in 2019. Finally, with respect to the environment, there is a tendency toward more negative positions for all parties, more pronounced for the far-right, but also accompanied by more uncertainty.

All in all, these results partially support our hypotheses. First, (a) salience has increased for all the issues considered, thus confirming our first hypothesis (H1). However, salience increased more for the EU polity issue as compared to EU policy issues, thus rejecting our second hypothesis (H2). In terms of positions, we find that the polarisation between mainstream and Eurosceptic parties decreased on the EU polity issue, but also the

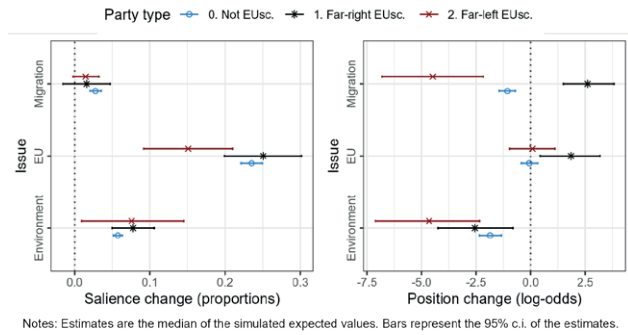


Figure 4. Simulated issue salience and position change (2019-2024), by party type.

migration issue. In only one case, the environment, positions have become more polarised, but only marginally given the movement of all the parties considered towards more negative positions. These results thus confirm our third hypothesis (H3) but only partially support our fourth one (H4).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Europe has grown in importance in the daily lives of EU citizens, influencing public discourse, electoral campaigns, and voting patterns within the Union's multi-level political framework. Global challenges and the strengthening of Eurosceptic parties throughout Europe have significantly contributed to these shifts, intensify-

ing debates on the EU's political structure and pressing cross-border issues like migration and environmental policies. Against this backdrop, we studied the following research questions in our paper: Did the salience and importance of key European issues increase in the 2024 EP elections compared to 2019? Have the positions of the political parties, in particular between Eurosceptic and mainstream parties, become more polarised? In our empirical analysis based on 71 manifestos from nine European countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Spain), we investigated whether political parties address these critical issues (issue emphasis) as well as the positions they have taken on these topics. Our findings highlight the continued and growing relevance of European issues in European party competition, and our research reveals three key findings that offer insights into the evolving dynamics of European party politics.

Firstly, the salience of the three key European issues analysed – polity, migration, and environment – has increased across the board. Despite our expectations, however, discussion about the EU polity has gained even more traction as compared to other topics, underscoring the ongoing Europeanisation of the EP (but also national) elections in the EU. But this might also be an effect of the increasing electoral strength of Eurosceptic parties, which keeps pushing non-Eurosceptics to engage with a topic previously downplayed. Thus, this dynamic reflects a strategic response by mainstream parties to counterbalance the narratives of Eurosceptic actors and reaffirm their commitment to European integration, articulating their stances on the future of the European project more clearly. This has been observed in the UK and France for the 2019 EP elections (see Braun and Grande 2021) and seems to be a persistent evolution in 2024 and presumably also future EP elections.

Second, the positions of political parties on key issues show diverse trajectories. Notably, far-right Eurosceptic parties have adopted less critical stances towards the EU polity and migration compared to 2019. This evidence suggests that, as far-right parties adopt more mainstream positions (in particular, right-wing ones that pursue vote-seeking strategies), they simultaneously moderate their stances as their chances of government inclusion increase. In contrast, mainstream and far-left parties have tended to adopt more critical positions, especially on migration. This is consistent with previous evidence concerning the mainstreaming of far-right parties and their impact on party competition over Europe. It seems that migration has evolved as an even “hotter topic” than it was perceived some years ago (see Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019), meaning that all parties adapt

their positions. Today the topic is among the top political issues in Europe.¹⁰ As a consequence, even political parties with liberal positions on migration take (more) negative stances on migration. On environmental issues, all party types have moved towards more negative stances, reflecting increasing contestation over the European Green Deal and related policies, but also a more generalised politicisation of the topic. Taking a long-term perspective on the evolution of European issues in party competition, we seem to be in a phase where party systems start to regulate themselves with political parties aligning on critical and polarised issues such as the EU polity, migration and climate change.

In conclusion, our findings indicate that European issues have become a central element of party competition in the EU's multi-level governance system. The 2024 EP elections thus represent further proof for what we have already seen in 2019 (Gattermann et al. 2021; van der Brug et al. 2022). The growing prominence of these issues, in conjunction with shifts in party stances, indicates that electoral processes in Europe are becoming increasingly influenced by discussions surrounding the future of European integration, environmental policy, and migration. Moreover, our findings lend support to a nuanced perspective on the phenomenon of polarisation. While there has been a decline in the polarisation of views on the EU polity issue, with mainstream and Eurosceptic parties becoming less ideologically distant from one another, the environmental issue has demonstrated a slight increase in polarisation due to varying degrees of negativity. These trends may have profound implications for the cohesion of the European Parliament and the broader trajectory of European politics in the coming years.

However, further research based on a broader sample of party-level data is needed to produce solid generalisations about the dynamics identified in our work.

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¹⁰ Another good example is the 2025 national election campaign in Germany, where all parties – including the Left and the Greens – have adopted much more critical positions than ever before in an election campaign.

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

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DATA AND METHODS

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

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

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

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

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

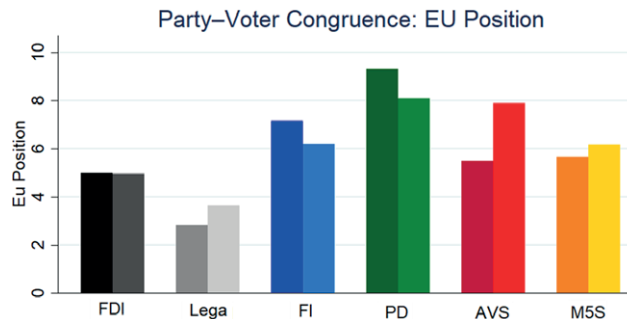


Figure 1. Party/voters EU positions and congruence. For each party, the left column indicates the party's position, and the right column indicates the corresponding voter position.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ANALYSIS

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

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

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

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

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

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

Standard errors in parentheses.

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

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

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

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

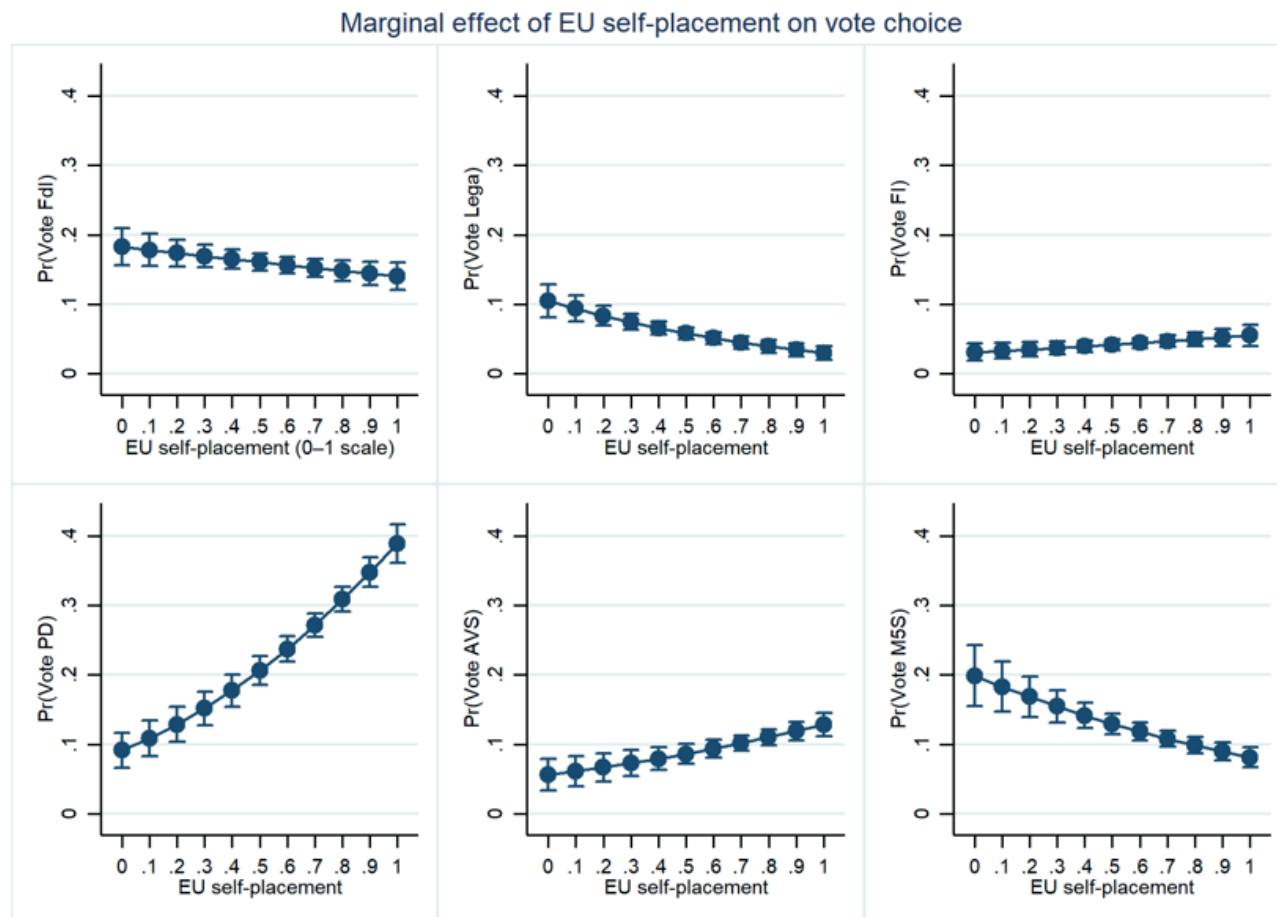


Figure 2. Marginal effect of EU self-placement on vote choice by party.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Standard errors in parentheses.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

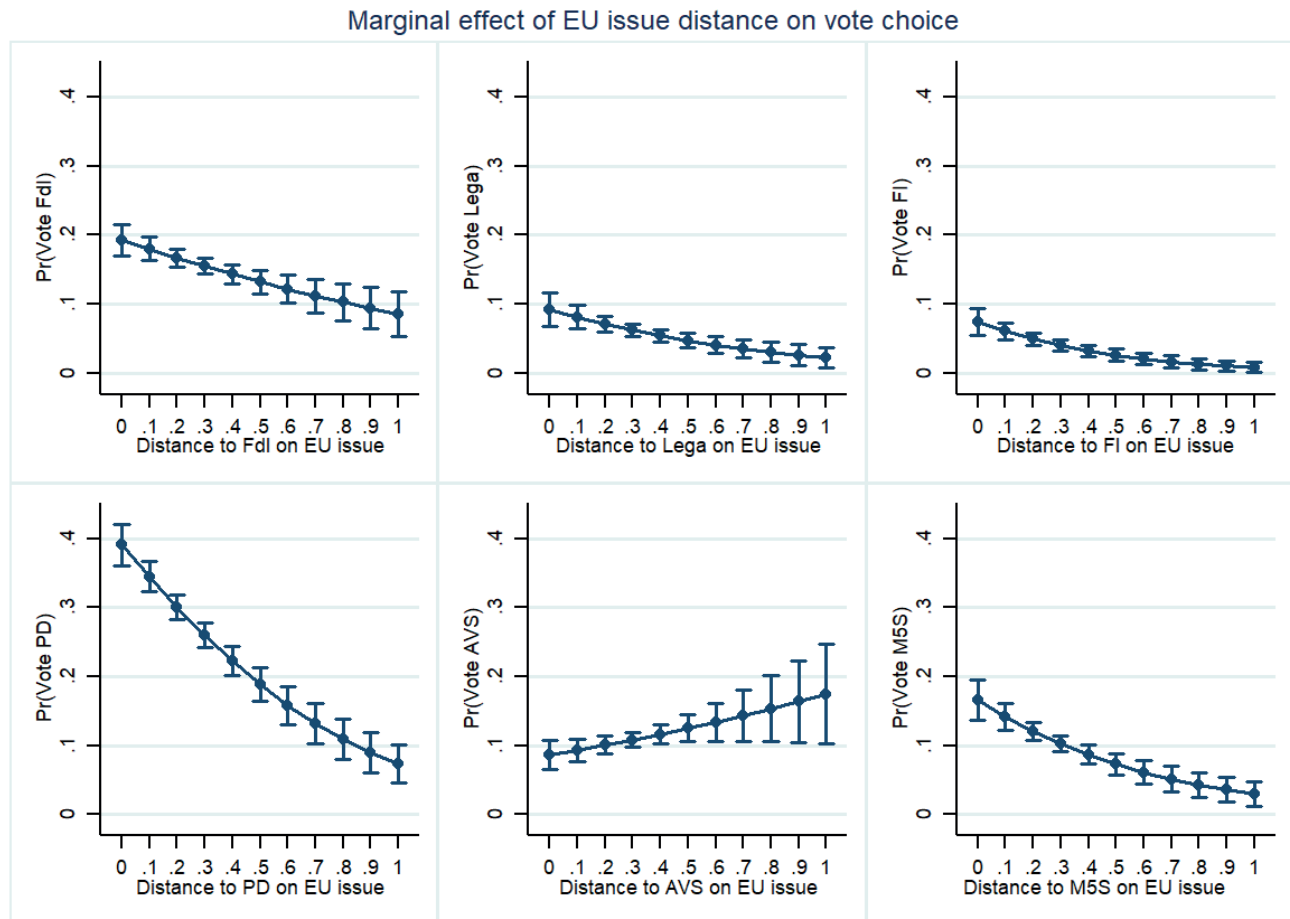


Figure 3. Marginal effect of EU distance on vote choice by party.

their communication strategies is an open question for future research.

CONCLUSIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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Economic matters: the 2024 European parliament elections

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Abstract. Using European Election Study (EES) surveys (2004 to 2024) from the six founding members (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands) of the European Union, we examine how economic perceptions affect vote choice in the European Parliament (EP) elections. Beginning with the second-order election thesis, i.e., voter behavior in EP elections is influenced by national politics, we investigate alternative economic voting hypotheses, culminating with a focus on the 2024 contests. We find the extant economic vote has remained stable, in the face of shocks such as the Great Recession or Brexit. Further, the economic perception effects appear competitive with the effects of left-right ideology and party identification. Economic voting remains a pivot for vote choice in EP elections, even in the face of emergent supra-national challenges, and shows no signs of diminishing as a result of the 2024 EP contests.

Keywords: economic voting theory, economic perceptions, European Parliament elections, second-order elections.

The proposition that the economy matters for elections in advanced industrial democracies has come to be conventional wisdom. The arguments and evidence have been summarized and critiqued in various studies (Duch and Stevenson, 2008; Hellwig, 2015; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; Stegmaier and Lewis-Beck, 2013). The investigation of comparative economic voting took off with the publication of Lewis-Beck's (1988) survey study of major Western democracies—Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. Its guiding theory held that voters acted retrospectively, punishing the incumbent for bad national economic performance while rewarding them for good. Of course, subsequent research explored nuances surrounding this proposition, such as whether the reward-punishment is pocketbook (Nannestad and Paldam, 1997) or asymmetric (Soroka, 2006) and how much clarity of responsibility counts (Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck, 2017).

In addition, there exists the level-of-analysis problem. Most work focuses on national elections. What happens when the election operates on another plane, i.e., local, national, or supra-national, such as the European Union? In particular, does the economic voter in a member state assign the EU significant responsibility for national economic conditions in European Parliamen-

tary contexts? We hold this to be so, even after the Great Recession, Brexit, or other international shocks, such as Covid.

In the remainder of the manuscript, we first focus on the literature review before outlining our hypotheses. We then present the data and describe the model estimations. Each following subsection addresses a specific hypothesis. Finally, we offer conclusions, and directions for future research.

