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

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SISP SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI SCIENZA POLITICA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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European versus Domestic Politics: Media Negativity during the 2019 European Elections Campaign in Italy

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Abstract

This article aims at understanding to what extent European issues and actors are covered through a negative tone within the news coverage of the 2019 EP election campaign in Italy. We rely on an original dataset based on content analysis of the 50 days prior to the 2019 EP elections in four mainstream newspapers (n=3,943) and four mainstream TV newscasts (n=1,873). Our findings show that the media negativity is primarily associated with domestic politics, while all in all European politics is covered using a less negative tone. This general picture is the results of two differentiated patterns: newspapers are less negative towards both EU politics and EU and foreign political actors, while TV news are more negative towards EU and foreign political actors.

1. Introduction

As is well known, European elections have been defined as second-order elections. Reif and Schmitt argued in 1980 that this type of election is generally characterized by a high voter turnout, the punishment of incumbents, and greater expressive voting. As regards party campaigns and elections coverage, the main features refer to the more limited budget and the shorter duration of the campaign when compared to national elections, the kind of candidate selected (not recruited from among the leaders of parties), and the constant presence within the campaign of national issues, or else European issues framed in a national perspective (Marsh 1998; Cayrol 1991; de Vreese, Lauf, and Peter, 2006a). Yet, it is also the case that this model is evolving (Schmitt 2005; Hobolt and Wittrock 2011; Galpin and Trenz 2018; Roncarolo 2011). Certainly, after the Great Recession, the EU gained considerable salience within domestic debate for imposing austerity measures and (not) managing the migration issue (Hutter and Kriesi 2019). In the same period, several national parties – both Europhile and Eurosceptic – have stressed the relevance of the EU within national political debates (Meijers 2017). In this context, the news media have become increasingly relevant not only as a source of information but also as an active player in the game of (de)legitimation of the EU.

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In this regard, a well-established branch of literature has found that the news coverage of European Union (EU) politics plays a crucial role in connecting European citizens with institutions and in raising public awareness of EU politics. Banducci and Semetko (2003) found that EU news coverage affects turnout in European elections, while other scholars have shown a correlation between citizens' support for future European integration and the features of news coverage on the EU (e.g. Maier & Rittberger, 2008; Vliegenthart et al., 2008). EU news coverage also contributes to enhancing the process of Europeanizing national public spheres (e.g. Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007) and strengthening the legitimacy of the EU institutions (e.g. Trenz, 2008).

A second strand of scholars focus more specifically on the negative media coverage of EU-related issues and on their effects on citizens' attitudes towards the EU. One consistent finding, regarding journalism and news values in general, is that bad news is more newsworthy than good news (Soroka, 2014). This also applies to politics at both national and supranational level. In this perspective, the news media can play an active role in amplifying or restraining EU contestation (Statham & Trenz, 2013). Galpin and Trenz (2018), comparing news media coverage in the UK and Germany, found that the UK news demonstrates a strong negative bias towards EU polity, whereas in Germany EP debates focus more strongly on EU politics and policies and show a positive bias towards EU polity. Other scholars, looking at the effects of this type of coverage, have analysed the tone of EU news and found that exposure to negative evaluations of the EU leads citizens to be more supportive of Eurosceptic parties (De Vreese 2004; van Spanje & de Vreese 2014).

This article examines mainstream media coverage of the 2019 EU elections, adopting the case of Italy as an illustration. These elections were the first test for the populist government led by the 5 Star Movement and the League. Both these parties are clearly not Europhile but rather, albeit with some differences, Eurosceptic. The 5 Star Movement has in the past adopted a pretty ambiguous approach by raising criticism against the EU but keeping their distance from the Eurosceptic parties once in Brussels (Franzosi et al. 2015). On the contrary, the League – especially under the leadership of Matteo Salvini – shifted towards hard Euroscepticism, moving the traditional cleavage (and divide) from Rome to Brussels, blaming EU institutions for the bad economic situation (Albertazzi et al., 2018). As a consequence, EU elections have acquired greater importance than in the past. This article aims to understand to what extent European issues and actors are referred to in a negative tone within the news coverage of the 2019 EP election campaign. It allows a thorough understanding of the role of the mainstream media in the (de)legitimation of the EU in a country affected by several controversies with the EU (among others, migration issues and public debt containment) and led by two Eurosceptic parties.

For a long time, Italy was considered a Europhile country (Huysseune, 2010; Conti & Memoli, 2010, 2013). Since 2014, the situation has radically changed. While Eurosceptic parties did not reach 20% in 2009, they exceeded 50% of the votes in 2014[1]. Italy further

[1] In the 2009 EP elections, the Eurosceptic parties were the Northern League (LN) and the Radical Left (SEL). In 2014, besides LN and SEL (renamed the 'Tsipras List' for the occasion), a further three parties openly joined the Eurosceptic side. On the right, Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI, Go Italy) ran a campaign under the slogan 'More Italy in Europe, Less Europe in Italy'. In the same area, Fratelli d'Italia (FDI, Brothers of Italy), a Berlusconi ally, campaigned close to the Eurosceptic positions of Marine Le Pen. Finally, the most voted Eurosceptic party in the 2014 elections was the Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S, Five Star Movement), whose campaign was based on the request for a referendum on the Euro and a refusal of

evolved toward an EU-critical positioning in 2019 when Lega, M5S and FDI won almost 58% of the votes cast. In this situation, where the two mainstream parties, Forza Italia (FI, Go Italy) and Partito Democratico (PD, Democratic Party), are marginalized, and no pro-European voices are heard in the public debate, it is relevant to investigate the role of the Italian media system in counterposing or fostering the anti-EU narrative.

In the light of the above, the article shows how the main Italian newscasts and newspapers used a negative tone to cover domestic and European actors and themes, by investigating different patterns of Europeanization (Koopmans and Erbe 2004). In the section below, we discuss how literature has addressed this issue and, on this basis, we present our research questions. In section 2, we outline the research design, while in section 3 we examine the coverage of the 2019 EP election campaign in Italy. Our findings suggest that TV and daily press present different patterns of negativity. Newspapers, in particular, appear more prone to using a negative tone when featuring politics. As concerns the dualism between EU and domestic politics, Europe still benefits from a Europhile media coverage if compared with domestic politics, and this applies to both press and TV. Conversely, when the distinction between EU and domestic politics is viewed through the lens of political actors, we observe a radical difference between TV and press. EU political actors are indeed more likely to be covered negatively on TV newscasts than in newspapers. Further differences can be identified when taking into account the dimensions of Europeanization, results suggesting that when the media cover the interaction between EU and domestic politics there are higher chances of negative coverage. There is one exception: when Italian political actors approach EU institutions or EU representatives, TV newscasts tend to be less negative

2. EU coverage on mainstream media

In the past two decades, several scholars have focused their studies on media coverage of the EU. Analyses of media coverage of European politics have answered questions about the Europeanization of national public spheres (e.g. Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007) and contributed to our understanding of the democratic legitimacy of the EU institutions (e.g. Trenz, 2008, Savini, 2019). Findings show that irregular and limited news coverage could unfavourably influence public citizens' awareness of the EU and especially the relationship between the representatives and the represented (Shephard, 1997). Regular coverage, on the contrary, would enhance opportunities for citizens to take note of EU activities and foster trust in European institutions (Norris, 2000; Nardis, 2015).

The development of the European public sphere is challenging journalism cultures and practices; despite country-based differences the EU has indeed become a common issue for journalists (Kunelius 2008). In this respect, Pfetsch et al. (2008), for example, found that the press plays a crucial role in the Europeanization of national public spheres, and in particular some countries seem to share similar approaches when dealing with EU issues as a consequence of a similar degree of involvement in the EU integration project (i.e. the press of France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain share a similar point of view on EU issues when compared with the UK or Switzerland). Besides the functional

the restrictive policies imposed by the EU (e.g. the inclusion of the fiscal compact and balanced budget principle in the Italian Constitution).

relationship with the EU, press coverage is affected also by the organizational infrastructure and the editorial policies setting the allocation of resources for EU newsgathering, and by the journalistic culture as well. Similarly, Cornia et al. (2008) suggest that a European journalistic culture is developing, but the domestic perspective still prevails and national relevance remains the core criterion for news selection. Similar results are found by Preston (2009), underlining that EU issues are still largely addressed and covered through domestic interpretative schemes.

News about the EU is not traditionally widespread in mainstream media and some differences can be found between media types. While quality newspapers usually tend to cover European affairs (Trenz, 2004; Machill, Beiler & Fischer, 2006), EU news on television has been limited, irregular, and mainly focused on domestic issues or actors (e.g. de Vreese, Peter & Semetko, 2001; Peter & de Vreese, 2004; Meyer, 2005; Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2010). Starting from 2008, the economic and Euro crises began to change this approach to covering the EU (e.g. Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2012). At the same time, another series of issues, including humanitarian intervention, common defence, immigration policy and terrorism, are becoming more transnational, potentially contributing to the Europeanization of national public spheres (e.g. Koopmans, 2004; de Vreese & Kandyla, 2009; Kantner, 2011).

Scholars have mainly addressed the study of European Union news coverage by taking into account several dimensions, such as the visibility of EU news (e.g. Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2010), the degree of Europeanization (or domestication) (e.g. Koopmans, 2007; McQuail & Bergsma, 1983; Peter & de Vreese 2004), the tone of the news regarding European integration, and the framing of EU affairs (e.g. de Vreese *et al.*, 2006).

As clearly illustrated in several studies by Boomgaarden, de Vreese, and colleagues (Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2010; Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2013; Schuck & de Vreese, 2011), the visibility of the EU in the news is relevant, since it provides citizens with 'information about the issues at stake and cues them about the importance of European Parliament elections' (Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2013: 611).

In the light of the second-order elections thesis (Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt, 2005), the Europeanness of the news, namely the extent to which EU news is (or is not) domestified (Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2013; Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2016), has been assessed through different dimensions. Europeanization has been defined as a vertical or horizontal process: vertical Europeanization 'consists of communicative linkages between the national and the European level', and horizontal Europeanization 'consists of communicative linkages between different member states' (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004: 101).

By using both of these dimensions, Schuck & De Vreese (2011: 289) showed that newspapers are still more important as agents of Europeanization than television news; the quality press and public television are more European in focus than their commercial counterparts. Mainly focusing on the vertical dimension, Boomgaarden *et al.* (2013: 623–624) examined the prominence of EU actors in news coverage and found that when there is increasing elite conflict, there is less of a European focus in the news. This also applies to negativity among the political elites: the more negative, the less European (or vice versa).

In light of the above, we investigate whether and to what extent the coverage of European politics and actors differentiates from the coverage of domestic politics and actors. We focus in particular on the negativity dimension, which is a recurrent element in the

coverage of politics in general (Lengauer et al. 2011). No study has so far focused specifically on the negative media coverage of European politics. Therefore, we do not have clear expectations but have structured our analysis around four different research questions.

A preliminary question concerns possible differences between newscasts and newspapers in the coverage of politics, in general. As mentioned above, we know that some differences emerge in terms of visibility but, to our knowledge, there are no studies that account for systemic differences between the two media regarding negativity. We therefore wondered:

RQ1: *Does the level of negativity vary between TV and newspapers?*

On the basis of this preliminary RQ, we developed a further set of queries aimed to better clarify the main drivers of negativity within the two media types. The aim is thus to compare the negative tones of TV and the press by focusing on the distinction between domestic and EU politics at different levels. Indeed, we found expectations that domestic politics is more relevant (in terms of visibility and space) than European politics, but there are no clear indications as to the patterns that a negative tone follows when covering the former or the latter. Similar findings concern political actors: domestic actors are more salient within national public debates, but no clear expectations are found regarding media negativity. In this regard, our questions read as follow:

RQ2: *Does the level of negativity differ when European or domestic politics are covered?*

RQ3: *Does the level of negativity differ when European or domestic political actors are covered?*

Finally, literature shows that the Europeanization of public debates involves the coverage of different dimensions of the European integration process. Our last question, therefore, wonders whether there are different probabilities of negative coverage being associated with vertical and horizontal Europeanization:

RQ4: *Does the level of negativity differ according to different ways to cover European politics?*

3. Methods

3.1 Sample

This study investigates the Italian media coverage of the 2019 EP elections. Our research questions are addressed by mean of a dataset including all news items focusing on political issues published or broadcast by the main Italian press and TV media outlets during the seven weeks before the EP elections (7 April–24 May 2019). The unit of analysis was the news story and it was studied through a human content analysis carried out by three supervised coders. The data collection comprehends five newspapers and five TV newscasts that were selected according to two different criteria: the readership/audience and the outlet's political leaning[2]. Therefore, among the most widespread Italian

[2] The outlets' political leanings were identified by referring to individual media diet and voting behaviour in the 2018 General Elections by relying on Itanes 2018 survey data (Itanes, 2018; Roncarolo and Mancini, 2018).

newspapers, we considered Corriere della Sera and La Stampa as less-politically-oriented/neutral outlets, while Il Giornale and La Repubblica were included as representatives of, respectively, right- and left-wing views. Finally, Il Fatto Quotidiano was covered by our analysis since its political leaning appears closer to the Movimento 5 Stelle. As regards TV, the evening editions of the following newscasts were examined: TG1, TG2, TG3, TG5 and La7 News. Also in this case, TG1 and La7 News were selected as less-politically-oriented/neutral newscasts, while the others account for different political areas. More precisely, TG2 was considered because it most reflects the government's political views, while TG3 and TG5 were included in our study for their traditional closeness to, respectively, the centre-left and centre-right positions.

For newspapers, all political news items published on the first page and recalled in internal pages were coded, while news items focusing on EU-related issues were all included in the data collection, regardless of their position within the newspaper. As regards TV, all political news items broadcast were coded. The final dataset includes 5,816 news items; in detail: 1,873 TV news items and 3,943 press news items.

3.2. Variables[3]

General tone of the story: negative tone. Our dependent variable (DV) accounts for the negative tone of media coverage. Following Lengauer et al. (2011), indicators of negative tone were found in those news items containing elements referring to (i.e.) crisis, disaster, negative outlook, conflict, defeat, fiasco The DV was derived from a categorical one, which according to the coding procedure aimed to distinguish between news items providing a negative, positive, balanced or neutral tone. Then, for the sake of simplicity, it was recoded to isolate the news items showing negative tones against all the other news items framed by positive, neutral or balanced tones.

Media Type and Outlets. The first research question (RQ1), exploring the negative bias in press and TV coverage, was addressed by means of a dichotomous variable (IV_1) distinguishing between news items reported by press (=1) and news items broadcast by TV newscasts (=0). Furthermore, we also investigated possible differences in the likelihood of negative tone among the outlets analysed. Indeed, according to the criteria adopted for selecting the outlets, we could rely on a sample reflecting different political leanings. This allowed us to clarify whether there were ideological elements underpinning the outlet patterns of covering political issues. We investigate this dimension through a set of dummy variables identifying each of the ten media outlets analysed (IVs_2).

EU politics vs domestic politics. According to RQ2, within a general climate of opinion characterized by citizens' increasing criticism of the European Integration project, we aim to assess if Italian media outlets contributed to this climate of opinion by covering European-related issues and political actors in a negative way, or whether EU politics still benefits from Europhile coverage (Bobba and Seddone, 2018). With this purpose in mind, we classified the news stories according to two main categories: those dealing with domestic politics and those referring to European politics. We intended this latter

[3] Coding instructions are reported in Appendix.

dimension as all the references to EU institutions, EU policies or EU political actors. In addition, when the story was devoted to issues relating to other EU member states it was also identified as European Politics. Conversely, all the stories covering the Italian political debate or Italian political actors were categorized as Domestic Politics. We derived, then, a dichotomous variable scoring 1 if news stories focused on European Politics and coded as 0 when Domestic Politics was addressed within the news item (IV3).

POLITICAL ACTORS. RQ3 examines the impact of political actors' visibility on negative bias within media coverage. The presence of political actors within the news story was detected by mean of a categorical variable accounting for the main Italian political leaders as well as any possible reference to EU or foreign political actor in news items. For each news item, coders were asked to register up to five political actors. These data were then recoded into a set of five different dummy variables (IVs_4) indicating, respectively, whether the story presented references to: Berlusconi, Di Maio, Salvini, Zingaretti or EU political actors.

EUROPEANIZATION. The fourth research question (RQ4) addresses the dimension of Europeanization. It is meant as a process of reciprocal connections between the EU political space and the domestic one. The contribution of Koopmans and Erbe (2004) appears fundamental. In particular, their theoretical framework identifies two dynamics of interactions between the national and the EU public spheres: Vertical and Horizontal. Vertical Europeanization is intended as the communicative linkages between the national and European political space. The Bottom-Up variant refers to the case of national actors directly addressing European institutions, European political actors or referring to EU policy issues. The Top-Down variant of Vertical Europeanization follows the inverse flow, i.e., the case of European actors addressing national actors, or intervening in domestic political debate by emphasizing common European issues and interests. Horizontal Europeanization, instead, pertains to the connections between the public spheres of EU members states. The Weak variant of Horizontal Europeanization occurs when national media coverage reports issues related to the national political space of other EU member states. The Strong variant of Horizontal Europeanization concerns instead direct communicative linkages between two member states' political spaces. It could take place, for example, when politicians of a given country directly approach political actors of another EU member state.

Empirically, the Vertical Europeanization dimension was covered by two dummy variables detecting whether the news item provides reference, respectively, to Top-Down and Bottom-Up Vertical Europeanization (IVs5). Similarly, two dummy variables identified the news items referring, respectively, to Strong and Weak Horizontal Europeanization (IVs6).

3.3. Models

The research questions leading our study were addressed by mean of four logit models, testing the likelihood of a negative tone in media coverage (DV). According to RQ1, in order to detect differences between media types, we ran separated models for Press and TV. Model 1 and Model 2 include as independent variables (a) the set of media outlets reporting the news story, (b) the dummy variable testing the reference to EU contents

(institutions, policy issues or political actors), and finally (c) the dichotomous variable accounting for the reference to EU political actors. Models 3 and 4 extend this analysis by introducing the set of dummy variables identifying references to Berlusconi, Di Maio, Salvini, and Zingaretti along with the dichotomous variable referring to the presence of EU political actors. In addition, these two models also include the dimension of Europeanization, by testing the dummy variables detecting Bottom-Up Vertical Europeanization, Top-Down Vertical Europeanization, Weak Horizontal Europeanization and Strong Horizontal Europeanization. Again, the two models distinguish between TV and press media. Table 1 shows descriptives of variables included in the two models.

Table 1. Descriptives of the variables

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Type of media (Press vs TV)	5816	0.68	0.47	0	1
Corriere della Sera	5816	0.14	0.34	0	1
La Repubblica	5816	0.12	0.33	0	1
La Stampa	5816	0.13	0.34	0	1
Il Giornale	5816	0.14	0.35	0	1
Il Fatto Quotidiano	5816	0.15	0.36	0	1
TG1	5816	0.07	0.25	0	1
TG2	5816	0.08	0.27	0	1
TG3	5816	0.07	0.26	0	1
TG5	5816	0.05	0.22	0	1
TG La7 news	5816	0.05	0.22	0	1
Reference to EU or Foreign Political Actors	5816	0.20	0.40	0	1
Reference to Berlusconi	5816	0.08	0.27	0	1
Reference to Di Maio	5816	0.23	0.42	0	1
Reference to Salvini	5816	0.37	0.48	0	1
Reference to Zingaretti	5816	0.08	0.28	0	1
EU news stories	5816	0.46	0.50	0	1
Bottom-Up Vertical Europeanization	2103	0.52	0.50	0	1
Top-Down Vertical Europeanization	2103	0.14	0.35	0	1
Weak Horizontal Europeanization	2689	0.31	0.46	0	1
Strong Horizontal Europeanization	2689	0.15	0.36	0	1

4. Results

We introduce our findings by providing some descriptive analyses illustrating the patterns of negative tone within our sample. Precisely, Table 2 shows the proportion of negative tone among the media outlets included in this study[4]. First of all, we observe that Italian media coverage of the EP election campaign presents high levels of negative tone, especially if compared with 2014 media coverage of the EP elections (Roncarolo 2019; Bobba and Seddone 2018). In total, 39.4% of the news stories analysed present elements of negative tone. This applies generally to all media outlets analysed, but it should be noted that negativity varies according to media type. Indeed, newspapers present a

[4] Table 1a reported in the Appendix provides details about the distribution of negative, positive and neutral tone. In general, among Italian media outlets a neutral/balanced tone prevails when addressing politics and related issues. However, there are some significant differences. In particular, as concerns media outlets like Il Giornale and TG5 – both owned by Berlusconi – the portion of neutral/balanced tone is quite low when compared with other outlets, while a negative frame prevails for depicting politics. In addition, it should be noted that a positive tone is actually extremely marginal for all the media outlets included in this study.

higher quota of news stories using a negative tone (42.8%) while TV outlets seem to be less inclined to cover political issues negatively; nevertheless, the portion of negativity remains pretty high since it concerns more than one third of TV news items. Further differences emerge among outlets composing our sample. As concerns the press, news items characterized by a negative tone range from 34.3% for Corriere della Sera to 56.8% for Il Giornale while the other press outlets register portions of negative news items close to 40%. Regarding TV, instead, TG1 has the lowest quota of news stories framed in a negative tone (24.4%), while TG5 seems to be the outlet that covers politics with greater negativity: almost one out of two news stories is depicted in a negative tone.

