

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? The Approaches of the Conte Governments to the European Union

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Abstract

Over the past few years, interdependence and the increasing importance of external constraints on Member State governments' domestic policies have deepened relations between the European Union (EU) and European cabinets. This article investigates the Conte I and Conte II governments' approach to the EU. Drawing on cleavage theory, we hypothesise that the PD exercised a 'mitigation effect' on M5S Euroscepticism, leading to a change in the government's attitude towards the EU. We test this hypothesis through a small-*n* comparative analysis based on the two governments' political programmes, composition, and budgetary policy in the framework of the European Semester. The article is structured as follows: First, we build the theoretical framework on cleavage theory and the 'mitigation effect' hypothesis. Second, we illustrate the transition from the Conte I to the Conte II government. Third, we discuss the method and research strategy. Finally, we examine the Conte governments' political programmes, composition and budgetary policy with a view to testing the 'mitigation effect'. Our analysis shows that a shift in Italy's orientation towards the EU occurred in the transition from Conte I to Conte II, owing much to the PD's involvement in the latter.

1. Introduction

In the XVIII parliamentary term, Italy has already had three governments. Two of them were headed by Giuseppe Conte, a nonpartisan figure who previously worked as a lawyer and academic. The first coalition government was formed in June 2018 by the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the League, and fell after the government crisis of August 2019. The subsequent cabinet, composed of M5S, Democratic Party (PD), Italy Alive (IV), and Free and Equals (LeU), took office one month after that crisis.

Several studies have investigated the formation of the first Conte government (Marangoni and Verzichelli 2019), its policy agenda (Giannetti *et al.* 2020), and early termination (Conti *et al.* 2020). Others have discussed the relationship between Italy and the European Union (EU), highlighting patterns of 'continuity and change' (Quaglia 2007). To this effect, Silvio Berlusconi's government represents the first shift in Italy's traditionally Europeanist orientation, standing in sharp contrast to the Europeanist approach of the previous Prodi government (Carbone 2009). The literature has recently emphasised the discontinuity between the Conte I and Gentiloni governments in their relations with the EU (Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019). In addition to European dynamics, the study of Italian governments' approaches towards the EU also helps to shed light on

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Italian Political Science. ISSN 2420-8434.

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Volume 16, Issue 1, 1–22.

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domestic politics. The link between the two has become apparent over time, fostering increasing academic attention (Fabbrini and Piattoni 2008).

This article analyses the approach of the Conte governments vis-à-vis the EU. It raises a two-fold research question: did Italy's approach to the European Union change in the transition from the Conte I to the Conte II government? And if so, why? Building on cleavage theory, we hypothesise that the PD exercised a 'mitigation effect' on M5S Euroscepticism, leading to a change in the government's attitude towards the EU. Specifically, we expect the Conte II government to adopt a more Europeanist approach compared to the previous government, due to the PD's involvement in the second coalition. We test this hypothesis through a small-*n* comparison based on the two governments' political programmes, composition, and budgetary policy in the framework of the European Semester.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. The second section presents the theoretical framework of the analysis. The third section deals with the turbulent transition from Conte I to Conte II. The fourth section illustrates the method and research strategy. The fifth and sixth sections analyse the political programme, composition and budgetary policy of Conte II and Conte I respectively. The final section discusses implications for future research and concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework: Cleavage Theory meets Mainstream-Eurosceptic Coalition Governments

For many years, the European integration project had little impact on national party systems (Mair 2000) while enjoying widespread approval among citizens. Such a 'permissive consensus' (Hooghe and Marks 2009) owed much to the European public's scarce perception of European integration outcomes (Carrieri 2020a). However, the 1992 Maastricht Treaty fostered the emergence of the EU as a relevant policy issue for Member States domestically, standing out as a 'critical juncture' (Fabbrini 2015). Moreover, the Euro crisis further consolidated the EU as a positional issue, thus 'awakening the Sleeping Giant' (Carrieri 2019). For its part, Italy has long been one of the most Euro-enthusiastic countries in the Union (Conti 2003). However, despite a pro-integrationist tradition, Italian public attitudes towards the EU have recently declined (Conti and Memoli 2015). Also, party positioning along the EU issue has been crucial in Italy's government formation process over the last few years. Specifically, a common anti-EU sentiment among the League and the M5S paved the way for the yellow-green coalition (Giannetti *et al.* 2018). Overall, the Italian party system has been characterised by an increasing politicisation of the EU issue, leading to polarised EU-based competition (Carrieri 2020b).

Interestingly, cleavage theory contends that mainstream parties have escaped such politicisation (Carrieri 2020b). These parties, defined as 'the electorally dominant actors in the centre-left, centre and centre-right blocs on the Left-Right political spectrum' (Hooghe *et al.* 2002), originated from four dividing lines: Centre versus Periphery, State versus Church, Industry versus Land, Owners versus Workers. Such a long-standing system of social cleavages has constrained mainstream parties' attitudes towards the EU. Mainstream parties have historically taken centre stage in the launch and advancement of European integration, thus incorporating pro-Europeanism into their traditional ideological commitments. In the European Parliament, mainstream parties form the backbone of the

European People’s Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists/Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (PES/S&D), the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe/Renew Europe (ALDE/RE), and the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens-EFA). Because of their ideological uniformity regarding the EU issue, these formations are invariably defined as ‘mainstream pro-European parties’ (Carrieri 2020b).

