

Leader Polarisation: Conflict and Change in the Italian Political System

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ABSTRACT

Polarising issues, polarising narratives, polarising leaders: this is the picture suggested by Italian politics in the 2018-2020 time-frame. The article introduces the concept of leader polarisation and suggests a Leader Polarisation Index (LPI) to trace the recent evolution of the Italian party system. After the 2018 general election, the Italian political space experienced rapid change marked by the weakening of tri-polarism, the re-emergence of bi-polarism and the rise of elite-driven polarisation. The analysis of voters' perspective through use of survey data reveals the increasingly divisive role of the Lega's leader, Matteo Salvini.

Keywords: *party system; political leaders; polarisation; personalisation; Matteo Salvini, political space; M5S; Lega*

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The results of the 2018 general election reinforced two (main) readings about the evolution of the Italian political system. The first concerned the consolidation of the tri-polar arrangement that emerged five years earlier with the spectacular breakthrough of a new and significant *third pole* represented by the M5S (Movimento 5 Stelle – 5 Star Movement). The second one concerned the emergence of a potential new cleavage, separating (old) mainstream parties and new anti-system challengers. The latter element of change seemed to be further fostered by the formation of a populist coalition government, led by the previously unknown jurist Giuseppe Conte¹. The Conte I cabinet (2018-2019) was supported by the two ‘winners’ of the election: Luigi Di Maio’s M5S and Matteo Salvini’s (new) Lega (League), which had been able to tap into new polarising issues, deep social grievances and growing democratic malaise.

The election appeared to mark the final demise of the (so-called) Second Republic and its bi-polar arrangement, centred on a left-right division and largely overlapping with a ‘personal cleavage’, based since 1994 on the division between the Berlusconi and the anti-Berlusconi camp. The M5S and the Lega, with their yellow-green government,² seemed to embody a new line of division polarising the political landscape, at both the mass and the elite levels. The anti-establishment, anti-globalisation, eurosceptic views expressed (although to different degrees) by the two allies seemed to support this interpretation and, at same time, to provide common ground for their joint access to power.

Nevertheless, the 14 months in power of the self-defined ‘government of change’ were also characterised by growing polarisation within the government majority. The tensions between the two allies could be explained by their starting differences, but also by the inherent competition for common segments of the electorate. Even more, the hyper-activism of one of the two party leaders – Salvini – gradually created the conditions for the final breakdown of summer 2019. Both the fall of the Conte I cabinet and the birth of the Conte II government (2019-), supported by a brand-new yellow-red alliance between the M5S and the PD (Partito Democratico – Democratic Party), can be traced back to Salvini’s rise and polarising drive: his intention to capitalise on his personal appeal and the electoral support for his party; and his adversaries’ resolution to stop him.

Polarising issues, polarising narratives, polarising leaders: this appears to be the picture if we observe the evolution of Italian politics since the 2018 general election. This is the picture, at least, if we focus on the elite level and especially on political communication. But what about the mass level? This article will examine voters’ perspectives by using survey data, in order to provide at least partial answers to an array of related questions.

¹ During the campaign, the independent Conte, a law professor at the University of Florence, had been indicated by the M5S as a member of a potential Di Maio cabinet.

² Yellow (M5S) and green (Lega) were the traditional colours of the two government parties.

What is the structure of the Italian political space, and how has it changed in the 2018-2020 time-frame? How many dimensions can be identified in it? Are such dimensions still associated with the traditional left-right axis, and has ideological polarisation grown in recent years? To what extent have the leaders acted as polarising agents? How can we define and measure the degree of 'leader polarisation'?

The article is organised in five sections. The first discusses how political polarisation can be conceptualised and operationalised with reference to post-modern, personalised societies. In particular, it introduces the concept of leader polarisation and suggests a new Leader Polarisation Index (LPI). The next section will identify the main polarising trends that emerged in the fast-paced political scenario between the 2018 general election and the first months of 2020. In particular, it will link these trends to the polarising drive induced by Salvini. The third section will use the Demos-LaPolis (University of Urbino) survey series to analyse the dimensionality of the Italian political space, its evolution over the studied time-frame and its links with the traditional ideological categories of left and right. The fourth section will retrace the trends in party system polarisation, using Dalton's Polarisation Index (PI) and the new LPI. The final section will discuss the results of the analyses and their implications for the future evolution of the Italian political system.

Measuring polarisation in post-modern societies

There is a large body of literature that conceptualises and operationalises polarisation in many different ways, often leading to diverging results. Sartori originally focused on party system polarisation, conceived in terms of ideological distance between political parties (Sartori 1976). According to Dalton, party-system polarisation 'reflects the degree of ideological differentiation among political parties in a system' (Dalton 2008, 900). However, Sartori himself acknowledged that different types of polarisation can characterise a party system – in terms of religious, ethnic or linguistic distance.

In any case, the existence of 'poles' in the political space entails the existence of lines of division structuring it. But, since the second half of the last century (at least), a series of interconnected transformations have shaped a fluid, secularised and highly individualised society, characterised by weak, multiple and overlapping identities (Giddens 1991). In the post-modern scenario, the old, deeply rooted and long-lasting cleavages (Lipset & Rokkan 1967) were replaced by mobile and contingent boundaries, which constitutively reject ideologies. In his seminal book, Jean-François Lyotard defined post-modernism as 'simplifying to the extreme, [...] incredulity toward metanarratives' (1979, p. xxiv).

At the same time, this representation of the post-modern society seems to be contradicted by the emergence of new culture wars. Before 9/11,

Michael Walzer observed that post-modernity coexisted with the longing for ‘more coherent communities and a more unified consciousness’ (1999, p. 88), that ‘explain’ intolerance and radicalism. Social sciences have long debated the possible emergence of new cleavages, linked to new values or the new issues of the globalised world (Kriesi et al. 2006): migration, the environment, financial crises (and pandemics). The euro crisis and the migration crisis in particular have been described as critical junctures that are producing a new transnational cleavage (Hooghe & Marks 2017). Even the rising populist ‘thin-centred ideology’ insists on the division between Us and Them: ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ (Mudde 2004). These new lines of division have also been linked to the rise of new political families and the parallel retreat of established parties.

McCoy, Rahman and Somer (2018, pp. 18-20) agree that, ‘in today’s world, additional important cleavages underlie contemporary polarisation not easily measured with the Left-Right ideological scale’. In their study, they define polarisation as a ‘process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become instead reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of “Us” versus “Them”’. This definition stresses the role of opinion alignment: to talk about polarisation, ideas and attitudes need to be ‘constrained’ within a ‘belief system’ (Converse 1964) or correlated in empirical terms (Baldassarri & Gelman 2008).

These were actually the traditional nineteenth-century dynamics regarding ideological polarisation – well-known especially on the European side of the Atlantic. However, ideologies have long since lost their grip on society, while the new lines of division that have emerged over the last decades seem to lack the social-structural basis and durability that characterised the cleavages of the past. Hence, what are the mechanisms that trigger contemporary polarisation? McCoy, Rahman and Somer argue that contemporary (severe) polarisation that harms democracy ‘happens when political entrepreneurs effectively highlight and activate underlying cleavages in a society, constructing and reinventing a dominant cleavage around which other cleavages align’ (McCoy, Rahman & Somer 2018, p. 18).

