The rising importance of non-economic policy dimensions and the formation of the Conte government in Italy

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Abstract

Due to key differences in the policy priorities of the League and the Five Star Movement, the formation of the yellow-green cabinet, appointed in Italy after the general election of March 2018, cannot adequately be explained by interpreting the main axis of party competition in terms of the classic left-right divide. Relying on a multi-dimensional spatial approach to party competition, this paper attempts to account for the formation of the Conte cabinet by looking at the policy positions of political parties on a number of substantive policy dimensions. We analyse changes in the dimensionality of the policy space of party competition by using data from an expert survey fielded in the aftermath of the 2018 election and by comparing these data with similar expert survey data collected since 2001. Results highlight dramatic changes in the last two decades, showing a gradual decline in the salience of economic issues vis-à-vis an increase in the salience of non-economic domains such as European integration and immigration. We show that the formation of the Conte executive can be understood in light of the closeness of the positions of the two coalition partners on non-economic policy dimensions.

1. Introduction

After three months of negotiations following the Italian general election of March 4, 2018, the Five Start Movement (*Movimento 5 stelle*, M5S) and the League (*Lega*) agreed on the formation of a government which was regarded as 'populist' by many observers. Such a judgement is due to the fact that the two coalition partners share a common view that pits 'a virtuous and homogenous people' against elites and dangerous 'others' (Mudde 2004). Elites and 'others' are together blamed for 'depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice'(Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015:5).

Indeed, the M5S and the League often mark the distinction between 'the elite' and 'the people', each seen as a homogeneous group with contrasting interests and values. Both parties speak of the people as a 'pure' entity whose general will and 'common sense' should be translated into political choices. In their communication strategy, the elite is depicted as a major enemy of the people because of its corruption or its technocratic nature (Bobba and Roncarolo 2018). This applies to the elite operating in the supranational

institutions of the European Union (EU) and – especially in M5S rhetoric – to the politicians belonging to the mainstream Italian parties.

Apart from sharing a common anti-establishment rhetoric, the 'thin-centred ideology' of populism (Mudde 2004) appears in combination with different features and ideological traditions of the members of the so-called yellow-green government.[1] The two parties do not seem to have much in common in programmatic terms. This is particularly apparent in the key areas of fiscal and welfare policies, as during the campaign the League promised a flat tax rate on income while the M5S pledged to establish a universal scheme of basic income ('citizens basic income').[2]

Because of such differences between the League and the M5S, the formation of the Conte government might simply be attributed to the shared anti-establishment attitudes of the two coalition partners, as well as to their party leaders' desire to obtain prestigious offices in the new cabinet. In this view, the cohesion of the cabinet would rest exclusively upon a shared opposition to traditional political and economic elites.[3] The so-called 'government of change' would hence be bound to encounter enormous difficulties when making crucial decisions of public policy.

However, before labelling the Conte executive a mere populist cabinet and/or a government formed on the basis of a purely office-seeking logic, it is worth analysing the policy positions of the two coalition partners in a more systematic way. To this purpose we adopt a spatial approach to party competition and coalition formation. In particular, we rely on expert survey data collected in March 2018 to assess the dimensionality of the policy space in the last general election and estimate the policy positions of Italian parties in a two-dimensional space. To analyse changes in the policy space of party competition, we compare the 2018 data with similar data collected since the 2001 Italian general elections.

Our findings highlight major changes in the policy space, with a significant rise in the importance of non-economic issues. The formation of the Conte government can hence be explained in light of the policy positions of the two key political actors, i.e. the M5S and the League, on those issues. This article is organized as follows. The next section introduces the spatial approach to party competition, while the third one discusses the expert survey methodology. The following two sections are empirical and illustrate the data on policy space in Italy. More precisely, in the fourth section we highlight the main changes occurring over time, while in the fifth section we show how the Italian parties were located within the policy space. Concluding remarks follow in the final section.

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[1] The nativist and anti-immigration attitudes of the League make this party an example of exclusionary populism, while the call for instruments of direct democracy as a way to return power to the people moves the M5S towards an inclusionary form of populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Scholars noted that, starting from 1994, Italy can be considered a sort of 'laboratory' for the study of populism due to the numerous parties defined as populist that entered the party system (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015).

[2] The importance of programmatic differences between the M5S and the League seems to be demonstrated by the fact that the two coalition partners signed a formal coalition treaty before reaching an agreement on the new government.

[3] According to Chapel Hill expert survey data, the League and M5S are very close to each other on a 0-10 scale measuring parties' anti-elitist attitudes (Polk et al. 2017).

2. The spatial approach to party competition

Rational choice approach to party competition is grounded on the assumption that candidates/parties attempt to maximize their electoral support by positioning themselves along one or more policy dimensions that are meaningful for voters (Downs 1957).Voters evaluate candidates on the basis of their policy positions and select candidates who are closer to their policy preferences (proximity theory). Models based on these assumptions are labelled spatial theories as they assume that each policy issue or cluster of related issues can be represented on a single dimension or axis (e.g., from most liberal to most conservative), that each voter/candidate has a preferred position on each issue or dimension (e.g., a point on that axis), and that distances between voters/candidates or between candidates themselves can be calculated from the vectors of their policy positions.[4]

Uni-dimensional spatial models represent the policy space in terms of a single underlying axis or policy dimension, typically understood as 'left-right'. This axis has been defined in terms of both economic and social policies. Such a dimension has been considered accurate enough to analyse party competition in most Western countries at least up to the 1990s (Bartolini and Mair 1990).