Table 2. Negative tone in media and single outlets

	News item (N total)	Negative news item (N)	Negative news item (%)
Daily Press	*3,943*	*1,687*	*42.8*
Corriere della Sera	787	270	34.3
la Repubblica	706	291	41.2
La Stampa	773	300	38.8
Il Giornale	808	459	56.8
Il Fatto Quotidiano	869	367	42.2
Newscast	*1,873*	*609*	*32.5*
TG1	393	96	24.4
TG2	451	157	34.8
TG3	431	124	28.8
TG5	305	145	47.5
La7 News	293	87	29.7
Total	*5,816*	*2,296*	*39.5*

Table 3 details the negativity of media coverage when the news story presents references to political actors[5]. We can see from these figures that, in general, when news items include EU or foreign political actors, the portion of negative tone is lower than media coverage focusing on Italian political leaders. Only one news story out of three is negative when referring to EU or foreign politicians. Conversely, negativity increases when the media cover Italian political actors. The percentage of negative news items ranges from 38.6% when Silvio Berlusconi is covered to 51.3% of negative tone when the story presents references to Nicola Zingaretti. Interestingly, the share of negativity referring to Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini is quite similar for the two leading exponents of the coalition government (resp. 45.5% and 42.5%).

Table 3. Negative tone and political actors

	News item (N total)	Negative news item (N)	Negative news item (%)
Berlusconi	453	175	38.6
Di Maio	1,333	606	45.5
Salvini	2,161	918	42.5
Zingaretti	483	248	51.3
EU-Foreign Political Actors	1,141	366	32

[5] Table 2a in the Appendix provides details about the general tone for political leaders. Data show that with the sole exception of Nicola Zingaretti, the negative tone prevails for all political leaders – including the EU/foreign political actors. The positive frame is also in this case extremely marginal, ranging from 2.9% for Zingaretti and 7.8% for EU/foreign political actors.

Table 4 shows instead the patterns of negative tone among news items focusing on the EU. Data suggest that media coverage tends to be more negative when addressing issues relating to domestic politics. This seems to confirm the idea of a Europhile attitude among Italian media outlets. The political debate among domestic politics catalyses the negativity of Italian media outlets where almost one out of two news stories presents a negative tone (46.6). Conversely, the percentage of negative news items decreases when the EU is covered (31.24%). However, taking into account the modalities of Europeanization, data indicate some differences. Indeed, as regards Horizontal Europeanization, the portion of negative news items is pretty similar: about 30% for both strong or weak variants. On the contrary, things appear slightly different when considering Vertical Europeanization. While one third of the stories presenting Bottom-Up elements are framed within a negative tone, as regards the Top-Down variant the tone of the coverage appears far more negative (37%).

Table 4. Negative tone and European vs domestic politics

	News item (N total)	Negative news item (N)	Negative news item (%)
News items with references to domestic politics	3,127	1,456	46.6
News items with references to European politics	2,689	840	31.2
Bottom-Up Vertical Europeanization	1,243	369	29.7
Top-Down Vertical Europeanization	303	113	37.3
Weak Horizontal Europeanization	837	246	29.4
Strong Horizontal Europeanization	398	124	31.1
Total	*5,816*	*2,296*	*39.5*

Although these are preliminary results, some interpretative cues can already be drawn. In the first instance, even within a negative media coverage context, Europe and its political actors seem to benefit from a benevolent media attitude. If domestic politics is covered more frequently with negative tones and frame elements, when dealing with issues relating to the EU the media moderate the negative tones. Furthermore, it is possible to identify a substantial difference between press and TV. The newspapers analysed are all characterized by prominent negativity, assuming much higher proportions than TV outlets. However, when figures are observed in more detail, some dynamics emerge clearly. The European theme is, in fact, treated in different ways by the Italian media. In particular, when the EU institutions directly approach the domestic political space, meaning they intervene in the national political debate by raising European interests, values or rules, the media show less indulgence and the share of negative news items grows more significant.

These bivariate analyses have to be integrated by multivariate analyses testing these dimensions and measuring their contribution to negative bias in media coverage during the last EP election campaign in Italy. Taken all together, indeed, these elements of media coverage have a different effect on the probability of negative media coverage.

When we look at the models presented in Table 5, these patterns appear clearer. Models 1 and 2, indeed, confirm the evidence that has already emerged from descriptive analyses. As regards the press (Model 1), where the Corriere della Sera is the reference category, all media outlets present positive and significant coefficients, meaning that they are all associated with a higher likelihood of negative media coverage.

Table 5. Drivers of Negative Tone on Press and TV coverage

VARIABLES	Model 1 PRESS Negative Tone	Model 2 TV Negative Tone	Model 3 PRESS Negative Tone	Model 4 TV Negative Tone
PRESS (ref. cat. Corriere della sera)				
la Repubblica	1.376*** (0.151)		1.520** (0.277)	-
La Stampa	1.259** (0.135)		1.267 (0.230)	-
Il Giornale	2.465*** (0.260)		2.464*** (0.438)	-
Il Fatto Quotidiano	1.262** (0.131)		1.481** (0.277)	-
TV (ref. cat. Tg1)				
TG2		1.692*** (0.262)	-	2.878*** (0.914)
TG3		1.350* (0.217)	-	1.429 (0.480)
TG5		2.926*** (0.486)	-	4.758*** (1.603)
La 7 News		1.353* (0.237)	-	1.367 (0.495)
EU/foreign Political Actor	0.701*** (0.0702)	2.052*** (0.288)	0.598*** (0.0879)	1.775** (0.420)
Berlusconi			0.438*** (0.0881)	2.072*** (0.573)
Di Maio			1.528*** (0.228)	1.088 (0.301)
Salvini			1.185 (0.162)	1.380 (0.338)
Zingaretti			0.541*** (0.120)	5.057*** (1.225)
EU politics	0.513*** (0.0393)	0.552*** (0.0636)		
Bottom-Up Vertical Europeanization			0.865 (0.103)	0.468*** (0.0976)
Top-Down Vertical Europeanization			1.417** (0.224)	1.830** (0.554)
Weak Horizontal Europeanization			0.952 (0.184)	2.509*** (0.848)
Strong Horizontal Europeanization			1.333* (0.223)	0.780 (0.250)
Constant	**0.769*** (0.0633)**	**0.349*** (0.0438)**	**0.369*** (0.0596)**	**0.103*** (0.0328)**
Observations	**3,943**	**1,873**	**1,472**	**631**

Notes: SE in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

On the contrary, news items focusing on EU-related issues are less likely to be framed within a negative tone, and the same applies for news stories referring to EU or foreign political actors. When we move to observe these patterns on TV (Model 2) something changes. Here we used TG1 as the reference category. Even in this case, odds rations associated with TV newscasts are all positive and significant, signalling that their news items increase the likelihood of a negative tone in media coverage. In addition, EU-

related issues are, also in this case, less likely to be covered in a negative tone. However, when it comes to assess whether the EU political actors act as drivers of a negative tone in media coverage, the coefficients are positive. Indeed, compared to the press, TV newscasts are more likely to frame negatively stories referring to EU politicians.

Models 3 and 4 enlarge this analysis by including two elements: the different variants of Europeanization illustrated above and the differentiated contribution of Italian political leaders. Model 3 focuses on the press. In this case, we observe that media outlets still maintain their effect in increasing the likelihood of negative coverage, with the sole exception of La Stampa. On the other hand, if we consider Model 4, the TV outlets show different patterns. Only TG2 and TG5 are associated with positive and significant odds ratios which are far higher than in Model 2, confirming they are drivers of negativity. In general, it is worth noting that elements of political parallelism could be identified if taking into account coefficients from the two media outlets owned by Berlusconi (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Mancini, 2008). We found, indeed that they are both characterized by a far higher likelihood of increasing negativity coverage during the election campaign. This is a result of the position taken by these outlets, which basically acted as the opposition to the government (and the former ally, Salvini, in particular) while attacking the left-wing parties as well.

Differences between press and TV remain prominent even when considering the dimension of political actors. While within press coverage the presence of EU or foreign political actors reduces the chances of negative coverage, TV shows the opposite result. In this case, news items are more likely to be framed by negative elements. Italian political actors are also differentiated. As regards the press, Berlusconi, indeed, is associated with significant coefficients proving a lower probability of negativity. The same applies to Zingaretti. Only Di Maio, according to our findings, boosts the likelihood of a negative tone in media coverage. Again, the picture changes with Model 4, focusing on the TV sample. Regardless of whether they are domestic or EU, all political actors are more likely to increase the likelihood of a negative tone. Only Di Maio and Salvini disconfirm this pattern, with no significant odds ratio. These patterns could appear as counterintuitive. Indeed, given the Eurosceptic claims from both M5S and League, one could have expected that the visibility of the two leaders contributed to increasing the likelihood of a negative tone in media coverage. However, according to some previous research, the Italian media tend to mitigate negativity driven by Eurosceptic political leaders by counterbalancing the negative frame relating to their positions with a neutral or even positive frame on the EU that results in a more balanced general tone. Furthermore, these coefficients appear quite coherent with bivariate analyses (see Figure 1a in Appendix) showing that on TV both Salvini and Di Maio present a lower degree of negative tone compared with other leaders.

Finally, distinguishing between variants of Europeanization, we found interesting results. While in Models 1 and 2, EU-related issues were found less likely to be covered in a negative tone, the introduction of variables relating to the four variants of Europeanization determines substantial differences between the two media. Within the press subsample, only Top-Down Vertical Europeanization and Strong Horizontal Europeanization are found to be significant and positively associated with the DV. Conversely, as pertains to TV, a negative tone is more likely when stories refer to Top-Down Vertical

Europeanization and Strong Horizontal Europeanization. On the other hand, when national political actors approach EU-related issues, the likelihood of a negative tone decreases.

5. Conclusions

Our study aimed to investigate the drivers of negativity within Italian media coverage during the 2019 EP Election campaign. Italy offers a privileged angle for addressing this issue. On the one hand, Italian politics is going through a shift in climate of opinion on the EU. The country was traditionally considered Europhile, but the success of populist parties – now in government – criticising the EU integration process and endorsing nationalist views, indicate that Eurosceptic views are becoming prominent among Italian parties. On the other hand, the media have usually held a supportive attitude towards the EU. Indeed, while media coverage of politics is in general characterized by a negative tone, where the elements of conflict and negativity prevail, the EU institutions and political actors have traditionally benefited from a less negative tone in the media. In other words, the media have often acted as moderators of criticism towards the EU by tempering their usual tendency to negativity in covering political issues.

Our study relied on an original dataset derived from a human content analysis carried out on news items reported by five newspapers and five TV newscasts during the five weeks preceding the EP elections. Our results contribute to a better understanding of the processes of development of the European public sphere, and we identify some interesting patterns concerning the Italian case. However, we are aware of some limitations. First of all, we should underline that our data may present some weaknesses due to the news item selection. Indeed, as concerns the press, the sample includes all news items focusing on the EU regardless of their position within the outlet (front page and internal pages), while news items focusing on domestic politics were included in the sample only when reported on the first page. On the contrary, as regards TV coverage, we took into account all political news items broadcast. On the one hand, this choice may entail a problem of comparability between press and TV; on the other hand, our data may suffer from overrepresentation of EU visibility in the press. For future studies, this issue will be addressed by re-defining the research design and including, for the press, all political news. Nonetheless, given that the purpose of the article was to clarify the dynamics of negativity in media coverage and the relationship with Europeanization patterns, the data provided still offer an interesting report on the dynamics of Europeanization during the 2019 European Election campaign in Italy. Secondly, we acknowledge that some results could be further strengthened if we included in our research design a qualitative dimension addressing the peculiarities of journalistic cultures characterizing the single outlets included in our analysis. This would allow us to differentiate outlets according to their editorial policy and organizational structure as pertains to the EU, since literature found these elements to be relevant to understanding the dynamics of the Europeanization of public debate.

Given the peculiarities of the Italian media system, we organized our research questions by addressing in particular whether press and TV may be characterized by different patterns of negativity within their coverage during the election campaign. In this regard, we observed that newspapers tended more to add a negative tone to political news stories,

while portions of negativity within TV appeared more limited. Furthermore, we also identified diverse attitudes among the outlets included in our study. These differences could be understood by taking into account the parallelism characterizing the Italian media system. Indeed, we found the higher quota of negative news items within the coverage provided by Il Giornale and TG5, which are both owned by the Berlusconi family. As a result of the crisis within the party, the poor results obtained in the 2018 General Elections and the marginal role played within the centre-right area, the two media outlets engaged in a very negative and critical coverage, attacking both the left opposition and the coalition in government in an attempt to mobilize Forza Italia supporters. On the contrary, media outlets such as Corriere della Sera and TG1 confirm their more neutral approach to covering politics.

The distinction between press and TV was explored also with regard to the other research questions leading this study. We investigated whether and to what extent the distinction between EU and domestic politics may affect the negative media bias. Two main considerations emerge from our study.

First of all, without much surprise, we observed that EU politics benefits from a lower likelihood of negative coverage compared to domestic politics. In other words, the national Italian political debate catalyses media negativity, and this applies to both press and TV. However, when we move to the dimension of political actors, the picture is more nuanced, showing net differences between newspapers and TV newscasts. In this case, indeed, the press confirms its moderation in the use of a negative tone when covering EU political actors, while on TV the dynamic is reversed, meaning that politicians from EU institutions or from other EU member states are more likely to be covered in a negative tone.

Secondly, as concerns Europeanization, we observed that the interplay between EU and Italian politics is more likely to be framed in a negative tone when EU political actors intervene directly within the Italian political debate by raising European interests (i.e. threatening sanctions in the event of disregarding EU treaties or agreements). More interestingly, when the Bottom-Up Vertical Europeanization variant is addressed within media coverage, TV media are less likely to adopt a negative tone. In other words, when Italian politics addresses EU politics, TV tends to change its approach. This is not found within the press sample of news stories. Also as regards Horizontal Europeanization, press and TV are differentiated, the strong variant being significant only within the press and the weak one significant only within TV.

All things considered, it seems that while the press have adopted a negative attitude towards politics, expressing criticism towards domestic politics rather than EU political space, TV shows some signs of adapting to a new climate of opinion. TV media outlets moderate their negativity against domestic politics when compared to the press. But within their coverage they tend more to frame EU political actors negatively in particular, while they temper their criticism when domestic actors approach EU institutions.

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Appendix: codebook

General tone of the story

What is the overall tone of the news item? Does the report convey primarily a positive, negative, balanced or neutral impression of politics, political records, conditions or views?

1 = predominantly negative tone

2 = predominantly positive tone

3 = balanced/ambivalent

0 = neutral/not applicable

Instructions: indications of a negative tone are when the story is framed as political failure, fiasco, disaster, crisis, frustration, collapse, flop, denial, rejection, neglect, default, deterioration, resignation, scepticism, threats, cynicism, defeatism or disappointment. Indications of a positive tone are depictions of political success, problem solutions, achievement, improvement, advance, prosperity, accomplishment, enthusiasm, hope, benefit, gain, sustainability, gratification or accomplishment. If a report does not reflect indications of a negative or positive tone, then it should be coded as 'neutral'.

EU and domestic politics

Does the news item contain relevant references to Europe (EU or any other EU country/political actor apart from Italy)?

1= Yes, reference to EU (in general or single institution)

2= Yes, reference to other EU country/political actor

0= no reference to Europe

Instructions: Europe is meant as a single institution, as EU issues, as EU policies as well as other EU countries. Please note that code 2 should be applied only in residual cases, namely only other EU country references and not EU institutions. Any reference to Brexit should be coded as 1. Any reference to EU parliamentary elections should be coded as 1.

Vertical Europeanization: Bottom Up

Does the news item include references to national actors addressing EU actors or making claims on EU issues/policies (general or specific)?

0= no

1 = yes

999= NA

Instructions: EU issues and policies should be addressed from a European perspective. For example, references to the EU election campaign or alliances at domestic level are **not** to be considered as an EU issue. On the contrary, when the discussion focuses on alliances within the EU Parliament it should be considered as an EU issue. Euro-crisis, Schengen, Lisbon Treaty are to be considered as EU issues.

Vertical Europeanization: Top Down

Does the news item include references to EU actors intervening in the domestic debate of any EU country in the name of common European/EU interests?

0= no

1 = yes

999= NA

Instructions: for example, code 1 to be applied for news items where, for example, Draghi/Junker/Tajani (or EU commissioners) intervene on Greek debt crisis.

Horizontal Europeanization: Weak

Does the news item cover the political debate in another country?

0= no

1 = yes

999= NA

Instructions: code 1 to be applied for news items focusing on other EU member states and their issues (i.e. Brexit, Gilets Jaunes...)

Horizontal Europeanization: Strong

Does the news item cover one political actor (from any EU country) speaking about issues or with actors related to another EU country?

0= no

1 = yes

999= NA

Instruction: code 1 to be applied when an actor from a member state addresses or refers to actors or issues related to another member state or even participating in public debates in another country (i.e. Merkel commenting on Gilets Jaunes; Di Maio speaking about Brexit, Orban commenting on Italian government)

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Digital Hyperleaders: Communication Strategies on Social Networks at the 2019 European Elections

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Abstract

This article investigates the state of development of the electoral communication of Italian political leaders at the elections for the 2019 European Parliament. The aim was to verify which attitudes and forms of adaptation used in the communication strategies of so-called 'hyperleaders' have developed towards the network media logic. The research considers the following analytical dimensions: the extent of leaders' fan bases; the effect of publication frequency in terms of engagement; the effect of issue management in terms of engagement, and the effect of emotionalization of messages in terms of engagement. The results suggest the consolidation of a digital model of communication via social networks that connects, above all, Salvini, Di Maio and Meloni. They have in common specific attitudes and forms of adaptation to the network media logic, i.e. eminently a much greater capacity to engage in relation to the largeness of the public, the strategic use of key issues and emotional frame management.

1. A hybrid and postmedial election campaign

The election campaign for the 2019 European elections, which took place just over a year after the general elections, confirmed the hypothesis of a new phase of campaigning (Cepernich 2017; Stromer-Galley 2014). In line with the transformations occurring in all democracies at an advanced stage of mediatization (Esser and Strömbäck 2014; Kriesi *et al*. 2013; Mazzoleni and Schultz 1999), even in Italy, the election campaign has become *hybrid* and *postmedial*. This is a kind of campaign that continues to take place without significant differences between first and second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980) because in the Italian context the European elections tend to maintain a strong national significance. In fact, although the information system in the last five years has steadily increased attention on European issues, the attention to Europe paid by TV news and talk shows remains low. Even lower is the attention of leaders and parties to supranational issues when participating in the television arena. They cover Europe in no more than 10% of their statements (AA.VV. 2019). Thus, the result is a European campaign that is played mainly on national issues.

First of all, the electoral campaign in the era of social networks is *hybrid* because the digitization and diffusion of the Internet on a large scale have contaminated the *legacy media logics* with the *digital media logic* (Chadwick 2013; Wells *et. al*. 2016) and with the

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network media logic (Baldwin-Philippi 2015; Klinger and Svensson 2014). A hybrid communication system, therefore, 'is built upon interactions among older and newer media logic – where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviours and organizational forms – in the reflexively connected fields of media and politics' (Chadwick 2013: 4). As Chadwick has shown, the hybrid campaign takes shape at the intersection of three dimensions within which the political actor acts:

a) in real space, where the leader brings into play his/her performative dimension with rallies, his/her presence among people and public events on the territory. The crowd is now the engine of every election strategy, with which the leader can influence media coverage and produce first-hand material to fuel online communication;
b) on television, the legacy media still at the centre of the information system that gives the leader visibility on a large scale and awareness to his/her personal branding;
c) on the Internet, that is social media, which are the main hub of propaganda and self-promotion, but also the infrastructure for the mobilization of the fan base online and offline (Bimber 2019).

Due to the combined action of the logics mentioned above, the hybrid structure of the media system modifies the social media habits of the political actors who, with their strategic practices, implement hybrid campaigning (Bracciale and Cepernich 2018).

Secondly, the electoral campaign is postmedial as a consequence of the centrality assigned by the digital paradigm to the user of the Web, an active node of social networks, no longer bound to the role of 'cold spectator' required by the broadcast nature of television and legacy media in general. Klinger and Svensson introduce the concept *of network media logic*, as opposed to that of mass media logic. 'Social media platforms are characterized by a different, though overlapping, logic form that of traditional mass media, with regard to the inherent communication norms and practices related to media production, distribution and usage' (2015: 1,246).