Cleavage theory suggests that mainstream parties cannot move along the EU issue dimension. They hold an inflexible pro-European position due to embedded reputations, ideological commitments and government responsibility. In this light, party system change did not occur because mainstream parties reneged on Europeanism, but because voters rewarded parties with strong views on the new pro/anti-EU cleavage (Hooghe and Marks 2018). As a matter of fact, even during the Euro crisis, mainstream parties showed continued responsibility to the EU by supporting and implementing austerity policies (Carrieri 2020b). Cleavage theory thus implies that mainstream parties are not willing to negotiate on pro-Europeanism when holding government office. We ask whether this applies to coalitions between mainstream and Eurosceptic parties, with Italy’s Conte II government between the PD and the M5S as a case study.

From a comparative perspective, the Conte II’s governing formula does not constitute a rarity in Western Europe.¹ Indeed, as Table 1 shows, Eurosceptic parties are in coalition governments with mainstream parties in Spain and Finland. Specifically, We Can (*Podemos*) in Spain and the Left Alliance (*Vasemmistoliitto*) in Finland both stand as junior coalition partners to the Social Democrats - i.e., the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) and the Finnish Social Democratic Party (SDP). Such government experiences suggest that when a mainstream party joins a coalition with a Eurosceptic party, that government ends up with a pro-European approach. Specifically, in Spain, the Eurosceptic We Can underwent a normalization process during its partnership with the PSOE (Mazzolini and Borriello 2021) while the Marin government in Finland adopted the pro-EU programme of the previous Rinne cabinet (Palonen 2020).

Along these lines, we hypothesise that the PD exercised a ‘mitigation effect’ on M5S Euroscepticism, leading to a change in the government’s attitude towards the EU. Specifically, we expect the Conte II government to adopt a more Europeanist approach compared to Conte I, due to the PD’s involvement in the second coalition. To be sure, such a ‘mitigation effect’ does not imply that the PD turned the M5S into a pro-EU party. It does imply, however, that the PD was able to induce a pro-EU shift in the coalition government. We identify three observable implications of the ‘mitigation effect’. First, we expect Conte II to emphasise pro-Europeanism as a key component of its political programme following negotiations between the M5S and the PD. Second, we expect Conte II to appoint PD members to key government positions in relations with Brussels and to nominate a PD member for the post of European Commissioner. Third, we expect Conte II to adopt an accommodating approach to the EU in negotiations over budgetary policy within the European Semester and to show a clear commitment to the Commission’s country-specific recommendations and Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) rules.

¹ In attributing the ‘Eurosceptic’ and ‘mainstream’ categories, we rely on Rooduijn (2019) and Taggart and Szczerbak (2004) for the former, and Döring and Manow (2020) for the latter. We have considered both the mainstream parties of the centre-left and centre-right, based on the ParlGov party family identifier.

Table 1. Party composition of 16 West European governments.

Country	Prime Minister	Cabinet parties	Eurosceptic in government	Mainstream in government
Austria	Kurz	Austrian People's Party The Greens		●
Belgium	Croo	Party of Liberty and Progress Reformist Movement Christian Democratic and Flemish Greens Socialist Party Socialist Party Differently		●
Cyprus	Anastasiades	Democratic Rally		●
Denmark	Frederiksen	Social Democrats		●
Finland	Marin	Social Democratic Party Centre Party Green League Left Alliance Swedish People's Party	●	●
France	Castex	The Republic on the Move Democratic Movement Radical Movement Act		
Germany	Merkel	Christian Democratic Union of Germany Christian Social Union in Bavaria Social Democratic Party of Germany		●
Greece	Mitsotakis	New Democracy		●
Ireland	Martin	Republican Party United Ireland Green Alliance		●
Italy	Conte	Five Star Movement Democratic Party Free and Equals Italy Alive	●	●
Luxembourg	Bettel	Democratic Party Socialist Workers' Party The Greens		●
Malta	Abela	Labour Party		●
Netherlands	Rutte	People's Party for Freedom and Democracy Christian Democratic Appeal Democrats 66 Christian Union		●
Portugal	Costa	Socialist Party		●
Spain	Sánchez	Spanish Socialist Workers' Party We Can Communist Party of Spain United Left	●	●
Sweden	Löfven	Social Democrats Green Party		●

Sources: own elaboration of original data; Rooduijn (2019); Taggart and Szczerbiak (2004); Döring and Manow (2020).

Note: date of observation is January 2020.

3. The Fall of Conte I and the Birth of the Eurosceptic-Mainstream Coalition

In recent years, Italy and other European countries have experienced turbulent times, particularly in the electoral arena (Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2019). The increasing levels of electoral volatility and the emergence of new parties have led to the formation of innovative government coalitions, reshaping the patterns of political competition. In Italy, new challenger parties, such as the M5S, have obtained enough electoral support to reach governmental office. The 2013 general election and, to a greater extent, the 2018 election have ushered in what has been labelled as the ‘Third Republic’.² While the former was an ‘electoral earthquake’ (Chiaramonte and De Sio 2014), the two elections’ combined effect was deemed ‘the apocalypse of the Italian democracy’ (Schadee *et al.* 2019).

Following the 2018 general election, many scholars emphasised the success of new challenger parties (Bellucci 2018), the role of social media, new communication strategies (Bobba and Roncarolo 2018), and increasing polarization (Bobba and Seddone 2018). Forza Italia’s Silvio Berlusconi, until then the undisputed leader of the centre-right coalition, was blatantly outclassed by the League’s Matteo Salvini in the intra-coalitional competition. The M5S obtained almost 33% of the votes, gaining electoral support in many areas of the country, especially in the South (D’Alimonte 2018; Emanuele and Maggini 2018). The PD obtained most of its vote share from the upper middle class, thus overturning the class vote (De Sio 2018). However, it bore the costs of governing and lost votes to the M5S.

