

## **Introduction to the Special Issue: A new page for Europe? Insights from the 2019 European Elections in Italy**

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European Parliament (EP) elections are commonly described as ‘second order’ (Reif and Schmitt 1980). The idea behind this description is that these elections are less prominent. On the one hand, the election campaign is often focused on domestic issues, or at least European Union (EU) issues that are domesticated and framed within a national dimension (Marsh 1998; Cayrol 1991; de Vreese 2007). On the other hand, EU institutions and their functioning are missing a real and visible link to citizens’ choices and preferences (Tsakatika 2007). Since they cannot determine the composition of supranational executive bodies, such as head of the EU Commission, EU citizens are cultivating a growing sense of detachment from the EU.

In light of the above, the European elections have been characterized by a low turnout, failing to mobilize citizens to cast their vote at the polls (Reif et al. 1997). The second-order election model is based on the idea of EP elections where there is ‘little at stake’ other than distant institutions, which are hard to understand in their very functioning mechanisms and have an ambiguous influence on domestic politics. Citizens lack strong incentives for engaging in these elections. This view, however, has been challenged in recent years. Europe, indeed, is progressively acquiring salience and visibility within domestic political agendas. This is a result – or even an unintended consequence – of the Great Recession (Hutter and Kriesi 2019), which uncovered the deep interconnection between EU member states, especially in the economic and financial field. The loss of domestic governments of the ability to autonomously define economic policies corresponded with a rise of EU institutions that rapidly become prominent. In this regard, scholars have pointed out that the process of politicization of the EU is bringing European institutions to the centre of the public agenda, making the EU increasingly relevant in public debates (De Wilde 2011; Statham and Trenz 2012; Kriesi 2016; Hutter and Kriesi 2019). This politicization takes place in terms of higher visibility of the EU within the national public debate on EU and European related issues.

For a long period, Italy was considered an extremely Europhile country, where permissive consent was high and interest in the EU consequently low. In the 1990s, however, the country entered a phase labelled ‘disenchanted Europeanism’ (Cotta 2005)

characterized by the progress of the process of integration, the progressive enlargement to Eastern Europe and a growing politicization of specific EU related issues such as the Euro currency and border control (Bellucci and Conti 2012). This situation of limited Euroscepticism changed in the 2014 European elections when Eurosceptic parties won about 50 per cent of the votes, placing Italy with those countries that show comprehensive Euroscepticism (Hernandez and Kriesi 2016). Attitudes towards the EU are going through a process of redefinition, since the traditional Europhile orientation towards the EU project is rapidly shifting towards more openly Eurosceptic views among the public and political parties (Conti and Memoli 2015), while media systems seem to keep a more nuanced approach (Bobba and Seddone, 2018). However, Italy still shows limited politicization of European integration: parties have developed new strategies on EU issues but citizens' preferences seem not to be significantly affected by the pro/anti-European dimension (Carrieri 2019).

The 2019 European elections, for the first time, seriously undermined the paradigm of the 'second-order elections' defined by Reif and Schmitt in 1980. With first the Euro-crisis and the Great Recession and then the rise of Eurosceptic parties in all the member states, the issue of European integration as such has moved front and centre in domestic political arenas. The EU was not only criticized for its policies but increasingly also for its very existence as a source of authority. Also, several politicians from different member states stated that the future of Europe was at stake in these elections.

All these new factors do not mean that the European elections as second-order elections has necessarily moved forward to the first order. But they are elements of enquiry into how and to what extent the EU and EU related issues have become relevant within the domestic political arena. This special issue deals with this burning topic, tackling three sets of questions.

The first set of question is: what role is played during the election campaign by news media and politicians? How do they foster the processes of Europeanization and domestication of the EU issues? Often, and in particular during the campaign of the last EP elections in 2019, Europe's image might have been constructed not only by experience (whether citizens benefit from Europe or not), but through the media. In the first article of the Special Issue, Seddone et al. (2019) deal with this very issue by analysing the news coverage of Europe in the Italian news. The relevance of this issue is due to the fact that previous research has already shown that attitudes towards Europe might be shaped by how the press covers Europe (see Vliegenthart et al., 2008). Yet, in the context of Italy there has been relatively little attention paid to this link, especially with regard to the negative coverage of Europe which, it is known, has a more powerful effect than positive coverage (see Soroka 2014), although European issues have become increasingly more present on TV and in newspapers. By analysing the content of five TV newspapers and newscasts, 50 days prior to the EP elections, Seddone et al. offer an overview of the drivers of negative representations of Europe in the media which might, in turn, provide suggestions to explain the changes in public opinion towards Europe and perhaps the success of Eurosceptic parties. They show, using an original dataset of coded news items, that TV and newspapers depict Europe differently, although media negativity is a common trait, especially when domestic politics is involved. Moreover, distinctions are made if EU politics vs. actors are considered.

Other questions this Special Issue deals with are: how did Italian political leaders communicate about Europe during the last EP electoral campaign? What were their strategies? The article by Cepernich and Bracciale (2019) show that social media networks have been fundamental factors in the communication strategies of Italian leaders. They argue that this is because of processes of 'leaderization', the transformation of political arenas, and social media allowing a direct relationship with the voters. By monitoring seven leaders' social media activity for six weeks before the EP elections on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, they underline differences between their strategies in terms of fanbase, posting and communicative flow. Moreover, the authors analyse how leaders manage issues on the most popular social media network, Facebook, showing that leaders are able to engage their fanbase when they use some communication strategies rather than others, in particular when emotional elements are involved.

Finally, what factors explain the success of Eurosceptic parties? Two articles address this point, taking different perspectives. Mancosu and Ladini (2019) argue that the success of the Lega can be found in historically rooted behaviours whose effects reach recent times. Patterns of socialization, which are passed down through generations, might explain the success of the Lega, together with a transformation of the party itself. Indeed, the Lega was not able to expand its support because of its ethno-regionalist characteristics. Yet, as soon as these characteristics were left behind, the Lega succeeded in regions where neo-fascist political traditions were relatively stronger, i.e. southern regions, although still minorities. The authors support these claims by relying on an analysis of survey data collected before the last EP elections and official data measuring the electoral strength of parties with neo-fascist heritage in 1976 and 2001. Thus, the Lega's success could be also found in the fact that some contexts are more open to messages recalling neo-fascist claims. Finally, the last article of the Special Issue by Quaranta and Martini (2019) argues that the success of Eurosceptic parties at the last EP elections might be due to the rising Eurosceptic attitudes of the Italian public, which might have been driven by the complex issue of immigration. Indeed, the 'refugee crisis' has hit the national debate, becoming a highly contested issue. Such crisis has shown the inability of Europe to find solutions, becoming the main target of criticism. Therefore, cultural and security threats due to the refugee crisis might have played a role in the decline of positive attitudes towards the EU among Italians, in particular among those with lower socio-economic resources. By using survey data over 25 years, the authors show that the number of refugees has a link with the declining trends in positive attitudes, especially among those with lower education and who are unemployed or not employed.

As the process of politicization of the European Union, for better and worse, is writing a new page in history, scholars are also addressing this topic from new and broader perspectives. This Special Issue offers a first attempt to provide empirical evidence of this ongoing process in the Italian case. European elections appear far from being simply second-order elections, at least according to their original definition. Nowadays EU and EU related issues are ubiquitous, and they are also increasingly relevant, not only across different elites but also across ordinary citizens. For these reasons, we hope the articles collected in this issue will inspire more scholars to set their research agendas and design towards the study of the processes of Europeanization of domestic politics and politicization of Europe.

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