2019 European Elections

The EU Party Democracy and the Challenge of National Populism

Edited by

Radu Carp
Cristina Matiuța

BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

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Case Studies

Europe Up for Grabs: an Italian Perspective

Gianluca Piccolino, Leonardo Puleo and Sorina Soare

In line with previous legislative elections, the Italian general election of 2018 confirmed a tri-polar pattern of party competition, although with a radical shift in the balance of the main competitors (Chiaramonte and De Sio, 2014; Emanuele, 2018). Two populist parties – the Five Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle, M5S) and the League (Lega) – made significant electoral inroads and eventually formed a coalition government. For the first time in the history of the so-called Italian Second Republic, the mainstream competitors, the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD) and Forza Italia, were both out of government (Emanuele, 2018).

Placed in a more general perspective, the post-2013 changes in Italian politics fit within a new era in the political development of Europe (Hooghe and Marks, 2018). The literature has noted that the crises that hit Europe after 2008 fed critical reactions against incumbent governments, while at the same time offering wide opportunities for protest parties to successfully mobilize voters (Hérnandez and Kriesi, 2016; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Bosco and Verney, 2016; Taggart and Pirro, 2018). With a nativist flavor, these parties launched a war of words against Brussels across Europe, targeting the European Union for being an elitist project, incapable of providing solutions compatible with the national interests of Member States (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Meunier and Vachudova, 2018; Caiani and Guerra, 2017). Similar reactions can be chronicled in Italy. The positive feelings towards the EU that had characterized the Italian political arena since the 1950s progressively weakened and statements voicing more or less radical, contingent or even outright opposition to both political and economic integration multiplied. The EU became a controversial political issue. On various occasions, representatives of the M5S-League government formulated critical stances towards Brussels that overtly pitched voters against the EU institutions. Contingent opposition to specific EU policies (e.g. the Fiscal Compact, the management of migration flows in the Mediterranean Sea) occasionally evolved into overt questioning of the compatibility of the national interest with the trajectory of the EU.

Unsurprisingly, the outcome of the 2019 European Parliament elections was perceived as important not only for the dynamics of Italian party politics and the survival of the governing coalition, but also for Italy's position within the

EU (Della Sala, 2019). The debates during the electoral campaign focused not only on critical aspects in the EU portfolio of policies (e.g. the management of migrants and asylum seekers), but also on the future of cooperation and integration at the European level (Landini and Paparo, 2019; Calossi et al., 2019). Within this context, this chapter aims to investigate how the EU was framed during the 2019 European Parliament elections campaign. The analysis draws on the assumption that investigating the ways Italian political actors framed the EU enables us to understand how different political actors perceive the dimensions of the project of European political and economic integration, how they constructed the argument, and to identify the causes and foresee the consequences with regard to the positions they take on the topic. For this purpose, we focused on communication on social media. The existing literature has revealed the increased opportunities for parties a to mobilize supporters, influence public agenda and win elections with low operating costs using social media (Boulianne, 2019; Lilleker et al., 2017; Vaccari, 2017; Jungherr, 2016; Gibson and McAllister, 2015). For politicians, social media provides a particularly useful tool to engage in interactive, unmediated communication with a strong personal flavor.

In our analysis, we use data collected on Twitter, including the accounts of both leaders and parties that obtained at least 1% of the vote. Our sample gathers eight parties: the M5S, the League, the Democratic Party, Forza Italia, the Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI), More Europe (+ Europa-Italia in Comune), the Left (La Sinistra) and Green Europe (Europa Verde). On the one side, the sample gathers mainstream parties that mobilize their electoral support alongside traditional issue dimensions and policy objectives (i.e. the center-left PD and + Europe). Forza Italia is a peculiar case. Often said to be among the different manifestations of populism in Italy (Tarchi, 2008), the party regularly exhibited a mainstream positional location on the left-right dimension, as illustrated by the most recent pro-European Union stances of its founding leader, Silvio Berlusconi (2019). On the other side, there are those parties that openly "defy existing patterns of party competition by rejecting the traditional economic dimension of politics and mobilizing on new issues or adopting more extreme positions on existing issues" (Hobolt and Tilley, 2016: 4). This is the case for the FdI, the Left and Green Europe. One caveat has to be mentioned with regard to both the M5S and the League. The two political actors verbally challenged the mainstream political consensus and instead promoted topics downplayed by mainstream parties (i.e. immigration, disintermediation in politics, etc.). However, both accepted the responsibilities of government in 2018, but only partially fine-tuned their "challenger" positions.

From April 26 to May 25 2019, we collected 2,747 original tweets from party leaders and party accounts, a corpus that was analyzed through a content analysis of each tweet using manual coding.[1] This relatively short time frame (30 days prior to the election day) is fairly typical in the literature, since most studies focus only on specific election campaigns within a single state (Hansen and Kosiara-Pedersen, 2014; Klinger, 2013; Lilleker and Vedel, 2013; Gibson and McAllister, 2011). The focus on Twitter is justified by the widespread agreement in the literature that Twitter is one of the most prominent tools for politicians to engage in unmediated and low-cost communication with a broad group of potential voters (Jacobs and Spierings, 2019, 2016; Boulianne, 2019). Twitter bypasses the potential biases inherent in traditional media and challenger parties can use it as their own press agency (Jacobs and Spierings, 2016). Although Twitter is only used only by 32% of Internet users in Italy (Global Report Digital, 2019), Italian politicians are prolific users of Twitter (Socialbakers.com, 2019). Unsurprisingly, during the 2019 campaign for the EP, there were few large rallies, while in the virtual world, party campaigning was very active.

Based on the above, this chapter has a twofold aim. From an empirical perspective, it addresses an information gap with regard to the most recent developments in the debates surrounding the EU project in Italy. While there is an increased agreement that the EU has become one of the most controversial political issues in Italian politics, we know little about the way parties discursively represent the project of European integration. In this perspective, this chapter provides a more nuanced understanding of the positions of Italian political parties on this issue in the context of the 2019 EP elections. From a theoretical perspective, it contributes to the research on party competition in EP elections and, more specifically, to understanding the extent to which, in the aftermath of the Great Recession and the migration crisis, EP elections continue to mirror prevalent national political concerns or, on the contrary, reflect a new centrality of European matters.