The outcome of the 2018 general election confirmed the Italian political system’s fluidity (Chiaramonte *et al.* 2018), bringing to the office the so-called ‘*Governo del Cambiamento*’ (Pedrazzani 2018), formed by the M5S and the League, and headed by Giuseppe Conte. The formation of this unprecedented coalition government prompted a considerable scholarly interest. While some authors have considered the Conte I cabinet as ‘populist’ and ‘nationalist’ (Kriesi 2018), others have preferred the ‘sovereignist’ label (Fabbrini 2019).

The Conte I political experiment had a short life: the cabinet remained in office from June 2018 to September 2019. During the bargaining process, a coalition agreement was drawn up and then subscribed to in May 2018 by Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini. However, such a coalition agreement (‘*Contratto per il governo del cambiamento*’) turned out to be ineffective in curbing squabbles between the ruling parties (Conti *et al.* 2020). To explain the reasons underpinning the Conte I government formation, scholars have emphasised the role of office-seeking considerations (Gianfreda and Carlotti 2018), issues related to European integration and immigration (Giannetti *et al.* 2018), and the parties’ policy positions along multiple dimensions (Giannetti *et al.* 2021). From the early stage of the cabinet’s life, its durability was constantly at risk, particularly considering delays in bargaining, and conflicts with the *Quirinale* regarding ministerial appointments (Marangoni and Verzichelli 2019).

² It is worth noting that in Republican Italy no radical regime change occurred. Therefore, such terminology is often overused in the public and political debate. As Pasquino noted (2016), political and institutional changes have not caused any changes in the Republic, thus any new ‘number’ is not justified.

The increasing levels of popular consent obtained by Matteo Salvini in the opinion polls during his time in office ultimately undermined the coalition's stability. In particular, the electoral success of the League and the simultaneous collapse of the M5S in the 2019 European election were significant factors in the reversal of the coalition's informal balance of power. To exploit the large vote share gained in May, Salvini decided to break the deal with his coalition partner and threatened a vote of no confidence against the government. This event led PM Giuseppe Conte to resign on 20 August, 2019. Thus, as has been noted, internal competition contributed to undermining the already fragile coalition (Giannetti *et al.* 2020).

These incidents opened up the 2019 Italian government crisis. While the League's Salvini asked the President of the Republic to call a snap election, the M5S struck a coalition agreement with the PD, which led to the formation of a new Conte government. The Conte II cabinet was hailed with relief and satisfaction by international and European political leaders (Fabbrini 2021), who particularly welcomed the appointment of Roberto Gualtieri as Minister of Economy and Finance (MEF) (Ansa 2019).

Table 2. Features of the Conte cabinets.

	Conte I	Conte II
Formation	2018	2019
Deputy Prime Ministers	Luigi Di Maio Matteo Salvini	
Composition	M5S, League	M5S, PD, LeU, IV
Opposition parties	PD, FI, FDI, LeU	League, FI, FDI
Minister of Economy and Finance	Giovanni Tria	Roberto Gualtieri
Minister of European Affairs	Paolo Savona* Lorenzo Fontana	Vincenzo Amendola
Total number of ministers	20	23
Technocrats in government (%)	30	8.7
Left parties' weight in government (%)	0	43.5
Leading party	M5S	M5S
Number of ministers of the leading party	9	10
Governing formula	Innovative	Innovative
Effective number of government parties	2.82	2.86
Seat share (%)	53.8	55
Pre-election coalition	No	No
Coalition agreement	Yes	No

Source: own elaboration on original data; Note: seat share (Lower House); *until 8 March, 2019.

Although the Prime Minister did not change, the features of Conte II are quite different compared to the previous executive. Table 2 shows a decreased presence of technocratic ministers in the government from 30% to 8.7%. Crucially, the key cabinet

office of Minister of Economy and Finance went back to a partisan figure after being entrusted to a technocrat in the first Conte government. Moreover, despite the increased number of ministers and government fragmentation, Conte was able to achieve greater autonomy by reinforcing the position of *Palazzo Chigi*, as displayed by the absence of ‘watchdog’ Deputy Prime Ministers.

Table 3. Party orientations (1-7 scale) on European integration and EU authority over budgetary policy

Party	2014		2019	
	EU position	EU budgets	EU position	EU budgets
M5S	1.42	1.28	3.47	2.21
PD	6.57	5.14	6.78	5.75

Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey trend file (Bakker et al. 2020).

Note: strongly opposed (1), opposed (2), somewhat opposed (3), neutral (4), somewhat in favour (5), in favour (6), strongly in favour (7).

Numerous studies have shown the Conte I government’s negative attitudes towards the EU (Basile and Borri 2018; Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019). Such a government was supported by a ‘populist’ majority in Parliament, as the two coalition parties took strong anti-Europe stances before and after the election (Pedrazzani 2018).

With the transition from Conte I to Conte II, Italy witnessed the formation of the first coalition government between a mainstream and a Eurosceptic party in its recent history. Table 3 shows the orientations of the yellow-red coalition partners, i.e., M5S and the PD, towards European integration and EU authority over budgetary and economic policies in 2014 and 2019.³ Interestingly, it emerges that while the M5S became slightly more pro-Europeanist over time, it remained ‘somewhat opposed’ to European integration and ‘opposed’ to EU authority over national budgets throughout 2019. On the other hand, and in line with its pro-EU tradition, the PD favoured both European integration and EU power over national budgetary policies throughout.

