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Is it all about education? A study of the impact of media exposure on political knowledge in Italy

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Abstract

This article investigates the individual predictors of political knowledge by means of a test that takes into account both 'traditional' factors (i.e. education and interest) and media exposure. We argue that, as media level out the knowledge gap between more and less educated and motivated voters, education and interest might be deprived of their role in explaining political knowledge. Empirically, we assess this by looking at whether the impact of education and political interest on political knowledge vanishes when media exposure variables are included in the estimates. Analyses rely on the 2014 European Election Study, selecting Italy as case study and correcting for measurement errors. Results after the correction for measurement errors show that exposure to news about the 2014 European elections on television does have a significant positive effect on knowledge about European affairs, while this is not the case for exposure to newspapers and the internet. Moreover, we find that the impact of education and interest persists also in the model containing indicators of media exposure. This finding confirms that, regardless of the role of media, education and interest are significant predictors of voters' political knowledge about European affairs.

1. Introduction

Scholars investigating the individual determinants of political knowledge have often found that education is the strongest predictor of political knowledge (Bennett 1988, Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). More recently, there have been a few attempts to revise the relationship between educational attainment and political knowledge (Highton 2009) and to stress the importance of pre-adult causes (Abendschön and Tausendpfund 2017), as well as of personality traits (Rasmussen 2016). Yet, the idea that education is of paramount importance in explaining what people know about politics is still well established in the literature (Grönlund and Milner 2006).

At the same time, political communication research has produced abundant evidence that exposure to news media can affect voters' political knowledge. The key mechanism behind this is that TV viewers, newspapers readers and internet users are more likely to encounter political news than other voters and thus be more knowledgeable about public affairs. In particular, scholars have investigated whether the increasing

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availability of media choice affects citizens' knowledge gap. Two main interpretations have been formulated. On the one hand, the *active learning argument* (Prior 2005) claims that people select their most preferred contents and avoid information they do not find interesting, which suggests a widening effect of media choice on knowledge gap. On the other hand, the *passive learning argument* (Aalberg and Curran 2012) stresses that media consumption is shaped more by situational factors than by personal preferences, indicating that media might instead narrow differences in knowledge among the public. As Shehata (2013, 201) explains, it seems that "due to a lack of strong interest in politics [among the population], information acquisition is primarily based on passive forms of learning". Indeed, there is strong evidence that television works as *knowledge-leveller*, favouring a growth in learning especially among the least politically interested voters (Shehata 2013, Fraile and Iyengar 2014, Shehata et al. 2015). Moreover, along with the interest-based gap, traditional media seem also to reduce the education-based knowledge gap. Indeed, Wei and Hindman (2011) showed that the education-based knowledge gap is significantly large among internet users, and to some extent among newspaper readers, while this is not found for TV viewers. In other words, more highly educated citizens learn more than the less educated from the use of digital media, while this does not apply to broadcast news media.

The recent findings about the narrowing education- and interest-based knowledge gap lead us to question the role of education and interest as predictors of political knowledge. Indeed, as long as less educated and less interested people are able to surmount the knowledge gap by assimilating information – even inadvertently – from the news media, education and interest might be deprived of their role in explaining levels of political knowledge. Against this background, this paper aims to enquire into the individual predictors of political knowledge by means of a test that takes into account both 'traditional' factors (i.e. education and interest) and media exposure (to different media). The insight behind this is that, because of the narrowing knowledge gap, the effect of education and interest on knowledge might be eroded by the impact of other factors, i.e. exposure to television, newspaper and the internet. To test this, in the paper we first run models containing only traditional predictors and then we replicate the analyses introducing three variables of media exposure. The intention is to check whether the effects of education and interest survive (or, on the contrary, vanish) when the variables of news consumption are introduced.

Moreover, since past research has emphasized that getting rid of measurement errors can change the substantive conclusions of the analyses (Bartle 2000, Pirralha and Weber 2014), in this paper we correct the analyses for measurement errors (DeCastellarnau and Saris 2014, Saris and Gallhofer 2014, Revilla and Saris 2013) by means of the Survey Quality Predictor (SQP) software,[1] version 2.1 (Saris 2015). This online platform allows us to easily obtain a prediction of measurement quality of the variables employed in the analyses, enabling us to implement regression analysis with structural equation modelling (SEM) corrected for measurement errors.

[1] SQP is free software available online that enables scholars to obtain a prediction of the measurement quality of survey questions. Saris and colleagues (Saris et al. 2011) have developed it, using data from more than 250 Multitrait-Multimethod experiments carried out in the first 3 rounds of the European Social Survey and 87 experiments carried out by other research agencies and combined with up to 60 characteristics of survey questions (Saris and Gallhofer 2014).

In terms of data sources, we rely on the 2014 European Election Study (EES), regressing political knowledge on a set of individual characteristics. In particular, alongside the impact of education, we seek to test whether exposure to campaign-related information in the four weeks before the 2014 European elections increased voters' political knowledge about European affairs. We select Italy as case study because of its media system characteristics. As Mosca and Quaranta (2016, 4) describe it, "Italy epitomizes the polarized pluralist model where media markets are elite-oriented, newspaper circulation is limited and television represents by far the most important channel for political information; a strong state intervention in the media is in play, while journalists tend to be politically regimented and engage in forms of political parallelism" and also "Italian public broadcasting is highly commercialized to the detriment of information capacity and quality" (7). In the light of this, focusing on the Italian case permits us to put our hypothesis to the test, since the low quality/capacity of the provided information might reduce the effect of media exposure on voters' learning.Alongside the peculiarities of media system characteristics, Italy is an interesting case study also from a political behaviour perspective. In particular, previous research focusing on the study of voters' political cognition in Italy has already questioned the role of education and interest in explaining the formation of sophisticated thinking. Baldassarri and Schadee (2006) have indeed found that, although scholars often operationalize political sophistication as education or interest, "political sophistication - at least in Italy - can be better measured by voter's capability in organizing political information rather than by education or interest in politics" (Baldassarri and Schadee 2006, 464). This suggests that the Italian context represents a relevant case in which to explore and possibly revise the relationship between education/interest and political knowledge.

Results after the correction for measurement errors show that exposure to news about the 2014 European elections on television does have a significant positive effect on knowledge about European affairs, while this is not the case for exposure to newspapers and the internet. Moreover, we find that the impact of education and interest persists also in the model containing indicators of media exposure. This finding confirms that, regardless of the role of the media, education and interest are significant predictors of voters' political knowledge about European affairs.

2. Political knowledge and education

The literature studying political behaviour and public opinion has often linked political knowledge to educational attainment. Most scholars presume the existence of a close connection between what people know and, in particular, university education (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Higher education indeed helps citizens to develop the skills to both retrieve and understand political information. Not only that, as Highton (2009) points out, "the effects of education are theorized to influence sophistication through its effects on social and career paths that subsequently leave people in environments that facilitate the development and maintenance of political sophistication" (1566). In this sense, the mechanism that relates knowledge to education involves both cognitive resources and social opportunities and has influenced the literature since the early sixties (Campbell et al. 1960, Converse 1964). In his seminal work, Converse (1964, 207) defined a belief system "as a configuration of ideas and

attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional dependence" and he argued that its level of sophistication is largely a function of the level of political information that a voter has. He also showed that only a minority of the population, the elite, were able to develop an ideological belief system and to understand common political labels such as Conservative and Liberal.

Besides several studies that tried to endorse or confute Converse's minimalistic view of the electorate's capacity (Achen 1975, Nie, Verba and Petrocik 1976, Smith 1989), Luskin (1987; 1990) revised the concept of sophistication, overlapping it with the notion of political expertise. He built a 'sophistication equation', a number of variables that worked as triggers of the individual level of political expertise. He focused specifically on three aspects, arguing that "the conditions that promote any particular behaviour can be grouped under the headings of opportunity, ability, and motivation" (1990, 334). In his equation, interest in politics represented the internal motivation, since interested citizens notice more the political information they encounter and think more about it (Chaiken 1980).

Education was partly motivation, since "in educated society, the blankest ignorance of politics may be a solecism" (1990, 335); partly opportunity, since students are more exposed to political information; partly ability, since education "can sharpen ability" (1990, 341), even though intelligence is better able to grasp this aspect. Moreover, exposure to political information in the mass media (in Luskin's words, both printed and general media) constituted the source of political information; thus, degree of exposure represented the opportunity to be politically knowledgeable. Lastly, intelligence corresponded to cognitive ability, occupation was a source of mobilization (e.g. workers directly affected by the legislation are more motivated to seek information) and gender/age/parental interest in politics were used as control variables. Luskin found that interest and intelligence had major effects on political sophistication, while education and media exposure did not.

A few years later, in their seminal book *What Americans know about politics and why it matters*, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) referred again to the idea that political knowledge is driven by abilities, opportunities and motivations. In particular, they argued that "the primacy of formal education as a facilitator of political knowledge lies in its relevance to all the components of the opportunity-motivation-ability triad" (1996, 190). They indeed showed, as many others before them (Neuman 1986, Bennet 1989, Smith 1989, etc.), that education is (one of) the primary causes of political knowledge.

More recently, the literature studying the determinants of political knowledge has investigated both contextual factors (Gordon and Segura 1997, Berggren 2001, Fraile 2013) and individual predictors other than the traditional socio-demographic variables (Rasmussen 2016, Abendschön and Tausendpfund 2017). On the one hand, it has been shown that voters' political knowledge is "a factor of the socio-economic, political and communicational contexts in which citizens develop their daily lives" (Fraile 2013, 123). In this debate, findings are consistent in showing that the complexity of the information environment counts in determining what people can learn about politics (Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006, Marinova 2016). Moreover, Grönlund and Milner (2006) found that political knowledge depends less on education in egalitarian countries (according to the Gini index) and proportional systems.

On the other hand, research has investigated whether individual predictors such as personality traits (the so-called Big Five) and intelligence could lower the effect of education on political knowledge (Rasmussen 2016). Data showed that this is not the case and that education retains the strongest effect on knowledge even when other predictors are taken into consideration (*ibidem*). Other studies have also tried to revise the relationship between education and knowledge. Highton (2009), for instance, found that attending college has no significant effect on political knowledge and that, in order to explain the existing political knowledge gap, scholars should pay attention to pre-adult causes. Similarly, it has also been illustrated that gender together with socio-economic factors can explain levels of political knowledge and that these differences do not disappear during the first year in school (Abendschön and Tausendpfund 2017).

Yet the debate is still open between those who claim that education is one of the most powerful predictors of knowledge (Grönlund and Milner 2006, Rasmussen 2016) and those who indicate that other variables exhibit a stronger influence (Highton 2009, Abendschön and Tausendpfund 2017). In addition to this, the political communication literature has also contributed to the study of the determinants of political knowledge by inquiring into the effects of media exposure. The following paragraph briefly summarizes the main findings.

3. Political knowledge and media

The political communication literature has looked at how exposure to news media can affect voters' political knowledge, but it has not always produced consistent results. Although in the 1970s and 1980s scholars doubted the role of television as a source of political knowledge (Patterson and McClure 1976), more recent studies have stressed the importance of broadcast (and print) news in informing citizens. In this regard, Chaffe and Frank (1996) have shown that television is indeed a powerful tool, especially for those who are not politically active, and it provides information about the candidates, while the print media tell more about differences in policies between parties.

Subsequent research has generally confirmed these findings (Aalberg and Curran 2012, Fraile and Iyengar 2014, Strömbäck 2016), even though some studies have delivered more pessimistic results (Jensson 2009, Fraile 2011). Yet scholars agree in saying that the growth of political knowledge is associated with watching public service TV, while there is no (or a lower) effect of exposure to commercial TV (Fraile and Iyengar 2014, Strömbäck 2016). Moreover, Drew and Weaver (2006, 38), studying voter learning in US presidential campaigns since 1992, found that "television news, televised debates, and now Internet information are important predictors, or at least correlates, of voter learning of the issue positions of the leading candidates and interest in a presidential election campaign" and that paying attention to newspapers is associated with a higher intention to vote.

Alongside all this, academics have investigated the effect of digital media, but also in this case, research has delivered contradictory results. Some have argued that the use of social media has weak effects on knowledge (Kenski and Stroud 2006, Kaufhold et al. 2010, Groshek and Dimitrova 2011), while others have been more optimistic about the effects on participation and knowledge (Hendricks and Denton 2010, Norris 2001, Papacharissi 2002). By means of panel data, Dimitrova et al. (2011) have shown that different types of digital media clearly differ in how they affect political knowledge and participation. In

particular, only the use of some news websites was found to favour voters' learning (their effect was significant but weak), while party websites and social media did not have any impact.

Besides this, scholars have also investigated the impact of the use of social media on political mobilization. In this regard, Theocharis et al. (2014) argued that Twitter is used for political discussions, but it does not have the effect of mobilizing protest. Gil de Zúñiga and Chen (2019) discussed the importance of social media as a source of discussion and coordination, but also as a possible cause of dissemination of misinformation and fake news. Moreover, Mosca and Quaranta (2016) demonstrated that some forms of non-institutional political action are associated with new diets and social media use (with clear differences between Twitter and Facebook).

Another branch of literature has explored how media widen or narrow the knowledge gap between more and less educated and motivated voters. In this regard, Prior (2005), following the active learning argument, claimed that, because of the wide range of media choice, people who are interested in getting more information become more knowledgeable, while those who prefer entertainment can avoid the news and reduce the possibility of learning about politics. Conversely, Shehata (2013) provided evidence of passive forms of learning, proving the knowledge-levelling role of television.

Analysing the individual growth in knowledge over time, Shehata et al. 2015 confirmed the argument of inadvertent learning by showing that public service channels have positive effects on the knowledge of voters, regardless of their political motivation and news attention. Fraile and Iyengar (2014) demonstrated that exposure to broadsheet newspapers narrows the knowledge gap, whereas public broadcasting does not have the same effect. Moreover, according to Wei and Hindman's (2011, 229) analyses, "the differential use of the Internet is associated with a greater knowledge gap than that of the traditional media". This illustrates that the use of the internet widens the knowledge gap between the more and less educated, while this is not the case for television, and it applies only partially to newspapers.

All together, these findings suggest that exposure to media should have – at least to some degree – an effect on voters' learning about politics. Moreover, it seems that the education- and interest-based knowledge gap is narrowed by the use of television (so far, there is no agreement about the effect of newspapers and the internet), according to a process of inadvertent learning. In the light of all this, we can hypothesize that the effect of education and interest on knowledge is eroded by the impact of media exposure when variables are considered all together in a comprehensive model correcting for measurement errors. This being the case, *we expect to see that the impact of education and political interest on political knowledge about European affairs vanishes when media exposure variables are included in the estimates.* Moreover*, we expect also to see a positive and significant effect of the exposure to information about the 2014 European elections on different media outlets (television, newspapers and internet) on political knowledge about European affairs*.

4. Data

For the analysis, we utilize data from the 2014 EES Voter Study. This dataset is based on probabilistic samples of roughly 1100 people in each country (with the exception of Malta, Cyprus and Luxembourg). In Italy, the sample size is 1091 interviews.

To measure political knowledge, we rely on a battery of three items (Cronbach's alpha=0.45) of political information (see Table 1 for the formulation). Since we want to test how exposure to news media during the 2014 European elections campaign affected political knowledge about European affairs, we select questions of factual knowledge about the EU. In particular, we rely on two strictly EU-related questions and a third item concerning internal politics, which is still linked to the EU campaign.[2] Based on these three items, we compute an additive index, distinguishing between 'Correct' and 'Incorrect' answers and recoding 'Don't know' answers as 'Incorrect' answers.[3] In this way, knowledge maintains all the observations. The variable that results from this computation varies from 0, which refers that a minimum level of political sophistication (respondents answered incorrectly or refused to answer to all the three questions on factual knowledge) to 3, which indicates the maximum level of political sophistication (respondents answered correctly to all three questions on factual knowledge).

As regards the independent variables (see Table 1 for the wording of variables), we include three indicators of campaign-related media exposure before the 2014 European elections, regarding the use of TV, newspapers and the internet. Although we could expect to see that richer media diets positively affect knowledge (the more voters combine the three sources of information, the more they are likely to be knowledgeable), we opt not to sum the three items in an additive index in order to take into account how different media can affect knowledge in various ways. We recode these three variables as 0 if respondents indicate that they have watched or read campaign-related news sometimes or never, and 1 if they indicate that have often been exposed to political news. In this way, we can test the effect of frequent exposure to media *versus* the effect of more sporadic exposure.

The two other main independent variables are education and interest. Interest has simply been reversed to have higher interest at higher values. As regards education, EES does not provide a measure of educational attainment, but instead asks age upon leaving education. For this reason, we have recoded this variable, redistributing the still-studying category to other groups by age. In this sense, we include respondents that are still studying and are less than 19 years old among the 16-19 group (i.e. middle education) and those who are more than 20 years old are included in group 20+ (i.e. high education). No full-time education and those who left schools before 15 are recoded together, while 'Don't know' answers are considered as missing values.

In addition to this, we consider as control variables (according to Luskin's equation, 1990): gender, age and perceived economic situation. For all the dependent and independent variables, we calculate measurement quality in order to correct the analyses for measurement errors. The method of calculating the measurement quality and the procedure of correction are described exhaustively in the Appendix.

[2] Matteo Renzi was indeed particularly active during the 2014 European campaign and we can assume that his name came up frequently in the campaign-related news before the elections.
[3] The reason for this is that we care whether or not a person gave a correct answer, regardless of whether (s)he failed because (s)he did not know or because (s)he was incorrect.

Table 1. English formulation of the questions used in this paper from the EES 2014 survey.

Variable	Question	Answer options
Variables of Political Knowledge (Dependent variable)[4]		
1st item of knowledge	Switzerland is a member of the EU	True False I don't know
2nd item of knowledge	Each Member State elects the same number of representatives to the European Parliament	True False I don't know
3rd item of knowledge	Matteo Renzi belongs to PD	True False I don't know
Explanatory variables		
Gender	Gender of respondent	Female Male
Age	How old are you?	Open-ended
Education	How old were you when you stopped full-time education?	I don't know 15- 16-19 20+ Still studying No full-time education
Perceived economic situation	Could you please tell me where you would place yourself on the following scale? Where '1' corresponds to 'the lowest level in society' and '10' corresponds to 'the highest level in society'.	From 0 to 10
Political interest	You are very interested in politics	Yes, definitely Yes, to some extent No, not really No, not at all I don't know
Exposure to television	In the four weeks before the recent European elections, how often did you watch a programme about the European elections on television?	Often Sometimes Never I don't know
Exposure to newspapers	In the four weeks before the recent European elections, how often did you read about the European elections in a newspaper?	Often Sometimes Never I don't know
Exposure to the internet	In the four weeks before the recent European elections, how often did you read about the European elections on the Internet (websites, social media, etc.)?	Often Sometimes Never I don't know

5. Results

As mentioned above, we run two structural equation models. The first one includes only traditional predictors at the individual level of knowledge, namely interest and education, together with the control variables. We expect to see a positive and significant

[4] Introduction text of the question: "For each of the following statements about the EU, could you please tell me whether you think it is true or false. If you don't know, just say so and we will skip to the next".

effect of education and interest on knowledge. The second model adds also the effect of media exposure to the variables already included in the first model. In this case, we expect to see that the impact of education and interest vanishes since the variables of media exposure (which work as knowledge-leveller) are included. We also expect to see a positive and significant effect of all the three variables of news consumption. Both these models are run twice, before and after correction. The correction for measurement error significantly changes the substantive conclusion of the analyses.

Table 2 shows the results before and after correction for measurement error of the model including only traditional predictors. Even before correcting for measurement errors, education and interest show a positive and significant effect on knowledge. This is in line with the previous findings about individual predictors of political knowledge, as well as with our expectations. After correction, the model gains explanatory power (R^2 increases from 0.10 to 0.20) and we witness also some changes in terms of statistical significance. Indeed, perceived economic situation becomes significant in the model after correction, while it is the opposite for age. More importantly, the positive effect of education and interest is confirmed, and it resists the correction, supporting the idea that these two variables are indeed important predictors at the individual level of political knowledge. By introducing the indicators of media exposure, we seek to test whether education and interest are still able to exert an effect vis-à-vis the levelling action of media.

Table 2. Regression model containing only 'traditional' predictors of knowledge (before and after correction for measurement errors).

Variables	Before correction	After correction
Education	0.16***	0.18***
	(0.033)	(0.034)
Political interest	0.24***	0.40***
	(0.029)	(0.027)
Gender	-0.015	0.010
	(0.029)	(0.027)
Age	0.06**	0.04
	(0.031)	(0.029)
Perceived economic situation	-0.04	-0.111***
	(0.031)	(0.031)
Observations	1091	1091
R^2	0.103	0.208

Note: standard error in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 3 illustrates the results before and after correction for measurement error for the model adding exposure to different media. Before applying the correction for measurement errors, three variables have a significant effect on political knowledge, i.e. education, political interest and exposure to television. The control variables gender, age and perceived economic situation have no significant impact and the same applies to

exposure to newspapers and the internet. As regards the direction of the effects, education, political interest and exposure to TV news are confirmed to be facilitators of voters' political knowledge, being a positive predictor of it. This is in line with the findings of the extant literature. The R^2 for this model is 0.11.

