

# Standing apart together?

## Analysing Lega (Nord) and Movimento 5 Stelle as new challenger parties in Parliament

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### Abstract

Following the 2018 election and a long phase of negotiations, Lega and the Five Star Movement (FSM) appointed the first cabinet in Western Europe that does not include any mainstream party family. The 'elective affinities' between the electorates of these two challenger parties had been quite evident for some time, but in the present work we argue that there are further traits that the two parties had shared well before 2018 that could help to further prove their proximity. We propose a new dimension of analysis that should be taken into consideration when studying (new) challenger parties: their relationship vis-à-vis the other opposition parties. We would expect them to enter parliament for the first time with both the goals usually related to the two different opposition status (temporary vs. permanent) in mind: leaving the opposition and exploiting the opposition. Furthermore, we would expect them to stand apart from the other parties, no matter whether the latter are in government or in opposition. This is, in fact, one of the main reasons for their electoral success and, in the end, their essence. We will test these expectations by employing Social Network Analysis methods and analysing and comparing the cooperation attitudes of the Lega and FSM with the other opposition parties, using as an indicator the amount of legislative co-sponsorship during their first term in parliament (respectively 1992-1994 and 2013-2018) and the amount passed together while in opposition (2013-2018).

### Introduction

The political landscape across Europe has changed remarkably in recent years. The most visible change has been the fall of mainstream parties and the rise of challenger parties in several European countries. Examples of such an escalation in the aftermath of the crisis are many and include both the success of new challenger parties and the rise in support for older radical (right-wing) parties (Hobolt and Tilley 2016). Within the category of challenger parties, in fact, we find very different actors, some of them whom were already present on the European scene before the Eurozone crisis, others appearing only afterwards.

Italy is a good example of such a transformation of the party and parliamentary landscapes, as it has recently witnessed both the success of a new strong challenger party and the rise in support of an old one. The 2013 election saw the fall of both the centre left and the centre right mainstream parties and, simultaneously, the emergence of the new Five Star Movement (M5S). In 2018 the tripolar competition resulting from that election

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was consolidated (De Giorgi 2018), but with the balance of power among the three political poles radically changed. The two main challenger parties – the M5S and the Lega<sup>1</sup> – achieved the majority of votes and no government was possible without the support of at least one of the two (Chiaramonte et al. 2018). After a long phase of negotiations, the two parties were able to appoint the first cabinet in Western Europe that does not include any mainstream party family (Paparo 2018).

What do these two new government partners have in common? Despite their apparent programme differences, the 'elective affinities' between the electorates of these two challenger parties had been evident for some time,<sup>2</sup> above all as regards their common anti-system profile based on a distrust of both national and European institutions (Franchino and Negri 2018). But the two parties also share the capacity to transform widespread feelings of insecurity and discomfort in different fields – economic, cultural, etc. but all attributable to the effects of globalisation – into consensus (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2017). Furthermore, starting from a green, libertarian platform, the M5S 'has gradually evolved, incorporating issues such as anti-taxation and Euroscepticism that could also attract right-wing voters, while remaining rather elusive on the crucial issue of immigration' (Mosca and Tronconi 2017, p.1). The Movement's turn to the right was, in a sense, preceded also by its agreement with the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the European parliament in 2014, although, at the same time, it 'has maintained typical leftist positions on the issue of guaranteed minimum income, as well as continuing to hold its environmentalist stance' (Ibid., p.1). So, despite a further shift to the right of the Lega and its voters in recent years (Passarelli 2013), the ambiguous and contradictory ideological positioning of the M5S (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013; Mosca 2014; Manucci and Amsler 2017) together with its electorate's preferences in terms of party alliances<sup>3</sup>, has favoured the achievement of an agreement between the two parties built on common or negotiated policy goals.

Besides these considerations, and the political opportunity that clearly neither party wanted to miss, we argue that further traits have been shared by the two actors since well before 2018 that could help further prove their proximity. These traits are related to the strategy adopted by the two parties once in parliament and are ascribable to their (initial) nature as challenger parties. Although in different periods, in fact, both the Lega and the M5S entered the Italian parliament as new challenger parties. The political and economic crisis of the late 1980s/early 1990s saw the rise of the Lega Nord, while the political and economic crisis beginning in 2008 facilitated the success of the Five Star Movement. We propose a new dimension of analysis that should be taken into consideration when studying this type of party, i.e. their relationship vis-à-vis other opposition actors. How do they behave once the representation threshold has been crossed? Do they tend to remain isolated or do they start some kind of socialisation process, meaning increased collaboration with some of the other opposition forces? We assume that, albeit in very different political periods, the two parties, on entering parliament, adopted a

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<sup>1</sup> Running for the first time without the word Nord (North) in its symbol, with the aim of expanding its electoral support.