By developing connectivity and interactivity, digital technologies make it possible to activate connective action according to a dual logic of aggregation: one that exploits the potential for self-organization of decentralized networks of supporters who extensively use digital platforms, the other that exploits the potential for individualizing communicative and political action typical of the digital environment. 'The important point for the purpose of analysing connective action is to understand the distinctive role that communication plays in these often densely interwoven networks of human actors, discourses and technologies. Beyond sharing information and sending messages, the organizing properties of communication become prominent in connective action networks' (Bennett and Segerberg 2013: 42).

The most significant case is the second edition of the 'Vinci Salvini' points competition, promoted by the League leader through his social channels.[1] This is the most advanced example of fan base infrastructure through the Web, whose aim is to promote

[1] Matteo Salvini launched the competition explaining the rules of participation with this video https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/videos/385938898675241/ and referring to the website http://www.vincisalvini.it.

the highest level of engagement of supporters on social networks (Facebook, Twitter and for the first time also Instagram) and, at the same time, the activation of molecular leaders offline. The weekly and monthly prizes – respectively a phone call and a face-to-face meeting with the leader – are, in fact, particularly effective incentives for the dissemination of the leader's content via social networks, but also an opportunity for the winners to re-intermediate his campaign in primary social groups: family, friends and colleagues at work. The multiplier effect of the connective action is enhanced in Salvini's communication by the tactical use of selfies with onlookers at the rally. At the end of the performance on stage, Salvini spends a great deal of time satisfying every single request for a selfie, so that his image and message are re-intermediated on a large scale by his supporters. In this sense, personal media rediscover the importance of social interactions and interpersonal communication. As the data will show, the responsiveness of the leaders' campaigns to postmedial logic cannot be said to be similar. On the contrary, it has proved to be significantly variable in the national scenario. In general, however, the emergence of increasingly adaptive communication models to the hybrid and postmedial ecosystem is confirmed. From this perspective, the figure of the hyperleader is emerging as 'the new type of leader that stands at the forefront of digital parties [...] This digitized leadership reflects the new possibilities for mass outreach and online crowding offered by social media, the rise of a digital celebrity culture that has emerged on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Snapchat, and the continuing necessity of leadership in contemporary politics' (Gerbaudo 2019: 144).

Therefore, we can acknowledge that social networks have a definitive centrality within the communicative strategies in political communication, which become even more so during the electoral campaign (Ceccobelli 2018). This is confirmed by the amounts of investments in political ads on Facebook: during the last month of the campaign, Salvini spent €127,518 on 56 ads, followed by the Democratic Party which paid €93,264 for 197 ads. The data seem to indicate weaker leadership of the Zingaretti campaign, which invested only €1,417 for five ads on its personal page. Berlusconi is third in the ranking, with an expenditure of €64,018 (343 ads) followed by the 5 Star Movement with €48,293 (25 ads), Meloni with €35,624 (58 ads), Forza Italia with €30,517 (22).[2] Moreover, the centrality of social networks in the communication strategies of political actors is also confirmed by the presence of precise elements of style and content common to all leaders. For example, Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018) clarify the recursiveness of the so-called 'populist' communication style in terms of 'endemic populism'.

There are three main factors that explain this centrality of social networks. The first is the leaderization of communication strategies (Enli and Skogerbø 2013). The consolidated process of party leaderization has also had an impact on communication. In a scenario of the deep crisis of parties and political disaffection, the political personality has become the most effective cognitive shortcut to the communication of a political program. The personalization of the communication strategy is the most functional solution to build consensus in the face of the weakening of the ideological apparatus. Social networks, therefore, become the privileged place for the production and diffusion of

[2] Source: https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/report. Here Facebook makes data available for advertisements on social issues, elections or politics in accordance with recent policies for transparency in electoral advertising.

surrogate narratives. In this way, the leader is today the raw material for every action of political branding. The second factor, which explains the centrality assumed by social networks in the communication of political leaders, is the fact that they have become a fundamental arena of electoral competition. On the occasion of the March 2018 general election, the Web and the main social networks were a source of information for almost 60% of Italians.[3] In particular, social networks were the first source for 12.4% of Italians and the second for 6.7%. Only television maintains a greater centrality (Legnante and Vaccari 2018). This is the pluralization of the information arenas, re-intermediated by the algorithms of social media and search engines, as well as by the new forms of journalism's adaptation to digital environments (Diakopoulos 2019; Linden 2017). Finally, their centrality derives from being the hub of the self-promotion strategies of the political actors and the space of disintermediate communication between political actors and voters, which mainly insists on the fan base of reference and on the indefinitely wider perimeter of fans and supporters. Disintermediating communication means strategically exploiting self-representation by speaking directly, bypassing the journalistic mediation of traditional media (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018; Coleman 2005).

This translates concretely into the search for the following elements:

a) the direct relationship of political actors with citizens: here, then, is the re-intensification of the public agenda of the leader, with public events, rallies and other forms typical of pre-medial election campaigns;
b) the potential for spreadability, or virality, of contents, an indispensable attribute for increasing the volume of circulation of online messages and increasing their visibility;
c) the upstream conditioning of the media agenda, which puts information and journalism in a position to follow political actors, rather than vice versa.

In continuity with some previous research (Bracciale and Cepernich 2018; Cepernich 2019), this article aims to analyse the hybrid and postmedial evolution of the election campaign on the occasion of the European 2019 elections. In particular, the article aims to highlight attitudes and forms of adaptation in leaders' communication strategies to digital environments. On the basis of specific indicators, there may emerge different degrees and ways of adaptation – and therefore of strategic exploitation – to the postmedial and network logics as illustrated above. This research examines the following analytical dimensions: (a) the extent of the leader's fan base; (b) the effects in terms of engagement of publication frequency; (c) the effects in terms of engagement of issue management strategies; (d) the effects in terms of engagement of frame management strategies and of the emotionalization of the messages.

As for the extent of the leader's fan base, let's observe that a primary strategic objective of communication on social networks is to involve and mobilize the widest support base to reach the maximum potential in terms of engagement.[4] The leader works in digital format to:

[3] Information websites, online newspapers or social networks as first or second source.
[4] Engagement is the ability to achieve reactions, comments and sharing by the public. The mobilization of users, but especially supporters, has significantly increased over time thanks to the availability of social networks (Norris and Curtice 2008; Vaccari 2013).

(1) receive the active involvement of his/her community of supporters to increase the visibility of its content on the platforms (primary audience); to keep active this base of online and offline supporters, to mobilize and support participation in the campaign with material and symbolic resources, and
(2) to activate secondary audiences when this communication is re-circulated by followers and friends (secondary audience) (Vaccari and Valeriani 2015).

This is the necessary precondition to facilitate the spread of online content on the basis of logical algorithms that regulate social media. The most recent evidence on mobilization shows that access to platforms and, in general, to digital technologies, can favour fairly articulated forms of political participation (Kahne and Bower 2018; Koc-Michalska and Lilleker 2019; Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013).

As far as the structure of the flow and the frequency of publication of the contents are concerned, the strategies of the political actors are split between the addition of information (therefore to the saturation of the channel through a high frequency of publication) and the subtraction of information (that is to the decompression of the channel through a moderate frequency of publication). Clearly, no automated relationship can be established between party size, flow capacity (i.e. the number of posts produced daily) and productivity in terms of engagement (Larsson, 2016, 2017, 2019). Precisely for this reason, the publication strategy is examined here in relation to the rate of engagement achieved on the main social networks. As for, thirdly, the effects in terms of engagement of issue ownership strategies, the potential for involvement of networked publics and the fan base will be considered here in relation to the agenda of the leaders' issues campaign and, in particular, in relation to the key issues of their election campaign. In fact, the construction of digital storytelling implies the positioning of the leader and his/her party on the thematic priorities of the electoral program. The leader is induced by the affordances of social networks to build self-representation based on a few salient issues that characterize his/her political proposal. Combined with a high publication frequency, emphasis framing can reduce information redundancy within the echo chambers (Cacciatore, Scheufele and Iyengar, 2016).

Finally, as regards the effects in terms of engagement as a consequence of the framing and emotionalization of the narratives, the involvement of audiences and supporters will be analysed in terms of positivity, negativity or neutrality. Based on the theory of affective intelligence (Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen 2000), the most likely hypothesis is that negative emotional frames have a higher activation potential than positive ones.

This research is conducted from a descriptive sociology perspective and considers the seven leaders of the main parties running for elections to the European Parliament on 26 May 2019: Silvio Berlusconi (Forza Italia), Emma Bonino (+Europa - +Europe), Luigi Di Maio (Movimento 5 Stelle - Five Star Movement), Nicola Fratoianni (La Sinistra - The Left), Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia - Brothers of Italy), Matteo Salvini (Lega Salvini Premier - League Salvini Premier), Nicola Zingaretti (Partito Democratico - Democratic Party). The monitoring was conducted between 15 April and 26 May, 2019, that is four weeks of the election campaign and two weeks of the pre-election campaign, including election day. This is a multimodal analysis of the leaders' flow capacity on social networks, which has considered the three main platforms currently present in the social

media communication device of political actors,[5] i.e. those that together most fully define the extent of the audience of each leader: Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The analysis took into account the whole flow of communication produced by the leaders in the indicated period: 2,449 posts on Facebook, 1,530 on Instagram, 4,799 tweets on Twitter (details in Table 1). The analysis[6] of issues and emotional frames, on the other hand, is limited to all the 2,449 Facebook posts, the generalist social network with the widest audience.[7]

2. Leaders' networked publics and the flow density on social networks

Matteo Salvini is the leader with the widest audience on all the platforms considered (Fig. 1). As well as more than 3.6 million fans on Facebook, he is the only one to exceed the threshold of one million fans on Instagram. The leader of the League also holds the record on Twitter, exceeding one million and sixty thousand followers. Luigi Di Maio follows in terms of audience, with over 2.2 million followers on Facebook and an audience of over 800,000 Instagrammers. With this first general data, a communication and digital leadership model emerges that is more adaptive than others to the logic of networked politics, a communicative model that also characterizes the leadership of Giorgia Meloni, who exceeds one million fans on Facebook and reaches with Twitter a threshold of 800,000 followers, having the second largest audience on this platform.

If, as we have seen, the fan base on social networks is a primary resource for campaigning, the leaders of the right and the Five Star Movement have a significant advantage over those of the centre-left. Silvio Berlusconi, the old tele-populist leader, is the fourth of the leaders to exceed the threshold of a million followers on Facebook, while significantly neglected is the self-referential environment of relations between media and politics on Twitter. Based on the centrality of images, he has only 190 followers on the platform.

Nicola Zingaretti, the first of the three on the left, is weak on Facebook, with about 260,000 fans on the most important platform in terms of penetrating a generalist audience. The largest circle of supporters of the Democratic Party leader is on Twitter, which is the social network with the lowest circulation among Web users, but which has primary importance for the political and cultural élites. Finally, the presence of Emma Bonino and Nicola Fratoianni on social networks is probably limited to the smallest community of militants and sympathizers of their respective parties. Bonino has a more active presence and a wider audience on Twitter (about 190,000 followers). Her total renunciation of Instagram and occasional use of Facebook (about 92,000 followers) assigned to the pages of the party, +Europe, the role of strategic channel for the campaign. Finally, Fratoianni,

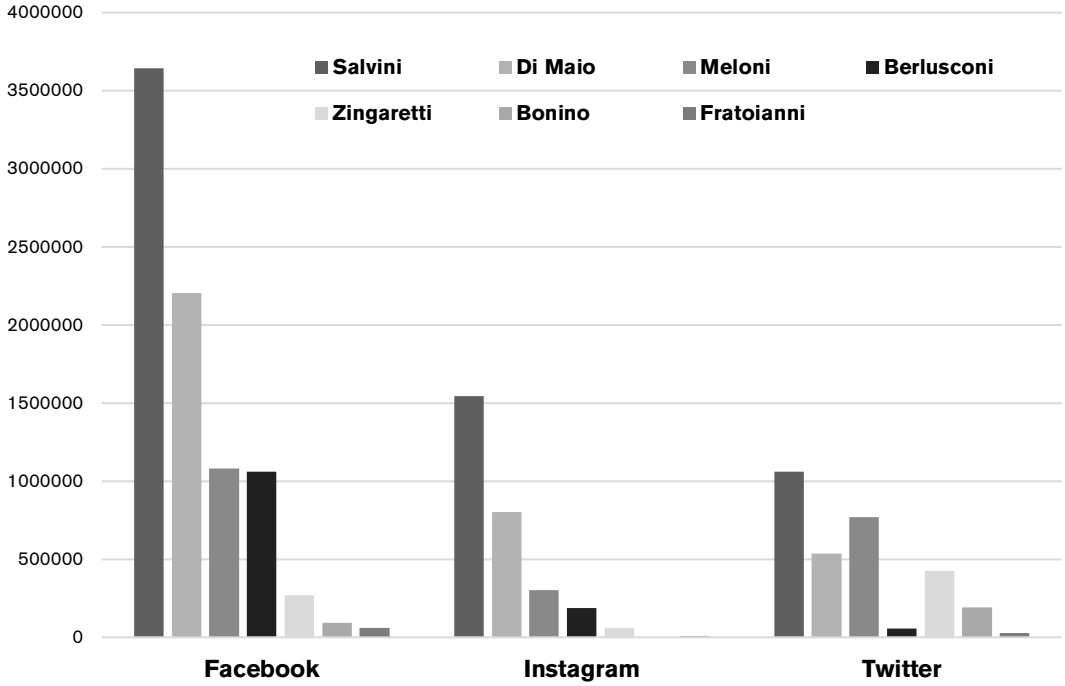
[5] The data was collected through Fanpage Karma (http://fanpagekarma.com).

[6] The monitoring was conducted as part of the activities of the Observatory on Political and Public Communication of the University of Turin through the manual content analysis of the posts published by the leader in the period considered. The coefficients of Krippendorff's α for the groups were highly satisfying in terms of almost all variables (Krippendorff's $\alpha > 0.88$ and percentage agreement = 98%) by conventions established in the field (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007).

[7] In 2018, 72.5% of the population were using social networks in Italy. More than half of them used the two most popular social networks: Facebook (56%) and YouTube (51.8%). Instagram users made up 26.7% of Italians (55.2% among young people). Twitter, on the other hand, fell again to 12.3% (Censis 2018).

who collects just 58,000 followers on Facebook and almost 27,000 on Twitter, also has a very weak presence on Instagram (just under 7,500 followers). The number of the leaders' followers can be considered an 'important measuring stick of online reach' (Bode and Epstein 2015: 136) and defines the perimeter of the network of potential connections. However, it does not give any indication of the quantity or type of interaction.

Figure 1. The fan bases of the leaders on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (26 May 2019)



The frequency of posting is a second key indicator as to the digital attitude of the leader, although the pursuit of a channel saturation strategy does not mean, in itself, that the strategy is more or less effective in producing effects on engagement. Salvini opts for a high frequency of publication of contents on all social networks monitored (Tab. 1). His average of 22 posts per day on Facebook and 17 on Instagram rank him at the top in terms of quantity of content produced. He is outperformed on Twitter only by Fratoianni, who produces an average of almost 45 tweets per day, compared to 41 by the League leader.

Meloni publishes 10.6 posts per day on Facebook and 6.5 on Instagram, a frequency that sets her within a saturation pattern, except on Twitter, where she stops at an average of 7.9 messages per day. Di Maio concentrates his flow capacity on Facebook, keeping the other platforms to a minimum. The leaders of the League, Brothers of Italy and the Five Star Movement are permanently above the average publication on Facebook in the period covered. On Instagram, only Salvini and Meloni publish above the average. The intensive use of Twitter by Salvini and Fratoianni seems to be congruent with the real-time informative nature of the medium (Bossetta 2018), which is different from occasional use (Di Maio) or sporadic posting (Bonino, Zingaretti). With an average of about 14 tweets per day, Berlusconi still recognizes microblogging as a relevant function of the real-time narrative of the campaign to reinterpret his message through media and influencers.

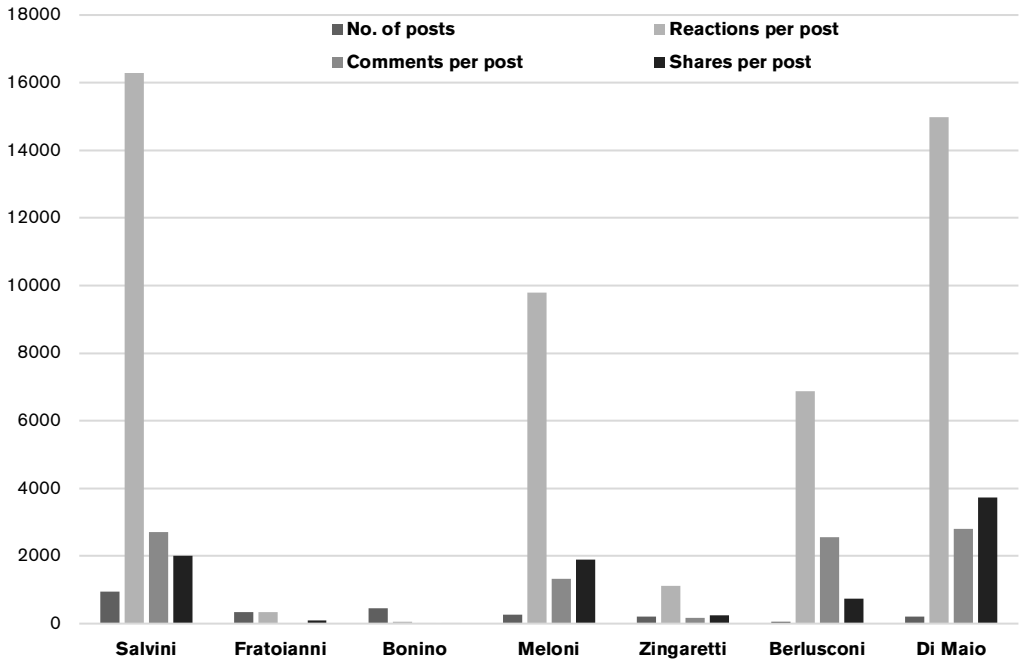
	Facebook		Instagram		Twitter	
	Posts per day	Number of posts	Posts per day	Number of posts	Posts per day	Number of tweets
Salvini	22.4	939	17	721	41.4	1,737
Di Maio	8	336	1.07	72	0.4	18
Meloni	10.6	445	6.5	271	7.9	333
Berlusconi	6.2	260	4	167	14.02	589
Zingaretti	4.8	201	3.2	125	3.9	162
Bonino	1.4	61	0	0	2.04	86
Fratoianni	4.9	207	4.1	174	44.6	1,874
Tot.	-	2,449	-	1530	-	4,799

Finally, Fig. 2, 3 and 4 relate the frequency of flow of leaders on social networks monitored with the effects obtained in terms of engagement. In general, the first evidence to be confirmed is the maximum efficiency of Salvini in all the production phases of the flow (construction of the fan base, frequency of publication and engagement).

Di Maio's strategy on Facebook is, in other ways, highly indicative because it shows a very high activity base, despite a very low frequency of publication compared to that of Salvini and Meloni. As Gerodimos and Justinussen (2015) have shown, also the regular and low frequency of publication – analogous to Obama during his campaign for re-election in 2012 (4 posts per day) – can produce a high and dynamic ability to engage online. On Facebook, for example, Di Maio gets about 1,500 reactions on average per post, a performance indicator not much lower than Salvini's (just above 1,600), despite the opposite choice to stress the flow. But what is really interesting is that Di Maio receives just under 4,000 shares in his posts, almost double those of the League leader. And he surpasses Salvini also for his comments, demonstrating that the Five Star Movement – the first digital native party in national political history – can count on very active and organized support for the digital strategy. This element clearly shows that the rate of engagement does not depend directly on the frequency of flow and therefore, the strategy of saturation of the flow is functional above all to emphasise framing rather than audience responsiveness (Bracciale, Martella and Visentin 2018).

Similar results emerge with regard to the number of shares per post obtained by Meloni (almost 200) and that of comments received by Berlusconi. It should also be underlined that for an evaluation of the real effectiveness of the engagement strategy it is necessary to give different weight to likes (more easily obtainable because they respond to a lower cost for the user), reactions, comments and shares.