Table 3. Regression model (before and after correction for measurement errors).

Variables	Before correction	After correction
Education	0.152***	0.173***
	(0.029)	(0.034)
Political interest	0.213***	0.37***
	(0.032)	(0.037)
Television	0.099***	0.096***
	(0.033)	(0.036)
Newspaper	0.033	0.031
	(0.034)	(0.036)
Internet	-0.026	-0.055
	(0.031)	(0.033)
Gender	-0.008	0.014
	(0.029)	(0.027)
Age	0.048	0.027
	(0.031)	(0.030)
Perceived economic situation	-0.05	-0.119***
	(0.031)	(0.031)
Observations	1091	1091
R^2	0.114	0.221

Note: standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

After correcting for measurement errors, we mainly want to check whether the effect of education and interest has vanished in the corrected model considering the influence of the media. Contrary to what was expected, education and interest conserve a positive and significant effect also in the corrected model, showing that their role in determining levels of knowledge is not eroded by the impact of different types of media. In addition to this, the analysis shows that TV viewers are more likely to be knowledgeable about politics: exposure to political news about the European election on television does have a positive impact on knowledge about the EU. Yet, this is not true for exposure to newspapers and the internet, whose coefficients remain not significant after correction. This finding is in line with previous research, which has often found a connection between exposure to news on (mostly public service) TV and political learning (Fraile and Iyengar 2014), while the effect of internet usage turns out to be significant only for certain types of websites (Dimitrova et al. 2011). Unfortunately, in our analysis, we cannot distinguish between different sources of internet exposure. Moreover, in the

literature, it has been shown that newspapers provide more complex information than TV channels and therefore do not promote fast learning in the less educated segments of the population (Kleinnijenhuis 1991). This could stand as a partial explanation of the not significant effect of exposure to newspapers.

In terms of control variables, only the perceived economic situation presents a significant but negative effect on knowledge. To understand this finding better, we can rely on previous studies about economic conditions and political learning. Recently, Marinova and Anduiza (2018) dealt with the contradictory effect of the economy on what people know about politics. On the one hand, an objective deterioration of economic conditions should lead citizens to be more prompt to acquire political information. On the other hand, a perceived decline in economic opportunities does instead depress the tendency to retrieve and retain information. This being the case, we should expect self-positioning at a high level of the social staircase (i.e. our indicator of perceived economic situation) to positively affect political knowledge. However, data suggest that this is not the case. An explanation of this unexpected finding can be found in the fact that, if on the one hand people who experience a bad economic situation have more important concerns (Marinova and Anduiza 2018) than learning political facts, on the other hand people who feel they are in a good economic situation simply do not have enough motivation to care about politics. As Luskin (1990) argued, a citizen needs to be in the situation where learning about politics makes the difference to his/her economic condition in order to make the effort to retrieve political information.

Taken all together, in the model after correction these variables are able to explain roughly 22% of the variance of political knowledge. Undoubtedly, we should expand the range of the individual variables and also account for contextual factors in order to better understand what the determinants of political knowledge are in a comprehensive way. Yet the aim of this analysis was to check whether the impact of education and interest persists when media exposure is introduced in the model, or it vanishes as a consequence of the knowledge-levelling effect of media. Our findings suggest that the role of education and interest in positively affecting political knowledge does exist even when media exposure is taken into account. Moreover, following the news on TV favours learning about politics. Yet this does not apply to exposure to newspapers and the internet.

6. Discussion

In this paper, we aimed to revise the relationship between education and political knowledge, focusing on the role of media exposure. The main purpose was to study the impact of education and interest on political knowledge, while information about news consumption is also included in the model. The expectation was that, according to the knowledge-levelling role of the media, the effect of education and interest vanishes when other facilitators of knowledge, i.e. exposure to different types of media, are considered. Methodologically speaking, the correction of the analysis was suggested by previous works that have demonstrated how measurement errors can lead to a mistaken conclusion about voters' political awareness (Achen 1975, Bartle 2000). Theoretically speaking, mechanisms were built on two strands of literature: the first focusing on political behaviour and public opinion and the second related to political communication studies. In

particular, the narrowing knowledge gap hypothesis and evidence about TV consumption as knowledge-leveller have been discussed.

To test this, we focused on the Italian case (characterized by a particular media system where information quality and capacity is questioned) and we ran models with and without indicators of media exposure correcting for measurement errors. Analyses have confirmed that being exposed to TV news about the 2014 European elections increases the likelihood of knowing about European affairs. However, reading the news in the newspapers or on the internet does not positively affect political knowledge. Moreover, contrary to our expectations, the impact of education and interest does persist also in the model containing indicators of media exposure. This confirms that, regardless of the role of the media, education and interest are significant predictors of voters' political knowledge about European affairs. Nonetheless, the positive and significant effect of exposure to television news indicates that, besides the determinants that have already been proposed in the literature (i.e. pre-adult causes, personality traits, information environment, and contextual factors), it is also worth considering media exposure, together with education and other individual factors, as efficient predictors of political knowledge.

It goes without saying that this analysis presents some limits. First, it considers just one point in time and only one country. Furthermore, the set of independent variables used here was limited to individual predictors. This study overlooks any possible contextual effect, although we know that context can affect political knowledge in many different ways (Gordon and Segura 1997, Berggren 2001, Fraile 2013) and other variables at the individual level that could play a role in explaining why people become politically knowledgeable. Further investigations could thus add more independent variables, as well as expand the scope of analysis across country and over time. For example, it would definitely be relevant to study how the relationship between education and political knowledge has mutated over time in Europe, net of a consistent number of contextual and individual variables.

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Appendix: correction for measurement error

The reason why we correct for measurement error is simple: we know that survey questions always bring about measurement errors and correcting for them means being able to trust our results more (DeCastellarnau and Saris 2014). It is no coincidence that other works focusing on political knowledge have already relied on correction for measurement error (Achen 1975, Bartle 2000). In survey research, measurement errors can derive from different sources: the interviewer, the respondents, the mode of data collection, the interview setting, the information system, and the questionnaire. Not accounting for errors implied by these sources means that we might expose our estimates to a series of important distortions. There are two types of measurement error: random and systematic, and both are able to affect the analyses. This is why we should take both into account when we aim to extract conclusions from society based on data provided by surveys (Saris and Gallhofer 2014).

Knowing the size of measurement quality of survey questions is necessary to correct for measurement errors. Obtaining such information is usually an expensive and time-consuming task. However, the software SQP can provide predictions of the size of measurement quality by means of the characteristics of survey questions. SQP allows users to specify (stated more correctly, to code) between 29 to 60 characteristics of survey questions. Based on these codes, SQP is able to provide a prediction of measurement quality using an internal algorithm and thousands of data about Multitrait-Multimethod (MTMM) experiments (Saris and Gallhofer 2014).

Measurement quality is defined in SQP as "the strength between the latent concept of interest and the observed response to the measure or survey question". It is composed of reliability (strength between the true score and the observed variable) and validity (strength between the simple concept of interest and the true score). It varies between 0 and 1. The higher the quality, the better the measurement (Saris and Gallhofer 2014).

A list of the variables' measurement reliability, validity and quality and their descriptive statistics is displayed in Table A. The quality of background variables, such as gender, age and education, was not calculated using SQP since it can only be used for attitudinal questions.[5] For such variables, we employed the reliability provided in Alwin's book (2007). Alwin's reliability measure is comparable to the measurement quality in SQP. It goes without saying that quality of socio-demographic variables is generally very high, even 1 in the case of gender. This means that they are less or not affected by measurement error.

As regards media exposure, political interest, social class and the four factual knowledge items, instead, quality varies between 0.5 and 0.7. In this case, measurement quality was obtained using SQP. Since questions from the EES 2014 were not yet included in the SQP database, we introduced them in the study called 'EES 2014' and the calculation is based on own coding[6] for the Italian formulation of the questions.[7]

[5] That is further explained in Limitation 3: http://sqp.upf.edu/loadui/#L3.

[6] This is publicly available (after registration) at: http://sqp.upf.edu/loadui/#questionList/page:1 by filtering for the study 'EES 2014'.

[7] Since Italy was not involved in MTMM experiments on which the current version of SQP is based, it is not able to provide quality predictions for the Italian case. In this respect, it is important to point out that SQP requires choosing a country for which the prediction is available in order to get an approximation of

Table A. Variables' descriptive statistics and their measurement quality.

Variables	N° of obs.	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Measurement			Source of Measurement Quality
						Rel.	Val.	Quality	
Gender	1091	0	1	0.52	0.499	-	-	1	Alwin (2007)
Age	1091	18	86	48.038	15.950	-	-	0.994	Alwin (2007)
Education	1057	1	3	2.019	0.765	-	-	0.972	Alwin (2007)
Perceived economic situation	1020	0	10	5.698	1.372	0.747	0.791	0.591	SQP own coding
Television	1086	0	1	0.182	0.386	0.673	0.965	0.650	SQP own coding
Newspapers	1082	0	1	0.113	0.317	0.663	0.954	0.632	SQP own coding
Internet	1077	0	1	0.081	0.274	0.935	0.678	0.634	SQP own coding
Political interest	1079	1	4	2.240	0.836	0.733	0.944	0.692	SQP own coding
1st item of knowledge	1091	0	1	.748	.433	0.651	0.906	0.59	SQP own coding
2nd item of knowledge	1091	0	1	.401	.490	0.653	0.922	0.602	SQP own coding
3rd item of knowledge	1091	0	1	.883	.320	0.657	0.923	0.606	SQP own coding
Knowledge Index	1091	0	3	2.034	0.872	-	-	0.647	Own calculation

Turning to the independent variable, computation of quality has followed a different path. Knowledge is an additive index composed of three items of factual knowledge. SQP only predicts the quality of single questions, not indices or sum scores. Therefore, we implemented the step-by-step procedure described in chapter 7 by DeCastellarnau and Saris (2014). The calculation is thus manually undertaken. The first step consists in obtaining the quality of the items used for the additive index from SQP (as described above). We then proceed with the formula for the calculation of the quality of additive indices, also known as composite score. The quality of the unweighted additive index is defined as (Saris and Gallhofer 2014, 297, DeCastellarnau and Saris 2014, chapter 7):

$$Quality\ of\ the\ additive\ index\ S = 1 - \frac{var(e_s)}{var(S)}$$

Where S refers to the additive index, var(e_s) is the variance of the errors in S and var(S) is the variance of the additive index. The variance of errors is calculated as follows:

$$Error\ variance\ of\ the\ additive\ index\ (S) = var(e_s)$$
$$= \left(1 - q_i^2\right) \cdot var(y_i) + 2 \sum (r_i \cdot m_i \cdot r_j \cdot m_j)(s_i \cdot s_j)$$

Where:

- q^2_i is the measurement quality for each indicator of the index
- $var(y_i)$ is the variance of each indicator of the index
- $r_{i,j}$ is the reliability of each indicator of the index, where j≠i

the measurement quality. That is further explained in F.A.Q. 5 : http://sqp.upf.edu/loadui/#5. Therefore, in this case, coding has been based on Italy, using Italian as language of reference, and we employed France as the country for the prediction.

- $m_{i,j}$ is the method effect (computed as $\sqrt{1-v^2}$, where v is the validity) of each indicator of the index, where j≠i
- $s_{i,j}$ is the standard deviation of each indicator of the index, where j≠i

The result is the measurement quality of the composite score composed of the four items of knowledge, whose value is 0.647.

Using the information about the measurement quality, we ran a SEM regression analysis with correction for measurement errors. To do so, we transformed the observed correlation matrix (Table B) by subtracting the common method variance from the variables that share the same method and replacing the variances in the diagonal by the measurement quality. Thus, the correlation matrix becomes a covariance matrix (Table C) and is used as input for the new regression corrected for measurement errors.

Table B. Observed correlation matrix, input of the regression before correction.

	Knowledge	Gender	Age	Education	Economic situation	Interest	TV	Newspapers	Web
Knowledge	1								
Gender	-0.05	1							
Age	0.02	0.03	1						
Education	0.19	-0.01	-0.34	1					
Economic situation	0.06	0.01	-0.07	0.38	1				
Political interest	0.28	-0.15	0.08	0.27	0.19	1			
Television	0.21	-0.10	0.04	0.20	0.13	0.36	1		
Newspapers	0.17	-0.14	0.04	0.22	0.14	0.32	0.46	1	
Internet	0.10	-0.11	-0.08	0.17	0.07	0.31	0.32	0.36	1

Table C. Covariance matrix, input of the regression after correction.

	Knowledge	Gender	Age	Education	Economic situation	Interest	TV	Newspapers	WEB
Knowledge	0.64								
Gender	-0.05	1							
Age	0.025	0.03	0.99						
Education	0.19	-0.01	-0.34	0.97					
Economic situation	0.06	0.01	-0.07	0.38	0.59				
Political interest	0.28	-0.15	0.08	0.27	0.19	0.69			
Television	0.21	-0.10	0.04	0.20	0.13	0.36	0.65		
Newspapers	0.17	-0.14	0.04	0.22	0.14	0.32	0.36	0.63	
Internet	0.10	-0.11	-0.08	0.17	0.07	0.31	0.07	0.26	0.63

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Trade unions and labour conflicts: Social movement and radical political unionism in France and Italy

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Abstract

This article explores differences in labour conflicts in Italy and France by focusing on the characteristics of the most prominent structures of worker mobilization: trade unions. Despite several similarities between the French and Italian industrial relations systems, and despite the fact that trade union density in Italy is more than three times greater than it is in France, France is one of the few European countries in which the average strike volume increased after the Great Recession. Protests in France also peaked in the pre-crisis period, while Italy did not show any wave of contention. We contend that the nature and level of labour conflicts observed in the two countries in the last two decades depend on alliances between trade unions and other social groups and organizations sustaining worker mobilization, specifically, social movement organizations. In particular, we argue that labour conflicts are related to the characteristics of social movement unionism. Evidence from cases studies in France and Italy suggests that the role of trade unions and their alliances has been different in the two countries. Confederal trade unions in France have been able to engage in social movement unionism within broader coalitions involving other social categories and social movement organizations. In contrast, in Italy, these dynamics have mostly involved small rank-and-file unions and self-organized workers' groups engaged in radical political unionism. This has resulted in different levels of mobilization associated with social movement unionism and radical political unionism, given the greater capacity of confederal trade unions in building nationally coordinated and sustained collective actions.

1. Introduction

Today, trade unions have serious difficulties in developing common and coordinated national and European strategies of revitalization in order to come out of the stagnation resulting in declining membership and worker mobilization. Since the nineties, governments have attempted to obtain social stability by co-opting these intermediate groups, which have historically challenged them through strikes, the most commonly used form of collective action in the labour field. In particular, in many countries, governments have promoted processes of trade union institutionalization. In this way, many unions have become bureaucratic organizations relying on institutional power resources, thus limiting efforts devoted to the mobilization of workers.

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Despite similar policy changes, evidence has shown highly heterogeneous levels and forms of labour conflicts in European countries since the beginning of the 2000s. In most European countries strikes have declined in the last two decades but, in a few cases, they have increased (Vandaele 2016: 279-280). Differences have been further exacerbated during anti-austerity protests. Since 2008, economic and labour-related claims have prevailed over political and cultural claims, but this has mostly occurred in southern Europe (Rüdig and Karyotis 2014; Portos García 2016; Kriesi et al. forthcoming).

In this framework, Italy and France represent two cases in point of some of the differences in labour conflicts that have emerged in Europe in the last two decades. France is indeed one of the few countries in which the average strike volume increased after 2005, as compared to the previous two decades, reaching, between 2005 and 2014, an average strike volume three times higher than that of Italy (Vandaele 2016: 280).[1] In addition, protests in France peaked in the pre-crisis period, while Italy only experienced a series of intermittent crisis-related mobilizations without showing any wave of contention, as had occurred in Greece, Portugal and Spain (Kriesi et al. forthcoming). Such differences emerged despite France and Italy sharing many similarities in their industrial relations systems and trade union models. Furthermore, this occurred despite the fact that the density of trade unions in France remains one of the weakest in Europe, at around 8 percent throughout the 2000s, compared to more than 30 percent in Italy, suggesting an apparently greater support from Italian trade unions for worker mobilization. These data therefore underline the ambiguous relationship between union density and mobilization.

This article aims to examine factors which are likely to affect the differences in labour conflicts between France and Italy. It contends that the nature and level of labour conflicts depend, inter alia, on alliances between trade unions and other social categories and organizations sustaining worker mobilization, particularly social movement organizations. In other words, we argue that labour conflicts are related to the characteristics of social movement unionism, as referred to by industrial relations scholars in order to explain these dynamics (Baccaro et al. 2003).

To explore such a hypothesis, our empirical study draws on existing evidence in the two cases. In France, case studies suggest the crucial role of the main confederations, like Confédération Général du Travail (CGT), in acting together with other actors to mobilize workers in protests such as strikes, demonstrations and occupations. In general, in France, confederal trade unions have a good connection to the social movement sector, even if some scholars argue that mobilization has remained fragmented since 2011 (Ancelovici 2011; Béroud and Yon 2012; Tapia and Turner 2013; Béroud 2018). In contrast, in the last two decades, Italy has often witnessed a lack of alliance building by the three major confederations – Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL), Confederazione Italiana Sindacati dei Lavoratori (CISL) and Unione Italiana del Lavoro (UIL) – in processes of worker mobilization. Workers have often relied on self-organized

[1] Empirically, strikes have a multi-dimensional character, reflected by three main indicators: the number of strikes, the number of workers going on strike and the number of days not worked due to industrial action. According to Vandaele (2016: 279), the latter, i.e., the number of working days lost through strikes per worker per year, referred to as strike volume, is considered the most reliable indicator for cross-national and historical comparisons. Although lockouts should in principle be separated from strike actions, most data on industrial action do not make a distinction between those two types of industrial action.

and informal groups or on grassroots, independent, small rank-and-file trade unions (Cillo and Pradella 2018; 2019; Chesta et al. 2019; Caruso et al. 2019; see also Mattoni 2016 on temporary workers).[2]

2. The repertoire of labour conflicts: strikes and beyond

Labour conflicts refer to instances of workers' collective actions or collective actions whose claims refer to labour. They identify the various forms of opposition that the workforce, or other actors on its behalf, carry out against the worsening of labour conditions in the workplace, and of workers' rights in relation to employment standards, retirement and social security (Roscigno and Hodson 2004). Historically, strikes have been the main form of labour conflict; however, labour conflicts have not been restricted to them. Indeed, they include street protests, sit-ins, assemblies, more institutional acts such as forms of consultations, and more disruptive actions such as squatting. These forms of action represent specific instances of contentious politics. Whether or not they identify, as a whole, as a labour movement is an empirical question. Indeed, labour movements are specific forms of collective action dynamics and are associated with sustained contentious interactions between challengers and authorities, a shared class consciousness and a variety of actors and organizations which support, engage in or organize various types of labour-related collective actions and events (Tilly and Tarrow 2015; Diani 2018).

Strikes, the main form of labour conflict since the 1980s and 1990s, have progressively decreased in most European countries, despite differences across countries (Brandl and Traxler 2010; Baccaro and Howell 2011). While the Great Recession has worsened conditions in many workplaces and often diminished workers' rights due to austerity measures adopted by many European countries in order to face the crisis, strikes have continued to decline even during the last decade. A comparison of strike volume before and after 2008, the year in which the Great Recession started, shows that the days-not-worked rates have only increased in a limited number of countries in the past decade. Compared with the pre-2008 period, the average days-not-worked rate after the Great Recession only rose in Belgium, France, Germany and Luxembourg (Vandaele 2016: 279-280).[3] Data from the European Commission reporting the distribution of strike volume across European countries further confirms that, after 2008, strike volume declined steadily in absolute terms in almost all countries. The only countries in which strike volume sharply increased in the first four years of the crisis, between 2008 and 2012, are Denmark, Ireland and France (European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion Unit B.1, 2015: 37).

Strikes have undergone several other changes in the last decades. On the one hand, they have become more defensive than offensive, thus differing in many ways from the labour movements of the second half of last century (Ancelovici 2011; Baccaro and Howell

[2] As Culpepper and Regan (2014) underline, from the middle of the 1990s onwards, radical organizations such as COBAS (Comitati di Base) have used their shop-floor power to arrange wage-settings at the local level. CGIL often contested these agreements using a binding vote of union members in order to reaffirm its own legitimacy.

[3] Vandaele (2016: 280) suggests being cautious when discussing data on strikes after the recession. Indeed, the author argues that the number of countries covered by strike data and its reliability have fallen since 2008, especially in southern European countries.

2011). Calhoun (2012) argues that modern workers seem to be reformists rather than radicals. They tend to compete in the capitalist arena for distributional advantage. However, they do not aim to challenge the mode of production, nor propose a new economic and social order. On the other hand, empirical evidence has shown that strikes have been increasingly addressed to governments rather than to employers. Indeed, general and political strikes increased during the Great Recession, especially in the period 2010–2013 and in southern European countries such as Greece (Rüdig and Karyotis 2014; Kelly 2015: 11; Vandaele 2016).