<sup>2</sup> See, among others, the results of the polls administered by Demos & Pi in 2016 (<http://www.demos.it/a01374.php>) and 2017 (<http://www.demos.it/a01396.php>).

<sup>3</sup> See also the results of the polls administered by Demos & Pi in 2016 (<http://www.demos.it/a01374.php>) and 2017 (<http://www.demos.it/a01396.php>).

highly similar strategy in their relationship with the other political actors, and in particular with the other opposition parties, attempting to send the same message to their respective electorates: we represent an alternative to the existing political parties, regardless of whether they are in government or in opposition, and we will behave accordingly in parliament. Furthermore, we assume that Salvini's Lega revived this strategy, trying to go back to the party origins in the last legislature (2013-2018), i.e. the one that directly followed the Eurozone crisis and saw the entrance of the M5S in the parliamentary arena.

We will test these expectations by analysing and comparing the attitudes to cooperation of the two challenger parties with the other opposition groups, using as an indicator the amount of legislative co-sponsorship during their first term in parliament (respectively, in 1992-1994 and 2013-2018) and in the term they spent together in opposition that preceded their government agreement. Since we are fundamentally interested in a relational dimension, that is the relationship between the new challenger parties and the other opposition parties in parliament, we will employ Social Network Analysis (SNA) methods. These methods have been applied in the context of bill proposals in other parliaments (Fowler 2010; Kirkland 2011) and have unearthed novel dynamics that lie beneath parliamentary activity. Thus, we expect that SNA will give us new insights also into new challenger parties' behaviour and, in particular, into the two new government partners in Italy.

The objective of this work is twofold: first, to verify whether the Lega and M5S have shown similar behaviour during their first years in parliament and, in so doing, to contribute to the knowledge of the nature of such an unprecedented coalition in Italy and second, to understand whether we can employ this possible common behaviour as one further variable for distinguishing the new challenger parties from others in parliament.

## 1. How challenger parties behave when they enter the parliamentary arena: expectations

Following Hobolt and Tilley (2016), we define challenger parties as those parties that 'seek to challenge the mainstream political consensus and do not ordinarily enter government' (p.972). Challenger parties may be on the right, left, or even neither of the two, as their ideological position does not contribute to the definition of their challenger status; their non-involvement in government does.<sup>4</sup> Reams of articles, academic and non-academic, have been written on these (new) protagonists of the political scenario and the reasons for their electoral success, but there is still little knowledge of the behaviour of these parties once in parliament.<sup>5</sup> The main purpose of this paper is to start filling this gap through the analysis of the case of the Italian Lega and M5S when they first entered the parliamentary arena, respectively in 1992 and 2013.

As we said, we aim to introduce a new dimension of analysis into the study of this kind of party, i.e. their relationship with the other opposition actors. No matter how much consensus- or conflict-oriented their action in parliament,<sup>6</sup> we expect all

<sup>4</sup>There are some exceptions, of course, mainly in Central and Eastern Europe (Grotz and Weber 2016).

<sup>5</sup>With some exceptions such as Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005 or Pinto and Pedrazzani 2015.

<sup>6</sup>Some studies have already proven the tendency of these parties to behave in a rather adversarial way in parliament (De Giorgi 2016; De Giorgi and Ilonszki 2018).

challenger parties to adopt one distinctive strategy: to stand apart from other parties, no matter whether the latter are in government or in opposition. This is, in fact, one of the main reasons for their electoral success and, in the end, their essence. Hence, we expect them to keep a distance from and not cooperate with either the temporary or the permanent opposition parties. In other words, we expect to find a significant distance between them and the other opposition parties in terms of action in parliament and how this action is (or better, is not) related to the others.

We will measure the new challenger parties' distance from the other opposition parties and its possible evolution over time by employing a social network analysis of bill co-sponsorship during the 11<sup>th</sup> (1992-1994) and 17<sup>th</sup> (2013-2018) legislatures, i.e. the first legislative terms in parliament of the Lega Nord and Five Star Movement respectively. Many studies, mainly focused on the US context, have shown that co-sponsorship is related to ideological proximity (Bratton and Rouse 2011; Aléman et al. 2009) but it is also a moment for representatives to signal other political actors (Wilson and Young 1997). So, we expect that the new challenger members of parliament (MPs) will collaborate less with the other opposition parties, as a way of signalling their distinctiveness. Other research has shown that in parliamentary systems with unified parties, co-sponsorship is mainly driven by specialisation: MPs introduce resolutions and amendments together with those who work on similar topics (Louwerse and Otjes 2015). This can be one further reason for the isolation of the new challenger parliamentary party groups (PPGs) who have no previous experience and are not well known by the other PPGs members, as they have entered parliament for the first time and with lack of experience as their best calling card against the established political parties. Of course, also the other parties matter. How established parties react to the challengers' presence in parliament is equally important. Despite their ideological proximity, in fact, parties are not always inclined to collaborate with the new challengers,<sup>7</sup> although they might try to react to their issue attention, notably when in opposition (Van de Wardt 2015) if they see the possibility of some electoral benefit (Meguid 2005). For all these reasons, we will test two main research hypotheses: first, the new challenger parties – and in our case the Lega (Nord) and M5S – do not co-sponsor the other opposition parties' legislative initiative much during their first legislature in parliament; second, the other parties do not collaborate either with the new challenger parties and their respective legislative proposals.