In what follows, we discuss the features of EP elections in relation to the spread of Euroscepticism. In the next section, we provide contextual information and discuss the most recent developments. The following sections present the results of the empirical analysis based on the 2,747 original tweets.

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1 The tweets have been collected in August 2019 using the tool "web scraper" for the 30-day period before the election day with the Twitter's public advanced search function. The sample offers a snapshot of the actual magnitude of tweets' flows. Twitter search function may indeed not provide the full number of tweets, due to limitations imposed by Twitter, underestimating the number of tweets of the most active accounts. See Search Tweets at https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/tweets/search/api-reference/get-search-tweets (accessed 1st June, 2020).

The final section summarizes the main results of the research and discusses its theoretical relevance for the broader literature.

1   Theoretical Background

For more than three decades, Second Order Election theory ("SOE"; Reif and Schmitt, 1980) assumed that, when compared to national elections, EP elections were less salient. At the heart of the original 1980 thesis and subsequent analyses was the assumption that European Parliament elections are in the shadow of national party politics: party campaigns are half-hearted and news media coverage is limited. Parties compete mainly on national issues, and non-habitual voters are less likely to turn out to vote (Franklin and Hobolt, 2011). In terms of electoral outcomes, such elections are characterized by low turnout; fringe parties perform better than in elections at the national level, and parties in government tend to lose votes. Of these three characteristics, the advantage of parties that challenge the mainstream partisan consensus in European elections provides a strong theoretical justification for an inquiry into the way in which a heterogeneous sample of Italian parties' highlight issues such as European integration in order to foster direct linkages through Twitter with their voters. Note also that recent years have seen a veritable explosion in the negative framing of the EU and an increased electoral support for parties expressing Euroscepticism was widely predicted in view of the 2019 EP elections (Taggart, 2019). In parallel, the literature has acknowledged that social media has lowered the threshold for non-mainstream parties to enter the arenas of communication, bypassing traditional media and professional journalists, and spreading unmediated messages in a raw language among the people (Engesser et al., 2017). Given this, our study is located at the intersection of research on EP elections, Euroscepticism and social-media communication. Our argument is that parties that do not belong to traditional politics intuitively identify EP elections as an opportunity to reject the mainstream consensus on the integration project. Whereas Italian politics has traditionally been pro-European, in the aftermath of the economic crisis, mainstream center-left and center-right parties have converged on a policy agenda of austerity and reforms, and various parties have voiced a rejection of austerity and have become critical of the EU's influence in shaping national policies. Considering these recent evolutions, how did certain Italian political parties use Twitter to frame the European Union and provide justifications for their positions on this matter?

Previous work on EP elections has demonstrated that Reif and Schmitt's thesis of the SOE (1980) remains valid (Hix and Marsh, 2007; De Sio et al., 2019).

Recent research has fine-tuned some of the features of the SEO thesis, demonstrating the increased importance of supranational elements in EP elections (Bellucci et al., 2010; Garzia et al., 2017). As of August 2019, party campaign data on the 2019 EP elections were still being processed; the limited research released on the topic has pointed only to a partial confirmation of traditional SEO theory. The exceptionally high voter turnout figures were associated with both greater interest among the electorate in these elections and with the growing importance of European issues – though with differences across the MSs (De Sio et al., 2019; Bolin et al. 2019). However, in the Italian case, the turnout decreased from 58.7% at the 2014 EP elections to 56.1% in 2019 (Landini and Paparo, 2019).

Within the specific context of the 2019 EP elections, pre-electoral surveys predicted a major rise in support for parties that expressed critical stances with regard to European political and economic integration (Taggart, 2019). The diffusion, diversification and electoral relevance of negative reactions to the European project are not new. Critical assessments have been a component of both national and European politics since the origins of the European project (Lacroix and Coman, 2007). However, over the last decade, Euroscepticism has been on the rise across the European Union (Emanuele et al., 2016; Pirro and van Kessel, 2018) and a rich literature has developed that conceptualizes and measures the many faces of these attitudes of opposition towards European integration. The most influential conceptualization in the field remains that developed by Taggart (1998) and successively fine-tuned by Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008). Their conceptualization distinguishes between soft and hard Euroscepticism: the latter implying an outright rejection of the entire project of European political and economic integration, while the former focuses on more contingent opposition to EU policy areas.

Beyond the challenge of a universally-agreed definition of Euroscepticism with a consequent shared operationalization, the literature has dedicated intense effort to identifying and assessing the drivers of Euroscepticism. Ongoing debates focus mainly on the importance of ideology vs. strategy. On the one side, scholars point to the increased importance of the cultural dimension in the two-dimensional political space, generating a division between those that militate for further integration and those that favor positions of demarcation and nationalism (Kriesi et al., 2008). On this ground, the literature assumes that parties that in the "new politics dimension" adopt a Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist perspective tend to be more Eurosceptic than parties on the Green-Alternative-Libertarian side (Marks et al., 2006; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019). The promoters of Euroscepticism express an explicit preference for a nationally tailored governance structure of political, economic and social issues.

On the other side, the so-called "Sussex School" privileges party strategic calculations filtered by the dynamics of the national competition and position in the party system (Taggart, 1998; Sitter, 2001; Taggart and Sczerbiak, 2008). Accordingly, critical stances with regard to the EU are mainly observed among protest-based and single-issue parties which tend to be peripheral to the party system (Taggart, 1998; Katz, 2008). If these parties are involved in government, they are expected to (radically) modify their Eurosceptic stances (Sitter, 2001). However, if we take into account the increased participation of challenger parties in government across Europe, it makes sense to assume that the relation between Euroscepticism and a party's position within the system depends on the context of reference and needs to be empirically fine-tuned. Intuitively, this is the case in Italy where two relevant challengers, propelled into government, have not only openly rejected the traditional economic dimension of politics, but also have mobilized on EU matters, with more extreme positions than traditional Europhilia.