A single dimension is not always sufficient to provide a valid representation of politics in a given context. Two-dimensional models of party competition have proven to be more persuasive in analysing electoral and post-electoral politics in multi-party systems (Laver and Shepsle 1996). Using comparative expert survey data, Benoit and Laver (2006) estimated two-dimensional maps of policy spaces for most European countries on the basis of their salience for political actors. The authors showed that issues relating to the economy defined the most salient policy dimension in nearly all Western European democracies. They also singled out a second relevant policy dimension labelled as social liberalism identifying a liberal-conservative divide on social policies. Such two-dimensional maps were generated using an *a priori* approach for comparative purposes, as the aim of the authors was to provide a data-set of party positions within common policy spaces. However, they also provided examples of two-dimensional policy spaces generated through an inductive approach, i.e. by empirically examining the relative salience of different issues or set of issues and their degree of correlation in a given setting.

Benoit and Laver (2006) aptly stressed the point that ascertaining the dimensionality of the policy space is an empirical matter, as a dimension may assume different meanings across time and space and new dimensions may become salient, redefining the policy space of party competition. More recently, a number of studies have highlighted the rise of policy dimensions related to the opening up of national borders in economic, political and cultural terms due to globalization processes. These dimensions have been conceptualized and labelled in various ways by scholars: as 'libertarian-authoritarian' (Kitschelt 1994), as 'green/alternative/libertarian vs traditional/authoritarian/nationalist' (GAL-TAN) (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2002), as 'cultural' contrasting universalistic and traditionalist-communitarian values (Bornschier 2010), and finally as 'demarcation-integration' incorporating social liberalism vs social conservatism, pro- vs anti-immigration positions, and pro- vs anti- EU attitudes (Kriesi et al. 2012). While the

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[4]Within this approach a policy dimension (for example social policy) can be generated by looking at a set of correlated preferences over similar issues (same sex marriage, abortion, euthanasia, etc.). See Benoit and Laver (2006) for a discussion.

increasing politicisation of new dimensions has given rise to a tri-polar party configuration – including the left, the moderate right and the populist radical right – in North-Western Europe, the same does not seem to have occurred in Southern European countries. Since the onset of the Eurozone crisis, party competition in Southern Europe appears dominated by an economic conflict over austerity and an often overlapping conflict over political renewal (Hutter, Kriesi, and Vidal 2018).

Recent research on the dimensionality of policy space in Italy highlighted not only the restructuring of the competitive space brought about by new challenger parties such as the M5S (Conti and Memoli 2015), but also the emergence of a distinct pro-/anti-EU axis of competition, orthogonal to the socio-economic divide in the 2013 election (Giannetti, Pedrazzani and Pinto 2017; Di Virgilio et al. 2015). Focusing on the 2018 elections, this paper attempts to assess to what extent the formation of the Conte cabinet may be explained on the basis of shifting policy positions of political parties along with significant changes of the main dimensions defining policy space.

3. The expert survey methodology

To assess the dimensionality of policy space in Italy we use data from an expert survey fielded in March 2018. Several methods have been used to estimate the policy positions of political actors. One prominent source of data is the Manifesto Research Group/Comparative Manifestos Project, which has been manually coding the electoral platforms of parties in 60 countries since 1945 (Budge et al. 2001). The content of party manifestos has also been coded by using techniques of computerized text analysis (Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003; Slapin and Proksch 2008). Data on legislative voting behaviour have been used to infer party positions (Poole and Rosenthal 1997), while other scholars have relied on surveys administered to voters, political elites or experts (Laver and Budge 1992).

In this paper we examine party system change in Italy using expert survey data collected by following the format used by Benoit and Laver (2006). The expert survey methodology is characterized by an *a priori* approach whereby policy dimensions or scales are predefined and parties are located on these scales by country experts. Estimates of party positions are therefore the aggregated results of expert judgements. Following the research methodology developed by Benoit and Laver, a survey among Italian experts was fielded in March 2018. We asked political experts to locate Italian parties on the general left-right axis as well as on a set of substantive policy issues or dimensions using 20-point scales. The nine dimensions are as follows: *Taxes vs spending* (measuring parties' support for public spending [1] vis-à-vis lower taxes [20]), *Deregulation* (capturing the preferred degree of state regulation of the market, from full control [1] to complete deregulation [20]), *Decentralization* (ranging from territorial decentralization [1] to full centralization [20] of decision-making), *Civil rights* (promotion of liberal [1] vs conservative [20] policies on matters such as abortion, gay rights, and euthanasia), *Immigration* (level of support for integration of immigrants into society, from high [1] to low [20]), *Environment* (environmental protection [1] vs economic growth [20]), *EU Authority* (scope of EU intervention, from broad [1] to narrow [20]), *EU Accountability* (role of the European Parliament [1] vs national governments [20] as democratic accountability mechanisms), and *EU Security* (parties' support for Italy's involvement in

European military operations, from high [1] to low [20]).[5] For each of these nine policy domains, experts were also asked to give each party a score on a scale measuring the importance or salience of the dimension for that party. This scale ranges from '1' (not important at all) to '20' (very important).