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS AND ECONOMIC VOTING: BACKGROUND

European elections are supposed to deal with European politics and policy. So why might European Parliament voters look to the economic performance of the nation? Because voters may perceive their national government as more responsible for the country's economy, compared to the EU. These international elections tend to be seen as of second-order importance, rather than first-order, like national elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Van der Eijk et al., 1996; Hix and Marsh, 2011). Moreover, the parties who run for office in-country routinely participate in the European competitions, so offering an additional opportunity to sanction the national rulers, in pursuit of their own domestic goals. In other words, they do not conceive the locus of economic responsibility as international. For example, in a large survey investigation of the 27 EU countries, Hobolt and Tilley (2014) find voters assign more economic responsibility for the economy to the national government, not the EU. As well, in an experimental study Hobolt et al. (2013) find British voters assign more responsibility to their government than to the EU. Costa Lobo and Lewis-Beck (2012), in related work, examine 2009 surveys from Southern Europe. They report, first, that respondents who view the country's economy favorably are more ready to vote for the incumbent, compared to those who report less favorable views. Then, in order to establish the conditioning of the economic vote by the EU's own level of responsibility, they interact a 'responsibility dummy' with economic evaluation. Among those who perceive that the EU as responsible for economic conditions, the national economic vote lessens, but still persists, even during times of economic crisis (Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck, 2014).¹

The 2008 economic crisis, which began in the United States with bank rescues, hit certain countries in the Eurozone especially hard, beginning with the nationalization of Anglo Irish in 2009, and spreading quickly to

Greece and Portugal, which had to be formally bailed out. Italy and Spain were also affected, with their governments having to implement harsh austerity programs. How did the economic vote operate in these financially challenged democracies? Relevant studies in these nations showed the economic vote continued. For example, economic voting persisted in Spain (Fraile and Lewis-Beck 2012). Further, a three-survey investigation of elections in Portugal revealed perceptions of the economy maintained a significant impact on vote choice, after serious statistical controls (Freire and Santana Pereira, 2012). Turning to Greece, Nezi (2012) looked at government vote support before and after the crisis (i.e. 2004 and 2009); she found retrospective sociotropic evaluations impactful in both contests. For Italy, Bellucci (2012) reported, from an investigation of the 2001, 2006, and 2008 elections, that retrospective sociotropic effects acted as key drivers of vote choice.

However, as the 2008 crisis unfolded chronologically, the influence of economic voting came to be questioned. Therefore, Costa Lobo and Lewis-Beck (2012), set out to test the hypothesis that, after the crisis, national retrospective economic voting in these Southern European countries would be lessened. In their cross-sectional examination of EES data from the 2009 elections, for the above four countries, they found that hypothesis supported. This notion, that increased EU responsibility would reduce economic voting, also received backing in certain, individual-country studies, such as in Portugal, (Magalhães 2014) and Italy (Bellucci 2014). However, some other relevant case studies pointed in the opposite direction, including findings in Spain (Torcal 2014), Greece (Nezi and Katsanidou 2014) and Ireland (Quinlan and Okolikj 2016; 2017). Additional cross-sectional studies further indicated that national economic voting persisted in the EP elections, even during the economic crisis period. For example, Okolikj and Quinlan (2016) found that economic voting remained significant in both 2009 and 2014 EP elections across a broad sample of European countries (for a review of the impact of the 2008 crisis, see Lewis-Beck and Costa Lobo 2017, Costa Lobo and Lewis-Beck 2021).

Our purpose here is not to resolve this particular issue, of the economic vote in national elections. Rather, we wish to raise the possibility that, when we go about looking at the impact of sociotropic retrospective evaluations on the EP vote, across nations and time, we must be prepared to examine whether the economic voting coefficient systematically changes in response to external shocks such as the economic crisis in 2008, the establishment of Brexit in 2020, or the arrival of Covid at about the same time. To capitalize these dynamics effec-

¹ Our data does not allow us to systematically test if EU or national responsibility drives the economic perceptions.

tively, our sample must encompass a range of political systems, including those with complex federal structures (Okolikj, Hooghe, and Lewis-Beck 2025).

With respect to Brexit, there can be no denying that the ‘*Leave victory*’ in the 2016 EU referendum administered a blow to British electoral practices and institutions. How sweeping was the transformation? We point to an impact assessment of the economic effects of Britain’s leaving the EU. According to the expansive current study of Whiteley et al. (2023, 277), these “negative effects of Brexit have been exaggerated...overshadowed by the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic.” Perhaps so. But what of the ensuing effects of post-Brexit economic evaluations on government support itself? In a richly specified regression model of support for Prime Minister Johnson, as measured in a national survey ($N = 3002$), he obtained highly significant backing from voters who held positive economic evaluations (Whiteley et al., 2023, Table 10.2, 294). In other words, the traditional pattern of economic approval (or disapproval) of government did not find itself abandoned because of the ongoing Brexit hubbub. As a matter of fact, it had “continued to be influential in both 2017 and 2019, as well as in the 2019 elections to the European Parliament.” (Whiteley et al., 2023, p. 310).

These foregoing international crises, or shocks, in conjunction with the moving target of governmental accountability, pose certain hypotheses about the rolling contour of the national economic vote. Below, we offer leading ones, based on the calendar, the country, and external events.

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS AND THE ECONOMIC VOTE: HYPOTHESES

With respect to national (first-order) elections in European countries, the consensus that economic voting exists, as a valence issue, has pride of place. In that literature, a central question, particularly for Western Europe, is stability versus change (Anderson, 2007, 286; Lewis-Beck and Paldam, 2000, 119). With respect to change, a recent argument suggests that the erosion of the voting effects of social class has made space for an increase in economic voting (Evans and Tilley, 2012; Jansen et al., 2011). As well, the apparent weakening of the long-term effects of partisanship, in terms of identity or ideology, could provide another opening for economic voting (Walczak et al., 2012). Indeed, at the aggregate level, it has been shown that macroeconomic conditions shape macropartisanship, further highlighting the shifting impact of economic variables on the voter par-

ty alignment (Okolikj, Quinlan and Lewis-Beck, 2022). These conditions have prompted certain scholars of Western European elections to claim the economic vote has increased its impact (Kayser and Wlezien, 2011, 365; Kosmidis and Xezonakis, 2010; Okolikj and Hooghe 2022). However, others have offered empirical evidence to the contrary, showing a decline (Duch and Stevenson, 2008; Hellwig, 2014). Fueling the debate, Listhaug (2005), in his post-1970s examination of retrospective economic voting in Europe, finds it to be stable. In an overtime investigation of popularity function determinants, in six leading Western democracies, Bellucci and Lewis-Beck (2011) agree, contending the economic coefficient remains quite stable.

We have then here in this literature three rival hypotheses: the magnitude of the national economic vote has increased, decreased, or remained stable. Thus far, few papers have addressed these hypotheses, in national voting studies taking into account multiple countries, different periods, and levels of analysis. To help alleviate this paucity, Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck (2018) undertook examination of outstanding national election studies, replicated in seven Western European countries over a long stretch of time: Britain, Denmark, Germany, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden. These surveys, begun in the early 1970s, serve as a type of gold standard for investigating the trajectory of the economic voting coefficient, at least with regard to national, first-order elections. The authors trace the impact of socio-tropic retrospective evaluations, while controlling for socio-demographics (i.e., gender, age, education, religion, class or income, and urbanization) and for partisanship (i.e., left-right ideology or party identification). Once these amply specified models are estimated, the average marginal effect of the economic vote is calculated.

What do the results show? First, the economic voting coefficients are plotted over time, within each country. In a visual inspection of these 56 points, variation exists, but no trend jumps out. Further, a bivariate correlational analysis (Pearson’s r), reveals no significant time trend. Second, the data are pooled, yielding an $N = 79,524$, which serves fodder for more analysis. The simple correlation between the economic evaluation and incumbent vote share is $r = .204$, suggesting an economic vote may be operating. When estimation becomes multivariate, in a binomial logit model, the economic voting coefficient demonstrates high significance ($p < .001$); further, it lacks a significant time trend (Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck, 2018, Table 1, 9). Moreover, robustness tests demonstrate the persistence of this finding.

In sum, across the 40-year period, for these elections, the “strength of the economic vote remains

unchanged” (Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck, 2018, 10). Given these results, our first hypothesis (H1a) for economic voting in our European Parliamentary elections is that it will be positive and statistically significant, stable over time (H1b) and over space (H1c). A second hypothesis (H2) is that, even though these EU elections are second order, the weight of this economic vote will be relatively strong, as compared to other important political factors such as ideology and partisanship. As a third hypothesis (H3) has a specific focus on the 2024 EP elections as part of this special issue. We propose the EU economic voting pattern, to be exhibited here, will show no breaks from external shocks, such as the Great Recession or Brexit. As Whiteley et al. (2023, 310) report, since the 1960s, economic conditions in Britain have done “much to shape voters’ decisions” regarding the governing party vote; indeed, they conclude that such “Valence political forces were not ‘cancelled’ by the Brexit controversy, but rather continued to be influential in both 2017 and 2019, as well as in the 2019 elections to the European Parliament.” We suspect such continuity to reach across the elections, not only in Britain, but in the other EU elections under investigation. This leads to the most recent, 2024, round of EU elections. That is, the impact of cumulated international shocks over time, from the Great Recession, Brexit, Covid, Trump—to name four—will not reflect themselves in a significantly changed economic voting coefficient (pre-to-post 2024). In other words, the overtime (2004 - 2024) economic voting coefficient will be shown to be stable across the series.

THE DATA

We wish to examine European Parliament survey data over a noteworthy period of time, with a relevant set of countries. Additionally, we wish the data-set to not be unwieldy, and have some coherence, in terms of age, values, and institutions. Thus, we chose to explore millennial EES surveys, post-2000, specifically, the election years 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019, and 2024. Moreover, taking a cue from the current Whiteley et al. (2023, 267) effort on the impact of Brexit, we focus on the six founding members (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands), thereby “examining the same set of countries over the entire period.” In addition to having established the EU framework, these countries share a common trajectory of economic and political development within the EU. They have been subject to EU level governance the longest and arguably continue to exert the highest level of influence. Their institutional and political comparability, specifically in the

post-World War II period, provides fewer potential confounding factors, especially as compared to the post-communist countries bloc. This focused scope enhances analytical clarity and helps control for external factors, such as enlargement effects of transitional political legacies, which are outside of the remit of this research.

Fortunately, EES surveys contain, across time and space, a consistent set of measures on variables essential to our investigation. The central dependent variable, vote for an Incumbent party, is binary (1 = incumbent party vote, 0 = vote opposition or blank). A party was declared incumbent if, at least one year prior to the EP election, it was governing at the national level (as determined by examination of Who Governs data (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2022)). The central independent variable, Economic Perceptions followed a classic retrospective socio-tropic economic evaluation format (5= a lot better, 4 = a little better, 3 = stayed the same, 2 = a little worse, 1 = a lot worse)². Critical, long-term anchoring variables were available: Left-Right Ideology (self-placement from 1 = left to 10 = right); Party Identification (1= yes, 0 = no, -1 = don’t know). In addition, socio-demographic variables were available, as controls: age, gender, education, religiosity. We also control for the aggregate level, measuring GDP growth for each country in the year of the EP elections. [Further information on the variables, their measurement and distribution, is available in the Appendix.]

FIRST ESTIMATES: AVERAGE EFFECTS, PLOTS ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

To put our analysis in perspective, we begin with some plots, to illustrate the basic link between Economic Perception and Incumbent Vote, in these EU elections. Recall from H1 a): the more positive the national economic evaluation, the more likely the incumbent receives support. To test this hypothesis, we estimate binary logistic regressions, where the vote is a function of economic evaluation. For Figure 1, we regress vote on economic perception (controlling on year and country fixed effects). Observe the economic scores on the X-axis. On the Y-axis, find the predicted vote probability, expressed in average marginal effects, within this pooled analysis of the six-country surveys (N = 16,836) over five elections, 2004-2024. We observe a steady, monotonic rise (of about nine points per interval), as economic evalua-

² For variation of economic perceptions through EP surveys see Appendix. We acknowledge that higher variation in economic perceptions exists in 2009 (negative perceptions) surrounding GFC crisis. However, by 2024 economic perceptions are close to the average of the pooled sample.

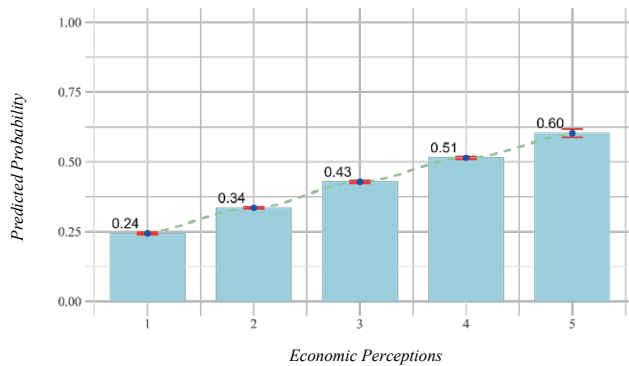


Figure 1. Average Marginal Effects with 95% CI of Economic Perceptions on Predicted Probability of Voting for Incumbent party in European Parliament elections.

tions improve. At the one extreme, when the voter sees the economy as a “lot worse,” a pro-incumbent vote appears far from likely (predicted probability of 24 percent). However, once the evaluation passes into positive territory, of a “little” or a “lot” better, the incumbent is likely to get that vote (average marginal effects of 51 and 60 percent), so supporting H1a.

Is the economic effect different, depending on the particular election? In Figure 2, we see the effects plot within each of the five contests. The pattern across time appears quite stable, again supporting H1b. The monotonic pattern of Figure 1 is essentially replicated. For example, here are the low-to-high ranges, by year: 2004, .25 to .66; 2009, .24 to .65; 2014, .31 to .68; 2019, .23 to .58; 2024, .23 to .56. In sum, the national economy, as perceived by the voters, reliably returns votes to the incumbent, regardless of the specific election under consideration. These results support H1b, regarding the relative strength of this economic vote. We can say that the economic effect is healthy, i.e., a voter who sees a good economy as opposed to a bad one is over twice as likely to support the incumbent party. Based on our findings, no external shock from the Great Recession seems to have a particular effect. Take the Year 2004 graph (in Figure 2) as the baseline, since it occurred well before 2008. The next election cross-section, for Year 2009 graph (in Figure 2) visually appears about the same as Year 2004, suggesting that the Great Recession of 2008 had no time to take effect. However, examining the 2014 Year election cross-section shows virtually the same pattern as Year

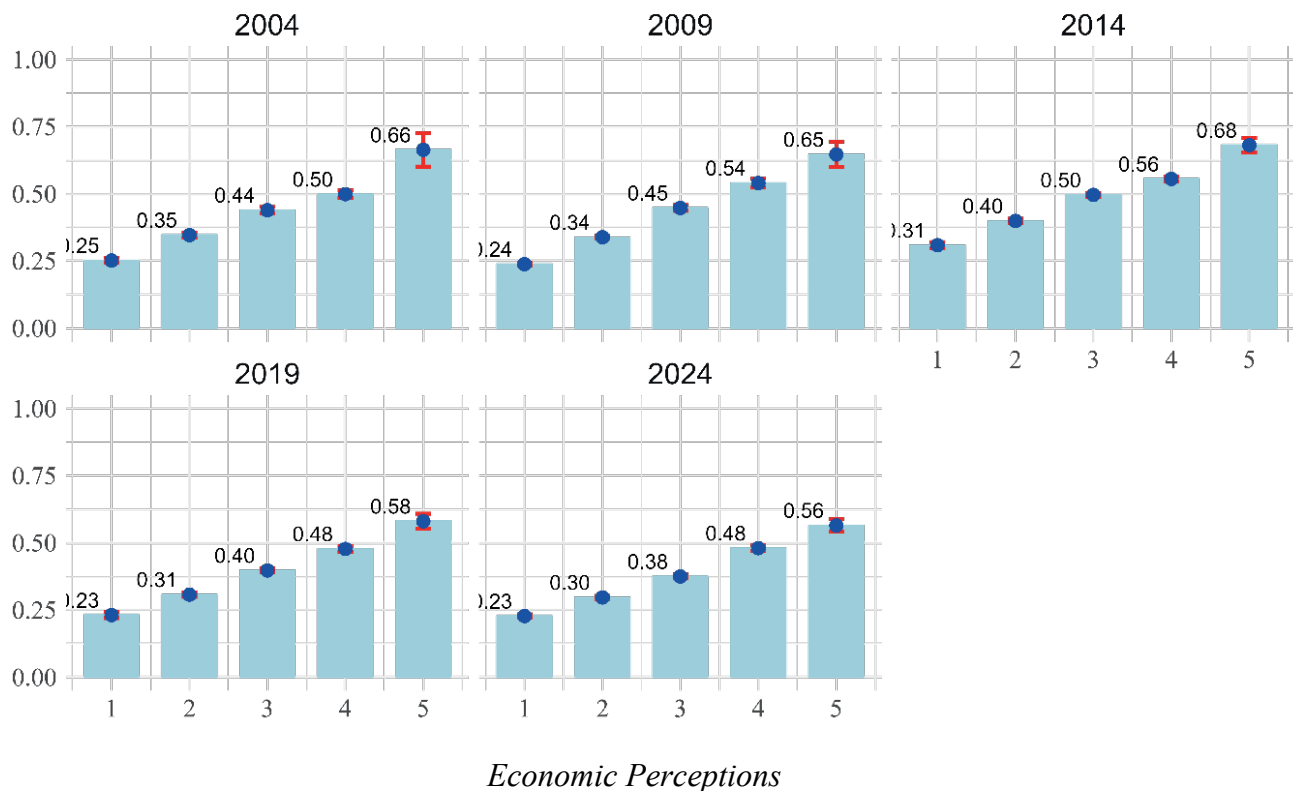


Figure 2. Average Marginal Effects with 95% CI of Economic Perceptions on Predicted Probability of Voting for Incumbent party in European Parliament by election year.