## 2. Data and Methods

Our empirical analysis focuses on legislation co-sponsorship and relies on one source of data, i.e. the Italian lower chamber's (*Camera dei Deputati*) data archive.<sup>8</sup> As we said, in this paper we consider two main periods of analysis: the first legislature of the Lega Nord in Parliament, the 11<sup>th</sup> (1992-1994), and the first legislature of the M5S in parliament, the 17<sup>th</sup> (2013-2018), divided into individual governments for each term.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See the attitudes of the centre-right parties towards the extreme right, as in Germany since the recent entrance of Alternative for Germany in the Bundestag or in Belgium with the principle of non-collaboration of all parties with the Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang.

<sup>8</sup> Data was collected by the project "Opposition parties in Europe under pressure. Far from power, close to citizens?" (IF/00926/2015). Source: [www.dati.camera.it](http://www.dati.camera.it).

<sup>9</sup> Amato I and Ciampi in the period 1992-1994 and Letta, Renzi and Gentiloni in the period 2013-2018.

We ran two different kinds of analysis. First, we employed a simple SNA representation to draw a graph showing the co-sponsorship network of the Italian parliament in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> legislatures. This simple exercise is quite helpful in showing the party cooperation attitude, or its absence, when proposing new bills. In our graphs each node, or point, represents an MP, whose colour represents her/his party, and each line between nodes, edges, represents the co-sponsorship of a certain bill.

For an easier representation of the co-sponsorship patterns we employed the Fruchterman and Reingold (1991) algorithm to distribute the different nodes along the graph. Using this algorithm, the position of each node is determined by its connections, in a fashion similar to that of recoil springs. If two MPs share a connection they will be drawn closer together, while other MPs that do not share any connection with these two are drawn further away. By calculating all these relative positions and combining the results, these graphs can be intuitively read as placing closer together those nodes that have connections while drawing apart those that do not share connections.

Though very informative, these graphs fail to present a clear and systematic point of reference which is needed in order to compare the different parties more precisely. To do this, we created an index of *intra-opposition party bill differentiation*. This index is a simple sum, for each period, of two different percentages. The first is the percentage of co-sponsors (*altri firmatari*) of bills initiated by *party x* that belong to the same party, i.e. the percentage of co-sponsors that are from the same party as the bill's initiator (*primo firmatario*). The second percentage represents, of all the bills co-sponsored by MPs of *party x*, the percentage of those initiated by *party x*. The combination of these two percentages can vary from 0, in cases where no bill presented by a member of *party x* is co-sponsored by any member of *party x* and members of *party x* are only co-sponsors of bills that were not introduced by *party x*, to 2 in cases where all co-sponsorship connections are made by members of *party x*. To ensure the statistical significance of these indices, we also ran a regression analysis that tested whether co-sponsorship with these parties was in fact lower during their first term.

### 3. Analysis

Turning our attention to the empirical analysis, we plotted the social network by connecting each MP, represented by a dot (node), with any other MP that also signed a bill proposed by her/him. In all plots, the colours represent the parties and the position of each MP in the graph is related to his/her relationship with other MPs, with cooperation bringing MPs closer to each other. Figures 1 to 5 plot the co-sponsorship network during each government within the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> legislatures.

In both figures 1 and 2,<sup>10</sup> Lega Nord clearly stands apart from the rest of the opposition parties' MPs. When compared to the other opposition parties, the Lega's MPs

