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## How Populist Parties (Re-)Frame Europe.

### The Changing Structure of EU Issue Competition in Populist Italy

#### Introduction

In the context of a multiple set of crises (i.e. economic crisis, euro crisis, refugee crisis), the EU has become an increasingly contentious and highly politicized issue, with party competition being consistently shaped by a pro-/anti-EU divide (Hooghe and Marks 2018; Börzel and Risse 2018; Taggart and Szcserbiak 2018; Otjes and Katsanidou 2017). Euroscepticism has thus become a source of electoral support for protest parties (Hobolt and De Vries 2016; Hobolt and Tilley 2016), not being a *sleeping giant* anymore (Van der Eijk and Franklin 2007), but rather the *elephant in the room*. Indeed, protest parties have stood out as the chief issue entrepreneurs of the EU and, adopting a conflict-mobilizing approach on EU issues, have managed to reshape their electoral fortunes (De Vries and Hobolt 2012; De Vries and Hobolt 2015). Italian protest parties are not exception. Indeed, the League, the Five Star Movement (M5S), and Brothers of Italy (FdI), though by means of different frames, have become strong Eurosceptic entrepreneurs, exploiting in particular the catalyst effects of the Euro crisis (Carrieri 2019).

Though the 2018 general elections in Italy had resulted into a hung parliament, without a clear-cut winner (Chiaromonte *et al.* 2018), M5S and the League had gained a large share of votes and seats, subsequently forming a governing coalition. Apart from their shared populist outlook, the common Eurosceptic background of the League and the M5S allowed these two parties to coalesce and give birth to the first fully populist government in Europe. Indeed, “*while being far from each other on the Taxes vs spending domain, the M5S and the League were rather close on all the EU-related issues except for EU Accountability.*” (Pedrazzani *et al.* 2018). Therefore, the formation of yellow-green cabinet, led by the PM Giuseppe Conte, had substantially interacted with the common Eurosceptic identity of these parties.

Nonetheless, the Italian context stands out for a certain complexity of EU issue voting, which has not been entirely summarized by a positional division, opposing pro- and anti-EU parties. Indeed, a valence side of the EU, mainly revolving around *the willingness to make Italy count more in Europe* (Chiaromonte and Maggini 2019; Emanuele *et al.* 2019), has emerged as particularly relevant in the Italian political competition. To be sure, voters form their electoral preferences on Europe by assessing *which party* is more credible (and capable) to ensure to the country a greater role at the EU level and not, simply, by evaluating whether parties are supportive or not of the integration process. This has a relevant

implication: the EU could be framed as a valence, non-divisive issue on which -theoretically- the entire Italian population agree upon. From this point of view, Carrieri and Angelucci (2019) have already shown that a valence side of the EU offered a better explanation than a positional one of electoral preferences both in Italy and France in the last general elections held in these two countries. Furthermore, they have shown that different party types hold different electoral incentives when competing on a European valence frame.

In particular, while mainstream parties have been considered as static actors with regards to EU positional issues (Hooghe and Marks 2009; 2018; De Vries and Hobolt 2012; Hobolt and De Vries 2015), their structure of incentives seems to be more dynamic on EU valence ones (Carrieri and Angelucci 2019). More generally, voters have been found to be more likely to support mainstream parties on the EU valence issues (Carrieri and Angelucci 2019). Indeed, mainstream/governing parties have been more successful in crediting themselves as more credible actors in dealing with the councils negotiations (Schneider 2014), making their country count more at EU level.

The Italian 2019 EP elections poses further challenges to the EU issue voting in Italy, potentially making the structure of voter preferences over Europe so far more complex. As mentioned before, protest parties are expected to win more votes on the EU positional competition, with mainstream parties benefitting more from a valence one. Between the 2018 general and 2019 EP elections, this pattern may have been reverted by the changing status of the major protest parties, namely the M5S and the League, which together formed a governing coalition in June 2018.

On this backdrop, we ask whether voter propensity to support protest parties on EU positional issues has changed due to the shift in the governing status between the general elections of 2018 and the EP elections of 2019. More specifically, granted the anti-establishment nature of the M5S and the League, have their traditional source of electoral support, namely Euroscepticism, changed in favour of EU valence-centred determinant? If this is the case, is this shift due to a transition in their governing status?