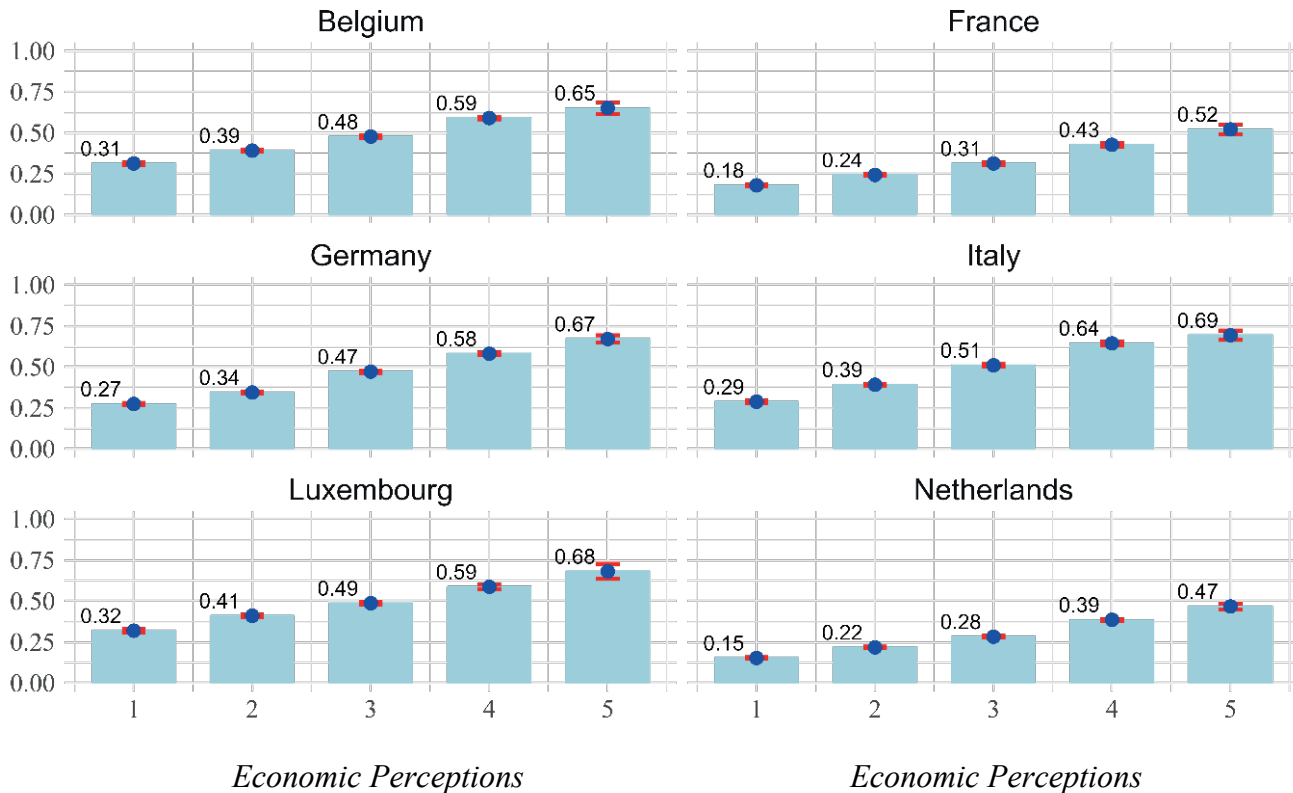


Figure 3. Average Marginal Effects with 95% CI of Economic Perceptions on Predicted Probability of Voting for Incumbent party in European Parliament elections by founding member country.

2004. We infer, from these pre-post observations, that on net the Great Recession played no role in the EP economic vote 2014, so supporting the stability trend.

What about country-specific differences? Figure 3 breaks the results down by country. These results are less harmonious, compared with Figure 2. For instance, for Belgium and Italy, the curve begins to flatten, as voters move from “little better” to “lot better”. However, all six countries have about the same low and high probabilities difference, i.e., from 30 to 40 percent. The Netherlands deviates slightly from that pattern, with a spread of about .15 to about .5. Nevertheless, this slightly different pattern remains monotonic, suggesting it essentially conforms.

Our conclusion in line with H1b and c is that economic voting is stable both through time (figure 2) and through space (figure 3).

SECOND ESTIMATES: MODEL SPECIFICATION

The foregoing results, which track the association of economic perception and incumbent voting under different cuts of the data, are suggestive. Still, to speak more affirmatively, with more statistical efficiency, the under-

lying micro-model deserves sharper

specification. In words, we pursue the following equation,

Incumbent Vote = f (*Economy, Ideology, Partisanship, Growth, Socio-Demographics, Year, County*) estimated via a binary logistic regression model, as in Table 1.

Model 1, simple in form, represents a linear additive specification, based on substantive variables. It offers a baseline model fit of MacFadden $R^2 = .288$. Economic perception, left-right ideology, party identification, age, education, and religiosity all show highly significant coefficients (at .001). Model 2, more complex, adds controls for year (with 2004 as the baseline) and country (with Belgium as the baseline). What does Model 2 reveal? We see, as expected, that Economic Perceptions continue to have a highly significant impact ($p < .001$) on the incumbent vote, as does objective economic performance, along with similarly significant effects from Left-Right Ideology and Party Identification. Effects from the Socio-Demographic variables are more scattered, as are the contextual controls from the Year and Country dummies.

Table 1. Logistic Regression Results, 2004-2024.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Incumbent	
	(1)	(2)
Economic perceptions	0.379*** (0.017)	0.398*** (0.018)
L-R ideology	0.114*** (0.007)	0.135*** (0.007)
Party ID	0.155*** (0.032)	0.197*** (0.033)
GDP Growth	-0.001 (0.007)	0.076** (0.025)
Age	0.010*** (0.001)	0.011*** (0.001)
Female	0.055 (0.033)	0.065 (0.034)
Education (middle)	-0.061 (0.051)	-0.011 (0.052)
Education (high)	-0.084 (0.050)	0.006 (0.053)
Education (still in school)	0.019 (0.103)	0.018 (0.107)
Religiosity	-0.122*** (0.014)	-0.100*** (0.016)
Year (2009)		0.044** (0.159)
Year (2014)		0.281*** (0.065)
Year (2019)		-0.227*** (0.067)
Year (2024)		-0.123 (0.077)
Country (France)		-0.690*** (0.062)
Country (Germany)		0.016 (0.067)
Country (Italy)		0.100 (0.072)
Country (Luxembourg)		0.151* (0.067)
Country (Netherlands)		-0.904*** (0.063)
Constant	-2.204*** (0.116)	-2.480*** (0.157)
Observations	16,836	16,836
McFadden's R ²	0.288	0.311
Akaike Inf. Crit.	21,166	20,497

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

Taken together, the presence of these controls helps assure us that the observed effects from economic perception are not spurious. Indeed, we observe that the impact of economic perceptions increases in the presence of these additional controls (from $b = .379$ to $b = .398$). Also, the model goodness-of-fits (McFadden R²) are respectable (at .288 to .311) across the models.

THE RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF ECONOMICS

What do these results indicate, in terms of broader theories of the vote choice? Consider the classic funnel of causality, a la American Voter, in particular the social-psychological variables at work (Campbell et al, 1960, chp.2; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008, chp.2). In our model those would be Left-Right Ideology, Party Identification, and Economic Perceptions. According to traditional economic voting theory, economic evaluations, especially sociotropic retrospective evaluations, are quite important for voters (Stegmaier and Lewis-Beck, 2013). If so, how does their strength compare to Left-Right Ideology or Party Identification? Look at Table 1, column1, and examine the magnitude of the coefficients. We see that Economic Perceptions appears to rank first ($b = .379$), Party Identification second ($b = .155$), and Ideology third ($b = .114$). However, this is not necessary a ranking of relative importance, because each of the variables have different metrics. That is, Economic Perception has five points, Ideology has ten points, and Party Identification has three points.

For purposes of comparison, suppose we standardize the metric, by converting the raw score of each these independent variables into standard deviation scores (Lewis-Beck and Lewis-Beck, 2015, 83-86). When we re-estimate the model, again with binominal logistic regression, using these standardized variables, we observe the results in Table 2, column 1. The coefficients are as follows: Economic Perceptions, .417; Left-Right Ideology, .344; Party Identification, .127. In terms of impact, Economic Perceptions has a stronger effect as compared to Left-Right Ideology, while Party Identification has less than half the weight of Left-Right Ideology.

These results suggest that, relatively speaking, Economics has the strongest impact, in terms of influencing Incumbent Vote. But what does that mean, more precisely, when we consider the effect of a unit change in X? The answer to that question becomes complex, within the logistic regression context. However, a manageable solution presents itself, if the dependent variable shows limited skewness (Stubager et al., 2013). In the data pool, the proportion of incumbent voters equals .346, indi-

Table 2. Standardized Regression.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Incumbent	
	(1)	(2)
Economic perceptions (standardized)	0.417*** (0.019)	0.090*** (0.004)
L-R ideology (standardized)	0.344*** (0.017)	0.068*** (0.003)
Party ID (standardized)	0.127*** (0.021)	0.027*** (0.004)
GDP Growth	0.076** (0.025)	0.019*** (0.006)
Age	0.011*** (0.001)	0.002*** (0.000)
Female	0.065 (0.034)	0.014* (0.007)
Education (middle)	-0.011 (0.052)	-0.004 (0.011)
Education (high)	0.006 (0.053)	-0.001 (0.011)
Education (still in school)	0.018 (0.107)	0.002 (0.022)
Religiosity	-0.100*** (0.016)	-0.021*** (0.003)
Year (2009)	0.440** (0.159)	0.117*** (0.035)
Year (2014)	0.281*** (0.065)	0.066*** (0.014)
Year (2019)	-0.227*** (0.067)	-0.047** (0.014)
Year (2024)	-0.123 (0.077)	-0.019 (0.016)
Country (France)	-0.690*** (0.062)	-0.139*** (0.013)
Country (Germany)	0.016 (0.067)	0.007 (0.015)
Country (Italy)	0.100 (0.072)	0.027 (0.016)
Country (Luxembourg)	0.151* (0.067)	0.033* (0.016)
Country (Netherlands)	-0.904*** (0.063)	-0.188*** (0.014)
Constant	-0.660*** (0.141)	0.346*** (0.030)
Observations	16,836	16,836
Akaike Inf. Crit.	20,497	

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; Model 1 standardized logistic regression; Model 2 standardized linear probability model.

cating support from over one-third of the electorate. Thus, while not at the 50-50 mark, it does not qualify as a skewness problem, since the expectation of relative effects should be much the same in a linear probability model (Denk and Finkel, 1992). Moreover, the partial regression coefficients will offer a more straightforward interpretation of impact.

In Table 2, column 2, we see the linear probability (OLS) slope coefficients for these three variables of interest. With respect to relative weight, they score as follows: Economic Perceptions, .090; Left-Right Ideology, .068; Party Identification, .027. Again, the effect of the economy is strongest, the impact of party just under half that of ideology. In terms of the direct impact, we see that a one standard deviation increase in positive economic perception increases the probability of an incumbent vote by about 9 percentage points, whereas the same change in ideology increases the probability of an incumbent vote by about 6.8 percentage points. In contrast, a similar increase in party identification has less than half that effect, at 2.7 percentage points.

Overall, it seems safe to conclude that economic perception acts as a major determinant of vote choice in EU elections, rivaling and outperforming the impact of more known, long-term social-psychological anchors of vote choice, such as ideology or party attachment. When it comes to H2, we find economy matters, even more than the other forces, such as ideology and partisanship.

ECONOMIC VOTERS IN THE 2024 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS: ARE THEY DIFFERENT?

Is the economic effect different, from what we have observed in the past surveys analyzed thus far? Let us run the tests applied to the series from 2004 to 2024 (See Figure 2). Figure 2 we present the effects plot for each EP election year. Across the contests the patterns seem visibly very similar. Economic Perceptions of the economy continue, into 2024, to impact the incumbent vote in the expected way, despite the particular election. Take, for example, the most immediate comparison, that of 2019 to 2024. In 2019, the range of probability expectations, low to high, runs from .23 to .58 (35 percent difference). For 2024, it is almost the same, i.e., .23 to .56 (33 percent difference).

Are there differences country-to-country? Figure 4 explores the results within-country for the 2024 EP elections only. As earlier, the economic effects in The Netherlands and France remain lower than the other countries. Belgium, Germany, Italy, and Luxembourg continue to tap out at the high end, with scores of .55 to .69.

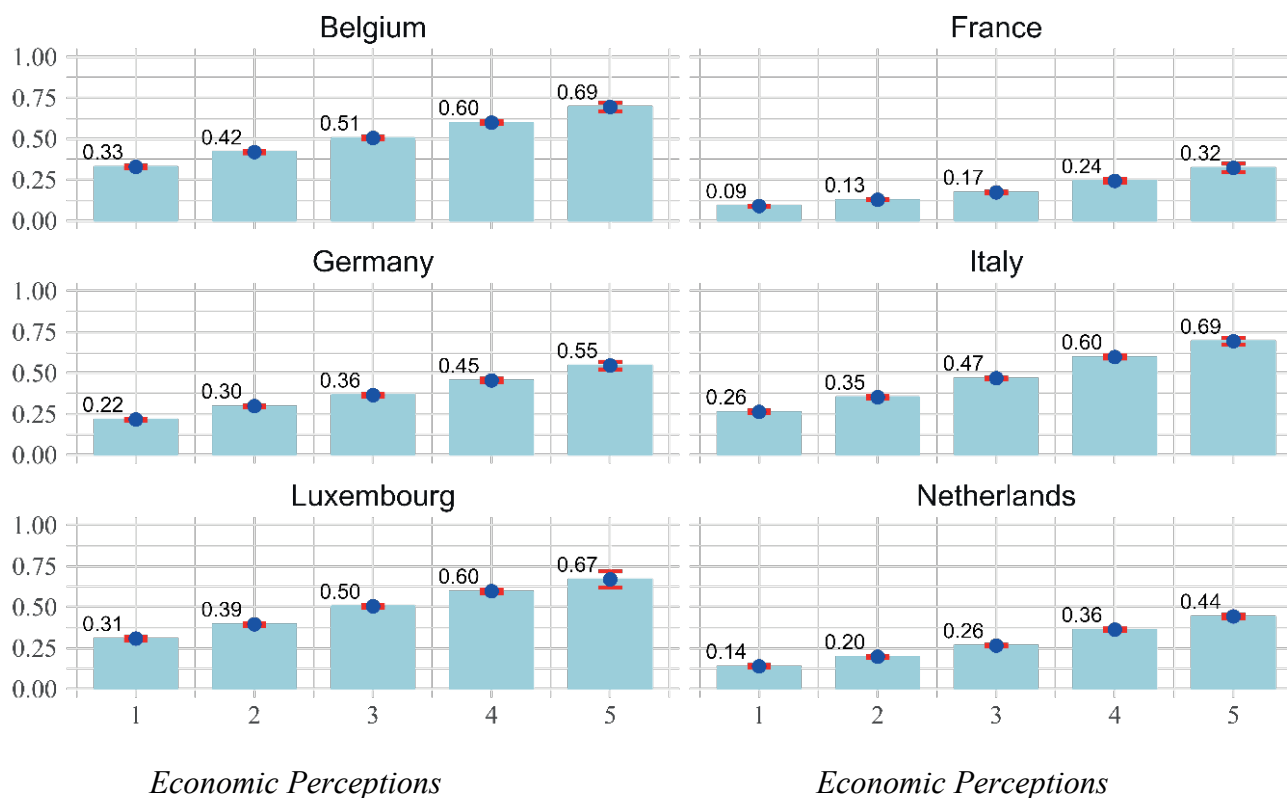


Figure 4. Average Marginal Effects with 95% CI of Economic Perceptions on Predicted Probability of Voting for Incumbent party in European Parliament elections by founding member country, in the 2024 EP elections only.

