

Is something changing? The impact of the COVID-19 emergency on Italians' attitudes towards the EU

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Abstract

The COVID-19 outbreak has had a strong impact on several aspects of private and public life all over the country. This article in particular deals with the impact of the pandemic crisis on attitudes towards the European Union. Based on an opinion survey administered after the COVID-19 first wave to a representative sample of Italians, this article provides preliminary results on whether the health crisis has impacted Italians' perceptions of EU membership. Findings suggest that one fifth of the respondents changed their minds about the EU in a relatively short time span. Among possible explanations for this shift, party cueing is shown to be the most important factor in transforming public perception of Europe, while the pattern is less clear for the perception of the pandemic risk and the economic outlook.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak has had a strong impact on several crucial fields in democracies, such as politics, economy, and social organization. Although the pandemic and its management are still ongoing and therefore a complete interpretation is not yet possible, several studies have addressed the consequences of the pandemic on citizens' political attitudes, with conflicting results (Schraff 2020). On the one hand, some research shows that the pandemic crisis has favoured incumbent governments, which means that citizens tend to 'rally around the flag' in times of crisis (Bol et al. 2020; Baekgaard et al. 2020; Devine et al. 2020). At the same time, however, other studies show that citizens have responded to this crisis by relying on their previous political values and beliefs (Calvillo et al. 2020). People reacted in different ways to pandemic-related policies, based on their level of support for the leader/party proposing a policy (Allcott et al. 2020). Even in these pandemic times, therefore, party cues have an influence on citizens' behaviour, such as compliance with anti-Covid measures (Painter and Qiu 2021; Grossman et al. 2020).

Against this backdrop, the impact of the pandemic on attitudes towards the EU is still underexplored. The few studies currently available lead to divergent interpretations also in the field of EU integration. Gianmarco et al. (2020), through an online survey experiment in Italy, Spain, Germany and the Netherlands, have found a growing demand for

competent leadership and that the COVID-19 crisis has led to severe drops in interpersonal and institutional trust, as well as less support for the EU. Focusing on Italy, Basile et al. (2021) show, however, that the picture is more complex: although in a trend of decreasing support, Italian citizens are willing to support burden-sharing to face the costs of the most urgent crises affecting EU countries. This includes, but is not limited to, the COVID-19 pandemic: the multiple crises affecting Europe may have produced the ideal conditions under which the EU could take a step towards deeper integration in the future.

In this global crisis — characterized by territorial specificities concerning both the pandemic and the economic dimension — the EU has had to overcome several problems in acting as a single political player. Lacking a common health protocol, during the first phase of the COVID-19 emergency, the EU Commission focused on the economic side. It adopted a slightly different approach from the past, calling for coordination between member states within the European Council. In particular, it called for measures aiming at softening the impact of the economic crisis via a massive programme of investment and financial flexibility, rather than austerity measures (Pacces and Weimer 2020). Nonetheless, and to some extent unsurprisingly, the pandemic emergency has re-ignited most of the classical divides within the EU, echoing the debate in the aftermath of the Great Recession in the second half of the 2000s about the economic solidity of northern and southern countries (de la Porte and Jensens 2021). Agreement on a set of measures — the Recovery Plan — came in late July 2020. The consequences of this situation, however, still appear contradictory and uncertain. The emphasis on a shared plan of interventions supporting the countries most affected by the pandemic emergency — and the concomitant relaxation of austerity — signals a drastic change in the EU approach (Luo 2021). This prolonged emergency situation has produced (and is producing) intertwined effects on both the supply side and the demand side.

With respect to the focus of this article, three different dimensions emerging from this crisis situation are relevant: citizens' perception of the risks associated with COVID-19, the perceived economic consequences of the management of the pandemic, and the political positioning of the parties regarding Europe. The aim of this article is to clarify whether, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, the pandemic has changed people's attitudes¹ towards the EU and, if so, whether they have improved or worsened. As mentioned above, there is no consensus in the literature on the consequences of such a crisis on citizens' attitudes.

The main contribution of this article, therefore, is to provide new empirical evidence and add literature on this ongoing process, also testing the likely factors that explain these changes.

