Euroscepticism behind the victory of Eurosceptic parties in the 2018 Italian general election? Not quite like that[1]

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The 2018 Italian General Election: Context and Question

On March 4, 2018 Italy went to the polls amidst an intense wave of anti-establishment sentiment. The parties that most contributed to, and capitalised from, this political climate were the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S, Five Star Movement) and the *Lega Nord* (Lega, Northern League), i.e. the challenger, populist parties. In spite of the outcome of a 'hung Parliament', they turned out to be the true political winners, having significantly increased their share of votes compared to the previous general election of 2013 and received, jointly considered, more than 50% of the electorate support. On the contrary, mainstream parties such as the incumbent *Partito Democratico* (PD, Democratic Party) and *Forza Italia* (FI, Go Italy) suffered heavy vote losses.

Given the Eurosceptic nature of the M5S and even more of the Lega (Emanuele et al., 2016), the election result has been regarded by many as a blow to Europe. Indeed, Italian voters have shifted from pro-European to Eurosceptic positions over the past 25 years, and particularly after the 2009 'great recession' and the following austerity measures implemented in 2011 by the technocratic government led by Mario Monti. As shown by the Autumn 2017 Eurobarometer survey, conducted only few months before the March 2018 election, about 40% of Italians 'totally agree' or 'tend to

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agree' that 'the country could better face the future outside the EU'. Although anti-EU and anti-Euro sentiments do not account for the majority of views in Italy, these data signal a growing discontent with the European integration process fuelled by the migration and economic crises (Bellucci and Serricchio 2016; Conti and Memoli 2015; Lucarelli 2015).

However, while the victory of Eurosceptic parties in the 2018 election is a matter of fact, whether Euroscepticism has been one of the main reasons explaining it remains to be determined. Thus, the goal of this article is exactly to assess the role played by Euroscepticism in (the outcome of) the 2018 Italian general election. For this purpose, we will try to see how and to what extent the EU-related issues have been able to shape parties' strategies and voters' preferences. More specifically, we will be looking at, on the one hand, the emphasis given to them by the parties both in their manifestos and in their official Twitter feeds during the electoral campaign, and, on the other hand, the voters' preferences and priorities on those issues and, comparatively, on other issues.

Parties, Coalitions and Electoral Manifestos

In October 2017, just four months before the end of the legislature, the Italian Parliament passed a new electoral law with the support of all the main parties except the M5s (Massetti and Farinelli 2019). The new electoral systems for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate are of a mixed nature, combining proportional representation for the nationwide distribution of two-thirds of the total seats with the first-past-the-post system in single-member districts for the remaining one-third (Chiaramonte and D'Alimonte 2018).

Although allocating most seats through a PR system, the new electoral systems provided a strategic incentive to parties to form pre-electoral coalitions supporting joint candidates in the single-member districts. Parties reacted differently to it. The M5S maintained its traditional decision to maximise brand recognition, running on its own as it had already done in 2013. The centre-right parties adopted the opposite strategy. They formed a unified coalition including Berlusconi's FI, the Lega – that since 2013 had been transformed by the new leader Salvini from a northern regionalist

party into a populist radical right-wing party with nationwide appeal (not by chance, the word 'Northern' was cancelled from the party's electoral symbol) –, the post-fascist *Fratelli d'Italia* (FDI, Brothers of Italy), and the minor list *Noi con l'Italia-Unione di Centro* (NCI-UDC, Us with Italy-Union of the Centre). Unlike the centre-right, and in spite of numerous attempts made to overcome the divisions, the centre-left parties were not able to form a unified front. *Liberi e Uguali* (LEU, Free and Equal), the joint list of parties to the left of the PD, ran for election separately from the PD. The latter created a coalition with three allies: the centrist *Lista Civica Popolare* (CP, Popular Civic List); +*Europa* (More Europe) led by Emma Bonino, former EU commissioner; and *Insieme* (Together), a joint list of Greens, Socialists and other leftist groups.