Still, the general, noteworthy monotonic increase continues much the same across countries, when we focus on the 2024 data only.

Consider the properties of the entire, twenty-year pool of the five surveys ($N = 16,837$). In Table 3 are displayed the logistic regression estimates of our pivotal model specification (as in Table 1) with the addition of an interaction effect of economic perceptions and year 2024. This allows us to investigate if economic voting in 2024 deviates from the overall economic voting effect found across time.

Focus first on the economic coefficients in column 1. The coefficients appear quite comparable to those in the earlier pool. In particular, the economic perception coefficient here is .384, very close to the Table 1 (column 2) estimate, at .398. Moreover, it is highly significant (at $> .001$) and increases in impact as the specification is enhanced. One could safely conclude that, despite adding the twists and turns of EP electoral politics and policy over the five years prior, when the dust settled, the impact of economic evaluations on incumbent vote choice persisted at its past levels of strength.

Table 3 directly tests H3 by including the Year 2004 dummy along with an interaction term (Economic Per-

ception $\times$ Year 2024). This allows us to observe whether the economic voting coefficient is significantly increased or decreased for the EP elections of that year. As we can see, the coefficient falls far short of conventional statistical significance (and the MacFadden R^2 does not change from the column 2 Table 1 specification). This indicates the cumulative interventions of the Great Recession, Brexit, Covid, and Donald Trump, as important as they may be, do not appear to have influenced the EP economic vote for 2024. To the extent that these interventions do exercise influence, they would have to pass through the system as indirect effects, via the other variables in the specification.

CONCLUSIONS

In this essay, we have explored three hypotheses with regard to economic voting in European Parliamentary elections. First, it will be positive, statistically significant, and stable. Second, this economic vote will be relatively strong. Third, the economic voting pattern will show no breaks focusing on the most recent, 2024, round of EU elections.

Table 3. Logistic Regression Results, 2004-2024.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Incumbent	
	(1)	
Economic perceptions	0.384***	(0.021)
L-R ideology	0.136***	(0.007)
Party ID	0.197	(0.033)
GDP growth	0.079	(0.025)
Age	0.011	(0.001)
Female	0.066	(0.034)
Education (middle)	-0.010	(0.052)
Education (high)	0.008	(0.053)
Education (still in school)	0.026	(0.108)
Religiosity	-0.098	(0.016)
Year (2009)	0.450	(0.159)
Year (2014)	0.288	(0.065)
Year (2019)	-0.221	(0.067)
Year (2024)	-0.245	(0.124)
Country (France)	-0.688	(0.063)
Country (Germany)	0.023	(0.068)
Country (Italy)	0.102	(0.073)
Country (Luxembourg)	0.152	(0.067)
Country (Netherlands)	-0.902	(0.063)
Economic perceptions x Year 2024	0.048	(0.038)
Constant	-2.466	(0.157)
Observations	16,836	
McFadden's R ²	0.311	
Akaike Inf. Crit.	20,497	

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

With respect to the first hypothesis, we do see a statistically significant impact of economics on the incumbent vote, within the six core EU countries, and across the time period the effect exhibits no trend. Second, these effects are forceful, in that they rival, sometimes exceed, the impact of the important anchoring variables of left-right ideology and party identification. Third, looking specifically at the analysis including the 2024 EP elections, we observe essentially the same pattern of effects as in the earlier period (2004 to 2019), with no structural break brought about by Brexit or other shocks, such as Covid or Trump. In other words, economic voting continues to matter for these second-order elections, as much now as in the past. It makes for a steady policy pressure on sitting governments, pushing them to institute policies that shape the domestic distribution of goods and services.

The resilience and stability of the economic vote shown in these data speaks to a rising controversy in the broader literature on economic voting, which carefully questions “the influence of economics on political support,” in particular the influence on executive approval (Hellwig and Singer, 2023). The Hellwig and Singer (2023) text, among other virtues, offers a pooled analysis of twenty democracies, as well as extensive case studies on eleven: Britain, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, Portugal, Spain, and the United States. In a review of these case studies, Park et al. (2023, 328) conclude that “10 of the 11 provide full or partial confirmation of the established general proposition that *the economy matters for approval ratings, but sometimes it matters more than others.*” The investigation at hand examines directly several of these case studies, and how the economy matters for government support, namely vote for national incumbents in the elections to the European Parliament. These results help further nuance the balance between politics (the ‘p’ term) and economics (the ‘e’ term), in calculating the VP function operating in contemporary industrial democracies (Paldam, 1991, 9).

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Populism and affective polarization in the times of “Giorgia”: an assessment of the effect on European voting

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Abstract. Despite the attention paid by comparative studies to the themes of populism and affective polarization (AP), the connections between these two concepts remain under-investigated. Both of them describe the conflict between ingroup (“us”) and outgroup (“them”) individuals. Nonetheless, although in the first case, the conflict pits the people against the elite, in the second case conflict occurs between party supporters and other parties (e.g., leaders, members). Even if conceptually and empirically separate, populism and AP are key explanatory factors of today’s politics and voting behavior. The increase in voter discontent, also fueled by a succession of economic, migratory, and pandemic crises, has indeed facilitated the rise of populists and affective sentiments. Do they work in parallel or do they share some points of contact? How do they interact in voting choices across different parties? In this paper, we analyze the Italian context to shed light on the dynamics and effects that AP and support for populist parties produce on voting behavior. We present new data from a dedicated survey conducted in Italy during the 2024 European elections, and our analysis highlights the complex implications stemming from these two political phenomena: Whereas AP is positively associated with voter turnout and support for ideologically driven parties, certain forms of populism are negatively associated with turnout and influence party choice in distinct ways.

Keywords: European election, vote, populism, affective polarization.

INTRODUCTION

Populism and affective polarization (AP) are among the most influential phenomena in politics today. Populist rhetoric has emerged in party strategies across nations and ideologies, while some parties have been explicitly labeled as “populist” for their opposition against political elites (Noury and Roland 2020). The recent electoral successes of these parties show that populist sentiments have risen in western societies. Similarly, the ways in which people “affectively” polarize in support for a party – perhaps most notably, their rejection of the idea that opposing parties may govern – have found fertile ground, especially during recent electoral campaigns. Europe is not

immune from these sentiments, which are giving rise to the electoral successes of new political actors (Milner 2021; Hahm et al. 2023; Reiljan et al. 2024).

Populism and AP also appear to affect ‘second-order’ European elections. In 2019 and 2024, mainstream pro-European integration parties hold the majority within the European Parliament, but the electoral success of populist parties remained high (Mudde 2019). In a context where high volatility, low participation and reactions to incumbent national governments play a crucial role, populist and affective sentiments could be crucial to explain voting dynamics.

Populism and AP have played a central role in shaping voting behavior in US presidential elections, where they tend to exert a mutually reinforcing influence in support of specific parties or leaders (Garzia et al. 2022). In the European context, however, the impact of these factors may differ due to distinct institutional and political configurations, such as multi-party systems and proportional electoral rules. On the continent, voters affiliated with socialist and confessional parties—which typically score low on populism indices—often display strong partisan identities rooted in long-standing political traditions. Conversely, supporters of populist radical-right parties have demonstrated a powerful convergence of populist attitudes and affective polarization (Harteveld et al., 2022), suggesting that the interaction between these dimensions may vary considerably across party families and electoral systems. According to these arguments, we want to investigate *to what extent populism and AP affected voting behavior in the 2024 European elections, and whether they have a mutual reinforcing on voting.*

In our analysis, we address the Italian case, taking advantage of an ad hoc survey conducted in the context of the 2024 EU elections. In addition to presenting an opportunity to use a unique dataset with key indicators, the analysis of this case appears particularly interesting due to factors such as high levels of abstentionism, high electoral volatility, and post-crises effects, all of which have shown a relevant and peculiar impact on voting (Angelucci et al. 2024; Giovannini et al. 2023¹; Chiaramonte et al. 2022). Because Italy has often been a political bellwether—experiencing phenomena that later emerge in other European countries—understanding how populism and AP affect voting in this case may contribute to unveil similar dynamics in the whole EU.

The following sections will define the concepts at the core of this study, describe their theoretical connections, and present the research hypotheses. We then describe the data and the analysis method before

addressing the results. The concluding section will wrap up our findings.

ITALY’S PRECARIOUS STABILITY ON THE EVE OF 2024 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

To test our hypotheses, we focus on the Italian case in the context of the 2024 European elections. This case is crucial for understanding current and prospective developments in electoral dynamics, given its similarities with other national contexts and its potential implications for the evolution of national political landscapes within the EU.

First, Italy’s current political stability has emerged from a period of turbulence. During the XVIII legislature (2018–2022), three different governments were formed: The first two were led by the Five Star Movement (M5S) leader Giuseppe Conte, and the third was a technocratic-led government supported by almost all political parties. The roots of this instability can be traced to both the increasing multipolarity of the party system, which granted smaller parties significant leverage, as well as the impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. In this context, the 2022 national elections took place amid a climate of uncertainty and fragmentation similar to that observed in other EU countries (Chiaramonte et al. 2022).

As in other contexts, the political landscape of the Italian party system remained relatively stable. However, volatility was a defining feature of the 2022 elections, as Giorgia Meloni’s small party experienced a dramatic surge in support, rising from approximately 4% in 2018 to 26% of the vote (Chiaramonte et al. 2022).

On the eve of the 2024 EU elections, Giorgia Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia (FdI) continued to enjoy a “honeymoon phase” with voters, bolstered by strong economic performance and significant public spending under the NextGenEU framework. Her decision not to support Mario Draghi’s government successfully channeled popular discontent and anti-establishment sentiments, drawing voters away from other populist forces (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2023).

Like in other EU countries, Italy’s party system has shifted toward the extremes of the political spectrum, both in voter preferences and party leadership positioning, as evidenced by Elly Schlein’s victory in the Partito Democratico (PD) primaries. The rise of non-moderate leaders may be linked to the growing prevalence of AP sentiments (Bettarelli et al. 2023) and to the perceived need to break away from moderate elites. In this context, the leadership of the formerly most prominent populist

¹ See the IJES Volume 86 n. 1 (2023). Available at <https://oaj.fupress.net/index.php/qoe/issue/view/822>.

parties, M5S and the Lega Salvini Premier (formerly the Northern League - NL), remained unchanged. However, their participation in the governments of the XVIII legislature significantly weakened their ability to attract anti-system voters. In this regard, Italy is among a growing number of cases where major populist parties have assumed governmental responsibilities. As such, it may provide valuable insights into how anti-establishment sentiments and affective feelings shape electoral results in a fragmented and radicalized party system.

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION, POPULISM, AND VOTING BEHAVIOR: SELECTIVE LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

In this article, we address the influence of populism and AP on electoral turnout and voting choice in the Italian 2024 European elections. Given their second-order nature – characterized by lower salience and emotional engagement (Reif and Schmitt 1980) – European elections would appear less susceptible to the influence of AP on voter turnout. Nonetheless, the technocratic character of the European Union and its policy decisions have consistently served as focal points for populist critique, reinforcing the anti-establishment narratives promoted by these parties (e.g., UKIP in the United Kingdom). Consequently, European elections provide a valuable context for assessing the mobilization potential of populist parties, which are likely to intensify their anti-establishment appeals by directly targeting EU institutions and key political actors. Indeed, recent research suggests that populist criticism of the EU has proven effective in mobilizing electoral support in both European (Milner 2021) and national contests (Conti et al. 2022).

AP has increasingly been considered in analyzing voting behavior, given its growing relevance in the United States (Iyengar et al. 2019) and other contexts (i.e., Wagner 2021). According to Iyengar et al. (2012), AP captures both strong positive feelings toward one’s in-party (positive partisanship) and strong negative feelings toward out-parties (negative partisanship). It differs from ideological polarization in that it is driven by feelings rather than issue-based differences.

Most of the literature on AP has focused on its negative consequences, such as the weakening of social cohesion and inter-group positive interactions or the growing preference for partisan goals over democratic norms (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). Recent scholarship has focused on its positive effects, stressing AP’s role in increasing political mobilization (i.e. electoral turnout). For example, Ward and Tavits (2019) found that

AP stimulated a greater perceived importance of voting, thereby triggering higher turnout. Using the same dataset, but widening the scope of the research, Wagner (2021) reached similar conclusions, stressing how AP is associated with a greater propensity to participate in politics. Building on these studies, Hartevelde and Wagner (2023) reached yet more solid conclusions; the positive impact of AP on turnout holds even after accounting for positive partisanship, ideological polarization, and reverse causality. Ferreira da Silva and Garzia (2024) reported similar findings, also considering the positive impact of AP toward political leaders on turnout. However, their analysis showed that AP toward political parties has an even stronger positive effect on electoral participation. This phenomenon explained by social identity theory: Higher AP increases the salience of party competition and its perceived stake (Ward and Tavits 2019). Affectively polarized citizens will consider opponents to be enemies and are encouraged to participate to keep opponents out of power. Based on this scholarship, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1. Citizens with higher levels of affective polarization are more likely to vote.

Although the relationship between AP and voter turnout has been diffusely examined, less attention has been paid to AP’s impact on voter choice. Pierce and Lau (2019) have found that in US elections, AP is positively correlated with voters’ likelihood of choosing of candidates whose policies are more closely aligned with their interests. According to Hartevelde (2021), AP in the Netherlands is stronger among those who support and oppose the populist radical right. Rodon (2022) reported that in Spain, individuals displaying higher AP were more likely to vote for left-wing parties. The heterogeneity and limited scope of these findings do not allow us to predict clear patterns in the case of the 2024 EU elections in Italy. Nevertheless, by emphasizing specific conceptual dimensions of AP, it is possible to outline preliminary expectations and identify plausible trends to be investigated through an exploratory analysis. Because AP favors identity over policy (Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015), we may expect voters with higher AP to prioritize a candidate or party’s symbolic representation of their values rather than specific policy proposals. This strengthens positive partisanship, encouraging voters to align with their party, and making them more likely to vote based on party identity rather than policy positions or candidate qualities. Cleavages may favor the identity dimension of partisanship by distinguishing blocs of opposing individuals (e.g., left vs right, regionalists vs nationalists, confessional parties vs secularists).

Accordingly, parties that clearly emphasize a position on a cleavage may attract supporters with high AP; on the other hand, personal parties (Rahat, 2024) and “catch-all” parties (Gunther and Diamond 2003) tend to downsize the identity issue in favor of the paramount figure of the leader or of opinion moods. Moreover, another component of AP (negative partisanship) stresses a strong sense of hostility to the out-groups. Consequently, citizens may choose parties that provide a sense of defense against the perceived threat posed by out-groups.

These AP features reduce the likelihood that voters will consider candidates from opposing parties and thus narrow voters’ choices, which may allow us to predict that affectively polarized citizens will be more likely to favor parties that appear most aligned with their emotional loyalties toward the in-group and that more viscerally manifest their opposition to out-groups.