The research question is not trivial. First, it allows us to shed some more light on the multifaceted nature of the EU issue voting in Italy, accounting for a valence frame that has been generally overlooked by the scientific literature. Second, as stressed above, the Italian case resonates for its prominence, being the largest European country experiencing a fully populist government. By epitomising this pattern, Italy provides with a unique opportunity to observe the complexity of EU issue voting, either reversing or confirming the party incentives associated with EU valence and positional issues. Understanding whether protest parties are conflict mobilisers because of their Euroscepticism or rather for their opposition

status, may shed light on the issue evolution process of this conflict. Indeed, if protest parties downplay their Eurosceptic agency because of their shifting governing status, a fully-fledged politicization of the EU could be hampered. Quite the contrary, if these parties genuinely compete on a pro-anti EU dimension, no matter their governing status, the politicisation of the EU could be reinforced.

## Theory

Patterns of EU issue competition have been conditioned by the dynamics of the domestic party systems, with the party location within the system acting as an important predictor in swaying strategies/positioning on the European integration (Sitter 2001; Batory and Sitter 2004; Hobolt and De Vries 2015). By analysing the party-based Euroscepticism in Scandinavia, Sitter (2001) has defined it as the “the politics of opposition”, with the government-opposition divide determining its translation into a source of political contestation. Though he has suggested several lines along which parties may develop antagonism over the European integration, Sitter has contended that anti-cartel/protest-based parties have held major incentives to turn their Euroscepticism stance into a tactical device in domestic competition. Similarly, Taggart (1998) interpreted the emerging phenomenon of party-based Euroscepticism as a strategic response towards the growing cartelization of politics (Katz and Mair 1995), with the more peripheral parties (protest parties) being more likely to mobilise a pro-/anti-EU divide as compared to central mainstream parties. Thus, protest parties aim at differentiating themselves from their governing counterparts, devoting greater attention to the EU issues for capturing the increasing share of Eurosceptic voters and spurring internal division among their mainstream counterparts (Szerbiak and Taggart 2000; Hobolt and De Vries 2016; Van der Wardt *et al.* 2014). These actors have no substantial constraints in dealing with the European integration because these do not have to implement controversial EU-driven policy as they do not usually hold governing positions (Green-Pedersen 2019). In brief, their peripheral location in the domestic party systems provided them with a more marked strategic room for mobilising a pro-/anti-EU positional divide.

However, protest parties have also held important ideological filters, which structure their entrepreneurial efforts on the EU issues. Important cleavage-based theories have tried to frame protest responses towards the ever-increasing integration processes, with these parties opposing the economic and cultural threats posed by the EU project towards national community and state sovereignty (Hooghe *et al.* 2002; Kriesi *et al.* 2006; Halikioupolou *et al.* 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2018). According to Kriesi *et al.* (2006), a new demarcation/integration cleavage has reshaped the pre-existing contents of conflict dimensionality, with the EU issues becoming important parcels of the cultural dimension. These ideological leanings have predicted the strategies of protest actors, with radical left parties rallying voters on the economic anxieties related to the European integration and radical right rallying the voters on the

cultural ones (De Vries and Edwards 2009). Though these parties are endowed with a specific system of strategic incentives linked with their opposition status, their background ideology may reinforce their propensity to mobilise a conflict over the EU. Although some contributions have successfully blended a focus on the party ideology with the compounding elements of the party system dynamic (De Vries and Edwards 2009; De Vries and Hobolt 2015; Hobolt and De Vries 2015), the latter appear to be more straightforward in explaining the structure of the EU issue competition (Vasilopoulou 2017). Indeed, party positional and strategic adjustments have often stemmed from their vote-seeking or office-seeking behaviour, with many protest parties blurring their Eurosceptic cues to gain more votes or enter in government (Sitter 2001; Batory and Sitter 2004; Benedetto and Quaglia 2007). The dilemma between party ideology and the government/opposition status lies at core of this work, which aim at testing the changing structure of the EU issue competition in a national context, characterised by a more blurred distinction between protest and mainstream party types. If parties have maintained their strategic incentives once they have moved from opposition to government (or viceversa), then we should conclude that a more ideological foundation of the EU issue voting prevails. If these incentives have been promptly reversed by the changing governing/opposition status of parties, then we should conclude that the party system dynamic in (re-)structuring the characteristics of the electoral competition on the European integration has been more relevant. In other words, we posit two possible dynamics of EU issue voting, i.e. an ideologically based EU issue voting, that is independent from the changing structure of incentives derived from governing/opposition status of parties; and a more contextual EU issue voting, which indeed depends on whether parties are in government or in opposition and on how much incentives these contextual factors can provide.