Turning to the analysis of main Italian parties' electoral manifestos, it results that the EU is an issue dealt with, although with different degree of relevance. On the centre-left, the PD dedicated an entire section to the EU issue, supporting pro-EU stances directed to strengthen democratic mechanisms and institutions at the EU level, to reform EU economic governance towards a new common fiscal policy, a social union and a common immigration policy as regards asylum seekers and refugees. The ultimate goal is the creation of the United States of Europe. Very similar goals are supported by +EUR, whose electoral manifesto and party label itself put the EU issue at the centre of party platform. More Europe, indeed, is the key message of the electoral list led by Emma Bonino, strong supporter of EU federalism. Compared to PD, EU issues are more relevant within +EUR platform and in terms of content +EUR supports free-market measures and fiscal stability in the context of greater fiscal, energy, banking, transport and services integration.

On the left, no specific section of LEU electoral manifesto is devoted to EU issues. Nevertheless, in the preamble of its manifesto LEU states that their choice is clearly pro-European, but in contrast with the technocratic drift that Europe has taken. They advocate for a fairer, more democratic Europe, supporting a greater role of the European Parliament to elect a real government

of European citizens, also to overcome the intergovernmental dimension that dictates duties and does not guarantee rights because of austerity policies.

As regards parties of the centre-right, the League, FI and FDI developed a common electoral platform in ten summary points, one of which is labelled 'fewer constraints from Europe'. The European issue is not dealt with in depth, but centre-right parties simply list a series of measures to eliminate the flaws of the EU or its powers considered as excessive: contrast to austerity policies; opposition to excessive EU regulations that hinder economic development; review of European treaties; less bureaucracy in Europe; reduction of the surplus of Italian annual payments to the EU budget; prevalence of Italian Constitution over Community law following the German model (recovery of sovereignty); protection of Italian interests starting from the security of savings and the protection of 'Made in Italy'. Nevertheless, the League created its own manifesto, in which Eurosceptic stances emerge more clearly. Indeed, the party led by Salvini dedicated a section of its manifesto to Europe, stating that the League wants to stay within the EU only upon the condition that Italian government re-discuss all the Treaties which place constraints on the exercise of Italian full and legitimate sovereignty, returning to the European Economic Community before the Maastricht Treaty. The Euro is considered as the main cause of Italian economic decline and therefore the League advocates to start a shared path of agreed exit from the Eurozone. Furthermore, the party claims to recover national sovereignty on several issues, advocating for: exclusive competence on commercial policy; restoring the full control of each State on its own borders, i.e. repeal of Schengen and the Dublin regulation; supremacy of the law of the Member States over that of the Union, EU Court of Justice case-law and EU legal personality (i.e. the power to conclude international agreements on behalf of the Member States); restoration of subsidiarity, by putting back most of the areas of shared competence and all areas of supporting action under the exclusive competence of the Member States

and by strengthening the power of national parliaments and regions to monitor the application of the principle of subsidiarity.

Finally, none of the 20 points of the electoral manifesto produced by M5S is dedicated specifically to the EU.

To conclude, the main Italian parties deal explicitly with EU issues in their manifestos, with the abovementioned significant exception of the M5S. Salience of EU issues varies, with some parties (+EUR) putting EU at the centre of their manifesto and others (LEU) mentioning it only in the preamble. Moreover, we noticed a clear contrast between pro-EU positions on the centre-left (with some nuances) and anti-EU stances on the right (especially the League). However, electoral manifesto data do not tell us about the actual party behaviour during the electoral campaign. In this regard, we can expect parties to adopt strategic choices much more on social networks than on their electoral platforms. Hence, the next section analyses main parties' and their leaders' feeds on Twitter, which represent the most widely accessible form of party communication.

Twitter Campaign Analysis

To comprehend the interaction between party strategies and electoral incentives, we relied on two different data sources, which allowed us to capture and measure both party strategies in terms of issue emphasis and issue opportunities for parties. The first goal has been reached by coding all the messages posted on Twitter by the main Italian parties and their leaders during the electoral campaign. The second goal has been obtained through a pre-campaign survey on a representative sample of the Italian voting-age population.[2] In particular, comparing party strategies during the electoral campaign and issue opportunities among voters before election allows us to understand (a) whether parties

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[2] These investigations have been carried out within the Issue Competition Comparative Project (ICCP) conducted by Italian Centre for Electoral Studies (CISE). See http://cise.luiss.it/iccp/.

politicised issues related to the EU by emphasising them through their Twitter feeds, (b) whether party strategies actually exploited EU-related issue opportunities available among voters.[3]