As already mentioned, labour conflicts are not only manifested through strikes. Prompted by struggles against neo-liberal policies developed at the beginning of the millennium and exacerbated by the Great Recession, claims over economic issues, including labour-related claims, have been expressed in a variety of actions, beyond strikes (Ancelovici 2011; Flesher Fominaya 2014; della Porta 2015; Andretta, Bosi and della Porta 2016; Giugni and Grasso 2015). During anti-austerity protests, demonstrations proved to be the major form of collective action next to strikes (for southern Europe see Rüdig and Karyotis 2014; Portos García 2016; Andretta 2018). During such protests, workers have often been incorporated in broader coalitions against neo-liberal policies or austerity measures, claiming against the demise of social benefits and the retrenchment of welfare states, against the regulation of immigration to Europe, and against financial regulations and spreading inequalities (Tapia and Turner 2013; della Porta 2015). Under such circumstances, workers have mobilized around cross-cutting issues such as social exclusion or various types of rights such as housing or migrants' rights and claims by traditional working classes, the 'insiders', have overlapped with claims by 'outsiders' such as atypical workers, the unemployed, students, youth, and migrants.[4] Occupations, as well as more disruptive forms of action, by means of violent or dangerous actions such as 'boss-napping' in France at the Goodyear tyre factory, where workers held their managers hostage in a protest against the plant closure in 2012, have also been used to claim labour rights or better working conditions (Baccaro 2010).

3. Interpreting changes in labour conflicts

Several hypotheses have been put forward to account for changes in labour conflicts, more specifically for declining strikes. One reason for the declining strikes is related to long-term shifts in the labour force composition. As regards the occupational sector, scholars have observed a steady trend towards further de-industrialization of employment, namely shrinking manufacturing employment, with a corresponding decrease in the days-not-worked rate in industry in most countries (Vandaele 2016: 284). From the 1980s onwards, labour conflicts have moved from the industrial sectors to public services. Indeed, shifts in the employment composition, namely the "tertiarisation of industrial conflict" (Bordogna and Cella 2002) assume that strikes in the services sector are

[4] The opposition between insiders and outsiders is defined as dualization (Emmenegger et al. 2012). It implies that policies differentiate rights, entitlements and services for different groups of recipients. While the position of insiders has remained more or less constant, the position of outsiders has greatly deteriorated. Scholars distinguish between process of dualization, output (institutional dualism) and outcome of the policies (divide). See Davidsson and Naczyk (2009) for a review of the literature.

escalating, while historically strike-prone unionized sectors have structurally declined over time (Vandaele 2016: 284).

Another factor associated with the generally decreasing number of days-not-worked rates before the Recession relates to the fact that, since the 1990s, in southern European countries, industrial conflict has been solved via 'social pacts'.[5] Until the mid-1990s, Italian trade unions represented an integral part of the policy-making process and a major counterpart of the government in the negotiations regarding several reforms. Afterwards, unions reduced this role, although they maintained their ability to mobilize social protest and the possibility to veto a decision during negotiations (Regalia and Regini 2018).

Industrial relations scholars have further delved into the role of the characteristics of the industrial relations system to explain declining industrial action. Moving in a neoliberal direction over the past 30 years has meant, inter-alia, a dualization of the economic system, in particular of the labour market opposing insiders to outsiders, a progressive flexibilization of workers' labour conditions, and a process of decentralization of collective bargaining from the national to the second-level-firm or company-bargaining levels (Silver 2003; Baccaro and Howell 2011; Emmenegger et al. 2012; Regan 2017). Austerity structural reforms imposed by the new European economic governance have further increased the process of decentralization and the flexibility of the labour market, reducing multi-employer bargaining systems, the process of institutionalization of many industrial relations practices and delegitimized unions as political subjects (Leonardi and Pedersini 2018; Leonardi 2018)[6]. Decentralization and company bargaining have increased in many European countries including, since the 1980s, both Italy and France. Governments have encouraged enterprise bargaining instead of sectoral or national collective bargaining and have removed the monopoly of unions in bargaining working conditions and wage setting.[7] While there is 80-90 percent of collective bargaining coverage in both countries, many sectoral agreements only include what is prescribed by law, and workplace settlement disregards the sectoral framework. Consequently, the problem is often how company agreement can derogate collective bargaining (the national collective agreement and the sectoral agreement) and what the arrangements for companies should be where no union representative exists. These changes imply that labour disputes are likely to be smaller and with relatively fewer workers involved, given the downward

[5] Since the Great Recession, the process of involving labour in social pacts has been interrupted. National governments, regardless of partisanship, have mostly rejected a process of negotiated adjustment of reform initiatives that involved unions (Culpepper and Regan 2014; Armingeon and Baccaro 2012).

[6] The progressive introduction of bilateralism can be considered the most evident example of the process of institutionalization.

[7] In this framework, France is the most prominent case of state-guided coordination (Culpepper 2006) as demonstrated by the high politicized level of wage setting, including coordinated second level bargaining. In this country there is a dual system of industrial relations. In large industrial firms and in the public sector, where trade unions maintain their presence, it is possible to observe the traditional exchange between working time flexibility for job security (long term contract). In small firms and low skilled sectors – public and private – without union representations, working conditions have deteriorated and flexibility is increasing (Palier and Thelen 2010).

scale-shift of bargaining to the firm level. In contrast, where bargaining takes place at higher levels, relatively more workers are involved but conflicts may be fewer.[8]

More recently, Gentile and Tarrow (2009) have drawn on the literature on social movements, namely on the concept of political opportunity structure (POS) - which defines the institutional setting shaping opportunities for collective actions - to explain changes in labour conflicts. The POS regards both the most stable dimensions of the institutional system, like the legislative frame, and more contingent dimensions such as the type of electoral system and the stability of elites' alignments or elites' alliances (cf. Kriesi et al. 1995). According to the main hypothesis driven by such theory, an open POS is expected to provide more opportunities for protest mobilization. Gentile and Tarrow (2009) have interpreted differences in labour conflicts, namely between labour and rights-based claims, by referring to the different degree of legal-institutionalized recognition of labour rights across countries. According to the authors, in corporatist settings the specific legal-institutionalized setting is associated with more opportunities for workers to mobilize along labour issues. This also characterizes a labour repertoire of industrial action, whereby workers tend to coordinate through trade unions and frame their demands in terms of the expansion or violation of their labour rights. In contrast, where labour rights are severely curtailed, as in neoliberal regimes, opportunities for workers to mobilize along labour issues shrink, leading to a closing POS and to a shift towards a citizens' rights-oriented repertoire. In this case, claims and grievances tend to be framed in terms of civil rights; workers will build alliances with social movements, not just unions, and they will resort to civil legal institutions for protection. This has been observed in the case of the US labour movement (Milkman and Voss 2004). Nonetheless, in recent decades, neoliberal policies have definitely touched all European countries, especially through decentralization, as mentioned, thus affecting countries with a corporatist regime too (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013).

The aforementioned scholars, in an attempt to account for changes in labour conflicts, argue that the broad macro-level context has significant consequences for labour conflicts through shifts in employment composition, or through changes in the legal-institutionalized recognition of labour rights, or else through policies aiming, inter-alia, to decentralize collective bargaining. These factors, as discussed, tend to affect many European countries, including France and Italy. Therefore, they cannot fully account for the specific differences observed between France and Italy.

In the following paragraphs, we therefore turn to examine factors associated with the meso-level, considering, in particular, intermediate mobilizing structures such as trade unions. Scholars have indeed argued that differences in labour conflicts may also depend on trade union characteristics, such as the level of unity or disunity of trade unions, the capacity of trade unions to shape government responses to socio-economic trends and periodic economic crises, and the involvement of trade unions in government decisions about public spending cuts (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013; Bieling and Lux 2014; Grote and Wagemann 2018). Below we specifically discuss the alliances built by

[8]According to Vandaele (2016) the associations between level of bargaining and strike characteristics are, however, weak and he advocates further analysis considering other economic and political variables.

trade unions with other sectors of civil society, specifically, with social movement organizations, SMOs, and the ways they may affect labour conflicts.

4. Trade unions, alliances, and labour conflicts: a hypothesis

Historically, the major actors coordinating industrial conflicts have been trade unions (Leonardi 2018).[9] Trade unions are active as both economic and political actors in activities spanning from collective bargaining, work-place regulation and the provision of services to their members, to claims-making, aggregating workers' interests against capital in relation to demands concerning salaries or work-place conditions, among others (Baccaro et al. 2003; Olivier 2011). As political actors, trade unions have played a major role in mobilizing the necessary resources for the coordination, organization and the management of strikes, the most notable and traditional form of industrial conflict in Europe (Shorter and Tilly 1974; Crouch and Pizzorno 1978).

Despite notable differences across European countries, today traditional trade unions have largely lost their primary role in mobilizing workers. As mentioned, a process of regulation of the labour market has led to progressive depoliticization and to a bureaucratization of labour disputes, leading trade unions to become more dependent on their institutionalized roles in current welfare states (Ebbinghaus and Visser 1999). The institutionalization of trade unions has meant, inter-alia, a progressive specialization of their organizational functions, the adoption of a more conventional repertoire of actions such as negotiation rather than protest, the centralization of decisions, and the moderation of the objectives which often evolve around organizational survival rather than broader social and political changes. By becoming more institutionalized – also in countries usually considered confrontational such as France and Italy – trade unions have therefore been involved in negotiations and consultation on policy making related to labour or pension laws (Ebbinghaus and Visser 1999; Ebbinghaus 2002; Brandl and Traxler 2010; Baccaro and Howell 2011). Under such circumstances, workers have, consequently, progressively perceived trade unions as institutional actors rather than as allies against institutions themselves and this has been aggravated by the growing incapacity of trade unions to organize workplace mobilization against the new organization and delocalization of production, technological innovation, shifts in the composition of employment and the flexibilization of labour contracts. Under such circumstances, trade unions have been facing a crisis of their representative power *vis à vis* workers. This has had substantial consequences for membership, which has steadily declined since the 2000s in most European countries (Visser 2016b in Regalia and Regini 2018: 69).[10]

[9] Concerning the relationship between union membership growth and strike action cf. Edwards and McCarthy 2004; Fantasia 1988; Kelly 1998; Barling et al. 1992; Clark 2009; Visser 2002).

[10] Italy is, together with Norway, the only advanced economy in which the union density rate has increased during the crisis, shifting from 33.9 per cent in 2008 to 37.3 per cent in 2013 (Visser 2016b in Regalia and Regini 2018: 69). Trade union density corresponds to the ratio of wage and salary earners that are trade union members, divided by the total number of wage and salary earners (OECD *Labour Force Statistics).* Density is calculated using survey data, wherever possible, and administrative data adjusted for non-active and self-employed members otherwise (Visser 2016b).

Trade unions have looked for strategies of revitalization to come out of this situation (Bernaciak et al. 2014). Industrial relations scholars have shown that trade unions in countries such as the US, Great Britain and France have followed peculiar strategies of revitalization by extending solidarity with other organizations and community networks, and promoting social movement unionism (Baccaro et al. 2003; Le Queux and Sainsaulieu 2010; Tapia and Turner 2013). Alliances are processes through which groups exchange various types of resources in pursuit of a common goal, and are of the utmost importance when actors cannot afford to pursue their goals in total autonomy (Van Dyke and McCammon 2010). Through social movement unionism, trade unions have been able to capture new claims by workers, including those by 'outsiders' such as claims related to temporary jobs, claims related to rising unemployment or civil rights-based claims (Ancelovici 2011; Tapia and Alberti 2019).

These cases of revitalization are usually portrayed as being opposed to those instances where traditional trade unions, in contrast, have not been able to rely on alliances with other organizations and social categories, remaining anchored to their institutional role and closed to mainstream parties (Simoni 2013; Ceron and Negri 2017). In Italy, for instance, established trade unions have been absent in many labour conflicts, and have mostly continued to protect the 'insiders', while the 'outsiders' have been often mobilized by independent, small rank-and-file and more radical trade unions. Scholars have referred to these dynamics as radical political unionism (cf. Cillo and Pradella 2019 for the Italian case).[11]

Both social movement unionism and radical political unionism have meant the reappearance, next to trade unions, of several other actors active in mobilizing workers such as SMOs, NGOs, workers' self-organized groups, grassroots informal groups and a multiplicity of networks evolving in open public spaces, such as the street, square, parks and virtual space. However, the type of trade unions involved in social movement unionism and in radical political unionism and the role of confederal trade unions and small rank-and-file unions differs. We contend that such differences are likely to sustain different types of labour conflicts and forms of protest. Labour conflicts can indeed span from short term, contingent, local-level single actions – such as those which may evolve around single firm-level issues – to more sustained interactions spanning several years. We advance that the presence of confederal trade unions in dynamics of social movement unionism is more likely to be associated with sustained long-term actions, and actions with a national scope. Confederal trade unions have indeed the necessary organizational resources, a more established structure, and chapters diffused throughout the national territory sustaining such actions, something that small rank-and-file trade unions or the presence of online networks do not always possess. In contrast, we expect that radical political unionism – dominated by fragmentation between confederal and independent small rank-and-file trade unions, and the prevalence of the latter – is likely to be associated with more contingent and sub-national or local-level actions. Indeed, fragmentation among trade unions, such as that which occurred in Italy, is more likely to be associated with the competition between organizations and the polarization of the organizational field. Through fragmentation, actors become more and more autonomous

[11] Radical political unionism has been discussed with reference to France and Britain as well (cf. Connolly and Darlington 2012).

from one another, draw on different sources of support, and focus on diverging goals and tactics, or diverging interests. These dynamics are all the more likely to prevent shared interests and constrain the construction of broad collective identities which support wide-ranging, sustained and long-term collective actions.

We try to explore this hypothesis better by investigating the relationship between the type of alliances and the nature of labour conflicts in the French and Italian cases.

5. The empirical study

5.1. France and Italy compared: case selection

To empirically explore the aforementioned hypothesis, we focus on France and Italy. In selecting these countries, we followed the comparative method of the 'most similar system design', in particular, a paired controlled comparison. This method implies the intentional selection of observations that resemble each other in every respect but one to control for possible effects of omitted variables (King, Keohane, and Verba, 1994: 205). Our cases, France and Italy, indeed share several characteristics. First, the two countries have historically shown a strong class cleavage and a stronger labour movement compared to other European countries. The two countries have long been considered similar in terms of the characteristics of their strikes, featuring high rates of days not worked and classified as belonging to 'the strike front' (Bordogna and Cella 2002; Vandaele 2016: 282). Despite this however, the Italian labour movement has been characterized as being weakly institutionalized and severely fragmented (Cella 1989). Workers' interests have mainly been represented by trade unions and left-wing parties in Italy, while in France labour movements have been stronger and trade unions have been more able to establish long-term alliances with SMOs. Indeed, in Italy the reciprocal defiance of trade unions and SMOs and their incapacity to build long-term alliances goes back to the seventies, when trade unions distanced themselves from the social movement sector, particularly when a few organizations turned to political violence.

Second, France and Italy share the same trade union model, historically characterized by highly politicized industrial relations, a contentious and conflictual model within a Latin cluster in which France, Italy and Spain are aggregated together (Meardi 2004; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013; Pedersini 2014; Visser 2016a). In both cases, in the last three decades, this model has experienced a process of institutionalization, with a moderate level of involvement of trade unions in government socio-economic policies and claims which are dealt with through state regulation.

Third, the two countries witnessed rising rates of unemployment and worsening levels of living conditions among workers after the 2008 crisis. Italy and France are among the 10 countries with the highest unemployment rates, especially of young people, with a subsequent massive build-up of debt, in Italy in particular (Bieling and Lux 2014).

5.2 Labour conflicts in France and Italy

Despite sharing the aforementioned characteristics, the two countries have shown quite divergent patterns in labour conflicts in the last two decades. France is one of the few countries where the number of days not worked due to strikes has increased in the last two decades (Vandaele 2016: 279-280). As regards the period between 2000 and 2009,

the average days not worked due to industrial actions in France were 127 per 1,000 employees (and the figure remained approximately the same between 2010 and 2017) while there were only 88 in Italy (ETUI 2019; see also Vandaele 2016). In turn, Italy showed higher levels of general strikes than France between 2000 and 2009 (ETUI 2019: 2). In 2010, a further peak resulted mainly from the 'national days of action' against pension reforms in France (Ancelovici 2011), after which the days-not-worked average declined to a level lower than before the Recession.[12] However, between 2008 and 2012, on average, over 150 working days were lost due to strikes per 1000 employees per year in France, and only around 25 in Italy, leading to an Italian strike volume six times lower than the French strike volume.[13] Likewise, a study on protests during the Great Recession shows that most protests in France occurred in the pre-crisis period, which spanned from 2005 to 2006. In contrast, Italy experienced a series of intermittent crisis-related mobilizations without showing any wave of contention which emerged in other southern countries such as Greece, Spain and Portugal (Zamponi 2012; Kriesi et al. forthcoming). This trend appears even more striking for Italy, given that anti-austerity protests overlapped with political disaffection in a strong political crisis, with Europeans' trust in government dramatically declining in most southern countries since the onset of the crisis. Political outcomes in these countries have, nevertheless, mainly resulted in the reconfiguration of the party system, rather than in a clear-cut resurgence of protests (Hutter, Kriesi and Vidal 2018).

In this framework, the repertoire of labour conflicts has also changed significantly in both countries. In France, "strikes are getting more scattered, impromptu, and shorter, and significantly, there is a rise in individual manifestations of conflict" (Le Queux and Sainsaulieu, 2010: 507). Labour struggles in the pre-crisis period involving immigrants in France started in 2006 and later developed in the *sans papiers* movement of 2008–2010, resulting in strikes integrated by occupations (Barron et al. 2016; Béroud 2018). The Great Recession further widened the repertoire of labour conflicts. In 2010, "the national days of action that punctuated the months of demonstrations were a combination of protests and strikes coordinated at the national level" (Ancelovici 2011). Furthermore, "in June 2010, workers spent day and night occupying part of Place de la Bastille; in the following autumn, they occupied the *Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration*, a new institution settled in the former Museum of Colonies." (Barron et al. 2016: 642). CGT leaders called "the main camp at Bastille – not a strike, not in a company – the 'picket of the pickets'" (ibidem). Likewise, the 2016 movement against the El Khomri law, or the 'loi Travail', that took place from March to July 2016 – the strongest and longest social protest under a left-wing government during the Fifth Republic and President Hollande's five-year term (2012–2017) – included not only strikes that lasted several days in different sectors, but a predominance of 'days of action' and demonstrations across the country (Béroud 2018). The 2016 protests were referred to as the Nuit Débout ('Up All Night'), and involved the occupation of public spaces in a series of cities, beginning with the Place de la République in Paris. More recently, in December 2019, the public sector strikes involved rail workers, bus drivers, teachers, hospital staff, and

[12] While the days-not-worked rate during the Hollande presidency (further) declined, at least until 2013, no later data are available (Vandaele 2016).
[13] This needs to be taken with caution as in the Italian case data is only available up to 2009.

students who walked out protesting the proposed reforms of the country's generous pension system. More than 800,000 people across the country took to the streets, in one of the biggest strikes in France in decades. Last year in Paris, labour union marchers were joined by yellow vest protesters, who posed a significant challenge to President Emmanuel Macron's agenda. People on strike were asking the government to back down on planned reforms to the pension system in an attempt to unify the system, which currently has specific rules for some occupations.

Likewise, the Italian repertoire of labour conflicts has also changed in the last decade. As regards anti-austerity protests, between 2009 and 2014, 33 percent of actions were strikes and 23 percent demonstrations (Andretta 2018). Similar findings are reported by a study specifically tackling labour conflicts in Italy after 2008 (Pilati, Frazzetta, and Perra unpublished manuscript). This study shows that strikes were the most common form of action during the first period of the crisis (2008-2010), representing around 24 percent of all forms of labour conflicts. Next to strikes, sit-ins and public demonstrations were the major forms of labour conflicts during those years, representing, respectively, around 19 and 15 percent of all actions observed. Furthermore, from 2008 to 2010 strikes declined from approximately 28 to 20 percent, while from 2008 to 2010 squatting increased to nearly 10 percent.

Below, we aim to discuss how dynamics of social movement unionism in France, and of radical political unionism in Italy, may have affected the aforementioned dynamics of labour conflicts in the two countries.