## The Valence Side of the EU

The European integration have been exclusively understood in positional terms, pitching the supporters of the supranational integration versus the supporters to the national sovereignty (Hix and Lord 1997; Marks and Steenbergen 2004; Ray 2007). Therefore, scholars have mainly framed and studies the EU issue voting in Downsean terms (Downs 1957), representing voter/party position as varying along an imaginary and mathematically represented pro-/anti-EU position (De Vries 2007; De Sio *et al.* 2016; Hobolt and De Vries 2016b). Though the Downsean so-called proximity theory stood out for its explanatory power, it has received many critical reviews over time. One of most successful challenges towards this approach was advanced by Stokes (1963), who identified a new kind of policy objective that could not be encompassed by a positional competition. These policy goals were dubbed as 'valence' and these receive a virtually unanimous support from all voters, being consensual rather than divisive, changing the structure of the issue competition. Indeed, when valence issues are at stake, voter would

not assess party credibility on achieving one over two policy objectives, but instead they will evaluate party credibility on a achieving a consensual policy objectives. The literature on valence politics leads to us an important framework, which can be usefully applied to the EU issue voting.

Indeed, consensual (valence) EU-related issues generally reflect the national interest of a country (Guinaudeau and Persico 2014) and, broadly speaking, concern the ability of national governments to achieve better deals for their countries in the EU institutions (Schneider 2020). In this vein, we understand the defence of the country position in EU institutions as a valence issue, that is a policy objective unanimously pursued shared by voters. Surprisingly enough, this consensual issue has been studied only in terms of issue competition among parties (Guinaudeau and Persico 2014), while its effects on voting behaviour (what we might call a EU-valence issue voting) have received no attention insofar. National governments, bearing the burden of the decision-making in the Councils, are aware that they will be evaluated by their voters on their ability to defend their country's interests (whatever they may be) in Europe (Schneider 2013). To be re-elected in national elections, ruling parties will attempt to credit themselves as the most competent in handling negotiations within the European institutions and in strengthening the country's bargaining power in Europe (Schneider 2013). On the contrary, opposition parties have the clear incentive to discredit the ability of governing parties to act in the interests of the country. There is empirical evidence revealing how voters respond to these party strategies, preferring those parties that manage to convey an image of competence in defending the role of the country in the European institutions (Schneider 2020). Therefore, voters reward and punish parties on the basis of their (real or simply declared) ability to defend the country's positions in the European Council, where all member states negotiate to obtain better deals for their respective country. In other words, there is a shared general objective for the electorate at large - on which parties compete-, which is to make the country stronger and more influent in Europe.

It is important to note that when we refer to this policy goal, we are specifying a quite general objective, which, however, conceals some important internal differences. The means for a country to achieve more relevance in Europe, or the definition of what the specific interests of a country are, can be interpreted very differently by both voters and political elites. We are well aware that framing an issue as a valence objective implies moving up a rung in the ladder of abstraction. This is a step, however, which allows for distinguishing between the means to reach a goal and the goals themselves (a dichotomy already elaborated by several scholars - e.g. Fiorina 1981; Van der Brug 2004). Making a country count more in Europe is clearly a general policy goal and, based on the arguments developed above, a goal widely shared by voters (what we would therefore call a valence issue). As for the means to achieve the goal, these can be highly different. On the one hand, some parties/voters may interpret a stronger role in the EU institutions as the best way to attain the EU valence goal. On the other hand,

others can conceive a greater autonomy from the EU as the most appropriate way to achieve the same objective. The above-mentioned policy tools are clearly divisive, and these can be absorbed within a classical spatial competition, pitting the pro-Europeans against the anti-Europeans. Therefore, in our study the impact of the shared general policy goal of making the country count more in Europe (hereafter, the EU valence issue) on electoral preferences is explicitly analysed, identifying its impact in terms of voting behaviour, without addressing “how” this policy goal is achieved or simply pursued (the policy means).

By studying the Italian 2018 general elections and the French 2017 presidential elections, Carrieri and Angelucci (2019) have found that the voters do not exclusively form their electoral preferences by assessing party credibility on the EU positional issues, but instead their evaluations on the EU valence issues have represented a more prominent voting predictor. Italian electors have identified a shared policy goal related to Europe, which revolves around the defence of national interest at the EU level, measured by asking the respondents to evaluate party credibility on the *Desiderability of Making (Your) Country Count More in the EU*. During the 2018 electoral campaign, this policy objective has been considered as priority in the agenda by almost the entirety of the Italian population (see: Carreri and Angelucci 2019), with the EU valence issues representing a prominent voting predictor. Though some positional blame shifting towards the EU institutions has often occurred in the Italian debate (Di Virgilio *et al.* 2015; Carrieri 2019), electors seem to be pay a considerable attention to the protection of their interests at the EU level, with (mainstream) parties probably receiving a political mandate for shielding these domestic affairs. This electoral dynamic may shed light on new pattern of domestic accountability, with citizens petitioning for a shared policy objective related to the European integration and parties trying to be responsive on this goal within the two Councils. However, this work does not focus on potential implications over the European integration in the long-term, observing the (mis-)match between external responsibility and domestic responsiveness, but instead it aims at investigating whether citizens have developed their voting preferences on the EU valence issues vis-à-vis EU positional issues. Furthermore, we try to ascertain to what extent several party type dichotomies – protest versus mainstream; governing versus opposition – are associated with a peculiar system of party strategic incentives, with mainstream parties benefitting from the EU valence issue and protest parties from EU positional ones. The Italian case provides us with an interesting scenario, with two protest parties (M5S and the League) seizing the government, potentially reverting the patterns of EU issue voting. These actors may have gained credibility over the defence of national interests at the EU level, while mainstream parties may have simultaneously lost their major reputation over this policy goal.