We turn now to populism. Here, we follow the ideational approach (Hawkins et al., 2019), which intends populism as a “thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004, 543). Populism is often identified with the “supply side” (i.e., party level), considering parties’ programmatic platforms or leaders’ discourses (i.e., Rooduijn 2013). Studies on the general public “demand side” consider populism to be a multi-dimensional concept whose ideological core consists of three interrelated components: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and a Manichean perspective (Akkerman et al. 2014). Regarding the first, populists emphasize the centrality of ordinary people, intended as the embodiment of democratic virtues and the basis of democratic decision-making processes. Ostensibly, the people share a single will and have the same interests, which only the populist party can represent. Anti-elitism regards the elite as an evil homogeneous group, usually including the political establishment in the form of established political parties, perceived as unresponsive, incompetent, and corrupt. Finally, the Manichean perspective considers the distinction between people and the elite in morally binary terms as a fight between good and evil.

Although the literature on populism has tended to stress its detrimental effects on democracy (Kriesi and Pappas 2015; Rummens 2017; Castaldo 2018; Castaldo and Memoli 2024), several authors have highlighted the ambivalent relationship between populism and democracy (Mudde and Rovina Kaltwasser 2012), and others have even suggested a positive role in enhancing inclusiveness and participation (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018).

In this perspective, populism is seen as a corrective to democracy because it seeks to mobilize the people in a struggle against existing power structures. Because this process may increase the participation of excluded groups or bring neglected issues back into the political debate, several studies have suggested a positive relationship between populism and turnout. The tests have produced mixed results, with more studies indicating a positive but conditional impact of populism on turnout. For example, Spittler (2018) finds that right-wing populist parties increase electoral participation by addressing neglected issues, dissatisfied voters, and citizens with anti-establishment attitudes. Verbeek and Zaslove (2016, 318) asserted that in Italy, populism “has been partly functional [...] in contributing to establish more contestation.” Avritzer (2002) argued that populists in Latin America mobilize the formerly disenfranchised to participate in politics. With a few exceptions (e.g., Nemcok et al. 2023), the literature stresses the positive effect of populism on turnout. However, this effect is not strong, and it is found mainly in specific segments of society (Immerzeel and Pickup 2015) or in certain regions (Leininger and Meijers 2021). Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2. Citizens with higher levels of populism are more likely to vote.

Relevant to our investigation of the relationship between populism and voting choice, past literature has addressed the connection between populist attitudes and support for populist parties. Are citizens with high populist attitudes more likely to vote for populist parties? Rooduijn (2014) and Akkerman et al. (2014) have found support for an affirmative answer to this question. More recent studies (e.g., Castanho Silva et al. 2020), as well as other research using partially different indicators of populism (e.g., Schumacher and Rooduijn 2013), have reached similar conclusions. However, a few studies (e.g., Stanley 2011) have questioned this finding. Other research has sought to disentangle the role of host ideologies and thin populist ideology and their constitutive components. For example, Neuner and Wratil (2022) found that in the German case, only some elements of the populist ideology (people-centrism) effectively increased the propensity to vote for a populist party. Moreover, these authors found that host ideology issues were more effective in influencing how citizens vote. In a replication study, Castanho Silva, Neuner, and Wratil (2023) applied Neuner and Wratil’s framework to the United States, finding that although their general conclusions held even in a different context, there were also several differences (e.g., greater impact of anti-elitism vs

people-centrism). In this sense, the effect of populism’s sub-components is context-dependent, stressing the value of testing their specific influence on different contexts. Hence, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H3. Citizens with stronger populist attitudes are more likely to support populist parties.

DATA AND METHOD

We ran several logistic regression models to test our hypotheses using data collected from an original survey fielded in the context of the 2024 European election in Italy.² Five dichotomous variables represent our dependent variables. They have been created by recoding the answers to the question on voting behavior.³ The first variable distinguishes those who did not vote (coded as 0) from those who did (coded as 1), and the other five binary variables distinguishing voters for the most relevant parties/lists: PD, Forza Italia (FI)–Noi Moderati, Lega Salvini Premier, M5S, and FdI. These variables distinguish voters for each party from those who voted for another party.⁴ The leading independent variables are represented by three indices, which express the different dimensions of populism (Table 1), as well as by AP.

Following Akkerman (2014), we measured citizens’ attitudes using a 12-item ordinal battery. By applying a polychoric principal component analysis (PPCA) to our indicators,⁵ it was possible to aggregate our information in three indices and obtain a synthesis (factor

scores) that expresses the respondents’ different populist dimensions.

As reported in Table 1, the three indices allow us to distinguish three types (factors) of attitudes within the Italian electorate, two referring to populism and one to pluralism. The first, “anti-establishment populism,” merging part of the populist and elitist attitudes of Akkermann et al. (2014) by denoting a particular opposition to the political class. Although seemingly contradictory, (given that populism includes anti-elitism among its key features), our results mirror those of Akkermann et al. (2014), which provide theoretical and empirical justifications for this partial overlapping of populist and elitist attitudes. In this perspective, anti-elitism targets the political establishment represented by politicians, who are seen as siding against ordinary people. According to this view, other (e.g., economic, technocratic) elites are acceptable and preferable to political elites. We labeled the second type “Rousseau populism” because, while including items referring to different sub-components of populism, it shows a prevalence of people-centrist attitudes. The third type, pluralism, which overlaps with Akkermann et al.’s (2014) pluralist attitude, represents the opposite of populism and is coherent with democratic values.

AP has been operationalized through respondents’ different levels of distance/appreciation, expressed on a scale from 1 to 11, for the five largest parties in the competition.⁶ Relying on Wagner (2021), we have first calculated the average absolute party like–dislike difference relative to each respondent’s average party like–dislike score:

$$AF = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{p=1}^p (\overline{like}_{ip} - \overline{like}_i)^2}{n_p}}$$

where p is the party, i the individual respondent and $\overline{like}_{ip}$ the like–dislike score assigned to each party p by individual i . Subsequently, because “the affective polarization measures in multiparty systems should then capture the extent the single in-group is seen positively compared to the out-group” (see Reiljan 2019, quoted in Wagner 2021: 3), we calculated the weighted affective polarization (WAP) equation for parties j and voter i by applying the following formula:

⁶ The exact question is “I will list a series of parties that are part of the Italian Parliament. Express a judgment on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means that you do not like that party at all, and 10 means that you like that party a lot.” For the five parties analyzed, 0 represents the maximum distance from the party, while 10 expresses the maximum closeness or appreciation for the party in question. See average values by affective polarization in Table A3 in the Appendix.

² The sample, which consists of 3,431 interviews conducted by the SWG using the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) technique, is representative of the adult population residing in Italy. The sample design, distributed according to five stratification parameters—area of residence, age group, gender, educational qualification, and party voted in the last European elections—is based on Italian Statistical Institute (ISTAT) and Eligendo data from Italy’s Ministry of the Interior. Further information on the number of contacts, interviews, missed responses, and the post-stratification weights technique is available in Table A1 reported in the Appendix.

³ The question reads as follows: “Which party did you vote for in the recent European Parliament elections?” The answers are as follows: 1 “Partito Democratico (PD),” 2 “Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra,” 3 “Azione,” 4 “Pace Terra e Dignità,” 5 “Stati Uniti D’Europa (Italia Viva e +Europa),” 6 “Forza Italia (Fi) – Noi Moderati,” 7 “Lega Salvini Premier (Lega),” 8 “Movimento 5 Stelle (MCS),” 9 “Libertà,” 10 “Fratelli d’Italia (FdI),” 11 “Pace Terra e Dignità,” 12 “Altro” 13 “voted blank ballot or invalid vote,” 14 “did not vote,” 15 “does not have the right to vote,” 98 “don’t know or don’t remember,” 99 “don’t know.” We deleted all cases that answered, “does not have the right to vote,” “don’t know or don’t remember” and “don’t know.”

⁴ Descriptive statistics of variables used are reported in Table A3 in the Appendix.

⁵ We eliminated all cases that answered “I do not know” or “no answer” to the 12 questions from the analysis. See Table A4 for percentages.

Table 1. Polychoric factor analysis on Akkermann's populism scale in Italy after the 2024 European elections .

	Anti-establishment populism	Rousseau populism	Pluralism
The politicians in the Italian Parliament must follow the will of the people		0.801	
The people, and not politicians, should make our most important political decisions	0.670	0.421	
The political differences between the elites and the people are larger than the differences between the people		0.690	
I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician	0.667	0.418	
Elected officials talk too much and take too little action		0.697	0.325
Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil	0.706		
What people call "compromise" in politics is really just selling out on one's principles	0.608	0.467	
In a democracy, it is important to make compromises among different viewpoints			0.746
It is important to listen to the opinion of other groups		0.522	0.615
Politicians should lead rather than follow the people			0.755
Our country would be better governed if important decisions were left up to successful business people	0.834		
Our country would be better governed if important decisions were left to independent experts	0.581		
Kaiser – Meyer – Olkin test	0.822		
Barlett's Test (Sig.)	0.000		
Eigenvalue	2.923	2.506	1.878
Alpha di Cronbach	0.781	0.755	0.513

$$Weighted AP = \sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^P v_p \frac{(like_{ip} - \bar{like}_{ip})^2}{n_p}}$$

where v_p is the vote share of each party, measured as a proportion with a range from 0 to 1.

We controlled the relationships between dependent and independent variables by using several types of sociodemographic information (see Table A2), such as gender, age, education, and occupation. We also considered information related to politics (political trust and political interest), the economy (national economic perception of last year), and local contexts (regions).

ANALYSIS

Table 2 presents a (logit) regression regarding the choice to vote or not during the 2024 European elections in Italy.

The different types of populist and pluralist attitudes do not affect voting participation except the Rousseau's populist type, which shows a negative significant value ($or = 0.724$). Accordingly, the higher the respondents' level of Rousseau's populism, the lower the likeli-

hood they will vote. Hence, our H2, which suggests a positive relation between populism and turnout, is not supported by our analysis. As expected, our data support H1: Citizens showing high levels of AP were likelier to vote ($or = 1.656$).⁷ These findings are consistent with those observed in other Southern European countries characterized by high levels of AP (Bettarelli et al. 2023). Our control variables indicate that voting participation is higher among those who are more interested in politics ($or = 1.627$) and more inclined to trust political institutions ($or = 1.727$). Voting tends to increase with age, among different levels of education, and in left-side voters ($or = 0.880$).

We turn now to the effects of populism and AP on party choice (see Table 3). Despite its ideological affinities with the radical right and its populist tendencies before coming to power in 2022, FdI represents a national conservative party (Vassallo and Vignati 2023). Although the different dimensions of populism and pluralism do not produce statistically significant effects on

⁷ Further research is needed to identify the mechanisms behind these findings. For example, political interest, which in our analysis is positive and significant, may play a relevant role (see De Sio 2008; Harteveld and Wagner 2023)

Table 2 Affective polarization and populism on voting turnout in the 2024 European elections in Italy.

	Not-Voting vs. Voting	
	OR	Std. err
Anti-establishment populism	0.978	0.088
Rousseau populism	0.724***	0.066
Pluralism	0.983	0.091
Affective Polarization (weighted)	1.656***	0.156
Political trust index	1.727***	0.194
Political interest (not at all+a little)	1.627*	0.318
Left_right self-placement scale	0.880**	0.035
Gender (man)	0.895	0.169
Age (19-92)	1.012*	0.006
Education (not educated-elementary)		
Middle School	4.653*	3.242
High School	6.747**	4.417
Degree	7.078**	4.759
Master-PhD	7.685**	5.597
Occupation (not employed)	1.341	0.288
Economic perception of last year - (remain the same)		
somewhat worse+much worse	1.497	0.308
somewhat improved+much improved	1.666	0.612
Regions (Piemonte)	@	
Constant	1.654	1.695
Pseudo R2	0.136	
LR (Prob>chi2)	0.000	
Number of observation	2,073	

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; to save space, we do not report the ‘Regions’ for each models.

the vote for FdI, AP shows a significant and positive effect such that FdI voters are more likely to be polarized ($or = 1.688$). This result is likely due to the strong sense of identity among FdI voters, whose ideological principles today are based on nativism, sovereignty, and Euroscepticism. This finding implies that FdI has been the right-wing party chosen by those polarized citizens who wanted to avoid an electoral affirmation of the left. The likelihood of voting for FdI increases with respondents’ age and among those who show little interest in politics. FdI voters place themselves on the right side of the political space ($or = 1.927$). Although sometimes included in the groups of radical-right populist parties (see PopuList classification, Rooduijn et al. 2024), FdI represents a “new” form of populism focusing mainly on nativist identity and strong leadership (Baldini et al. 2022), yet with only sparse anti-elite rhetoric. Thus, our results reinforce the thesis that FdI is

not chosen for its populist anti-political elite positions. Conti and colleagues (2022) already showed that FdI MPs ranked negatively on populism and that populism was not a significant factor in voting for FdI in the 2018 national elections.

This is also the case for FI but with a significant difference. Until the death of its leader, Silvio Berlusconi, FI had been considered a personal party and a precursor of populism in the form of techno-populism (Castaldo and Verzichelli 2020). Although FI has never been considered a purely populist party, populist sentiments historically ran strong among its voters (Conti et al. 2022). Tajani’s new leadership appears to have blunted Berlusconi’s populist accent. Hence, still in search of a new political identity, FI is assuming moderate positions on many policies (including citizenship for immigrants, the EU and liberalism) which do not appeal to affectively polarized citizens ($or = 0.642$).

The leadership change is also at the origin of our results regarding the Lega Salvini Premier. When Umberto Bossi led the party, the Lega Nord (LN) was a regionalist party with strong anti-political elite rhetoric as well as a geographically and socially defined electoral base. The party’s motto, “*Roma ladrona*” (Rome the thief), summarizes a regionalist populist view that is hostile to national (corrupt) political elites. These characteristics have changed with the leadership of Matteo Salvini (Vampa 2017, Albertazzi et al. 2018), as the party’s ideological position shifted from regionalism to national identity and sovereignty. Although the League’s rhetoric retained its xenophobic and traditionalist features, it was increasingly framed within a national context in an effort to broaden its electoral appeal. Salvini’s electoral lists also flourished in southern regions, gaining unprecedented electoral success in the 2018 national elections (17%) and 2019 European ones (34%). The League’s nationalist U-turn is likely the originating factor of our results on AP and the voting choice for this party in 2024. Indeed, the relationship is not significant, indicating that the regional identity associated with the region of Padania—previously a driver of AP among the League’s traditional electorate—has been diluted among the party’s broader national support base, reflecting the party’s redefined identitarian orientation. Conversely, the League remains a party opposed by those who have pluralist sentiments ($or = 0.728$) and is sustained by populism. This is in line with previous literature on the League’s populist nature, although our sub-categorization of populism shows that only the emphasis on people’s will remains significant in electoral matters (Rousseau populism, $or = 1.379$). As the party lost its populist anti-national elite rhetoric and acquired

Table 3. Affective polarization and populism on voting choice of main parties in Italy during 2024 European Parliament Elections.

	Vote - Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)		Vote - Forza Italia (FI)		Vote - Lega		Vote - Partito Democratico (PD)		Vote - Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S)	
	OR	Stdr	OR	Stdr	OR	Stdr	OR	Stdr	OR	Stdr
Anti-establishment	0.924	0.070	0.976	0.102	1.109	0.118	1.112	0.063	1.327***	0.106
Rousseau populism	1.003	0.083	0.932	0.107	1.379**	0.152	0.848**	0.053	1.191*	0.092
Pluralism	0.913	0.076	1.161	0.136	0.728**	0.152	1.359***	0.085	0.824*	0.068
Affective Polarization (weighted)	1.688***	0.156	0.642***	0.081	0.957	0.112	2.135***	0.153	0.502***	0.043
Political trust index	1.166	0.106	1.234	0.157	0.833	0.098	1.390***	0.104	0.727**	0.069
Political interest (not at all+a little)	0.521***	0.096	0.779	0.201	1.498	0.386	0.750	0.112	0.997	0.189
Left_right self-placement scale	1.927***	0.085	1.531***	0.090	1.833***	0.113	0.626***	0.020	0.854***	0.032
Gender (man)	0.887	0.147	0.823	0.192	1.223	0.272	1.375**	0.165	0.807	0.131
Age (19-92)	1.014*	0.006	1.015	0.008	1.991	0.008	1.012**	0.004	0.991	0.005
Education (not educated-elementary)										
Middle School	0.489	0.412	0.800	0.924	0.738	0.388	2.304	1.667	0.227	0.185
High School	0.570	0.462	0.631	0.701	0.684	0.273	2.851	1.976	0.234	0.178
Degree	0.554	0.457	0.872	0.980	0.530	0.219	3.374	2.364	0.167*	0.130
Master-PhD	0.527	0.452	0.715	0.842	1	--	2.696	1.939	0.247	0.151
Occupation (not employed)	1.240	0.247	0.768	0.213	0.697	0.182	1.255	0.182	0.792	0.151
Economic perception of last year - (remain the same)										
somewhat worse+much worse	0.635*	0.124	0.675	0.181	0.580*	0.155	1.147	0.155	1.248	0.238
somewhat improved+much improved	2.232***	0.446	0.836	0.245	0.702	0.194	0.326***	0.075	0.920	0.298
Regions (Piemonte)	@		@		@		@		@	
Constant	0.002***	0.002	0.009**	0.014	0.001****	0.001	0.039***	0.035	7.668	8.027
Pseudo R2	0.409		0.145		0.326		0.251		0.214	
LR (Prob>chi2)										
Number of observation	1,912		1,831		1,900		1,914		1,878	

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001; to save space, we do not report the 'Regions' for each models.

a governmental role, the anti-establishment sentiments did not significantly affect its electoral gains.