Relying on evidence based on an opinion survey with a representative sample of Italians after the COVID-19 first wave, this article provides preliminary results on whether the global health crisis has impacted Italians' perceptions about EU membership. Findings suggest that one fifth of the respondents changed their minds about the EU in a relatively short time span. We also noted that in most cases this change of heart goes towards an improved attitude towards the EU institutions. When investigating factors

¹ In this article we use the term 'change' to indicate the shift in individual attitudes before and after the pandemic outbreak. This change is not measured through a panel design, but through questions regarding the prospective evaluation of the respondents. See Methods section below.

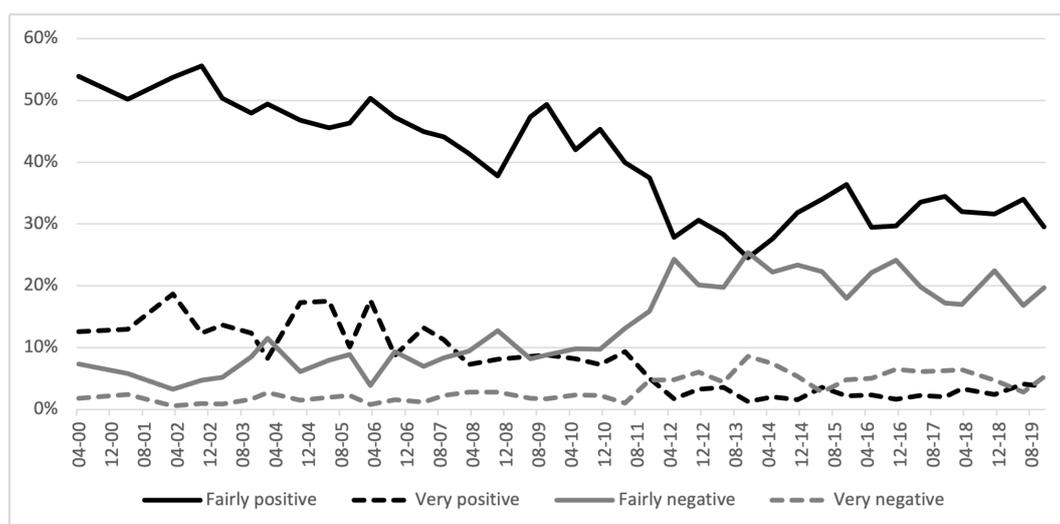
driving this change, the voters' reliance on parties emerges as the most relevant, while the pattern is less clear about perceptions of the pandemic risk and the economic outlook.

In what follows, the next section will provide a general background on attitudes toward the EU and the COVID-19 emergency in Italy while the third section summarises the theoretical framework and articulates the hypotheses. The research design will then be discussed in section four, while section five presents the data and results of analysis. The discussion and limitations of the study are presented in the last section