In line with the focus of this research on how parties frame the EU on Twitter, it is important to acknowledge that various studies have demonstrated that campaigning on social media platforms (overwhelmingly Twitter and, less often, Facebook) has become a core feature of contemporary party politics, allowing for cheap, unmediated and easy to use communication (Vaccari, 2017). Initially a niche strategy used by peripheral and marginal players to overcome the high costs of exposure in the traditional mass-media, online platforms have been increasingly used by both old and new parties, mainstream and challengers, in order to promote their agendas, messages and candidates (Gibson and McAllister, 2015; Bartlett et al., 2011). Recent studies have analyzed how and why the populist family of parties has made use of social networks (Jacobs and Sperings, 2019; Stier et al., 2018; Engesser et al., 2017; Van Kessel and Castelein, 2016; Bartlett et al., 2011). In line with the equalization/normalization debate (Gibson and McAllister, 2015), this bourgeoning literature has emphasized the advantages that these online platforms guarantee for the populist family, although with numerous caveats (Jacobs and Sperings, 2016). According to this literature, Facebook and Twitter messages privilege direct communication with the "people" to which populist parties regularly refer. These platforms enable populist representatives to claim that they are closing the gap between politicians and the electorate and to bypass the traditional media they consider to be biased in favor of the elites. Moreover, these platforms favor the use of a casual, unguarded and non-standard language, an additional opportunity for populist parties to assert their identity as the "common people", and implicitly underscore their differences with the mainstream élites.

Last but not least, the virality of this online communication has been connected with the increased visibility of populist messages in public debates.

Taken together, the three strands of literature briefly summarized above allow us to develop three main expectations. We start from the assumption that European elections are internal polls of parties' popularity among national voters within a campaign focused prevalently on national aspects. However, considering the composition of the governing coalition at the time of the EP elections and the pervasiveness of the critical stances towards Brussels, we expect these elections to actually be about Europe. This expectation is further endorsed by the assumption that parties on the TAN-side tend to be more Eurosceptic (e.g. the League, the FdI). However, in line with the constraints arising from the national competition (e.g. the position of the parties in in the party system or the dynamics of partisan competition), we expect Europe to be a line of demarcation between the (prevalently Eurosceptic) government parties and the (prevalently Europhile) opposition parties, excluding FdI. We expect a similar division on the use of populist rhetoric which in the Italian case has been prevalently linked to Eurosceptical actors. All this in a framework in which the SOE theory, apart for the turnout, does little to explain the election results. As we shall see, rather than a loss for the ruling parties and a gain for the opposition parties, there was instead a rebalancing of power within the governmental coalition, while niche parties made little or no gains compared with the previous general election.

2   2019 European Election: Just the Umpteenth Earthquake?

The 2019 European Election confirmed the intrinsic instability of the Italian party system. The elections occurred just 359 days after the formation of Conte's cabinet, a political executive supported by the M5S and the League, signaling the first time in the history of Italy that a political majority was composed solely of populist forces (Piccolino et al., 2018; D'Alimonte, 2019). One year and eighty-three days since the general election in February 2018, the Italian political landscape looked to have flipped over again, with the success of the League and an astonishing debacle for the M5S.

Figure 8.1 shows the electoral results in the last three European elections in Italy, taking into account only the parties that obtained at least 1% of the vote. These data clearly illustrate the upheavals that the Italian political system has undergone in recent years. The electoral leap of the League was particularly spectacular: from 6% in 2014 to 34% in 2019. In between, the League get 17.4%
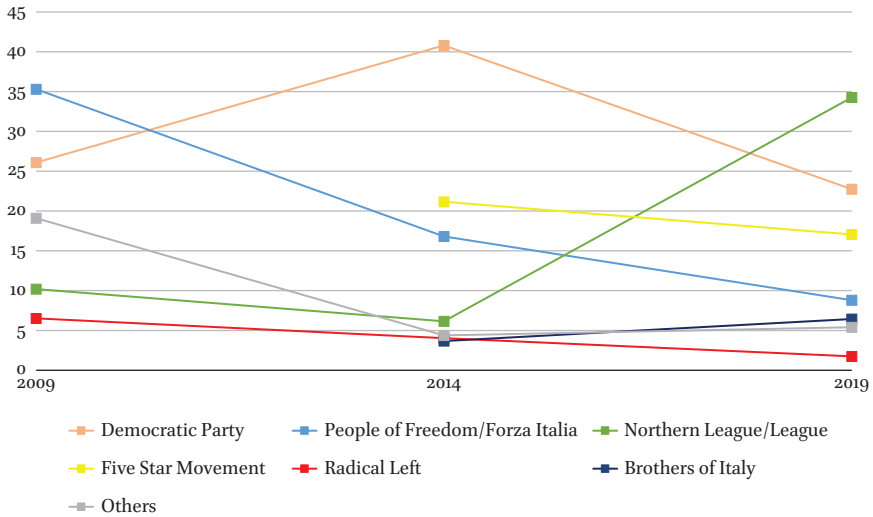
of the vote in the 2018 general elections. Conversely, the decline of the PD was also impressive, falling from over 40% in 2014 to less than half that in 2019. The party, led by Nicola Zingaretti since a few months before the election, has however limited the damage compared to the general elections of one year ago, when the PD obtained just 18.7% of the vote. A decrease can also be registered for the M5S, which received 17.1% of the votes on this occasion. However, this figure does not give the measure of the party's defeat, comparing the results of this year with those of the most recent legislative election that led it to the government. One year ago, in fact, the M5S had established itself as the largest party in the country, collecting 32.7% of the votes. Finally, we can note the crisis of Berlusconi's party, now reduced to a marginal role within the political system, the growth of another radical right-wing populist party – Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy – and the deep crisis of the Radical Left, once one of the strongest on the continent.

Ultimately, only one year and eighty-three days since the general election, the Italian political landscape looks flipped over again. These elections led to a clear shift to the right, with the center-right – League, Forza Italia and Brothers of Italy – gaining very close to 50% of the vote. The M5S was the primarily casualty of this advance, with an astonishing debacle compared to one year ago, while the center-left area is still facing a strong identity crisis.

In this context, it is not surprising that one of the main topoi of the electoral campaign revolved around the competitive relationship of the two eccentric coalition partners. The so-called government of change (Pedrazzani, 2018) immediately displayed mounting tension between the two members of the governing coalition. In this respect, we can detach three policy areas marked by high degrees of conflict:

i)   the construction of the high-speed Turin-Lyon railway (TAV),
ii) the management of migrant rescues and arrivals and
iii) the political posture *vis-à-vis* the European Commission during the budget approval. In all three areas, the governmental partners held different positions that animated their respective electoral campaigns.