5.3 Social movement unionism in France

If we approach the explanation of labour activism in France by drawing on theories related to resource mobilization and the role of trade unions as major actors mobilizing resources in the labour field, the picture is quite puzzling. In France, the density of trade unions remains low compared to other countries. Throughout the 2000s unionization in France remained around 8 percent. Specifically, the density in 2018 was 8.8 percent in France and 34.4 percent in Italy, despite the latter largely accounting for affiliations by workers with a typical contract, the 'insiders', and by pensioners who receive various types of services from trade unions (OECD 2020). Indeed, "French trade unions are often considered an 'atypical' case when it comes to international comparisons due to their small number of members and their strong dependence on the state (particularly for their funding), but also, and paradoxically to the first two points, because of their ability to instigate very strong collective mobilization" (Béroud 2018: 180). Previous research points to two other characteristics of trade unions: trade union unity as well as trade union alliances with other organizations and societal groups (cf. Ancelovici 2011). As regards trade union unity, the so-called 2010 'national days of action' were indeed organized by an alliance of all French labour confederations, namely the CGT, the CFDT, FO, the CFTC, the CGC, UNSA, the FSU, and Solidaires. Such an alliance, called 'intersyndicale', was not unprecedented, but it had never held together over such an extended period (Ancelovici 2011). Alliances that trade unions built in France affected their strong collective mobilization: despite the 2010 French reform concerned with retirement and unemployment insurances, worker mobilization gradually extended to youth, who had initially organized their own rallies, independent of those of the trade unions. According

to several youth organizations, 70,000 youths (high school and university students) participated in the national day of action on 19 October 2010 (Ancelovici 2011: 123). Cross-sectional and national-wide initiatives in which trade unions allied with other social movement organizations, youth-led or immigrant-led initiatives also include the CGT-led '*sans papiers*' campaign, which started in 2006, as well as the Nuit Débout movement, in which French trade unions played a determining role in the opposition to the El Khomri law (also called the 'loi Travail') in Spring 2016 (Tapia and Turner 2013; Barron et al. 2016; Béroud 2018). Following this, some scholars have contended that traditional trade unions in France have engendered dynamics of social movement unionism by privileging coalition-building with other organizations and constituencies, including not only workers with a variety of contracts, but also students and immigrants (Tapia and Alberti 2019).[14] The evolution of the protests by undocumented migrant workers which started in 2006 exemplifies this process (Barren et al. 2016). The strike, which began in 2006 in Chilly-Mazarin, near Paris, involved immigrant workers in an industrial laundry service; a second major strike then took place at a Buffalo Grill restaurant in June 2007 and a third strike was organized at *La Grande Armée* restaurant near the Champs-Elysées, with the support of several CGT branches. All three initiatives were initially supported by the local branch of CGT, which workers knew from media and community networks. Due to their limited resources, the local CGT branches had, however, contacted and involved the main branch of the CGT in Paris and eventually involved the national branch when strikes became diffused in 2008. Eventually, the multi-site movement was followed by negotiations between the CGT and the government over regularization criteria (Barron et al. 2016: 639).[15] These campaigns were successful due to the union attempts to involve migrant workers, thanks to the intersection of demands for liberation and equality (Tapia and Alberti 2019: 117). Claims had been related to mobility rights, the freedom of movement through regularization, as well as to labour rights, in an attempt to achieve equal treatment among all workers in the workplace (Tapia and Turner 2013; Tapia and Alberti 2019). Collective action frames were, therefore, resonating both with traditional workers' claims and with claims by new categories of workers such as migrant workers. Likewise, with respect to the 2016 protests known as the Nuit Débout, Beroud (2018: 181) highlights that "a number of the organizers of Nuit Débout wanted to create a space where their struggles could converge and to help the unions to strengthen their position of power in relation to the government. For them, it was less about rejecting trade unions than about pointing out their weaknesses in relation to the difficulties they have in reaching a whole section of the

[14] Vandaele (2016: 283) nonetheless contends that "due to divisions between unions, a revival of social movement unionism has hardly resulted in revitalizing the main characteristics of France's industrial relations system so far".

[15] Of course, the participation of CGT in undocumented workers' strikes did not come without conflict as when "On 2 May 2008, members of the 'Coordination 75' of sans-papier collectives (CSP 75) occupied the Bourse du Travail, a communal labor building housing the Paris branch of the CGT, which by then was the most active labor union section in the strikes [...] criticizing what they believed to be the union's new role as an unavoidable intermediary of regularization" (Barron et al. 2016: 640). Conflicts peaked when "on 24 June 2009, after facing 14 months of occupation at the Bourse du Travail, the CGT proceeded to forcibly evacuate its premises, with the assistance of anti-riot police outside the building" (ibidem).

workforce, including occasional workers, and offering them an adapted framework of representation."

5.4 Radical political unionism in Italy

According to a recent study, trade unions in Italy staged 52 percent of the anti-austerity protests. 34 percent were organized by the largest confederations, mostly CGIL in 2009 and 2010, and 20 percent by radical grassroots trade unions (Andretta 2018). During these protests confederal trade unions were not, however, able to ally with other actors in building strong coalitions, hampering the development of cooperative relations and of social movement dynamics, and facilitating the growth of independent unions. Several case studies on strikes that have emerged since the Great Recession confirm that many of them were backed by independent trade unions and self-organized groups, at times in alliance with other constituencies, involving dynamics of radical political unionism (Cillo and Pradella 2019). Strikes which occurred in the logistics sector from 2008 onwards mainly concerned immigrant workers from North Africa and Asia (Cillo and Pradella 2018). In this case, conflicts began in 2008 in one logistics centre of the Bennet supermarket chain in Origgio (Milan), and then spread to the main logistics hubs in the central north of Italy. As well as self-organized workers' groups, these struggles were mostly supported by independent small rank-and-file unions like Slai Cobas and Adl Cobas and were supported by left-wing militants and social centres from Milan (Cillo and Pradella 2018: 77). A first national strike of the logistics sector was organized on 22 March 2013, blocking the sector in the north of Italy, Rome and Naples, and then two other national strikes followed. As well as strikes, workers organized pickets which went on for several months, blocking commodity flows from the warehouse to supermarkets in northern Italy. Issues claimed were initially focused on working conditions but then included broader and political issues, such as the repeal of the 'Bossi-Fini' Law (ibidem). Workers eventually managed to achieve better working conditions in the cooperatives of the main logistics hubs but, at the same time, induced harsh repressive measures by the state and the companies.

The same authors report experiences of strikes across the Fiat-Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) plants in southern Italy which erupted in 2015 (Cillo and Pradella 2019). This time strikes started when workers at FCA went on strike against increasingly worsening working conditions such as those related to delays which were "often offset by forcing employees to work during rest periods, refusing permission to use the toilets, and not stopping the assembly line in case of accidents" (Cillo and Pradella 2019: 463). Strikes were called in January 2015 and then repeatedly called in the following months and years – in May and November 2015, in April and July 2016, in January and October 2017 and in March 2018 – involving workers from different FCA plants in southern Italy, Melfi, Termoli, and Cassino and Atessa. Strikes also transnationalized to include solidarity with workers on strike at the FCA plant in Serbia. Even in this case, strikes were organized thanks to the support of SiCobas and, to a lesser extent, AdlCobas and USB. Fragmentation among trade unions was clear in this case, as independent trade unions pushed for going on strike in clear opposition to traditional trade unions even to the most militant branch, the FIOM-CGIL (Federation of Metallurgical Employees and

Workers), which precipitated into a crisis as many shop stewards preferred to join independent unions (Cillo and Pradella 2019: 459).

Another case study examined the emergence of 'rider unions', self-organized collectives of food delivery riders working for online platforms (Chesta et al. 2019: 821). The first of these workers' strikes took place in Turin in October 2016 and involved a group of riders employed by the food delivery company Foodora. This action was then followed by Deliveroo employees in Milan who organized a strike in July 2017, and then workers grouped under the label Riders Union Bologna went on strikes in November 2017. In all such cases, riders were claiming better working conditions, either rejecting the transition from an hourly pay system to a payment-by-delivery system, as had occurred in Turin, or refusing to risk their health by riding on the icy streets, as had occurred in Bologna. In all such instances riders were self-organized. The support for their claims came, again, not from confederal trade unions but from youth associations and social centres, due to the presence of students with previous experiences of activism among workers (Chesta et al. 2019: 822).

These case studies show the absence of engagement by confederal trade unions and the dominant role of small rank-and-file and independent trade unions, as well as their fragmentation. Italy has indeed experienced isolated trade unions since the 1990s, with marked differences and competition between the three traditional union confederations, with CGIL showing a more conflictual approach than the other two, CISL and UIL. This situation has been further exacerbated by the distance between confederal trade unions and independent trade unions. The latter, often in competition with confederal trade unions, have, since the 1990s, increasingly focused on atypical workers who have been looking to have their concerns represented at a political level (see Mattoni 2016 on temporary workers). When traditional trade unions met instances by atypical workers, whose claims in Italy were often backed by self-organized workers' groups and independent trade unions, they were pushed by other sectors of society, as was the case with the emergence of NIDIL, the CGIL trade union sector representing atypical workers. NIDIL was initially rooted in the autonomous organization of professional occasional freelancers (Murgia and Selmi 2011: 171). However, rather than collaborating with the latter, CGIL preferred to create a specific internal representation. The aim was to provide protection for under protected workers, also through collective bargaining. CGIL defined a national committee for professional self-employed individuals, in order to extend labour rights and welfare protection to all workers. This initiative aimed to revitalize CGIL and it was part of the strategies to organize young and atypical employees, 'knowledge workers' and immigrants (Pirro and Pugliese 2015; Leonardi 2018).

In the last decade, confederal trade unions have nonetheless supported campaigns against xenophobia, exploitation of migrants and the abuses associated with low-cost services in urban transport, in some airline transport as in the case of Ryanair, as well as in the area of home-delivered food. There has been strong mobilization against the overexploitation of migrant workers in agriculture by providing assistance in rights and contracts. In October 2016, through the support of traditional trade unions, immigrant workers obtained the approval of a law, the 2016 Law 199, that punishes illicit labour intermediation and forced labour and slavery (Leonardi 2018). Despite this, confederal trade unions have lost much of their appeal amongst workers. As mentioned, this has

been linked to processes of decentralization of bargaining and of co-optation of trade unions by political parties.[16] The negative effects of these processes on trade unions were multiple and included not only the lowering bargaining power of trade unions, but also a crisis of their representation and their de-legitimation among workers. This has contributed to competition between parties and trade unions for consent and the exit of trade unions from labour–capital conflict (Streeck 2009; Cella 2012; Crouch 2012a; 2012b).

In this regard, traditional trade unions in Italy seem to be caught in the middle of two processes of delegitimization.

First, Italian confederal trade unions are progressively losing their legitimacy in the industrial relations system as they are often not a legitimated counterpart for the national government in the definition of major reforms. While trade unions have the possibility to veto a decision, and they have been involved in the discussions on reforms such as those on retirement or on the labour market (see Pritoni and Sacchi 2019) governments do not necessarily include their claims when finalizing and implementing reforms. With regard to the 2011 Fornero law, for instance, this occurred with reference to the 'esodati'.[17] Scholars have indeed underlined that, during the Great Recession, the government not only excluded trade unions from the process of adjustment, but eviscerated tripartite social partnership arrangements (Culpepper and Regan 2014; Benassi and Vlandas 2016). Despite this, trade unions, most notably CGIL-FIOM, are still maintaining a set of power resources in defence of collective bargaining. Recently, Leonardi (2018) observed that for Italian unions, progressive decentralization is manageable due to their comparatively strong membership and their representative power at the plant level.

Second, trade unions have progressively lost their legitimation in the eyes of workers. Indeed, unions are today organizations founded both on notions of collectivism and on individual identities and interests. These need to be continuously negotiated for trade unions to encompass all forms of exclusion due to gender, job insecurity and international migration that produce deep fractures between the workforce. In Italy, one of the main channels used to increase union density has been the transformation of the membership basis. While this has been traditionally based on collective ideational motivations, more recently membership has shifted its focus on individual instrumental attitudes. In this perspective, trade unions have aimed to increase their membership by managing services of welfare provisions which offer organizational and financial resources. However, members have become clients rather than activists.

[16] Particularly, the architecture of Italian industrial relations has changed since 1993 (Baccaro and Howell 2011). The 1993 Interconfederal Protocol attributed a central role to decentralized bargaining as it provided unions with a 'right to access' the enterprise-level bargaining that was previously unavailable. However, as discussed by Baccaro and Howell (2011) Confindustria, the Employers' Association, became "increasingly disenchanted with tripartite negotiations and, on the eve of national elections in 2001, struck a strategic alliance with the center-right coalition, [...] criticized concertation as an empty rite that blocked much-needed structural reform [...]"

[17] The 'esodati' are those workers who had agreed to stop working at the time of the 2011 Fornero reform, but who could not earn a pension under the new retirement age and contribution age rules, thus finding themselves unemployed and without pension rights for a number of years.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this article was to explore differences in labour conflicts in Italy and France by focusing on the characteristics of the most prominent structures of worker mobilization in labour conflicts: trade unions. Italy and France have indeed witnessed similar changes in labour conflicts. However, the level of strike volume after 2008 increased in France but not in Italy. In addition, anti-austerity protests in France started to emerge in the pre-crisis period while Italy experienced a series of intermittent crisis-related mobilizations without showing any wave of contention.

Under this framework, both in France and Italy, trade unions have shown strategies of alliance building. However, evidence suggests that the alliances built by trade unions have been different in the two counties.

In particular, confederal trade unions in France have been able to engage in social movement unionism within coalitions involving other social categories and SMOs. On the one hand, this may have occurred because of low French trade union density rates. On the other hand, confederal trade unions in France have been more open to SMOs. Through social movement unionism, confederal trade unions in France have enlarged their frames from a closely bound focus on workers and their conditions – including those related to salary, layoffs, restructuring and redundancies – to a focus on broader rights including equality and basic rights such as, for instance, mobility or housing rights. The participation of confederal trade unions in alliances has implied national-level and long-term actions. As discussed, France witnessed an increasing average strike volume after 2005, as compared to the previous two decades, and the cases studies discussed, such as in the case of the *sans papiers* movement or of the Nuit Débout protests, show important long-term, sustained interactions involving a variety of actors.

In contrast, alliances between trade unions and SMOs in Italy have mostly involved small rank-and-file unions and self-organized workers' groups engaged in radical political unionism. Confederal trade unions have remained more marginal in such alliances. These dynamics have been associated with a lower level of strikes in Italy than in France, and with a decreasing number of strikes after 2005. However, single case studies such as strikes at FCA suggest that further evidence is required to better assess the role of independent small rank-and-file trade unions in shaping long term and sustained labour conflicts. Differently from what we could have expected given the presence of small rank-and-file trade unions – which, according to our hypothesis, are more likely to be associated with local levels, and short-term actions – the FCA strikes started in 2005 and then spread to 2016 and 2017 across many northern Italian regions. Independent small rank-and-file trade unions may therefore, at times, be able to replace the role of confederal trade unions. The conditions for them to do so need, however, to be better assessed.

Finally, regardless of which dynamics prevail – social movement unionism or radical political unionism – trade unions face the problem concerning the relationship between their identities as collective actors and workers' interests in the capitalist arena. This entails a paradox. Unions are in fact strongly advocated to criticize the capitalist mode of production. This implies a regulation of the labour market, particularly during economic crises, to support the rights of workers and to improve their working conditions. However, during the last crisis, the critique of capitalism was not at the core of public and political debates. Trade unions appeared weak in opposing governments'

attempts to reform the labour market rules. The consequence was limited popular support for trade union initiatives. Workers and unions therefore appeared divided in their efforts to defend jobs in the context of the industrial crisis, of the restructuring of industrial sectors and of increasing social inequalities. Unions are clearly organizations founded on notions of collectivism, but this risks colliding with workers' individual identities whose interests cannot all be associated with class belonging. Therefore, the unions' challenge is to incorporate and represent the variety of interests based on class belonging, gender, race, international migration and job insecurity conditions, in order to face challenges due to profound fractures among workers (Dufour et al. 2010).

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Representation in hard times: party-voter distance on support for Social Europe in Italy*

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Abstract

Political representation is a fundamental virtue of contemporary democracies. The policy preferences of politicians should converge to some extent with those of voters. In the last twenty years, and in particular in the aftermath of the multiple crises the European Union (EU) has recently experienced, the integration process has become an increasingly polarizing issue for both voters and political representatives. While the existing literature has investigated party-voter distance on diffuse support for the EU, this article focuses on preferences for EU-level policies aiming to strengthen European solidarity. We argue that although Italian voters and their political representatives tend to diverge on their general support for the EU, they are closer over their willingness to share the burden across EU member states of the multiple crises Italy has recently experienced. Employing original mass and elite survey data collected between the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2018 in the framework of the RESCEU project, our empirical findings show that both MPs and their voters strongly support European solidarity, though they also detect differences across parties. The most important implication of this study is that the mounting Euroscepticism of Italian voters is not an outright rejection of the EU but a call for the EU's proactive role in protecting weaker countries and peoples.

1. Introduction

In representative democracies the decisions made by policy-makers should, to some degree, mirror the preferences of their voters (Downs 1957). The present article looks at collective representation (Wlezien and Soroka 2016) by comparing the (general and specific) attitudes towards the European Union (EU) of Italian citizens with those of their parliamentary representatives. While most of the extant literature analyses the gap between masses and elites in their diffuse support for the EU (Dolny and Babos 2015; Mattila and Raunio 2006; 2012; McEvoy 2012; Thomassen and Schmitt 1999), our study takes a less travelled road by focusing also on the differences in how the demand side and the supply side of the chain of representation evaluate the policy-making role played by EU institutions (see Sanders and Toka 2013 or Muller et al. 2012). More precisely, we investigate party-voter issue proximity on preferences for policies aiming to foster European

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solidarity, an issue that in the aftermath of the Euro crisis has become highly salient and contentious in several EU member states.

In the last two decades, a broad literature has discussed how EU integration and other macro-level phenomena such as globalisation and massive migration have contributed to reshaping party competition in several European countries by generating a new political divide that deals with the opening of national borders and cross cuts the traditional left-right dimension (Kriesi 2008; 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Otjes and Katsanidou 2017). Considering its increasing policy-making role during the Euro and the refugee crises, the EU has further polarised the attitudes of both voters and political elites. What is increasingly debated are the policy initiatives and measures that the EU has adopted (or should adopt) to face the negative externalities of the multiple crises it has experienced and to avoid future predicaments: in other words, policies fostering solidarity across EU member states as well as European citizens. Financial help to states facing severe economic difficulties, the harmonisation of welfare policies to guarantee a high standard of social security to all Europeans in need, and the redistribution of extra-EU migrants and asylum seekers among EU member states are all items on the agenda of political parties that campaign on these issues to gain electoral consensus. However, while several recent studies investigate the determinants of public support for European solidarity (Baute et al. 2019; Ciornei and Recchi 2017; Ferrera and Pellegata 2018; Gerhards et al. 2019), we have significantly less knowledge about the attitudes expressed by political elites (see Conti 2018 for an exception). To the best of our knowledge, moreover, no study expressly compares voter and party preferences on this highly contentious topic.

Italy represents an interesting case to study party-voter distance on the topic of European solidarity. It was badly hit by the economic recession, it implemented a series of fiscal austerity measures and structural reforms to keep its public debt under control, and it is one of the first landing places for migrants coming from the African continent. On the political side, Italy has shown a dramatic decrease in popular support for the EU and trust in its institutions and, at the same time, a significant increase in electoral consent for Eurosceptic parties, though with different nuances, such as the Five Star Movement (M5S), the League (L) and Brothers of Italy (FdI).

Thus, do voter and party preferences tend to converge or diverge on the issues of European integration and solidarity? Are there differences across parties in how close political representatives are to their voters? We expect to find a significant divergence between Italian voters and elites on a general evaluation of the benefits of the EU project with the former being more sceptical than the latter. However, we expect to find more convergence on support for policies strengthening solidarity in the EU. Given Italy's exposure to the crises, both voters and their representatives demand EU-policy intervention to correct economic and social imbalances among EU member states that the recent challenges experienced by the EU have exacerbated.

We provide answers to these research questions by employing original public opinion and political elite survey data collected between the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2018 within the framework of the REScEU (Reconciling Economic and Social Europe: Values, Ideas and Politics) research project conducted at the University of Milan in the 2014-2019 period. While exploratory in nature due to the limitations of the data, we believe that the present study provides useful contributions to the literature on both EU

support and representation in Italy. Regarding the former, by comparing party-voter distance not only on the general view of the EU but also on its policy role, we shed light on the nature of Euroscepticism in Italy. Concerning the latter, we provide important insights on how the integration-demarcation dimension is contributing to restructure the preferences of political actors in the Italian party system.

2. Background and expectations

2.1. Italy and the crises

The multiple crises that the EU has experienced in the last decade have contributed to exacerbate the line of tension over the integration process and to generate a new conflict constellation within the EU (Armingeon and Ceka 2014; Ferrera 2017). The bailout of the Greek economy in exchange for severe austerity measures, Merkel's decision to allow more than one million asylum seekers into Germany and the outcome of the Brexit referendum as well as other critical junctures became salient political issues for national governments and affected the everyday life of European citizens.

However, the consequences of the multifaceted European crisis were unevenly distributed across EU member states. Italy, as well as other weak economies of the Eurozone periphery, was strongly affected by the detrimental consequences of the global economic downturn and the sovereign debt crisis. Since 2009, the main macro-economic indicators have abruptly deteriorated. The sharp decline in GDP caused the Italian economy to enter recession and in 2012 – the peak of the sovereign debt crisis – Italian public debt rose to 126.16 per cent of GDP – a figure considerably higher not only than the average value of the Eurozone, but also than the average value of southern European member states (Pedrazzani et al. 2018). Even though Italy, differently from Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain, did not formally sign a bailout agreement with the 'Troika' (EU Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund), the country committed itself to an 'implicit conditionality' programme that implied fiscal austerity measures and structural (labour market and pensions) reforms (Moschella 2017; Sacchi 2015).

The economic downturn and the policies implemented by the technocratic Monti government (2011-2013) had relevant negative social consequences (Natili 2019). Unemployment rose from 6.1 per cent of the labour force in 2007 to 13.1 per cent in 2014 and the scenario was even more alarming concerning youth unemployment, which rose from 20.4 per cent in 2007 to a remarkable 42.7 per cent in 2014. Poverty rose as well: the share of households living in absolute poverty increased from 4.7 per cent in 2009 to 7.9 per cent in 2013 (ISTAT 2019a). The deterioration of the objective indicators was paralleled by mounting public concern about the situation of the national economy, with a peak of negative evaluations – over 92 per cent of Italian citizens – in 2012[1].