Let us start with the Twitter campaign analysis. Although it can be claimed that the Twitter audience is in most countries scarcely representative of the entire population, we consider that the use of Twitter feeds for measuring issue emphasis should allow to successfully detect the party's strategic priorities in a campaign. Indeed, in line with De Sio *et al.* (2018), we believe that parties use Twitter mostly to provide official statements and positions to the media and the public (as a *press release* tool), even in countries with low or elite-only Twitter penetration, as shown by empirical research (Kreiss 2016; Parmelee and Bichard 2011). All tweets of Twitter account of main parties and party leaders competing in the election were collected in the two months preceding the election day (7 January- 4 March 4). We scrutinised the official Twitter accounts for seven parties – PD, M5S, FI, League, FDI, LEU, +EUR – and their leaders – Matteo Renzi, Luigi Di Maio, Silvio Berlusconi, Matteo Salvini, Giorgia Meloni, Pietro Grasso, Emma Bonino. After removal of retweets and replies, 17,667 tweets remained for scrutiny. During the coding procedure, human coders manually assigned each of the 1,292 policy tweets to one of the 34 issues included in the survey[4], while tweets not related to policy issues were deleted (92.8%). The issue selection process was designed to address all topics debated during the campaign and to cover different policy domains, namely the economy, Europe, immigration and social issues. We identified both *positional* and *valence* issues (Stokes, 1963). To summarise, positional issues are those on which two rival goals are preferred by only portions of the electorate (i.e. tax progressivity vs. flat tax), while valence issues concern goals shared by the whole electorate (i.e. fight against unemployment).

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[3] For a more comprehensive analysis of the interaction between issue opportunity structure and strategic choices of Italian parties, see Emanuele et al. (2019, forthcoming).

[4] Specifically, two coders coded all tweets independently, by deciding which of the 34 issues measured in the electoral survey it belonged. The validity of our *ex ante* issue selection has been confirmed by the very low number of tweets dedicated to issues not included in the original 34-items list (19 out of a total of 17,667 tweets), leading us to exclude these 19 tweets from the analysis. The inter-coder reliability was very high, as measured by the Cohen's kappa statistic (0.90): according to Fleiss *et al.* (2013), values over 0.75 can be considered excellent. Consequently, we preferred to keep only the classification of the coder assigning the highest number of tweets to issue content.

Table 1 reports, for each of the selected Italian parties, the top-five issue goals in terms of issue emphasis along with their specific tweet share. It is worth noticing that EU issues were not at the centre of party campaign strategies, with the (expected) exception of +EUR. Indeed, EU issues are not included among the top-five issue goals in terms of issue emphasis (i.e. share of tweets) by Italian parties. As anticipated, the only exception is +EUR, which dedicated 39% of their tweets to the goal 'stay in the EU', by far the issue most emphasized by the party led by Emma Bonino. In addition, a valence issue related to the EU ('make Italy count more in Europe') appears among the most emphasised by the party (5% of tweets). Overall, 44% of +EUR tweets focused on the EU. This is consistent with the party's electoral manifesto and is definitely not surprising, as +EUR can be considered a niche party founded precisely around the EU issue, with strong pro-EU and federalist stances.

Table 1: *Top-5 goals by Issue Emphasis on Twitter for Italian parties (EU issues in bold)*

Party	Issue Goal	Issue Emphasis
PD	Support economic growth	0.14
	Fight unemployment	0.13
	Keep tax progressivity on income	0.12
	Make citizens safer from crime	0.07
	Increase economic bonuses to families with children	0.07
M5S	Fight pollution and disruption of territory	0.32
	Improve Italian education	0.26
	Ensure the good functioning of healthcare system	0.13
	Lower pension age	0.06
	Renew Italian politics	0.06

League	Limit the number of refugees	0.27
	Lower pension age	0.15
	Introduce a flat tax	0.09
	Make citizens safer from crime	0.06
	Decriminalise excess of self-defence	0.05
FI	Introduce a flat tax	0.39
	Limit the number of refugees	0.14
	Fight unemployment	0.14
	Reduce poverty in Italy	0.10
	Support economic growth	0.07
FDI	Limit the number of refugees	0.22
	Making citizens safer from crime	0.22
	Decriminalise excess of self-defence	0.09
	Fight pollution and disruption of territory	0.08
	Increase economic bonuses to families with children	0.06
LEU	Fight pollution and disruption of territory	0.21
	Ensure the good functioning of healthcare system	0.14
	Keep tax progressivity on income	0.12
	Improve Italian education	0.09
	Scrap the cost of university tuition fees	0.06
+EUR	**Stay in the EU**	0.39
	Continue to accept refugees like now	0.16
	Support economic growth	0.10
	Make Italy count more in Europe	0.05
	Renew Italian politics	0.05