What is interesting from our viewpoint is that even this ‘relational’ conception of polarisation – based on underlying cleavages – highlights the role of political elites in ‘instrumentally’ fostering polarisation. In the American context, research has shown that ‘affective polarisation’ – i.e. the tendency of party identifiers to ‘view opposing partisans negatively and copartisans positively’ (Iyengar & Westwood 2015, p. 691; Iyengar et al. 2019) – is also elite-driven: when Americans are asked to evaluate the opposing party, ‘they think of elites more than ordinary voters’ (Druckman & Levendusky 2019, p. 119).

However, in highly individualised societies with political landscapes largely centred on personalised parties and presidentialised governments (Poguntke & Webb 2005), political elites not only attach their message to

latent or full-fledged lines of division, but often become lines of division themselves. Political leaders able to ignite public emotions (frequently through the media) can become ‘cleavages’, and thus polarise the electorate. The narratives of political leaders can help citizen-voters provide meaning to (and reduce the complexity of) social reality. Very often, such narratives combine relevant (old or new) issues with personal attributes of the leaders: their image, style and personal history can become divisive issues themselves. In this sense, leaders can even be seen as ‘functional alternatives’ for ideologies. Of course, leaders’ (personal) narratives sometimes incorporate (and even reinforce) elements of the old, ideological meta-narratives.

From this perspective, the concept of *leader polarisation* can be introduced to describe the polarising drives produced by individual leaders. Leader polarisation can be defined as the divisive effect induced by (the action of) a political leader, generating opposing camps characterised by conflicting attitudes towards the leader. Leader polarisation can in turn be defined as both a status and a process, with reference to the strength and the reinforcement over time of such divisions.

This article uses survey data to analyse party system polarisation from two distinct perspectives. On the one hand, it provides measures of traditional ‘ideological’ polarisation, using (an adapted version of) Dalton’s well-known party system Polarisation Index (PI). On the other hand, it introduces a new Leader Polarisation Index (LPI).

Party system polarisation has been operationalised in many ways and observed at both the elite and the mass levels. The ‘object’ of the empirical analyses has traditionally regarded specific issues, arrays of issues (and their alignment) and, especially, ideology, measured in terms of party positions on a left-right scale – or a liberal-conservative scale. Party positions are usually derived from ‘(i) studies of elites, (ii) studies of party programmes and manifestos, (iii) expert surveys, and (iv) mass surveys’ (Rehm & Reilly 2010, p. 45). Polarisation indexes often include measures of distance, dispersion and bi-modality of a distribution.

Following Downs (1957) and Sartori (1976), Dalton’s PI (2008, pp. 903-907) conceptualises ‘parties as aligned along a single ideological dimension’, and uses the perceptions of the electorate to estimate the position of the main parties on the traditional left-right axis. In election surveys, respondents are often asked to place (themselves and) the main parties on a scale ranging from 0 to 10, where 0 means the extreme left and 10 means the extreme right. Dalton’s PI considers the relative ‘position of each party along the left-right scale’ and ‘the party’s position weighted by size’. It is computed as follows:

$$PI = \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^r w_i \left(\frac{p_i - P}{5}\right)^2}$$

where w_i is the electoral weight (in percentage points) of each party, p_i is the score of party i on the 0-10 L/R scale, p is the average score of the party system on the 0-10 L/R scale and r is the number of parties. As Dalton writes, this index is comparable to a measure of standard deviation, standardised to range from 0 ('when all parties occupy the same position on the left-right scale') to 10 ('when the parties are split between the two extremes of the scale').

The data used in this article were taken from the Demos-LaPolis (University of Urbino) survey series. Each survey is based on representative samples of the Italian voting-age population by gender, age, education and geo-political area. When possible, data from different surveys were pooled together to increase the sample size: Table A1 in the online appendix (available at [ADD LINK]) provides detailed methodological information about each data-file on which the analyses are based. Demos-LaPolis surveys register respondents' self-placement on the left-right scale: hence, party positions were estimated as average scores within party constituencies (Rehm & Reilly 2010). Another difference that needs to be stressed is that, in this case, respondents' self-placement was originally measured on an ordinal five point scale: 1 = Left; 2 = Centre-Left; 3 = Centre; 4 = Centre-Right; 5 = Right. All the scores were rescaled to have PIs ranging from 0 to 10.

How can this methodological framework be adapted to the measurement of leader polarisation? Dalton's PI can be standardised easily for every kind of scale. In the analysed survey series, leader evaluations are measured on a 1-10 scale. Hence, for each leader, a Leader Polarisation Index (LPI) can be computed as follows:

$$LPI = \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^r w_i \left(\frac{s_i - s}{4.5}\right)^2}$$

where s_i is the leader's score on party i and s is the leader's overall score. Once again, the index is standardised to range from 0 (when each party electorate shares the same opinion of the leader) to 10 (when the party electorates' evaluations of the leader are split between the two extremes of the scale - which means half the voters assign a 1 score and the other half a 10 score). This is a measure of variation which can be considered a rough indicator of a leader as a source of political conflict along party lines.

There are some additional caveats to the usage of this specific index. As with any variability index, the LPI might be influenced by the 'size' of the corresponding mean value; in this case, the average leader score. For this reason, a second index can be computed, which, like a coefficient of variation³, is calculated as the ratio of the LPI to the mean p (rescaled to range between 0 and 10). This index can be labelled a Relative Leader Polarisation Index (RLPI):

³ In statistical terms, the RLPI is twice the coefficient of variation.

$$RLPI = \frac{\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^r w_i \left(\frac{s_i - s}{4.5}\right)^2}}{p}$$

At the same time, it's important to stress that leader evaluations can reflect other political pre-dispositions. The literature on the personalisation of politics provides a vast ongoing debate – and often contradictory empirical evidence – about the role leader evaluations play in voting behaviour (King 2002; Bittner 2011; Costa Lobo & Curtice 2015; Rahat & Ofer Kenig 2018). A specific challenge in this field of research regards the fact that party identification, ideological attitudes and leader evaluations are very difficult to unravel in the net of causal relations (Garzia 2014).

It is not the aim of this article to dwell upon these research questions. Nevertheless, the starting point of the analyses developed in the next pages is that – in the post-modern scenario made up of weak, unstable and overlapping identities – the direction of the causal links between all these dimensions and their position in the ‘funnel of causality’ (Campbell et al. 1960) cannot be taken for granted. This theoretical premise has (at least) three important consequences for the empirical analysis of leader polarisation and ideological polarisation developed in the next pages.

First, although leader polarisation may reflect partisanship, observing significant differences in degrees of leader polarisation for different parties-leaders, or significant variation for the same party over time – especially when associated with the rise of a new leader – can signal the specific polarising drive connected to a specific political figure.

Second, leader evaluations may also be associated with issue positions, especially with respect to relevant polarising issues. This topic will not be directly addressed in this work. Nevertheless, according to the theoretical perspective provided in the article, leaders, just like the ideological categories of left and right, can serve as ‘super-issues’ (Inglehart & Klingeman 1976): political heuristics containing and connecting other (relevant) issues, as well as providing shortcuts for political behaviour and even a (contingent) source of identification.