M5S support for Ursula von der Leyen’s appointment to the post of European Commission President in 2019 is in line with its positional shift along the EU dimension. Such a decision was not without consequence, as it led to party members voting against it and to subsequent defections from the parliamentary group. To defuse a party crisis, the M5S published an official blog post highlighting the vote’s strategic nature and its unaltered will to set their agenda in Europe.⁴ In line with their continued anti-Europeanism, the *pentastellati* tried to establish an agreement with several Eurosceptic formations during that election campaign. On 9 February 2019, Luigi Di Maio and other M5S representatives liaised with leading figures of the French anti-EU and anti-establishment movement ‘*Gilet Jaunes*’. After further negotiations, the M5S established a formal alliance called ‘Pan-European Electoral Alliance’ with four Eurosceptic parties:

³ The Chapel Hill expert surveys estimate party positioning on European integration, ideology and policy issues for national parties in a variety of European countries (Bakker et al. 2020).

⁴ See ‘La verità sulla Von der Leyen votata anche dai sovranisti’, available at: <https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2019/07/la-verita-sulla-von-der-leyen-votata-anche-dai-sovranisti.html>.

Zivi Zid (Croatia), Kukiz '15 (Poland), Liike Nyt (Finland), and Akkel (Greece). Due to an unsuccessful electoral performance, such a coalition was not able to form a party in the European Parliament, confining the M5S to the Non-Inscrits group.

4. Methods and Research Strategy

This article adopts a qualitative research method. It embarks on a small-*n* comparative analysis of the Conte I and Conte II governments, focussing on *a*) the political programme and composition of each cabinet and *b*) their budgetary policy in the framework of the European Semester. The comparison aims to understand what approach the two governments adopted in relation to the EU, whether that changed in the transition from Conte I to Conte II, how it changed and why. Since research on party attitudes towards the EU has highlighted the importance of pre-existing ideological position constraints (Marks and Wilson 2000; Marks *et al.* 2002), the analysis considers the cabinets' preferences by investigating political programmes and composition. Moreover, the paper includes budgetary policy in the framework of the European Semester for analysing the relationship between the EU and national governments consistently with the previous literature focussing on the Italian case (Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019).

The period considered goes from June 2018 to December 2018 (for Conte I) and from September 2019 to March 2020 (for Conte II), as the outbreak of Covid-19 forced the Italian government into continued revisions of its fiscal targets throughout the 2020 European Semester's second half. The article relies on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include: official political programmes and policy statements of the two governments; the European Commission's 2018 and 2019 country-specific recommendations for Italy; Italy's 2019 and 2020 draft budgetary plans and Italy's 2020 revised budgetary plan; the Commission's opinion on Italy's 2019 and 2020 draft budgetary plans and on Italy's 2020 revised budgetary plan; letters from the European Commission to Italy and from Italy to the European Commission; statements of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council; European Council conclusions; the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU); the SGP, and the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union (Fiscal Compact). Secondary sources consist of: news reports; academic books and articles; newspaper articles; and existing interviews with EU authorities.

5. The Conte II Cabinet and the EU: A Pro-European Turn?

5.1. Political programme and composition

After turbulent weeks of back-room negotiations between the Quirinale and parliamentary delegations, the Conte II government formally took office on 5 September 2019. The previous Conte-led coalition government between the M5S and the League split up over nominations to the post of European Commission President (Fabbrini 2019). On that occasion, Conte and the M5S aligned with mainstream groups at the EU level in supporting former German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen. In an attempt to call for snap elections and gain more power, the League's Secretary Matteo Salvini stepped back from the coalition, triggering a government crisis. Despite this, the centre-left pro-

European PD joined forces with the M5S and replaced the League in Conte II. This ushered in the first Italian ruling alliance between a mainstream party and a self-declared populist movement (Barigazzi and Brown 2019).

The joint ‘yellow-red’ policy programme of Conte II was the first sign of the government’s changing orientation towards the EU. In his policy statement to the Chamber of Deputies on 9 September, PM Giuseppe Conte set out a clear pro-EU agenda. While stressing the need for a ‘more solid, more inclusive’ Europe, Conte conceded that rising economic and environmental challenges ‘can only be addressed with success, to the benefit of the national interest, if European institutions come out strengthened’ (Conte 2019). In his speech to the lower house, Conte framed the concept of national interest within the broader European governance system, breaking with previous isolationist tendencies. He emphasized he had been able to avoid two infringement proceedings on the part of the EU, and concluded that the wellbeing of Italians is to be found ‘within the perimeter of the European Union’ (*ibidem* 2019).

The government’s new attitude towards the EU owes much to the role of the coalition’s junior partner: the PD. By the time the Conte I government formally stepped down, PD Secretary Nicola Zingaretti had already laid down the negotiating policy guidelines with the M5S for the upcoming coalition. As the PD made clear, Europe was to be the undisputed pillar of the new government’s actions. The pressing challenge of migration flows and the economic downturn were now to be discussed in a spirit of open cooperation with the EU, ending the populist drift of the previous coalition. Zingaretti stressed the need for shared policy objectives to be in line with the principles of liberal democracy and the European perspective. In particular, he reiterated Italy’s continued ‘commitment and loyal belonging to the EU’ as a top policy marker (La Repubblica 2019). The PD made pro-Europeanism a precondition for joining the coalition partnership with the M5S. It was able to realise its ‘coalition-bargaining potential’ (Sartori 1976, 108) on the European issue for its ‘clearance’ was key to ruling out snap elections. Conte and the M5S found themselves faced with a choice between ending their government experience or giving in to the Democrats’ demands. This seems to confirm our expectation that the PD exercised a ‘mitigation effect’ on M5S Euroscepticism, urging its coalition partner to adopt a pro-EU political programme.