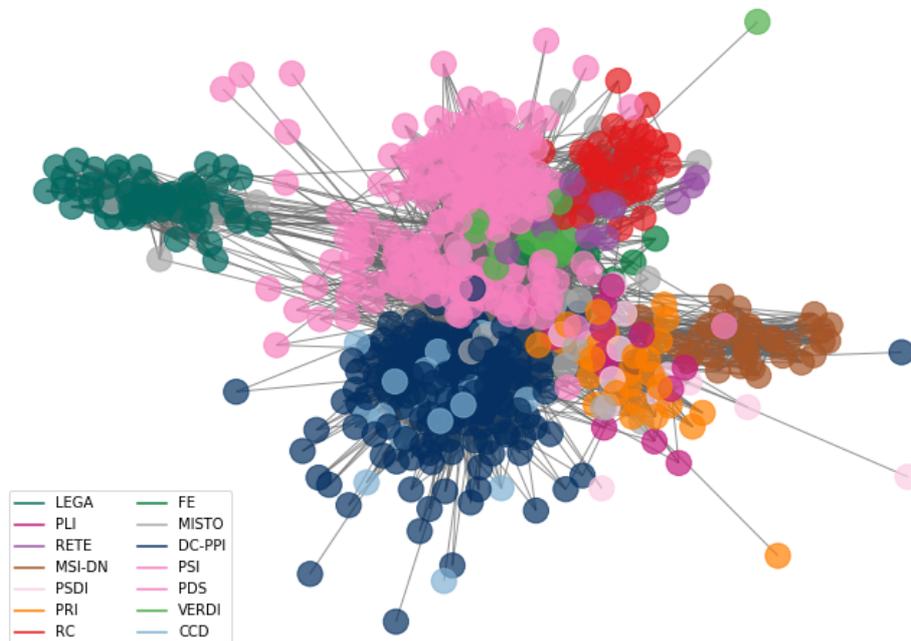
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<sup>10</sup> For the 11<sup>th</sup> Legislature the party acronyms refer to: Centro Cristiano Democratico (Christian Democratic Centre – CCD); Democrazia Cristiana - Partito Popolare Italiano (Christian Democracy - Italian Popular Party – DC-PPI); Federalisti Europei (European Federalist – FE); Lega Nord (Northern League – LEGA); Movimento Per La Democrazia: La Rete (Movement fo Democracy - The Net – Rete); Movimento Sociale Italiano - Destra Nazionale (Italian Social Movement - National Right – MSI-DN); Partito Democratico Della Sinistra (Left Democratic Party – PDS); Partito Liberale Italiano (Italian Liberal Party – PLI); Partito Repubblicano Italiano (Italian Republican Party – PRI); Partito Socialista Democratico

cooperate less when it comes to jointly proposing legislation with other parties, and vice versa: the other opposition parties are not inclined to collaborate with the Lega's MPs when the latter initiate their own legislation. The distinction between the new challenger Lega Nord at that time and the other parties is particularly noteworthy when compared with other permanent (radical) opposition parties: in both figures, we can observe that both the Communist Refoundation Party (*Rifondazione Comunista* - RC) and the Radicals (*Federazione Europa* - FE) are more inclined to propose new legislation with other opposition parties. The only party that seems to adopt similar, whilst more moderate behaviour in the 11<sup>th</sup> legislature is the extreme right Italian Social Movement (MSI-DN), which had a history of non-collaboration with the other PPGs, and vice versa, since the beginning of the so-called First Republic.

In Figures 3, 4 and 5,<sup>11</sup> the M5S is equally, if not more, distinguishable in the co-sponsorship dimension, notably during the Gentiloni government. All throughout the legislature, its MPs were internally quite cohesive when introducing legislative proposals and very rarely cooperated with other parties. So, when comparing the first legislative term in parliament of the two challenger parties we find a similar distinctive pattern in the behaviour of the Lega and M5S.

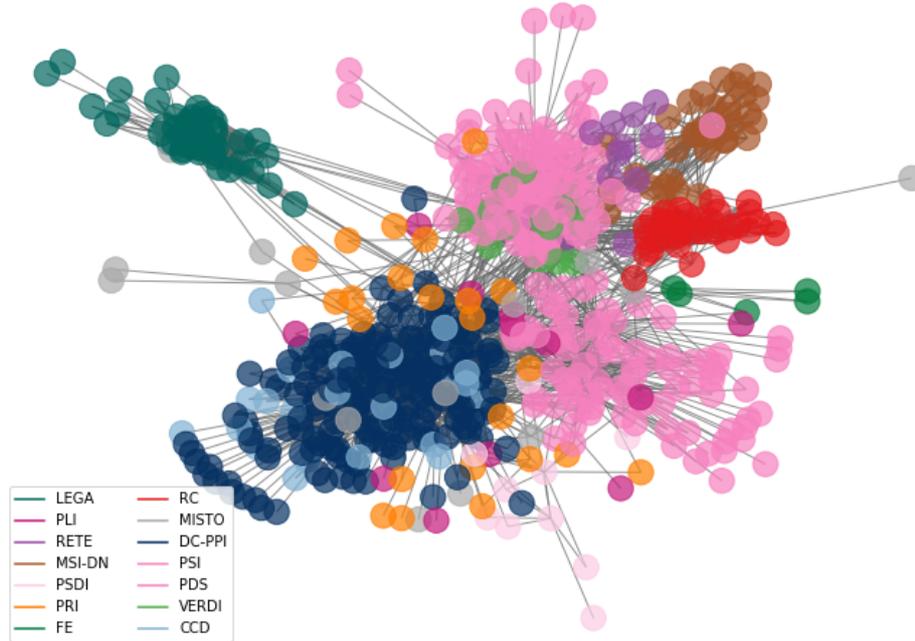
**Figure 1.** Social network plot of bill co-sponsorship during the first Amato Government.