Therefore, as far as EU issues are concerned, actual party communication strategies in general do not reflect their electoral manifestos. This is particularly evident for PD and the League, whose pro and anti-EU positions do not emerge during their electoral campaign on Twitter. Conversely, the lack of emphasis on EU issues by M5S is consistent with its electoral manifesto.

By looking at the specific strategies of four major parties (M5S, PD, League, FI), we can notice that the M5S chose a non-ideological campaign, given that it emphasised only one positional goal – lowering pension age, while it focused its message on non-divisive, *valence* issues (Stokes 1963), such as reducing pollution, improving the education and healthcare system, renewing Italian politics. Conversely, the PD emphasised mostly economically progressive goals (tax progressivity and bonuses for children), while FI campaigned on both cultural and economic conservative goals (less refugees and flat tax). Finally, the League mostly campaigned on right-wing cultural policies, but also on two economic goals of different ideological sign: the flat tax – a clear right-wing economic measure – and reducing pension age – a traditional social-democratic economic goal.

Election results: to what extent did the EU shape voters' preferences and behaviour?

The outcome of the election turned out to be a hung parliament, with none of the main competitors capable of winning the majority of seats in the Chamber and in the Senate (Table 2).

Table 2: *Results of the 2018 Italian general election in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate*

Lists and *coalitions*	Chamber				Senate			
	Votes		Seats		Votes		Seats	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Lega	5,705,925	17.3	125	19.8	5,334,049	17.6	58	18.4
Forza Italia (FI)	4,586,672	13.9	103	16.3	4,358,101	14.4	57	18.1
Fratelli d'Italia (FDI)	1,440,107	4.4	32	5.1	1,286,887	4.3	18	5.7
Noi con l'Italia-Unione di Centro (NCI-UDC)	431,042	1.3	5	0.8	362,131	1.2	4	1.3
FI-FDI-MNVA	5,533	0.0	0	0.0	5,223	0.0	0	0.0
Total Centre-Right	*12,169,279*	*37.0*	*265*	*42.1*	*11,346,391*	*37.5*	*137*	*43.5*
Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S)	10,748,372	32.7	227	36.0	9,747,701	32.2	112	35.6

Partito Democratico (PD)	6,153,081	18.7	112	17.8	5,788,103	19.1	53	16.8
Più Europa (+EUR)	845,406	2.6	3	0.5	716,136	2.4	1	0.3
Insieme	191,489	0.6	1	0.2	163,903	0.5	1	0.3
Civica Popolare	180,539	0.5	2	0.3	152,505	0.5	1	0.3
SVP-PATT	134,613	0.4	4	0.6	128,336	0.4	3	1.0
PD-UV-UVP-EPAV	14,429	0.0	0	0.0	15,958	0.1	1	0.3
Total Centre-Left	*7,519,557*	*22.9*	*122*	*19.4*	*6,964,941*	*23.0*	*60*	*19.0*
Liberi e Uguali (LEU)	1,114,298	3.4	14	2.2	990,715	3.3	4	1.3
Others	1,354,919	4.1	2	0.3	1,226,064	4.0	2	0.6
Total	*32,906,425*	*100*	*630*	*100*	*30,275,812*	*100*	*315*	*100*

Source: own elaboration on data from the Italian Ministry of Interior

The centre-right coalition came first with 37% of the votes and 42.1% of the seats in the Chamber, and 37.7% of the votes and 43.5% of the seats in the Senate. It increased its 2013 vote share by roughly 8 percentage points, with the League growing by 14 points, and FI losing over 7 points. As a consequence, the League became for the first time the most-voted party of the coalition, achieving its best electoral result ever.