If anything, the composition of the new cabinet further underscores the new government’s changing stance on the EU. As anticipated, the PD was able to secure two top government positions. Roberto Gualtieri, a long-time MEP and former chair of the Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, was appointed Minister of Economy and Finance. Gualtieri is an experienced Brussels insider who knows European institutions and how they work. European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde soon welcomed Gualtieri’s appointment as a ‘good thing for Italy and Europe’ (Ansa 2019a). Then European Commissioner Pierre Moscovici also congratulated Gualtieri, tweeting he was ‘looking forward to seeing [him] in Helsinki and to working closely with [him] in the coming weeks’ (Moscovici 2019). Conte sent another signal of change appointing a pro-European PD member, Vincenzo Amendola, formerly responsible for Foreign Affairs, as European Affairs Minister in the new government. Amendola succeeded League’s Lorenzo Fontana, an ultraconservative who set out to defend Italy’s national interests in Europe (Carli 2019).

Overall, the Conte II cabinet consisted of 10 ministers from the M5S, including Luigi di Maio as Minister of Foreign Affairs, seven ministers from the PD, four independents, including PM Giuseppe Conte; two ministers from Italy Alive, and one from Free and Equals. Following the new government's first Cabinet meeting, Conte officially proposed former Italian Premier Paolo Gentiloni (PD) for the post of European Commissioner. A long-time Europeanist, Gentiloni boasted very good relationships with both German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron. After talks with Ursula von der Leyen, Paolo Gentiloni was nominated European Commissioner for Economy, and started his mandate in December 2019. Days before taking office in Brussels, he declared: 'I am a patriot and I will try to make it clear that the best way to protect the national interest is to do so in the European dimension' (Gentiloni 2019).

The Conte II government was hailed with favour by EU policymakers. Conte's political programme and the composition of the new cabinet contributed to reassuring supranational leaders as to the accommodating line of Conte II in its relations with Brussels. On the same day as the government took office, the then European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker sent a letter of congratulations to Giuseppe Conte saying he was 'convinced that Italy will be able to play an important role in addressing European challenges' and will 'live up to its responsibility as a founding member of our Union' (Ansa 2019b). Such an endorsement from Juncker is all the more remarkable since it came from an outspoken critic of the previous Conte I government. Vice President of the European Commission, Frans Timmermans, whose relations with Conte I and its budgetary policy was at least as tumultuous, also greeted the new government, acknowledging 'it is good for Europe that we've got a government in Italy that is clearly committed to pro-European lines and finding common solutions with the rest of the European Union' (Timmermans 2019). The PD's impact on the composition of the cabinet and on the nomination of Italy's European Commissioner reinforces our 'mitigation effect' hypothesis. The PD's 'mitigation effect' on M5S Euroscepticism is also reflected in how EU authorities welcomed the formation of Conte II, despite troubled relations with the previous Conte government.

Conte II's political programme and composition pointed to the government's changed orientation towards the EU. However, in his inaugural address to Parliament, Conte did not provide any clarity as to actual budgetary policy choices in view of the Italian draft budget due by October 2019 as per the European Semester. The next paragraph explores the Conte II government's approach to the EU with reference to its budgetary policy.

5.2. Budgetary Policy and the European Semester during Conte II

While monetary policy is centralised in the European Central Bank (ECB), EU Member States retain responsibility over their budgetary policies. These, however, are integrated at the EU level within the intergovernmental governance framework of the European Semester. A six-month cycle of economic policy coordination and surveillance, the European Semester aims, *inter alia*, to ensure sound public finances and prevent

excessive macroeconomic imbalances in the EU.⁵ With respect to the European Semester, the European Council (or Euro Summit for the Eurozone) and the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN, or Eurogroup for the Eurozone) – two intergovernmental fora – exercise core decision-making functions, while the European Commission deals with technical implementation, surveillance and monitoring. The European Parliament is confined to a marginal, often consultative role,⁶ and the European Court of Justice adjudicates on inter-state disputes. To ensure that the underlying fiscal position of Member States is conducive to fiscal sustainability, the European Semester is based on three macroeconomic criteria, enshrined in the SGP and the Fiscal Compact. First, the annual nominal deficit to GDP ratio must not exceed 3%; second, the annual government debt to GDP ratio must not exceed 60%; third, the annual structural deficit to GDP ratio must not exceed 0.5% and must aim at a balance or surplus. To this effect, the ECOFIN may initiate, on a Commission proposal, an Excessive Deficit Procedure (EDP) against any Member State found in significant deviation from such targets.

On 5 June 2019, the European Commission released its country-specific recommendations for all Member States. The recommendations were discussed and approved by the European Council on 20 June. The ECOFIN later approved the economic and budgetary parts on 8 July, before the Council adopted the final version of the recommendations on 9 July. The Council's adoption of country-specific recommendations on the initial Commission proposal is the final phase of the 2019 European Semester, and sets the stage for Member States' draft budgetary plans (DBPs) due in October (start of the 2020 European Semester).⁷ The Commission's recommendation to Italy required a nominal reduction of net government expenditure of 0.1% in 2020, amounting to an annual structural adjustment of 0.6% of GDP, and the reduction of the general government debt ratio (European Commission 2019a). On 16 October, Roberto Gualtieri submitted Italy's DBP, which planned a deterioration of the annual structural balance of 0.1% of GDP and a nominal growth of net primary government expenditure of 1.9% in 2020. The DBP requested a margin of flexibility to recognise the budgetary impact of exceptional circumstances, such as seismic and meteorological events, amounting to 0.2% of GDP (Ministry of the Economy and Finance 2019).