The League conducted a widespread territorial campaign;[2] its leader, Matteo Salvini, Deputy Premier and Minister of the Interior, toured throughout the country giving speeches in countless towns. The Lega's campaign was characterized by the construction of the "European Alliance of People and Nations" (EAPN), gathering the vast majority of European Populist Radical Right Parties.[3] Salvini played the card of being the leader of the trans-national coalition and framed the league as the only defender of the Judeo-Christian roots of Europe. This cultural frame accompanied the main themes of the campaign – migration and law and order issues – and escalated in Milan on the 18th of May, when Salvini closed his speech entrusting the destiny of Europe to its six patron saints and kissing the rosary (Corriere, 2019a).

The M5S's electoral campaign was mainly characterized by its effort to show its distinctiveness from the League. At the beginning of the campaign, the M5S leader, Luigi Di Maio, tried to imitate its powerful ally in constructing a block of allied parties.[4] One of the first international meetings took place in Paris with an extreme faction of the gilet jaunes (IlSole24ore, 2019). The meeting provoked international scorn and was criticized by the M5S's partner in government. Remarkably, after the meeting, the M5S campaign focused on the need to reassert its loyalty to the EU, supporting stronger welfare provision for European Citizens and the increase of EP's power (Landini and Paparo, 2019).

The PD conducted its electoral campaign under the new leadership of Nicola Zingaretti, the president of the Lazio region, who had won the party

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2   The EP election has been celebrated jointly with local election.
3   At the kick-off event, the League was joined by representatives of Alternative for Germany, the Finns Party and the Danish People's Party.
4   The M5S created an alliance with the Polish party KUKIZ'15, the Greek AKKEL, the Finnish Liike Nyt and the Croatian Zivi Zid.

primaries on the 3rd of March 2019 (Corriere, 2019b). Zingaretti attempted to re-unify the party, conceding abundant political space to Carlo Calenda, a former minister and the leader of the centrist-liberal faction within the party. Calenda was the top list candidate in the north-eastern district, and the symbol of its movement, "We are Europeans" was presented in the ballot paper together with that of PD, underlining the Europhile nature of the party.

Silvio Berlusconi's party, Forza Italia (FI), suffered an internal division of its elites. The main friction lay in its future relationship with the Lega. One faction, supported by the president of the Liguria region, Giovanni Toti, proposed to move closer to the League's position. The other, led by Mara Carfagna and supported by Berlusconi himself, was more oriented towards a solid anchorage in the European People Party family. In part due to these internal clashes, the FI campaign was entirely dedicated to the re-appearance in the political arena of Silvio Berlusconi.[5]

In the center-right camp, Giorgia Meloni campaigned with her party, Brothers of Italy, on a political platform based on the issue of migration and a pronounced Euroscepticism. The area of the radical left witnessed the coalition: The Left, which combined the Italian Left and Communist Refoundation and which belonged to the European Left. Finally, the most Europhile lists in the election were Green Europe, members of the Greens, and +Europe affiliated with ALDE.

Looking at the degree of party system electoral volatility (Chiaramonte and Emanuele, 2019; Emanuele et al., 2018), the 2019 EP election confirmed the high level of fluidity of the Italian context (37.25%, see Figure 8.2). In the history of Italian elections only the critical elections of 1994 (both general and European) showed a higher degree of volatility. However, the process then was triggered by the collapse of the entire party system in the wake of the "Tangentopoli" scandals and the rise of the then newcomer party Forza Italia (Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2014). In this respect, the entire reshuffling of the party system seems to fit with a prolonged phase of de-alignment marked by a series of critical election more than it adheres to the SOE hypotheses.

The 54.5% turnout in these European Elections represents a new record low for Italy in this type of election. However, this recent trend is not new or confined to European elections. Figure 8.3 shows that, in the last forty years, the Italian turnout in the General and European elections has experienced an

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5   In August 2013, Silvio Berlusconi has been convicted for tax fraud. The sentence prescribed 4 years of prison – then commuted to 1 year of social service – and the exclusion from public offices. On May 2018 the Court of Milan established the Berlusconi's full penal rehabilitation.
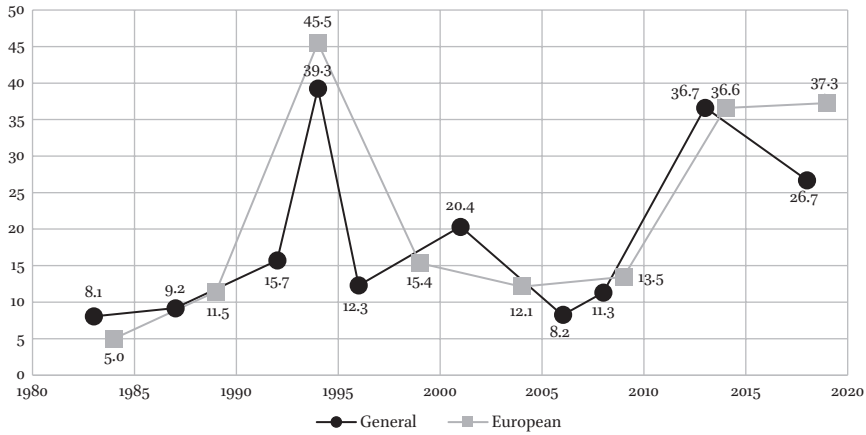
FIGURE 8.2 Electoral volatility at the European and general elections in the same period
SOURCE: FOR GENERAL ELECTIONS EMANUELE (2015); FOR EP ELECTIONS
EMANUELE ET AL. (2019)
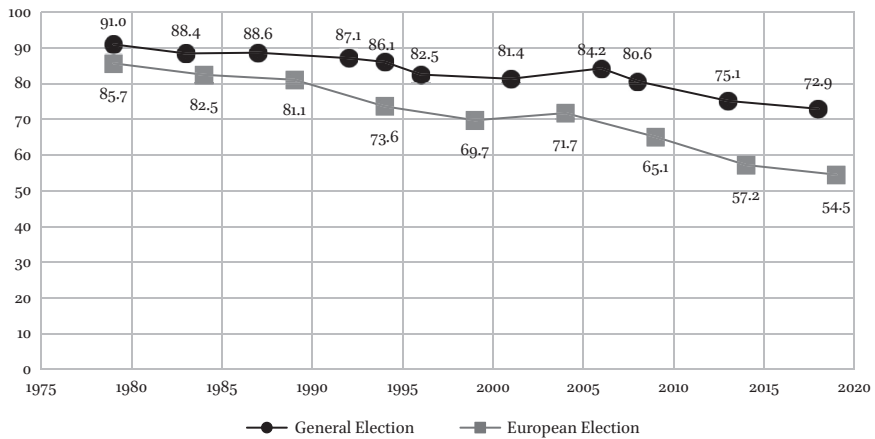
FIGURE 8.3 Turnout at the European and general elections in the same period
SOURCE: MINISTRY OF INTERIOR

almost linear negative trend, with the exception – for both competitions – of a slight growth during the mid-2000s. In any case, it is interesting to note that the trend underwent a clear acceleration in the years after 2010. At the EU level, except for 2019's remarkable turnout, the level of participation has been low, although with different paths and intensities across individual or clusters of Member States (De Sio et al., 2019).