Therefore, three different set of conditions may have shaped (and changed) the nature of EU issue voting between the general elections of 2018 and the European elections of 2019 in Italy. The first one concerns the protest versus mainstream nature of the electoral competition in Italy. We know from a very fully-fledged theoretical backdrop that protest parties tend to behave as conflict mobilisers, pursuing the politicisation strategies on positional issues. From a general point of view, mainstream parties have been shown to be more likely to electorally capitalize on valence issues, compared to protest ones, which instead are often seen as conflict-mobilisers (De Sio and Lachat 2019; Meguid 2005; Van der Wardt *et al.* 2014; Hobolt and De Vries 2015). This piece of evidence has been further confirmed in relation to European valence issues, with mainstream parties being once again more likely to be rewarded on a valence frame (Carrieri and Angelucci 2019). In this paper we take a step forward and we try to assess the nature and complexity of EU issue voting in a more dynamic way. Indeed, by observing the fluctuations of EU issue voting between 2018 and 2019, we will be able to assess whether protest parties have held positional incentives and mainstream parties valence ones (Clarke et al. 2009; De Sio and Lachat 2019) or rather their strategic opportunities have changed as a consequence of changing conditions.

Based on the existing literature on issue competition, which posit the strategic advantage of mainstream parties on valence issues, we advance the hypothesis (H1): Between the 2018 general and 2019 EP elections, different party types have maintained their structure of incentives, with mainstream parties being more likely to electorally benefit from EU valence issues and protest parties from positional ones.

The second relevant condition potentially affecting the nature of the EU issue voting and the structure of party competition revolves around the governing role of parties, which is expected to trigger transformative effects. By drawing up a distinction between opposition parties (PD, FI, FDI, the Left and +EU) and governing parties (the League and M5S), we expect a changing structure of opportunities on the European integration, affecting the voting preferences. The literature on valence voting is pretty much consensual in signalling that governing parties tend to compete (and be rewarded) more on valence issues rather than positional ones (Clarke *at a.* 2009; De Sio 2014; De Sio and Lachat 2019). Indeed, parties in government, because of the constraints derived by their institutional role, are more likely to profile themselves as problem-solving actors emphasizing policy goals which are non-divisive within the electorate. When, however, protest parties are in government, despite their conflict-mobilizing nature, they may gain a relative credibility on valence issues, profiling themselves as less conflictual. This credibility may have grown at the expenses of mainstream parties, which could have lost some of the benefits they traditionally held on valence issues. By being bounded to the government position, protest actors could not dismiss the incentives provided by the intergovernmental arena, which require a more responsible approach on the EU. All this granted, it would be, however, quite a strong hypothesis the

complete demise of a conflictual frame on the EU by protest parties when in government. Therefore, we do not hypothesise the demise of a positional frame of the EU among protest parties; rather, we expect a more punctuated transformation brought by their governing status shift, devising the following hypothesis (H2): Between the 2018 general and 2019 EP elections, their governing position has changed protest party credibility on both EU positional and EU valence issues, reshaping the structure of strategic incentive on the European integration issue competition.

## Methods

The Italian case offers a unique opportunity to test whether and how the electoral strategic incentives of the major protest parties have changed as a consequence of their shift to government. In fact, the Italian context allows us to conduct a quasi-experiment, isolating the effects of party status change on the electoral results. The general elections of 2018 (when all the protest parties were in opposition) will serve as a benchmark to measure the evolution of EU issue voting, assessing the effect of EU positional and valence issues on the electoral fortune of different party types in Italy. The European elections of 2019, instead, will allow us to verify the stability of these results, after the formation of the coalition government between the League and the M5S (therefore, after their shift to government). Moreover, the presence of Brothers of Italy, a protest party that has always remained in opposition between 2018 and 2019, will allow us to check that the changes in the structure of strategic incentives of protest parties can be really attributed to a change in their governing's position.