2. Attitudes toward the EU and the COVID-19 emergency in Italy

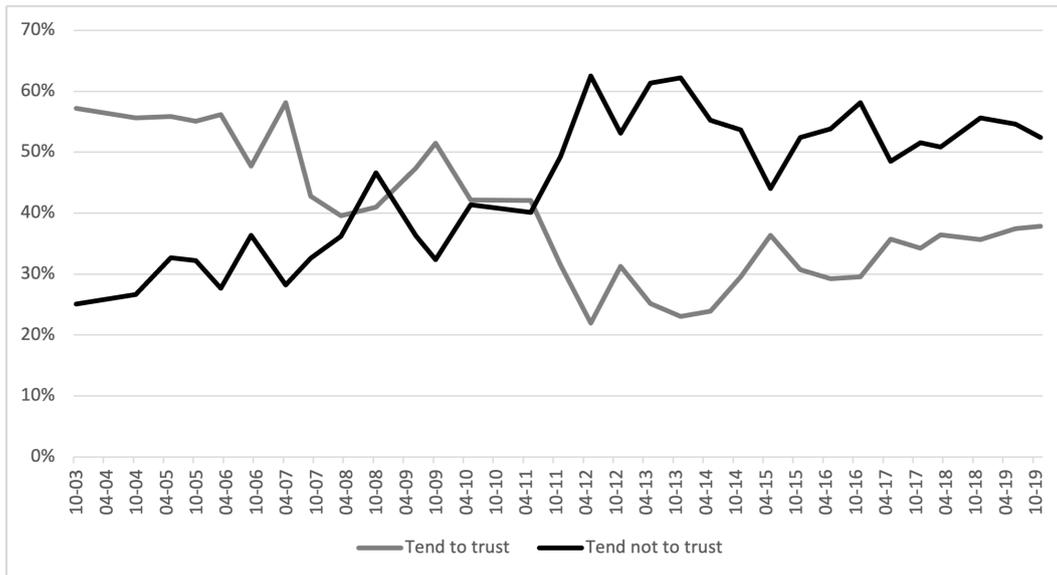
As is well known, Italy has long been one of the strongest supporters of the European project (Cotta et al. 2005). This situation started to change in the 1990s, moving the country towards a more 'disenchanted Europeanism' (Cotta 2005: 35). The effects of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty and the financial recovery necessary for participation in the Economic and Monetary Union process (Ferrera and Gualmini 1999), together with further transfers of national sovereignty contained in the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, led to an increase in Euroscepticism (Verney 2011; Down and Wilson 2008). In the 2009 European elections, this initial Euroscepticism was 'stronger among citizens than in the party system, socioeconomic elites and the media' (Bellucci and Conti 2012). The attitude towards the EU of a growing share of citizens went in those years 'from enthusiasm to scepticism' (Bellucci and Serricchio 2012). In the following years, the Great Recession and the need to comply with EU financial requirements had several consequences on the attitudes of Italians towards the EU (Bellucci 2014; Armingeon et al. 2016). While Eurobarometer data shows that the percentage of those evoking a positive image of the EU had already started to decline in the early 2000s and latent dissatisfaction had started to rise (Figure 1), it was in the 2011-2013 period that opinions worsened significantly, decreasing by up to 20 percentage points.

Figure 1. Image of the EU in Italy



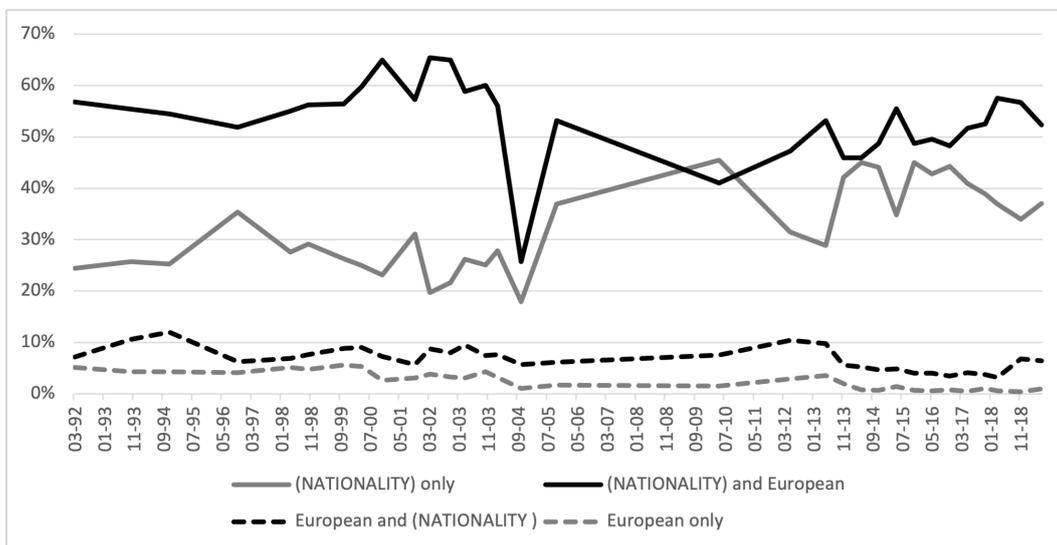
Source: Eurobarometer Interactive. Note: reply to the question, "In general, does the European Union conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?"

Figure 2. Trust in the EU in Italy



Source: Eurobarometer Interactive. Note: reply to the question, “I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain media and institutions. For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it: The European Union”.