Figure 2. The communicative flow (no. of posts) of leaders on Facebook and media reaction, comments and shares received to the number of posts (15 April - 26 May 2019)

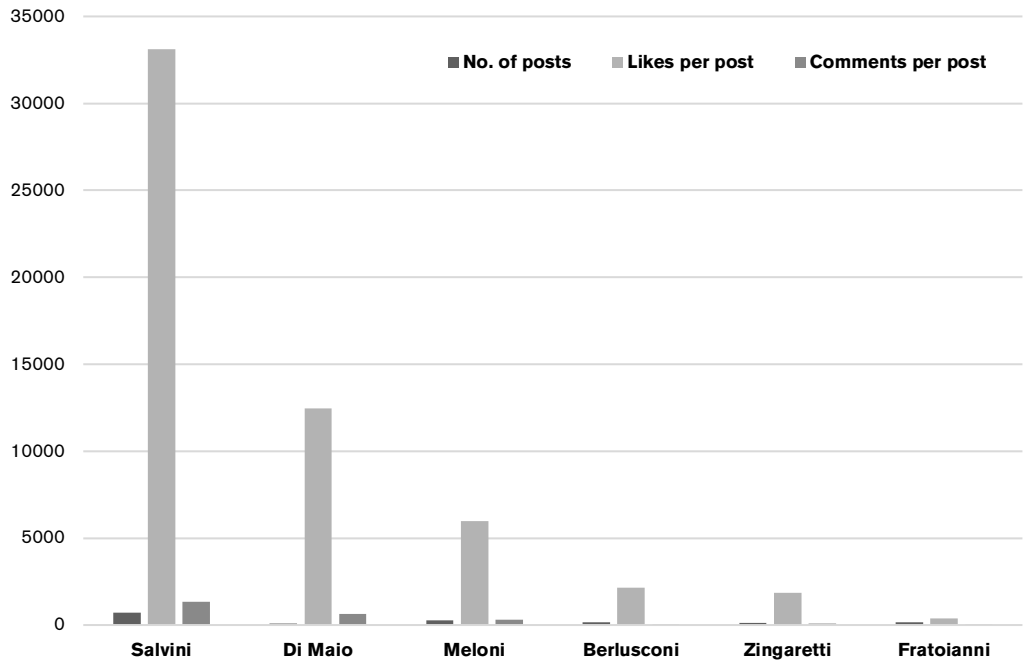


Instagram (Fig. 3) is still a new tool in the digital communication strategies of Italian political actors. In all the cases observed, the platform, which is based on the use of images, has not been recognized as a specific function in communication strategies, and is therefore different from Facebook and Twitter. This is different from the United States, where cross-platform integration strategies are more consolidated as a result of both a higher level of professionalization of political communication and the availability of budgets that are not comparable in terms of amount. For example, in the primary elections of the 2016 presidential elections, Rubio (Republican) and Sanders (Democrat) published on their Instagram pages original content not relaunched by Facebook in 96% and 89% of the posts respectively. The other candidates, however, reused content which was never in smaller quantities than 40% (Bossetta 2018. See also Stier *et al.* 2018). We can hypothesize that this is reflected in a substantial generalized ineffectiveness in the production of engagement for all the leaders considered. Fig. 3 shows, on the one hand, how the weak 'like' is the largely prevailing form of engagement, albeit with a clear difference in attractiveness. Salvini clearly seems to operate on a different scale from his competitors. On the other hand, the figure shows the substantial generalized inconsistency of the interaction with users through comments. An increasing corpus of research on the use of Instagram in electoral communication shows that the relatively low volume of interactions is still common to other European political actors in periods of campaign (Filimonov, Russmann and Svensson 2016; Larsson 2017; Russmann and Svensson 2017).[8]

[8] In general, however, it is indicative that most of the studies on Instagram in the election campaign do not have as their focus engagement, obviously not yet at a significant level, but the use of images and the

The generalized low frequency of comments, in fact, allows us to assume that the platform has not yet reached a sufficient centrality to impose itself as a competitive arena to Facebook and Twitter.

Figure 3. The flow of communication (no. of posts) of leaders on Instagram and like media, comments received compared to the number of posts (15 April to 26 May, 2019)



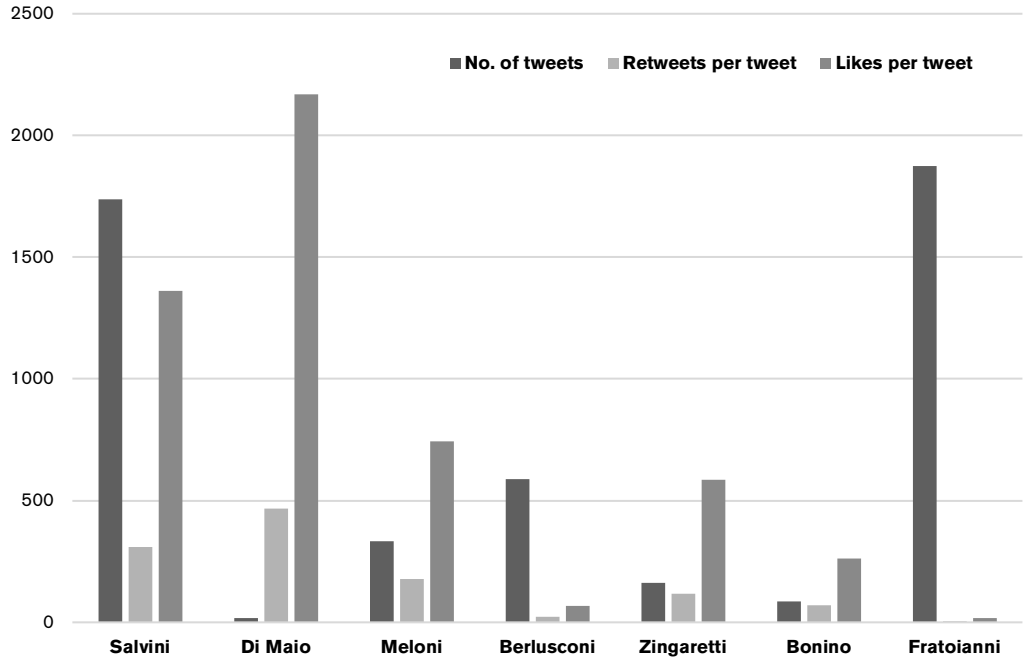
The strategy of saturation on Twitter (meaning a high frequency of tweeting) by Salvini and Fratoianni (Fig. 4) produces contrasting results in terms of public engagement. First of all, in terms of spreading the message, Salvini, with a base of more than 1 million followers, produced a massive number of tweets (1,737) and was quite successful in terms of 'like' per post (1,362). The massive flow, however, did not reward him in terms of retweets obtained (310). Fratoianni, who tweeted 1,874 content items to a very narrow base of 27,000 followers, did not activate Twitter audiences, collecting on average just over 16 likes and four retweets per post. Once again, a strong presence on the platform clashes, on the one hand, with the different widths of the fan base, and on the other, with its lesser activism.

Di Maio confirms on Twitter the collaborative nature of his fan base, as in the nature of a party and digital leadership. The Five Star Movement leader published only 18 tweets during the analysis period. However, he achieves better results than Salvini in terms of both retweets and likes: about 2,170 likes per post and 467 retweets. This demonstrates, on the one hand, that the fan base is more active; and, on the other, that it is effectively organized and has adequate infrastructure for digitally evolved campaigning. It is noteworthy that even the most recent empirical research seems to confirm that Twitter

construction of the visual storytelling of the candidate, according to the logic of personalization (Lalancette and Raynauld 2019).

remains – albeit to different extents in different social and political contexts – an élite channel compared to Facebook and Instagram (Jensen 2017; Larsson and Moe 2014).

Figure 4. The communicative flow (no. of posts) of leaders on Twitter retweeted and liked compared to the number of posts (15 April – 26 May, 2019)



The strategy of Meloni and Zingaretti is similar, and produces comparable effects, although Meloni confirms the attitude to another frequency of flow on this channel. So, the Brothers of Italy leader gets an average of 744 likes and 179 retweets, compared to a production limited to 333 tweets. Zingaretti gets on average 584 likes and 118 retweets for each of his 162 posts. Finally, Berlusconi gets a low rate of engagement from the Twitter audience, despite a significant frequency of publication with an average of 67 likes and 22 retweets per post. The same happens to Bonino who, having a richer fan base of about 190,000 followers, receives for each of her 86 tweets an average of 236 likes and 71 retweets.

3. The effects of issues management on Facebook

The monitoring of issue management activity enables significant results to be drawn on functionality from policy priorities in leaders' communication strategies on social networks. The promotional affordances of social media push leaders predominantly towards self-promotional and propagandistic communication. Almost half of the leaders' posts (48%) are classified as electoral propaganda.[9] The leaders' strategic communication,

[9] The issues were classified according to manual content analysis of posts, considering all published posts during the observed timeframe, as follows: electoral propaganda (posts containing texts and links that explicitly promote and invite the recipient to vote for the leader, his/her party and his/her candidates); national political debate post with texts and links with which the leader directly intervenes in the political debate in progress (i.e. parliamentary dynamics, public debate on government issues and the reporting

therefore, differs on the selection of the second and third most salient issues: Salvini and Di Maio use the power of issue ownership as a reflection of their government action. In fact, 12.4% of the posts of the League leader, then Minister of the Interior, are focused on security, and 8.5% on immigration, typical issues of the right. Di Maio's issue ownership is even clearer: then Minister of Labour and Economic Development, 21.9% of his posts deal with the issue of labour and 16.1% with intervention in the national political debate. Similar to Salvini, Meloni emphasizes the issue of security (12.5%), but at the same time differs in her marked attention to the dimension of values and rights (11.2%). The main focus is on patriotism and Italianism, which are spread over a wide range of topics: priority for Italians in accessing social services, and protection of 'Made in Italy' production to enhance the sovereign right-wing identity traits of the party. Zingaretti places the Democratic Party on the same issues as the 5 Star Movement, on the ground of which he plays his political strategy: work and social policies (13.7%) and national political debate (8.8%). In the same political space traditionally of reference for the left there is also Fratoianni: job and social policies (17.9%), news facts (11.7%) are often the subject of reframing for posts in negative campaigns against the policies of Salvini and Di Maio on the hottest issues such as immigration, labour rights and employment, and security.

Let's explore, now, the liberal side of the political scenario: Berlusconi focuses mainly on the internal debate (13.5%) and on economic issues (9.6%). Finally, Bonino, in predictable coherence with the leadership of a single issue party called '+Europe' — which places at the centre of its programme the strengthening of European integration policies up to the constitution of the United States of Europe — focuses on foreign policy and the Union (18.6%) and on the news as an expedient for political positioning on the issues at the centre of the media agenda. The marginality reserved by political actors for European and foreign policy issues is significant (2.4%), as already shown by other research (AA.VV. 2019; Cepernich *et. al.* 2019), for an election for the supranational parliament.

The narrative 'private life and leisure' is, first of all, a fundamental indicator of personalization (Enli and Moe, 2017) and, secondly, a sign of deep popularization of self-promotion strategies, in terms of mixing the codes of politics and those of pop culture (Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019; Street 1997; Van Zoonen 2005). Finally, the narrative indicates the intimization of self-representation in public (Stanyer 2013). This category is meaningfully present in the contents of Salvini (39 posts, 4.3%) and Meloni (22 posts, 5.6%), residual in those of Berlusconi (8 posts, 3.2%) and Fratoianni (2 posts, 1.2%), and completely absent in Bonino and Zingaretti.

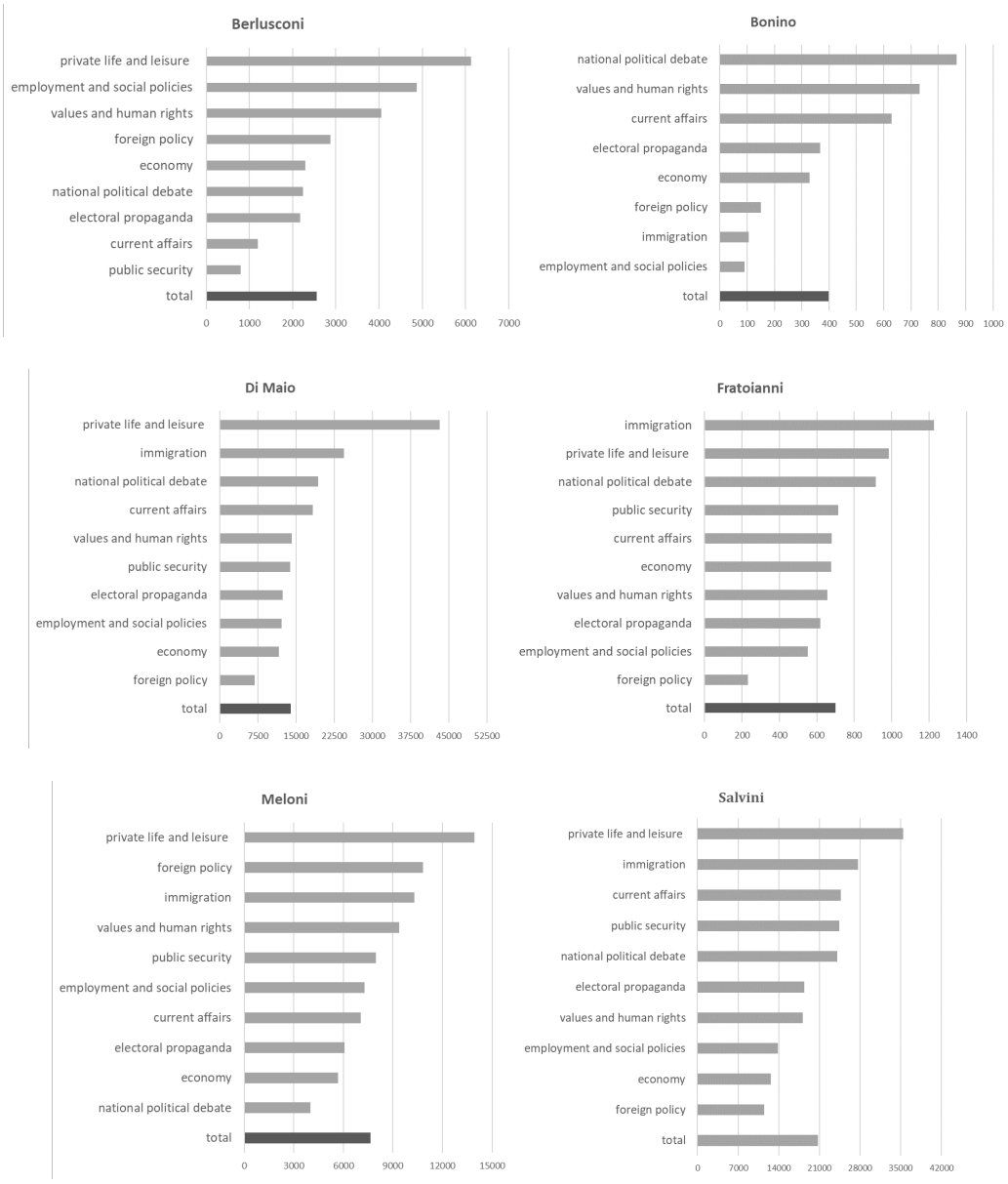
Despite the salience of issues recognized as central to the public agenda such as security (8.8%), employment and welfare policies (8.6%), domestic political life (7.8%), civil and social rights (6.1%) and immigration (5.6%), posts on the private life and free time of leaders are those that get the maximum public activation on Facebook in terms of engagement.[10] As Fig. 5 shows, it is the issue 'private life and leisure' that achieves the best performance, with indicators of involvement for all leaders who have made use of this narrative, with the

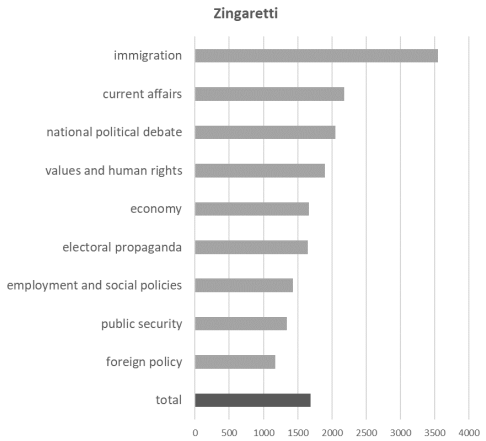
on facts and events with a political valence); values and human rights, foreign policy, public security, economy, employment and social policies, private life and leisure, immigration, current affairs (post containing texts and links with which the leader comments and reframes news reported by newspapers, TV news and so on).

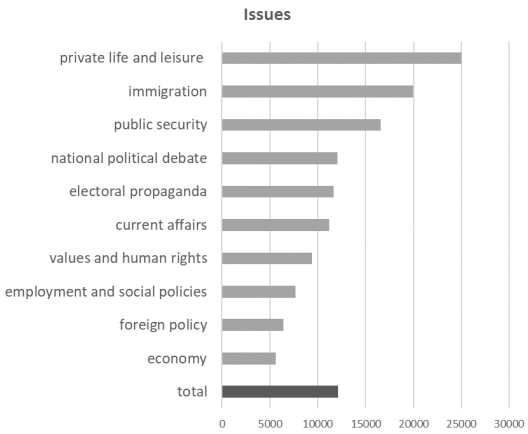
[10] The engagement rate is calculated by dividing the daily number of likes, comments and shares by the number of fans.

only exception being Fratoianni, for whom the issue of immigration is more engaging for his audience.

Figure 5. The leaders' issue rate of engagement per issue. The rate is the relationship between the daily sum of 'likes', comments and shares and the number of fans. (continues on next page)







Note: total posts 2,449.

So, what are the issues that most activate the audiences of monitored leaders? Berlusconi, Di Maio, Meloni and Salvini maximize their respective engagement rates when they personalize their narration of politics with posts on their private lives and leisure time. More generally, the popularization of the communication flow is a positive lever for increasing the involvement of the online public. These are posts in which the humanization and intimization of celebrity politicians becomes important (Wheeler 2013), while the political value of content is relegated to the background. Even though it is a counterintuitive hypothesis, it follows that electoral propaganda – which has been the main issue in the leaders' posts – tends instead to activate the user only to a limited extent.

The second most engaging issue is immigration. It is primary for Salvini, but also for Di Maio; these data highlight very significant dystonia between the latter's issue priorities and his fan base ones, which are more coherent with Salvini's. It is also true for Zingaretti and Fratoianni, who build on Facebook the counter-narrative to Salvini and to the government's anti-immigrant policies. The second most engaging issue for Meloni is foreign policy, where evidently the sovereign rhetoric against Europe has real power to involve the relevant public. Finally, Berlusconi engages more, in addition to his private life, in talking about economic development, employment and social policies.

The situation is different for Bonino and Zingaretti, who do not popularize digital narratives with the personalization of content. As we have seen, Zingaretti engages mainly by talking about immigration in antithesis to Salvini and government policies on the theme, but the second most engaging issue is the news. This is the effect of reframing facts from the political news used by the leader to position himself. The +Europe leader, on the other hand, engages her base, first of all, by intervening on the issues of the national political debate and then, in line with the Radical Party fan base, on the issue of liberal values and civil rights. Finally, Fratoianni is the only leader who, while exploiting the codes of intimidation (2 posts), is more successful with the fan base when intervening on the immigration issue.

3. The emotional narratives of leaders on Facebook

The emotionalization of digital messages and narratives[11] is now a pivotal element in the communication of political leaders in election campaigns. Overall, in fact, 55% of the posts analysed contain at least one of the emotions sought, 38% of which are positive, 16% negative.

Nevertheless, an increasing corpus of empirical studies highlights a process of 'negativization' of political communication, particularly on social media. This is because negative emotional frames tend to show a greater ability to engage network users (Brader 2006; Bracciale and Martella 2017; Cepernich and Novelli 2018; Neuman *et al*. 2007). The perverse effect of the negativization of social communication is represented by the risks of a structural polarization of the public sphere (Amnesty International, 2019). In any case, the communication of political actors to the European elections 2019 has not been characterized by markedly 'negative' tones, at least on Facebook. In fact, only 16.1% of posts are characterized by negative frames (attacks on the opponent, negative campaigning, etc.) (Tab. 2), while the positive frames of change and hope reach 38.8%.

Frame management in the leaders' communication shows significant differences. The leaders most oriented towards negative emotions are Meloni (27.2%), Fratoianni (27.2%) and Zingaretti (20.9%). Salvini, on the other hand, stopped at 12.4%; Berlusconi at 13.5%; Di Maio at 8.1% and Bonino at 4.7%. Particularly interesting is the negative rate in Salvini's posts, that mostly use the positive frame for alarmist issues, such as immigration and security, in order to reassure voters, triggering in opponents a negative counter-narrative as a criticism of positioning or blame. However, in consideration of the high frequency of publication, in absolute values, the quantity of negative posts produced by Salvini (112) is much higher than other leaders. Only Meloni, with 107 posts, is in step with him.

The effects of frame management on networked publics can be observed referring to the average engagement. Thus, the picture changes: in line with the main findings in the literature, all users respond more intensely to the negative messages of leaders (Weber 2013), with the sole exception of Fratoianni. The negative strategy produces evident effects on the average of Di Maio's engagement, who is also one of the leaders to use less negativity in posts. The same happens for Salvini and Meloni. When these leaders use negative frames, they engage their audiences more. Positive frames, on the other hand, are well below average capacity. Confirming the existence of a strong trend towards emotionalization, non-emotionalized posts involve fewer users for all leaders.

The analysis conducted in Table 3 by crossing the analytical dimensions of (a) emotional frames (b) issue of the post and (c) engagement product, shows interesting results. Considering the electoral propaganda posts, which are the most numerous, Bonino, Di Maio and Fratoianni achieve above-average activation when using positive communication registers. In contrast, Meloni, Salvini and Zingaretti activate the base more when the frame is negative. Only in Berlusconi's case is the lack of an emotional frame in propaganda posts a positive engagement factor.