Five days later, in a joint letter to Gualtieri, the Vice President of the European Commission Valdis Dombrovskis and Pierre Moscovici (2019) asked for clarifications regarding Italy's DBP. They noted that, as it stood, the plan fell short of the budgetary policy requirements as per the country-specific recommendations, pointing to a risk of significant deviation in 2019 and 2020. Italy's response was not long in coming. The following day, Gualtieri (2019) sent a letter of reply, reiterating the Italian government's commitment to the Medium-Term Budgetary Objectives (MTOs) of the SGP. While

⁵ See 'The European Semester Goals' available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/framework/european-semester-why-and-how_en.

⁶ Art. 121(2) TFEU states: 'The European Council shall [...] discuss a conclusion on the broad guidelines of the economic policies of the Member States and of the Union. On the basis of this conclusion, the Council shall adopt a recommendation setting out these broad guidelines. The Council shall inform the European Parliament of its recommendation'.

⁷ See 'European Semester' at <https://consilium.europa.eu>.

confirming a 'slight deterioration' in the structural balance of 0.1% of GDP in 2020, the Italian Minister claimed 'the DBP then foresees a subsequent reduction in the deficit to 1.8% of GDP in 2021 and 1.4% in 2022, which would entail structural improvements of 0.2% per annum' (Gualtieri 2019). In the letter, Gualtieri recalled Italy's application for a margin of flexibility worth 0.2% of GDP in 2020, sure that such additional fiscal space would prevent a significant deviation in the annual structural balance.

On 20 November 2019, the European Commission issued its formal opinion on Italy's DBP. Based on the Commission forecast, both the expenditure benchmark and the structural balance pointed to a risk of a significant deviation in 2020 and over 2019 and 2020 as a whole. The adjustment path towards Italy's 2020 MTO was also at risk of significant deviation, and this would not change even if the requested additional fiscal space of 0.2% of GDP was accorded for 2019 and 2020. According to the Commission, Italy was not in the process of complying with the debt reduction benchmark in 2019, nor in 2020. Overall, the Commission's opinion of Italy's DBP prefigured a risk of non-compliance with the requirements of the SGP (European Commission 2019b). Despite the clear warning, the European Commission eventually gave the 'green light' to Italy's DBP, acknowledging the Italian government's progress with respect to the structural side of the country-specific recommendations and inviting Italian authorities to take further action. During the elaboration of the Commission's opinion, Pierre Moscovici had already announced that it would not result in the rejection of the budget or the opening of a procedure (Reuters 2019), as was instead the case with the previous 2018 Italian DBP presented by the Conte I government a year before (see further below).

Arguably, the Conte II government's accommodating approach to the EU and its renewed commitment to the European Semester's budgetary policy requirements played a role in the Commission's decision not to ask for a resubmission of the DBP. While the DBP was not quite in line with the requirements of the SGP, the Italian government remarked that it 'dutifully [takes] note of the Council recommendation' (Gualtieri 2019) throughout its exchange with the European authorities. Moscovici himself revealed that 'discussions with the current government have been much easier on the 2020 budget than with the previous government on the 2019 draft', noting that 'this government has a pro-European stance, knows what the rules are about and wants to be compliant' (Strupczewski 2019). On behalf of the European Commission, Moscovici appreciated Italy's efforts to foster economic growth and to respect the rules of the SGP (*ibidem* 2019).

The outbreak of Covid-19 in Europe in early March 2020 significantly altered the normal course of the European Semester. On 5 March, in a letter to Dombrovskis and Gentiloni (by this time serving as Commissioner for Economy), Roberto Gualtieri (2020) informed the Commission of the government's intention to deviate from structural deficit targets in response to the health crisis, while reiterating its commitment to resuming the debt-reduction strategy after the crisis. The following day, Dombrovskis and Gentiloni (2020) expressed their solidarity with the country, and stressed that any one-off budgetary measure in response to Covid-19 would be excluded from the compliance assessments of the EU. After yet another letter exchange between March 10 and 12, and as Covid-19 turned into a global pandemic on March 11, European authorities opted for an extraordinary measure. On 23 March, acting on a Commission proposal, the

ECOFIN (2020) triggered the ‘general escape clause’, thus temporarily suspending the budgetary requirements of the SGP for the whole Union.

Importantly, the analysis of the Conte II’s budgetary policy validates our hypothesis that the PD was able to exercise a ‘mitigation effect’ on the coalition partner’s Euroscepticism. The Italian government took the Commission’s country-specific recommendations and SGP rules seriously, showing a clear commitment to the European Semester’s parameters. Despite the fact that Italy’s DBP failed to meet such parameters adequately, the EU acknowledged the Conte II’s accommodating approach to Europe and decided not to ask for a resubmission of the budget.

6. A Brief Window of Discontinuity: The ‘Sovereignist’ Coalition Goes to Brussels

6.1. Political Programme and Composition

The Italian general elections of March 2018 witnessed the emergence of the M5S and the League as the leading parties in the country. Combined, they obtained 50.3% of the people’s votes and 56% of seats in the Chamber of Deputies, while the outgoing centre-left coalition which had supported the previous Gentiloni government stopped at 22.85 and 19.86 percent respectively. After almost three months of tight negotiations, an unprecedented coalition government was sworn in on 1 June 2018 with Giuseppe Conte at its head. The M5S populist programme and the League’s nationalist claims laid the groundwork for the first ‘sovereignist’ government experience in Western Europe.

Conte I was born out of a ‘Contract of the government of change’ (hereafter, ‘Contract’), which Di Maio and Salvini signed on 17 May 2018. Although several policy divergences emerge from an in-depth read of the governing parties’ electoral manifestos, their common ground concerned their adverse orientation towards the EU. Indeed, when the government took office, Italy’s relationship with Europe became the most salient issue in the public debate (D’Alimonte 2019). While downplaying their anti-EU positions during the electoral campaign, the M5S and the League later put Euroscepticism at the service of the former’s claims about direct democracy and of the latter’s intention to restore full national sovereignty.