Figure 3. European identity



Source: Eurobarometer Interactive. Note: reply to the question, “In the near future, do you see yourself as...?”.

However, in this critical climate of opinion surrounding the EU integration project, one particular figure emerging from Eurobarometer data is especially interesting. While the figures concerning trust in the EU signal a decreasingly supportive mood (Figure 2), when asked about their identities as European citizens, Italians still appear relatively close to the European ideal and there is no evidence of decreasing trends. Rather than a

rejection of the European project in principle, the Italian respondents seemed to express discontent as a consequence of the ‘spiral of Euroscepticism’ that has involved citizens, parties and representative institutions in the last decade (Conti et al. 2020).

It was within this context of mixed signals, of decreasing support but stable pro-EU identity, that the pandemic broke out. The consequences on citizens’ attitudes are not entirely clear and are currently under the spotlight of researchers. The consequences on the political system, on the other hand — although not necessarily clear — have been much more evident: the pandemic has forced parties in Europe to tackle an issue that has strong supranational implications. This has led people to question, and in some cases redefine, their orientation towards the EU. This certainly happened in Italy where the need for management of the pandemic modified (and is still modifying) the orientation of several parties towards the EU. As regards the parties in power when the survey was administered (late June 2020), they supported the pro-EU government led by Giuseppe Conte (Conte II). While this support is completely coherent for the Democratic Party (PD, Partito Democratico) — which has always had a pro-European vocation (Bobba and Seddone 2020) — it is something new as far as the Five Star Movement (M5S, Movimento 5 Stelle) is concerned. Listed for a while among Italian Eurosceptic parties (Emanuele et al. 2016; Maggini and Chiaramonte, 2019; Pirro and van Kessel 2018), its positioning towards the EU in the European Parliament has also been defined as confused (Salvati 2019). It is therefore no coincidence that, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the M5S started changing their minds about the EU by endorsing Ursula Van der Leyden as the president of the EC and by forming the governing alliance with the PD in September 2019. Further, since the pandemic outbreak, the M5S have become more likely to support European integration, conveying Europhile messages to their voters. This orientation also seems to be confirmed by their support for the pro-European government led by Mario Draghi, a controversial figure in the M5S narrative, defined as an ‘apostle of the elite’ by one of the Movement’s leading figures.² Besides, it is worth noting that the M5S supported the Conte government’s strategy and position leading to the Next Generation plan and it justified its Europhile position by stressing the need to address economic hardship at the national level.

The opposition parties have also been affected by the consequences of the pandemic crisis. After a season of partly ideological and partly strategic criticism of the EU (Quaglia 2011), Go Italy (FI, Forza Italia) moved towards a more mainstream pro-EU position, starting with the 2014 European elections (Conti et al. 2020). Since the start of the pandemic, FI has further endorsed the government’s initiative and clarified its support for the EU, distinguishing itself from its alleged allies the League (Lega) and Brothers of Italy (FdI, Fratelli d’Italia). These two parties are certainly the most Eurosceptic as they have introduced some positions of rejection such as exit from the Euro and suspension of the Schengen treaty to reintroduce border controls (Conti et al. 2020). However, while FdI has maintained unchanged its positions even during the pandemic, rejecting any possible collaboration with all the latest governments (Conte I, II and Draghi), the ideological and strategic Euroscepticism of the League has instead wavered in the face of the possibility of drawing benefit from the management of Next Generation EU funds. This probably explains the decision of its leader, Matteo Salvini, to support Mario Draghi’s

² The Guardian view on Mario Draghi: the right man for Italy ... for now. The Guardian, February 4, 2021.

government: ‘I prefer to be involved and manage 209 billion rather than stay outside [the government]’.³

In short, even if for different reasons and at different times, the pandemic has had an impact on the main parties, shifting, at least temporarily, the axis of their political orientation from substantial Euroscepticism to a moderate pro-EU orientation.