[11] The emotional frames are the result of the aggregation subsequent to the classification of the posts on the basis of the prevailing emotional frame denoted by the content (Cepernich et al. 2018): joy, trust, hope, surprise (Positive); sadness, fear, disgust, anger (Negative).

Table 3. The most engaging communication frames on Facebook to the issues (15 April to 26 May 2019).

	Berlusconi	Bonino	Di Maio	Fratoianni	Meloni	Salvini	Zingaretti
Electoral propaganda	neutral	positive	positive	positive	negative	negative	negative
National political debate	negative	negative	negative	positive	negative	positive	negative
Values and human rights	positive	positive	negative	negative	neutral	negative	neutral
Foreign policy and Europe	positive	positive	mt	positive	negative	negative	positive
Public security	positive	np	negative	positive	negative	negative	negative
Economy	negative	mt	positive	positive	positive	negative	neutral
Employment and social policies	negative	mt	negative	positive	negative	neutral	negative
Private life and leisure	positive	np	positive	positive	negative	positive	np
Immigration	np	mt	mt	neutral	negative	positive	positive
Current affairs	negative	negative	negative	positive	negative	negative	positive
Total	negative	negative	negative	positive	negative	negative	negative

Legend: np=does not address the issue; mt=monotone

In general, the neutrality of the message benefits leaders only occasionally: Meloni and Zingaretti when the issue is 'values and human rights', only Zingaretti when talking about economics, Salvini on the issue of 'employment and social policies' and finally, Fratoianni on the issue of immigration.

The Left leader is also the only case in which the public react with greater involvement when the post contains a positive frame. This, as we have seen, is in the face of a flow built with a high rate of negativity (27%). For all the others, engagement is higher than average in the presence of a negative emotionalization of the message.

When the positive emotional framing produces a high capacity of engagement, this indicates the equal capacity of the fan base to support leaders on certain issues identifying their campaign: for example, Salvini on the hottest issues of the internal political debate and, above all, on immigration. These, in fact, are issues that have radically polarized opinions on the Italian political landscape. In the same way, Meloni's posts on the economy reflect a space where evidently sovereigntist positions are pushed within the social environment by the widespread agreement of the fan base.

Finally, a separate consideration about the 'private life and leisure' issue is that it is a powerful driver of engagement with positive frames. Although the popularization of the communication flow is a smaller part of content production, it confirms its high potential in terms of engagement. This is true, except for Meloni, who often uses irony to place a negative frame on her personal and private life.

5. Conclusions

This article investigated the degree of development of the electoral communication of Italian leaders in a context of second-order elections – as are those for the European Parliament – but which have significant national importance. The aim was to verify which attitudes and forms of adaptation political leaders have developed towards the dominant logics in digital communication.

Overall, the emergence of 'hyperleaders' in online political communication is confirmed, i.e. leaders who are more adaptive than others to digital environments and the normativity of their grammar. In line with what emerged in the 2018 political elections (Cepernich 2019), Salvini, Di Maio and Meloni share specific attitudes and forms of adaptation to the network media logic. These attributes include, first of all, the breadth of the public, if we consider the three social networks monitored as a whole and second, the communicative strategy that favours interactions and, therefore, engagement, each with its own characteristics. Third is the strategic use of key issues of the campaign. Significant examples of efficient frame management are the popularization and focusing of key issues to contain channel redundancy within the communication flow, which is particularly stressed in the election campaign. Finally, there is the emotionality rate of the posts, which is above the system average in the communication of Meloni (61.6%), Salvini (60.6%) and Zingaretti (60.4%). The strategic use of the negative frame – that is, the one that is technically the most mobilizing – characterizes only two of the three most digital 'hyperleaders': Meloni and Salvini. This responds to specific choices of communicative style and political rhetoric.

Let's consider, first of all, the extent of each leader's audience. Salvini has the largest audience. More than 3.6 million followers on Facebook make his presence on the platform comparable in terms of visibility effects to those of a mass medium. In addition, Salvini is in a position of great advantage on all social networks observed. Apart from this striking case of 'digital hyperleader', the leaders of the emerging right (Salvini and Meloni) and Luigi Di Maio (leader of the Five Star Movement) demonstrate greater efficiency of audience building. This is compared to a major weakness of the leaders of the left, Zingaretti, Fratoianni and Bonino: in fact, they are permanently below the threshold of half a million followers on all strategic social networks.

Looking at the frequency of publication and the density of the flow, Salvini is the only one showing a saturation goal. Di Maio and Meloni also publish above-average posts on Facebook, confirming certain common attitudes towards digital strategies. On Instagram, instead, only Meloni follows Salvini, while on Twitter only Fratoianni competes with the leader of the League, but with much lower results for engagement. In fact, considering the ability to engage the public related to the frequency of flow, we find that on Facebook, and especially on Twitter, Di Maio exceeds Salvini for engagement, particularly with regard to comments and sharing. It is, therefore, necessary to underline, once again, both the strongly participative nature of the Five Star Movement, and the evidence that stressing the flow does not automatically mean making it more productive. A second relevant fact, instead, is the homogeneous low capacity of Instagram to generate engagement, if we exclude the likes of Salvini and – to a significantly lesser extent – of Di Maio and Meloni.

An analogously significant result emerges from the analysis of engagement capacity through issue management on Facebook. On the one hand, in fact, the monitoring confirms the dual strategic use of classic issues: self-promotion through direct propaganda and the insistence on key issues with which to place oneself and one's party in the political scenario. On the other hand, however, it is very interesting to note that in the majority of cases the most engaging posts are not on key issues, but on the leaders' private lives and leisure time. This means that the personalization and popularization of messages pay off in terms of activating online audiences more than anything else. The second most engaging issue for most of the leaders considered is immigration, with no significant differences between left and right.

Finally, as regards the strategies of frame management and emotionalization of the messages, a counterintuitive result is that only 16% of the electoral communication of leaders is framed negatively. The highest rate of content negativization is found in Meloni, Fratoianni and Zingaretti (over 20%), while Salvini is below with 12.4% of negative posts. The League leader, in fact, tends to attribute positive frames to alarmist themes, from his points of view, such as immigration and security. However, this research largely confirms the greater engagement potential of negativity compared to positivity. The average engagement, in fact, is greater if the frame used by the leader is negative in relation to almost all the issues, with the only exception being Fratoianni. The positive frame is most engaging, however, when the leader personalizes the flow with light news from his private life.

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The neo-fascist territorial legacy and the success of the Lega in the 2019 European elections: a multilevel approach

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Abstract

In Italy, the Lega obtained outstanding electoral success in the 2019 European elections, becoming the first party on the political spectrum. Previous literature has argued that this performance can be attributed to the leadership of Matteo Salvini, who transformed the Lega from an ethno-regionalist party into a national right-wing party (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018). Previous research has also argued that the recent geographical trajectories of the party's success might be associated with the prevalence of a neo-fascist minority during the First Republic (e.g. Mancosu, 2015). However, the empirical evidence comes from aggregate official results and focuses only on some specific Italian regions of the so-called 'red-zone'. By employing multilevel models on survey data, this paper tests whether this expectation holds also at the individual level, and in a larger geographical area. The findings show that individual propensities to vote for the Lega in 2019 are associated with the percentage of votes obtained more than forty years ago by the Movimento Sociale Italiano in the municipality where the respondent lives, but only in central and southern Italian regions, in which the Lega was an irrelevant competitor before Salvini's leadership. These findings provide additional evidence concerning the ideological drivers of preferences for the Lega.

1. Introduction

In Italy, the most relevant outcome of the 2019 European Elections was the outstanding consensus for the Lega, which obtained more than 9 million votes, equal to 34% of valid votes. Since its foundation about thirty years ago, the Lega, for the first time, has become the most supported party on the political landscape at the national level. The result is even more stunning when considering the party's strong ethno-regionalist background, rooted in the northern part of the country. We should also consider that the Lega's best performance at the national level before the leadership of Matteo Salvini, who became leader of the party in December 2013, was far lower than the most recent one – dating back to the 1996 national elections, when 3.8 million people voted for Lega Nord (about 10% of valid votes).

Until a few years ago, the electoral performance of the Lega could be depicted by the metaphor of an expanding and contracting lung, always confined to the northern regions of the country (Segatti and Vezzoni, 2011). In political times characterized by

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the relative stability of the political system, the Lega reduced its area of consensus and maintained some support only around its strongholds. In more unstable political periods (e.g. the 1992 and 1996 elections, characterized by significant political turmoil), support for the Lega overcame its traditional boundaries by reaching some peripheral areas of its territorial basin, such as some provinces of Emilia-Romagna. In the last electoral cycle, pundits and academics have observed the increasing nationalization of the Lega, which largely increased its consensus in the red area in the 2015 regional elections and, starting from the 2018 national elections, became a relevant political actor even in central and southern regions.

This paper relies on the strand of literature that posits the relevance of mechanisms of *behavioural path dependence* to understanding social and political facts (e.g. Diamanti, 2003; Acharya et al., 2018). According to this literature, individual attitudes and behaviours are partially related to a self-reinforcing set of geographically-located behaviours and attitudes that persist over time. Similarly to institutional path dependence (Putnam et al., 1993), behavioural path dependence literature argues that attitudes are passed down through generations, by means of grass-roots learning mechanisms (in this respect, the role of primary socialization is crucial) and by local social structures (schools, churches, associations, etc.) that persist in the territory (Sani, 1976; Wittenberg, 2006; Voigtländer and Voth, 2012; Acharya et al., 2018). As a result, we are able to trace a certain political culture – defined geographically – back to its roots by identifying the characteristics of the same geographical place several decades (or even centuries) before.

Scholars have stressed that the success of the Lega is, among other things, related to the rapid change in the party agenda enacted by the new leader, Matteo Salvini, who aimed to transform what was originally an ethno-regionalist party into an extreme right-wing national one (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018). In this regard, the Lega started adopting a totally new set of claims and communication strategies, sometimes appealing to a narrative that resonates with that of the neo-fascist parties of the First Republic (above all, the Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI). According to previous studies (Mancosu, 2015; Mancosu and Ladini, 2018), in regions in which the Lega has never obtained a sufficient level of support because of its former ethno-regionalist structure, this new – more extreme and nationalist – rhetoric might have been particularly appealing for voters living in areas with a stronger neo-fascist political tradition. The present paper aims to test the patterns of geographical diffusion of the 'new' Lega in central and southern Italian regions by providing, among others, a contextual-level explanation of the success of Salvini's Lega.

We combine survey data at the individual level with official data at the contextual level to show that, in the centre-south of Italy, individual propensities to vote for the Lega during the 2019 election campaign are positively correlated with the electoral performance of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (measured more than forty years ago) in the municipality where the respondents live.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section focuses on the success of the Lega in the 2019 European elections beyond its traditional borders, illustrates the shift in the communication strategy of the party, and describes the possible social mechanisms fostering the party's diffusion trajectories. The third section explains data, variables and

models employed in the paper; the fourth section presents the results and the fifth draws some conclusions and suggests some limitations of the paper.

2. Background

2.1. The Lega beyond its borders

Previous studies have provided various explanations for the increased performance of the Lega on the political spectrum and the overcoming of its traditional borders (Mancosu, 2015; Albertazzi et al., 2018; Mancosu and Ladini, 2018; Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018). Nonetheless, these explanations agree that the success of the Lega is largely dependent on the shift in the party's rhetoric carried out by Matteo Salvini. Since he took office, the new leader of the party has characterized his political action by transforming the Lega from a somewhat traditional right-wing regionalist party (Tarchi, 1998), into a national/nationalist right-wing party (Albertazzi et al., 2018; Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018) radically based on anti-immigrant and anti-EU rhetoric.

As outlined by Passarelli and Tuorto (2018, 90), although the Lega started to move towards the right in the mid-1990s, the leadership of Salvini 'sped up' the process of radicalization of the party. This strategy was intended to increase the potential electoral basin of the Lega, with the realization that, among the Italian population, anti-immigration attitudes are widespread (Sniderman et al., 2002; Vezzoni, 2018) and anti-EU attitudes have substantially increased in the last 20 years (see Albertazzi, 2016; Brunazzo and Della Sala, 2016; Serricchio, 2018).

Moreover, the refugee crisis which led to the arrival of about 600,000 immigrants in Italy from 2014 to 2017 contributed to making the voice of the Lega louder on the immigration issue. In this respect, we should outline that the salience of this issue dramatically increased between 2013, when only 4% of Italians considered it as the first or second Italian problem, and 2018, when the percentage rose to 23% (Vezzoni, 2018). By shifting its main enemy from Rome to Brussels (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017) and avoiding attacks against southern Italians (largely present in the first incarnation of the party, Lega Nord), Salvini's Lega has been successful in going beyond its traditional geographical boundaries.

Starting from the last election of the pre-Salvini era – the 2013 national elections in which the share of votes for the Lega was around 4% – the positive trend of party support has led the Lega to largely increase its consensus at every election (obtaining 6% of valid votes in the 2014 European elections, 17% during the 2018 national elections, and 34% in the 2019 European elections). To appreciate the effectiveness of the Lega's strategy, Table 1 compares the percentages of valid votes for the Lega before and after the appointment of Matteo Salvini as leader of the party in two European elections (2019 and 2009 in which, incidentally, party performance was above the historical average up to that moment).[1]

[1] The five areas considered refer to the Istat geographical categorization, where the northwest is composed of Valle d'Aosta, Liguria, Piemonte and Lombardia, northeast includes Veneto, Friuli, Trentino-Alto Adige and Emilia-Romagna, Centre includes Toscana, Marche, Umbria and Lazio, South includes Abruzzo, Molise, Puglia, Basilicata, Campania, and Calabria, and Islands comprise Sicily and Sardegna. We decided not to employ the geopolitical categorization (Galli, 1968), in order to keep separate Emilia

Table 1. Voting percentages for the Lega in 2009 and 2019 European Elections in Italy

Geographical area	Lega Nord 2009 (pre-Salvini)	Lega 2019 (post-Salvini)	Delta
North-West	19.4	40.7	110%
North-East	19	41	116%
Centre	3	33.5	1017%
South	0.6	23.5	3817%
Islands	0.4	22.4	5500%
Italy	**10.2**	**34.3**	**236%**

In addition to the party's growth in its strongholds (in which the Lega doubled its strength in the northeast and northwest), the most stunning performance is the increase in support in places in which the party was substantially irrelevant 10 years ago (becoming 11 times larger in the centre, 39 times in the south and 56 times in the islands). We can thus say that the 2019 European elections consolidated the new geographical pattern which started at the beginning of Salvini's office.

2.2. A neo-fascist inheritance?

Why did this operation become so effective? The new era of the Lega comes in a moment of crisis of the centre-right coalition, which began with the economic crisis of 2011. The progressive erosion of the image and political credibility of the main shareholder of the centre-right coalition, Silvio Berlusconi, and his personal party Forza Italia, combined with the corruption scandal that involved the former leader of Lega Nord, Umberto Bossi, in 2012, allowed new actors to exploit the potential of this political space.

If, on the one hand, the opening of this political space has been crucial in the new success of the Lega, on the other it is also important to understand what kind of claims and communication strategies filled this political gap. Salvini's communication, since the very beginning of his office, has been aggressive and mainly based on negative campaigning (Bracciale and Martella, 2017), aimed at targeting a certain number of enemies of his potential electoral constituency (immigrants, NGOs, intellectuals, and everything that might recall the 'left' or the 'outgroup') and repeatedly attacking them on every medium at his disposal.

The communication strategy enacted by the new leadership was also characterized by a certain 'hidden' openness to even more extreme positions, a form of scantily disguised sympathy towards more extreme right-wing parties and, in general, to the neo-fascist area. For instance, as noticed by De Giorgi and Tronconi (2018, 341), 'While the use of violence by [...] extreme right groups was apparently condemned, [...] the League [...] often justified episodes of racism and xenophobia that took place during the course of 2017, placing the blame ultimately on the various governments in office over recent years and the decisions they took on immigration'. Other examples can be traced back by employing the direct communication of its leader via social media, often characterized by

Romagna, where the Lega was a relevant competitor even before Salvini's leadership (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2012, 2018), and the other regions belonging to the 'red zone', where the Lega obtained a very low consensus in the pre-Salvini period (see Mancosu and Ladini, 2018).

positive referencing to the public works done during the so-called 'Ventennio' (the 1922-1943 period of fascist dictatorship, see Rame, 2018). Although this communication style could be interpreted as a form of tactical 'dog-whistle politics' (Haney-Lòpez, 2014), instead of a clear endorsement of the dictatorship, the subtle but insistent references to the fascist regime and its most important characters might have produced some effect on the resilient minority of Italian voters that look with sympathy and nostalgia on the Ventennio period as a 'golden age' of order, discipline and security (see Castelli Gattinara, 2018). This shift toward the right in the rhetoric of the party was also reflected in the profile of the voters of the Lega. According to the Itanes data, while in the mid-1990s, on average, voters of Lega Nord located themselves at the centre of the left-right (0-10) scale, their average values increased from 6.8 to 7.8 from 2001 to 2013, and to 8.2 in 2018 (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018).

In this respect, several studies have argued that the Lega diffusion trajectories in the last 5 years might be partially explained by the more extremist and nationalist turn operated by Salvini. In some of these studies (Mancosu, 2015; Mancosu and Ladini, 2018), it is shown, by means of aggregate analyses, that places in which the performance of the 'new' Lega was stronger are also those contexts in which the neo-fascist minority, measured by means of the support for the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) in the '70s, was strong as well.

As concerns the social mechanism that might explain this empirical evidence, we move in the wake of the strand of literature aimed at explaining political and electoral behaviour by means of patterns of 'behavioural path dependence' (Acharya et al., 2018). Analogously to path dependence in institutions (see, above all, Putnam et al., 1993) this strand of literature argues that attitudes and behaviours become, in some way, self-reinforcing: once a path of development is embedded in the political culture of a certain geographical space, it becomes increasingly harder to erase. Similarly to institutions like language, religion and rituals, attitudes are passed down from generation to generation, encouraged by families and mechanisms of primary socialization and by social structures, such as schools, churches, political and non-political institutions rooted in the territory (see Acharya et al., 2018). Many examples which suggest behavioural path dependence can be traced back in the literature: Voigtländer and Voth (2012) show that the Nazi Party's support in 1933 elections was higher in places that had Jewish pogroms during the fourteenth century (showing a persistence in behaviour of almost 500 years); Wittenberg (2006), by analyzing voting behaviour in Hungary before and after the communist period, shows that the performance of right-wing parties after communism was higher in areas in which right-wing parties had higher consensus during the pre-communist period.

The social mechanism argued in these studies is somewhat similar to theories explaining the persistence over time of scattered zones of political influence in Italy: areas with a strong communist or Christian-democratic tradition during the First Republic were usually characterized by a stronger activism of militants of the local majority party, as well as a stronger presence of associations connected to the party itself (Bellucci and Segatti, 2010). Moreover, in these areas, it was more likely that the primary socialization, operated by the family of origin, was more able to convey a precise set of values compatible with the ideology of the dominant party.

In our case, the mechanisms argued here have a probabilistic component. Given certain contextual conditions, a larger quota of the local electoral body will be more likely to accept a neo-fascist rhetoric if the characteristics of the context are exogenously more permeable to such rhetoric. What has been argued in the previous literature, thus, is that the shift of the communication operated by Salvini could have contributed to triggering parts of the electoral body that were exogenously prone to accepting this type of rhetoric (and that one of the more prompt measures to identify the exogenous propensity to accept it is the prevalence of the neo-fascist right in a previous period). We need to outline that since support for the MSI during the First Republic was far lower than that for the Democrazia Cristiana and Partito Comunista Italiano, its political tradition could be referred to as a 'minority political tradition' (Mancosu and Ladini, 2018). Moving from the suggestion of Sani (1976, 394), who argued that the 'search for contextual forces shaping political attitudes should not be limited only to the identification of the major political tradition of the larger community', our contribution aims at analysing how neo-fascist political traditions could be reflected in recent voting trajectories.

The abovementioned empirical research on the topic presents at least two drawbacks: first, almost all the studies aiming to explain the new Lega's geographical trajectories of success with the scattered neo-fascist legacy of the context are mainly aggregate analyses, based on official electoral data at the municipality or provincial level, over a small part of the territory (Mancosu, 2015; Mancosu and Ladini, 2018). This approach, which in addition does not take into account southern regions that saw a massive increase in support for the Lega in 2019, keeps open concerns regarding the inference to the entire part of the country exposed to the party's outbreak and exposes these studies to issues of ecological fallacy (Robinson, 1950). In other words, just by looking at the aggregate, we do not have the 'smoking gun' of the effect of the context on individual attitudes and behaviours.