Third, traditional measures of ideological polarisation themselves may reflect partisanship, especially in contexts where the categories of left and right have been part of the political conflict and used in party or coalition names. It can even be argued that people no longer assign to the categories of left and right the ideological meaning they had in the past. However, putting aside the problem of causal links and their direction, studying the ways in which left-right self-placement and leader evaluations align might provide valuable information. This approach, in line with the strand of literature that studies polarisation as correlation (Baldassarri & Gelman 2008), can suggest if (and to what extent) ‘ideological’ polarisation and leader polarisation overlap and reinforce each other.

The indexes introduced in this section will be used in section four to trace the trends of ideological and leader polarisation in Italy over the last three legislatures (2008-2020), focusing in particular on the phase following the 2018 general election. Before doing so, the next section will discuss the role of polarisation and political leaders in the (recent) evolution of the Italian political system, while the following section will use survey data to reconstruct the changes in the Italian political space between the 2018 general election and the first months of 2020.

2018-2020: a new phase of leader polarisation

Political polarisation was one of the key features of the Italian (so-called) First Republic, a typical example of Sartori's polarised pluralism (1976). The strength of ideologies, the presence of anti-system parties and a centrifugal political dynamic were main features of that model. With the birth of the Second Republic (1994), Silvio Berlusconi imposed a new line of division: a 'personal cleavage', which, nonetheless, partly overlapped with the left-right division. Actually, the leader of FI (Forza Italia – Forward Italy) could be seen as the 'inventor' of the Italian bipolarism. In this new system, elections were assumed to be fought (and won) at the centre, triggering a centripetal dynamic. Nevertheless, Berlusconi himself was a highly polarising figure and, for over 20 years, Italians were divided not only between centre-left and centre-right but also between supporters and opponents of Berlusconi.

With Berlusconi's slow departure from the centre stage, even the left-right division seemed to lose its salience. The political crisis of 2011 and the fall of the last Berlusconi cabinet opened a season of grand coalitions supported by both centre-left and centre-right parties. Not by chance, the main emerging political actor of this phase, the M5S, was a populist *anti-cartel party*, denouncing the collusion between supposed enemies and rejecting the categories of left and right (Bordignon & Ceccarini 2013).

The results of the 2018 general election and the following events marked a further departure from the bi-polar scheme of the Second Republic. In a highly fragmented political landscape – fostered by a new, mainly proportional electoral law – without a majority (and a government) emerging from the vote, the M5S and the Lega were the 'clear' winners: the former was the largest political force, winning almost one third of votes (32.7 per cent), whereas the latter more than tripled its electoral support, rising from 4.1 (2013) to 17.4 per cent (Table 1).

Despite their differences, the right-wing Lega and the post-ideological M5S seemed to share common features, that revolved around their anti-system natures. Which system(s) did they oppose? First, they opposed the system of old mainstream parties, their grand coalitions, and even their liberal/representative democracy. Second, both parties strongly criticised the EU system, vaguely and intermittently suggesting the idea of a possible withdrawal from the eurozone. Finally, they despised the system

of globalised interests, denouncing the consequences of globalisation at the national level. Empirical research has shown that both parties have been able to tap into a mix of widespread economic malaise (connected to the effects of the economic crisis), cultural malaise (connected to international migration) and democratic malaise (connected to the functioning of state institutions and the conduct of political elites) (Itanes 2018; Emanuele & Paparo 2018; Chiaramonte et al. 2018; Bordignon, Ceccarini & Diamanti 2018).

Could these changes configure a new cleavage capable of structuring the political space beyond the categories of left and right? What role did the leaders play in the polarising trends that emerged out of the 2018 general election? The rest of the section will address these questions in the 2018-2020 time-frame.

From the yellow-green to the yellow-red government

After the 2018 general election, the clearest signs of a sharp break with the bipolar era related to the M5S: not only the weight of the Italian ‘third pole’ and its composite ideological profile but also the political strategy of its leadership in pursuing executive power. Taking advantage of the party’s multi-ideological profile, Di Maio initially offered two alternative government pacts to the Lega and the PD. However, it was quite clear, since the early election aftermath, that the most likely outcome was the M5S-Lega ‘government contract’ (Marangoni & Verzichelli 2018) – a (linguistic) innovation inspired by the German *Koalitionsvertrag* .

Moreover, the process of government formation entailed the breakup of the traditional centre-right ‘pole’. Its three parties - Lega, FI, and FdI (Fratelli d’Italia - Brothers of Italy)⁴ - had contested the election under the same coalition, completely redefined in its internal balance. Its old undisputed leader, Berlusconi, and his party, FI (14.0 per cent) were surpassed for the first time by their historic junior partner, the Lega.

On the other side of the political spectrum, the main centre-left party, the PD, appeared to be isolated, shaken by a resounding electoral defeat (18.8 per cent) and by the divisions generated by its resigning secretary, Matteo Renzi. Renzi’s leadership had brought the party to its highest electoral peak (40.8 per cent) in the 2014 European election and then to its record low in 2018.

The electoral momentum of the two parties, combined with their ‘elective affinities’, provided the right environment for the convergence between the M5S and the Lega. Both parties had been able to attract insecure, disillusioned (if not angry) voters, who may be described as the ‘losers of globalisation’ (Kriesi et al. 2006). The M5S emerged as particularly strong in impoverished and economically stressed social (and geographic) areas. The Lega was able to go beyond its traditional Northern

⁴ FdI is the closest heir of the post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance, 1994-2009).

strongholds capitalising on the fears connected to the themes of crime and migration in-flows. Nevertheless, these factors were not mutually exclusive in the explanation of their success. They overlapped and merged with a third ingredient: the widespread distrust of political elites and dissatisfaction with the performance of democratic institutions (Bordignon, Ceccarini & Diamanti 2018; Morlino & Raniolo 2017). The two ‘populisms in power’ could be seen as the main political expression of the new cleavage polarising Italian society.

However, compatibility also entailed competition. The self-defined government of change, under the leadership of Giuseppe Conte, enjoyed great popular support: 62 per cent in September 2018. Its approval rates constantly remained higher than 50 per cent during its 14 months in office (although with declining levels).⁵ At the same time, this unusually extended honeymoon combined with a deep redefinition of the electoral balance within the majority. In March 2019, voting intentions for the Lega as registered by the polls were at 34.4 per cent. In May’s European election, the party actually won 34.3 per cent of the votes, more than twice (in percentage points) what it had received at the general election – and more than three times the best result of the ‘old’ LN (Lega Nord - Northern League). Meanwhile, the M5S suffered constant erosion in its electoral support, certified by the sound defeat of the European vote: 17.1 per cent compared with 21.2 per cent in the 2014 European election and 32.7 per cent in the 2018 general election. Combined with the parties’ inherent differences, this process created growing tensions between the allies (Moschella & Rhodes 2020). Polarisation grew within the governing majority, which, according to many commentators, ‘contained’ both majority and opposition.