Besides the economic crisis, Italy is facing other important challenges deriving from increasing migration flows into the country. Given its geographic position, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Italy became one of the countries of first landing for migrants and asylum seekers coming from the African continent. Immigration contributed to

[1] See Eurobarometer data on Italian citizens' evaluation of their national economy: http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/index .

change the composition of Italian society. While in the early 2000s foreign-born residents were around 1.5 million, at the beginning of 2018 they were around 5 million, about 8.5% of the total population (ISTAT 2019b). This mutated social landscape contributed to affect the Italians' attitude towards immigration. A series of IPSOS surveys highlight that Italian citizens tend to overestimate the real number of immigrants living in their country.[2] In the weeks before the 2018 national elections, 62 per cent of respondents who participated in the PASTEL survey believed that Italy had already hosted too many immigrants and 43 per cent of them believed that foreigners represent a threat to Italian culture.[3]

The consequences of these multiple challenges on party system configuration and electoral competition dynamics are manifest for the observers of Italian politics. Indeed, the 2013 and 2018 general elections caused a political earthquake (Chiaramonte et al. 2018; Emanuele 2018; Schadee et al.2019). In line with a pattern emerging also in other EU member states badly hit by the economic crisis (Hutter et al. 2018), the last two election rounds marked a significant increase in votes for Eurosceptic parties at the expense of the mainstream parties – the Democratic Party (PD) and Go Italy (FI) – that had rotated in government since the mid-1990s. In 2013 M5S – a populist and anti-elite party – obtained 25.6 per cent of the vote, which is the best result ever obtained by a newcomer party in national elections in Europe. After five years in opposition, in 2018 M5S managed to again increase their vote share (32.7 per cent) becoming the pivot in the parliament and the major party in the two different government coalitions it has experienced so far. The 2018 elections also marked a victory for the League – a right-wing Eurosceptic party renovated under Matteo Salvini's leadership – which quadrupled its vote share (17.4%) compared with the 2013 elections (4.1%).

2.2. Diffuse and Policy support for the EU during the crisis

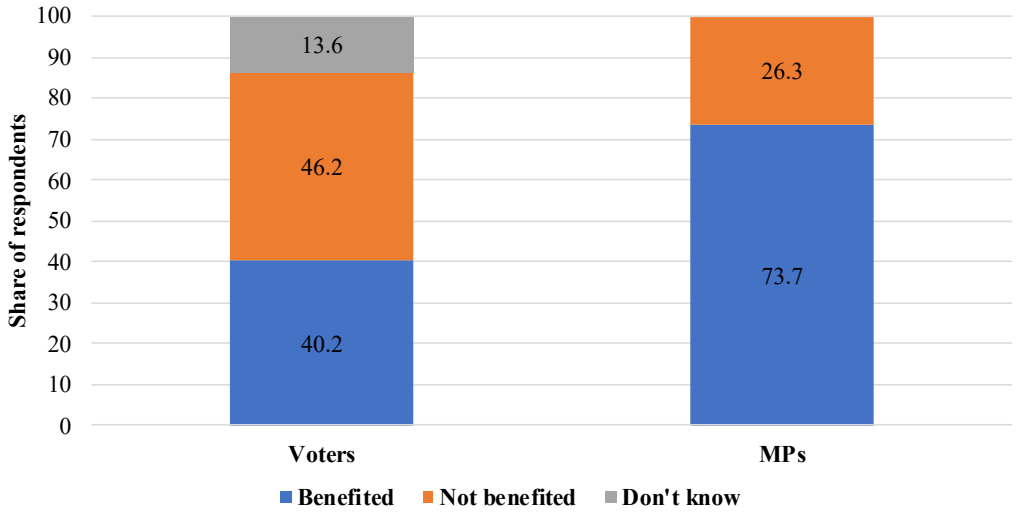
Against this background, a number of recent studies depict how the average level of public support for the EU among Italian citizens – traditionally among the highest across EU member states from the 70s to the 90s – sharply decreased after the crises that invested Europe in the last decade (Olmastroni and Pellegata 2018; Conti et al. 2020; Serricchio 2018). The deterioration in the level of support for the EU is striking whichever dimension we consider: polity identification, trust in EU institutions, benefit from EU membership or the deepening of the integration process (Olmastroni and Pellegata 2018; Conti et al. 2020). A similar trend is detected in all southern EU member states, while in northern and continental countries the average support for the EU remained high also during the crisis (2011-2016). The literature argues that economic concerns and perceived threats to national identity are the main drivers of Euroscepticism (Bellucci 2014; Conti and Memoli 2015). In hard times, individuals blame the EU because they consider it responsible for the worsening of both their personal and their country's economic conditions.

While a broad literature has investigated trends of public support for the EU, we know incredibly less about political elites' preferences on this increasingly contentious issue. Figure 1 compares the attitudes of Italian voters and their representatives in the Chamber of Deputies towards the EU. Data on voters are taken from the Eurobarometer

[2] See the IPSOS 'perils of perceptions' project (https://perils.ipsos.com/).
[3] Participated platform for the study of Italian Elections 2018, a project of the Department of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Milan and Ipsos Italia. REScEU project sample.

88.1 (October 2017) while data on national representatives come from the REScEU elite survey conducted between 2017 and 2018[4]. The column chart displays the share of voters and political representatives who believe that Italy has benefited or has not benefited from EU membership. We chose this question to compare mass and elite support for the EU for two main reasons. First, this is one of the most commonly used survey items in the literature on EU support. By tapping the utilitarian calculation with which individuals evaluate their country's membership in the EU, this is particularly suitable for measuring how Italians' judgement of the EU has changed during the crisis. Second, this is one of the few survey items for which data are available at both mass and political elite level.

Figure 1. Diffuse support for the EU among Italian masses and elites.



Note: *'Taking everything into consideration, would you say that [COUNTRY] has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European Union? 1) It has benefited; 2) It has not benefited.'*

Not surprisingly, in late 2017, 46.2 per cent of Italian respondents believed that their country had not benefited from being a member of the EU. This percentage is one of the highest among the 28 EU member states and it reflects a pattern common to other southern EU member states, such as Cyprus (49.7 per cent) and Greece (45.9 per cent). However, citizens of other countries that have been badly hit by the Euro crisis such as Portugal (14.2 per cent) and Spain (20.4 per cent) tend to evaluate much more positively their country's membership in the EU. On average, instead, Italian political representatives are much more satisfied than their electorate with Italy's membership in the EU. 73.7 per cent of the MPs interviewed believe that Italy has benefited from being a member of the EU, while only 26.3 per cent express a negative view about the EU.

Although the support for the EU expressed by Italian political elites has also worsened in the last decade, even after the crisis an overwhelming majority of MPs tend to express a positive evaluation of Italy's membership in the EU.[5] More than 30 points separate Italian MPs from their voters, with the former being more supportive of the EU

[4] Detailed information about the survey is reported in the next section.
[5] Data taken from the IntUne elite survey show that the share of MPs who believe that Italy has not benefited from being a member of the EU was 4.1 per cent in 2007 and 2.6 per cent in 2009 (Best et al. 2012).

than the latter. This result confirms that the EU can still be considered an elite-driven project (Haller 2008). The masses' permissive consensus that allowed a deepening and a widening of the integration process for more than three decades after the Treaty of Maastricht (1992) turned into an explicit dissensus that started to constrain the work of the EU institutions (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Müller et al. 2012; Sanders et al. 2012; Conti 2014). Opposition to the integration process became explicit especially in those countries badly hit by the multiple crises experienced by the EU. In these countries citizens voiced criticism of the role played by the EU institutions during the crisis and Eurosceptic parties entered the government.

However, if we turn to analyse support for specific policies that can be implemented by the EU institutions to challenge the most contentious and detrimental aspects of the different European crises, we expect to find closer views between Italian citizens and their representatives in parliament. We start from the assumption that, since Italy found itself in the eye of the storm of simultaneous crises, the relevance of the utilitarian calculation over the role of the EU increases both for public opinion and among political elites. Given that the EU is a supranational project built with the aim of providing solutions to large-scale problems, such as the economic recession and the humanitarian crisis related to massive migration flows, in a socio-tropic perspective Italian masses and elites should be more supportive of EU-level policies aiming to strengthen solidarity across EU member states by sharing among them the burden of the crises. In an apparently paradoxical scenario, while Italian citizens are more negative than their official representatives when expressing a general judgment of the EU as a polity project, they share preferences closer to those of the elite for policies that can help Italy, as well as the other countries in difficulties, to face the detrimental consequences of the crises.

Recent studies have investigated which factors contribute to explain mass and elite support for burden sharing and solidarity measures across EU member states and for delegating policy initiative to the EU (Basile and Olmastroni 2019; Conti et al. 2020). The degree of exposure to the crisis at both the country and individual levels correlate significantly with support for European solidarity. The present study, instead of assessing mass and elite correlates of support for a more proactive role of the EU, remains interested in the existence of representation gaps between voters and parties over EU-level policies strengthening European solidarity.

In doing so we mainly focus on differences across parties. We are firstly interested in comparing the level of party-voter distance between mainstream and challenger parties. Following the definition provided by Hobolt and Tilley (2016), challenger parties are not necessarily new but are those parties that have 'sought to reshape the political landscape by putting new issues on the agenda' (Hobolt and Tilley 2016, 974). In the following analyses we consider the M5S and the L as two challenger parties given the issue-entrepreneurship role they played in the recent developments in Italian politics. They have been able to mobilise the electorate on new issues like European integration and immigration, by breaking the previous consensus.[6] Challenger parties should also not have

[6] The 2017 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Polk et al. 2017) considers the L and the M5S as the two parties among those investigated with the lowest values in overall orientation towards European integration (variable goes from 1 'Strongly opposes' to 7 'Strongly in favour'). Party scores are: L 1.5; FI 4.714; M5S 2.643; PD 6.5; SI 4.5; MDP 5.363.

had previous government experience. While this was true for the M5S at the time the two surveys were conducted, this is not the case for the L who held important government positions in all governments led by Silvio Berlusconi. Still, the new leadership of Matteo Salvini has given a new and distinct characterisation to the party, and thus we consider it a challenger.[7] Due to their role as issue entrepreneurs, we expect challenger parties to reduce the gap with their voters, as well as with the median Italian voter, compared to mainstream parties (PD and FI) that have registered major electoral setbacks.

3. Defining and measuring European solidarity

The concept of solidarity refers to individuals' agreement to share resources with others by personal contribution through taxation and redistribution organised by the state (Gelissen, 2000; Stjernø, 2009). It is a definition grounded in the very notion of nation state, and historically solidarity has been institutionalised through the development of national welfare states.

Since the 1980s, the successive waves of European integration have put under stress nation-based welfare systems. This was primarily due to the tension between the 'logic of closure' upon which nation-based welfare states developed and the 'logic of openness' of EU integration, represented by the completion of the internal market and then by the institutionalisation of the monetary union. This tension threatening the social sovereignty of EU member states has forced institutions and citizens to reframe the concept of solidarity in European terms (Ferrera 2017).

In the EU wide context, solidarity has been (re-)defined as the individual willingness to share risks across the EU (Ciornei and Recchi 2017:470). Sangiovanni (2013) differentiates between two dimensions of European solidarity: member state and transnational solidarity. The former refers to risk sharing across EU member states. The latter entails the sharing of obligations among EU citizens (see also Ciornei and Recchi 2017; Baute et al. 2019). Here we consider both these dimensions of European solidarity.

The following analyses draw on two surveys conducted within the REScEU project. The first is a public opinion survey carried out in the autumn of 2016 that evaluates citizens' preferences on EU solidarity. It includes 1,320 Italian respondents interviewed through the CAWI method and sampled around age, education, and area of residence. The second is an elite survey conducted on national members of parliament (MPs) between 2017 and 2018. It includes 87 Italian MPs of the lower chamber (*Camera dei Deputati*) elected in 2013, of whom 76 answered all relevant EU solidarity items.

In both surveys we identified five items designed to measure Italian citizens' and MPs' support for policy programmes introducing cross-national and trans-national forms of European solidarity. Table A1 in the Appendix lists these five items along with their response categories. The first question asks respondents whether they are in favour of or against the introduction of common European bonds. While undoubtedly a technical issue, so-called Eurobonds became a salient topic after the Euro crisis in the Italian debate. Think for instance about the M5S manifesto prepared for the 2014 European Parliament elections that explicitly mentioned the introduction of Eurobonds as one of

[7] Brothers of Italy can also be considered a challenger party, but due to the low number of MPs of this party that took part in the elite survey we could not consider them in our analyses.

their seven key proposals (Della Porta et al.2017). The second question asks respondents to indicate whether they are in favour of or against the introduction of a common EU fund compensating national governments and local communities for the costs related to immigration from other EU member states. In the last five years in Italy as well as in other countries both intra and extra EU immigration have become a more salient topic of political debate on which right-wing populist parties have capitalised. The third EU solidarity item measures respondents' preferences on the institution of common EU social insurance schemes (such as healthcare, unemployment or pensions) covering intra-EU migrant workers. This question captures preferences over forms of trans-national solidarity, and preferences over one of the cardinal achievements of the EU: free movement. The fourth question asks citizens and MPs whether or not they agree with the introduction of an EU budget large enough to provide substantial financial help to member states facing a sudden rise in unemployment rates, which remains among the top concerns in the minds of Italian citizens. The fifth and final question asks citizens and MPs whether they agree that in the case of a severe financial crisis in a given member state, the EU should make sure that no citizen remains without means of subsistence (food, shelter, essential medicines etc.). This item depicts a social crisis triggered by severe economic turmoil, a scenario similar to what happened in Greece during the Euro crisis.

Responses were given using 4-point Likert scales (1 - Strongly disagree/against, 2 - Somewhat disagree/against, 3 - Somewhat agree/in favour, 4 - Strongly agree/in favour), where lower values mean anti-solidarity preferences, and higher values pro-solidarity views.[8]

In the next section we gauge the congruence between Italian voters and party representatives both on the single dimensions, as well as on a comprehensive measure of EU solidarity. This consists of an additive index based on the summation of respondents' answers on the five solidarity items presented above. The index has then been rescaled to vary between '0 - Anti-EU solidarity' and '10 - Pro-EU solidarity'. The internal consistency of this index is ensured by a factor analysis run on polychoric correlations separately for the elites and the mass datasets, confirming that these items are captured by only one underlying dimension.[9]

To investigate the congruence between Italian MPs and their electorate, we have matched them based on the party group of the MP at the moment of the interview, and on the future vote intention of citizens. To ensure consistency we included in our analyses only parties for whom more than three MPs and at least ten voters have been interviewed. Table A2 in the Appendix lists the political parties with the number of voters and MPs considered in the analysis: *Sinistra Italiana + Movimento Democratico e Progressista* (SI+MDP), *Partito Democratico* (PD), *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S), *Forza Italia* (FI), and *Lega* (L).

[8] Employing short answers scales to survey questions protects against the risk of excessive influence of outliers. This is a way to make findings relatively more robust given the difficulties of collecting elite data and the relatively small number of observations that does not allow us to conduct more sophisticate tests.
[9] Table A3 in the Appendix displays results obtained from factor analysis. The correlation between the additive index of EU solidarity and the factor extracted from the factor analysis is of 0.995 for MPs and 0.993 for citizens.

4. Assessing party-voter differences

Here we are interested in comparing Italian public opinion and political elites on the European solidarity issue. To this end we look at two dyads: issue congruence between citizens and MPs, and between voters and parties. Firstly, we compare the average levels of support for European solidarity expressed by our samples of Italian citizens and political representatives, irrespective of their different political orientations and partisan affiliations. With this analysis we aim to detect whether political elites are also more supportive of policies fostering European solidarity than citizens, as they are for the EU in general. Then we turn to compare the distance in support for European solidarity between major Italian parties and their voters to assess whether there are differences between mainstream and challenger parties. Rather than focusing on the individual representative, we scrutinise party-level representation because the electoral system in place at the time of the elite survey emphasised the central role of parties in the chain of representation. The 'Calderoli electoral law' was indeed a proportional representation system with a majority prize for the plurality party/coalition, large districts and blocked lists in which the voter could not express any preference vote. While directly comparing distributions within two groups is a viable approach (Golder and Stramski 2010; Lupu et al. 2017) we follow the classic representation literature that resorts to measures of central tendency like the mean and the median (Huber and Powell 1994; Müller et al. 2012) to evaluate absolute congruence.

Table 1 reports summary statistics for the additive EU solidarity index and each of its five components for the Italian masses and elites in the aggregate. They show that on average, both the Italian public and elites favour a very high level of EU solidarity. On average, Italian citizens share an EU solidarity score of 7.35 on a scale from 0 to 10. At the same time, MPs are even closer to the pro-EU solidarity pole, with an average value of 8.33.

Looking at each solidarity item separately, we note that the interpolated median[10] is always closer to the pro-solidarity pole of the measurement scale for both groups with only slight mass-elite differences. Italian political elites are a bit more pro-EU solidarity than the average Italian citizen on all policies but one – preferences for an EU budget large enough to provide financial help to MSs in case of a sudden rise in unemployment. In this case, no relevant difference between the two groups emerges. The introduction of Eurobonds is the solidarity policy towards which both the public and elites are relatively more sceptical. Instead, the one receiving the broadest support is the policy programme ensuring the EU will guarantee to all its citizens that no one is left behind in the aftermath of an economic crisis. The two European solidarity policies relating to the free movement of European citizens, the fund compensating for the costs of managing intra-EU migration and the institutionalisation of a supra-national social insurance, are instead the two proposals with the relatively most significant discrepancy between masses and elites.

At the aggregate level, we find support for our expectation of observing closer views between Italian citizens and their representatives when it comes to specific EU level policy programmes fostering solidarity, rather than when looking at diffuse support.

[10] When dealing with ordinal variables with a limited number of responses, comparing simple medians may not be informative: two distributions with equal median may be heavily weighted above or below the median. The interpolated median provides an alternative measure of centre which takes into account the percentage of the data strictly below or strictly above the median. It gives a measure within the upper and lower bound of the median, in the direction that the data is more heavily weighted.

Table 1. Summary statistics for EU solidarity index and its five components.

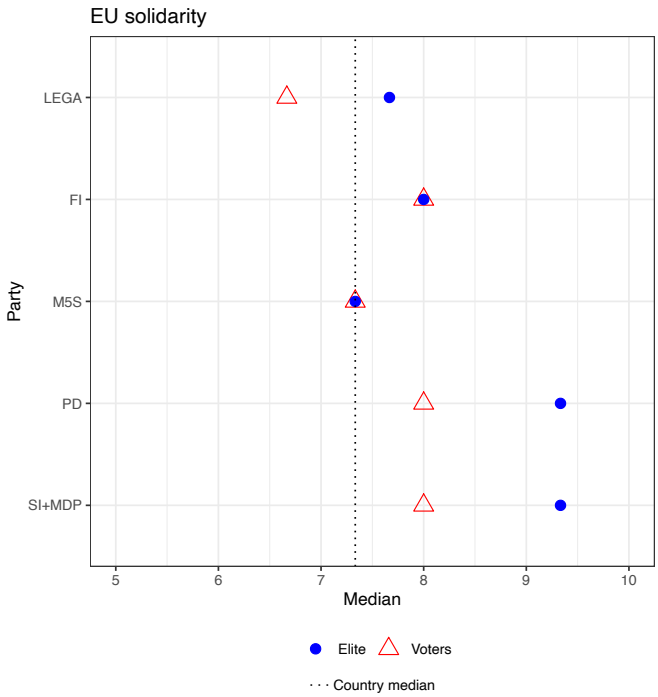
EU solidarity index	**Mean**	**Standard Error**	**Median**	**St. Dev.**	*N*
Elite	8.33	0.154	8.67	1.34	*76*
Mass	7.35	0.043	7.33	1.56	*1295*
Introduction of Eurobonds	**Mean**	**Standard Error**	**Interpolated median**	**St. Dev.**	*N*
Elite	3.37	0.086	3.36	0.75	*76*
Mass	2.86	0.02	2.94	0.85	*1295*
EU fund to compensate for immigration costs	**Mean**	**Standard Error**	**Interpolated median**	**St. Dev.**	*N*
Elite	3.55	0.076	3.70	0.66	*76*
Mass	3.19	0.022	3.25	0.80	*1295*
EU social insurance covering intra-EU migrants	**Mean**	**Standard Error**	**Interpolated median**	**St. Dev.**	*N*
Elite	3.47	0.081	3.58	0.70	*76*
Mass	3.01	0.022	3.07	0.80	*1295*
EU should provide financial help to MSs in case of sudden rise in unemployment	**Mean**	**Standard Error**	**Interpolated median**	**St. Dev.**	*N*
Elite	3.34	0.078	3.44	0.69	*76*
Mass	3.39	0.018	3.46	0.66	*1295*
EU should ensure subsistence in case of financial crisis	**Mean**	**Standard Error**	**Interpolated median**	**St. Dev.**	*N*
Elite	3.76	0.049	3.85	0.42	*76*
Mass	3.57	0.017	3.70	0.63	*1295*

Of course, aggregate level differences can hinder variation at a lower level of analysis. The next figures present data disaggregated by party, portraying the median position of parties (blue dots), of their voters (red triangles), and the median position of all Italian citizens interviewed in the mass survey (dotted line) on all measures of EU solidarity. Figure 2 portrays the median on the EU solidarity index for the five parties meeting the conditions described in the previous section and listed from left to right on the vertical axis: SI+MDP, PD, M5S, FI, L.[11] The horizontal axis records instead the median on the EU solidarity additive index for both party members and for citizens who would vote for these parties. Four insights emerge from the figure. First, there is more between-party variation in support of European solidarity among political elites than among voters. While median supporters of parties tend to be closer to the median citizen, the median representatives of the same parties, though they tend to be more pro-solidarity than the median citizen, present more differences. Second, while in the aggregate the elites were more pro-

[11] The left-right positioning of Italian parties is based on the 2017 Chapel Hill Expert FLASH Survey (Polk et al. 2017) available at https://www.chesdata.eu/1999-2014-chapel-hill-expert-survey-ches-trend-file-1.The position of the parties on the LRGEN variable measuring parties' ideology – where 0 means 'Extreme left' and 10 'Extreme right' – is the following: SI 1.36; MDP 2.23; PD 3.8; M5S 5.2; FI 6.533; L 8.26.