The Contract itself testified to the important bridging role anti-Europeanism played in the governing coalition’s action, particularly with respect to budgetary policy. The Contract envisaged the parties’ intention to boost economic growth through public investments, increased welfare and tax cuts,⁸ in open contrast to SGP rules. In order to foster domestic demand and support families’ purchasing power, it also hinted at an ‘appropriate and limited recourse to deficit spending’ (Contract 2018). But it is with respect to the broader question of the EU’s economic governance that Conte I’s Euroscepticism became apparent. The governing parties committed themselves to reforming the Treaties in order to exclude public investments from the Commission’s assessments of annual structural deficits. The M5S and the League agreed to re-negotiate the EU’s Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to make it consistent with the Contract’s

⁸ The Contract provided for the introduction of a 15% ‘flat tax’ in a broader mechanism of progressive deductions.

objectives. They also set out to revise the economic governance architecture at the EU level, including monetary policy, the SGP, Fiscal Compact and European Stability Mechanism (ESM), which were seen as ‘based on the market’s predominance over the wider economic and social dimension’ (Contract 2018).

The cabinet’s composition also speaks to the government’s adverse attitude to the EU (Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019). Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini took office as Minister of Economic Development and Minister of the Interior respectively, in addition to both serving as deputy prime ministers to Giuseppe Conte. Paolo Savona, an anti-EU hard-liner, became European Affairs Minister after his appointment to the Ministry of Economy and Finance was vetoed by Italy’s Head of State Sergio Mattarella over fears that this could lead to Italy’s exit from the currency union (Capussela 2018). Savona had widely expressed his Euroscepticism in interviews, papers and books (Savona 2018), going so far as to define the Eurozone as ‘a German cage’ (Rachman 2018). The Conte I cabinet comprised eight ministers from the M5S; five to six ministers from the League;⁹ and five to six independents,¹⁰ including PM Conte, Minister of Foreign Affairs Enzo Moavero Milanesi, and Minister of Economy and Finance Giovanni Tria. It is to the latter that the government entrusted responsibility for the Italian budget.

6.2. Budgetary Policy and the European Semester during Conte I

On 23 May 2018, the Commission published its country-specific recommendations, requiring Italy to ensure that the growth of net primary government expenditure would not exceed 0.1% in 2019, amounting to an annual structural adjustment of 0.6% of GDP. It also called upon Italy to reduce the government debt ratio (European Commission 2018a), which had reached a peak of around 130% of GDP. On 4 October, in an unprecedented move before the submission of Italy’s 2019 DBP, Economy and Finance Minister Tria notified the European Commission of the government’s intention to alter Italy’s fiscal targets, envisaging an increase in the nominal deficit to 2.4% of GDP in 2019, and an increase in the annual structural balance of 0.8% of GDP (Tria 2018a). M5S members blatantly celebrated such a turnaround on the balcony of Palazzo Chigi, the official residence of the Prime Minister (Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019). The following day, in a letter to Italy on behalf of the Commission, Dombrovskis and Moscovici took note of Tria’s update but said any formal exchanges in the framework of the European Semester would only take place after Italy’s submission of its 2019 DBP. They limited themselves to observing that the country-specific recommendations were unanimously endorsed by the European Council on 28 June and approved by the Council on 13 July, with Italy’s consent. They concluded that ‘Italy’s revised budgetary targets appear *prima facie* to point to a significant deviation from the fiscal path recommended by the Council’ (Dombrovskis and Moscovici 2018a).

On 15 October, Italy submitted its official 2019 DBP, which confirmed the announced deviation from the country-specific recommendations the Italian government itself had endorsed a few months earlier at the EU level. In a letter ahead of its formal opinion on Italy’s DBP, the Commission addressed Giovanni Tria in search of reasons

⁹ In July 2019, then Minister for Family and Disability Lorenzo Fontana (League) replaced Paolo Savona (independent) as European Affairs Minister.

¹⁰ See Footnote 6.

behind such a significant deviation from both the recommendations and the SGP, underlining that the Italian budget was a source of serious concern (Dombrovskis and Moscovici 2018b). Italy replied on 22 October, recognising that its DBP would not fulfil the rules of the SGP while adding that ‘it was a difficult but necessary decision’ in a context of prolonged economic crisis (Tria 2018b). Italy’s obstinate approach paved the way for the Commission’s opinion, which came on 23 October. The Commission found in Italy’s DBP a ‘particularly serious non-compliance’ with the country-specific recommendations in relation to both the expenditure benchmark and the structural balance. According to the Commission’s opinion, Italy was not projected to comply with the debt reduction target either. It therefore rejected Italy’s DBP, and allowed the Italian government three weeks to present a new one (European Commission 2018b). This was the first time the European Commission had formally turned down a Member State’s budget in the framework of the European Semester.