The PD shows a different perspective: The likelihood of voting for the PD increases as pluralist attitude rises. By contrast, Rousseau-style populism negatively relates to voting for the PD ($or = 0.848$). However, it should not be forgotten that this party showed populist tendencies under Matteo Renzi's leadership (Castaldo and Verzichelli 2020) and that, in 2019, the party established a government coalition with the populist M5S, which is now struggling to become a more structured political alliance within the so-called *campo largo* (broad field of alliances). At the same time, past studies revealed that MPs of the Democratic Party oppose populism (Conti et al. 2022), and populist voters tend not to support this party. PD voters show higher AP ($or = 2.135$) than FdI supporters, suggesting that they were more likely to vote with the intent of preventing a right-wing victory. PD's strong identity is a heritage of the party's origins from the Italian Communist Party of

the First Republic. Hence, a solid identity base is rooted in 20th-century politics with traditional symbols and a party structure that goes beyond the current leadership. Women are more likely to vote for the PD than for other parties ($or = 1.375$), a result in line with the theory of the modern gender gap (Inglehart and Norris 2000). It also enjoys a greater share of the vote among older voters and those who place themselves on the left side of the ideological spectrum ($or = 0.626$).

Predictably, anti-establishment ($or = 1.327$) and Rousseau ($or = 1.191$) populist attitudes, as well as negative and significant results in the pluralist attitude's type ($or = 0.824$), have fueled the M5S vote. This party has epitomized populism in recent Italian history by targeting politically corrupt elites in its discourses and policy proposals, adopting internal rules toward direct democracy, and favoring the people's needs over the interests of elites. However, M5S has clearly shown an ideological flexibility, as confirmed by its participation in ideologically different government coalitions. Since the begin-

ning of Conte’s leadership, the party has been living through a profound transformation, moderating its populism and trying to establish itself as a progressive party anchored on the left side of the political spectrum (Tronconi, 2022). The low level of polarization among voters ($or = 0.502$) supports the idea of an electorate, in line with the party, with a “chameleon-like character” (Pirro 2018), which—despite being on the left of the ideological spectrum—tends to be characterized by a significant distrust of institutions ($or = 0.727$), a factor that remains key today for its electoral consensus.

CONCLUSIONS

This study focused on the effects of populism and AP in Italy during the 2024 European elections. Our results showed that populism and AP have opposite effects on turnout: AP increases the likelihood of voting (thus confirming H1), whereas only Rousseau populism exhibits a statistically significant effect, negatively influencing voter turnout (thus rejecting H2). This suggests that when individuals delegitimize the role of political representatives and perceive an unbridgeable divide between ordinary people and the elite, they are less likely to vote in elections. We observed a similar opposing relationship among the leading independent variables concerning voting preferences. AP is significantly and positively associated with voting for parties that possess a strong identity and/or represent the more straightforward choice to prevent the victory of the “other” camp or out-group. These parties, FdI and PD, are located on opposite sides of the left–right ideological spectrum but have a long historical tradition rooted in the previous century with a national electoral basis inherited from their mass-party ancestors. Conversely, AP appears to have no effect on voting behavior, or even a negative one, in contexts where political leadership becomes central (as in the case of personalist parties), entrepreneurial issues take on a catch-all character, and the party undergoes a redefinition of its core identity elements—as observed with the Five Star Movement (M5S). These results appear to lend some support to the general expectations deductively elaborated in the literature and hypothesis section regarding the possible impact of AP on vote choice. The voters of the top populist party considered in the analysis are then the less affectively polarized.

Consistent results on populist attitudes complete the picture of our findings. The first and the second factors significantly relate to voting for a populist party (H3 confirmed), whereas pluralism does the opposite. The anti-establishment and Rousseau populisms increase the

likelihood of voting for the M5S. As the League lost its anti-national elite rhetoric, only Rousseau’s populism was associated with a vote for Salvini’s lists, whereas it was negatively related to voting for the PD.

Overall, when AP is significant and positively associated with voting for a party, the effect of populism is negative or not significant. Otherwise, when populism significantly increases the likelihood of voting for a party, the effect of AP is negative or not significant. The case of the M5S is emblematic: significantly favored by populism and negatively affected by AP.

Our results on pluralism reinforce the findings. Although populism and pluralism are not necessarily conflicting attitudes at the individual level (Ellenbroek et al. 2023), in our analyses, they have opposite effects on voting choice. The same applies to populism and AP: although they may positively correlated at the individual level (Davis et al. 2025), in some contexts (such as the United States) they mutually reinforce voting preferences, whereas in others (our case), they have opposite effects. The patterns of radicalization and fragmentation observed in different European political systems suggest that similarly divergent effects of populism and affective polarization on voting behavior may be expected in other national contexts.

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Keeping the left alive: exploring voter support for the Greens and Left Alliance (AVS) in the 2024 European elections

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Abstract. This paper explores the motivations of voters who supported the Greens and Left Alliance (Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra, AVS) in the 2024 European elections in Italy. In 2024, AVS nearly doubled its national vote share compared to the 2022 general elections, with an increase of more than 600,000 absolute votes – a growth second to none among Italian parties in that election. The goal of this study is to explore the reasons that drove individuals to choose this relatively small and previously marginal alliance. We investigate whether support was primarily driven by ideological alignment, policy positions on salient issues, candidate appeal, leaders' character or other factors. Drawing on a two-step mixed-methods design, we combine data from an original post-election online survey of AVS voters with insights from semi-structured in-depth interviews. This research design mitigates common limitations in electoral studies, particularly the challenge of understanding voters' underlying motivations for their vote choice. Our findings suggest that voters were primarily motivated by AVS's perceived ideological clarity and consistency, as well as by its prioritization of workers' rights, environmental protection, and international solidarity – rather than by individual candidates or leaders. The study contributes to the understanding of the 2024 European elections and offers broader insights into Italian politics, the dynamics of left-wing and green parties, and issue-based voting.

Keywords: Greens and left alliance, European elections, Italy, survey, interviews.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the motivations behind voter support for the Greens and Left Alliance (*Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra*, AVS) in the 2024 European Parliament elections. AVS, a coalition formed by the Italian Left (*Sinistra Italiana*, SI) and Green Europe (*Europa Verde*, EV), secured 6.8% of the national vote – its strongest performance to date, marking a record gain over 2022. This growth was not only unexpected but also appears to have consolidated in the months that followed, as suggested by consistent trends in national polls. These developments indicate that AVS may become a more influential actor in Italian politics moving forward. For this reason, it is important to understand what drove voter support for the alliance in the 2024 European Parliament elections.

Electoral turnout is on a downward trend in virtually all liberal democracies around the world (Kostelka & Blais, 2021). Italy is not an exception to that trend. The 2022 national elections recorded the lowest turnout in the history of the republic (Improta et al., 2022). Participation in local elections has also reached unprecedented lows, with some provinces failing to reach 30% turnout and some municipalities approaching 15% (Gatti & Mannoni, 2023). In a political environment characterized by low turnout and widespread disaffection, understanding the motivations behind support for a relatively small left-wing alliance is a relevant and timely question. AVS entered the election as a marginal force, historically overshadowed by more established parties on the left side of the political spectrum. Voters had other progressive options such as the Partito Democratico (PD) and the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), both of which offered competing claims to represent the progressive space. This study therefore seeks to address the question: What motivated voters to support AVS in the 2024 European Parliament elections?

To address this, we adopted a multi-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative data. The first step of our research involved an original survey, allowing us to explore broad trends and assess the relative importance of different motivations. The second step consisted of in-depth interviews, which provided a more nuanced understanding of voter motivations by scrutinizing the underlying reasoning behind the responses gathered in the survey. The rationale behind this design is that, while survey data can highlight correlations and general patterns, qualitative interviews allow us to examine the thought processes of voters, thereby uncovering dynamics that might not emerge from standardized responses alone.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we provide an overview of AVS and its electoral performance in the 2024 EP elections. We then discuss the theoretical framework of vote choice determinants, contextualizing our study within broader discussions on ideology, issue voting, and electoral strategy. Next, we present our research design, detailing the data collection and analytical methods employed. The results section integrates findings from both the survey and interviews, highlighting key themes that emerged from voter motivations. Finally, we conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for understanding the dynamics of left-wing support in Italy.

2. BACKGROUND: AVS AND ITS PERFORMANCE IN THE 2024 EUROPEAN ELECTION

AVS is a left-wing political formation in Italy, created on July 2, 2022, as an alliance between two parties:

the Italian Left (*Sinistra Italiana*, SI) and Green Europe (*Europea Verde*, EV). Bringing together democratic socialist and environmentalist ideologies, AVS positions itself as a red-green coalition that represents progressive, ecological, and social justice-oriented voters (Newell, 2024). Its political platform emphasizes environmental sustainability, social equality, workers' rights, and international solidarity. AVS is characterized by a joint leadership formed by the respective leaders of the two parties: Nicola Fratoianni of SI and Angelo Bonelli of EV.

AVS was born out of the need to unify the fragmented Italian left and provide a coherent platform to address key leftist issues. The coalition first ran in the 2022 national elections, where it secured 3.6% of the vote (Improta et al., 2022). While this result did not allow it to become a major player in national politics, especially regarding the government formation processes, it set the stage for greater visibility and political consolidation. By offering a more radical alternative to center-left-wing parties, AVS has positioned itself as an option for left-wing voters who were keen to abandon the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD) (e.g. Biancalana et al., 2024).

The 2024 European Parliament elections marked a turning point for AVS, making their results worth defining as a relevant electoral success. AVS almost doubled its vote share compared to the 2022 national elections, jumping from 3.6% to 6.8%. This result is particularly notable given the broader electoral context. The party of Giorgia Meloni (FDI), for instance, while it earned nearly three percentage points from 2022 to 2024, it actually lost votes in absolute terms due to the significantly lower turnout of this election (49.7%). In contrast, AVS not only substantially increased its vote share, but also gained approximately 600,000 additional votes compared to the 2022 general elections, marking a rare and significant advance both in percentage and absolute terms. This growth was second to none among Italian parties, highlighting a significant expansion of its electoral base. Not only did AVS surpass the 4% electoral threshold required for representation – which neither AVS nor the two parties that compose it had ever reached before – but it also secured six seats in the European Parliament, increasing its presence in the European institutions (Ceron et al., 2025).

AVS performed exceptionally well in larger cities, exceeding 10% of the vote in urban centers such as Rome, Naples, Milan, and Turin (Newell 2024). Its rise was even more pronounced among younger voters, where it emerged as the first choice among students living away from home, gaining over 40% support in this social group¹. Notably, this result also appears to have

¹ Based on Eligendo (Italian National Electoral Archive).

consolidated its standing in national polls in the months that followed the election, suggesting that the EP election performance was not just a one-off but could be the start of a more enduring political presence.

3. DETERMINANTS OF VOTING CHOICE: A BRIEF INSPECTION OF MAIN THEORIES AND THEIR APPLICABILITY TO THE AVS CASE

Political scientists have long debated the determinants of vote choice, with several key factors emerging consistently as influential across different contexts (Budge et al., 1983). In the case of AVS in the 2024 EP elections, we explore different factors: party membership, habitual voting, ideology, leader effects, and issue voting. All this considering that the Italian context introduces some nuances and contingencies that may affect the relative importance of these factors for left-wing voters (e.g. Sandri & Seddone, 2015).

First, party membership is traditionally seen as a strong predictor of voting choice, as members are likely to support their own party due to a sense of loyalty and ideological commitment (e.g. Bartels, 2000). However, membership rates have been steadily declining across Europe, leading to a reduced impact on electoral outcomes (Van Biezen et al., 2012). In Italy, this trend is particularly pronounced, reflecting a broader crisis of party identification and organizational structures (e.g. Whiteley, 2011).

Voting out of habit, implying that voters continue to support the party they voted for in previous elections, is another relevant factor emerging in the literature (e.g., Dinas, 2012). However, this may be limited in Italy due to its high levels of electoral volatility, recorded even in recent times (Chiaramonte, 2023). Since the transformation of the traditional party system in the early 1990s, Italian voters have shown a remarkable tendency to switch voting preferences between elections (Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2017). This volatility reduces the predictive power of habitual voting as a determinant of vote choice for AVS, which is a relatively new political force with no established historical base. Therefore, while habitual voting can explain continuity for some established parties, it is unlikely to account for the support of AVS in the 2024 EP elections.

Ideological alignment and party identification are traditionally among the strongest predictors of vote choice (e.g. Miller, 1991). According to the spatial model of voting, individuals tend to vote for the party closest to their own ideological position on the left-right spectrum (Downs, 1957; Miller, 1991). In the case of AVS,

this would suggest a strong appeal to voters who identify as left-wing and are dissatisfied with more moderate alternatives, particularly the PD. However, in some contexts, strategic voting can override ideological alignment. Specifically, when voters believe that their preferred party is unlikely to pass the electoral threshold, they might choose a more viable option to avoid wasting their vote (Blais & Massicotte, 1996). This is particularly relevant in the context of EP elections in Italy, which use a proportional representation system with a 4% threshold. Given that AVS had never previously reached this threshold, some left-wing voters might have strategically opted for other parties perceived as more promising. This strategic consideration could moderate the impact of ideological alignment, even among voters who are otherwise ideologically sympathetic to AVS².

Leadership has become increasingly important in the era of personalized politics, where voters are increasingly influenced by leader cues and the perceived competence, charisma, and trustworthiness of party leaders (e.g. Garzia et al., 2020). However, AVS presents a unique case because it does not have a single leader but rather two co-leaders who lead two separate parties within the alliance. This dual leadership structure might dilute the impact of leader effects, as voters are not presented with a singular charismatic figure. Additionally, the preferential voting system used in EP elections in Italy allows voters to choose specific candidates, which may further diminish the importance of the main co-leaders. In this context, the personal appeal of new candidates, such as Ilaria Salis, Mimmo Lucano, and Ignazio Marino, may play a more significant role than the collective leadership of the party. The peculiarity of the leadership structure in AVS thus complicates the application of personalization theories in this case.

Finally, issue voting documents that voters support the party that aligns with their positions on key policy issues. The literature indicated issue voting as an important determinant of voting choices, yielding significant effects in explaining vote choices over multiples decades (Carmines & Stimson, 1980). When it comes to issues, AVS is notably the most pro-environmental party in the Italian political landscape (Mannoni, 2025) and is perceived as credible on environmental protection (De Sio et al., 2024). This suggests that environmental issues might have played a central role in motivating support

² It should be noted that strategic considerations may not only deter but also encourage support for some small parties, if they are polling near the electoral threshold. This may have been the case for AVS in 2024, as polling data suggested that it had a real chance of surpassing the 4% barrier. Informed and politically engaged voters may have been aware of these dynamics and motivated by a perception that their vote could make the difference in helping AVS secure representation.

for AVS. However, AVS is not solely a green party; it also addresses other issues such as social justice, peace, and workers' rights. In the 2024 EP elections, new issues like the Gaza crisis and traditional left-wing issues like workers' rights may have attracted voters with specific issue preferences, going beyond the environment. As we will observe in the results section of this paper, the qualitative analysis revealed that these issues resonated with AVS voters. Therefore, issue voting for AVS appears to be multidimensional, encompassing environmentalism, social justice, and international solidarity.