European solidarity than the masses, this is not always true when we look at each party separately. The aggregate level result holds for SI+MDP, PD, and L. The two parties located closer to the left pole of the ideological axis are those with the largest distance between elites and masses (for both parties, voters and MPs shared the same median position). Solidarity policies are the preferred terrain of battle for left-wing parties, issues that therefore they tend to emphasise more in their political activities. The same also holds for the League of Matteo Salvini. Interestingly, L voters are the only group whose median lies below the overall median of Italian citizens. Third, MPs of the L, together with the M5S representatives, are the least supportive of European solidarity. Nevertheless, compared to the left-wing MPs, they are closer both to the L median voter and to the median citizen. Finally, FI and M5S show perfect congruence between national MPs and their voters. Voters of Berlusconi's party present the same median score on the solidarity index as the left-wing voters (PD and SI+MDP). However, FI MPs are less prone to supporting pro-solidarity policies than their left-wing counterparts. The perfect congruence of the position of M5S representatives not only with their electoral base but also with the median Italian citizen on the issue of EU solidarity is probably related to their electoral success in the general elections of 8 March. It falls in line with the pivotal role played by the M5S in the Italian political system since the 2013 elections

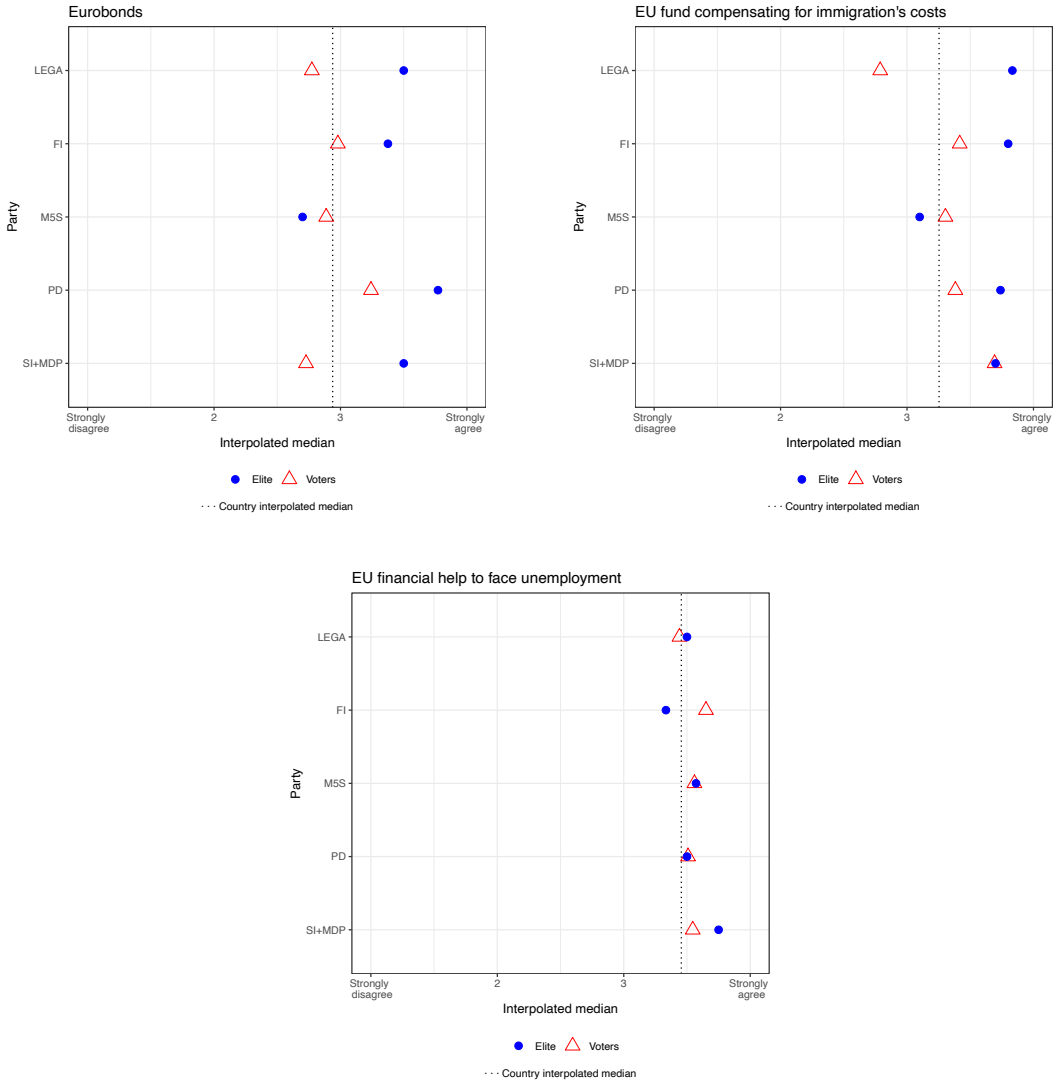
Figure 2. Medians for voters and elites on the EU solidarity index.



Looking at the additive index may hinder differences on the specific policy proposals considered. While the underlying structure of preferences on the five issues is similar, it is not exactly the same and there is some independent variation across the five EU solidarity policies. Therefore, Figures 3 and 4 show the interpolated medians on each of the five components of European solidarity. The first figure depicts the three items measuring preferences over the introduction of forms of cross-national

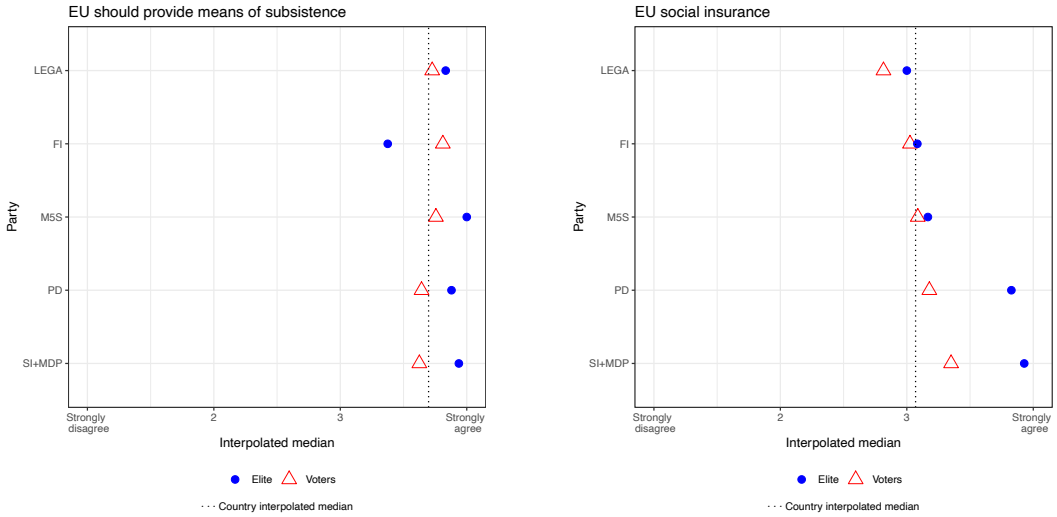
solidarity, while the second looks at the transnational forms of EU solidarity. First, we find that there is greater congruence on issues related to poverty and unemployment, two problems that the economic crisis has exacerbated since 2009. Both parties' and voters' preferences on these issues are very close to the pro-EU-solidarity extreme. Therefore, regardless of the polity-level Euroscepticism characterising Italian citizens, it emerges that a solution to these problems lies at the supra-national level through further integration in the minds not only of MPs but also of voters. Second, we find lower congruence when we look at support for the introduction of Eurobonds to pool risks related to public debt. This is a complex issue to be understood and processed by citizens, and across parties they tend to align close to the overall country median. Third, the two policies related to freedom of movement are the ones with more variation across parties in terms of congruence.

Figure 3. Interpolated medians for voters and elites on cross-national components of EU solidarity.



Concerning the first policy, the introduction of an EU fund compensating member states for immigration costs, we find a low level of congruence for all parties but SI+MDP, which perfectly match their voters, and the M5S. As regards this policy, of particular interest is the distance between the interpolated median of MPs of the L and their voters, which is the most extreme distance between elites and voters found in our data. L's voters are only moderately in favour of more integration policies in the field of immigration, and less so than the median citizen. Instead, their representatives hold a very favourable opinion about the introduction of this programme. This result could hint at the outright rejection of immigration on behalf of voters, notwithstanding refunds for its management. On the second policy item related to free movement, the introduction of a social insurance scheme covering workers moving from one EU member state to another, our data suggest an association between the interpolated median position of MPs and the left-right positioning of their party: the more a party locates itself on the left, the more it supports such a form of transnational solidarity. Still, parties located on the left of the ideological spectrum are those less congruent with their voters. Even if M5S representatives are less in favour of EU solidarity policies than left-wing parties (apart from the item on subsistence in case of a severe crisis), they tend to be very much attuned to their voters and the general citizenry.

Figure 4. Interpolated medians for voters and elites on transnational components of EU solidarity



These results suggest the M5S has been able to catalyse the priorities and preferences of Italian citizens on the fight against poverty and unemployment, and the need for new welfare instruments which are much better than its competitors. These issues have been central in the M5S policy agenda and key to its electoral success. Instead, these results somewhat contradict the official M5S rhetoric of a party that wants a return to the principles of solidarity and community in the EU (Della Porta et al.2017). When compared to the other parties included in our analysis, their MPs, as well as their voters, present positions that are either less pro-EU solidarity or not significantly different from other parties.

5. Concluding remarks

This article investigated party-voter distance on support for policies strengthening the social dimension of Europe in Italy. In the aftermath of the multiple crises that the EU has experienced in the last decade, solidarity and redistribution of resources across EU member states and citizens have become salient and highly contentious issues among both political elites and citizens. While Italian voters are much more sceptical than their representatives about the benefit brought by their country's membership in the EU, they are much closer to them when it comes to supporting policies strengthening European solidarity. In a country such as Italy, badly hit by the Euro crisis and by the negative externalities of fiscal austerity, both public opinion and political elites blame EU institutions for being unable to face the unevenly distributed challenges coming from the crisis and ask for policies aiming to redistribute resources and correct imbalances across EU member states. By means of a public opinion and elite survey under the framework of the REScEU project, we analysed the Italian mass-elite gap on support for policies fostering European solidarity, focusing on differences across parties. We found a high level of congruence between mass and elite preferences towards pro-solidarity policies. Left-wing parties (PD and SI+MDP) are the most supportive of European solidarity. For these parties as well as for the League we detected a certain amount of divergence between MPs and their voters, with the former tending to be more pro-EU solidarity than the latter. Our analysis revealed instead a perfect match-up of the M5S MPs' preferences and those of both their voters and the Italian median citizen. Voters of the League show they are the most Eurosceptic, while M5S party representatives show on overage a lower level of support for pro-EU solidarity policies, even when they were part of their official electoral manifesto as in the case of Eurobonds. These findings seem to corroborate works on the issue-entrepreneurial role of challenger parties and their ability to better represent the median citizen (Hobolt and Tilley 2016).

While exploratory in nature, our study suggests two relevant and interrelated implications. First, our findings show that, though salient, EU-related issues do not seem to contribute to reshaping political competition in Italy. Although we detected few cross-partisan differences, voters and MPs have preferences in favour of policies that can contribute to sharing the burden of the multiple crises Italy is experiencing with other EU member states by redistributing risks, resources and responsibilities. Second, this study sheds light on the nature of the Euroscepticism that is increasingly characterizing large sectors of Italian public opinion as well as important parties. It is plausible that Italians are sceptical about the EU institutions for being unable, or unwilling, to implement policies that can help those member states that, more than others, are facing the challenges provided by the multiple crises that recently invested Europe. However, both Italian voters and their political representatives do not consider the EU a project deemed to fail but, on the contrary, they ask for a proactive role of the EU in protecting weaker countries and peoples.

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Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive statistics of the dependent variable's components.

Question wording		Response categories
Thinking about the European Union over the next 10 years, can you indicate whether you are in favour or against the following:		
Item 1	The introduction of common European bonds (aka Eurobonds).	1- Strongly against; 2- Somewhat against; 3- Somewhat in favour; 4- Strongly in favour
Item 2	The introduction of a common EU fund compensating national governments and local communities for the costs related to immigration from other EU member states.	
Item 3	The introduction of common EU social insurance schemes (such as healthcare, unemployment or pensions) that cover intra-EU migrant workers.	
EU member states have decided that their economic and social policies should be brought closer together. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements:		
Item 4	The EU should equip itself with a budget large enough to provide substantial financial help to member states facing a sudden rise in unemployment rates.	1- Strongly disagree; 2- Somewhat disagree; 3- Somewhat agree; 4- Strongly agree
Item 5	In the case of a very severe financial crisis in a given member state, the EU should make sure that no citizen of that state remains without means of subsistence (food, shelter, essential medicines etc...).	

Table A2. Number of MPs and voters for each party considered.

Party	Number of MPs	Number of voters
SI+MDP	9	21
PD	39	235
M5S	13	305
FI	7	51
LEGA	4	99
Total	*72*	*711*

Table A3. Results from factor analyses on elites and masses items.

	Elites		Masses	
Variables	**Factor loadings**	**Uniqueness**	**Factor loadings**	**Uniqueness**
Eurobonds	0.580	0.586	0.371	0.810
Financial help	0.334	0.612	0.575	0.504
Subsistence	0.411	0.597	0.583	0.489
Immigration	0.738	0.442	0.679	0.473
Insurance	0.756	0.400	0.605	0.506
Eigenvalues	*1.733*		*1.636*	

Note: factor analyses based on polychoric correlations.

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Who is afraid of 'Gender'?
Gender and Politics Research between Institutionalization and Contestation in Italy

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Abstract

Gender and politics scholarship has challenged conventional political science with new political questions and research issues and enriched the discipline both theoretically and methodologically. However, gender-based analysis of political phenomena is confronted with the resistance of political science – a traditionally male-dominated discipline. In Italy, gender research is still a weakly institutionalized academic field compared with other European countries. This contribution reflects on the state of gender within Italian political science and discusses the present situation at the crossroads between slow academic institutionalization and strong political contestation.

1. Introduction

It was not long ago that both the journals *European Political Science* (Mügge, Evans and Engeli 2016) and *Italian Political Science* itself (Padovani and Vingelli 2016) hosted a symposium on the state of gender scholarship in European political science, addressing the contributions of gender research in studying political phenomena and challenges for the future. Overall, they predicted a bright future for gender and politics studies due to the resurgence of the feminist movement across Europe, the ongoing process of recognition within the political science discipline and the key role of the European Union in funding and promoting gender politics and research. In sum, the feminist project was here to stay and would have an enduring life. This scenario strongly contrasts with the present climate of growing populism and 'anti-genderism', given that in 2018 gender studies were banned by Prime Minister Orbán in Hungary (University World News 2018), a member state of the European Union and the Council of Europe, while in other European countries the subject is increasingly opposed by a variety of actors (Verloo 2018). Why are gender studies and scholars under attack today? What has happened in the recent period to lead some parts of politics and society to declare 'a war on gender studies'? This short contribution aims to open a discussion within our discipline about the state of gender and politics studies and the challenges posed by the rise of far-right populist parties, with broader implications for academic freedom.

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The article will proceed as follows. The first section outlines the relevance of adopting a gender perspective in studying politics and the results achieved over the past thirty years. The second section focuses on the state of gender research within Italian political science. The third section discusses the current backlash against gender studies and gender scholars in times of far-right populism, a situation we also know very intimately in Italy. The conclusion raises some questions involving the academic community as a whole.

2. The challenge of gender research to conventional political science

The concept of 'gender' is rooted in the experience of the 1960s feminist movement. In the 1970s, it gained political significance and became an issue in the study of politics (Lovenduski 1992). It also diffused erratically – neither with linearity nor in homogenous mode – across the field of social sciences (including economics, sociology, law, history and anthropology). Using a gender perspective in research emphasized how the differences between men and women are structured, embedded and maintained by a variety of historically male-dominated institutions (for example, the state, family, church, labour market, politics, or education) (Scott 1986). While 'sex' refers to the biological differences between men and women, the term 'gender' indicates the social and cultural construction of the differences between masculinity and femininity. This process occurs in more than one context, shaping a 'gender order', a term that refers to a power system which constrains the relationships between people (Connell 2017). As political science is concerned with the exercise of power, studying gender and politics aims to 'reveal and explain how and why political inclusion and exclusion are fundamentally gendered' (Bonjour, Mügge and Roggeband 2016, p. 304). The traditional focus of the discipline on the machinery of government, elections and party politics rendered women invisible (Celis et al. 2013). Historically, (white, rich and educated) men were the only ones who were active in the public sphere, while women were excluded because of their supposed inferiority and inability. However, male-dominated politics regulated women's access to abortion and sexuality, intimate and family issues. This ideological and artificial separation between private and public spheres was strongly contested by the mobilization of feminism and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) activism, which together broke the gender division and brought about a rethinking of traditional concepts and political questions.

Gender and sexuality research has shown the extent to which conventional traditional political science concepts are gendered, such as democracy, voting behaviour, citizenship, representation, state and party politics (Goertz and Mazur 2008). The early works of feminist scholars focused on the traditional topics of political science with the inclusion of women: the study of female voting behaviour (for Italy, see the pioneering work of Weber 1977), the electoral system's gendered effects (Dahlerup 2006), and the impact of male-dominated party politics and the recruitment process on women's political representation (Lovenduski and Norris 1993; for Italy, see Guadagnini 1993 and Del Re 1999). Following the inclusion project (aimed at integrating women in the traditional areas of political research), gender and politics scholarship took three broad research directions (Celis et al. 2013): the study of women in politics on their own terms (with a focus

on women's political mobilization); the study of gender regimes, gendered states, institutions and policies, given that they reproduce gender (in)equalities (Mazur 2002) and finally, the 'gender trouble' (Butler 1990) effect as a key to exploring the interplay between diversity and identity politics struggles to fight against discrimination and exclusion based on colour, race, class and sexuality.

Gender and politics scholarship also introduced new specific concepts, such as patriarchy (Walby 1989), state feminism (McBride Stetson and Mazur 1995), intersectionality and multiple inequalities (Verloo 2006), in mainstream political science. Feminist contributions also brought about methodological pluralism (Ackerly and True 2010) and attention to the role of social actors inside the political system in promoting instances favouring and opposing gender equality (Ferree 2006). After decades, the division between the public and private spheres was openly contested, and the issues of body and sexuality increasingly became the object of political science attention and research, giving rise to LGBT and queer political studies (Paternotte 2018; Thiel 2019; for Italy see Prandelli et al. 2019)

It took time for feminist research contributions to receive recognition within political science, which remains a largely male-dominated and masculinized discipline. In the context of Europe, feminist scholars have experienced a variety of modes to 'gender mainstream' a resistant discipline (Vickers 2016). On taking stock of the situation, we see that some elements appear crucial in evaluating the gendering of political science. The first is the number of women, given that gender-related courses are mostly taught by women: recruiting more women means increased attention to gender issues. In the last two decades, the status of women in political science has improved in terms of the number of women (full) professors; women's presence in major disciplinary handbooks; women's participation as authors, editors and reviewers in relevant disciplinary journals, and women taking leading roles in the profession (e.g. presidency of a professional association).

Table 1. Establishment of Women/Gender and Politics sections across some professional associations.

Professional Association	Section/ Research committee	Year of foundation
UK Political Studies Association	Women and Politics	1970s
American Political Science Association	Women and Politics	1986
German Political Science Association	Gender and Politics	1992
Spanish Association of Political and Administrative Science	Gender and Politics	1997
Austrian Political Science association	Gender and Politics	1997–1999
Italian Political Science Association	Gender and Politics	2018
European Consortium for Political Research	Gender and Politics	1985
International Political Science Association	Gender Politics and Policy Women and Politics in the Global South	1979 1992
International Sociological Association	Women, Gender and Society	1973

Source: Mügge et al. 2016 (with author's updates and integration)

Another element supporting the academic recognition of gender studies is the foundation of a section on Women/Gender and Politics within national professional

organizations and European, transatlantic and international umbrellas: the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), the International Political Science Association (IPSA) and the International Sociological Association (ISA) (see Table 1). The aim is to diffuse the study of gender and politics, to support gender equality in the profession and to facilitate contact and communication between scholars engaged in the study of gender and politics by organizing group conferences and workshops, panels at general conferences and other events, and awarding prizes.