2.3. Hypotheses

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, we assess whether contextual characteristics are able to explain, by means of an aggregate measure, the variance of likelihood to vote for the Lega explicitly *at the individual level*, net of several other individual-level controls. Second, we extend previous analyses (focusing on a few regions) to the entire country, by looking in particular at central and southern regions, in which the Lega was an (almost) irrelevant competitor before Salvini's leadership, and in which the increase of consensus has been more impressive in relative terms. These regions also made up the most important basin of the MSI during the First Republic (see Ignazi, 1998), leading to a more precise test of our theoretical framework. In addition, while the diffusion of Lega Nord in northern regions took place in a period in which the party had ethno-regionalist connotations, the unprecedented diffusion of the Lega beyond its strongholds coincided with the shift of the party to nationalistic and more radical right-wing positions. In this respect, we hypothesize that the effect of MSI strength on individual support for the Lega will be stronger in central and southern regions. The first hypothesis will thus read as follows:

H1. *Contextual levels of the neo-fascist minority are positively associated with individual propensities to vote for the Lega in the 2019 European elections, especially in the centre-south.*

As an additional drawback, previous studies do not take into account the transformation of the extreme right-wing parties in the past decades. A correlation between the strength of the Lega (either at the aggregate or individual level) in recent elections and the permeability of the context to the MSI, *per se*, does not automatically lead to a corroboration of the mechanism depicted above. As stressed in the literature, indeed, the neo-fascist right has undergone several vicissitudes since the end of the First and the beginning of the Second Republic (see Ignazi, 1998). In 1993, the MSI leadership abandoned the ideological references to fascism (which clearly characterized the MSI during the First Republic), by dissolving the old party and founding Alleanza Nazionale, a more moderate party that aimed at qualifying itself as a potential governing party. The ideological shift, similar to the one that invested the centre-left parties in the same period, allowed this new party to receive 5 million votes at its first appearance in the 1994 elections, almost doubling the historical best performance of the MSI (almost 3 million votes in 1972). However, the relationship between the two parties remained quite strong. For instance, the municipal-level correlation between the Movimento Sociale Italiano in 1976 and Alleanza Nazionale in 2001 – two periods in which the voting percentage for the parties was about one percentage point higher than their average – is indeed equal to .54 (authors' analysis). It is thus possible that the places in which the MSI was strong became progressively less extreme, aided, in this process, by the decreasing extremism of the political entrepreneur which they referred to. The effect of the neo-fascist tradition on the Lega must thus be discounted by the effect of a subsequent, and less extreme political entrepreneur that might have mitigated the original extreme ideological tenet of MSI in the context. The second hypothesis will thus read as follows:

H2. *Contextual levels of the neo-fascist minority in the centre-south are positively associated with individual propensities to vote for the Lega in the 2019 European elections, irrespective of the contextual performance of Alleanza Nazionale during the Second Republic.*

3. Data and methods

To test our hypotheses, we employed a survey carried out in Italy before the 2019 European elections (from 13 March to 15 May, 2019). Overall, 11,063 respondents from an opt-in panel of a private company (SWG) were interviewed through the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) mode. The survey contains questions referring to the socio-demographic, attitudinal, and behavioural characteristics of the respondents. In addition, the survey contains information on the municipality in which the respondents live. This piece of information is employed here to link the individual dataset with the election results extracted from the official database of the Italian Ministry of the Interior. In particular, the voting percentages for the Movimento Sociale Italiano in 1976[2]

[2] The distribution of the voting percentages for the MSI in the 1976 national elections by geographical area are reported in Appendix 1. To take into account possible bias due to the extreme values of the MSI strength in some municipalities, we also attempted to fit the same models without these extreme values. Results, available on request, are substantially equal to those presented in this article.

and Alleanza Nazionale in 2001 at the municipality level have been matched with every respondent declaring a non-missing municipality of residence.

In this paper, we present four different models with the aim of providing consistent empirical evidence to back our hypotheses. The dependent variable is the individual propensity to vote for the Lega, measured by means of a 0-10 scale in which the respondents express the likelihood of their voting for the party, with 0 meaning '0% likelihood' and 10 meaning '100% likelihood' (for more information on the measure see van der Eijk et al., 2006). The first model, fitted only on respondents coming from the northern regions (northeast and northwest), explains the variation of the propensity to vote for the Lega conditional to the level of support for the MSI at the municipal level in 1976. The second model also includes the share of votes for Alleanza Nazionale at the municipal level as control variable. In this way, we are able to assess whether the propensities to vote for the Lega are associated with the permeability to the neo-fascist tradition of the context in which people live, controlling for the level of the (more moderate) heir to this tradition in a subsequent election (Alleanza Nazionale). The same two models are fitted only on the respondents living in central and southern regions (third and fourth model)[3]. All the models also include a set of individual-level control variables: gender, age group (six categories: <25, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65 and more), educational level (three categories: primary, secondary, and tertiary), perceived wealth (five categories: wealthy, living easily, living with difficulties, living with huge difficulties, poor), and left-right self-placement on a 0-10 scale recoded in 6 categories (left: 0-1; centre-left: 2-3; centre: 4-6; centre-right: 7-8; right: 9-10; refused to locate).[4] According to our hypotheses, we could expect that the coefficient of MSI will be positive and significant in the centre-south of the country, net of control variables.

To control for the possible inflation of standard errors because of the hierarchical structure of the data, we employ linear multilevel random-intercept regression models (Snijders and Boskers, 1999). This multilevel approach has some antecedents in the study of Italian electoral behaviour aimed at analysing the role of territorial political traditions on vote choice (Vezzoni, 2008). To further take into account the context at a lower level of specification, all the models are fitted with a fixed-effect control that indicates the Istat geographical area to which the respondent belongs.

4. Results

Table 2 shows the coefficients for the four multilevel regression models, fitted on respondents living in the northern (Model 1 and 2) and central-southern (Model 3 and 4) regions.

[3] To stress the differences in voting behaviour for the League between north and centre-south we employed a separated model approach instead of estimating a single pooled model with an interaction between MSI strength and a dichotomous north/centre-south variable. This choice is explained by both theoretical and methodological reasons: first, insofar as we deal with the geographically scattered support for the Lega, subdividing north and centre-south signals that we are dealing with two different subnational contexts that should be treated in different ways (see Passarelli and Tuorto, 2012). Second, by applying a two-model approach, we provide a more conservative interpretation of the effects that, in this way are estimated separately in the two subnational contexts (a pooled approach would indeed provide a weighted average of the control variables' effects without taking into account geographical specificities).
[4] All the question wordings can be found in Appendix 2.

With regard to the control variables, although we can detect some differences between the models, results are in line with previous literature (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018). All over the country, the propensities to vote for the Lega are far higher among respondents with a low educational level, whose average value is more than one point higher than tertiary educated ones, both in northern and central-southern regions.

Table 2. Multilevel linear regression models to study the propensity to vote for the Lega

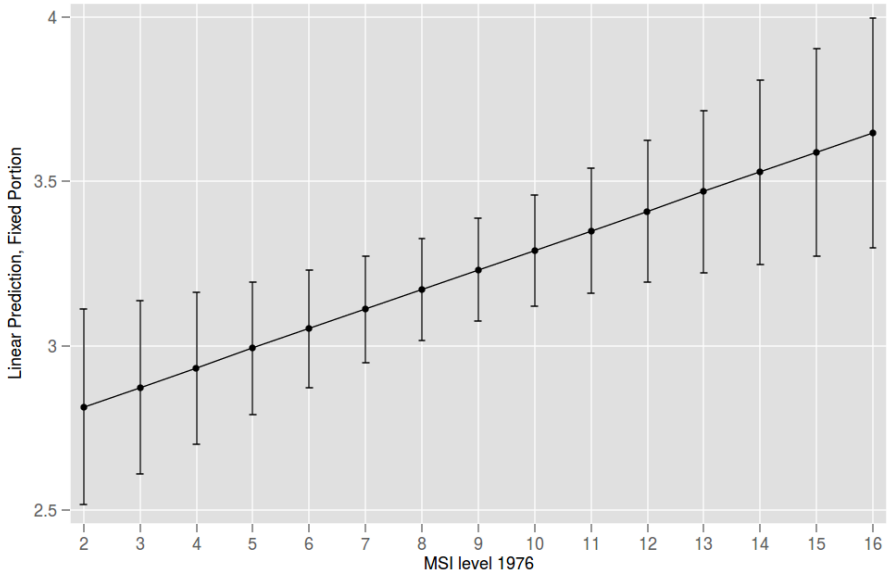
Indep. Variables	Model 1 North only Lega PTV		Model 2 North only Lega PTV		Model 3 Centre-south only Lega PTV		Model 4 Centre-south only Lega PTV	
MSI municipal level (1976)	-0.00	(0.04)	0.03	(0.06)	0.06***	(0.02)	0.06***	(0.02)
AN municipal level (2001)			-0.03	(0.03)			-0.01	(0.02)
Gender: Female	0.33***	(0.09)	0.32***	(0.09)	0.26***	(0.09)	0.27***	(0.09)
Age: 25-34 (ref. <25)	0.04	(0.22)	0.03	(0.22)	-0.22	(0.22)	-0.22	(0.22)
35-44	0.25	(0.21)	0.25	(0.21)	0.18	(0.21)	0.18	(0.21)
45-54	0.57***	(0.21)	0.57***	(0.21)	0.22	(0.21)	0.22	(0.21)
55-64	0.02	(0.21)	0.02	(0.21)	-0.03	(0.21)	-0.03	(0.21)
>64	-0.19	(0.20)	-0.19	(0.20)	-0.43**	(0.20)	-0.43**	(0.20)
Education level: Secondary (ref. Primary)	-0.23	(0.18)	-0.23	(0.18)	-0.58***	(0.18)	-0.58***	(0.18)
Tertiary	-1.09***	(0.19)	-1.09***	(0.19)	-1.39***	(0.19)	-1.39***	(0.19)
Income: I can live easily (ref. I'm wealthy)	-0.04	(0.34)	-0.04	(0.34)	-0.47	(0.36)	-0.47	(0.36)
I have difficulties	0.35	(0.35)	0.35	(0.35)	-0.56	(0.36)	-0.56	(0.36)
I have huge difficulties	0.79**	(0.37)	0.80**	(0.37)	-0.56	(0.38)	-0.56	(0.38)
I feel poor	0.65	(0.43)	0.65	(0.43)	-0.07	(0.41)	-0.07	(0.41)
Left-right s-p: Centre-right (ref. Right)	-1.07***	(0.19)	-1.07***	(0.19)	-0.86***	(0.20)	-0.86***	(0.20)
Centre	-3.56***	(0.22)	-3.57***	(0.22)	-2.28***	(0.22)	-2.28***	(0.22)
Centre-left	-6.30***	(0.18)	-6.30***	(0.18)	-5.01***	(0.18)	-5.01***	(0.18)
Left	-6.86***	(0.19)	-6.86***	(0.19)	-5.37***	(0.19)	-5.37***	(0.19)
Not located	-4.73***	(0.19)	-4.74***	(0.19)	-3.52***	(0.19)	-3.52***	(0.19)
Constant	7.97***	(0.46)	8.15***	(0.49)	7.75***	(0.48)	7.84***	(0.55)
Level-2 variance	0.17**	(0.08)	0.17**	(0.08)	0.24***	(0.07)	0.24***	(0.07)
Level-1 variance	1.08***	(0.01)	1.08***	(0.01)	1.13***	(0.01)	1.13***	(0.01)
Observations	*4,467*		*4,467*		*5,121*		*5,121*	
Number of groups	*1,053*		*1,053*		*922*		*922*	

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1 (the models contain fixed effect for the geographical area – coefficients not shown).

When looking at gender, women present on average a propensity to vote for the Lega which is 0.3 higher than men. Concerning age groups, the analysis shows that, in the south, older voters (age > 64) have the lowest propensity to vote for the Lega, In the north,

45-54 year old individuals are more likely to choose the Lega than the youngest ones. As expected, individuals who locate themselves at the extreme right pole of the left-right scale had the highest propensity to vote for the Lega in the 2019 European elections. In line with the argument on the radicalization of the Lega, they are even significantly more supportive of the party compared to respondents locating themselves on the centre-right. Individual economic conditions seem to be associated with a preference for the Lega only in the north, with people with difficulties having a higher propensity to vote for the party.

Figure 1. Predicted propensities to vote for the Lega according to the different levels of MSI at the municipal level in 1976 (95% confidence intervals) – centre-south only, Model 4 predictions



Our two substantively relevant independent variables are, as stressed above, the municipal-level strength of the MSI in 1976, and the level of the less extreme heir to this party, Alleanza Nazionale, about twenty years before the 2019 elections. Results seem to support our hypotheses. The association between the strength of the MSI in the municipality and the propensity to vote for the Lega in 2019 is positive and significant, but only in the south. In the north, the traditional stronghold of the party, we find no correlation between MSI performance and individual support for the Lega. This is further proof of the fact that the neo-fascist explanation of party trajectories can be an explanation only in the centre-south of the country.

Another relevant result is that this outcome is stable even when controlling for the municipal levels of Alleanza Nazionale, the less extreme heir to the MSI, which turns out to be non-significant in explaining the variation in the propensity to vote for the Lega.[5]

[5] Since the two variables might present issues of multicollinearity, we performed a variance inflation factor (VIF) test on the model. In both north and centre-south models, the VIF score of MSI and AN variables are around 2, a value that reassures us regarding the absence of multicollinearity issues (in general, a VIF value over 5 or 10 starts to be worrisome; see Hair et al., 2010).

An analysis of the magnitude of the effects is enlightening as to the relevance of the MSI effect in shaping voters' attitudes and behaviours. As figure 1 shows, if we select the central 90% of the distribution of our independent variable, the predicted propensity to vote for the Lega (on a 0-10 scale) is equal to 2.8 when people live in a municipality in which the share of votes for the MSI was around 2%. Instead, when people exposed to areas which are more permeable to the neo-fascist minority (level of MSI in 1976 equal to 14% on valid votes), their average propensity to vote is 0.8 points higher, equal to 3.6.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This paper aims to test the relevance of one possible explanation for the success of the Lega in the 2019 European elections in Italy, by focusing especially on central and southern regions where the consensus for the Lega was irrelevant before Matteo Salvini's leadership. To do so, we moved from the previous literature (see Mancosu, 2015; Mancosu and Ladini, 2018) by looking at the persistence of the neo-fascist political tradition in the vote for the new Lega. According to this view, one of the communication strategies of Salvini started from the standpoint that support for the Lega could expand by exploiting a potential national basin of extreme right-wing voters who were, if not contiguous, not reluctant to a classical set of neo-fascist claims (which include Ventennio nostalgia, a supremacist view of the Italian cultural and ethnic milieux, and a general preference for a 'strong leader' figure). Some of the rhetoric in the communication strategy of the Lega's leader followed this general trend and progressively shifted its claims and political action to the extreme right of the political spectrum and to the centre-south as regards the geographical diffusion trajectories. Previous research aimed at finding an association between the geographical scattering of the Lega in the last 4-5 years and the contexts in which the extreme right minority was stronger, were mainly based on aggregate data – a strategy that does not allow us to clearly identify causal mechanisms.

In this paper, we aimed to explain the electoral success of the Lega in 2019 by explaining the individual variation of propensities to vote with levels of the neo-fascist minority in the First Republic – measured by means of the municipal strength of the Movimento Sociale Italiano. The mechanism hypothesized here can be identified with a form of behavioural path dependence (Acharya et al., 2018) that argues that contexts more open to accepting a strong neo-fascist minority are those in which more extreme ideas can spread, even if more than forty years have passed.

The analyses presented here provide empirical evidence towards our hypotheses, by showing a significant association between support for the MSI and the propensity to vote for the new Lega, but only in those areas where the Lega was almost absent before Salvini's leadership. We think that our results can be relevant in showing the persistence of political attitudes over time. Similarly to other cases of behavioural path dependence shown above, the attitudes of the neo-fascist minority at the local level which were present, and sometimes relevant, during the whole of the First Republic, show up again with the exploits and communication shift of the new Lega, after a period in which they have been hidden.

These results must be evaluated by considering at least two *caveat*s. The first one is that results do not show that 'Lega voters are neo-fascists', nor that 'neo-fascists massively vote for the Lega'; rather, what we show here is that people in contexts in which a

neo-fascist minority were particularly present might have been socialized in a political context in which, among other things, shreds of the ideology were present. It is not necessary for people voting nowadays for the Lega to accept the complete set of ideological tenets of neo-fascism; nor do they need to completely understand all the consequences of the ideological structure, which, by the way, has been historically extremely vague and foggy. In addition, the relationship between the MSI's prevalence and the propensity to vote for the Lega allows us to explain only a part of the success of the party in the centre-south, which can also be accounted for by more recent trends, such as the immigration and economic crises (see Albertazzi et al., 2018).

Finally, our results only indirectly argue that the trigger of the correlation that we see is the shift of Salvini's communication. Although previous studies stressed that the correlation between the neo-fascist legacy and the trajectories of diffusion of the Lega are related only after the advent of Salvini as leader of the party, we do not present any evidence relating to this (crucial) point. Future research should aim at better identifying the path dependence mechanism – by means, for instance, of panel data.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1. Voting percentages for the Movimento Sociale Italiano in 1976 national elections

Geographical area	MSI 1976
Northwest	3.8
Northeast	3.4
Centre	6.3
South	9.4
Islands	10.1
Italy	**6.1**

Note: Within the centre, in Lazio – the only region of the macroarea not belonging to the so called 'red zone' – the voting percentage for the MSI was equal to 9.5.

Appendix 2. Question wording (authors' translation)

Dependent variable

Propensity to vote for the Lega: What is the likelihood that you will vote for the Lega in the upcoming European elections?

1. not at all likely — 11. totally likely

(variable rescaled on a 0-10 scale in the analyses)

Independent variables

Gender: you are...

1. Male
2. Female

Age: Age class at 6 – pre-coded in the dataset.

1. <25
2. 25-34
3. 35-44
4. 45-54
5. 55-64
6. >64

Education level – pre-coded in the dataset

1. Primary
2. Secondary
3. Tertiary

Your income allows you to live...

1. I'm wealthy
2. I can live easily
3. I have difficulties

ips

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A sinking boat? The refugee crisis and attitudes towards the European Union in Italy, 1993-2018

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Abstract

The refugee crisis has been difficult for Mediterranean countries, including Italy. Due to the structural defects of EU regulation on security and a lack of coordination between member states, management of the crisis has developed as a continuous confrontation with the EU. This article evaluates the effect of the refugee crisis on whether citizens think Italy's membership in the EU has been positive and beneficial and whether they are satisfied with democracy in Europe. Applying hierarchical models to survey data between 1993 and 2018, findings indicate that positive attitudes towards EU dropped substantially over the period, and that refugee inflow might have been a source of such a change. The results also point to a polarisation of EU attitudes among social groups, with the poorly-educated and not employed/unemployed becoming more critical compared to their better educated and employed counterparts. These differences seem to widen as the inflows of migrants increase.

1. Introduction

The 2019 European elections represented a landmark in the politics of the area. Italy contributed to the European Parliament by electing a large number of MEPs from parties that are Eurosceptic. The *Lega* (the League) and the *MoVimento 5 Stelle* (Five Star Movement), after succeeding at the 2018 parliamentary elections, in fact, won 51.4% of the votes (34.3% and 17.1%, respectively). They reinforced their stances through slogans against the EU campaign 'to stop bureaucrats, bankers, good-doers, ships', 'to stop the "invasion', 'to give representatives more powers, and fewer to bureaucrats', 'to stop austerity' and, in general, 'to stand up in Europe'.[1] At least until Matteo Salvini's threat to pull the League out of Conte's government and the prime minister's resignation in August (2019), Italy was the only Western country with a government formed by anti-European Union parties.[2]

Given the electoral success of these two parties, and the relatively weak results of openly pro-European parties such as the *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party), and the failure of others, such as *+Europa* (More Europe), a question that arises is how a

[1] For political platforms and slogans of the Five Star Movements and of the League see: https://continuarexcambiare.it/programma/ and https://legaonline.it/t_galleria.asp?l2=1965.
[2] See Basile and Borri (2018) and Giannetti et al. (2018) on the positions of this government and its voters.

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country that was known for its positive attitudes towards Europe ended up becoming one of the least pro-European (Di Mauro, 2014). The Italians' positive attitudes towards Europe have often been considered the result of the weak performance of national institutions and widespread dissatisfaction with domestic politics and actors (Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000; Martini and Quaranta 2015). Yet the results of the last European elections seem to confirm that something has changed among Italians also with respect to European Union agencies. Existing research focusing on the Italian context has often pointed to economic reasons to explain rising popular Euroscepticism, in particular in recent years. These contributions have suggested that Italian citizens evaluate the EU primarily in relation to the perceived costs and benefits of European governance to the interests of their own polity, with utilitarianism emerging as a key explanation for the decline. Indeed, EU utility seems to have decreased due to the effects of the economic recession (Quaglia 2011; Di Mauro 2014; Conti and Memoli 2015; Lucarelli 2015).