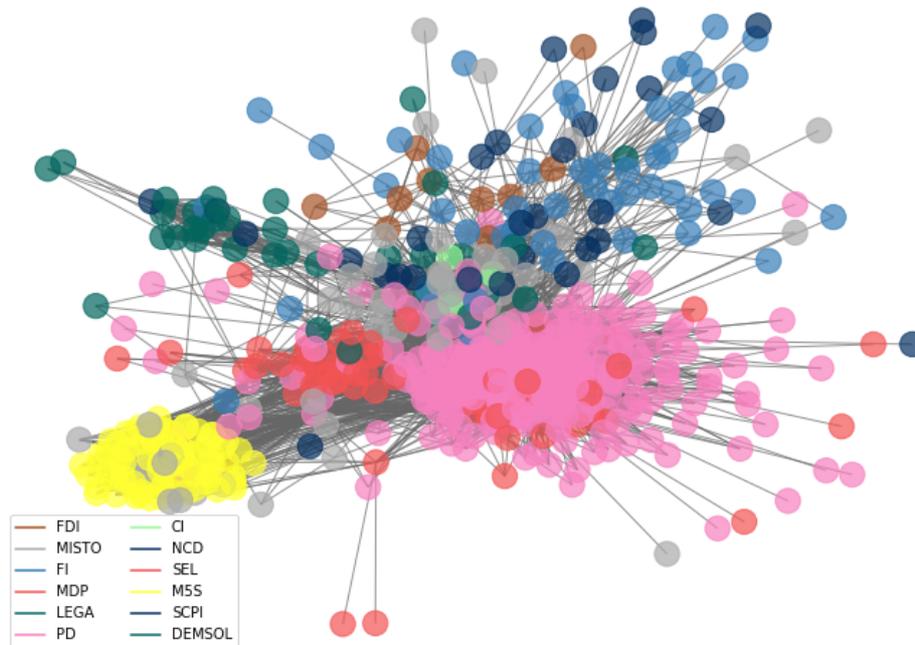
Italiano (Italian Social Democratic Party - PSDI); Partito Socialista Italiano (Italian Socialist Party - PSI); Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation Party - RC); Verdi (Greens).

<sup>11</sup> For the 17<sup>th</sup> Legislature the party acronyms refer to: Nuovo Centro Destra (New Centre Right - NCD); Articolo 1 - Movimento Democratico E Progressista (Article 1 - Democratic and Progressive Movement - MDP); Democrazia Solidale - Centro Democratico (Supportive Democracy - Democratic Centre - DEMSOL); Forza Italia - Il Popolo Della Libertà' (Forza Italia - Freedom People - FI); Fratelli D'Italia (Brothers of Italy - FDI); Lega Nord (Northern League - LEGA); Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement - M5S); Scelta Civica Per L'Italia (Civic Choice for Italy - SCPI); Partito Democratico (Democratic Party - PD); Sinistra Ecologia Libertà (Left Ecology and Freedom - SEL); Civici e Innovatori (Civic and Innovator - CI).

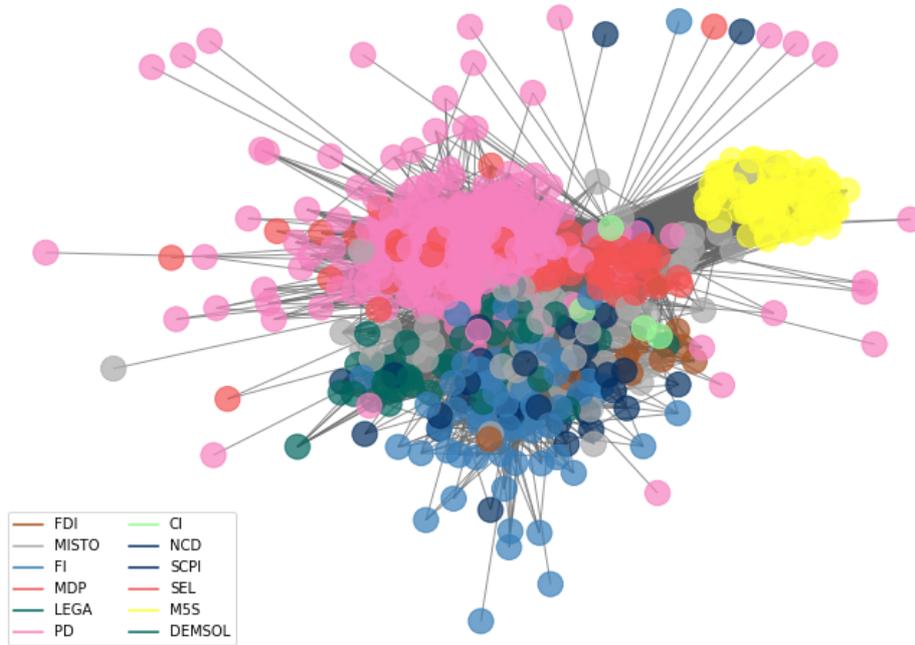
**Figure 2.** Social network plot of bill co-sponsorship during the Ciampi Government.