To test our hypotheses, we rely on two different sets of survey data, which, however, have been designed in a consistent way. For the analyses concerning the general elections of 2018, we will use the data provided by the ICCP dataset (De Sio et al. 2019). For the analyses related to the EP elections, we will use the data provided by an original ICCP-inspired CAWI survey, specifically designed to study the EP elections in Italy. Most importantly, the two datasets include a fairly large set of common variables, which are measured in a consistent way.

The two surveys are structured in the same way and follows the ICCP scheme to develop homogenous (comparable) measures of both positional and valence issues. In the two surveys, issue attitudes are captured by referring to issue *goals*, which provide more general and abstract building blocks that can be employed to homogeneously conceptualize both positional and valence issues. For both positional and valence issues, conceptualized in terms of policy goals, party credibility is used to get a measure of party-voter affinity. For valence issues, represented by a single shared goal (e.g. “boost <country> economic growth”) party credibility is explicitly asked; for positional goals it is first necessary to ask the respondent to select one of two rival goals, and then to indicate on the selected goal which are the parties that are deemed to be credible. As a result, homogeneous measurement is achieved for capturing party credibility

on any issue goal (either related to positional and valence issues), thus also allowing homogeneous data analysis (D'Alimonte, De Sio and Franklin 2019).

Our dependent variable is the Propensity to Vote (PTV) for a party (0-10 scale). Our focal independent variables are party credibility on both EU positional and valence issues. We measure EU positional issues relying on party credibility on “Remaining vs Leaving the EU”; we measure EU valence issues relying on party credibility on “Making Italy count more in Europe”. The analyses implement a generic model of voting. Therefore, we are not interested in establishing the direction between our independent and dependent variables; rather, we are interested in assessing the relative weight that the independent variables have had on our dependent variable. In so doing, we do not focus on the identification of specific political parties chosen by individuals. For example, focusing on European issues, we do not want to establish whether positive or negative attitudes towards further integration affected the decision of voters to vote for a specific party, but rather we want to assess whether the issue has had a generic impact on the way which voters cast their vote in the elections.

Implementing a generic model of voting, our unit of analysis is no longer the individual voter, but the voter-party dyad. For each respondent we have as many dyads as the number of parties available in the party system. To carry out this analysis, we reshaped our data matrix into a stacked (by party) data matrix. This yields a multiplication of observations (respondent x number of parties) (Van der Brug, Van der Eijk and Franklin 2007b). For each of the two elections considered in this study we run separate analyses for the different party types to compare variations over time. Thus, three OLS models are construed to verify the extent of EU valence and EU positional voting, distinguishing between protest (all) and mainstream parties (table 1), between protest governing VS protest opposition parties (table 2).

## Results

We present a series of OLS models (Table 1, 2) for capturing the effects of the EU positional voting and EU valence voting between at the 2018 general elections and 2019 EP elections, ascertaining *H1* and *H2*. In Model 1, we test *H1*, which predict that system of strategic incentives between the two elections has remained unaltered over time, with mainstream parties being more likely to electorally benefit from EU valence issues and protest parties from positional ones. This expectation is rooted within the above-mentioned literature background, which assessed this strategic differentiation between these party types. Thus, the empirical step is devoted to understand whether this incentive system stabilised its impact over time, confirming the prominence of the party-based ideological leaning in structuring the EU issue voting. However, as was have already highlighted, we know that the protest-mainstream distinction may have been blurred by League and M5S changing governing status, reshaping the strategic incentives related to the EU issues. To verify this hypothesis, Table 1 reports several multivariate (OLS) regression analyses, running models for 2018 general elections and 2019, observing the propensity to vote for the two party

types under scrutiny. The two party clusters – mainstream and protest – have not undergone any modifications, with M5S, League and FdI falling into the protest category and PD, FI, +EU and the Left/LeU into the mainstream one. The general election of 2018 represents the benchmark in this analysis, allowing to observe the potential electoral transformation occurred in one year.