FIGURE 8.4   Percentage of vote share of the governing coalition and main party at European
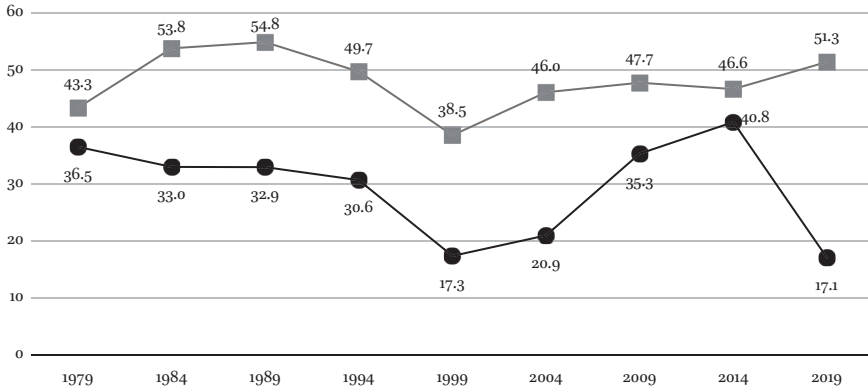   election
             SOURCE: ITALIAN GOVERNMENT AND MINISTRY OF INTERIOR

Looking at the dynamics between the turnout in European Elections and in
General Elections, there is a sign of the growing Euroscepticism of the Italians
towards Europe. If in the late 1970s and for almost all the 1980s the ratio be-
tween the turnout in European Elections and that in General Elections was
very close to parity, forty years later the situation has drastically changed. In
fact, European turnout is now around 75% of General Election turnout, show-
ing how the decline in turnout over time has been much more pronounced for
European Elections than for national ones. In this respect, Italian EP elections
appear to fit with the SOE hypotheses.

    Turning to the parties, the data shown in the following two figures show
how these European Elections were a historic earthquake for the governing
coalition. In Figure 8.4 we can see that, on the one hand, the governing coali-
tion obtained more than 50% of the vote – the first time that this has hap-
pened since 1994. On the other hand, never in the history of Italy the main
party in government had achieved such a modest result at the European Elec-
tions. The 17.1% get by the M5S in 2019 is, in fact, lower than the previous record
low, the 17.4% obtained by the Democrats of the Left in 1999, a party that had
less weight within the then governing coalition than the M5S does today. Note
also, and this is evidence of the instability of the Italian political system in the
last decade, that five years ago it had been registered the opposite record:
the 40.8% obtained by the PD led then by Matteo Renzi represents not only the
best result obtained by a government party in the European elections in Italy,
but the best result obtained by any Italian party in this type of election.

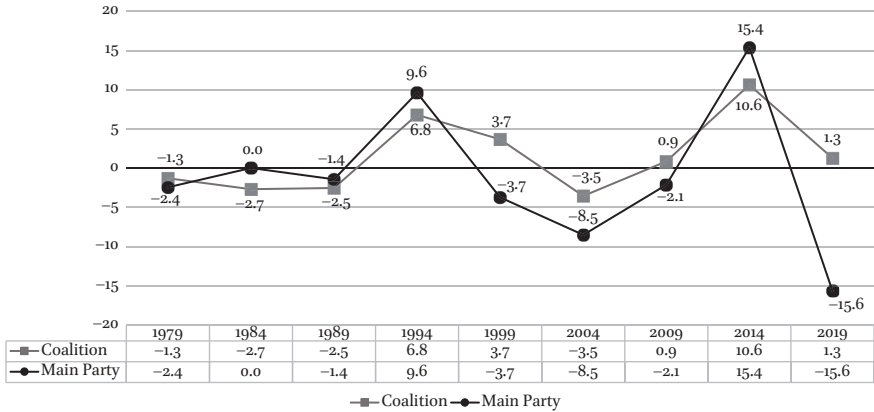|	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019
Coalition	−1.3	−2.7	−2.5	6.8	3.7	−3.5	0.9	10.6	1.3
Main Party	−2.4	0.0	−1.4	9.6	−3.7	−8.5	−2.1	15.4	−15.6

FIGURE 8.5   Difference vote share government coalition and main party between European and general election (%)
SOURCE: ITALIAN GOVERNMENT AND MINISTRY OF INTERIOR

The data shown in Figure 8.5 compare the result obtained at the European Elections by governing coalitions and the main ruling party with that of the general election from which they obtained the parliamentary majority. These data give an even sharper measure of the collapse of Di Maio's party. Compared to the general election of 2018, the government coalition recorded a slight gain – 1.3%. However, this was solely due to the strong advance of the party led by Matteo Salvini. In fact, the decline recorded by the M5S – down 15.6% in just one year – represents the largest setback ever for a ruling party at the European Elections compared to the previous general election, and is much more significant than the previous negative record (an 8.5% decline registered by Forza Italia between the 2001 General and 2004 European elections). In other words, if electoral support for the government remained stable compared to the previous year, the balance of power between the two governing parties changed dramatically. The M5S has clearly been traumatized by its first experience in national government, while the visibility and popularity of an experienced politician like Salvini and a party already used to occupy important positions in national government allowed the League to achieve a historic result.

The SOE model hypothesizes poor performance by governmental actors, balanced by the success of fringe actors. In this respect, the most recent European Elections in Italy revealed a different function. In a context of perennial dealignment – and the absence of a recognizable pattern of realignment – EP elections seem to play a plebiscitary role, potentially rewarding the government – as in 2014 – or part of it, as occurred in 2019.