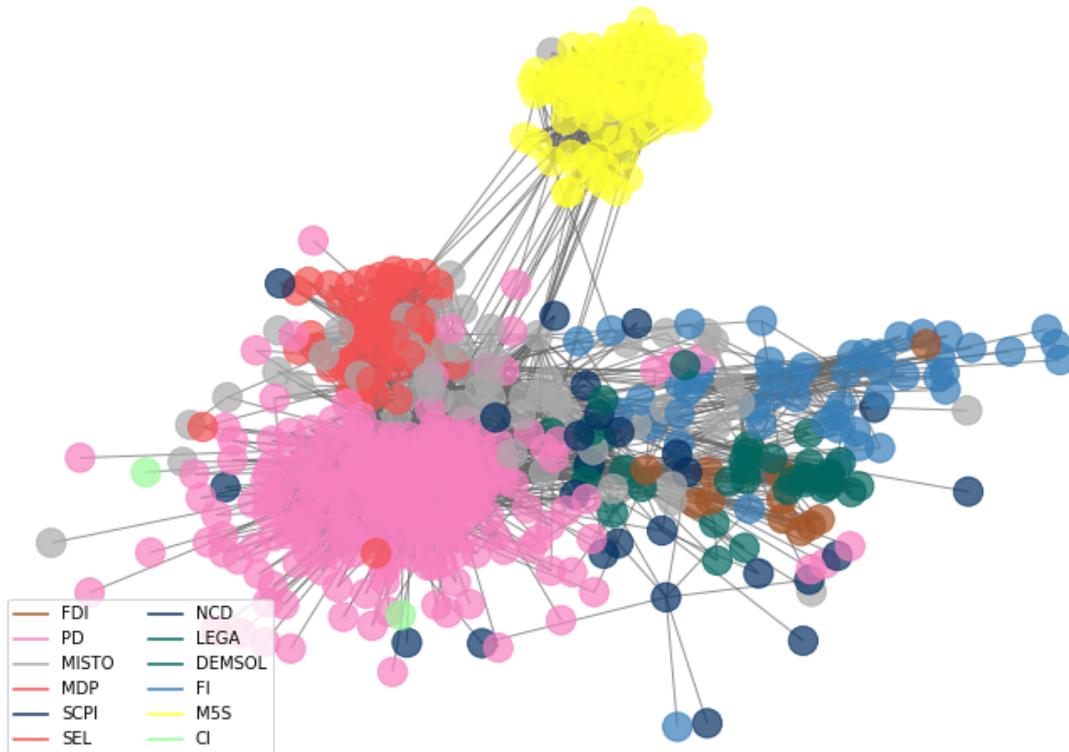
**Figure 3.** Social network plot of bill co-sponsorship during Letta government



**Figure 4.** Social network plot of bill co-sponsorship during Renzi government



**Figure 5.** Social network plot of bill co-sponsorship during Gentiloni government.



A different and more systematic way of analysing this data is to look at the percentages of co-sponsorships between members of the same party. Hence, we calculated an *intra-opposition party bill differentiation index* for each party in both legislatures. The results for the 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> legislatures are respectively shown in Tables 1 and 2. Looking at the first table, we find once again that between 1992 and 1994 the Lega relied on intra-party co-sponsorship more than any other opposition party group, achieving almost a perfect score of 2 during both the Amato and Ciampi governments. The only party with a similar score is the MSI-DN, while other opposition parties, even the Radicals or RC, cooperated more with each other. When comparing this table with Figure 1 we can conclude that, during its first legislature in parliament, the Lega's strategy was to distinguish itself by standing apart from and not collaborating with any of the other opposition parties (and vice versa).

A very similar conclusion can be drawn from Table 2. Between 2013 and 2018, the M5S was the party that cooperated the least when presenting bills throughout, with only one party exceeding its score during Letta's government. It is striking how high the indexes for M5S remain during the legislature when the size of their group in parliament is taken into consideration. When compared with the figures for FI-PDL, which started with about the same number of MPs, or even with PD, which had a group twice as big, M5S scores do still seem to stand out.

It is crucial to point out that even small differences in these indexes can have big effects on the social network plots. The centrifugal effect witnessed in the figures above does not correspond solely to these scores, which indicate that relational factors, including the size of the party and the variety of parties or MPs that cooperated with the Lega and M5S during their parliament debut, are also relevant.