This dynamic led to the hectic days of August 2019, when the alliance broke up. After several weeks of instability, the M5S signed a new pact with the PD for the formation of a new government, that Conte led once again. The driving force behind this fast-paced political scenario could largely be attributed to the ‘personal factor’, which is analysed in the next two sub-sections. The first describes Salvini’s rise and the issues behind it. The second focuses on the other parties’ reaction, deeply influenced, in turn, by their leadership issues.

The rise of ‘the Captain’

In the Conte I cabinet, Matteo Salvini was the minister of the interior and deputy prime minister. Although, in terms of electoral strength, the Lega was the majority’s junior partner, the two party leaders shared exactly symmetrical starting conditions with respect to their cabinet positions. However, Salvini was able to take advantage of the new government stage to display his undeniable communication gifts.

⁵ See Demos-LaPolis surveys: http://www.demos.it/atlante_politico.php.

Salvini chose the Ministry of the Interior so that he could focus all of his strengths on his closed-border anti-immigration programme. Inside the governing majority, Salvini was the one who marched to the beat of a different drummer. He did this with his incessant battle against undocumented immigration and the NGO ships in the Mediterranean; his daily fight with national and European elites; and his ubiquitous permanent campaign online, on television and in piazzas. Inside the Lega, he was the undisputed leader.

After becoming party secretary in 2013, Salvini aimed at transforming a once-regionalist (even secessionist) political force into a national (and even nationalist) party with a strongly centralised and personalised organisation (Diamanti 2015; Albertazzi, Giovannini & Seddone 2018). If the South and Rome were the old LN's enemies, the new Lega – with no reference to its old heartland, the North, in the new name – mainly targeted Brussels and its euro-bureaucrats. In a few months, Salvini was able to delocalise localism, putting aside the old 'The North first' narrative and promoting a new 'Italy first' scheme. This perfectly matched the exclusionary populism of European radical right populist parties (Passarelli & Tuorto 2018; Akkerman, de Lange & Rooduijn 2016).

This strategy produced two main effects: inflating popular support for the Lega and its leader (Table 2) and sparking a growing personal polarisation over the new Italian 'strong man'. Salvini's growing prominence in Italian politics, combined with his aggressive action and communication style, attracted growing criticism both from the opposition and from government partners. However, Salvini was not attacked solely for his anti-immigration, closed-port policy – for which Italian courts investigated him. Other political choices were also met with concern among the international community and internal competitors. These include his preferred foreign partners: Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán and especially Vladimir Putin. Salvini was also criticised for his use of religious symbols in party rallies – where he showed the rosary asking for the protection of the Virgin Mary – and for the use of public symbols for private benefit. 'The Captain' (the nickname that his supporters gave him) often appeared in public wearing T-shirts, caps and jackets of the police or military corps. For all of these reasons, the main opponents accused him of authoritarian and fascist inclinations.

After the European election, the secretary's personal support reached 54 per cent (July 2019). In August, from his preferred beach club (already transformed into his summer headquarters), Salvini started a government crisis. He declared his aim was to unblock the Italian government, which was stuck due to the M5S vetoes, and to ask for snap elections in which voters would give him 'full power'. The government fell, but instead of a snap election the result was the formation of the M5S-PD government. In the following months, Salvini led a reunited centre-right to important victories in local elections, especially in the Umbria regional election (October 2019). His plan was to defeat the governing parties in the regional election scheduled for January 2020 in Emilia-Romagna. He

promised the ‘liberation’ of the traditional leftist region as a first step towards the demise of the Conte II government. Nevertheless, the centre-left was able to defend one of its last strongholds and won the election in Emilia-Romagna. Following the self-induced exclusion from government, this was Salvini’s second false step.

In search of an anti-Salvini: the other parties and their leadership

Salvini’s rise and polarising drive can be seen as the main factor behind the deep reconfiguration of the political scenario in the 2018-2020 time-frame.

The M5S. The birth of the Conte I government was a crucial step in the process of institutionalisation and normalisation of the M5S (Tronconi 2018). For the first time, the Movement took government responsibility, putting aside its isolationist strategy. Luigi Di Maio, the suit-and-tie leader, embodied the departure from the revolutionary days of Grillo’s sweating, shouting and swearing.

In the Conte I cabinet, Di Maio was deputy prime minister and minister of economic development, labour and social policies. The choice of this post reflected the party’s resolution to tackle economic issues and especially to launch its ‘citizenship income’ project. However, while Salvini was able to maintain the image of the insurgent, Di Maio was relegated to the role of the incumbent.

When the alliance broke up, the M5S leader was very reluctant about the convergence with the PD. It was actually Beppe Grillo, the old founder, who forced this solution, by publicly supporting the ‘historical chance’ to govern the country. It was the beginning of the end for Di Maio’s leadership, sandwiched between Grillo’s intermittent comeback and Conte’s growing visibility and autonomy⁶.

The following months were marked by growing divisions within the M5S – a novelty for a party characterised by a strong top-down control – and painful electoral defeats in regional elections. Pressed by many, in January 2020, Di Maio announced his decision to step back from the party leadership.

The PD. The 2019 European elections saw the partial recovery of the PD, with a gain of four percentage points compared with the previous year’s general election: from 18.7 per cent to 22.7 per cent. Meanwhile, the party had held a Congress and leadership elections (primaries) in March 2019: Nicola Zingaretti, the president of the Lazio region, was chosen as the new

⁶ During the Summer 2019 government crisis, Conte was able to strengthen his position and assume an anti-Salvini profile. Although not being a party member, he was seen by many as a potential future M5S leader.

secretary.⁷ Nevertheless, Zingaretti was a reluctant leader. His style seemed, in many respects, to bring the party back to the old age of centre-left collegial leadership. After all, his moderate, inclusive approach was aimed at healing the wounds produced within both the party and the centre-left political space by Renzi's divisive strategy (Bordignon 2014), which had reached its highest level with the personal-plebiscitary Constitutional referendum of December 2016 (Pritoni, Valbruzzi & Vignati 2016). At the same time, Zingaretti's understatement and weak inclination for the media spotlight prevented him from acquiring centrality in the political debate.

The collapse of the Conte I cabinet provided the PD with a unique chance to come out of the shadows. In the PD's perspective, elections had to be avoided. At the same time, Zingaretti, whose internal opponents often accused him of working on a PD-M5S pact, hesitated to sign the alliance that he had always denied supporting. Paradoxically, it was his main accuser and a fierce antagonist of the M5S, Renzi, who promptly endorsed the idea of a yellow-red government, explicitly described as an anti-Salvini device. Once again, the former PD secretary was revealed to be a great blitzkrieg strategist but also a reckless political gambler. The formation of the new government provided Zingaretti with the opportunity to reunite the old comrades of LeU (Liberi e Uguali - Free and Equal) – a group largely composed of PD splinters and Renzi's opponents⁸ – in the same coalition. Nevertheless, it was Renzi himself who left the PD to form a new party, IV (Italia Viva - Italy Alive), in September 2019 (Moschella & Rhodes 2020). Renzi's aims were to lead a (personal) party he could completely control, to be independent within the government majority and to regain the popular support he had lost. Nevertheless, his move represented an (additional) destabilising factor for the yellow-red coalition.