The results partially disconfirm our *H1*, with the patterns of EU issue voting substantially changing in 2019. As a matter of fact, the electoral benefits over the EU positional goals were evenly distributed between the two party types in 2018, without protest parties being more likely to be rewarded as compared to their mainstream counterparts. This homogeneity had drew an unexpected scenario, with the Eurosceptic entrepreneurship not representing a tactical asset for protest parties in 2018. On the contrary, the effects of the EU positional issues had indicated new promising strategic avenues for the mainstream parties, which did not electorally lag behind on this voting predictor. Several overviews have already identified the mainstream electoral potential on the EU positional issues at 2018 general elections (Chiaromonte and Maggini 2019; Emanuele *et al.* 2019), which hold a room of maneuvering to prime Europhile hints in the political debate. This window has rapidly vanished for mainstream actors, with the EP elections straining this equilibrium, which has proved to be ephemeral. Indeed, EU positional issues has held no significant effects on the mainstream voting preferences, while the protest coefficient has underwent a substantial boost, doubling its impact. This result epitomizes a pattern of growing Eurosceptic voting at the 2019 EP elections, with the protest parties (re-)gaining more clear-cut payoffs on the EU positional issues as compared to mainstream parties. The current finding is consistent with a broad amount of literature, which has identified the electoral benefits of the EU positional issues associated with the protest party type. Nevertheless, by showing this abrupt fluctuation from the 2018 to 2019, we shed light on the volatility of this positional incentive, which does not simply arise from the ideological credibility of protest parties, instead being probably grounded in the context-based explanations.

EU positional voting is not the only story behind protest party electoral preferences. Indeed, the EU valence issue has reinforced its impact on the propensity to vote for protest parties. Moreover, these actors have more intensively benefitted from the EU valence issue as compared to mainstream parties, which lost some significant strategic payoffs on this voting driver. On the contrary, mainstream parties have seen a decline a rapid decline in their capacity to electorally capitalize on the EU valence voting. Although this issue has remained a significant voting predictor for mainstream parties, it has been markedly eroded in 2019. Since June 2018, it is worth to note all mainstream parties had been relegated to the opposition benches, with their credibility in handling the Italian interests at the EU level being probably dampened by their status. By observing this electoral trajectory, we are able to assess the high

context-dependency of the EU valence voting, with mainstream parties being conditioned by dynamic of the party systems.

To sum up, the protest parties have relied on a multiple set of strategic incentives related to EU issue voting at the 2019 EP elections, partially reshaping the structure of competition on the European integration. On the one hand, they have increased their electoral benefits on the EU positional issues, which have probably interacted with some contextual-based explanation. However, this voting trend is consistent with the expectation drew in the *H1*, predicting the major capacity of protest parties in benefitting from the EU positional issues as compared to mainstream parties. Whether they have achieved this result by successfully realigning voters along the pro-/anti-EU issue dimension or by increasing their Eurosceptic shortcuts in the political debate must be the object of a distinct empirical analysis. On the other hand, these parties have seized a major credibility on making Italy count more at the EU level, reversing the 2018 system of party-based strategic incentives. Though this determinant has grew from one election to another, this result does not reverse the expected strategic incentives linked to the protest party type, with the EU positional issues outweighing the valence ones. On the contrary, mainstream parties have not fitted with forecasted scenario, with EU valence voting decreasing its explanatory scenario. We posit that this outcome has been explained by the dynamic of the party system, with the governing-opposition often reshaping the party-based credibility on the valence issues.

Table 1. OLS Models - Mainstream versus Protest Parties between 2018 and 2019

	2018 Mainstream	2018 Protest (All)	2019 Mainstream	2019 Protest (All)
Positional	1.702*** (0.138)	1.700*** (0.163)	1.473 (0.754)	3.359*** (0.865)
Valence	2.337*** (0.146)	1.778*** (0.184)	2.123* (0.868)	2.297** (0.817)
y_woman	0.369 (0.528)	0.570* (0.221)	0.353* (0.171)	0.219 (0.284)
y_church	0.731*** (0.109)	1.023*** (0.142)	-0.171 (1.110)	0.663 (0.641)
y_edu3	0.544*** (0.107)	0.345 (0.277)	0.287 (0.252)	0.795*** (0.176)
y_ageclass	0.486 (0.273)	0.385* (0.164)	0.0174 (0.13 3)	-0.113 (0.134)
y_clasself	0.432*** (0.0976)	0.0613 (0.708)	-0.0353 (0.567)	-0.0459 (0.276)
Pid	3.819*** (0.205)	4.787*** (0.217)	6.879*** (1.070)	5.430*** (0.884)

_cons	0.672*** (0.149)	1.132*** (0.160)	2.807*** (0.255)	2.943*** (0.345)
<i>N</i>	3531	2656	2204	1653
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.373	0.401	0.065	0.143

To better understand the role of the political context, which was already clear-cut for mainstream parties, we now move to assess our second hypothesis. Our prediction here is that the specific structure of incentives derived from the institutional position that political parties hold, may be relevant in explaining variations in EU issue voting. In particular, governing parties should be more likely to be rewarded on valence issues (and, therefore, also on *EU* valence issues). This is because when in government, parties have to face political and institutional constraints that reduce their margins of maneuvering and create incentives to adopt a less divisive approach to political issues. Given this structure of incentives, it is plausible to expect that the electoral weight of the credibility on valence issues should be higher for these parties, compared to parties in opposition. Indeed, when parties are in opposition, they are not bounded by institutional constraints and they are clearly free to compete also on more divisive issues -when and if these issues are deemed to be rewarding.