This article seeks to contribute to this literature, evaluating one factor that has attracted much attention among pundits and scholars, but whose effect has not been thoroughly investigated: the unfolding of the refugee crisis and the mass influx of migrants. Since 2010 this has escalated in addition to the crisis of the Euro, which has also contributed to citizens' increasing detachment from the EU (Börzel and Risse 2018; Caporaso 2018). Amid this gloomy scenario, the refugee crisis may have reinforced an already widespread sense of insecurity and cultural threat and the perceived economic threat resulting from enduring economic strain. Moreover, it has given the opportunity to political actors to attack the EU for its inability to seek coordination and agreement between member states on how to stop or limit the inflow of migrants from north Africa and the Middle East, as well as on how to relocate quotas across the member states (see Attinà, 2017; Bauböck, 2018). In brief, the magnitude of the crisis, with the arrival of hundreds of thousands of migrants on the Italian coast, the increasing number of asylum seekers, and the opposition of various European countries to sharing the burden in a context of prolonged economic turbulence has revealed 'the contradictory nature of Europeanization' (Castelli Gattinara, 2017: 322).

This article, then, proposes to further explore the link between immigration and attitudes towards the European Union by looking at the differences between social winners and losers (Kriesi et al. 2008). There are two pieces of evidence that might be relevant in this respect. First, more disadvantaged social groups tend to have negative attitudes towards Europe and support anti-EU political forces (e.g. Hakhverdian et al., 2013; Foster and Frieden, 2017). Second, anti-immigration sentiments and a perceived threat from immigrants seem to be more widespread among such groups (e.g. Lubbers and Scheepers, 2007). Therefore, citizens with more disadvantaged positions in society might be more subject to changes in immigration inflows and, in turn, blame Europe more intensely for its inability to solve such problems, weakening their support for it.

Last, in spite of its value, available research on the Italian case is often the result of a historical-institutional examination of events or data analyses based on limited periods. Relying on a Eurobarometer series from 1993 to 2018, this article provides an overview of the trends in attitudes towards the EU among the overall Italian sample of respondents and among groups of citizens distinguished by education and employment status during the whole post-Maastricht period. It then provides a preliminary

test of whether immigration can explain such trends. Findings indicate that positive attitudes towards Europe dropped substantially over the period analysed, and that immigration might be considered a potential source of such a change. The results also point to the polarisation of EU attitudes among groups of respondents, with the poorly-educated and not employed/unemployed becoming even more critical with respect to their better educated and employed counterparts. The differences between groups seem to widen, in particular, as the inflows of migrants increases.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Immigration (in-)flows, the refugee crisis, and support for the European Union

Research has pointed to the strong link that exists between immigration and attitudes towards the European Union (henceforth EU). The argument originates from the idea that, when relating to the EU, citizens use as point of reference the nation-state, which defines their group loyalties and provides a context for strong territorial identities. This identification with the national polity may, as a consequence, constrain preferences towards EU integration, which is supposed to remove borders and bring diversities together following the 1985 Schengen agreement (e.g. Taggart, 1998). In line with this rationale, attitudes towards the EU may depend on the way people relate to other cultures and their level of hostility (McLaren, 2002).

People's tendency to categorize themselves and others is important to understand why immigration can be related to attitudes towards the EU (De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005). Such categorization means that people attribute more importance to the members and characteristics of the in-group, negatively valuing the out-group (Lubbers and Scheepers, 2007). The process of integrating nation-states, with the consequent opening of internal borders and the circulation of citizens, represents a peril to national identity (Luedtke 2005), as this may have an impact both on distribution of resources as well as on cultural traditions. Thus, although internal migration within the EU is necessary for the successful functioning of its economic and political integration, the increasing circulation of people may have had negative effects on support for European integration in the host societies (Toshkov and Kortenska 2015). In other words, the increasing presence of migrants resulting from integration may represent a threat to national identity, favouring a negative bias against foreign people, and, in turn, the critical evaluations of the EU project. However, what has been the impact of immigration from outside the Union?

Generally speaking, there is 'a lack of scholarly interest in the impact of the number of asylum seekers and refugees on support for European integration' (Kentmen-Cin and Erisen, 2017: 19). Various expectations can be drawn regarding the link between asylum seekers and attitudes towards the EU. The first is that the arrival of large numbers of asylum applicants in EU countries would amplify in-group attachments because of the cultural and material threats these bring to the host countries. The relocation and resettlement of asylum seekers have material costs, and they represent a burden for the local communities in which these are located on arrival. In addition, the inflow of asylum seekers to Europe is composed mainly of citizens of Muslim heritage (e.g. Syria, but also Iraq and Afghanistan) (Eurostat 2019), which may explain the hostility towards them. A

strand of literature has, in fact, argued that hostility towards Muslim communities has been somewhat exacerbated by recent terrorist attacks and that negative orientation towards them is also linked to anti-EU attitudes in general and to specific EU policies (Azrout and Wojcieszak 2017; Hobolt et al., 2011). In short, an increase in the inflow of asylum seekers may have brought about ethnic conflict and social tensions which have affected citizens' evaluations of the EU (see Berry et al., 2016).

Alongside this psychological mechanism there is also the institutional defects of EU regulation on security, and the lack of coordination among member states which may have reinforced people's hostility towards the EU. While policy responsibilities are shared between the EU and its member states, policy failures tend to be attributed to the EU alone (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014). In this regard, the refugee crisis that has exploded since 2010 has been seen as an important failure of the EU (see Niemann and Zaun 2018). Because of geographical location, existing migrant networks, immigration policies and the Dublin Regulation,[3] according to which countries of arrival are responsible for the processing of asylum applications, the distribution of asylum seekers and its costs has been unequal (Thielemann 2018). In sum, the EU has been heavily criticized for its failure to find cooperation since: 'member states had to choose between a cooperative solution that would have preserved open borders and distributed the refugee admission burden and a non-cooperative one where each country would retake control over its national borders. […] Defection by a few states was enough to create a domino effect that tipped the balance towards non-cooperation' (Bauböck 2018: 148).

2.2. Social winners and losers, immigration and the EU

In this article we assume the link between citizens' attitudes towards the EU and immigration to be heterogeneous across social groups of the population. This expectation is justified by much literature arguing that support for the EU is connected to citizens' socio-economic status (e.g. Anderson and Reichert 1995; Gabel and Palmer 1995, Gabel 1998; Hooghe and Marks 2005).

Literature based on 'cognitive mobilization theory' (Inglehart 1970) has emphasized that education and cognitive skills increase political awareness, making individuals adhere to the norms and core values of democracy with a 'norm-inducing' function (Mayne and Hakhverdian, 2017) as well as to cosmopolitan worldviews and tolerance towards diversities (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2006). Thus, more educated people would look more favourably on the development of super-national institutions aiming at overcoming the nation-state.

Moreover, according to a 'utilitarian approach', in modern global capitalism, trade liberalization has gradually favoured the displacement of the production of goods which require low skills from more developed countries to less developed ones, where the cost of

[3] Originally signed in 1990, the Dublin Regulation was emended in 2003 (Dublin II) and 2013 (Dublin III) without substantial changes to this basic regulatory principle. See: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32013R0604. We need also to acknowledge two decisions made by the Council (2015/1523 and 2015/1601) establishing provisional measures for the relocation of immigrants across countries of the area for the benefit of Italy and of Greece. However, the decisions left the final word to receiving countries whether or not to reject requests of relocation. See: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1568048254135&uri=CELEX:32015D1523 and https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1568048276875&uri=CELEX:32015D1601.

labour is reduced. Conversely, highly skilled jobs, especially in the tertiary sector, have grown where the levels of education and technology are high. Thus, in developed democracies, 'social winners', or people with higher educational attainment and better skills, may be more able to benefit from opportunities available through the new economy. Instead, 'social losers', that is, citizens with lower human capital, tend to be penalized when competing for jobs (Kriesi et al. 2008).

Thus, attitudes towards the process of integration may depend on objective individual conditions such as education and employment status, which can be used as proxies of labour skills. The goal of the European Union, in fact, has been, first and foremost, to remove barriers to economic exchange in order to create an integrated economic market with a unique currency. As Anderson and Reichert (1995: 233) argue: 'EU membership is not necessarily a positive sum game where everyone wins; instead it frequently involves both winners and losers'. Over the years, such expectations have been gradually sustained by empirical research which has shown that more highly educated and employed citizens tend to express greater support for the integration process than less educated and unemployed ones, or those out of the labour market (see Di Mauro and Memoli 2016; Di Mauro 2014; Foster and Frieden 2017; Hakhverdian et al. 2013).

Building on these theoretical approaches and the evidence of gaps in support for the EU among social groups, it is also reasonable to expect citizens with varying socio-economic status to react differently to contextual conditions related to immigration. Competition between natives and immigrants increases feelings of insecurity over resources, availability of jobs, and services provided by the state, thus making the former more hostile towards the latter (see Polavieja 2016), as the result of intensified in-group/out-group discrimination.[4] However, following the arguments sketched above, those with a lower social status should be those who are more sensitive, feeling more threatened in economic and cultural terms by immigrants (Lubbers and Scheepers 2007). Indeed, poor socio-economic conditions seem to predict nationalistic or exclusionary attitudes, favouring more restrictive immigration policies and opposing a harmonization of the rules among member States. This eventually would result in a preference towards the nation-state over European integration, responsible for the inflow of newcomers (Luedtke 2005).

2.3. The refugee crisis in Italy: context and hypotheses

The refugee crisis has been particularly difficult for Mediterranean countries. Since 2010, in fact, a large share of migrants have reached Europe by sea as a result of the civil war in Syria and the dramatic events relating to the Arab Spring in northern Africa (European Parliament 2017). The crisis has been even harsher in Italy, given its favourable geographical location on the Libyan route to the European continent. Thus, due to the structural defects of EU regulation on security and the coordination problems sketched above, the crisis has opened a new line of demarcation between southern and northern member states (Caporaso 2018).

In Italy the management of the influx of refugees soon developed into a continuous confrontation with the EU. Governmental policy to tackle the problem has gradually

[4] For an alternative view on the 'labour market competition hypothesis' – i.e. opposition to immigration is higher among those who are employed in similar job positions to those of immigrants – see Valentino et al. (2017).

changed from the ordinary management of irregular immigration based on the Schengen scheme during Berlusconi's (2008-2010) and Monti's (2010-2013) cabinets to the *Mare Nostrum* operation of Letta's government (2013-2014) motivated by humanitarian principles of saving lives at sea; from the promotion of a common approach through the *Triton* mission coordinated by Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, a position held by Renzi during his mandate (2014-2016), to a new turn interpreted by Gentiloni during his years (2016-2018) in which migrants were stopped at 'hotspots' and returned to their countries of origin (e.g. Attinà 2017).

Meanwhile, with the increasing inflows of migrants, anti-migration rhetoric and mobilization against relocations of migrants have become common (Castelli-Gattinara 2017). The relocation and resettlement operations have been seen as a 'business': migrants should be 'helped at home', an 'invasion' is occurring and in times of economic crises politics should put 'Italians first'[5]. Although the connection between prejudice and politics is nothing new in Italian politics (Sniderman et al., 2000), in a few years immigration has become one of the most important problems facing the country and migrants have become increasingly perceived as a threat to public security. The number of asylum seekers, for instance, has grown exponentially over the last 25 years in Italy (Ministero dell'Interno 2019), and this might have contributed to the increase in intolerance and detachment from the EU. For instance, between 1993 and 1997, there were, on average, about 1900 applications; between 2003 and 2007 there were about 12,000, while between 2013 and 2018 applications became, on average, more than 80,000, reaching a high of more than 130,000 in 2017. The rhetoric about immigration has mainly been used by emerging populist and right-wing parties which gained considerable electoral support during the last general (2018) and European (2019) elections amid widespread anti-immigration resentment (Garzia 2018; Guidi and Martini 2019). These actors emphasized the economic consequences of migration and the necessity of taking back control over national security in opposition to EU agencies. Thus, the refugee crisis might have added to a long period of economic distress starting in 2008, which in Italy, as in many other peripheral countries of Europe, has been very intense and characterized by growth contraction and rising public debt with negative consequences for system support at the domestic level (Martini and Quaranta 2015) as well as towards the European Union (Di Mauro 2014; Conti and Memoli 2015; Dotti Sani and Magistro 2016).

The process of more exclusory policy eventually culminated during the first Conte government and Salvini's doctrine[6] of strengthening the sanctions on non-governmental boats that take migrants rescued in the Mediterranean sea to Italy (June 2018-August 2019).[7] In brief, given the failures of the EU in addressing the complexities of the refugee crisis, the fact that Italy has been one of the main countries of arrival, and the increased politicization of the migration issue, it is likely that immigration inflow connected to the refugee crisis has had an effect in shaping attitudes towards the EU in the country. Thus:

[5] ''Italians first': how the populist right became Italy's dominant force', The Guardian, December 1 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/01/italians-first-matteo-salvini-the-league-rise-rightwing-populism.

[6] The Conte government I passed two more restrictive decrees on security and migration.

[7] 'Italy targets migrant rescue boats with new law', Financial Times, July 23 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/2320c93e-ad53-11e9-8030-530adfa879c2.

H1: *Attitudes towards the EU in Italy worsen as the inflow of asylum seekers/refugees increases.*

Moreover, in a country also troubled by fiscal constraints, the costs of the refugee crisis have been central in public debate and in the press, with the claim that the resources devoted to the relocation and resettlement of migrants should instead be used to assist natives in difficulty (see Berry et al. 2016). Finally, Eurosceptics have attempted to cue the opinion of more disadvantaged groups, influencing their attitudes towards the EU. Briefly, in Italy, the migration crisis might have exacerbated existing grievances among those with more disadvantaged positions in society, distancing them further from Europe. Therefore, it could be expected that:

H2: *The increase in the inflow of asylum seekers/refugees affects more negatively the attitudes towards the EU of those who have a low level of education or who are not employed/unemployed.*

3. Research design

To study the trends in public attitudes towards the European union in Italy we rely on the Eurobarometer series (EB), from 1993 to 2018, covering the last 25 years over the whole post-Maastricht period.[8] Overall, we rely on a sample of 72,256 respondents aged between 18 and 85 years old, before the list-wise deletion of missing values on the selected variables.[9]

3.1. Dependent variables

Regarding the dependent variables, we consider three indicators which can provide a general overview of citizens' support for the EU: an indicator measuring whether the respondent considers her country's membership in the EU a good thing or not;[10] one capturing whether membership in the EU is considered beneficial or not;[11] and one eliciting the respondent's satisfaction with how democracy works in the EU.[12] The three indicators have been recoded as dichotomous variables gauging positive vs. negative attitudes (good thing vs. bad/neither; yes vs. no; very or fairly satisfied vs. not very or not at all satisfied).

In line with most of the literature on public opinion about the EU, we argue that these three indicators should capture support for European integration, although there is an ongoing debate about what dimension of the concept these actually measure (see Anderson and Hecht 2018). Research has relied on the classic conceptualization of Easton (1975), who distinguished between 'diffuse' support, which refers to what the system represents and not what it does in practice, and 'specific' support, which refers to the attitudes towards the outputs of the system. Hobolt and De Vries (2016) argue that in

[8] The analysis is based on 72 surveys.
[9] Dependent variables are not available in all surveys.
[10] 'Generally speaking, do you think that (OUR COUNTRY)'s membership of the EU is...?': 1) Good thing, 2) Bad thing, 3) Neither good nor bad.
[11] 'Taking everything into account, would you say that (OUR COUNTRY) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the EU?' 1) Yes; 2) No.
[12] '...How about the way democracy works in the European Union? Would you say you are very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied?)': 1) Very satisfied, 2) Fairly satisfied, 3) Not very satisfied, 4) Not at all satisfied.

the context of the EU, it is also useful to distinguish between 'regime' and 'policy' support, which is a distinction mirroring the one illustrated before (for a different position see Boomgaarden et al. 2011 or Di Mauro and Memoli 2016). Regime support can be assessed by looking at attitudes towards membership in the EU, as it provides an indication of the legitimacy citizens posit towards the Union. In fact, this indicator has also been used to capture support for EU integration (see Eichenberg and Dalton 2007), or, when reversed, it has been used to capture 'public opposition to the EU as a regime' (see Serricchio et al. 2013) or Euroscepticism.

When it comes to the policy aspect, this mainly regards a calculation of costs and benefits. Therefore, it can be argued that the indicator measuring the benefits/costs of EU integration can be considered an evaluative judgement of the output of the EU. Finally, the indicator measuring political satisfaction should also lean towards the assessment of the 'functioning of democracy in a specific system, rather than support for democratic norms as such' (Hobolt 2012: 91). The indicator is similar to that largely used to measures satisfaction with national democracies. While, also in this case, there is considerable debate on 'what' this indicator actually captures (see Canache et al. 2001; Martini and Quaranta 2019), most research uses it as an indicator of citizens' perception of the outputs and the performance of a political system, in this case the EU.

3.2. Explanatory factors

The time-varying contextual variable of interest is the logarithm of the total number of asylum applicants (Ministero dell'Interno 2019).[13] This indicator allows us to measure the extent of the migration crisis in Italy and it provides an indication of how the inflow of persons seeking international protection has changed over time (see Harteveld et al. 2018). Given that, in the period analysed, another important change has occurred in Italy, i.e. the economic crisis, we use as control the Consumer Confidence Indicator (CCI) drawn from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2019). This indicator uses opinions about the past and future personal and national economic situations, and therefore provides a clear indication of the citizens' mood about the economy.[14]

We then use two main individual characteristics that have been argued to be important predictors of attitudes towards the EU, given their consequences for the position individuals have within society. We use age at completed education and employment status. Although in the context of the study of public opinion towards the EU, the first one has been criticised due to problems of comparability (see Hakhverdian et al. 2013), in the Italian context this should not present drawbacks, since the educational cycle follows age patterns in the country. We therefore distinguish between those who did not complete their education after the mandatory age (up to and including 15 years old, 34.2%) and those who completed it afterwards (65.8%). This dichotomy allows us to clearly distinguish respondents with better and worse opportunities in the labour market and who are in turn less at risk of suffering the consequences of societal changes.[15] With regard to the

[13] The logarithm transformation is used to assess potential non-linear associations.
[14] Both variables are included as one-year lag.
[15] To determine the educational levels of respondents still in education we used their age (see Hakhverdian et al. 2013).

employment status, we similarly distinguish between three categories: those who are employed (49.1%) and those who are unemployed or not employed (39.8%). In doing so, we can distinguish between citizens who are still part of the labour market, no matter their position, and those who are out, because they are looking for work, or because of life cycle, or other roles, and as a consequence occupy more disadvantaged roles in societies and are more vulnerable. Additionally, we add a category capturing whether the respondents are students (11%). Finally, we consider gender (men = 45.28%, women = 54.2%), age (M = 46.35, SD = 16.73) and its squared term.

3.3. Model

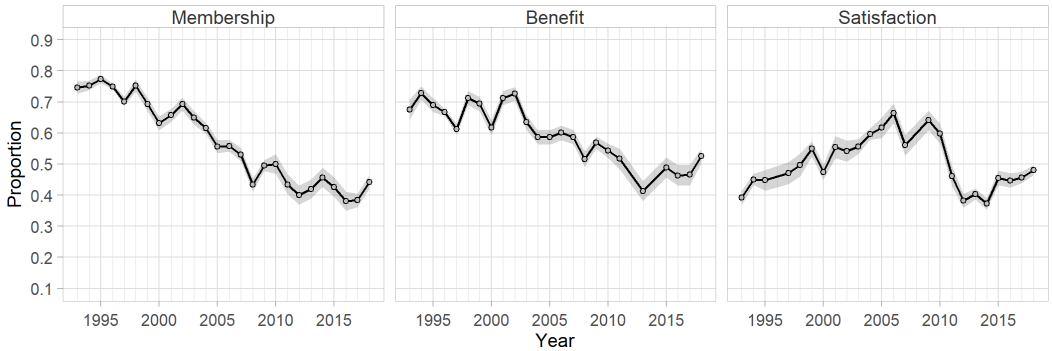
The empirical analysis will take two steps. First, we assess descriptively the trends in the three indicators over time in the whole sample, and among the groups of interest, namely low vs. highly educated and unemployed/not employed vs. employed. This step will provide a general overview of the temporal patterns of Italians' attitudes towards the EU. Second, we use logistic hierarchical models (see Gelman and Hill 2006) to formally test whether time-varying factors are associated with the trends in attitudes towards the EU, and with the differences in trends among respondents with different education and employment status. Given the structure of the data, respondents are nested in surveys (i.e. time points), and we are interested in testing cross-level interactions. Therefore, we will use models with random-intercepts which allow us to test whether the deviations from the overall levels in the dependent variables follow the time-varying variables. We then let the coefficients of the individual-level variables of interest vary across time points and we test whether these variations are captured by the time-varying variables.