Meanwhile, the main innovation on this side of the political spectrum took place outside of the arena of party politics. Starting from November 2019, the newly established web-based Sardine (Sardines) movement organised a series of successful demonstrations in Emilia-Romagna and then around Italy. The young Sardine – mainly in their thirties – protested against the populist rhetoric, the radical right wave, and especially against Salvini. The name of the first flash mob organised in Bologna was '6000 sardines against Salvini': their aim was to fill public spaces – 'packed like sardines' – in the cities where Salvini was going to hold his electoral rallies.

⁷ After Renzi's resignation, in the aftermath of the 2018 general election, the party had been led by Maurizio Martina – who was a candidate himself for the party leadership at the congress.

⁸ LeU was formed in December 2017 as a federation of left-wing parties, including Articolo Uno (Article One), founded in February 2017 by former PD secretaries and leading figures like Pier Luigi Bersani, Guglielmo Epifani and Massimo D'Alema, who had strongly clashed with Renzi.

The centre-right. After the fall of the yellow-green government, Salvini returned to the centre-right coalition, and he could undoubtedly claim to be the coalition leader, controlling more than two-thirds of the overall centre-right vote share. His strength also came from the weakness of the old undisputed leader, Berlusconi. His FI dropped to 8.8 per cent in the European election, only just ahead of Giorgia Meloni's FdI (6.5 per cent).

FI's slow decline was consistent with the features of the 'personal party' model (Calise 2010), which does not envisage any kind of succession. For the same reason, a challenge for the coalition leadership could only come 'from outside', and no one had so openly challenged Berlusconi's leadership of the centre-right in the same way as Salvini managed to do. During the first months of the PD-M5S government, the centre-right area of the political spectrum maintained almost 50 per cent in the polls and was able to win regional elections in Umbria and Calabria (De Giorgi & Dias 2020). However, it suffered the already mentioned defeat in Emilia-Romagna. According to opinion polls, the Lega remained the largest party, with slightly lower support than in the European election. But the main internal trend regarded the constant growth of FdI. Since September 2019, Meloni's party had surpassed a further declining FI. In February 2020, FdI was estimated to be around 13 per cent. This significant trend was paralleled by a significant growth in the leader's popularity (46 per cent – Table 2).

The evolution of the political space

This section investigates the evolution of the political space between 2018 and 2020. Multivariate statistical techniques have been used to identify the main dimensions characterising the relationships between political parties, to draw the space emerging from the combination of these dimensions, and to isolate the *poles* described according to the distribution of the main political parties in that space. In particular, factor analysis has been applied to cross-sectional surveys of the Italian voting-age population at five separate moments. The variables used in each analysis concern respondents' (declared) proximity to the main parties⁹. Parties over 4 per cent in voting intentions (or electoral results) have been considered: five parties – M5S, PD, Lega, FI and FdI – passed this threshold at each moment. The individual party proximity was originally measured on a four-level scale, but the analysis used dichotomised variables, isolating respondents who feel 'very' or 'somewhat' close to each party. Robustness checks have been performed using the original variables (as scale variables) in factor analysis and (more properly, as categorical variables) in multiple correspondence analysis, obtaining

⁹ Schadee, Segatti and Vezzoni (2019, p. 45) suggested a similar strategy, using 'propensity to vote' variables in their analyses. The authors argue this solution is preferable to the reconstruction of party space through issue positions, which might overlook the role of the categories of left and right in voting behaviour.

similar results in terms of the dimensionality and configuration of the political space.

The scatter plots in Figure 1 illustrate the factor weights for factors with an eigenvalue over 1. For each moment, two main factors were identified via the statistical procedure, explaining over 60 per cent of total variability. To allow for a better assessment of the political space, the points representing the parties have been transformed into *bubbles* illustrating the party's electoral strength – in terms of survey estimates or election results.

The choice of the five moments partly reflects the availability of the data. However, these moments also identify key periods in the studied 2018-2020 window. The moments chosen were (1) the March 2018 general election; two moments of the yellow-green phase: (2) March 2019, about one year after the general election; and (3) June 2019 in the aftermath of the European election; and then two moments of the of the yellow-red phase: (4) immediately after the formation of the Conte II cabinet, in September 2019 and (5) a few months later, in February 2020.

Immediately after the 2018 general election, the political space confirmed the tri-polar arrangement that emerged in 2013. Actually, tri-polarism manifested itself in a much clearer way in 2018 (a comparable analysis based on 2013 post-electoral data reported in the online appendix provides an important benchmark). The first dimension, capturing 39 per cent of total variance, apparently reproduced the traditional left-right division, with the PD on the one side and the three traditional centre-right parties on the other. The M5S was almost exactly in the middle, confirming its composite post-ideological (or multi-ideological) profile. For the same reason, the M5S was the party that most characterised the vertical axis, explaining 22 per cent of the six variables' variability. This second dimension showed a PD vs M5S structure: for this reason, it could be viewed as an establishment vs anti-establishment division. In this respect, one must remember that the PD had always been in government since 2011, whereas the M5S had played the role of the main (societal, then parliamentary) opposition. A similar arrangement is confirmed by Schadee, Segatti and Vezzoni (2019) using 2013-2018 panel data.

Two additional elements are worth noting. In 2013 (see Figure A.1 in the online appendix), the first two factors explained 51 per cent of total variability, and a third dimension was needed (i.e. identified as significant) to sketch an accurate picture. Moreover, the second dimension somehow 'completed' the information that the first one provided, dividing the main party representing the outgoing government – prime minister Mario Monti's centrist SC (Scelta Civica - Civic Choice) – from all of the opposition parties, the M5S, the LN, and the PdL¹⁰ (the latter had left the majority a few weeks before the end of the legislature). Only the third dimension expressed the novelty that the M5S represented (20 per cent of

¹⁰ The PdL (Il Popolo della Libertà - The People of Freedom) (2009-2013), which Silvio Berlusconi led, was a centre-right party formed by FI and AN.

explained variance), in opposition once again to SC. The results seem to suggest tri-polarism consolidated during the 2013-2018 legislature. A second element to stress is that in the 2018 tri-polar space, the Lega was the closest party to the M5S. This was further proof of the partial overlapping of the two parties' electoral bases, explaining their mutual attraction and final convergence.

This final element was reinforced by the yellow-green months in government. At least, this was the case in the first phase, in which the two allies' common anti-system drive, their commitment to the government contract, but also their will to occupy power positions prevailed over the already visible elements of attrition. In March 2019, the two allies appeared to be much closer in the political space: the M5S was slightly moving towards the right, whereas the Lega was moving downwards, along the second factor. This second dimension (explaining 23 per cent of total variability) seemed to be reinforced, even because it was partially transforming into a majority vs opposition dimension: in fact, the three opposition parties were almost aligned on it. The two governing parties attracted together almost 58 per cent of voting intentions, but the size of their bubbles had significantly changed. The Lega had almost doubled its vote share, whereas the M5S had gone more than 10 points down.