Italian experts were asked to locate on the above-mentioned scales the most politically relevant parties – that is, only those parties that won at least one percent of the popular vote in the 2018 elections.[6] Table 1 presents some summary statistics from the survey data reporting the mean and the standard error of the expert placements for each party on each policy dimension. In addition, the first column of the table reports the overall importance score of each dimension, as well as the associated standard error. We measured the overall salience for each policy dimension in the 2018 election by computing, for each issue, the mean of the party-specific salience scores and weighting it by the vote share received by each party.

Table 1. Experts' placement of parties and salience of policy dimensions in the Italian general election of 2018

Votes/Policy dimensions		Importance	+EU	FDI	FI	LEU	LEGA	M5S	NCI	PAP	PD
Vote share 2018			*2.56*	*4.35*	*14.00*	*3.39*	*17.35*	*32.68*	*1.30*	*1.13*	*18.76*
Taxes vs spending	Mean	13.94	11.97	11.31	15.35	5.46	14.43	9.74	11.83	3.94	9.36
	SE	0.21	0.55	0.42	0.47	0.44	0.43	0.43	0.34	0.57	0.34
Deregulation	Mean	12.68	14.74	10.18	16.90	4.83	13.54	8.69	10.79	2.34	10.33
	SE	0.22	0.51	0.53	0.29	0.35	0.48	0.41	0.36	0.20	0.39
Decentralization	Mean	10.34	10.17	13.20	8.70	12.88	5.17	11.22	11.61	15.07	10.59
	SE	0.36	0.62	0.64	0.42	0.47	0.58	0.49	0.46	0.68	0.47
Civil rights	Mean	11.47	3.29	17.15	13.44	4.77	16.30	9.52	16.78	3.67	5.74
	SE	0.32	0.53	0.48	0.49	0.49	0.46	0.40	0.48	0.47	0.45
Immigration	Mean	15.09	5.28	19.00	16.30	4.11	19.43	13.82	12.41	2.85	7.13
	SE	0.32	0.44	0.17	0.30	0.38	0.13	0.39	0.47	0.34	0.43
Environment	Mean	10.45	9.68	15.25	16.94	6.44	16.49	5.76	13.64	5.67	9.34
	SE	0.48	0.47	0.45	0.35	0.44	0.39	0.51	0.41	0.62	0.36
EU Authority	Mean	15.38	3.20	17.99	14.47	9.48	18.79	15.69	10.53	14.60	7.59
	SE	0.19	0.48	0.37	0.41	0.39	0.32	0.42	0.47	0.72	0.42
EU Accountability	Mean	12.53	3.48	16.82	14.65	7.67	17.34	11.74	10.68	10.10	7.31
	SE	0.17	0.49	0.52	0.56	0.53	0.52	0.72	0.48	1.08	0.45
EU Security	Mean	10.77	3.71	11.98	7.46	11.98	13.52	14.74	8.00	17.59	4.96
	SE	0.16	0.51	0.72	0.51	0.66	0.69	0.64	0.56	0.72	0.40
Left-Right	Mean	–	9.66	18.38	15.27	4.31	18.32	11.52	12.71	1.92	7.99
	SE	–	0.34	0.29	0.21	0.36	0.29	0.38	0.25	0.30	0.25

Notes: Expert survey data gathered by the authors in March 2018 using Benoit and Laver's (2006) format. Vote share refers to the election of the Chamber of Deputies (source: Ministry of Interior).

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[5] See Appendix 1 for the exact phrasing of the survey's questions.

[6] Experts were selected from members of the Italian Political Science Association (SISP). We sent an email invitation to 316 experts, 71 of whom completed the questionnaire, with a response rate of about 22.5 percent.

As Table 1 shows, none of the two policy issues dealing with economic matters – *Taxes vs spending* and *Deregulation* – was judged by our sample of experts to be the most salient dimension in Italian politics during the 2018 general election. The two most important policy domains were instead not (directly) related to the economy: *EU Authority*, measuring parties' propensity to increase/reduce the set of areas subject to European intervention, and *Immigration*, capturing parties' support for policies designed to help asylum-seekers and integrate immigrants into Italian society. The fact that the latter two issues – and not the economic ones – were the top-rated ones in March 2018 give a first hint of the dynamics underlying the formation of the Conte government. A quick glance at Table 1 suggests for example that, while being far from each other on the *Taxes vs spending* domain, the M5S and the League were rather close on all the EU-related issues except for *EU Accountability*. Before attempting to account for the formation of the M5S-League coalition government from a spatial perspective, we provide a more systematic analysis of the evolution of the policy space in Italy.