3   **The Campaign on Twitter: Resonance, Issues and Populism**

The data shown in Table 8.1 show how Italian parties on Twitter have followed very different strategies. The data of the party that won the elections are impressive. The League has clearly invested in the Twitter arena more than any other party, to the extent that the 1,113 tweets of Salvini's party constitute a little more than 40% of all the tweets collected in this period by our analysis. Suffice it to say that the second party for number of tweets, Brothers of Italy, registered "only" 437 tweets, which is fewer than half of those of the League. Moreover, the League's communication on Twitter showed marked personalization. The leader's tweets – 667, i.e. slightly less than a tweet for every single hour of the electoral campaign – exceeded those of his party's account. Only two other parties show a pre-eminence of the leader over the party, Forza

TABLE 8.1   Tweets by party and account

	Account	Number of Tweets	Total
League	Leader	667	1113
	Party	466	
Democratic Party	Leader	48	148
	Party	100	
Five Star Movement	Leader	141	156
	Party	14	
Forza Italia	Leader	253	330
	Party	77	
Brothers of Italy	Leader	121	437
	Party	316	
+Europe	Leader	47	105
	Party	48	
The Left	Leader	89	139
	Party	50	
Green Europe	Leader	100	314
	Party	214	
Total			2747

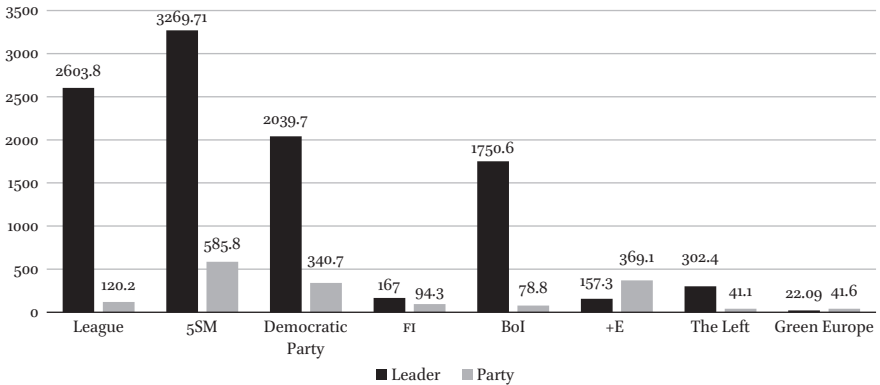SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION; INFORMATION GATHERED FROM TWITTER

FIGURE 8.6   Average interactions per tweet according to party and account
            SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION

Italia, another hyper-personalized party, and the radical left-wing coalition. The data of the League's main two competitors, namely the M5S and the PD, which stopped at around 150 tweets in total, are emblematic of the difference between them and the League.

These first data become even more interesting if we examine Figure 8.6, which shows the average reactions for each individual tweet, obtained by adding up the number of "comments", "replies" and "favorites" for each tweet. On the one hand, the performance of the League as a party is not particularly exceptional. The account of Salvini's party in fact received an average of 120 interactions per tweet, a figure that sees it only in fourth among the parties, where the M5S, the PD and + Europe perform better. However, the real communicative power lies in the accounts of the party leaders, who – apart from the two minor parties, + Europe and Green Europe – get much higher interactions than their respective parties.

From these data, the power of Salvini's propaganda on Twitter emerges resoundingly. Salvini's account is not only the account that produced the most tweets, but also the second that produced the most reactions, with an average of 2,600. Salvini's account generated fewer average interactions only compared to that of Di Maio, which, however, produced a minimal number of tweets. The leaders of the other parties are some way behind, and it is interesting to note that weak performance on Twitter of Silvio Berlusconi, once considered a major actor of mass communication, who receives a smaller number of interactions than a marginal leader such as that of the Left.
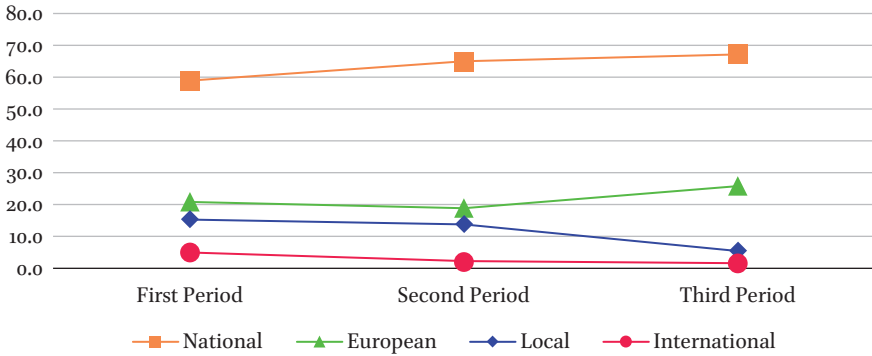
The 2019 EP election occurred at the same time as local elections.[6] Figure 8.7
shows the arena (national, local, European and international) to which both
parties and leaders addressed their tweets. As local elections are the ideal type
of SOE, European elections receive more attention from parties and leaders in
all the phases of the electoral campaign. However, it should be noted that –
despite a sizable growth in the last period of the campaign (15–26 May) – the
number of tweets devoted to the European arena remains considerably lower
than those addressed to the national one. This portrait shows the ancillary na-
ture of EU themes, compared with national issues, in the Italian political sys-
tem, a finding consistent with the analysis of other mass media, such as
newspapers and TV, in the same electoral campaign (University of Siena et al.,
2019).

    The adherence to an SOE model rests on the under-politicization of EU is-
sues compared with national ones. However, in the 2019 EP elections, as we can
see in Figure 8.8, there was a marked politicization of EU issues. The figure
shows both Eurosceptic and Europhile postures as percentages of the total
number of tweets sent by a political party (combining party and leader).