As already pointed out, these trends largely explain the growing tensions of the following months, in which the M5S became increasingly annoyed by Salvini's exuberance and 'commanding' attitude. However, clashes between the two parties also involved policy issues. The Lega had almost a free hand in the promotion of Salvini's controversial security and immigration decrees. The M5S, on the other side, focused its government action largely on the ambitious 'citizenship income' law, which was finally approved in March 2019. The Lega had tolerated the M5S flagship policy but openly expressed sceptical views. Salvini feared that such a measure would have disappointed the party's (traditional) Northern constituencies. More and more often, Salvini denounced the government's inability to adopt pro-growth measures, particularly tax cuts, due to vetoes from the M5S.

The growing distance between the two parties is also visible in the picture of Figure 1 which maps the political space after the May 2019 European election: its configuration is similar to that of the previous picture, but the Lega was moving closer to the other centre-right parties – FdI in particular. Meanwhile, the M5S was becoming (once again) more isolated in the political space. The climax of this process was reached when, in July 2019, the Movement decided to support the election of Ursula von der Leyen to the presidency of the European Commission. For Salvini – who was firmly anchored to the European opposition camp – it was the final proof of the two parties' diverging paths. The Lega's leader also maintained that the M5S and the PD were already preparing to work together even before his own decision to bring the government down. Whichever the case, it was the prelude to a deep redefinition of the political space, which is clearly visible if we look at the next moment of

this analysis. In September 2019, the M5S moved leftward on the first (left-right) dimension. However, it was the second dimension, explaining 20 per cent of total variability, that revealed the most striking change, now contrasting the two old allies: the M5S and the Lega (or better to say the re-formed centre-right coalition).

The general pattern was still tri-polar, but now the PD was – predictably – the closest party to the M5S. The first months of the yellow-red government were, in turn, marked by deep divisions and frequent policy stalemates. Nevertheless, cohabitation under the same government progressively smoothed the contrasts between the two parties, whose convergence was largely ‘justified’ by their common enemy: Salvini. As a result, the two parties drew closer on the political space, but – even more important – the political space reassumed a bi-polar structure. This was clearly visible in the configuration of the political space in February 2020.

The results presented in this section seem to suggest that the left-right division still plays an important role in defining the Italian political space and its poles – even if a second dimension cannot be neglected. This point has also been examined with an analysis of the links between the identified dimensions and the respondent self-placement on the traditional ideological axis. This information in particular has been split into two variables: the respondent’s average score on a five-point scale (forcing non-respondents into the central position), and the *distance* from the scale itself, measured as a dichotomous variable isolating the respondents who reject this scheme. These two variables have been introduced as predictors in a series of linear regression models in which the two factors’ scores have been used as dependent variables.

Table A2 (in the online appendix) displays the results for the initial and final moments of the analysed time-frame: March 2018 and February 2018. The first dimension isolated by factor analysis is strongly associated – in both phases – with the traditional left-right scale (about 40 per cent of explained variance), even when the model is controlled for the main socio-demographic variables. The distance from the scale itself is (negatively) associated with the first dimension – even if it specifically characterises the second dimension. The 2018 dataset also included important opinion variables that can be used to refine the interpretation. Predictably, this first dimension – in which positive values correspond to right-wing parties – is partially explained by well-known right-wing attributes, such as fear of foreign people, the idea that national borders should be protected and euroscepticism. Nevertheless, the overall increase in the model fit is quite modest, compared with the baseline (bivariate) model, including left-right self-placement only.

The second dimension is much harder to explain: it is weakly associated with the individual’s left-right position, but it is strongly (negatively) associated with the rejection of this scheme – even if the explained variance is only 12 per cent in the model featuring socio-demographic control variables for March 2018, and it is even lower in February 2020 (8 per cent). In this respect, it is important to stress that the

M5S – the party with the largest component of post-ideological voters who refuse to position themselves on the left-right scale – stood at the bottom part of the plot in 2018. Previous research has actually shown that the party has been able to attract both former centre-left and centre-right voters, but it has also attracted a large portion of voters coming from ‘outside’ the traditional political space (Bordignon & Ceccarini 2013). Moreover, the party’s position on the vertical axis, in 2018, was associated with a critical evaluation of national democracy, distrust of the European Union, and a preference for border protection (contrasted with the ideal of an open society). These features seem to reinforce the interpretation of this second axis as an (inverse) populist dimension. Unfortunately, the same indicators were not included in the 2020 survey; nevertheless, the significant change in the Movement’s position on the vertical axis seems to suggest that the party’s potential electorate may have moderated its populist profile. This result will require further empirical evidence, but it is in line with the idea of a complex, largely incomplete and expensive (in terms of electoral appeal) process of institutionalisation.

Ideological and personal polarisation

Still left and right?

In the previous section, the left-right division emerged as strongly connected to the main dimension structuring the political space. However, the presented analyses could not provide any information about the degree of polarisation associated with the most traditional political categories.

To assess the overall party system polarisation trends, the studied time-frame needed to be extended to include, at least, the final part of the so-called Second Republic (1994-2011). Fortunately, the Demos-LaPolis survey series include data collected since the 2008 general election, the last competition characterised both by a centre-left vs centre-right format and by the centrality of the figure of Berlusconi. The results presented in Figure 2 provide the 2008-2020 trends for the adapted version of Dalton’s PI. The analysis ‘zooms in’ on the studied 2018-2020 time-frame - highlighted in grey - providing two observations per year.

The time series of the PI accurately outlines the evolution of the Italian party system over the analysed time-frame. After the 2008 general elections, won by Berlusconi’s centre-right, the system still displayed its bi-polar configuration, and the (ideological) PI – which ranges from 0 to 10 – was at 5.6. The index remained over 5 until at least September 2011. Then, it suddenly dropped to 4.4 in spring 2012, the lowest value in the time series. This important change can be traced to two main factors. First, the final months of 2011 marked the tumultuous end of Berlusconi’s government in the midst of the economic and financial crisis, and the beginning of Mario Monti’s technocratic government, supported both by centre-right and centre-left main parties. Second, in the following months,

the M5S, officially founded in 2009, significantly accelerated its electoral rise, obtaining its first wins at May's municipal elections. This path would bring Grillo's movement to become first party at the 2013 general election. It was a new tri-polar Italy, and the presence of a big 'third' party, bringing together voters coming from the left, right, and outside the traditional political spectrum, largely explained the reduced level of polarisation connected to (traditional) ideological divisions.

Over the following years, the PI, although showing a wavering trend, constantly remained below the 5 threshold – reaching a peak of 4.9 during the 2016 Constitutional referendum campaign. Only after the 2019 European elections, with the already mentioned rise of Salvini's Lega and the parallel decline of the M5S vote, the PI returned to higher levels, 5.1 in 2019 and 5.7 in February 2020 – the highest value recorded since 2009. In the same period, almost all the main regional and municipal competitions reassumed the old centre-left vs centre-right format. Did this herald the return of ideological politics? It might be a hurried conclusion. What the results seem to suggest is that, in line with the analyses presented in the previous section, the partial demise of the tri-polar scheme had given new strength to the left-right division, resuming the levels it displayed in the final part of the Second Republic. However, in the age of post-Berlusconism, was this trend still associated with the action of individual leaders?

Leaders as polarising agents

The first section also postulated the additional (potential) role of political leaders as polarising agents, in the (alleged) age of post-ideological and personalised politics. To what extent do people's views of party leaders divide the electorates of the main Italian parties? Is the degree of polarisation induced by political leaders somehow 'comparable' to ideological polarisation?