The M5S followed with 32.7% of the votes and 36% of the seats in the Chamber, and 32.2% and with 35.6% of the votes and the seats respectively in the Senate. It increased its 2013 vote share by 7 percentage points. In 2013 the M5S had achieved a record high for a new party at its first electoral outing in the whole of Western Europe since WWII. Five years later, at the subsequent national election, not only did the M5s manage not to lose support, but managed to build on what was already a record performance.

Finally, the centre-left coalition led by the incumbent PD trailed third with only 22.9% of the votes and 19.4% of the seats in the Chamber, and with 23% and 19% of the votes and of the seats respectively in the Senate. It diminished its 2013 vote share by about 7 percentage points and it was the clear loser of this election.

While the lack of a clear winner was a largely expected outcome, the overall performance of individual parties has come as a surprise. The success of the challenger parties, the M5s and the

League, has been much greater than predicted by most polls – as has the defeat of the mainstream parties, the PD and FI.

While a comprehensive explanation of the election outcome goes beyond the remit of this article, we address the question of whether EU issues have played a major role in shaping priorities and preferences of Italian voters.

In order to comprehend how party strategies – as outlined in the previous section - were consistent with the issue opportunities available among their voters, we need to look at public opinion data. In this regard, a computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) survey was carried out before the March 4 election (6-12 February) among a quota sample of 1,000 Italian citizens over the age of 18. The sample was representative of the voting-age population in Italy based on gender, age group, geographic area, and education. The response rate was 49%.[5] Respondents were asked items regarding their policy preferences and priorities (namely, the same items we detected in the Twitter campaign analysis).

Before entering the details of each party constituency, it is worth to briefly look at the issue preferences and priorities of the overall Italian electorate. Table 3 presents, for both valence and positional issues, their systemic salience[6] for our whole sample and, for positional issues only, the favourite and most salient rival goal – with its level of support and percentage points of predominance in terms of salience compared to the rival goal. The first point to be stressed is that on the European dimension, Italians are quite in favour of both the country staying in the EU (66%) and the Eurozone (61%), with a good level of salience of both issues (74% and 72%, respectively). In comparison to other issues, EU issues fall in an intermediate position in terms of salience. All eight most-salient issues are valence, with unemployment, corruption, and the health-care system at the top of voters' agenda. The only positional issues showing levels of salience comparable with valence issues are

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[5] The response rate of 49% is definitely good because it is usually around 33% in non-random CAWI surveys and even less in telephone surveys.
[6] The systemic salience of an issue is calculated as the percentage of all respondents that considers the issue as 'high' priority, with respondents reporting 'medium' priority being counted as half.

pensions, refugees, and tax evasion. We can thus note a mix of conservative cultural goals on immigration and social-democratic goals on the economy, which are considered more salient. Roughly three-quarters of Italians are in favour of tax progressivity, increasing benefits for families with children, reducing income differences, introducing a minimum hourly wage, reducing economic austerity, and introducing a basic income for people in poverty. The former, in particular, appears interesting as its rival goal (introducing a flat tax) has been the signature campaign proposal on the economy of the most-voted coalition – the centre-right. The only economic issue splitting the electorate into two portions weighing about the same is job-market regulations. Still, 60% of Italians choose the left-wing goal – reducing the freedom of entrepreneurs to fire and hire.

Table 3: *Italian public opinion configuration before the election (valence issues in italics, EU issues in bold)*

Issue	Systemic salience	Most supported and salient goal	Goal support	Salience differentials between rival goals (percentage points)
Fight unemployment	93%			
Improve Healthcare	92%			
Fight corruption	92%			
Reduce costs of politics	90%			
Fight poverty	90%			
Safety from crime	89%			
Support economic growth	89%			
Protect from terrorism	84%			
Tax evasion	83%	Increase tax evasion fight	85%	+67
Number of refugees	82%	Limit the number of refugees	80%	+56
Renew politics	82%			
Protect environment	81%			
Pension age	81%	Lower pension age	80%	+59