3. Determinants of attitudes toward the EU

The literature has identified several determinants that may contribute to shaping citizens’ attitudes toward European integration. For this article we rely on (a) literature about the EU institutions conceived as a rescuer-actor for solving particular crises or societal needs requiring transnational governance; (b) the utilitarian approach, in terms of individuals’ economic outlook perceptions; (c) party cueing, meant as a common heuristic used by citizens to disentangle complex issues, such as EU matters.

A first branch of literature, which is particularly relevant considering the current situation of the pandemic crisis, reads the EU institutions as a fundamental part of the multilevel governance system operating in Europe. In this perspective, when policy problems or societal needs are transnational and require coordination at the European level, the EU institutions play a crucial role and EU citizens are likely to recognize their responsibility (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014). The COVID-19 emergency, in this respect, has opened up new scenarios in the relationship between member states and especially between domestic and European politics. The very dynamics of a pandemic emergency like the COVID-19 outbreak have indeed required coordination and cooperation between countries. After initial hesitation, the EU in this respect has put in force extraordinary economic measures for fighting the economic crisis (through the European Stability Mechanism and the Next Generation fund) and started a centralized strategy to accelerate the purchasing, development, manufacturing and deployment of vaccines against COVID-19 (EU Commission 2020). Previous research has demonstrated that in the case of critical issues, citizens tend to perceive the EU institutions as more competent and effective in facing these societal challenges. As regards the migration crisis and EU immigration policy, for example, Conti et al. (2019) found that citizens worried about this issue are likely to delegate the definition of policy solutions to the EU institutions. This kind of result is consistent with the literature maintaining that citizens (still) tend to identify the EU as a reliable transnational rescuer able to address (and solve) critical issues at the national level (Milward 1992), even despite the Great Recession Crisis (Isernia and Cotta 2016). Drawing from this literature, the first hypothesis aims at assessing the relationship between perception of the pandemic risk and evaluation of the EU:

H1: *Higher levels of pandemic risk perception are related to a positive evaluation of EU integration.*

As concerns the utilitarian perspective, studies suggest that the economic dimension has an effect on individual attitudes towards the EU. Indeed, the literature has found that a personal capacity to better adapt (or not) to the EU’s setting of rules on the

³ La giravolta moderata di Salvini: ‘Preferisco mettermi in gioco e gestire 209 miliardi che stare fuori’. Open, February, 6, 2021.

economic dimension impacts how individuals perceive the very role of the EU. For example, those benefitting from market liberalization prove to be more likely to support the EU integration project (Anderson and Reichert 1995). In addition, studies also found that people's feelings towards the EU are often consistent with their economic interests (Gabel 1998). Besides individual assessment of the economy, scholars have underlined that people's perceptions of the EU are also affected by a more general evaluation of their country's economic performance (Eichenberg and Dalton 1993; Anderson and Reichert 1995). In this respect, studies argue that the level of EU support depends also on individual perceptions of the country role within the EU and in particular the relationship/connections with other member states. Precisely, dimensions such as country security, national trade interests within the EU, or even the country's ability to get net returns from the EU budget, are said to shape citizens' attitudes towards the EU (Eichenberg and Dalton 1993; Anderson and Reichert 1996).

This literature led us to formulate a specific hypothesis to test whether and to what extent individual perception of the country's economic outlook affects attitudes towards EU integration. Specifically, we expect a congruence between economic outlook and EU evaluation. Accordingly, our second hypothesis is spelt out as follows:

H2: *Citizens' positive expectations of the country's economic outlook are related to a positive evaluation of EU integration*