Overall, the presented strands of voting choices' determinants – party membership, habitual voting, ideology, leadership influence, and issue voting – provide a comprehensive framework for understanding why voters might have supported AVS in the 2024 EP elections. However, to uncover the true drivers behind voter support for AVS, one must turn to voters themselves – through direct questioning and empirical investigation.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

In this research, we adopted a multi-method approach in a two-step analysis. We draw on both quantitative and qualitative data to support our analysis. First, we leveraged original online (computer assisted web interview, CAWI) survey data as testing ground, to determine whether our preliminary expectations are well-founded. Then, to refine the questions and gain deeper insights, we incorporated them into the semi-structured interviews and the interview guide for the second stage. In the second step, we collected more detailed qualitative evidence via in-depth interviews. Both the online survey and the in-depth interviews adopted a purposive sampling strategy (also known as criterion-based sampling), that is, participants were deliberately selected based on a specific criterion that made them particularly suitable to unveil the mechanisms we are interested in. In our case, that meant only targeting Italians who had voted for AVS in the European elections in June 2024. As Mosley (2013) notes, “statistical relationships are a good starting point, but they do not rule out alternative relationships that would generate the same statistical patterns” (p.3). In other words, correlations between attitudes and behaviors are not sufficient to identify the actual motivations underlying vote choice. To get closer to causal explanations, we need to ask voters directly – not only via structured survey items but through in-depth interviews that allow them to explain their reasoning in their own words. Hence, we consider this research design the most appropriate

for exhaustively addressing our research question, as it allowed us to overcome one of the key limitations in voting behavior research – namely, identifying why voters preferred one party or candidate over others. Rather than inferring motivations from statistical correlations between vote choice and attitudes (e.g., toward issues or leaders), we asked respondents directly to articulate their reasons for voting for AVS in their own words. This approach avoids the limitations of forced-choice survey items or ranking tasks, which can be cognitively demanding and may fail to capture the complexity of voters' reasoning.

4.1 First step: online survey

First, we collected original survey data (n=147). The data collection started eleven weeks after the election and took place from August 24 to September 5. The data was collected using snowball/convenience sample, with participants filling in the survey upon voluntary participation. The data collection process targeted a specific and relatively limited segment of the Italian population. To optimize participant recruitment, we strategically distributed the survey link and QR code³ on platforms where AVS voters were more likely to be reached⁴. Additionally, we employed a snowball sampling approach by initially sharing the survey with individuals who were likely AVS voters themselves and who, in turn, were expected to have connections with others who had also voted for AVS. In addition to employing the traditional snowball sampling technique to collect responses, we extended our outreach by posting the survey link to several Facebook groups with a clear left-wing or green ideological orientation. This approach aimed at enhancing the survey's reach within the target population. Furthermore, some individuals to whom we initially sent the link informed us that they had already encountered or received it through other channels, indicating that the survey was effectively circulating among the intended respondents.

The survey was intended to be very short, consisting of twelve questions⁵. In addition to a few socio-demographic questions designed to provide an overview of the

³ We also designed and circulated a visual infographic alongside the link, containing the QR code, to capture users attention and encourage participation (see Appendix A3).

⁴ We used platforms such as Facebook (including ideologically aligned groups), Instagram, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp to maximize engagement across demographic groups. We deliberately excluded X (formerly Twitter) from our dissemination strategy, as due to its recent transformation, the exodus of many left-leaning users led us to deem it unsuitable for reaching our target audience.

⁵ Median time for completion: 3 minutes and 22 seconds.

sample distribution in terms of gender, age, and region, respondents were asked a series of questions to explore the factors underlying support for AVS in that election. The survey began with a screening question asking whether they had voted for AVS in the European elections held on June 8–9, 2024. Respondents who answered “No” were automatically redirected to the thank-you page at the end of the survey and thus excluded from the analysis, as were those who did not answer all of the questions. This resulted in a final sample size of $n = 147$.⁶

After asking respondents whether they had voted for AVS and whether they had expressed any preference, we directly posed the open-ended question: “Could you explain why you voted for AVS?”, allowing them to elaborate freely on the reasons for supporting the alliance. Subsequently, we asked them to indicate the extent to which specific issues or events had influenced their decision to vote for AVS. To assess issue voting, we included references to the current situation in Gaza, the climate crisis, and the protection of workers’ rights. To evaluate the potential impact of personalization, we asked about the role of the party leaders Nicola Fratoianni and Angelo Bonelli, as well as the candidacy of Ilaria Salis (the most widely discussed AVS candidate in the media as having a particularly strong mobilizing potential for the party). Finally, to examine the role of ideological alignment, we included a question on leftist ideology, which we later compared with respondents’ self-placement on a left-right scale ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right).

The open-ended question was deliberately placed before the battery of items selected by us to prevent priming respondents to attribute greater importance to factors that we had anticipated as influential in their vote choice. This approach is also aimed at minimizing social desirability bias, which occurs when participants under- or over-report certain responses based on what they perceive as socially expected (Fisher & Katz, 2000). In this case, had respondents first encountered references to issues such as Gaza, climate change, or workers’ rights, they might have assumed that these factors were expected to have influenced their vote for AVS. Such an order could have led to biased responses and reduced the variation in the open-ended answers, which we were able to capture by structuring the survey differently.⁷

Lastly, we asked the respondents which party they had voted for in the previous national election held on

September 2022, to possibly distinguish those who had voted already in the recent past for AVS and those who had not.⁸ At the end of the survey, one last question asked the respondents whether they would be willing to give their availability for a follow-up in-depth interview, to be held in person or online, to discuss about the issues just covered in the survey. In order to protect and guarantee the anonymity of the answers provided in the survey until then, if respondents answered “Yes”, they were redirected to a different survey where they could insert their contact details. More information on the retention rate can be found in the section below.

4.2 Second step: in-depth interviews

As stated by Della Porta (2014: 230), “qualitative interviews are particularly useful for understanding the meaning that actors attribute to their actions”. Therefore, after analyzing the survey data, we developed the interview guide and proceeded to contact respondents who had expressed willingness to participate in a follow-up in-depth interview. A total of 61 respondents agreed to be interviewed, resulting in a retention rate of over 40%. We believe that this figure, combined with the relative ease of collecting survey data despite the limited target population, may indicate a strong level of enthusiasm and willingness to have their voices heard and actively contribute. This level of engagement appears characteristic of the AVS electorate, as evidenced in the qualitative interviews.

While conducting in-depth interviews immediately after the online survey would have allowed us to capitalize on the momentum, our objective in the second phase of the analysis was also to examine potential shifts in voters’ motivations over time. Specifically, we aimed to assess whether the factors respondents initially cited as reasons for their vote remained salient several months after the election, once the enthusiasm surrounding AVS’s unprecedented results might have started to fade. For this reason, we waited for a few months before reaching out to those who had indicated their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview.

In mid-December, we began randomly selecting small groups of contacts from our list and emailing them, spacing out our invitations over several days to allow time for responses and the scheduling of interviews. As expected, only a subset of those contacted ultimately agreed to participate. In total, we reached out to 25 respondents, of whom 7 agreed to be interviewed,

⁶ The original number of collected responses before removing the invalid ones was 183.

⁷ The questionnaire was programmed so that each question appeared on a separate page, and respondents were required to answer the question on the current page before proceeding to the next. This design choice ensured that participants could not preview or skip ahead to later questions.

⁸ A copy of the whole questionnaire is available in the Supplementary materials.

resulting in a 28% response rate. We stopped sending invitations once we determined that we had reached a saturation⁹ point, as additional interviews were no longer yielding new insights.

To meet the interviewee's preferences and due to logistic constraints since they were spread all over the country, the interviews took place online.¹⁰ All interviews were conducted in January and February 2025. To minimize variation attributable to interviewer effects, all interviews were conducted by the same interviewer. Their content was transcribed using MAXQDA.

4.3 Sample

Our sample consisted of 52% male, 47% female, and 1% non-binary voters. This quite aligns with gender distributions of AVS voters in the most recent EP elections as resulted in other surveys¹¹. It includes voters ranging from 20 to 86 years old. Voters under 45 years old constitute 47% of our sample. Regarding the geographical distribution, we have an over-representation of regions in the center¹² accounting for slightly more than 70% of the respondents, and less people from Northern¹³ or Southern regions (around 20% and 10% respectively)¹⁴. Regarding the distribution of vote and political preferences, most respondents claimed to have expressed at least one preference for a candidate in the election (87%). A majority of approximately 65% reported they had already voted for AVS in the last national elections held on September 2022 – the remaining 35% was distributed mostly between the Democratic Party (9%), Five Star Movement (7%), or a combination of AVS and either Democratic Party or Five Star Movement, voting two different parties at the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate (5%). Consistently with such party prefer-

ences, the ideological self-placement of respondents is substantially on the left. On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicated the left and 10 the right, our sample's mode self-placement value was 1, and the average value 1.3. No respondents located themselves at points further to the right than 5.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Results from first step: online survey

Survey data revealed a clear hierarchy of motivations behind voting for AVS, emphasizing ideological alignment and programmatic issues over personal leadership. As the figure below evidently shows, left-wing ideology and the protection of workers' rights stand out as the most relevant reasons among the options offered. As per the left-wing ideology, 61.9% of respondents considered it crucial and an additional 28.6% very relevant as a reason for voting AVS. This confirms that AVS is perceived primarily as an ideological choice, appealing to voters seeking a consistent and coherent left-wing alternative. The qualitative analysis supports this, showing that many voters view AVS as the only authentic left-wing option, emphasizing its radicality and alignment with their political values.

Programmatic content plays a rather significant role. Beyond workers' rights, climate change and Gaza emerge as rather relevant in the decision to support AVS. Climate change follows closely, with 50.3% of respondents considering it crucial, underscoring AVS's identity as an environmentally focused party. Gaza, while slightly less prominent, still holds substantial relevance, with 44.2% of respondents rating it as crucial. The distribution patterns for these three issues are remarkably similar, reflecting AVS voters' shared commitment to social justice, environmentalism, and solidarity, and international solidarity. The graph comparing these three motivations visually supports this interpretation, showing the close alignment in how voters prioritize these issues.

In contrast, the personal component is noticeably less relevant. Both the party leaders (Bonelli and Fratoianni) and the candidacy of Ilaria Salis show a reversed pattern, with most respondents rating them as either irrelevant or not so relevant.¹⁵ This suggests that AVS

⁹ One may question the adequacy of a small-N interview sample. However, in line with standard practices in qualitative research, we followed a thematic saturation logic. As shown in the benchmark study by Guest et al. (2006) even six to twelve interviews can be sufficient to identify stable, recurring themes in relatively focused populations. While our interviewees reflected a reasonable degree of variation across key socio-demographic dimensions (see Appendix A1), we acknowledge that such a small sample may not fully capture the diversity of the entire AVS electorate.

¹⁰ To ensure data protection, all participants received and signed a written consent form and notification of voluntary participation before the in-depth interview.

¹¹ In the post-electoral CISE Telescope (De Sio et al., 2025) survey, the gender distribution was 56% male and 44% female among AVS voters.

¹² Mostly Tuscany.

¹³ Mostly Lombardy.

¹⁴ It should be noted that AVS performed best in the Central Italy district (7.6%), which includes Tuscany, followed by North-West Italy (7.2%), which includes Lombardy. It performed worst in Southern Italy (5.7%) and Insular Italy (6.2%).

¹⁵ While Salis did not emerge as a primary motivation in our data, it is possible that her candidacy had an indirect effect by signaling electoral viability, as some voters may have perceived it as a factor that could increase AVS's chances of surpassing the 4% threshold. In such cases, the presence of a high-profile candidate, may have reinforced a strategic or expressive vote, even if not explicitly acknowledged by voters as decisive.

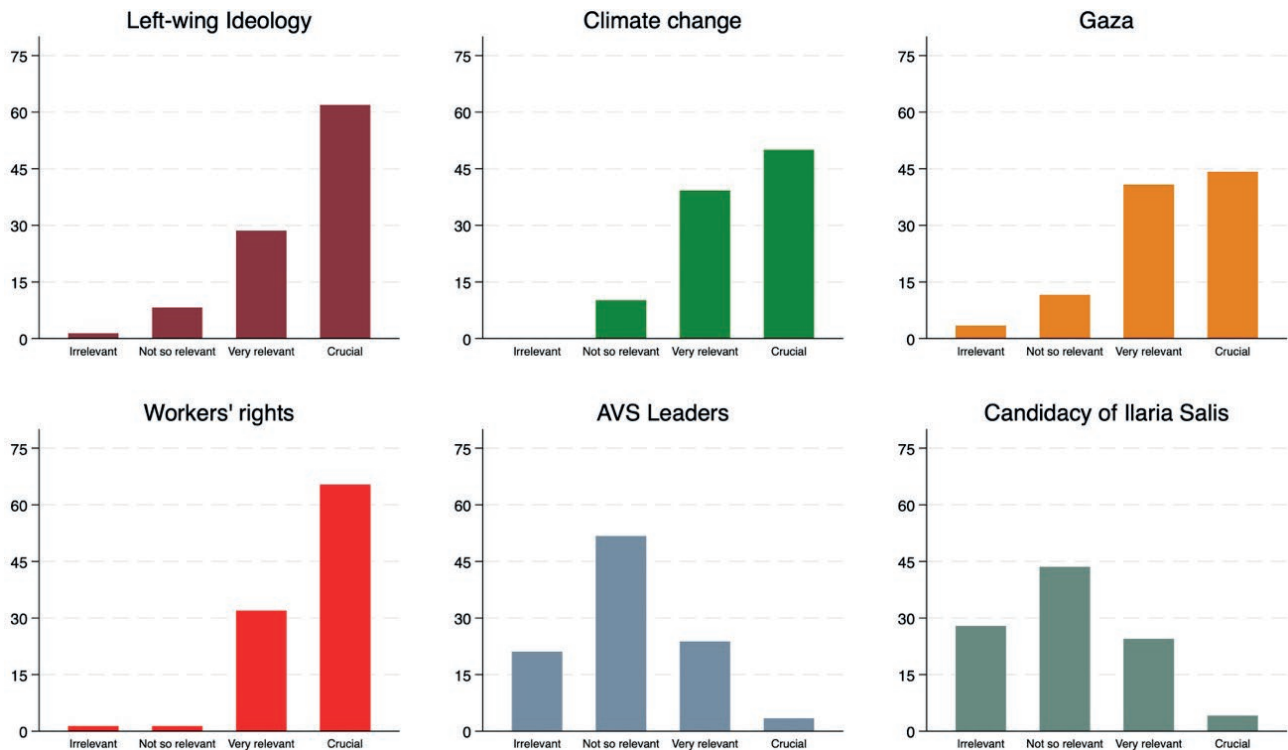


Figure 1. Reasons for voting AVS. The numbers on the y-axis express percentages. The bars display shares of respondents selecting that answer to the question “How much did the following factors influence your decision to vote for AVS in June?”.

voters are primarily motivated by ideological and programmatic considerations rather than by personal leadership. The qualitative analysis reinforces this finding, indicating that while trust and respect for candidates exist, they are linked to the candidates’ experience and alignment with the party’s values rather than their personal charisma or leadership. The graph on leadership personalities illustrates this lack of importance, supporting the interpretation that AVS voters seem to prioritize ideas over individuals.

A significant portion of respondents expressed support for AVS due to ideological alignment and shared values, particularly with left-wing ideologies, socialism, and environmentalism. This reflects a perception of AVS as embodying principles and ideals that resonate with voters’ personal beliefs. For example, respondents who made use of the open-ended text box noted that “it was the party that most aligned with my ideals”, mentioned the “shared values”, and emphasized that “their values and principles reflect mine”. Others expressed that “their political values align with mine” and appreciated the “radicality of content” and “consistency and radicality”. A common sentiment was that AVS represented “a true left-wing force, structured, coherent in choices and behaviors”.