    Figure 8.8 shows how FdI performs as the most Eurosceptic actor in the sys-
tem, while, at the opposite pole, +Europe is the most Europhile actor. What

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6   Local elections took place in 34,843 cities and town, including 238 cities with more than
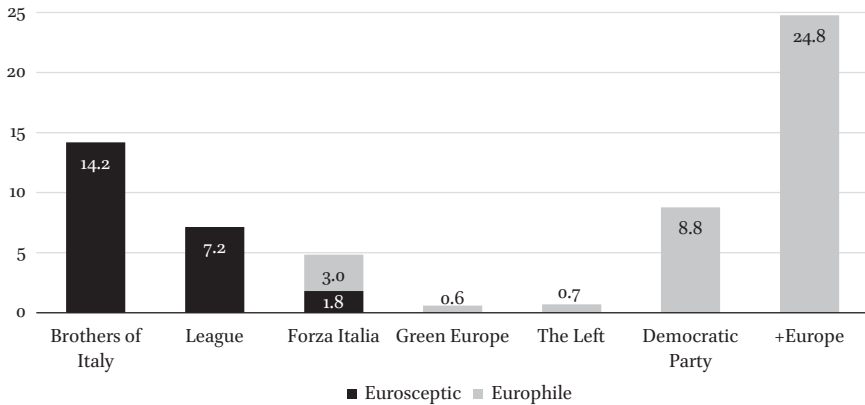   15,000 inhabitants.

FIGURE 8.8   EU salience and its components
Note: The N for each party is: BoI=437; L=1133; FI=330; GE=314; Left=139; DP=148; +E=105.
SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION

emerges in the figure is that the EU dimension can be identified as a dimension of political competition partially independent from the general left-right competition (Hooghe and Marks, 2019). Indeed, even if the Eurosceptic bloc is represented by the rightist actors of the party system, the same does not occur for pro-Europeans, where the Europhiles are represented by +Europe, a liberal party on both the economy and socio-cultural values. Thus, in the 2019, the distribution of the Eurosceptic actors is not polarized to the extremes of the party system (Hooghe; Marks and Wilson, 2002), but is spread among all the actors, independently of their ideological stance. Finally – as the figure shows – two parties do not politicize the European issues. In the case of The Left, this shows their willingness to portray themselves as a radical actor but unwillingness to completely break with the European Union like other European radical left parties.

   The lack of reference to the EU on the part of the M5S is significant and, at least apparently, surprising. If, on the one hand, this party has in the past had an ambiguous position on the EU and the Euro, to such an extent that in the previous European Parliament the 5SM was part of the same parliamentary group as UKIP and its leaders had previously dreamed of a referendum on the Euro, on the other hand, the party has never been ready to take its positions to the extreme once in government. Moreover, in the months before the electoral campaign, Di Maio's party – which was clearly declining in the polls – clearly

sought to distance itself from its cumbersome coalition partner: a tactic that could have led the party to moderate its positions on Europe by reaction, as also demonstrated by the confidence given by the party's MEPs to the von der Leyen Commission.

Figure 8.9 offers displays evidence regarding the main issues politicized during the electoral campaign. Considering the totality of our corpus, the most emphasized issues are: Economy (27.2%), Law and Order (19.7%) and Immigration (19.1%). This issue-profile is shared by the League, PD and FdI; however, the relative percentage of each issue differs a great deal. The League and FdI dedicate 65% and 51.3% respectively to Immigration and Law Order, while Economy is most politicized issue by the PD (42.2%). Economic issues are most emphasized by FI (74%) and the remaining political actors, excluding Green Europe, which dedicated 61.8% of their tweets to the Environment.

An analysis of the populist content of the tweets is unavoidable in the only Western European country ruled by populist forces at the time of the elections – which, moreover, has been labelled a "populist paradise" (Zanatta, 2002). Figure 8.10 shows the populist claims in parties' tweets, combining the people-centrist and the anti-elite features of their political communication. Unsurprisingly, FdI, M5S and the League are the most populist parties in the Italian party system. However, it is remarkable to note how the core of M5S's populism rests in its anti-elite posture, while the FdI and the League framed theirs on the basis of their people-centrism.

Finally, interesting insights can be found in the analysis of how these tweets are used, i.e. the policy areas associated with tweets with populist content. As we can see from Figure 8.11, the distribution of these tweets is very different from the general distribution. A large chunk of the tweets with populist content are connected to immigration issues, which exceed 30% – compared with a general percentage of less than 20%. More isolated, among the populist tweets, are tweets on economic issues, which are underrepresented, and those on the law and order, which are in line with the general percentage.

In conclusion, these data tell us that the winner of the elections and that of the electoral campaign on Twitter are the same. The League, and above all Salvini, were able to produce a much better Twitter campaign than any other competitor, in terms of both quantity and quality. Salvini's campaign had as its cardinal points the two areas on which he operated most as a minister: immigration and law and order. He was therefore able to gather a quantity of interactions from the general audience wider than any other actor in the electoral campaign.
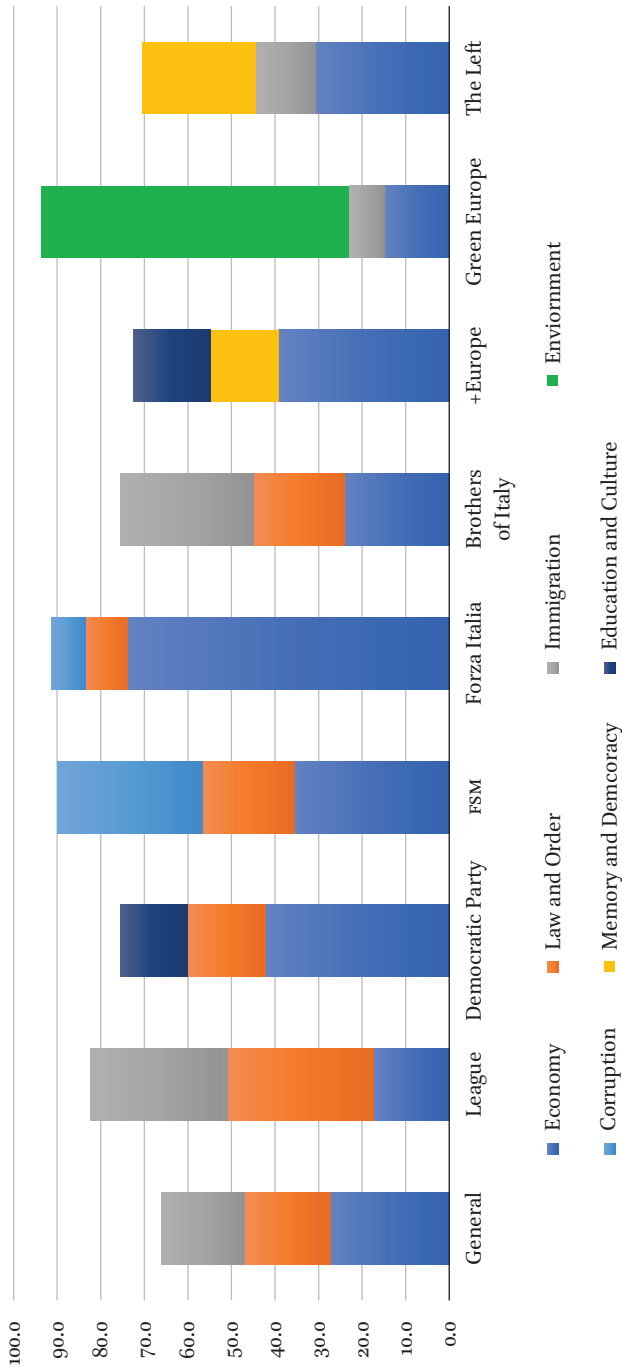
FIGURE 8.9 Three most salient issues by political parties (%)