Improve education	80%			
Make Italy count more in Europe	78%			
Tax progressivity	77%	Keep tax progressivity	74%	+39
Vaccines	76%	Keep vaccines compulsory	78%	+48
The EU	**74%**	**Stay in the EU**	**66%**	**+26**
The Euro	**72%**	**Stay in the Euro**	**61%**	**+18**
Economic benefits for families with children	71%	Increase benefits for children	85%	+55
Reduce income differences	71%	Reduce income differences	79%	+49
Hourly minimum wage	71%	Introduce hourly minimum wage	80%	+53
Make political economy of the UE more flexible or not	71%	More EU economic flexibility	76%	+44
Basic income	69%	Introduce basic income	73%	+41
Self-defence	69%	Decriminalise excess	69%	+31
Freedom of enterprise	64%	Reduce freedom of enterprise	60%	+17
Welfare chauvinism	63%	Restrict welfare for immigrants	60%	+22
Citizenship for immigrants' sons	60%	No easier citizenship	56%	+11
Living will	59%	Keep living will legislation	76%	+33
Globalisation	58%	Limit globalisation	55%	+8
Soft drugs	53%	Not legalise soft drugs	52%	+11
Prostitution	51%	Legalise prostitution	70%	+26
University tuition	51%	Abolish university tuition fees	62%	+20
Same-sex unions	43%	Keep same-sex unions	67%	+15

In parallel to the observed preference for social-democratic economic goals, Italians favour 'demarcationist' cultural goals (Kriesi *et al.* 2006). In addition to 80% of Italians that want a reduction in the number of refugees, the majority also prefers not easing the citizenship for immigrants' children born in Italy and reducing welfare services for legal immigrants. On these issue dimensions, then, the centre-right appears much more in line with the electorate.
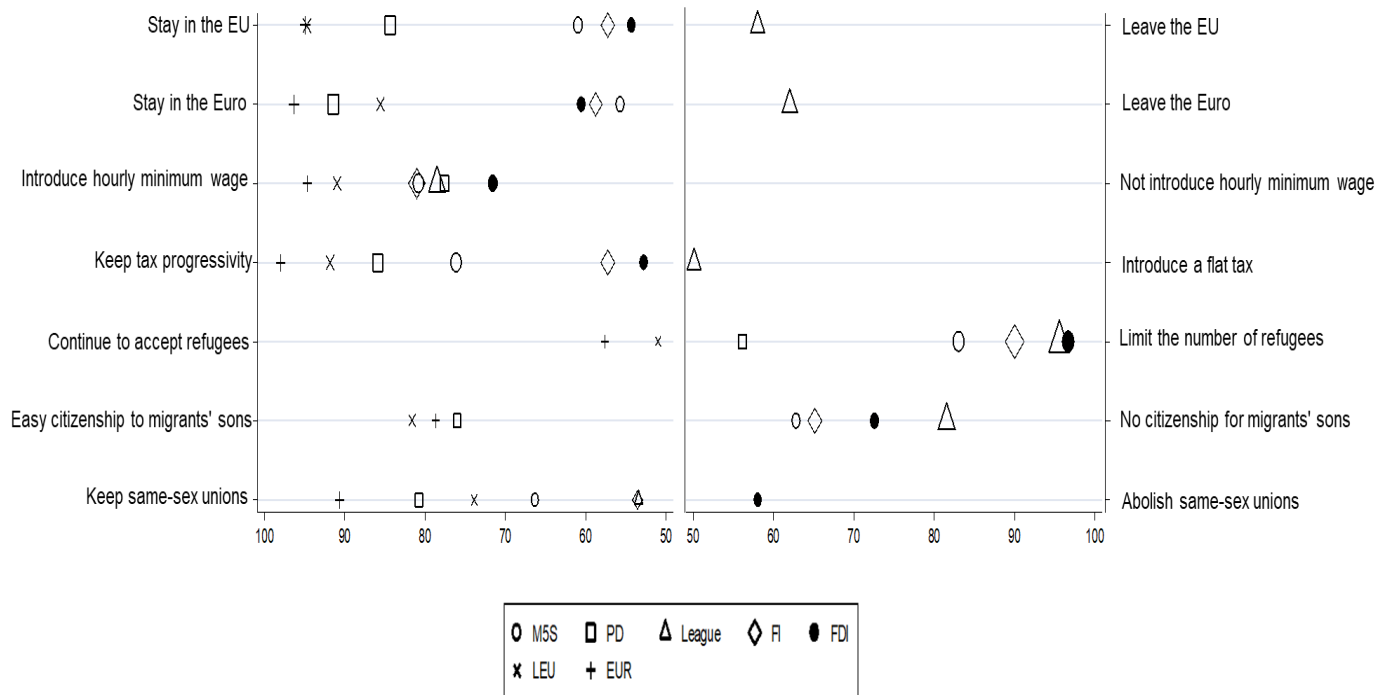
The issue dimension that is least salient for Italians concerns social issues. End-of-life regulations, legalising prostitution or soft drugs, and gay-couples' rights are all at the bottom of the Italian agenda, with the latter being the only issue whose level of salience is below 50%. This is

something worth underlying: despite on these issues the pro-choice goal being usually preferred, their low salience makes them harder to be moved to centre stage during the campaign.