Following this broad scenario of what is meant by gendering political science, now we turn our attention to the field of political science in Italy to reflect on the state of gender research.

3. The weak institutionalization of gender research within Italian political science

In Italy, as elsewhere, gender research emerged in response to the issues brought up by the rise of the Italian feminist movement in the late 1960s and the progressive inclusion of feminist scholars within academia. In their initial stage, gender studies were integrated in the education system in a 'hidden way' (Di Cori 2013), as gender-related teaching was mainstreamed into the general social science curriculum, including political science. Given the institutional context of female academic underrepresentation and of curricula rigidity, many feminist scholars managed to introduce a focus on women into their courses, integrating new issues such as female electoral behaviour, female political representation and women's movement activities. Starting in the 1990s, gender studies centres and gender scholar groups formed at the university department level. This had the support of national initiatives such as the decision of the then Minister of Equal Opportunities, the sociologist Laura Balbo, to sustain gender studies within academia and that of the central government to subsidise universities in organizing the course 'Women, Politics and Institutions' in the period 2006–2013 (Saraceno 2010). Today we count at least 20 centres developed in many universities across Italy and they are a key venue where seminars and conferences are organized, research on women and gender issues is conducted and training courses and advanced education are provided. A more recent development was the recruitment of a younger generation of female scholars, formed abroad or members of international gender research networks (Pravadelli 2010). Taken together, all these developments led to a process of institutionalization of Women's and Gender Studies in the early 2000s, despite the rigidity of the Italian university system and a decline in public funding.

What about gender in our discipline today? Political science is quite a young discipline in Italy compared to other social sciences, with a community of around 238[1] members, of which 77 are women (32%). The female presence registers minoritarian numbers in the highest positions of full (10 women out of 52, 19%) and associate professor (37 women out of 95, 39%). It is no surprise, then, to note that most teaching materials and syllabuses are still gender blind and the main findings of feminist scholars are disregarded. As Padovani and Vingelli (2016, p. VI) remark, 'the reflection [on

[1] Data taken from the website of the Italian Minister of University and Research, 21 December 2019: http://cercauniversita.cineca.it/php5/docenti/cerca.php.

the potential of promoting and supporting gender-aware approaches to political science research and education] is ongoing across Europe and beyond. Yet the Italian political science community has not been attentive to these debates; and (…) most of the above issues have seldom been addressed in our professional circles'. From the areas of party politics to public policy analysis, from comparative politics to European and international politics, the gender perspective has been absent, or without consistent and permanent scholarly activity, for a long time. The first generation of Italian feminist political scientists did not establish a tradition of gender studies, mainly for two reasons: either they were marginalized within the discipline, with their work unacknowledged or undervalued as 'unscientific', or they decided to be outsiders to the Italian community, preferring to build and be part of international research networks, where gender studies were recognized and funded. However, their pioneering work was precious for the succeeding generation of gender scholars who acknowledged their research and prosecuted it in an academic context which was more favourable to gender equality. Such a context was also increasingly open to collaboration with researchers across countries (see the establishment of international gender research networks such as the Research Network on Gender, Politics and the State RNGS launched in the late 1990s and which brought together more than 50 researchers to investigate and generate theories about the effectiveness of women's policy machineries) and was supported by political science institutions such as ECPR, IPSA and others.

In the last two decades, gender perspective has been slowly integrated into social sciences (for example, economics, history, sociology, law, literature, psychology), and a growing number of young (female) scholars with an interest in gender studies have achieved academic positions in Italian universities. These changes have led research activity, supported by EU funding, to focus on the place of knowledge production, i.e. academia, and to question its supposed gender neutrality.[2] As in other workplaces, the results show the persistence of sexism and gender inequality within the university system, with a masculine (almost) monopoly at the highest level (*professore ordinario*) of the academic hierarchy, negatively affecting the realization of justice and equal opportunities in the recruitment process. Scientific knowledge and the environment where it is produced are not gender neutral, then, and this awareness underlies the recent equality measures adopted by some Italian universities (among others, the University of Trento in 2014 and Scuola Normale in 2016) aiming to increase the number of women in academia, from the early to the last crucial stages of their academic careers. The greater the efforts to fill the gender gap in academia, the more the presence of women numerically increases, and so it is reasonable to expect that gender studies will be reinforced in the near future.

In this context of 'structural gender awareness', there are some, albeit small, positive signs of de-masculinization and of recognition of gender and politics research within the discipline. First, the Italian Political Science Association (*Società Italiana di Scienza Politica* SISP) has a female president for the second consecutive time since 2015. Second, gender and politics topics have started, very humbly, to be incorporated in mainstream textbooks (see paragraph on female political representation in Capano

[2] Among others; see, for example the EU funded project GARCIA – Gendering the Academy and Research: Combating Career Instability and Asymmetries (http://garciaproject.eu/).

et al. 2014). Finally, after decades of scattered panels on gender issues, the foundation of the Gender and Politics Standing Group (GPSG) of the SISP in 2018 is good news (albeit with a significant delay in comparison with other European countries, as seen above in Table 1). Thanks to the commitment of a group of about 30 gender scholars from different Italian and European universities and the support of the SISP organization, the GPSG was built to give visibility to gender and politics research, to reunite gender scholars coming from different disciplines periodically and to organize seminars and panels during the SISP annual meetings, with the overall goal of bringing about significant change in the knowledge and education of the mainstream discipline. The GPSG was active in organizing a plurality of gender panels at the 2018 and 2019 SISP annual meetings (with six panels in total, plus a roundtable), thus becoming a key reference institution for gender and politics scholars. The establishment of the GPSG might represent a further step towards the mainstreaming of gender within Italian political science, as has already happened in other countries. Much will depend on the capacity of their members to build alliances with other standing groups within SISP, to diffuse gender awareness across thematic fields, to collaborate with other national and umbrella professional organizations and to work with scholars of other disciplines, reinforcing the interdisciplinarity of gender studies.

It has taken a long time for Italian political science to reach this early stage of institutionalization. Compared with other European countries, our discipline is a latecomer in recognizing the contributions of gender and politics research. Things are slowly changing, thanks to the initiatives pursued over the years by a group of committed actors today and in the past within political institutions, political science associations and universities in favour of the institutionalization of gender and politics research. A critical point remains the weak inclusion of gender in university education[3], political science courses included. Moreover, there are great disparities between subfields within the discipline in the types and amount of gender scholarship that has been done. For example, International Relations is a subfield where feminist contributions remain largely ignored despite the increasing amount of gender research available on topics such as international security, human rights and international political economy (on this debate see Tickner and Sjoberg 2011). Hence, the main challenge for the future will be to increase the supply of gender in political science curricula at undergraduate, master's and doctoral levels to equip students, future scholars and policymakers with a gender lens to understand power and politics and identify gender inequalities.

Gender studies need solid and consolidated roots to better contrast recurring gender backlash. Today more than before we realize how institutionally weak this research field is in times when gender research and scholars have been contested and attacked by social and political actors. We will explore this last development in the next section.

[3] In 2012, 16 universities out of 57 offered at least one module on gender studies (Antonelli, Sarra and Sorrentino 2013).

4. The contestation of gender research and scholars outside the discipline

As anticipated in the introduction, in many European countries gender studies are under attack, especially since the anti-gender movement – a constellation of conservative and religious associations and organizations acting in defence of a supposed 'natural' gender order – has converged with the anti-gender discourses of populist radical right and conservative party programmes (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). In Hungary, France, Germany, Poland and Slovakia (Kováts and Põim 2015), the political agenda of populist radical right parties has been reframed in such a way as to intercept the claims of religious fundamentalist movements, with the establishment of a strategic alliance against so-called 'gender ideology'. The latter is a label that represents the 'symbolic glue' behind which, attacks occur against the feminist project of equality and social justice (Verloo and Paternotte 2018). The rise of far-right populism in Europe has meant a backlash against gender equality policies and academic gender studies programmes.

Italy has not been immune to this cultural backlash since Lega, under Matteo Salvini's leadership, was transformed from an ethno-regionalist to a populist radical right party (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018). Gender scholars have pointed out that populist radical right parties can be characterized as conservative with respect to family values and traditional gender roles (Köttig et al. 2017), and Lega is not an exception. Its 2018 electoral manifesto included the centrality of the natural patriarchal family as the fundamental unit of society and the need to defend it; the urgency to promote demographic growth policies; the exclusive role of parents in choosing the kind of education given to their children; and the necessity of alternative measures to abortion. In Lega's view, gender equality represents a threat to social values, contrasted with Christian civilization, and it is considered the cause of the demographic crisis, the emergence of alternative family models, the diffusion of the practice of abortion and the disappearance of traditional male and female roles in society. Hence, according to Lega, the heterosexual family is the institution of moral values, currently under attack by liberal and secular ideas and elites.

The conservative agenda and populist discourse of Lega overlaps with the fundamentalist positions of the Italian anti-gender movement (Lavizzari and Prearo 2018), and this explains the alliance between the two actors and why some members of Catholic organizations decided to run for office under the Lega flag in 2018 (Donà 2020). Close relationships were also previously established at the local level (where Lega holds government positions) in contrast with the diffusion of so-called 'gender ideology' (*ideologia gender*). It suffices to mention a few examples of anti-gender radical right populism campaigns which confirm that we are not talking about isolated events, but about the result of a deliberated political strategy aiming to (re)politicize gender issues and counter the progressive policy changes introduced in the areas of LGBT, reproductive and sexual rights. What follows is not an exhaustive list of events.

In May 2018, a workshop organized by the research centre Politesse of the University of Verona on 'Asylum Seekers, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity' was cancelled due to protests from extremist and fundamentalist Catholic groups against gender (orsato 2018). In November 2018, the Lega Minister of University, Marco Bussetti, stopped an academic study on homophobic attitudes in education conducted by the

University of Perugia on the (undemonstrated) basis that the questions on sexual orientation exposed students to gender ideology (Drogo 2018). In December 2018, gender equality programmes promoted for secondary school students under the scientific supervision of the Centre of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies at the University of Trento were cancelled (and never reactivated) by the Lega local government because they were accused of promoting gender ideology (Baldo 2018). A contested event happened in March 2019 when the XIII World Congress of Families (WCF) took place in Verona as part of the activities of the International Organization for the Family, a Christian fundamentalist movement.[4] Since the first conference held in Prague in 1997, the subject of the WCF has been the 'natural family' to mobilize against LGBT people's rights and school programmes on gender and sex education. The event was sponsored and endorsed by Lega politicians from local (the governors of the Veneto region and Trento province) and national government, including party leader Salvini together with Lorenzo Fontana (then Minister of Family and Disability) and Bussetti (Minister of University).

All these initiatives were promoted in the name of the family, Christian identity, and 'real people', not only to attack existing equality policies, but also to discredit the scientific standing of gender research and gender scholars. Radical right populism and religious fundamentalism, for different reasons, are on the same side in the battle against 'gender imposed on the people', and they are acting together to contest gender studies and gender scholars, accusing them of destroying the 'natural' gender binary and the 'natural complementarity of men and women', thus weakening the basis of the 'natural family' made up of a man and a woman and, consequently, the 'moral order' of the nation itself

4. Conclusions

We are facing a paradoxical situation today. On the one hand, gender has started to be mainstreamed within Italian political science and academia, while on the other, a growing opposition to gender studies has emerged outside academia. The fact that populist parties and religious factions contest and attack a research field in the name of 'ordinary people' is of immediate concern to those who do gender research.[5] When a research field is under attack for political reasons, it should ring alarm bells for the entire academic community (Corbett and Gordon 2018). At stake here are scholarly knowledge, university autonomy and academic freedom.

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[4] For more information about the organization, mission and activities see the institutional website https://www.profam.org/mission/.

[5] Today grouped in the Rete italiana degli Studi di Genere, Intersex, Femministi, Transfemministi e sulla Sessualità (GIFTS), https://retegifts.wordpress.com/.

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Political Science in Italian Universities: Demand, Supply, and Vitality

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Abstract

Political Science is widely considered to be an established academic discipline, even in a country like Italy, where the penetration of empirical social science has been deeply constrained historically and culturally, and where there has been a clear predominance of other academic disciplines, including history and constitutional law. Twenty years after the introduction of the so-called 'Bologna Process', and a few years after the implementation of the 2010 reform of the public higher education system, it is worth looking for a comprehensive description of the state of our academic discipline. This can be done by exploring some data about the role of Political Science within the Italian university system. More in detail, three aspects of the current state of Italian Political Science will be explored. Firstly, the dynamics of the educational 'demand' for Political Science is here explored through an analysis of its presence in relevant Bachelor's and Master's degrees. This is even more interesting given the two dangers in the academic presence of Political Science: reiterated criticisms against the uselessness of social sciences, and the effects of at least two decades of anti-political sentiment, particularly diffused among younger cohorts of students. The second aspect tackled here is the capability of Political Science practitioners to respond to these challenges by presenting a credible set of academic subjects and increasing its visibility among students. Third, we will discuss the overall reaction of the community of political scientists to these decisive challenges by looking at the magnitude and variance of academic recruitment in the Political Science academic community currently active in Italy. The evidence presented in the article will offer some reasons for optimism, namely, the stability of the student population and the crystallisation of Political Science in the overall teaching supply. However, some critical elements are also evident: a persistent geographical imbalance in the spread of Political Science and difficulty in adapting to some new professional and inter-disciplinary courses. This will lead us to discuss, in the final part of the article, a grid of more specific and fine-tuned research questions on the future of Political Science in Italy.

1. Introduction

More than half a century has passed since the foundation of modern academic Political Science in Italy by Giovanni Sartori with the fundamental support of Norberto Bobbio (Morlino 1989; 1992; Sartori 2004). Italian political scientists can now count on a reasonable academic presence. They teach quite a large number of

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subjects and they 'matter' in several European and International professional associations, as well as in some relevant research networks at a global level.

However, political scientists know that there is no reason to celebrate this period as the embodiment of an academic 'institutionalization'. Indeed, one can note the continuing relevance of long-term factors that determined a considerable delay in the development of the discipline in Italy. These were, in particular, the long Fascist regime in the twentieth century and the predominance of other disciplines, like history and constitutional law, at the core of the positivist normative vision of the Italian intellectual elite. Moreover, since the 1970s, the presence of professional political scientists in Italy has always been rather irregular, with a relevant number operating in the northern and metropolitan universities, while a shortage of human resources has characterized the peripheral and southern areas.

Several reasons may explain the inertia of the process of stabilization of the discipline and its persisting weaknesses (Capano and Verzichelli 2016). At the same time, recent years have also brought about opportunities for some momentary phases of expansion. Indeed, the long-term decline, dramatically impacted by the effects of the recent economic crisis, might have been somehow balanced by the rise of at least three relevant intervening processes:

1. The adjustments of the university curricula after the introduction of the so-called 'Bologna Process' in 1999. These new regulations may have determined interesting chances to consolidate the discipline in different programmes or, on the contrary, may have penalized Political Science in Italy.

2. The reforms of the whole academic recruitment system, increasingly based on the principle of 'matching funds' and the capacity of a given discipline to support new positions by raising resources through international research projects. This is another relevant intervening factor, especially if one looks at the elements of flexibility and the increment of non-tenure-track positions introduced by a first university reform in 2005 and then formalized by the systemic law (n. 240/2010) on university governance.

3. Finally, one may wonder if innovations in the system of public university funding could have had any effect on Political Science: the availability of some local and territorial resources, or the (still limited) ministerial bonuses provided during the last decade after the introduction of research quality assessments run by an independent agency (*Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione del Sistema Universitario e della Ricerca*, ANVUR). These factors could potentially have a positive effect on a research-based, naturally internationalised, empirical social science, whose outcomes can also be transformed in 'applied' knowledge.

Hence, twenty years after the Bologna Process, and a few years after the implementation of a systemic reform of the whole public higher education system, it is worth looking for a comprehensive description of the state of this academic discipline. We will do this by providing a first analysis of fresh data on the current shape of Italian Political Science collected by the *Società Italiana di Scienza Politica* (SISP) (Italian Political

Science Association).[1] Such data aim to provide a real-time analysis of the state of the discipline and allow us to explore, in a potentially novel way, different paths of Italian Political Science. Three research questions, in particular, are at the core of this explorative work.

First, we aim to assess what can be defined as the rough 'demand' for Political Science, by looking at the dynamics of the flow of students within the Bachelor's and Master's degrees where Political Science is present. This is a potentially fruitful research question, in light of two dangers that emerged during a phase of crisis (from 2008 onwards) following a period of relative academic establishment of the discipline (1999-2008) (Capano and Tronconi 2005; Capano and Verzichelli 2008). These dangers would come from criticisms of the social sciences and their usefulness, and the spread of anti-political sentiment, especially among younger cohorts of (potential) students. The potential effects of these challenges will be measured by looking at the trend of the overall number of students enrolled in classic Political Science degrees.

Secondly, we want to measure the capability of the 'supply side' of the Italian Political Science academic market. The discipline may have responded to the multiple challenges that have emerged during the past decades by putting forward a modern and competitive set of subjects offered to students. The overall visibility of the 'motherhouse' discipline can somehow be assessed by looking at the recent evolution of the presence of Political Science subjects in some Bachelor's and Master's programmes offered in Italian generalist universities.

Our third question has to do with the reaction of the whole community of Italian political scientists to these decisive challenges. The vitality of Political Science in contemporary Italian universities will be analysed by looking at the recruitment and the career-related variance within the Political Science community of untenured and tenure-track academics.

In the next section, we will approach the first two questions, while the third section will cover the problem of the vitality of Italian Political Scientists. A short conclusive section will summarise our findings and present elements of reasonable optimism, as well as the persisting challenges, and will also refine a few questions about the future academic evolution of Political Science in Italy.

2. Political Science in the Italian University System: Demand and Supply

As mentioned above, the first goal of this article is to assess the effective relevance of Political Science according to the magnitude of students selecting one of the dozens of Political Science related degrees activated in Italian universities. A first rough indicator of the pool of students to be exposed to the discipline is the number of people enrolled in the degrees included in the ministerial class *Scienze Politiche e Relazioni Internazionali* (Political Sciences and International Relations, code: L36), the only BA programme

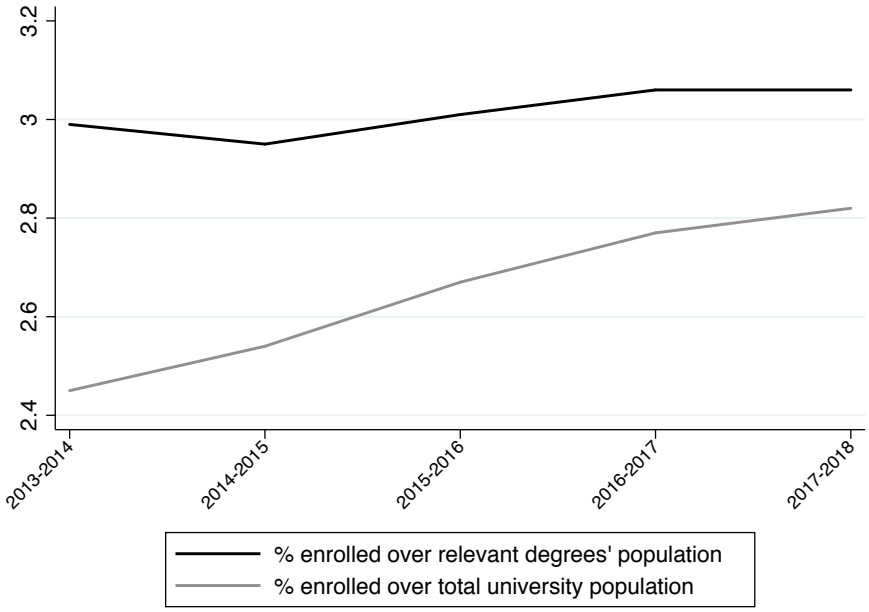
[1] The SISP project started in 2017 and has been collecting data on the presence of political scientists and Political Science subjects in the main Italian university programmes. All the data presented in this article are based on three datasets - *subjects, teachers, students* - at the core of the project. A first version of the database is expected to be released in 2020.

imposing a minimum number of academic credits (*Credito Formativo Universitario*, CFU) in Political Science in Italian universities.

More in detail, the percentage of all Italian BA students who selected an L36 degree from 2013-2014 until 2017-2018 oscillated around 4% (a minimum of 3.98 in 2013-2014 and a maximum of 4.11 in 2016-2017). In absolute terms, the number of BA students enrolled in an L36 degree reached a peak of more than 38,000 people in 2017-2018.

These numbers give us a measure of the potential exposition of students to Political Science but they do not assess the real 'demand' for this discipline, for the simple reason that a relevant percentage are likely not to know precisely what this discipline is before entering a university. A better idea of the real degree of attention paid to Political Science is the trend of students populating the whole 'chain' of BA and MA programmes where Political Science is typically offered. So, we have focused on the above-mentioned L36 BA class and two Master's classes: *Relazioni Internazionali* (International Relations, code: LM52) and *Scienze della Politica* (Political Sciences, code: LM62).