In general, citizens are said to lack general political sophistication; they have a limited ability to think in the abstract about political matters and they also lack factual information about politics (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Nonetheless, despite this scarce knowledge and a limited availability of information, the literature underlines that they may overcome their information shortfalls by relying on heuristics to infer their position on an issue (Sniderman et al. 1991; Lupia 1992; 1994; Dancey and Sheagley 2012; Kuklinski and Quirk 2000). Citizens, indeed, use diverse kinds of information shortcuts to fill the information gap, relying on party identification, election campaigns, media contents or elite endorsements (Downs 1957; Lodge et al. 1995; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Lupia 1994). As concerns the European Union, an extensive literature has demonstrated that messages from political parties have a strong influence on citizens' attitudes to the EU (see for example Pannico 2017; Torcal et al. 2018; Stoeckel and Kuhn 2018; Pannico 2020). EU matters, indeed, prove particularly difficult to understand and European issues are usually marginal in national politics (Van der Eijk and Franklin 2004). Even from an electoral point of view, EP elections are interpreted as 'second order elections', implying that citizens tend to perceive these elections as being less at stake, which disincentivizes voting mobilization (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Hobolt 2014). Furthermore, studies have also highlighted that European citizens are actually poorly informed about EU politics (Anderson 1998; Baglioni and Hurrelmann 2016; Hobolt 2007). Therefore, they are more likely to align their evaluations of the EU with the positions of the parties to which they feel closest. Relying on this literature, we therefore expect that partisanship has an impact on individuals' evaluations of the EU. Precisely, the last hypothesis reads as follows:

H3: *Citizens' evaluations towards the EU are congruent with the orientation of their party.*

4. Methods

4.1. Data

The data employed in this study are based on an opinion survey from the project ‘The impact of COVID-19 pandemic crisis on social and institutional trust’.⁴ Interviews were administered to respondents through CAWI/CATI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) mode between 26 June and 3 July 2020. Respondents were selected from an opt-in community maintained by SWG (a private Italian research company). The sampling design accounts for age, gender and geographical distribution of the Italian population. In total, the dataset includes 2,265 respondents. It is worth noticing that the period of data collection is shown to be particularly appropriate for the purposes of this study. As concerns the pandemic emergency, indeed, the contagion rate signalled a cooling phase. Therefore, containment measures and restrictions were no longer in force. Instead, focusing on the EU dimension, the end of June coincides with negotiations within the European Council about the definition of recovery measures. As a result, EU issues were again at the top of the public agenda, emphasizing the prominence of EU political actors such as the EU commission in this phase of mediating between diverse (and often conflicting) domestic interests (Botta et al. 2020).

4.2. Measures: the dependent variable

Our hypotheses have been tested through a multinomial logit model investigating kinds of individual opinions about the EU. We were specifically interested in identifying which factors contributed to shaping EU evaluation in positive or negative terms.

The dependent variable (DV) was computed by combining two different items referring, respectively, to the retrospective and prospective evaluation of Italian EU membership (see Table 1). The first item, thus, is spelt out as follows: *With regard to the last few years, do you think that EU membership has been [good, bad, neither good or bad] for Italy?* The second item, instead, was deliberately framed around the pandemic and allows the respondent a near-future prospective evaluation: *In the light of the COVID-19 crisis, do you think that EU membership will be [good, bad, neither good or bad] for Italy in the next few months?*

We then computed a trichotomous variable accounting for the direction of changes in prospective attitudes towards the EU in the light of the pandemic emergency. Those confirming their opinion on Italian membership in both retrospective and prospective evaluations have been coded as neutral (=1). The group of respondents whose evaluations worsened is composed of those moving from a positive to a negative or neutral evaluation, as well as those shifting from neutral to negative opinions (=0). Finally, an improved perception of EU membership is identified in respondents who move from negative and neutral opinions towards a positive prospective evaluation of EU in the light of the pandemic emergency. Respondents moving from neutral to fully positive opinions also fall into this category (=2).

⁴ The project was funded by the Collegio Carlo Alberto and the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Turin.

Table 1. Dependent variable detail

		In the light of the COVID-19 crisis, do you think that EU membership will be for Italy in the next few months?		
		neither good		
		good	nor bad	bad
With regard to the last few years, do you think that EU membership has been for Italy?	good	same	worsened	worsened
	neither good nor bad	improved	same	worsened
	bad	improved	improved	same

4.3. Measures: independent variables

As concerns individual outlook on the economic dimension, this was operationalized by means of a 1-5 scale variable measuring the individual’s economic prospective evaluation where 1 indicates an improvement in personal economic conditions, while 5 refers to a worsening of personal economic conditions.⁵ As regards, instead, the partisanship dimension we relied on a set of dichotomous variables accounting for respondent voting behaviour in the 2019 EP elections. We focused on those parties that allow for a reasonable numerosity to be tested, that is: FI, FdI, M5S, League and PD.