The line graphs in Figure 3 display the evolution of the LPI (with RLPIs reported in brackets) for the five main parties' leaders.

Considering the overall trend of the LPI in the 2008-2020 period for main party leaders, one clearly emerges as the most polarising. Berlusconi's scores are the highest for 8 out of 15 of the considered time points, although with generally declining values. This trend is consistent with the opening of a new political season, in which Berlusconi's hegemony over the political system was gradually vanishing.

The first points in the time series coincide with the last years of the so-called Second Republic. In May 2008, the fresh winner of the parliamentary elections and newly appointed prime minister enjoyed broad public support, and his LPI, although the highest for the main party leaders, was 4.2 'only'. This honeymoon effect rapidly disappeared, and, especially during 2010, Berlusconi's fourth government attracted growing criticism, due to the conflicts within the centre-right coalition, the worsening economic conditions, and the personal scandals involving the

leader himself. At the end of 2010, the LPI rose to 5.2 (and the RLPI to 1.4): Berlusconi was harshly condemned by voters of opposition parties while still strongly supported by PdL and LN voters. Umberto Bossi (LN), Berlusconi's closest ally, was the second most divisive leader, with a PI of 4.1. In the following two years, Berlusconi's support further declined, together with his polarising effect, and he was forced to resign in November 2011. In spring 2012 his LPI was 3.7.

Although significantly downsized in his political role, Berlusconi has remained a highly controversial figure even in recent years, especially during election times: the PI rose to 4.7 and 4.2 in 2013 and 2018, respectively, while the lowest values registered since 2019 can be taken as a further proof of his political decline.

No other political actor assumed a comparable role in the most recent phase, at least in terms of durability. Nevertheless, other party leaders have strongly divided the Italian electorate. In 2012, during the first 5 Star boom, Beppe Grillo had a PI of 4.2, the highest value in a phase in which political competition was almost frozen by grand coalition agreements. The following measurements for M5S leaders have registered lower values, even though always above the 3-line both for Grillo and Di Maio. In particular, the LPI was 3.9 after the 2018 general election, with a relative value (RLPI) of 0.8. Di Maio's resignation in January 2020 and the appointment of the uncharismatic Vito Crimi as acting leader have brought the Movement's index to its lowest value to date of 1.6.

Centre-left parties never had divisive political leaders; they never had one before Matteo Renzi, the first – as the political sociologist and PD founder, Arturo Parisi, has put it – to use the pronoun *I* in a political camp that had always put the collective *We* in first place. Renzi strongly reinforced the monocratic rule inside his party and, as prime minister (2014-2016), was able to monopolise public attention for a few years (Ventura 2019). His short (but intense) political cycle can be taken as an example of the frailty of strong leaders, who seem to fade as fast as they rise (Campus 2016). The evolution of his LPI is very interesting, since it marks a clear break with the tradition of centre-left leaders.

Renzi was initially able to attract a large and crosscutting support, being appreciated by significant numbers of non-centre-left voters. His polarising drive largely unfolded within the PD, as Renzi's main (populist) message regarded the 'scrapping' of the old party elites (Bordignon 2014). That's why, after his big success at the European elections of 2014, his LPI was still quite low: 2.9. However, during his months spent in government, Renzi became a highly polarising political actor, much like Berlusconi deeply loved by his followers and almost hated by his opponents. This process culminated with the 2016 Constitutional referendum. In the months leading to a highly personalised vote, Renzi's LPI rose to 4.3 (and the RLPI to 1.1). The defeat of the referendum was the beginning of his fast decline, and after the 2018 general election – another defeat for the PD – his LPI was at 3.3. The initial phase of the Zingaretti era seemed to bring the PD back to the

normal condition of collective, impersonal leadership. In line with this interpretation, Zingaretti's LPI was below 3.

While Renzi's leadership was fading away, a 'second Matteo' – Matteo Salvini – was making his way in Italian politics. It was, once again, a fast rise that, especially during his 14 months as minister of the interior and deputy prime minister, made him the most powerful political actor in Italy. The LPI index shows Salvini's rise was associated with a visible polarisation built around his figure: in Figure 3, the progression of his line is actually the most striking in the whole time series. Being below 2 during the first months of his leadership, his index approached 4 in the lead-up to the 2018 general election, and reached 5.4 in 2019. It rose even further after his decision to leave the government. The figure registered in February 2020 displays the highest value for all political leaders during the analysed time-frame (6.0).

It is also important to stress that, for the first time (in the 2008-2020 period), the LPI registered higher figures compared to ideological polarisation. These results encourage speculations about a new political-personal cycle, the third in the analysed time-frame. After Berlusconi and Renzi, Salvini seems to be a largely divisive figure, and the polarising drive of his leadership corresponds to great personal and electoral success.

At the same time, the analysis suggests caution, for at least three reasons. First, recent political history casts serious doubts on the durability of post-modern leadership over time. From this perspective, Renzi and Salvini seem to live in a different age compared to Berlusconi. Second, polarisation seems to be a highly rewarding political device. However, it is a double-edged sword that often leads a leader to overplay his hand. In this respect, Salvini's moves since summer 2019 have also produced a (temporary) decrease in the Lega's performances in the polls. In this unstable scenario, new leaders can obviously emerge. And being an outsider – or being able to project an outsider's image – is maybe the most important trait a leader's profile should display.

During the first months of 2020, Salvini was already experiencing internal competition from his closest right-wing ally: Giorgia Meloni. Her FdI was the only party in constant rise after the European election. It was actually the only party that could claim to have always been in opposition since its inception in 2013. Meloni's direct and resolute, ironic and blunt communication perfectly fitted the standards of the Italian *populist zeitgeist* (Mudde 2004). The data presented in Figure 3 reveal that Meloni's rise in popularity also combined with an increasing polarisation effect. Her LPI rose over 3 after the 2018 general election and over 4 by the end of 2019. A new 'strong woman' was already challenging Salvini's control over Italian politics.

The alignment between leader and ideological polarisation

Do leader polarisation and ideological polarisation associate and reinforce each other, or does leader polarisation act independently in

structuring the political space, somehow replacing the traditional role played – if not by ideologies – by the categories of left and right? To shed some light on these points, additional analyses have been performed and reported in the online appendix.

First of all, leader evaluations have been introduced as (additional) independent variables in the regression models presented in section three (Table A3 in the online appendix), in order to assess their role in explaining the two main dimensions structuring the political space (isolated by factor analysis). Leader evaluations for the five main party leaders emerged as significant even if the models already included the respondents' self-placement on the left-right scale, the distance from the scale itself and socio-demographic control variables. They emerge as significant for both the analysed phases (March 2018 and February 2020), both when introduced one by one in the baseline models and when introduced all together. In particular, the first dimension appears to be strongly associated with centre-right party leaders.