In order to investigate the configuration of issue opportunities for Italian parties which stays behind the aforementioned general patterns, now it is worth looking at preferences and priorities of party constituencies on positional issues. The latter, as stated, consist of two rival goals, which can vary in terms of salience and within-party agreement. For a party, a goal on which its voters agree most and perceive as salient can provide a higher electoral opportunity compared to a divisive and less salient goal.[7] Figure 1 shows, for the selected parties, where their electorates stand on the EU positional issues, along with their relative salience (represented by the size of the indicator). Apart from EU-related issues, Figure 1 includes also a selection of economic and cultural positional issues, which can be clearly interpreted according to the progressive-conservative antithesis (Middendorp 1978).

Figure 1: *EU, economic and cultural issues: preferences and salience of major Italian party constituencies*

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[7] In this regard, we are in line with the theoretical insights of issue yield theory (De Sio and Weber 2014; De Sio *et al.* 2018), which considers contemporary party competition best understood in terms of issue competition (Carmines and Stimson 1980; Green-Pedersen 2007).

	Stay in the EU	...	Leave the EU
	Stay in the Euro	...	Leave the Euro
	Introduce hourly minimum wage	...	Not introduce hourly minimum wage
	Keep tax progressivity	...	Introduce a flat tax
	Continue to accept refugees	...	Limit the number of refugees
	Easy citizenship to migrants' sons	...	No citizenship for migrants' sons
	Keep same-sex unions	...	Abolish same-sex unions

O M5S   □ PD   △ League   ◇ FI   ● FDI
✕ LEU   + EUR

Note: On each positional issue we placed parties according to the share of their voters supporting the favoured goal between the two rivals. The size of party markers is proportional to the salience assigned to that goal by voters of that party who support that goal.

EU issues show a certain degree of polarization across party constituencies: centre-left party constituencies (+EUR, PD, LEU) strongly support EU stances, whereas League's voters are on the opposite side, with M5S, FI and FDI voters somehow in the middle (but with a prevalence of pro-EU positions). Hence, it seems that parties could actually mobilize on EU issues: this is true especially for centre-left parties. Indeed, EU issues were very salient for their voters (and quite salient for the whole electorate, as shown by previous Table 3). Moreover, there was a high level of agreement on pro-EU goals among electors of centre-left parties (ranging from 84% of PD voters to 96% of +EUR electors on the Euro issue, see Figure 1) and a good level of agreement in the whole electorate (between 66% on the Euro issue and 61% on the EU issue, see Table 3). Therefore, emphasising such issues could have been a win-win strategy, which combines electoral expansion with the preservation of party's usual electoral constituency.[8]

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[8] See again De Sio and Weber (2014); De Sio et al. (2018).

However, only +EUR did it, as previously seen. Neither PD nor LEU dedicated a considerable amount of tweets to EU issues, contrary to the aforementioned electoral incentives. Parties of the centre-right and M5S adopted the same choice, but in this case their strategy was consistent with their issue opportunities. Indeed, as shown by Figure 1, EU issues for M5S, FI and FDI were highly divisive issues within their electorates and less salient compared to other issues. Even among League voters there was a noticeable share of pro-EU positions (42% as regards the permanence in the EU and 38% as regards the permanence in the Euro zone). Furthermore, for League voters EU was less salient than for centre-left voters, and also in comparison to other issues (especially those related to immigration). Hence, League's choice to focus more on immigration than on EU was in line with actual electoral incentives.

Regarding economic and cultural issues, in a nutshell, most of the electorates of Italian parties appear to converge on progressive economic issue goals, on progressive cultural goals related to civil rights and on conservative cultural goals related to immigration, in line with the preferences of the whole electorate previously mentioned. In particular, the data show that there is not a huge difference among the seven electorates on desiring a minimum hourly wage. A similar progressive agreement can be found on civil rights, although more relevant differences emerge and with the clear exception of FDI voters who mostly oppose same-sex unions. Anyway, most party constituencies consider more salient the economy than civil rights.