Table 2. OLS Models – Protest Opposition (FDI) versus Protest Government Parties (M5S-League) between 2018 and 2019

	2018 FDI	2018 M5S-League	2018 , FDI (opposition)	2019 M5S-League (government)
Positional	1.825*** (0.353)	1.738*** (0.187)	3.072 (1.697)	3.621*** (1.019)
Valence	2.802*** (0.377)	1.468*** (0.211)	2.338 (1.581)	2.397* (0.976)
y_woman	169.9 (190.4)	0.587** (0.222)	0.269 (0.428)	0.189 (0.379)
y_church	0.946*** (0.185)	1.111*** (0.225)	-2.558 (4.789)	0.694 (0.660)
y_edu3	0.715 (2.177)	0.429 (0.283)	0.498 (0.309)	0.913*** (0.216)
y_ageclass	-1.889 (1.909)	0.421* (0.165)	-0.112 (0.233)	-0.121 (0.164)
y_clasself	0.939 (0.926)	-1.337 (1.249)	1.001 (0.605)	-0.298 (0.314)

Pid	5.239*** (0.583)	4.797*** (0.238)	8.929*** (2.592)	5.186*** (0.979)
_cons	1.017** (0.323)	1.140*** (0.188)	3.203*** (0.502)	2.682*** (0.474)
<i>N</i>	893	1763	551	1102
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.260	0.445	0.066	0.166

Based on these arguments, we should expect that protest parties that were in opposition in the occasion of the general election of 2018, once entered in a governing position in 2019, have been increasingly rewarded on EU valence issues (compared to those protest parties which have remained in opposition). This argument, however, clashes with the *nature* of the two protest parties which formed a government in Italy after the general election of 2018. Theoretically, we should expect that protest parties -given their ideological leaning- should be more likely to be rewarded on positional issues than on valence issues and that this structure of payoffs should be unaltered, independently from the changing governing/opposition status.

To empirically test these arguments, in Table 2 we report a series of multivariate (OLS) regression analyses, run separately for 2018 and 2019 and predicting the propensity to vote for Italian protest parties which were either in opposition or in government in 2019. To be clear: first we assess EU issue voting for protest parties in 2018. In that occasion, all the Italian protest parties were in opposition. However, we still distinguish those parties which will form the government after the 2018 election (i.e. M5S and League), and those which will be in opposition also after the election (i.e. FdI). Second, the same analysis is then performed in 2019, keeping the distinction between protest in opposition and in government. This design allows us to compare the changing structure of incentives among protest parties in a quasi-experimental design. We could think the general election of 2018 as our benchmark to evaluate electoral changes over one year. Protest parties in opposition both in 2018 and 2019 are our control group. Protest parties which formed the government after the general election of 2018 are our treatment group (where the treatment is clearly the changing governing status of these parties).

Looking at the regression results, we first notice that in 2018 the differences between different protest parties are not particularly relevant: FdI, the M5S, and the League have all taken advantage of EU issue voting (both in its positional and valence dimension) in the general election of 2018. Indeed, we find highly significant coefficients for both EU positional and valence issues, although with some interesting nuances.

First, we find that EU positional voting has been equally rewarding for FdI and the two parties that will form the government after the election; second, for FdI, we notice the prevalence of EU valence voting over the positional one; finally, for the parties that will be in government after the elections of 2018, the

structure of payoffs appears in line with our expectations, with a prevalence of EU positional voting over EU valence voting.

When we look at the results of the same regression analyses one year later (when the M5S and the League have given birth to the coalition government), the picture is radically changed. The first striking result is that we do not find any significant effect of EU issues (neither positional nor valence) on the propensity to vote for FdI.

On the contrary, we find an increasing effect of EU issue voting on the electoral success of the protest parties in government. Based on this picture, it clearly emerges that over one year, among protest parties, those in government have basically ‘monopolized’ the payoffs derived from EU issue voting. In particular, we observe not only an increasing effect of EU positional voting (whose coefficient more than doubles between 2018 and 2019), but also an increasing effect of EU valence voting (in this case, however we record a slightly lower increase, compared to positional voting).

This means that, overall, the relative importance of EU positional voting compared to EU valence voting has not diminished once the M5S and the League entered in a coalition government. The changing governing status of these two parties had produced a two-fold effect, increasing the relative increase of the relative importance of both EU positional and EU valence voting. Our data suggest that after one year in government, protest parties still maintain higher strategic incentives to compete on EU positional issues, with their governing position boosting this electoral payoff. These are indeed the issues that - significantly more than valence issues- push voters to express a propensity for these parties. However, the latter predictor has increased its explanatory power for the protest actors, with mainstream parties lagging behind on the valence voting. Based on these results, we do not reject our second hypothesis, according to which the changing governing/opposition status of protest parties should produce a transformation of the strategic incentives connected to EU issue voting.