On 13 November, Italy resubmitted its 2019 DBP, which provided for an increase in the target for the sale of public assets to 1% of GDP in order to expedite the reduction of the government debt ratio. It also included exceptional expenditures of around 0.2% of GDP in 2019, 2020 and 2021, due to extraordinary events that exposed Italy’s hydrogeological vulnerability (Ministry of the Economy and Finance 2018). In a letter attached to the revised budget, Giovanni Tria reiterated that ‘the fiscal expansion decided by the government is confined to what is strictly necessary to counter the slowdown in the business cycle’ (Tria 2018c). A few days later, in its formal opinion of Italy’s revised DBP, the Commission noted that changes to the previous version were ‘very limited, mainly consisting in a higher privatisation target for 2019’ (European Commission 2018c). It thus confirmed that both the expenditure benchmark and the structural balance pointed to a serious non-compliance with the country-specific recommendations, and that the government debt ratio would in any case not decrease at a sufficient pace. Along with its opinion, and under Art. 126(3) TFEU, the Commission presented Italy with a formal report on the debt criterion, which represents the first step in the EDP. The report remarked Italy’s lack of compliance with the debt reduction benchmark, pointing to the existence of an excessive deficit as per the SGP. Net of all relevant factors, the report concluded that the debt criterion ‘should be considered as not complied with, and that a debt-based EDP is thus warranted’ (European Commission 2018d). The Economic and Financial Committee and the Eurogroup also endorsed the Commission’s report while welcoming the ongoing dialogue between Italian authorities and the Commission itself.

After an initial phase of outright contestation on the part of government leaders,¹¹ the threatening prospect of an EDP, as well as fast-rising bond yields, pushed the Italian government to give in to European demands. On 18 December, in a letter to the Commission, the government said it was willing to intervene and adjust its budgetary policy in line with the Commission’s opinion. In particular, it set out to reduce its net primary expenditure and to increase its fiscal revenue. Given the circumstances, the letter was exceptionally signed by PM Conte, along with Minister of the Economy Tria (Conte and Tria 2018). The following day, the Commission replied to Italy, appreciating the Italian government’s efforts to amend the draft budget consistently with EU rules. While

¹¹ Following the Commission’s opinion of Italy’s revised DBP, Matteo Salvini sarcastically declared he was ‘also waiting for a letter from Santa’ (Il Messaggero 2018).

remaining committed to monitoring budgetary developments in the country, the Commission said Italy's announced measures would allow for a stop to the EDP if approved before the end of the year (Juncker *et al.* 2018).

Despite a last-minute deal between EU authorities and the Italian government, Conte I's relationship with Europe was pretty turbulent overall. Born as an unprecedented sovereigntist coalition, the Conte I government gave ample proof of its Euroscepticism in the definition of its budgetary policy. Not only did Italy's 2019 DBP flout the Commission's country-specific recommendations and SGP rules, but the government's approach to the EU remained confrontational throughout the European Semester.

7. Conclusions

This article has compared the Conte I and Conte II governments' orientation towards the EU. With an eye to the composition of the two cabinets, their political programme and their budgetary policy in the framework of the European Semester, the article has argued that a shift in the Italian government's approach to the EU occurred in the transition from Conte I to Conte II, due to the PD's involvement in the latter. We showed that the PD exercised a 'mitigation effect' on the government's Euroscepticism, leading to a more accommodating relationship with EU authorities. In particular, we identified three manifestations of such a 'mitigation effect'.

First, the political programme of the Conte I cabinet offered clear evidence of that government's Euroscepticism. The Contract envisaged recourse to deficit spending and committed the parties to a radical review of the EU's economic governance. By contrast, upon the inauguration of his second government experience, Conte's policy statements to the Chamber of Deputies pointed to a pro-European turn, emphasising the need to address rising policy challenges in a fully European perspective. The PD exercised a 'mitigation effect' by making pro-Europeanism a precondition for joining the coalition partnership with the M5S. Second, the unprecedented party composition of Conte I earned it the label of 'sovereigntist' government as it combined two anti-EU groupings and included figures such as Paolo Savona, an anti-Europeanist who served as European Affairs Minister. The later changeover from League to PD ministers brought with it a Europeanist breath in the Conte II government. Roberto Gualtieri, a Brussels insider with previous working experience in EU institutions, became Minister of Economy, while pro-European Vincenzo Amendola took office as Minister of European Affairs. The Conte II government soon proposed long-time Europeanist Paolo Gentiloni for the post of European Commissioner, a clear sign of the government's changing attitude towards the EU and of the 'mitigation effect' provided by the PD.

Third, in terms of budgetary policy, both Conte I and Conte II fell short of the Commission's country-specific recommendations and SGP rules. However, their draft budgets were received differently by European authorities. Found to be in serious non-compliance, Conte I's 2019 DBP was rejected by the European Commission in its formal opinion, which was without precedent in the history of the European Semester. As Italy's revised DBP was almost unchanged from the previous version, the Commission took the first step towards the opening of an EDP against the country. By contrast, despite finding Conte II's 2020 DBP at risk of non-compliance, the Commission did not ask for a

resubmission of the budget, appreciating Italy's commitment to EU rules. Arguably, the two governments' approach to Europe played a role in the Commission's evaluations. Conte I acted in open defiance of European authorities, displaying an obstinate attitude throughout its exchanges with the European Commission. On the contrary, while not meeting the relevant macroeconomic benchmarks, Conte II maintained an accommodating line in its relations with Brussels, and proved willing to adjust its budgetary position consistently with the Commission's requirements. This offers final evidence of the PD's 'mitigation effect' on the government's Euroscepticism.

Understanding the causes of Italy's changed approach to the EU in the transition from Conte I to Conte II may lay the groundwork for a comparative research agenda with a focus on Western Europe. Comparable cases in Western Europe might help to explain how and why government reshuffles lead to changed orientations towards the EU. Specifically, our 'mitigation effect' hypothesis may be tested on other governing coalitions which include both a Eurosceptic and a mainstream party. Finally, further research may investigate this issue by adopting different methodologies, particularly by using quantitative techniques.

Acknowledgements

This article is the outcome of an equal collaboration between the authors. We are grateful to the editors and the anonymous referees for their valuable comments and suggestions. We also wish to thank Vincenzo Emanuele, Luca Carrieri, and Tiziano Zgaga for providing us with helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

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