Symmetrically, conservative positions definitely prevail as regards the refuge issue: all electorates, except two small party constituencies (+EUR and LEU), favour the right-wing goal of reducing the number of refugees. However, the level of support here is much higher than on consensual left-wing economic goals: more than 80% of M5S voters and 90% or more of FI, the League and FDI voters support the anti-immigration position, shared even by 56% of PD voters. Also, slightly less than half of voters of the left-wing party LEU want to reduce the number of refugees, as well as 42% of +EUR voters do. Moreover, there is much more variation in terms of salience: for centre-right voters (and League and FDI voters in particular), anti-immigrant goals are crucial; while

for M5S and PD voters, economic goals are more important. As far as access to citizenship for migrants' sons is concerned, preferences are conversely more polarized between progressive positions on the left (PD, LEU and +EUR), and conservative positions on the right (FI, FDI and League) and among M5S voters.

To sum up, the success of challenger parties is not directly related to EU issues. Indeed, M5S emphasised EU issues neither in its manifesto nor during the electoral campaign on Twitter, 'reading' correctly the issue opportunity configuration within its electorate, whose positions on issues were on average the closest to the median voter (thus, more pro-EU than anti-EU). Hence, campaigning on anti-EU positions could have been a very risky choice. The League, while showing a strong positioning in its manifesto, did not campaign on Twitter against the EU (as it did in the 2014 European Parliament Elections). This strategy allowed it to attract a divided (on the EU) electorate, while clearly occupying one camp of the positional issue. Both parties, indeed, had their best electoral opportunities on other issues: a mix of progressive issues on the economy and of conservative goals on immigration for the M5S, whereas the League was clearly the party of cultural demarcation on immigration. Although EU is not the explanation of the populist success, it might be one of the reasons behind the PD's failure. Focusing on pro-EU stances might be a strategic choice for the main party of the centre-left, with promising electoral opportunities according to our data. But this was not the case, as we have seen.

Concluding remarks

The European dimension was not prominent during the electoral campaign on Twitter. Overall, out of roughly 1,300 policy tweets we have collected and coded, less than 8 per cent concerned the EU, the Euro, or EU economic policy, and less than 5 per cent the EU *per se*. For the M5S and the centre-right coalition, the strategic decision to silence the EU dimension makes sense, given the internal clashes on the EU existing both in their electorate and in their political élites. In the centre-right there was a coexistence of clearly pro-European figures (such as the former EU commissioner and current

European Parliament President, Antonio Tajani, who was FI's candidate Prime Minister), with Eurosceptic figures, including some with an openly anti-EU stance (especially in the League). Ambiguity was also present within the M5S ranks. For the centre-left, a clearly pro-EU actor, the choice of silencing the European dimension is less easily understandable. It probably has to do with the perceived growing unpopularity of the EU in the eyes of Italian voters, which made the party believe that campaigning on this issue would not be electorally beneficial.

All in all, based on the evidence coming from our analysis, it is hard to support the interpretation whereby Euroscepticism was a main determinant of the election outcome. The (still minoritarian) negative views of the EU and the Euro may have been fundamental for some voters, and may have indirectly affected the preferences of other voters on issues such as immigration and the economy (or the other way around); however, they didn't play a direct role, neither in shaping the party's mobilization strategies, nor in structuring the voting choice of the electorate at large.

All of this appears particularly interesting if we consider the post-electoral developments resulting in the creation of a M5S-League government and in the relegation of both PD and FI to opposition. Hence, Eurosceptic parties are now in office on their own and Europhile parties are in opposition. The new government-opposition dynamics may be well interpreted as a sign of the emergence of the 'globalisation' (Kriesi *et al.* 2006) or 'transnational' cleavage (Hooghe & Marks 2018), setting, on the one side, Eurosceptic, anti-immigrant and anti-globalisation parties against, on the other side, Europhile, pro-multiculturalism and pro-globalisation parties. However, as we have seen from our data, and also from the very first acts of the new government vis-à-vis the European authorities (for example, reaching a compromise with the European commission over its 2019 budget), the M5S's and League's Euroscepticism has been so far in words not in facts.

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