4. The changing salience of policy dimensions over time

As parties attach different degrees of importance to various policy issues, party salience scores enable us to understand which dimensions are the most relevant at the time of a given election. The fact that the space of party competition in March 2018 seems structured by non-economic issues rather than by economic ones may certainly help to explain the formation of a government coalition between parties that are relatively distant in terms of fiscal and welfare policies. However, any account of the formation of such an unusual cabinet would benefit from understanding whether the configuration of Italian policy space in 2018 was historically exceptional or was rather the outcome of a long-term process of change.

To answer this question, we rely on a time series of surveys administered to Italian experts covering the last five elections (2001, 2006, 2008, 2013 and 2018).[7] In each study, experts were asked to place the most significant political parties competing in the elections on the general left-right scale as well as on the nine substantive policy dimensions mentioned above, and to give each party a score expressing the salience the party attributes to every dimension. Therefore, the five surveys together allow us to trace the evolution of policy space in Italy over a relatively long time span. In what follows, we use the salience scores attached by each party to the nine specific policy dimensions to understand how the relative salience of the policy domains has changed in the last two decades.

For each election covered by the data we rank the various policy domains according to their overall importance. We obtain the overall salience for each policy dimension in a given election by calculating, for each dimension, the mean of the party-specific salience scores and weighting it by the vote share received by each party. Figure 1 displays the ranking of the above-mentioned nine policy dimensions for each election from 2001 to 2018. Generally speaking, we can observe that the space of party competition in Italy has changed substantially in less than two decades. The relevance of the two issues dealing with the economy – *Taxes vs spending* and *Deregulation*, both referring to the

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[7] See Appendix 2 for further details.

traditional opposition between state and market – has declined over time. Such a trend has been countervailed by an increase in the salience of the issues related to the functioning of the European Union – *EU Authority* and, to a much lesser degree, *EU Accountability*. The decline of economic domains, starting after 2008, is rather surprising in light of the dramatic impact that the Eurozone crisis had on the party system and the functioning of political institutions in Italy and in other Southern European countries (Bosco and Verney 2016; Charalambous, Conti, and Pedrazzani 2018; Conti, Hutter, and Nanou 2018; Moury and De Giorgi 2015; Pedrazzani, Pellegata, and Pinto 2018). Although we could have expected an increase in the salience of economic matters in times of severe economic hardship, the simultaneous increase in the emphasis on EU-related issues signals the peculiar ways in which Italian parties have framed domestic economic problems connected to the Great Recession. Indeed, several parties put the blame much more on the Euro currency and European institutions than on Italy's fiscal and budgetary weaknesses.
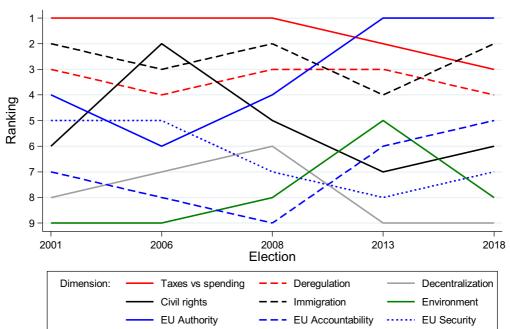
Figure 1. Ranking of policy domains according to their salience in Italy, 2001-2018.

Figure 1 also shows that *Immigration* has always been among the top three dimensions of competition among Italian parties, with the only exception being the 2013 election. In contrast, the *Civil rights* domain has waned in importance after a peak observed in 2006, when social policy issues were politicised from a liberal point of view by the radical-socialist Rose in the Fist (*Rosa nel pugno*, RNP) and from a conservative perspective by the Christian Democratic Centrist Union (*Unione di centro*, UDC). A general decline over time can be observed also in the relevance of the dimension capturing the parties' degree of support for military operations involving Italy together with other EU member states (*EU Security*). This trend parallels the gradual disengagement of the Italian armed forces from Iraq and Afghanistan and is not affected by the outbreak of more

recent political crises in a number of non-democratic regimes in North Africa and the Middle East, implying the potential military involvement of European countries.

Environment and *Decentralization* have constantly been at the bottom of the issues' salience ranking. The environmental domain has always been last or second to last except for 2013, when it was particularly important for the leftist Left Ecology Freedom (*Sinistra Ecologia Libertà*, SEL) and most of all for the M5S. In its electoral manifesto, the latter put primary emphasis on topics such as the protection of common goods and the environment, sustainable development, and support of eco-friendly lifestyles (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013; Pedrazzani and Pinto 2015).[8] The territorial decentralization of administration and decision-making has traditionally been promoted by the League, which was known as the Northern League (*Lega Nord*, LN) until the 2018 electoral campaign. Indeed, since Matteo Salvini was appointed secretary of the party in the late 2013, the League has moved away from its original federalist commitment typical of a party representing Northern Italy and has become a radical right party with a national message (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018).[9]