**Table 1.** Intra-Opposition Bill Differentiation Index for each party during the 11<sup>th</sup> Legislature.

	Lega	MSI-DN	DC-PPI	PDS	RC	PSI	PRI	VERDI	PSDI	FE	Rete	PLI
<b>Amato</b>	1.983	1.956	1.893	1.749	1.507	1.476	1.674	1.295	1.596	0.746	0.555	1.449
<b>Ciampi</b>	1.984	1.915	1.787	1.785	1.803	1.530	1.674	1.480	0.813	1.210	1.234	0.236

**Table 2.** Intra-Opposition Bill Differentiation Index for each party during the 17<sup>th</sup> Legislature.

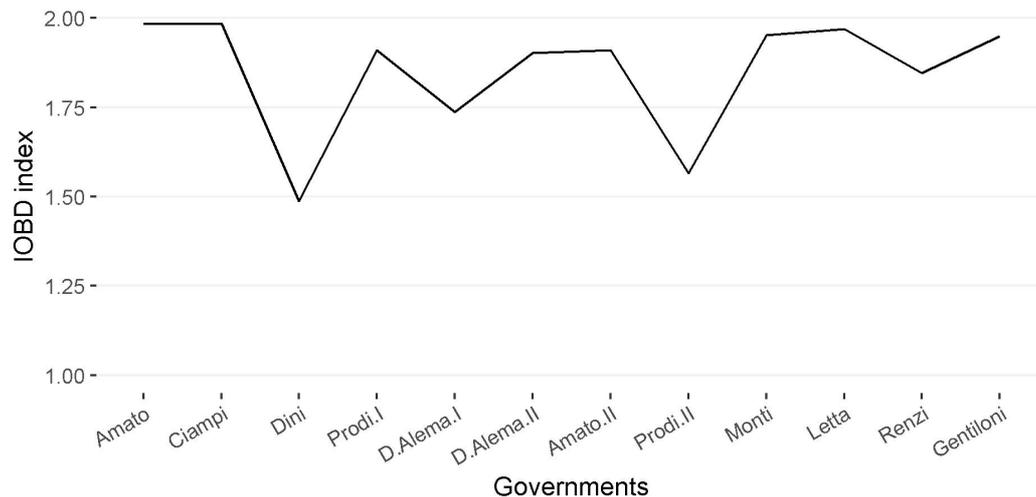
	M5S	Lega	PD	SEL	FDI	FI-PDL	CI	DEmsol
<b>Letta</b>	1.948	1.970	1.865	1.637	1.784	1.495	1.434	0.609
<b>Renzi</b>	1.900	1.847	1.773	1.596	1.416	1.395	0.994	0.701
<b>Gentiloni</b>	1.953	1.950	1.849	1.645	1.649	1.706	1.341	1.320

So far, we have overlooked the Lega's performance during the 17<sup>th</sup> legislature. But it should be noted that this party's behaviour was similar to that during its first term in parliament in the period 2013-2018. Albeit overshadowed by M5S, the Lega shows high scores in the dimension taken into consideration here. This raises the question: is this

intra-opposition party differentiation a consistently distinctive feature of this party or only a strategy recently reintroduced to improve its electoral performance? Figure 5 would indicate the second option. This behaviour, in fact, seems rather strategic. In this last figure, we plot the evolution of the Lega's *intra-opposition party bill differentiation* index since its debut in parliament. We can see that while, in general, the Lega cooperated very little over the years, it behaved more similarly to the other parties during the governments led by Dini (1995-1996) and Prodi II (2006-2008). So, it seems that its tendency to differentiate itself from the other (opposition) parties has been mainly tactical over the years. It was revived, in particular, after the outbreak of the Eurozone crisis, which coincided with the party's return to opposition – first with the Monti government and then with the grand coalition led by the Democratic Party following the 2013 electoral earthquake and the entrance of the M5S in parliament – and the change in the party leadership, with the election of Matteo Salvini.

One last noteworthy point is that, despite sharing a similar differentiation strategy during the 17<sup>th</sup> Legislature, there was almost no collaboration between the Lega and M5S during the whole legislative term. Neither of the two parties co-signed any single bill initiated by the other during the Renzi and Gentiloni governments. The only two exceptions to this pattern were two bills proposed by the M5S, co-sponsored respectively by one and three Lega MPs and concerning regional identity and banking issues. Neither bill reached the final voting stage and in both cases MPs from other parties had also co-sponsored them. It seems that the non-cooperation strategy that the two new government partners shared in the 17<sup>th</sup> legislature applied also to each other.

**Figure 6.** Evolution of Intra Opposition Bill Differentiation Index for Lega from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> legislature.