Figure 1. Evolution of students enrolled in Political Science degrees (L36, LM52, and LM62), Italy (2013/2014-2017/2018)



Note: relevant degrees include data on students enrolled in the degrees belonging to the following ministerial classes: 'L', 'LM', 'LM4 C.U.', 'LM85 bis', 'LM/SNT1', 'LM/SNT2', 'LM/SNT3', 'LM/SNT4', 'LMG/01', 'LMR/02'.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the students enrolled in L36, LM52, and LM62 ministerial classes[2] represent a small yet stable percentage of the students enrolled in what we have called 'relevant degrees' (black line in Figure 1). Such relevant degrees correspond to the

[2] Roughly corresponding to the old four-year degree in Political Sciences offered to Italian students before 1999. This is why we have considered L36, LM52, and LM62 degrees as the most typical programmes for the teaching of Political Science.

entire academic path leading to a Master's degree in any subject, thus excluding, for instance, professional training programmes (e.g., nursery programmes).

Conversely, if one considers the entire Italian university population, the situation is undoubtedly brighter for Italian Political Science: the grey line of Figure 1 shows an increase in the percentage of students enrolled in our three classes over the total population of Italian universities. In other words, from this specific viewpoint, the demand for Political Science in Italian universities has undergone a certain increment over time.

Also by looking at the absolute figures, the number of students enrolled in L36, LM52, and LM62 degrees grew from some 41,500 in 2013-2014 to more than 47,500 in 2017-2018. Admittedly, this population remains limited, but these numbers do not point to a decline in Political Science, as the arguments for the 'end of social sciences' would suggest.

In any event, we are writing about a thin minority of students. Moreover, in absolute terms, in 2017-2018, while the L36 BA degrees enrolled more than 38,000 students, in the same year, the number of students enrolled in two Master's degrees – LM52 and LM62 – was just higher than 9,500. In relative terms, if we disaggregated Figure 1's data (black line) for BA and Master's degrees, the percentage of L36 students over the 'relevant BA degrees' population would be slightly more than 4% in 2017-2018, while the same percentage of LM52 and LM62 students over the 'relevant Master's degrees' population would be just above 1.5%. All in all, the demand for Political Science in Italian universities is higher in BA degrees than in Master's degrees.

Is the picture we have just depicted any different if we disaggregate the data according to geographical areas? Figure 2 below helps us to answer this question.

Figure 2. Evolution of students enrolled in Political Science degrees (L36, LM52, and LM62) by geographical area and type of degree, Italy (2013/2014-2017/2018)

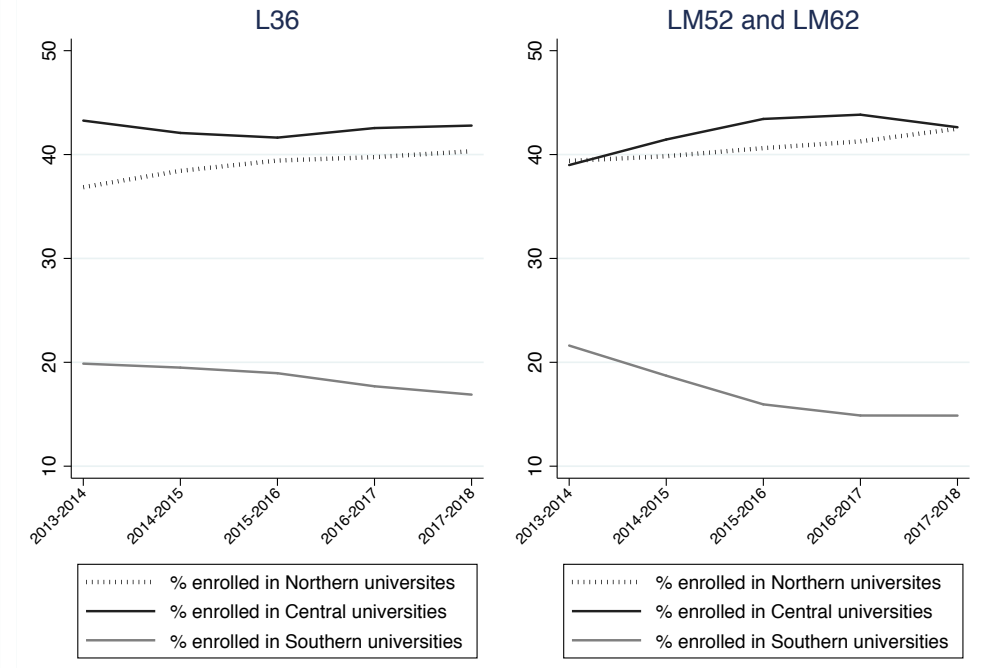


Figure 2 tells us that the relative majority of Political Science students are enrolled in central Italy.[3] This is not surprising, considering that this category includes Rome universities, which are among the biggest academic venues in Italy. On the other hand, some northern universities (in particular, the University of Milan and the University of Bologna) are among the most populated ones. In some years, the students enrolled in the north for relevant Master's programmes (LM52 and LM62) surpass or equal those enrolled in central Italy. A different picture is that of southern universities: in the *Mezzogiorno*, there is a substantial decline in the proportion of Political Science students over time. Such a decline is evident solely in this area of the country, and is particularly evident when analysing the right part of Figure 2, which includes data for our two Master's degrees.

All in all, the demand side does not seem to have dramatically changed over the past few years, with the noticeable exception of southern Italy, which seems less and less attractive to Political Science students. This decline is even more relevant if we underline that the absolute number of students enrolled in these three degrees has actually increased over time.

We have just analysed the demand side of Political Science in Italy in the past few years. What about the position of Political Science on the 'supply side' of Italian academic organisation?

A first look at the presence of Political Science subjects in a broad set of Italian academic programmes can give us a first rough answer to our second research question, related to the supply side of Political Science in Italy. We have considered as a Political Science course all those courses labelled with the SPS/04 Scientific Sector code (*Settore Scientifico Disciplinare*).

Table 1. Number of Italian universities offering at least one Political Science (SPS/04) course for each ministerial class, Italy (2017-2018 and 2018-2019)

Ministerial class	2017-2018	2018-2019
BA degrees		
L36	37	37
Other BA ministerial classes	60	58
TOTAL BA	97	95
Master's degrees		
LM52 and LM62	42	44
Other Master ministerial classes	81	85
TOTAL Master	123	129

Table 1 presents the situation, for the last two academic years, in terms of the number of universities offering at least one Political Science course (i.e., one SPS/04 course) for each Ministerial class. The overall number of universities in each class has certainly increased in comparison to the pioneering times between the foundation of the discipline and the late 1980s (Morlino 1989). A little improvement is also visible when comparing these figures with those of the first decade of the twenty-first century (Capano and Verzichelli 2010).

[3] Northern Italian universities include those located in Piedmont, Aosta Valley, Liguria, Lombardy, Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, and Emilia Romagna; central Italian universities include those in Marche, Tuscany, Umbria, Lazio, and Sardinia; finally, southern Italian universities include those in Campania, Abruzzo, Molise, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, and Sicily.

However, the presence of Political Science in the academic teaching supply side still looks residual. Above all, the discipline still looks too concentrated in the L36 class, while the other entry-level degrees show a somewhat limited presence in comparison to the former. Although stable in the last couple of years, just a minority of BA degrees in Public Administration, Communication, Social Work, and Sociology, among others, (included in the row 'Other BA ministerial classes') have offered a minimum of courses in Political Science.

The situation looks a little more articulated if one analyses the Master's level, where some Political Science courses have been added, with a positive surplus for the 2018-2019 academic year. For instance, we have counted some Political Science courses in ministerial classes like Territorial, Urban, Landscape and Environmental Planning (L21), Geography (LM80), Historical Sciences (LM84), European Studies (LM90), and in some hybrid programmes built by using the minimal requirements of two ministerial classes. For instance, Sociology (L40) plus Social Studies (L39), Administration and Organisational Sciences (L16) plus Political Sciences (L36), and so on.

These data suggest two things. First, there is still a certain reluctance in conceiving Political Science as a 'vital discipline' to be anchored at the core of a comprehensive chain of studies. The very fact that, still now, there is no trace of Political Science in the BA classes of History, Geography, and in the Master's class in Pedagogy is a clear indication of the difficulty of Political Science being considered a credible option for many students. As a result, Italian students may just meet Political Science in a myriad of Master's programmes in social sciences and humanities, without having had any background in the discipline in their earlier BA academic career.

The second suggestion, to be better verified and discussed based on more consolidated evidence, is about the average role of Political Science within Italian universities. Only a handful of programmes in Italy show a presence of Political Science courses, and only in those universities where a critical number of practising political scientists is active, typically in central and northern Italy. In this very last regard, let us discuss some provisional data for the 2018-2019 academic year.

In the L36 BA ministerial class, there are just 12 universities where Political Science related courses (again, those with an SPS/04 Scientific Sector code) sum up to at least 36 academic credits[4]. Out of these 12 universities, 9 are located in northern Italy and 3 in central Italy. Then, moving to Master's degrees, in the LM52 class, Political Science courses sum up to at least 24 credits[5] in 11 universities: 8 in northern Italy, 2 in central Italy and 1 in the southern part of the country. Finally, concerning the LM62 class, 9 universities are offering Political Science courses for at least 24 credits: 3 for each Italian macro-region (northern, central, and southern Italy).

[4] This sum includes *all* the Political Science courses offered in a specific university, regardless of the number of degrees present in that university. We have selected 36 credits as a cut-off point representing 20% of the credits required to obtain a BA degree. A caveat is necessary: while it is likely, especially in Political-Science-related ministerial classes, that more degrees lead to more Political Science courses, we contend it is useful to consider the aggregate number of courses offered to a specific population of students in a given university.

[5] We have selected 24 as a cut-off point because it is equal to the 20% of credits needed to obtain a Master's degree. See also fn. 4 above.

Hence, this preliminary analysis shows that the two features of the mere presence and relevance of Political Science in Italy are today evident only in a selected group of universities, and almost all of them are located in the northern or the central area of the country. This means that the traditional marginality of Political Science is far from being overcome.

As mentioned, the two historical steps of the 1999 reform imposing the 'Bologna Process' and the reform of 2010 represented two opportunities to include a broad and attractive set of Political Science subjects in a galaxy of programmes.

However, the resilience of the old faculties (then transformed into broader 'departments' by the 2010 reform) has somehow prevented the transformation of several programmes (Capano, Turri and Regini 2016) by introducing a number of non-compulsory Political Science courses (Capano and Verzichelli 2008). Another reason for persisting weakness, however, may be attributed to the negligence of political scientists themselves: their typical attitude to 'clone' standard and repetitive academic profiles and research agendas may indeed work as a negative sign of evolution and an indicator of lack of eclecticism (Capano and Verzichelli 2016).

3. The Vitality of Italian Political Scientists

Let us now focus on the third research question discussed in the Introduction. More in detail, can we say something about the vitality of the Italian Political Science community? Has there been any evolution in the composition of such a community over time? Has the recent wave of recruitment changed something in the proportion of tenure-track or untenured scholars? To answer these questions, in this section, we focus on those scholars belonging to the SPS/04 Scientific Sector.

A first hint is given by the distribution of different academic positions within the Italian Political Science community.

Table 2.1. Distribution of academic positions within the Italian Political Science community. Absolute values and percentages, 2017-2019. Post-doctoral research fellows included.

	2017	2018	2019
Assegnisti di ricerca (Post-doctoral Research Fellows)	n.a.	63 (21.9%)	59 (20.3%)
RTD-A (Non-tenure-track Researchers)	17 (7.8%)	20 (7%)	21 (7.2%)
RTD-B (Tenure-track Researchers)	11 (5%)	14 (4.9%)	27 (9.3%)
Ricercatori (Old tenure-track Assistant Professors)	52 (23.7%)	48 (16.7%)	43 (14.8%)
Associato (Confermato) (Senior Lecturers / Associate Professors)	88 (40.2%)	85 (29.6%)	85 (29.2%)
Ordinari (Full Professors)	50 (22.8%)	54 (18.8%)	54 (18.6%)
Straordinario TD (Temporary Full Professors)	1 (0.5%)	3 (1.1%)	2 (0.7%)
TOTAL	**219**	**287**	**291**

Note: the category *RTD-A* includes all the non-tenure-track positions introduced in 2005 (Law 230) and confirmed with the organic reform of 2010.

A first element emerging from Table 2.1 is the progressive increase in the numerical consistency of the Political Science community. Nonetheless, this increase is mainly due to the presence of post-doctoral research fellows for 2018 and 2019. If we excluded this category, there would be a substantially less strong upward trend in the number of Political Science academics in Italy. This is made evident by Table 2.2, which reports the same

data as Table 2.1 with the exception of post-doctoral research fellows, which are excluded from the calculus.

Table 2.2. Distribution of academic positions within the Italian Political Science community. Absolute values and percentages, 2017-2019. Post-doctoral research fellows excluded.

	2017	2018	2019
RTD-A (Non-tenure-track Researchers)	17 (7.8%)	20 (8.9%)	21 (9.1%)
RTD-B (Tenure-track Researchers)	11 (5%)	14 (6.2%)	27 (11.6%)
Ricercatori (Old tenure-track Assistant Professors)	52 (23.7%)	48 (21.4%)	43 (18.5%)
Associato (Confermato) (Senior Lecturers / Associate Professors)	88 (40.2%)	85 (37.9%)	85 (36.6%)
Ordinari (Full Professors)	50 (22.8%)	54 (24.1%)	54 (23.3%)
Straordinario TD (Temporary Full Professors)	1 (0.5%)	3 (1.3%)	2 (0.9%)
TOTAL	**219**	**224**	**232**

Note: the category *RTD-A* includes all the non-tenure-track positions introduced in 2005 (Law 230) and confirmed with the organic reform of 2010.

A second element shown in Table 2.1 is that, in 2019, 27.5% of academics do not have tenure-track positions (post-doctoral research fellows plus untenured researchers). Although the lack of longitudinal data prevents us from presenting a comprehensive analysis of the presence of non-tenure-track scholars, it is quite clear that having temporary positions has become an important feature for a relevant percentage of the Italian Political Science community. Nonetheless, this can also signal the presence of some vitality in the discipline, given that as many as 60 post-doctoral research fellows, that is, scholars in the early stage of a prospective academic career, worked in Italian universities in 2018 or 2019.

Third, and as a somewhat counterbalancing element, there is a growing presence of tenure-track researchers (*RTD-B*). Incidentally, let us recall this category is made up of scholars with a lower average age than that of old tenure-track Assistant Professors or even Associate/Full Professors. All in all, there has surely been an injection of fresh blood into the veins of the Italian academic community in the past few years, possibly also due to the presence of Political Science in the excellence grants (*progetti di eccellenza 2018-2022*) provided to a few Social Science departments by the Italian Ministry of Education and Research.

A further point of discussion is the geographical distribution of Italian Political Science scholars. Let us focus our attention on Tables 3.1 and 3.2 below.

Table 3.1. Geographical distribution of the Italian Political Science community, absolute values and percentages, 2017-2019. Post-doctoral research fellows included.

	2017	2018	2019
Northern Italy	121 (55.2%)	155 (54%)	164 (56.4%)
Central Italy	65 (29.7%)	92 (32.1%)	91 (31.3%)
Southern Italy	33 (15.1%)	40 (13.9%)	36 (12.4%)
TOTAL	**219**	**287**	**291**

Also in this case, a clear prevalence of northern and central universities is evident. Let us again recall that 2018 and 2019 data include post-doctoral research fellows: if we excluded this category for these two years, the percentages would be slightly higher for northern and southern Italy, even if the general picture would not change, as shown in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2. Geographical distribution of the Italian Political Science community, absolute values and percentages, 2017-2019. Post-doctoral research fellows excluded.

	2017	2018	2019
Northern Italy	121 (55.2%)	125 (55.8%)	133 (57.3%)
Central Italy	65 (29.7%)	66 (29.5%)	67 (28.9%)
Southern Italy	33 (15.1%)	33 (14.7%)	32 (13.8%)
TOTAL	**219**	**224**	**232**

Is there, instead, any difference if we show the distribution of post-doctoral research fellows, RTD-A, and RTD-B? Data from Table 4 help us in addressing this task. To make figures comparable, we show data just for 2018 and 2019, given that no data on post-doctoral research fellows is available for 2017.

Table 4. Geographical distribution of post-doctoral research fellows, RTD-A, and RTD-B, 2018 and 2019.

	2018				2019			
	Post-doc Research Fellows	RTD-A (Non-tenure-track Researchers)	RTD-B (Tenure-track Researchers)	TOTAL geographical area	Post-doc Research Fellows	RTD-A (Non-tenure-track Researchers)	RTD-B (Tenure-track Researchers)	TOTAL geographical area
Northern Italy	30	6	9	45 (46.4%)	31	8	18	57 (53.3%)
Central Italy	26	11	3	40 (41.2%)	24	9	7	40 (37.4%)
Southern Italy	7	3	2	12 (12.4%)	4	4	2	10 (9.3%)
TOTAL	**63**	**20**	**14**	**97**	**59**	**21**	**27**	**107**

Note: the category RTD-A includes all the non-tenure-track positions introduced in 2005 (Law 230) and confirmed with the organic reform of 2010.

Table 4 tells us that a huge bulk of the younger cohorts of Italian political scientists work in northern and central universities. Two pieces of data are worth underlining: first, there is a certain balance between northern and central universities in 2018 which becomes a more pronounced imbalance towards the former in 2019. In other words, in 2019, Italian universities operating in the north employed more than half of post-doctoral research fellows, RTD-A, and RTD-B. Second, Table 4 confirms the severe geographical imbalance between, on the one hand, northern and central universities and, on the other hand, southern ones, which, in 2019, employ less than 10% of early-stage political scientists.

All in all, Tables 3.1 and 3.2, along with Table 4, tell us that there is a crystal-clear northern-central predominance in the places where the Italian Political Science community operates. Moreover, in 2019, northern universities alone employed more than

half of all Italian political scientists and more than half of the 'new generations' of Political Science scholars.

These data will be connected with those presented in the previous section, and unequivocally tell us that the lion's share of Political Science in Italy is that of northern and central Italy. On the contrary, southern Italian universities have a more peripheral position: a declining trend both concerning students enrolled in Political Science degrees and Political Science scholars is quite evident.

4. Conclusions

In this article, we have dealt with three research questions. The first related to the demand for Political Science in terms of students enrolled in relevant BA and Master's degrees. The second connected to the supply side of the discipline (i.e., the general presence of Political Science courses). Finally, the third aims to investigate the vitality of Political Science concerning the number and the career status of Italian political scientists.

First of all, we have shown that, despite some apocalyptic predictions, in Italy there is a stable demand for Political Science courses. In terms of rough figures, the number of students exposed to the discipline have increased over time. Hence, the crisis does not seem to have led to a sharp decline in the demand for Political Science programmes. However, a problem of 'critical mass' remains, since the overall percentage of university students who have attended or are going to attend some Political Science courses remains quite limited. This might be connected to a persisting deficit of Political Science subjects in many programmes, especially at BA level, and to the long-term numerical weakness of the Italian Political Science community.

This brings us to the second point emerging from the analysis: the patent disequilibrium in the academic presence of Political Science in different Italian macro-regions. In particular, we have stressed the persistence of a centre-north/south divide: with some remarkable exceptions (e.g., the University of Catania, the University of Naples 'Federico II'), the presence of political scientists in southern Italy is limited to isolated personalities who can guarantee just a 'minimum offer' in terms of teaching and training.

As for the third point, our analysis of the recent development of the academic community reveals that a new generation of Political Science researchers has been recruited, notwithstanding the difficult financial period experienced by the discipline. As one could easily expect, there is a growing role of temporary positions. This can be read in two very different ways. One may argue, indeed, that the difficulty of political scientists to achieve a full professorship or at least a tenured position is evidence of the persistence of a limited institutionalisation (Sartori 1986; Freddi and Giannetti 2007). On the other hand, the availability of a growing number of non-tenure-track positions might also be related to the availability of research grants from the European Union or even from private institutions. This is just speculation to be empirically supported in more fine-grained research, but could point towards a sort of acknowledgement of Italian Political Science as a source of 'good research'. Therefore, future research might empirically verify the thesis of an overall good outlook for a discipline that shows growing competitiveness, although suffering from a 'critical mass' problem in a number of departments and universities (Verzichelli 2014).

All in all, the survival – and possibly the consolidation – of a discipline which is now strong, but certainly non-unitary and quite uneven, can be a realistic perspective only when its practitioners are able to extend their room for manoeuvre within the academy and society at large. This is the big challenge for the years to come: preserving the good quality of Political Science research and, at the same time, becoming more central in university programmes and within academic organisations. The strategies to be implemented to reach this goal will be, of course, discussed in more appropriate contexts. However, it seems clear that three elements will be crucial to assess the health of Italian Political Science in the future: research eclecticism, a growing presence of the discipline in different inter-disciplinary and applied programmes, and an adequate diffusion of its subjects in all the relevant degrees in social sciences.

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