Looking at the ranking of policy issues election by election, we observe that party competition in Italy was largely shaped by economic issues up to the 2008 elections. In 2001, *Taxes vs spending* represented the most salient issue ahead of *Immigration*, and *Deregulation* was the third most salient domain. Five years later, *Taxes vs spending* was still at the top of the ranking, followed by *Civil rights* and *Immigration*. The policy ranking of 2008 was very similar to that estimated for the 2001 elections, with *Taxes vs spending*, *Immigration* and *Deregulation* being the three most relevant issues. A substantial change occurred in 2013, when one of the issues relating to the EU (*EU Authority*) replaced *Taxes vs spending* at the top of the policy ranking. Before 2013, the only party attaching high salience scores to EU-related matters was the League, which has also expressed fairly Eurosceptic positions. In 2013, the *EU Authority* domain was judged as particularly salient also for two pro-EU parties: the Democratic Party (*Partito democratico*, PD) and – even more – Civic Choice (*Scelta civica*, SC) founded by the technocrat and former Prime Minister Mario Monti (Giannetti et al. 2017).

EU Authority remained at the top of the ranking also in 2018, when it resulted particularly relevant – with a salience score greater than 15 on a 1-20 scale – for most Italian parties. These include the PD and its electoral ally +Europe (*+Europa*, +EU) on the pro-European side, and the League, the M5S, the radical right-wing Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*, FDI) and the radical left Power to the People (*Potere al popolo*, PAP) on the much more populated and heterogeneous anti-European side. Remarkably, in 2018 *EU Authority* was followed in the policy ranking not by the *Taxes vs spending* domain as it was in 2013, but by another non-economic issue (*Immigration*). This marks a further discontinuity with the past, implying that in less than two decades the structure of the Italian policy space changed dramatically, with a decline in the importance of economic issues – typically considered as crucial and associated with the general left-right axis – and the

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[8] After entering the legislative arena in 2013, the M5S seems to have undergone a process of normalization from an institutional and a programmatic point of view (Tronconi 2018).

[9] Such a shift is reflected in the expert survey data. The salience score attached to *Decentralization* by the League was 15.9 in 2018, while it was never below 18.5 in all the elections from 2001 to 2013.

increasing salience of non-economic issues such as attitudes towards the EU and immigration.

5. The structure of policy space in the 2013 and 2018 Italian elections

Salience scores can be combined with party position estimates to build spatial maps of policy space in Italy. Accordingly, we now look at the policy positions of the main political parties on the most salient dimensions structuring the policy space, focusing on the two most recent elections. In particular, for the elections of 2013 and 2018 we analyse the positions of the most relevant Italian parties in two-dimensional spaces constructed using the three most salient dimensions identified in the previous section. These policy spaces are represented in Figures 2 and 3. For each election we build two policy spaces: one built using the first and second most salient domains (left panel of each picture) and one built using the first and third most salient domains (right panel). These graphs also hint at the extent to which the most important dimensions of party competition are related to each other and shed some light on the dynamics underlying the formation of Italian governments.[10]
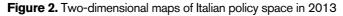
Party positions in the 2013 Italian elections are illustrated in Figure 2. The left and right panels show that the two dimensions dealing with economy – *Taxes vs spending* and *Deregulation* – almost perfectly overlapped, while being completely unrelated to the *EU Authority* domain which was found to be by far the most important dimension in 2013.[11] The main actors of the 2013 elections were three multiparty pre-electoral coalitions and a number of other single-party lists, among which the M5S. The centre-left cartel was located in the pro-EU and economically leftist quadrant of the policy space, with the PD more on Euro-enthusiastic positions and SEL more on the economic left. The members of the centre-right coalition shared a weaker or stronger anti-EU stance, in spite of holding heterogeneous positions concerning taxation and market deregulation. While People of Freedom (*Popolo della libertà*, PDL) and LN were judged to be anti-taxes, FDI was rather centrist in economic terms and the post-fascist The Right (*La destra*, DX) was clearly against market deregulation and slightly in favour of increasing taxation to increase public spending. The members of the centrist coalition headed by Monti – SC, UDC and Future and Freedom for Italy (*Futuro e libertà per l'Italia*, FLI) – were more or less neutral on the trade-off between increasing taxes and cutting public services, as well as on the scale measuring the desired degree of state regulation of markets. However, they were slightly more heterogeneous in terms of their attitudes towards the EU.
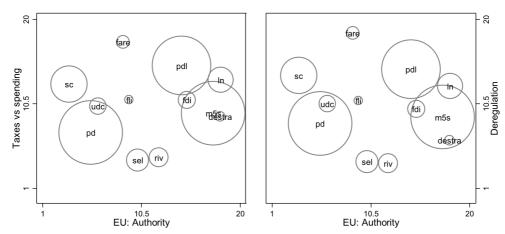
The M5S was placed by Italian experts among the most anti-EU parties: Beppe Grillo's Movement was judged to be just marginally less in favour of reducing EU authority than LN and DX. The position of the M5S on economic matters was slightly to the left of the centre, although with a very large standard deviation (3.82 on *Tax vs spending*, 4.38

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[10] For ease of exposition, our discussion of the process of government formation in Italy only marginally draws on well-established formal spatial models based on policy-seeking assumptions. See Laver (1998) for a review.