## Conclusions

Many works have considered the translation of EU issue into the electoral politics as being determined by the dynamics of the domestic party systems, with their systemic (peripheral) location mainly driving protest parties entrepreneurial strategies (Taggart 1998; Sitter 2001; Batory and Sitter 2004; Hobolt and De Vries 2015). Though Euroscepticism has often been equated with the politics of opposition, other contributions have stressed the pivotal role of ideologies in structuring party responses towards the European integration. By experiencing a landmark government turnover, with two protest/populist parties monopolising ministerial offices, the Italian case helps to understand which factor - party ideology or party system dynamic – had been more powerful in shaping the EU issue competition, disentangling a long-lasting dilemma. To verify our hypotheses, we also included the EU valence issue, revolving around *the desirability of making Italy count more in the EU*. Carrieri and Angelucci (2019) has showed the impact of this predictor in affecting the voting preferences in Italy at the 2018 general elections, with

mainstream parties gaining more electoral profits on the EU valence issue. Meantime, protest parties should be more likely to harness upon the EU positional issues. By observing the changing explanatory power held by EU valence and EU positional issues, we are enabled to assess if the government/opposition status has reshuffled the nature of competition on the European integration.

Surprisingly, the party system have almost doubled the impact of the EU positional issues in increasing voting preferences for protest parties. At the 2018 general elections, these parties did not have any supplemental payoffs on these positional issues as compared to mainstream parties, which could compete with their opponents on EU positional frames. This backdrop has been notably reversed, with the protest actors increasingly exploiting the (anti-)EU positional issues. These have gained benefits over the EU valence issues at the expenses of the mainstream actors, which owned a major credibility in 2018. The latter actors have suffered from losing their governing position, with, conversely, protest party strengthening their image as EU problem solvers. The latter findings is to some extent grounded within EU valence voting theory, which somehow forecast this kind of development. However, given the lack of studies on the EU valence voting, we cannot underestimate the potential width of this finding and its implication on the European integration and public opinion studies. Indeed, our analysis suggests that intergovernmentalism matters in affecting voting preferences, with voters scrutinising government action with the Councils. Voters have been sensitive towards the shifting governing status between an election and another, with the party incentives on EU valence issues being somehow associated with the cabinet position. By occupying crucial location with the two Councils, parties may rapidly increase their credibility in advocating for the national interests at the EU level, being rewarded/punished by the electorate. The mismatch between external responsibility and domestic responsiveness is a very vexed question in political science and we have not the ambition to provide with a clear-cut solution. Nevertheless, as proposed by some works, the intergovernmentalism may increasingly represent an arena for filling this gap, achieving greater responsiveness (Schneider 2018; Wratil 2019). We contend that the discussion on the EU valence voting and its outcomes on the EU governance represent a promising studying avenue, encompassing both voting behaviour and European integration theory.

The boost in the positional incentives for the protest parties is a startling result, drawing an interesting scenario. Indeed, by controlling for the governing status with a quasi-experimental design, these findings have been further corroborated. Those governing protest parties have seized upon themselves all the major strategic incentives related to the EU issues competition, with the domestic dynamic of the party system interacting with their ideological electoral success. Although these voting patterns may have been magnified by some contingent contextual factor, such as the honeymoon effect held by these actors (especially the League), this fluctuation signals a notable transformation in the structure of the EU issue voting, which must be the object of separate tests in the long-term. Most overviews have assessed that

the governing status set out a moderating effect on party-based Euroscepticism, outweighing the importance of the party background ideology. On the contrary, our analysis has demonstrated the party system dynamic has injected a boost in ideological driven vote for governing protest parties, rather than weakening the cleavage explanation. M5S and League changing location in party system has reinforced their positional incentives on the European integration conflict, with the governing status not providing a further constraint, but potentially releasing a renovated conflict mobilisation strategy. This scenario unravels the above-mentioned dilemma between ideological-driven and context-driven explanations, showing their marked interaction, which move towards a different direction from the one forecasted by scholars. As a matter of fact, when Eurosceptic parties enter in government, they do not necessarily lose incentives in mobilising the EU conflict, but they can seize supplemental windows of opportunity. Though we cannot generalize this patten on the other EU member states, the Italian case shed light on the strategic potential associate with the governing protest parties in framing both EU positional and EU valence issues.

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