4. Findings

We start with a descriptive assessment of the trends in public attitudes towards the EU. Figure 1 shows the proportion of respondents who think that Italy's membership in the EU is a positive thing, that Italy has benefitted from being a member of the EU, and that are satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU over 25 years. Starting from the first panel we can see that in 1993 the proportion of those supporting Italy's membership in the EU was about 0.75, which dropped in 2000 and then improved in 2002. Afterwards, the decline is steady until 2008, when the proportion is about 0.42. In the following two years there is a slight improvement, but then the proportions drop again, reaching a minimum of about 0.39 in 2016-2017.

With regard to opinions about whether Italy has benefitted from being a member of the EU, we can see that trends are quite similar to the previous one, although it seems that levels were higher between 1993 and 2002, and in more recent years these seem to improve. In contrast, satisfaction with the way democracy works in the EU seems to follow different patterns. In fact, satisfaction increased between 1993 and 2006, from 0.40 to about 0.68. It remained more or less stable up to 2009, and dropped drastically after that. The minimum was reached in 2014 (0.37). In the following years, satisfaction seemed to take a more positive, yet weak turn.

Figure 1. Trends in attitudes towards the EU in Italy, 1993-2018.

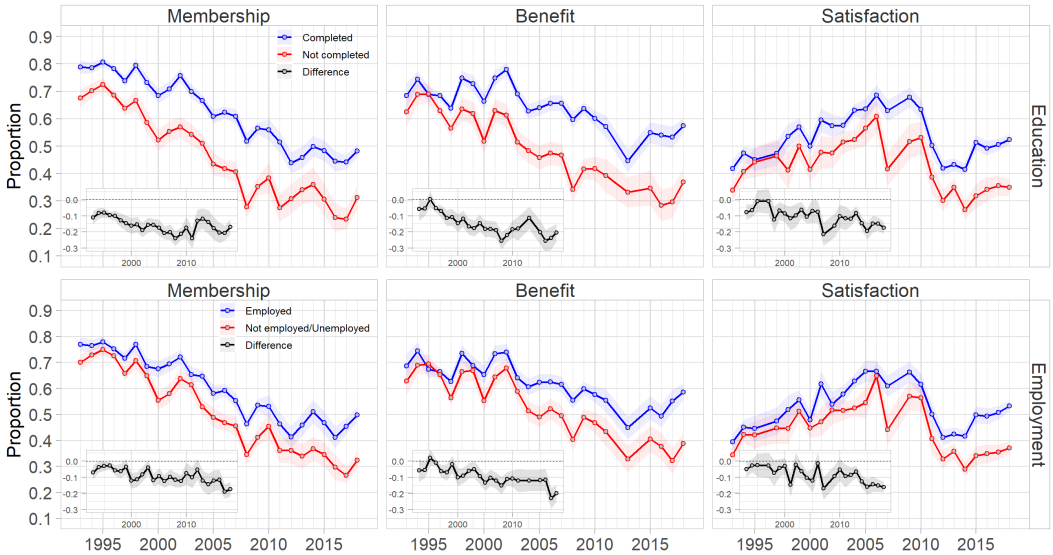


Note: proportions with 95% confidence intervals.

To understand the trends in public opinion it is also important to investigate group-level heterogeneities (see Martini and Quaranta 2019). This allows us to understand whether decreasing trends are due to one or another group of citizens, and also to understand if there are temporal patterns in the attitudinal differences between members of groups. We show public opinion on the EU by educational levels and employment status in Figure 2. The top panels of this figure show trends by education. The first thing to notice is that throughout the period and for all the dependent variables there were considerable differences in terms of attitudes towards the EU between those who completed mandatory schooling and those who did not. We can see that the trends were negative for both groups and that they do not follow different patterns compared to those seen in Figure 1. Nevertheless, we can notice that over time, differences seem to become larger. As regards the indicator measuring the benefits of the EU and satisfaction with its democratic functioning, we can see that the education gaps seem to get larger over time too. The education gap regarding the benefits of the EU is about 0.05 in 1993, then it becomes about 0.14 in 2000, 0.18 in 2010 and 0.20 in 2018. Similarly, the gap in satisfaction widens by about 0.10, from a gap of about 0.08 in 1993 to a gap of 0.17 in 2018.

The bottom panels in Figure 2 show the same trends by employment status. We can see that the differences between employed and unemployed or not employed are quite important too. The gaps in attitudes towards the EU seem to be downward over time. The largest differences in opinion about Italy's membership in the EU can be found in the last period observed, in particular after 2016, and this can be attributed to the more visible decrease in positive attitudes among the unemployed or not employed compared to the other group. The scenario is similar for the attitudes about EU benefits, although between 2011 and 2016 the differences remained quite constant. With regard to satisfaction, we can see that larger gaps were in 2007, and as before in the most recent period.

Figure 2. Trends in attitudes towards the EU in Italy by levels of education and employment status, 1993-2018.



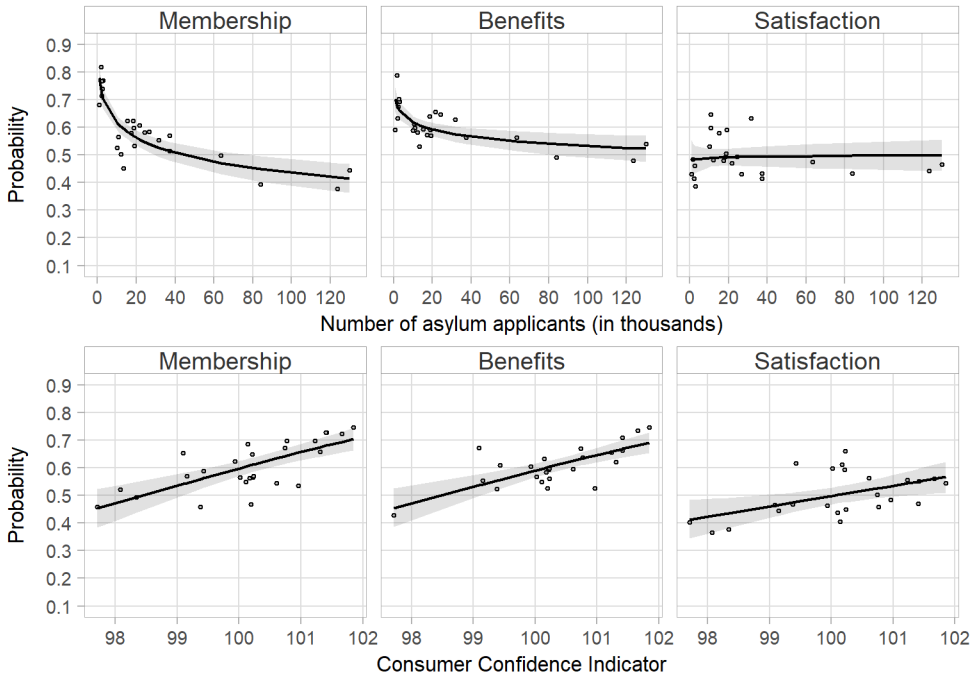
Note: proportions and differences with 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 3 reports the predicted probabilities, based on the hierarchical models, of citizens responding that Italy's membership in the EU is a positive thing, that Italy has benefitted from being a member of the EU, and of those being satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU, by number of asylum applicants (in thousands, on the original scale) and the Consumer Confidence Indicator.[16] Economic conditions have been regarded as very powerful predictors of over-time change in support for Europe (see Serricchio et al. 2013; Dotti Sani and Magistro 2016), therefore the inclusion of the CCI in the models should provide a robust test of the role of immigration in EU attitudes. We can see that there are strong associations between the time-varying variable of interest and two attitudes. As the number of asylum applicants increases over time, the probability of being supportive of the EU drops significantly. When asylum applicants are few, the probabilities of positive attitudes are between 0.80 and 0.70, while when these become more numerous, as in recent times, the probabilities drop to about 0.40 to 0.50. In contrast, we can notice that there is no association between the number of asylum applicants and the levels of satisfaction with democracy in the EU. The bottom panels report the association between the CCI, which we use as control, and the three dependent variables. Here, we can also see that there is a strong link between citizens' perceptions of the economy and attitudes. Over the range of the CCI, the differences in probability of responding that membership in the EU is positive and that the country has benefitted from EU membership are about 0.22 points. Finally, there is also an association with satisfaction with the way democracy works in the EU, although it appears slightly weaker. Therefore, these results seem to confirm that the changes in the contextual economic conditions are linked to the weakening of attitudes towards the EU among Italians, as research has already shown (see Dotti Sani and Magistro 2016; Di Mauro 2014; Conti and

[16] The models are reported in the Appendix.

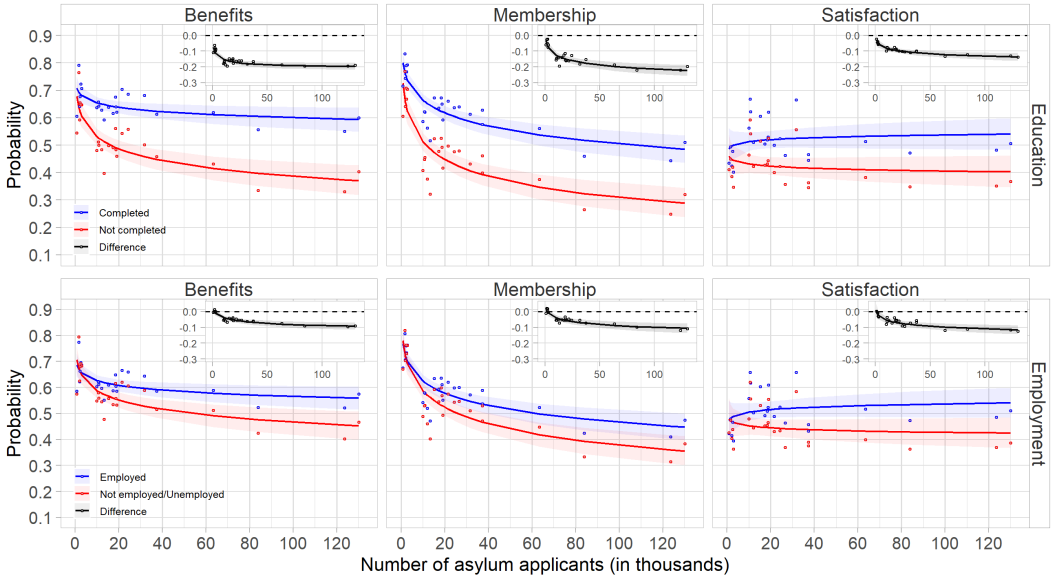
Memoli 2015), yet they also indicate that the larger burden of immigration has played a not irrelevant role.

Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of positive EU attitudes in Italy, 1993-2018, by number of asylum applicants (in thousands) and Consumer Confidence Indicator, with 95% confidence intervals.



While we have found that immigration may be important with regard to attitudes towards the EU, we have yet to understand whether this factor matters differently for the attitudes of members of social groups. The figures shown previously clearly indicate that there are substantial and significant gaps in attitudes between respondents with different levels of education and employment status. Nevertheless, does immigration have heterogeneous effects on EU attitudes among respondents with different levels of education or employment status? Does this factor contribute to widen the gaps due to education and employment status in EU attitudes? We can address these questions by looking at Figure 4, which shows the probabilities of positive attitudes by levels of education and employment status and the differences between respondents, along the number of asylum applicants. We can see that an increase in the number of asylum applicants is associated with a decrease in the probability of positive attitudes towards EU benefits and membership among both educational groups (top panels), although it seems that the effects are slightly more negative for the group of respondents who did not complete mandatory education. In contrast, we can see that the number of asylum applicants has quite a different role for satisfaction between both groups.

Figure 4. Predicted probabilities and differences in probabilities of positive EU attitudes in Italy, 1993-2018, by number of asylum applicants (in thousands), education and employment status, with 95% confidence intervals



With regard to the employment status gaps (bottom panels), we can also notice they become larger as the number of asylum applicants increases, and this seems to be due to the opinions of not employed/unemployed citizens which become more negative compared to those of the employed. When asylum applicants are few there are basically no differences between not employed/unemployed and employed respondents. However, as the number increases, the differences in attitudes between the groups become significant, ranging between 0.09 and 0.12 when the number of applicants reaches the maximum. Indeed, the results for these groups indicate that the difference between groups of respondents become larger as the number of applicants increases, providing evidence that the migration crisis might have polarized attitudes towards the EU among respondents with different levels of education and employment status, and thus different positions in society. In sum, this analysis points out that respondents in more disadvantaged positions become more critical about the EU as immigration increases with respect to the counter-group.

However, similar comments cannot be made for the economy, as the interactions between the CCI and our variables identifying social winners and losers are almost always not significant (with the exception of the interaction with unemployed/not employed and whether EU membership is beneficial; see on this, Tables A2-A3 in the Appendix). In brief, immigration seems to be better suited to explain over-time changes in support between social winners and losers, exerting an additional contingent effect compared to the economy

5. Conclusion

In recent years, Italy has evolved into one of the most Eurosceptic countries in the Union. This has ultimately been testified by the increased success at the last 2019 European elections of populist and right-wing parties.

This article claims that in order to improve our understanding of this process we need to look at trends in public opinion on the EU and look for different explanations of these changes. In this respect, it has argued that one potential explanation of such trends might have been the unfolding of the refugee crisis and its overlapping with a prolonged period of economic distress which contributed to radically change the relationship between citizens and the EU project (Börzel and Risse 2018; Caporaso 2018; Castelli Gattinara, 2017). The argument is that the magnitude of the shock, with the arrival of thousands of migrants on the Italian coast, the increasing number of asylum seekers, and the structural defects of European regulation when it comes to migration and security issues, may have exposed the incapacity of the EU to respond efficiently to the imminent crisis in a country already experiencing a gradual detachment from EU institutions. This view would thus be coherent with a mechanism of activation of in-group national identities due to increased perceived threat and a problem of policy coordination. Moreover, this article has suggested that this erosion of support for the EU may not have been homogenous across social groups, since citizens with lower socio-economic status in term of education and employment position may be less supportive of an integrated European economy and feel more threatened by an incoming immigrant workforce also demanding services provided by the national state.

By applying hierarchical models to the Eurobarometer series between 1993 and 2018, we have shown that a general erosion occurred in the three indicators of support for the EU project, with Italian citizens who became more sceptical with respect to whether the country's membership in the EU is positive and beneficial and more dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy in Europe over the period analysed. This was even more pronounced for poorer educated, not employed or unemployed citizens. Additionally, aggregate changes in support for the EU can be explained according to contextual time-varying factors, such as the increasing number of asylum/refugee applications and consumer confidence over time. This complements existing research on the topic, extending the time period and providing new evidence (Conti and Memoli 2015; Di Mauro 2014). Finally, findings have also shown that the longitudinal effect of the refugee inflows in the country were stronger among more disadvantaged citizens.

Some caveats might also be specified with respect to our analysis. Studying the link between EU attitudes and immigration over time is not an easy task. There might be other factors which could act as confounders, which we could not address in this article. Trends in support for the EU had already been negative before the refugee crisis reached its climax, so this had a catalyst effect on something that had already been ongoing in the country. Nevertheless, our aim has been to provide evidence that, in addition to economic conditions, there is at least one other phenomenon, i.e. immigration, that should be accounted for when studying the changes in Italians' attitudes towards the EU. Although the role of the refugee crisis in EU attitudes has already been pointed out by some literature (see Castelli Gattinara 2017), there has been relatively little attention to its role over longer periods and, above all, to its influence among citizens with different social characteristics. This article, therefore, is an initial attempt to explore these patterns and should certainly be followed by more systematic research, accounting for multiple factors and, hopefully, multiple countries, to assess whether these results are consistent across different political contexts.

In this article, we have documented how scepticism towards the EU project has dramatically grown in the last twenty-five years in Italy and how this has been connected to the unfolding of two crises, the economic and the refugee. Of course, the future is uncertain and recent developments in domestic and European politics might change the course of events and, perhaps, of public opinion. Indeed, citizens' support for the EU in Italy might take a different turn depending on how the new Italian government formed by the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party, together with the new elected commission, handle these two key challenges.[17]

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Appendix 1

Table A1. Hierarchical logistic models predicting the probabilities of responding that Italy's membership in the EU is a positive thing, that Italy has benefitted from being a member of the EU, and of being satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU, 1993-2018.

	Membership	Benefits	Satisfaction
Intercept	0.877***	0.769***	0.220***
	(0.059)	(0.052)	(0.065)
Woman	-0.111***	-0.098***	-0.033
	(0.020)	(0.022)	(0.022)
Age	0.068***	0.018	0.061***
	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Age-sq.	-0.055***	-0.023*	-0.022
	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Education not completed	-0.619***	-0.493***	-0.376***
	(0.022)	(0.025)	(0.027)
Not employed/Unemployed	-0.158***	-0.157***	-0.283***
	(0.025)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Student	0.415***	0.411***	0.275***
	(0.051)	(0.059)	(0.055)
Asylum applicants (log)	-0.451***	-0.214***	0.020
	(0.059)	(0.050)	(0.063)
CCI	0.237***	0.206***	0.169**
	(0.048)	(0.044)	(0.063)
Random-effects (var.)			
Year	0.071	0.050	0.083
N/Year	51812/26	38542/24	35677/24

Note: estimates are log-odds, standard errors in parentheses. Sig: * = p < 0.05; ** = p < 0.01; *** = p < 0.001. Age, asylum applicants (log) and CCI are standardized.

Table A2. Hierarchical logistic models predicting the probabilities of responding that Italy's membership in the EU is a positive thing, that Italy has benefitted from being a member of the EU, and of being satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU, with interactions between education and the time-varying variables, 1993-2018.

	Membership	Benefits	Satisfaction
Intercept	0.866***	0.757***	0.217**
	(0.055)	(0.050)	(0.066)
Woman	-0.115***	-0.106***	-0.038
	(0.020)	(0.022)	(0.022)
Age	0.066***	0.015	0.061***
	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Age-sq.	-0.052***	-0.015	-0.016
	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Education not completed	-0.621***	-0.505***	-0.392***
	(0.028)	(0.038)	(0.031)
Not employed/Unemployed	-0.154***	-0.149***	-0.282***
	(0.025)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Student	0.411***	0.399***	0.270***
	(0.051)	(0.059)	(0.055)
Asylum applicants (log)	-0.407***	-0.141**	0.058

	(0.055)	(0.049)	(0.064)
CCI	0.243***	0.202***	0.159*
	(0.045)	(0.043)	(0.065)
Education not completed × Asylum applicants (log)	-0.118***	-0.215***	-0.118***
	(0.028)	(0.038)	(0.028)
Education not completed × CCI	-0.014	0.023	0.036
	(0.026)	(0.035)	(0.027)
Random-effects (var.)			
Year	0.061	0.045	0.086
Education not completed	0.006	0.016	0.004
N/Year	51812/26	38542/24	35677/24

Note: estimates are log-odds, standard errors in parentheses. Sig: * = p < 0.05; ** = p < 0.01; *** = p < 0.001. Age, asylum applicants (log) and CCI are standardized.

Table A3. Hierarchical logistic models predicting the probabilities of responding that Italy's membership in the EU is a positive thing, that Italy has benefitted from being a member of the EU, and of being satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU, with interactions between employment status and the time-varying variables, 1993-2018.

	Membership	**Benefits**	**Satisfaction**
Intercept	0.866***	0.759***	0.216**
	(0.056)	(0.049)	(0.066)
Woman	-0.117***	-0.105***	-0.041
	(0.020)	(0.022)	(0.022)
Age	0.065***	0.015	0.057***
	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Age-sq.	-0.051***	-0.018	-0.014
	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Mandatory education not completed	-0.617***	-0.489***	-0.375***
	(0.022)	(0.025)	(0.027)
Not employed/Unemployed	-0.148***	-0.153***	-0.285***
	(0.027)	(0.033)	(0.035)
Student	0.407***	0.399***	0.261***
	(0.051)	(0.059)	(0.055)
Asylum applicants (log)	-0.396***	-0.153**	0.073
	(0.056)	(0.048)	(0.064)
CCI	0.228***	0.180***	0.155*
	(0.045)	(0.042)	(0.064)
Not employed/Unemployed × Asylum applicants (log)	-0.126***	-0.145***	-0.130***
	(0.024)	(0.030)	(0.031)
Not employed/Unemployed × CCI	0.022	0.067*	0.036
	(0.022)	(0.028)	(0.030)
Random-effects (var.)			
Year	0.062	0.042	0.085
Not employed/Unemployed	0.003	0.006	0.009
N/Year	51812/26	38542/24	35677/24

Note: estimates are log-odds, standard errors in parentheses. Sig: * = p < 0.05; ** = p < 0.01; *** = p < 0.001. Age, asylum applicants (log) and CCI are standardized.

4. I have huge difficulties
5. I feel poor

Politically, you would locate yourself more on the… – pre-coded in the dataset

1. Right
2. Centre-right
3. Centre
4. Centre-left
5. Left
6. I would not locate myself

Geographical area – pre-coded in the dataset

1. Northwest
2. Northeast
3. Centre
4. South
5. Islands

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