[11] The Pearson correlation is 0.015 between *EU Authority* and *Taxes vs spending* (0.304 if we calculate the correlation weighting parties by their vote shares), -0.183 (0.102 weighted) between *EU Authority* and *Deregulation*, and 0.972 (0.975 weighted) between *Taxes vs spending* and *Deregulation*.

on *Deregulation*). The economic liberal Act to Stop the Decline (*Fare per fermare il declino*, FARE) and the left-wing Civil Revolution (*Rivoluzione civile*, RIV) – which did not enter Parliament and disappeared soon after the election – were on opposite sides in economic terms. However, they shared a similar neutral position on increasing the scope of EU authority.

Figure 2. Two-dimensional maps of Italian policy space in 2013

Notes: Data taken from Di Virgilio et al.'s (2015) expert survey. The size of the markers varies according to party vote share.

After an attempt to involve the M5S in the government, the PD formed a 'grand coalition' cabinet together with PDL, SC and UDC. The legislative majority supporting Enrico Letta's executive was rather divided on the main policy issues (Di Virgilio et al. 2015). The Letta cabinet lasted indeed less than 10 months. During this period, the PDL withdrew from the government, renaming itself FI and Matteo Renzi became secretary of the PD. A new cabinet headed by Renzi formed in early 2014, relying on the parliamentary support of PD, SC, UDC and a new centrist party called New Centre-Right (*Nuovo centrodestra*, NCD), a PDL splinter.

Figure 3 represents policy positions along the most salient dimensions in the Italian elections of 2018. Two electoral cartels contested the March 2018 election. The centre-right cartel led by FI and the League included the extreme right FDI and a centrist list named Us with Italy (*Noi con l'Italia*, NCI). The centre-left coalition led by the PD involved several minor lists among which the radical Euro-enthusiastic +Europe. The election was also contested by a number of single-party lists like the M5S, extreme left PAP and a left-wing PD splinter called Free and Equal (*Liberi e uguali*, LEU). As we discussed earlier, the most salient policy issue in March 2018 was *EU Authority*, followed by another non-economic policy (*Immigration*) and then by the *Taxes vs spending* domain. The two graphs of Figure 3 suggest that the positions of Italian parties on the scope of EU authority were strongly related to their attitudes towards immigrants, but not to their positions on the trade-off between increasing services and cutting taxes. At the same time, there was some correlation between *Immigration* and *Taxes vs spending*.[12]

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[12] Correlation is 0.712 between *EU Authority* and *Immigration* (0.901 weighted), 0.174 between *EU Authority* and *Taxes vs spending* (0.445 weighted), and 0.766 between *Immigration* and *Taxes vs spending* (0.753 weighted).
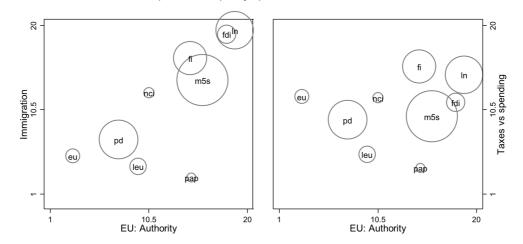
Figure 3. Two-dimensional maps of Italian policy space in 2018

Notes: Expert survey data gathered by the authors in March 2018 using Benoit and Laver's (2006) format. The size of the markers varies according to party vote share.

If we look at the left panel of Figure 3 – where the two most salient issues are represented – we observe that most Italian parties lie on a hypothetical 45-degree line. This indicates that, in March 2018, parties that were more against immigration also tended to support reductions in the range of areas in which the EU can set policy. Conversely, parties more in favour of immigration were also likely to promote an expansion of the policy areas decided at the EU level. The significant overlapping of immigration and European integration may provide a clue to the likely emergence of a 'demarcation-integration' axis of political competition in Italy, which would capture parties' attitudes on the so-called 'new cultural issues' (Kriesi et al. 2012).

In March 2018, Italian parties seemed to be grouped in two distinct clusters. On the one hand, there appeared to be a cluster of pro-EU and pro-immigration parties: PD, +Europe and LEU. On the other hand, a cluster of anti-EU and anti-immigration parties included all the parties belonging to the centre-right electoral cartel plus the M5S. Even more than in 2013, in 2018 the M5S was closer to the centre-right parties than to the PD and other centre-left lists in policy terms. Within the 'pro-demarcation' cluster, we can further distinguish between extreme parties like the League and FDI and a bunch of parties – FI, NCI and M5S – holding more moderate positions about immigration and the EU. In the 2018 elections, the main 'outlier' in the positioning of Italian parties was represented by PAP, which had the most pro-immigration position but at the same time was as Eurosceptic as FI.

The right panel of Figure 3 reveals that, according to Italian experts, PD and M5S had virtually the same position on key economic matters. On the *Taxes vs spending* trade-off, both parties were slightly in favour of expanding social services even at the cost of increasing taxes. The other two large parties – League and FI – were instead more prone to reducing public spending in order to cut taxes.