Finally, to ensure the statistical significance of this *new challenger effect* we employed a simple multilinear regression, based on a Poisson distribution for each legislature, in which the dependent variable was the number of bills co-sponsored between each possible pair of legislators. Our main independent variable of interest is a dummy variable that differentiates if one of the two MPs in each possible pair was from

the Lega, in the 13<sup>th</sup> legislature, or M5S in the 17<sup>th</sup>. To control for other factors that might also have an effect on co-sponsorship relations between MPs, we included further variables, namely one dummy variable considering the case of both MPs belonging to the same party; one dummy variable considering the case of one of the MPs being a new-comer; one dummy variable considering the case of both MPs coming from the same constituency and one variable representing an absolute ideological difference between the two MPs' respective parties.<sup>12</sup>

**Table 3.** Summary results of regression analysis with number of co-sponsorships between each possible pair of MPs as the dependent variable.

	Dependent variable:	
	Number of Co-sponsorships	
	(1)	(2)
<b>Same Party</b>	3.347*** (0.013)	3.435*** (0.013)
<b>Same Constituency</b>	0.314*** (0.013)	0.467*** (0.009)
<b>L-R Distance<sup>13</sup></b>	-0.010*** (0.001)	0.029*** (0.001)
<b>New MP</b>	-0.328*** (0.007)	-0.366*** (0.005)
<b>New Challenger</b>	-2.368*** (0.065)	-2.011*** (0.033)
<b>Constant</b>	-2.972*** (0.013)	-3.265*** (0.013)
<b>Observations</b>	394,384	643,204
<b>Log Likelihood</b>	-301,599.700	-494,214.600
<b>Akaike Inf. Crit.</b>	603,211.300	988,441.200

Note: \*p\*\*p\*\*\*p<0.01

The results from both regression models, presented in Table 3, do support the hypothesis that both Lega and M5S MPs cooperated less with other parties during their first legislature in parliament. Any possible connection that involves one MP from each party has a statistically significant lower probability of co-sponsorship. Moreover, this effect does not seem to be only attributable to their lack of previous experience, as the effect persists even when controlling for this variable.

<sup>12</sup> A table with more details about the variables just mentioned can be found in annex (Table 4).

<sup>13</sup> We based our analysis on the Comparative Manifesto Project (MARPOR) dataset, which only analyses ideological variation based on the economic dimension. This might generate some problems. For instance, during the 17<sup>th</sup> legislature the M5S is placed more to the left than Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà (SEL) with a score that is twice as high. We expect that this might impact the real ideological differences between parties and lead to misleading coefficients.

Of course, these results should be read with caution. First, we are only looking at a single country during two different time periods. While there might be some evidence that the patterns exhibited by the Lega and M5S are also present in other opposition parties in other countries, a further and larger analysis is necessary to evaluate how this hypothesis scales to a regional scope. Secondly, in both regression models we assume that co-sponsorship between each pair of MPs is independent, which might not be the case. Since these are social relationships, they can have some reciprocal effects. For instance, we should expect reciprocity, i.e. if MP y supports a bill proposed by MP x, then it might be more likely that MP x supports a bill proposed by MP y. Still, the figures, the indexes and these results point to the same phenomenon: both the Lega and M5S began their parliamentary experience in quite a distinctive way.

## 8. Conclusions

This work had two main aims: first, we wanted to prove the existence of one further trait that the new Italian government partners might have in common, as a result of the nature of (new) challenger parties they shared when they entered parliament for the first time. What we expected to find was a common tendency of the Lega and M5S to distinguish themselves in parliament by standing apart from the other party groups, regardless of whether the latter are in government or in opposition. Second, we aimed to understand whether we can employ this possible common behaviour as one further variable for distinguishing the new challenger parties from others in parliament.

We have tried to do so by introducing a new dimension of analysis – that is, the relationship between the new challenger parties and the other opposition parties – and applying that to the study of the Lega and M5S. We measured the distance between the Lega and M5S on the one hand and the traditional opposition parties on the other, and its possible evolution over time, by employing a social network analysis of bill co-sponsorship during their respective first legislative term in parliament. The data employed gave clear support to our main expectations: once in parliament, the Lega and M5S pursued a very similar strategy. They tried to stand out by keeping their distance from and not cooperating with any of the other opposition parties. And while the Lega's history shows that this strategy may not necessarily be permanent, it also shows that it can be revived when needed. Going by their recent electoral performance it is still a successful one. In fact, the behaviour of Salvini's Lega during the 17th legislature (2013-2018) proved very similar to both that of its first legislature in parliament and that of the M5S. So, besides the elective affinities shared by the two parties before 2018, they also shared very similar behaviour in parliament as far as their (non-)relationship with the other parties is concerned.

Further research is undoubtedly required to confirm the results obtained so far – above all, a comparative analysis would clearly be crucial to corroborate our findings. Nonetheless, results on the two Italian parties taken into consideration here have proved sufficiently effective to suggest that this relational dimension might be employed in future research as one further variable for distinguishing the new challenger parties from the other opposition parties in parliament and, in so doing, contributing to a new empirically based definition of this party type.

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