Respondents also emphasized the importance of AVS’s programmatic content, especially its focus on environmentalism and social justice. Many were drawn to AVS’s strong emphasis on environmental issues, climate justice, and sustainability, expressing support for their “environmental commitment” and agreeing that “environment is an urgent issue and should be a priority in political agendas”. Others saw AVS as advocating for “ecology, peace, redistribution”. In addition to environmentalism, social justice and equality were pivotal for many voters, who supported AVS for its stance on “social and environmental justice”, “social justice, equality, and freedom”, and “social justice and fight against tax evasion”. The party’s anti-militaristic stance and critique of specific international organizations also resonated, with voters supporting AVS “for votes in parliament against arms”, “for the commitment to peace”, and for its “critical stance towards NATO, EU, and the US regarding the war in Ukraine”.

The identity of AVS as a genuine left-wing party, contrasted with the perceived lack of authenticity in other political options, was a decisive factor for many. Respondents emphasized that “it is the only left-wing party available”, noted the need for “genuinely left-wing political formations”, and saw AVS as “the only left-wing

party likely to surpass the electoral threshold". A sense of strategic positioning also emerged, with some voters arguing that "there was no party that reflected my views, and this one was the least distant". Several respondents identified as members or activists within AVS or its affiliated organizations, indicating a strong identification with the party's grassroots movement. They stated, "I am a member", "I am a member of the Italian Left¹⁶", and "I am an activist and their program represents my ideals".

Moreover, some respondents expressed confidence in "high-profile candidates" and said, "I believe in their programs and trust the people", while others cited trust in the leadership at the local level in their city. The party's candidate selection process was perceived positively, emphasizing a commitment to values and inclusivity. Respondents appreciated the "candidate selection and call for left-wing unity" and the way the "candidate selection combined party logic with the desire to include young candidates from activism".

For some voters, supporting AVS was a strategic choice or a calculated political decision. They explained their choice "by exclusion and possibility of 4%", and admitted it was "the least bad option". Notably, someone explicitly mentioned voting for AVS to send a signal to the PD, suggesting a strategic decision to influence political dynamics on the left side of the political spectrum.

Emotional attachment to left-wing identity and symbolic representation of political ideals also played a role in voting choices. This was evident in statements like "I still hope for the true left", "I believe in the values of the left", and "because they stand for peace". Many voters also expressed a sense of hope and optimism about the future, seeing AVS as embodying a vision of progress and renewal. Words such as "hope", "future", and "change" were frequently mentioned, reflecting a desire for transformative political action and a better society. This emotional and symbolic attachment highlights how AVS represents not only a political choice but also an aspirational vision for many of its supporters.

The qualitative analysis of survey data suggests that the primary motivations for voting AVS revolve around ideological alignment, particularly with environmentalism, social justice, and left-wing values. AVS is seen as the only genuine left-wing option by many, contrasting with other political options. The party's coherence, radical stance, and trust in candidates further bolster its appeal. Several respondents were party members; some voters made a strategic choice or aimed to send a political signal to PD, showing a nuanced political calculus.

¹⁶ It should be reminded, as stated in previous sections, that AVS is not a party per se and, as such, citizens cannot be members of AVS but rather members of either Italian Left or the Greens.

Emotional identification with leftist ideals and symbolic representation was also recurrent.

5.2 Results from second step: in-depth interviews

While survey data provided an initial indication of which factors mattered most, qualitative interviews allowed us to better explore the underlying reasoning behind vote choice and identify additional dimensions that could not emerge from standardized and more limited survey items.

The analysis of the interviews confirmed the combination of ideological commitment and issue-based considerations. While respondents differed in the specific concerns they prioritized, their pathways to AVS show a high degree of internal consistency. AVS was rarely perceived as a first-choice party in absolute terms but rather as the only viable option within the existing political landscape.¹⁷ A recurring theme across the interviews was the perception that AVS remained the only political force in Italy that still adhered to leftist principles without compromise. For most, voting for AVS was not necessarily an enthusiastic endorsement of its leadership or electoral prospects, but rather a deliberate decision to support the last remaining expression of a genuine left-wing alternative. We made sure the interviewees elaborated on this point in the conversations, and in doing so they mainly focused on the PD and the M5S. The PD was widely rejected, with respondents arguing that it had progressively abandoned any meaningful connection to the left, becoming "unelectable" (Int.6). Some had initially placed hope in Elly Schlein's leadership, but ultimately felt that she had been unable to shift the party toward a more progressive stance. Even among those who had participated in the PD primaries, the perception was that the party's internal contradictions prevented it from offering a clear ideological direction, making it an unsuitable option for voters looking for coherence in left-wing politics.

A similar reasoning applied to the M5S, which respondents overwhelmingly dismissed as excessively ideologically flexible. The volatility of M5S's leadership and its frequent shifts in policy positions led to a general lack of trust in the party. Some respondents acknowledged that M5S had, at times, aligned itself with progressive positions in line with theirs, but argued that it was unreliable and unpredictable, making it an unviable choice for those looking for long-term political consistency.

I'm afraid there's a fundamental inconsistency, you know? They've moved from one side to the other, which makes

¹⁷ One of the interviewees referred to it as a "residual choice" (Int.6).

it hard to trust. Even if they now claim to take firm positions that align more with where you stand, you still wonder: okay, but how much can I really trust that this is how it will stay and that it won't change again tomorrow? (Int.2)

It's like, with the M5S, which one? Which Movement? Which people? Which historical phase? (Int.6)

It's also difficult for me to even have a dialogue with someone like Conte, who goes around saying "we're not leftist, we're progressive", like he said the last time. (Int.7)

In other words, the PD was rejected due to inconsistencies within the party; the M5S due to inconsistencies over time, and not being reliably left-wing. In this context, AVS was seen as the only remaining political actor that still reliably held onto fundamental leftist values, even if its electoral potential remained limited compared to the PD and the M5S. Indeed, interviewees acknowledged that while they would not welcome potential party merging with either one of them, they would see it strategically useful to consider the possibility of the progressive camp (the so-called "*campo largo*"), including both Schlein and Conte's political formations. While some were more skeptical of the former and others of the latter due to the concerns described above, there was unanimity in clarifying that the inclusion of Carlo Calenda's Action or, even more adamantly, Matteo Renzi's Italy Alive would be a no go:

I would not want Renzi in the way. (...) everyone knows he's a schemer, always looking out for himself... he's never really been capable of anything other than dismantling things. But when it came to actually putting things together, he was never a particularly constructive person. (Int.4)

I would really struggle to accept Calenda, but let's see on what terms. I mean, I think Calenda himself would understandably struggle to be with us. For example, on nuclear energy, we have very different positions. Calenda is a neo-liberal. (...) Being liberal, that I can deal with. The real no, the absolute veto, is Renzi. (Int.7)

Beyond ideological positioning, several policy concerns emerged as decisive factors in voters' choice. The number one first key issue was the protection of labor rights and redistribution of wealth. The discussion on economic justice, fair wages, and housing affordability was perceived as lacking in the programs of mainstream parties, whereas AVS was seen as more radical and direct in its commitment to these matters. Secondly, but not unrelatedly, the interviewees viewed AVS as the only party that took the climate crisis seriously, rather than treating it as a secondary or symbolic issue. Other parties were perceived as addressing environmental matters in a superficial way, often framing them as a secondary

concern rather than an existential challenge requiring immediate action, or even denied the existence of climate change:

I prefer who anyways has the idea that that's a problem and therefore it must be faced, rather than those who want to deny. I mean, here we have denialists for everything. There were denialists of Covid, (...) and so we have denialists of climate change. (Int.3)

Environmental protection was never framed as the single most important issue, but rather as an essential component of a broader vision of society where no one is left behind, and linked to the interest in welfare policies and redistribution mentioned above.

I actually voted for AVS more because of their economic policies. But, of course, the environmental component was also very present. However, I don't see it as separate from the issue of social rights and redistribution, because it's also connected to jobs in the green transition and so on. (Int.6)

As such, it was seen as an essential programmatic element that could never be dropped by the Left even in the scenario in which the Greens and the Left were to split in the future. Furthermore, it was interesting to notice how, from the interviews where the topic was brought up, it did not emerge a clear stance on the recent wave of climate protests by Last Generation targeting artwork. Some interviewees said they shared the goal but not the means, others were surprised by how much people would care about art in the face of climate change. These divergences are consistent with the debates that several interviewees reported they had with people close to them as well as with the position reported by one of the interviewees who mentioned they were at first critical of these protests, but after debating over the issue with people with different views, they came to not only understand them, but also support them.

Moreover, foreign policy considerations, particularly regarding the situation in Gaza, also emerged as having an important role. It emerged that AVS was the only Italian party to use the word genocide in their program, distinguishing it from other that had either remained silent or had adopted different terminology. From the interviews it emerged how this issue is an example of the consistency of the party with its values over time, as some recalled past instances of pro-Palestinian solidarity activism in which the parties that now form AVS had been actively involved.

There has always been quite a strong focus from their side on that. I remember the last pro-Palestine demonstration I attended (...) and they were there. You didn't really

see many parties or party representatives, you know, but there were some of theirs. They have always been there. I remember the demonstrations; I remember the Greens when we were in high school. It was always them (...). That's consistency. And clearly that for people like me, that pays you back, because it's difficult to be consistent. (Int.1)

In this sense, AVS's foreign policy stance was perceived not as an opportunistic reaction to current events but as a continuation of its broader political identity, which made its position more credible than that of other parties, on an issue that for some emerges as a non-negotiable:

...I wouldn't want a government that, as a response to a serious act, then carries out massacres like what's happening in Palestine. This, luckily, I feel like I can find here. If I didn't find it anymore, I'd say goodbye to Fratoianni. If Fratoianni were to say tomorrow that bombing Gaza is justified... if he were to say that, I couldn't be on that side anymore. (Int.3)

While not among the most discussed issues, immigration was raised by some, either as something AVS seems to care about, hence strengthening the choice to vote for them, or an issue on which other parties or leaders had not done enough in the past, making it too difficult to vote for them now.

Consistently with the findings from the survey, interviews confirmed that candidates and leaders were not key reasons for supporting AVS. Some respondents pointed to specific candidates – particularly Mimmo Lucano, the former mayor of Riace known for his pro-migrant policies – as reinforcing their choice. However, given that Lucano was not on the ballot in all regions, his impact was largely symbolic rather than directly influential. Some mentioned Ilaria Salis, Ignazio Marino (former mayor of Rome), as well as less popular names which were nevertheless more known and appreciated at the local level. In any case, while some viewed some of those more popular candidacies positively, some were also skeptical about them, and the interviewees generally indicated that their decision to vote for AVS was already made before the candidacies were announced. While AVS voters acknowledged that there might have been a candidate-effect for some acquaintances of theirs, who might have been persuaded to vote for AVS because of some of those candidacies, they declared it was not their case. Similarly, the interviewees showed various degrees of appreciation for the two leaders of AVS, Nicola Fratoianni and Angelo Bonelli, who are described as experienced politicians, reliable because consistent over time and loyal to their stances, and with concrete but

not oversimplistic agendas. Yet, the general feeling that emerged from the interviews was that the personalities did not even get close to having the same importance in the choice to vote for AVS as its values and positions. Interestingly enough, where some linked this to the widespread lack of charisma of current left wing leaders, others emphasized the asset of having in AVS the maintenance of “bottom-up processes” (Int.7) and a more collectively oriented leadership style within an increasingly personalized party system.

I'm definitely the kind of voter who didn't vote for the left because of the people – I mean, not because of the candidates, not because of the leaders. (...) When Berlusconi died, I thought: is there anyone on the left who could fill a square for their funeral? I couldn't think of a single name. (Int.6)

Let's say that, from my point of view, it's important to have this idea that the party is something collective, something shared, that belongs to everyone, and that when we are there, we feel at home. Now, of course, that doesn't mean that if there's a strong leader, we can't stand them – let's be honest, that can be useful. I mean, if you've had Togliatti, Berlinguer, all those figures... But there's a way of interpreting politics – I'm speaking about Fratoianni now, whom I know better – a way of interpreting politics where, even though he's clearly the face of the party, since he's our secretary, that doesn't speak of 'me', but of 'us'. And that's important. Of course, these things have to go hand in hand. Actually, I think that important leaderships, like Berlinguer's, were not just the result of personal qualities – though obviously the fact that he was a serious person mattered – but rather the outcome of a collective effort. He represented something much bigger than himself. The two things can coexist. What doesn't work today, though, is this total fixation on the 'I' and nothing else, on the person and nothing else. And that's a situation I don't feel comfortable in. (Int.5)

Voting for AVS was about more than policies or candidates – it was an act of political identity. Several interviewees framed their vote as a means of keeping left-wing politics visible, even if AVS had limited electoral weight.

You vote for them and you know it's just twenty of you, so no, I wouldn't had much hope. What matters to me, what was more important, was consistency. Then, of course, you always hope, otherwise, you wouldn't even go vote. You hope they grow, that more people vote for them, but still (...) this is a process that requires time. (Int.1)

In this sense, vote choice was not merely a pragmatic assessment of electoral potential but rather a symbolic reaffirmation of political values, and an endorsement to an idea of society more than to single specific policy

goals. In “a system which makes you believe that if you want, you can. If you believe in it, you can” (Int.7), voting for AVS substantially emerged as an act of holding the ground on welfare policies for a more equal society, both domestically and globally.

6. CONCLUSION

The 2024 EP elections resulted in a surprising rise in support for the AVS in Italy – even considering the growing abstention rates recorded in the country. While AVS had not previously surpassed the electoral threshold required for European representation, its ability to do so in 2024 suggests a shift in voter preferences that deserves attention. This led us to address an important question: What led people to support AVS in 2024? This study thus examined the motivations behind AVS’s support, combining survey data and qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influenced AVS voting. While our sampling strategy likely attracted respondents with higher-than-average political interest and ideological commitment, thus limiting the statistical generalizability of our findings, the study nevertheless provides meaningful insights into the motivations that may have led individuals to vote for AVS.

The findings suggest that support for AVS was primarily driven by the perception of AVS as the only remaining party consistently adhering to left-wing principles, distinguishing it from the PD and the M5S, both of which were frequently criticized for ideological ambiguity or strategic shifts over time. Workers’ rights, environmental sustainability, and international solidarity emerged as additional factors, with AVS being regarded as the most credible advocate for these causes. Moreover, while personal leadership played a limited role in shaping voter preferences, certain candidates – such as Ilaria Salis and Mimmo Lucano – along with the experience and consistency of AVS leaders Nicola Fratoianni and Angelo Bonelli, reinforced existing political leanings rather than serving as primary motivations for support. Therefore, AVS’s electoral success cannot be solely attributed to the strategic selection of well-known candidates. Finally, considerations regarding AVS’s electoral limitations did not influence respondent’ vote choices, as they viewed their support for the party as a meaningful and necessary expression of their leftist identity and values. Their decision was not merely strategic but rather a way to uphold a vision of society that, in their view, risked being extinguished.

Although AVS remains a minor player in Italian politics, its performance in these elections suggests an

opening for more radical left-wing positions within the Italian party system. Whether this momentum can be sustained in future national elections will depend on AVS’s ability to consolidate its support base and attract new voters, particularly those encouraged by its recent electoral gains.

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QO E I J E S

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Special Issue

A new normal? The 2024 EP elections amidst old and new challenges

Guest Editors: Davide Angelucci and Kaat Smets

A new normal? The EP elections 2024 amidst old and new challenges. Special issue introduction <i>Davide Angelucci, Kaat Smets</i>	3
Politicization and domestication of European issues: Italian citizen engagement on social media during the 2024 European election campaign <i>Antonella Seddone, Giuliano Bobba, Elisa Iannone, Costanza Massidda</i>	9
Party competition on European issues in the 2024 EP elections <i>Giuseppe Carteny, Daniela Braun, Alexander Hartland, Ann-Kathrin Reinl</i>	21
EU issue voting in the 2024 European elections in Italy: is the sleeping giant awake? <i>Luca Carrieri, Nicolò Conti, Matteo Giardiello</i>	35
Economic matters: the 2024 European parliament elections <i>Martin Okolijk, Michael Lewis-Beck</i>	53
Populism and affective polarization in the times of “Giorgia”: an assessment of the effect on European voting <i>Antonino Castaldo, Danilo Di Mauro, Vincenzo Memoli</i>	65
Keeping the left alive: exploring voter support for the Greens and Left Alliance (AVS) in the 2024 European elections <i>Marco Improta, Elisabetta Mannoni</i>	77