The configuration of Italian policy space can help explain some crucial choices made by key political actors after the elections of March 2018 and the outcome of negotiations over government formation. Although particularly cohesive in policy terms, the centre-right coalition failed to obtain a majority of seats in Parliament. This led the

largest member of the centre-right coalition – the League – to search for possible coalition partners outside the centre-right bloc, starting with the M5S. Despite being close to centre-right parties on the main axes of policy competition – European integration and immigration – the M5S refused to negotiate over a new government with FI because of the numerous judicial scandals involving its leader Silvio Berlusconi. This broke the centre-right cartel and finally led to a deal between the M5S and the League (Valbruzzi 2018). During the long bargaining process, the M5S always seemed to prefer the League over the PD as a coalition partner. The spatial analysis of party competition shows that the M5S strategy was not only due to a refusal to make an agreement with a party which had been in government since 2011, but was also grounded on policy concerns about the most salient issues shaping Italian politics.[13]
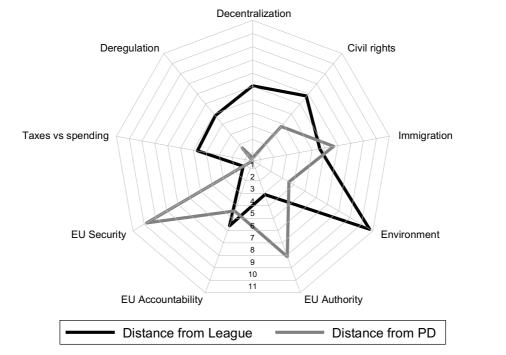
Figure 4. M5S's distance from League and PD on nine policy dimensions, Italy 2018

The radar plot in Figure 4 shows how distant the M5S was in absolute terms from the League and the PD, along the nine policy dimensions considered in the 2018 expert survey. The M5S was certainly closer to the PD than to the League on a number of domains such as the economic ones: the M5S had almost the same position of the PD on the *Taxes vs spending* dimension and was very close to the party led by Renzi on *Deregulation* (less than two points on a 1-20 scale). Furthermore, the M5S and the PD shared roughly the same position on territorial decentralization of decision-making and the distance between the two was lower than 4 points if we consider civil rights and the environment. On these dimensions, the M5S was much farther from the League. However, all these issues were not so relevant in the aftermath of the 2018 elections. On the most important domains, the M5S was closer to the League than to the PD. In particular, M5S's distance

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[13]See Valbruzzi (2018) for an account of the formation of the Conte government emphasizing the strategies of party leaders and the role of the President of the Republic.

from the League was just three points on *EU Authority* (the most prominent dimension in 2018) while being eight points from the PD, and was 5.6 points on *Immigration* while being 6.7 from the PD.[14]

8. Conclusions

Clear differences in the economic platforms of the League and the Five Star Movement have led many commentators to call into question the cohesion of the Conte government as well as its possible duration in office. Indeed, the very birth of the yellow-green cabinet is inadequately explained by adopting a uni-dimensional model of electoral and post-electoral politics based on the classical left-right divide. Relying on a more persuasive two-dimensional approach to party competition, this paper has offered a simple account of the formation of the League-M5S government by looking at the closeness of the two coalition partners' policy positions on substantive domains other than the economic ones.

We analysed the dimensionality of Italian policy space using data from an expert survey conducted in the aftermath of the election of March 2018 and compared these data with similar expert survey data collected in the past. Our study emphasizes major changes in the last two decades, with a decline in the salience of economic issues and a simultaneous increase in the salience of non-economic issues such as European integration and immigration. Such an analysis of the evolution of policy space in Italy resonates with the literature showing the recent emergence of an integration-demarcation axis of party competition in Western Europe.

The emergence in Italy of a new political dimension that is primarily centred on cultural issues helps explain the formation of the Conte executive, whose coalition members are far from each other on the (relatively less salient) economic dimension, but much closer on particularly important domains like European integration and immigration. However, other factors have contributed to the formation of the yellow-green government, such as M5S's abandonment of their previous uncompromising position towards entering any coalition.

Several findings of this study deserve further investigation. To begin with, a deeper analysis of the relations between the several policy domains covered by expert surveys is needed. Although we showed that the economic domains have gradually become less salient, the policy issue that seems to have replaced them as the most prominent one deals with the scope of EU authority, which has clearly some fundamental economic implications. We leave to future work the task to specify the extent to which party positions on policies aimed at regaining national sovereignty vis-à-vis the EU are related to financial and monetary aspects. Moreover, our analysis showed that the issues dealing with the EU do not necessarily overlap, as for example the M5S's position was judged by experts close to that of the League on two EU-related domains, but not on the domain concerning democratic accountability in the EU.

A second research avenue we leave for future work has to do with the growing importance of valence issues or non-policy factors (social identities, personalities and so on) in explaining party competition. We believe that, as the proximity theory of party

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[14] These considerations hold if we use 2017 Chapel Hill expert survey data to measure distances among parties' positions. Correlations between Chapel Hill data and ours range from 0.95 for the economic dimension to 0.99 for the left-right continuum.

competition upon which the spatial approach is based is definitely an essential step in analysing electoral and post-electoral parties' behaviour, it needs to be complemented by a focus on valence effects or non-policy information. These aspects appear to be strongly related to the populist attributes that many scholars correctly point out as important features in explaining the Conte government's formation.