Notes: The General N=1370. The N for each party is: L=457; DP=90; FSM=90; FI=115; BoI=232; +E=51; GE=249; LE=88.

SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION
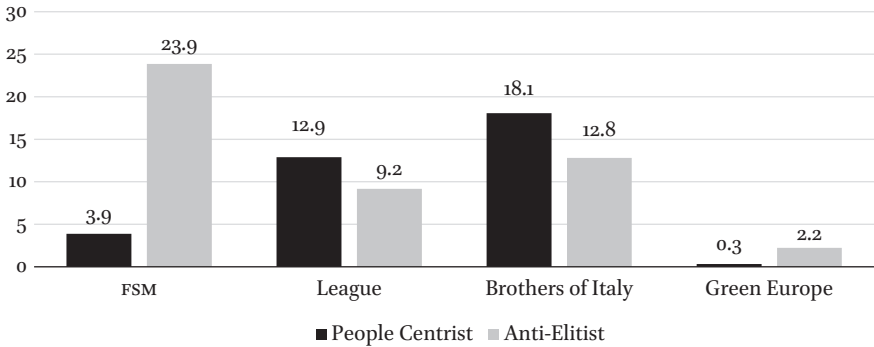
FIGURE 8.10 Populist tweets (%)
            Note: The N for each party is: FSM=155; L=1133; BoI=437; GE=314.
            SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION
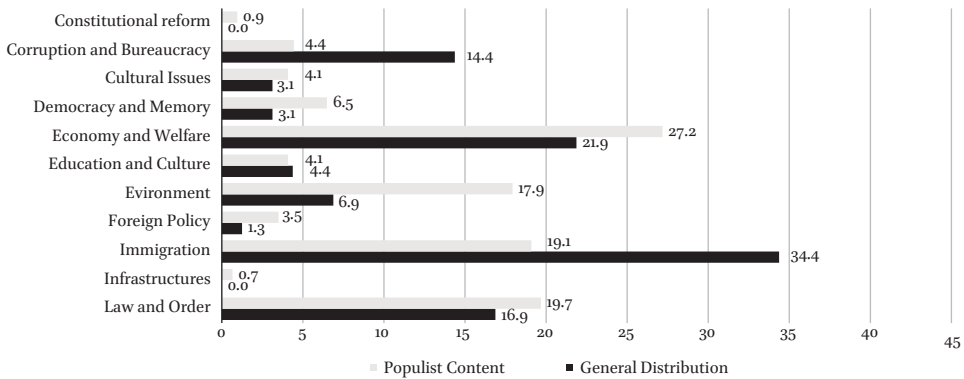

FIGURE 8.11 Policy areas for populist content (%)
            Notes: Percentages exceed 100% since more than one policy area could be coded per each
            tweet. General Distribution N=1372; Populist Content N=160.
            SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION

4   Conclusions

This chapter aimed to investigate how eight Italian political actors framed the
EU in the context of the most recent EP elections. For this purpose, we col-
lected 2,747 original tweets from party leaders and party accounts, and ana-
lyzed them using a content analysis. From an empirical perspective, the analy-
sis confirms that critical voices towards the European project have become an
integral part of Italian politics. It also shows that, despite a diffused criticism,
political parties and party leaders prioritize the national dimension of politics
in their communication strategy. Last but not least, the empirical analysis

identifies the hardcore of the communication strategy within the accounts of the party leaders. From this point of view, our data confirms the suitability of this online and disintermediated communication for party leaders. As identified in the literature, Twitter provides a low-cost tool with which to engage in unmediated communication with a broad group, as illustrated by the virality of Salvini's tweets.

From a theoretical perspective, the analysis has demonstrated the limits of SOE theory with regard to the Italian context. More specifically, the contextual analysis demonstrates that the Italian EP elections seem to perform a plebiscitary role. As in 2014, parties in government successfully mobilize voters in favor of domestically-tailored political, economic and socio-cultural project. As such, they used the electoral endorsement in the EP elections to legitimize their position with regard to the dynamics of the domestic competition. Unsurprisingly, Europe remains peripheral in the debate, overshadowed by national issues. However, the EU is confirmed as a dimension of political competition independent from the general left and right dimensions. Against reasonable expectations, our data also indicates that Eurosceptic stances are spread among all the political actors under scrutiny, independent of their ideological stance. Surprisingly, the main party in government moderates its positions on Europe, although in the previous years the Movement strongly targeted the EU as a vehicle of global capitalism and a threat to Italian interests (i.e. the welfare state). While the theory assumes that parties involved are expected to modify their Eurosceptic stances, the Italian case provides mixed empirical evidence. The M5S fits within this model, while the Lega remains an outlier. All in all, European stances do not provide a clear demarcation line between parties in opposition and in government. In parallel, the analysis of the populist content points towards FdI, M5S and the League as the most populist parties in the Italian party system. Most interestingly, while M5S's populism is flavored with anti-elitism, the FdI and the League mostly exhibit people-centrism.

All in all, this analysis allows us to reflect more broadly on the impact of Europe on Italian party politics. Currently, Euroscepticism is becoming increasingly central and much more widespread among parties and party élites, although it has had no direct impact in terms of policy outcomes.

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