Finally, for assessing H3 — testing the effects of pandemic concerns on EU evaluations — we considered two items accounting for individual concerns on the pandemic side. Accordingly, the first variable measures on a 0-10 scale the respondent’s perceived risk of getting infected,⁶ while a second variable measures, still on a 0-10 scale, the respondent’s perceived risk that the country will face a second wave of contagion.⁷ In both cases, 0 was meant as a minimum/null level of concern while 10 indicated the maximum level of concern.

Table 2. Descriptives

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
EU change attitude	2165	1.05	.44	0	2
EU retrospective evaluation	2201	1.779	.822	1	3
EU prospective evaluation	2186	1.73	.821	1	3
Risk of 2nd COVID-19 wave	2216	6.576	2.174	0	10
Risk of COVID-19 infection	2131	4.643	2.059	0	10
Economy evaluation (next 12 months)	2172	3.389	.867	1	5
FI vote in 2019 EP elections	2265	.04	.195	0	1
FdI vote in 2019 EP elections	2265	.037	.188	0	1
M5S vote in 2019 EP elections	2265	.159	.366	0	1
LEGA vote in 2019 EP elections	2265	.174	.379	0	1
PD vote in 2019 EP elections	2265	.246	.431	0	1

⁵ The original wording of the question was: “Looking to the future, do you expect your economic situation over the next 12 months to be...?”.

⁶ The original wording of the question was: “In your opinion, how possible is it that you will get infected by the COVID-19 virus?”.

⁷ The original wording of the question was: “In your opinion, how possible is it that in the next few months there will be a second wave of contagion in Italy?”.

5. Findings

A general overview of our data suggests that most of the respondents have not changed their minds about the EU. As detailed in Table 3, indeed, the prospective evaluation about EU membership in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic does not show relevant differences compared to the retrospective evaluations. About 80.37% of the sample confirmed their opinions while those changing their attitudes about their country's EU membership account for one fifth of the sample. Notably, given that rapid and sudden changes in attitudes are usually quite rare — even if minor — this portion of respondents must be considered as a potential (and remarkable) signal of the pandemic's impact on citizens' perceptions about the EU. Also, it is worth noticing that when looking at the direction of the switch in attitudes we found that 7.3% of the respondents have moved towards worsened feelings, while 12.3% have instead improved their sentiments towards the EU (Table 3).

Table 3. Switch in attitudes towards EU membership

	Percent
Worsened EU attitude	7.30
Same EU attitude	80.37
Improved EU attitude	12.33
N	2,165

In order to identify the potential factors contributing to explaining changes in respondents' attitudes towards EU membership, we ran a multinomial logistic model assessing the impact of independent variables accounting for pandemic, economic and political dimensions on the direction of shifting attitudes towards the EU. Interestingly, we found that the worsening and improving of individuals' opinions on EU membership are affected by a diverse set of factors working differently in terms of both significance and direction of the impact. In particular, our analyses suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has an effect on attitudes towards the EU. In this respect, H1 — testing the EU rescuer argument — has quite blurred results. While concern about a second wave of COVID-19 contagion is not significant, meaning that it does not affect prospective evaluations of the EU, we found that concern about individual infection has an impact on decreasing the chances of improving evaluation of EU membership, while it has no effect on the worsening of individuals' attitudes, as compared to those maintaining a stable attitude towards the EU. Conversely, the economic factors (H2) have an effect only on the latter. Indeed, a negative outlook towards the economy decreases the chances of a turn towards negative EU attitudes if compared with those maintaining their opinion of the EU. Finally, H3, focusing on the party cueing dimension, is instead fully confirmed, signalling that partisanship plays a crucial role in orienting citizens' feelings on EU matters. It indeed proves significant in any case. The analyses show that — compared with those respondents maintaining their opinion on the EU — the vote for FDI, Lega in the 2019 EP is less likely to have a negative effect on the individual's attitudes towards the EU. Also, for respondents voting FI and M5S, the model shows a greater likelihood of change towards a positive attitude, as compared to those maintaining their evaluation on

EU membership. Finally, it should be noted that the electoral support for PD in the 2019 EP elections does not increase the chances of changing the evaluation on EU matters in either a positive or a negative direction. All in all, we find partial confirmation of our hypotheses. The three dimensions tested in our model indeed prove to have an impact on the switch of individual attitudes towards the EU. However, the kind of impact is different when investigating the direction of change.