Appendix 1: Italian expert survey policy dimensions

Taxes vs. Spending
- Promotes raising taxes to increase public services. (1)
- Promotes cutting public services to cut taxes. (20)

Deregulation
- Favours high levels of state regulation and control of the market. (1)
- Favours deregulation of markets at every opportunity. (20)

Decentralization
- Promotes decentralization of all administration and decision-making. (1)
- Opposes any decentralization of administration and decision-making. (20)

Civil Rights
- Favours liberal policies on matters such as abortion, homosexuality, and euthanasia. (1)
- Opposes liberal policies on matters such as abortion, homosexuality, and euthanasia. (20)

Immigration
- Favours policies designed to help asylum-seekers and immigrants integrate into Italy's society. (1)
- Favours policies designed to help asylum-seekers and immigrants return to their country of origin. (20)

Environment
- Supports protection of the environment, even at the cost of economic growth. (1)
- Supports economic growth, even at the cost of damage to the environment. (20)

EU: Authority
- Favours increasing the range of areas in which the EU can set policy. (1)
- Favours reducing the range of areas in which the EU can set policy. (20)

EU: Accountability
- Promotes the direct accountability of the EU to citizens via institutions such as the European Parliament. (1)
- Promotes the indirect accountability of the EU to citizens via their own national governments. (20)

EU: Security
- Favours Italy's involvement in European security and peacekeeping missions. (1)
- Opposes any Italian involvement in European military affairs. (20)

The General Left–Right Dimension
Please locate each party on a general left–right dimension, taking all aspects of party policy into account:
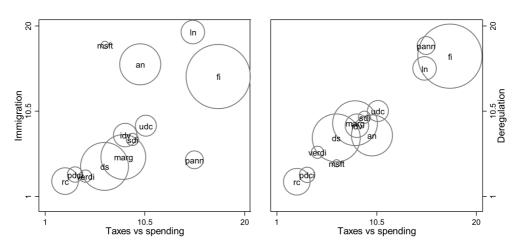- Left. (1)
- Right. (20)

Appendix 2: Some details of the Italian expert surveys, 2001-2018

Criteria	2001	2006	2008	2013	2018
N. relevant parties	13	16	8	12	9
N. of respondents	54	40	54	95	71
N. of dimensions	10	10	10	10	10
Survey type	Web	Web	Web	Web	Web
Election date	May 2001	Apr 2006	Apr 2008	Feb 2013	Mar 2018
Field	Sep-Dec 2003	Mar-May 2006	Jul-Aug 2008	Feb-Mar 2013	Mar-Apr 2018

Notes: Data on 2001 were taken from Benoit, K. and Laver, M. (2006). Party Policy in Modern Democracies. London: Routledge. Data on 2008 were taken from Curini, L. and Iacus, S. (2008). 'Italian Spatial Competition between 2006 and 2008: A Changing Party System?' Paper presented at the XXII Congress of the Italian Political Science Society (SISP), Pavia, 5-8 September 2008. We thank Kenneth Benoit for sharing with us expert survey data for the 2006 election. Data on 2013 were taken from Di Virgilio, A., Giannetti, D., Pedrazzani, A. and Pinto, L. (2015). 'Party Competition in the 2013 Italian Elections: Evidence from an Expert Survey'. Government and Opposition 50(1):65–89.

Appendix 3: Two-dimensional maps of Italian policy space, 2001-2008

Figure A1. Two-dimensional maps of Italian policy space in 2001.

Notes: Data taken from Benoit and Laver's (2006) expert survey. The size of the markers varies according to party vote share.
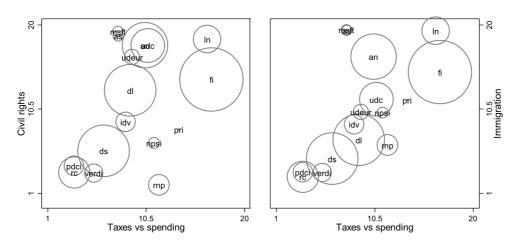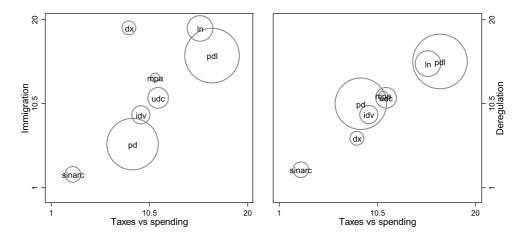
Figure A2. Two-dimensional maps of Italian policy space in 2006.

Notes: Expert survey data provided by Kenneth Benoit. The size of the markers varies according to party vote share.

Figure A3. Two-dimensional maps of Italian policy space in 2008.

Notes: Data taken from Curini and Iacus' (2008) expert survey. The size of the markers varies according to party vote share.

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