Table 4. Multinomial Logit model (DV: worsening, improving and same EU attitudes)

	RRR	St. Err.	Sig
Worsening evaluation of EU membership			
Risk of COVID19 infection (0-10 scale)	.968	.04	
Risk of COVID19 2nd wave (0-10 scale)	.967	.038	
Economy evaluation (next 12 months)	.821	.085	*
FI	.96	.35	
FDI	.38	.218	*
M5S	.615	.195	
LEGA	.422	.106	***
PD	.392	.118	***
Constant	.431	.179	**
Improving the evaluation on EU membership			
Risk of COVID19 infection (0-10 scale)	.926	.031	**
Risk of COVID19 2nd wave (0-10 scale)	.993	.032	
Economy evaluation (next 12 months)	.995	.081	
FI	1.662	.474	*
FDI	1.116	.384	
M5S	2.124	.42	***
LEGA	.928	.168	
PD	.448	.122	***
Constant	.262	.091	***
Number of obs.	1988.000		
Pseudo r-squared	0.027		
Log Likelihood	-1271.394		

Source: *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$. Same evaluation on EU membership is the base outcome.

6. Conclusions

The pandemic emergency has, of course, impacted the public debate redefining political priorities, reshaping the political agenda also at the EU level. In this study we were interested in verifying whether and to what extent Italians' attitudes towards the EU may have changed in the immediate aftermath of the first wave of contagion and, more specifically, we investigated factors determining the worsening or else an improvement of Italians' opinions of EU matters.

Relying on individual survey data, we found that about one fifth of the respondents changed their attitude towards the EU. Given that feelings about the EU are not usually subject to drastic and radical shifts, this quota should be considered relevant, signalling that the pandemic emergency may have produced a re-definition of the EU image. In

particular, among these respondents, we can see a greater tendency to improve their opinion of EU matters, rather than turn to more negative evaluations.

When tested via inferential analysis, however, our results appear less univocal. If there were any doubts regarding the impact of party cueing on citizens' evaluations towards the EU (e.g., Carrieri 2020), in line with previous literature (see Hobolt 2007) findings suggest that partisanship affects individuals' perceptions of EU matters. Conversely, results on the utilitarian dimension are blurred, and the same applies to the pandemic dimension. More precisely, data suggest that even if the pandemic is interpreted exactly as one of those societal challenges needing a transnational policy intervention where the EU represents the fundamental (and leading) institution the path (and impact) of this health crisis is still unclear. In this respect, the EU may emerge as a rescuer. For sure, the pandemic emergency, combining both the health and economic crises, requires a sound ability to adapt and it could be interpreted as a trigger for a more profound change at the institutional level (Wolff and Ladi 2020).

The limitations of the article are clear both in terms of theoretical expectations and data availability. This study was carried out during a peculiar period that is still ongoing. Its merit is probably to have identified a notable change (about 20%) in the opinions of Italian citizens towards the EU — namely attitudes that normally don't change quickly. However, the reasons for this change do not emerge clearly from our analysis. On the one hand, when testing for diverse and possible changes in EU attitudes, the results do not appear robust enough, due to the limited number of cases. On the other hand, the availability of other variables — such as vertical and horizontal trust, territorial data about the management of the pandemic, reduction in income levels — could have offered additional interpretations. Besides, our data are a snapshot of a very precise phase of the pandemic crisis: the end of the first wave. Obviously, it is conceivable that the persistence of the crisis and the role played by the European institutions have continued to affect changes of opinion. Further studies should therefore move forward, disentangling the role of the EU at the economic and health levels. Italy is now preparing its recovery and resilience plan, the consequences of which should begin to be perceived in the coming months. At the same time, the vaccination campaign begun in January 2021 is expected to be fully operational before the summer. The success of both these processes will affect the support of Italian public opinion for the European integration project.

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