Even if the results seem to suggest an additional independent role of party evaluations, with respect to ideological orientations, these analyses might be biased by the strong link between leader evaluations and party identification. As suggested in the first section, a different approach can be used to study the alignment between left-right orientations and leader evaluations. Table A4 (online appendix) provides overall correlation coefficients between the two variables and partial correlation coefficients, controlled by vote. We expect the former measures to be generally significant and coherent with party positions on the left-right scale. The partial coefficients should instead signal the strength of the alignment between leader evaluations and left-right orientations within party electorates. We expect leaders with strong ideological profiles to be more strongly supported by ideological voters of their party (or other parties of the same political area) and more strongly opposed by ideological voters of the other parties.

In Table A4, the values of the most polarising leaders for each time point are highlighted in bold characters. Berlusconi's personal support was generally strongly associated with the voters' position on left-right political spectrum – high, positive values reveal the association with the right-wing 'pole', and correlation coefficients were high even when controlled for the vote. Only in recent times, after the 2018 election, the decline in personal support and the 'centrist' positions often assumed by the leader seemed to produce a more 'indefinite' personal position.

The association between M5S leaders' evaluations and the left-right orientation is generally weak and varying. However, if the trend in the overall correlation coefficients seems to mirror the various stages of the evolution of the party, only in recent times have its leaders assumed a weak ideological profile, which nevertheless reflects the Movement's strategic alliances.

Much more interesting is the ideological connotation of the two most polarising leaders who emerged in recent times: Renzi and Salvini.

Although Renzi's overall figures reflect the PD's left-wing legacy (but with the lowest values of the time series, especially in the first stages of his leadership), his partial correlations coefficients were close to zero.

Salvini's overall evaluations emerge as strongly (and positively) correlated with left-right orientations, consistently with the position of the Lega in the ideological space and with the recent reinforcement of the bi-polar scheme (and ideological polarisation). Nevertheless, the recent rise in Salvini's polarisation drive corresponded with declining partial correlation coefficients. In other words, the growing personal polarising drive induced by Salvini's action seems to have partially 'detached' his personal profile from ideological orientations.

Conclusion: unstable polarised personalism?

Since 2011, Italian politics has entered a phase of accelerated political instability in which its old coordinates, cleavages and the corresponding 'poles' seemed to fade away. The 2018 general election confirmed the new tri-polar arrangement and the strength of a new post-ideological, populist line of division. Nevertheless, the turbulent phase of the yellow-green government (2018-19) and the first months of the yellow-red government (after September 2019 and before the Covid-19 outbreak) were once again characterised by deep changes.

This article has examined the mass perspective using survey data to reconstruct the evolution of the political space in the 2018-2020 time-frame and trace trends in party system polarisation. The new concept of leader polarisation and a Leader Polarisation Index (LPI) have been introduced to assess the polarising drive of political leaders and its relationships with ideological polarisation. The results can be summarised in five (interrelated) points.

Back to bi-polarism. The break-up of the yellow-green coalition and the birth of a brand new yellow-red alliance seem to have weakened the tri-polar pattern and fostered the rise of a new bi-polar scheme. At the beginning of 2020, two dimensions were still needed to situate the parties in the political space. Nevertheless, the second dimension, which only a few months before seemed to characterise the new populist axis, now only 'completed' the configuration suggested by the first (left-right) dimension. Even more importantly, only two 'poles' emerged in the political space: on the one side, the novel (highly heterogeneous) M5S-PD government coalition, favoured by the complex (yet incomplete) M5S institutionalisation, and on the other side, the re-formed Lega-led centre-right opposition bloc, deeply redefined in its leadership and internal balance. At the same time, the fast reconfiguration of people's attitudes appeared to be more reactive to the elites' strategies than rooted in social change.

Left-right polarisation. In a highly fluid political landscape – with moving, multiple, overlapping lines of division – the most solid dimension

was still strongly associated with the left-right division. Possibly devoid of the ideological connotation they had in the past, the traditional political categories maintained their salience in structuring people's attitudes. Moreover, Dalton's (adapted) ideological Polarisation Index, after declining between 2012 and 2018, registered an increase after the 2018 general election, suggesting similar figures to 2008-2011, the last years of the so-called Second Republic.

A new personal cycle. Political personalisation emerged as a key component in the explanation of electoral and party dynamics. A central role was played by one leader in particular: Matteo Salvini. His political action and growing popular support, in the 2018-2020 time-frame, not only strongly influenced the other actors' moves and the complete rewriting of the alliance system; it deeply influenced the voters' political orientations as well. An attractive political leader, able to dominate the media arena and ignite public emotions, tapping into relevant polarising issues such as insecurity and immigration, proved to be a necessary competitive weapon. Salvini's direct, brilliant, frank and aggressive language as well as his ubiquitous communication style, combining TV and social networks with permanent campaigning on the ground: all allowed him to connect to a large audience.

High leader polarisation. However, these personal features also made the Lega's Captain a highly divisive political figure. Italy's mass polarisation was confirmed to be largely elite-driven. The trends in the LPI show that Salvini was the most polarising political actor since 2008. Although this dynamic was combined with a rise in ideological polarisation, left-right orientations and leader evaluations were not completely aligned, suggesting an independent polarising effect of leaders' personal cleavages. 'Salvinism' and anti-'Salvinism', in the analysed time-frame, were the new distinctive features of (what might be called) the Italian 'polarised personalism'.

The weakness of strong leaders. Since the final stages of the so-called Second Republic, three personal-polarisation cycles were identified: the final tail of Berlusconi's cycle, Renzi's fast flaring cycle, and Salvini's cycle. Polarisation seems to be a highly rewarding political device for political leaders and, at the same time, a double-edged sword. The empirical evidence suggests political cycles have become shorter and shorter, in recent times. Post-modern polarising leaders shine as long as they are able to present themselves as political outsiders: to embody, through their story, their image, their narrative, the polarising issues which characterise the globalised political landscape. However, their success rests on shaky ground. Fast flares are soon followed by abrupt, often irreversible eclipse. Leaders who seemed to be unstoppable in their rise, destined to control power for years, suddenly (and often ruinously) lose their magic touch.

Democratic malaise, electoral volatility and government instability increasingly characterise contemporary political systems around the world. South European countries are no exception to this scheme (Bosco

& Verney 2016). These features combine themselves with growing political polarisation, which often appear to be elite-driven. In the scenario of post-modern personalised politics, the concept of leader polarisation and the correspondent index could provide scholars with useful theoretical and empirical tools to read the evolution of political systems well beyond the Italian case.

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Table 1. Voting Tendencies in Italy (2018-2020): Electoral Results and Opinion Polls (%)

	Mar. 2018 General Election	Sep. 2018	Mar. 2019	May 2019 European Election	Sep. 2019	Feb. 2020
LeU – The Left	3.4	2.9	2.6	1.7	3.1	3.6
PD	18.7	17.3	19.0	22.7	22.3	20.6
+Europa	2.6	2.6	2.5	3.1	2.5	2.6
Italia Viva	---	---	---	---	---	3.9
M5S	32.7	29.4	23.2	17.1	20.8	14.4
FI	14.0	8.7	9.6	8.8	6.5	6.2
Lega	17.4	30.2	34.4	34.3	32.5	29.2
FdI	4.4	2.7	4.2	6.5	7.4	13.1
Other	6.8	6.2	4.5	5.8	4.9	6.4

Source: Demos & Pi – LaPolis (University of Urbino) surveys

Notes:

LeU-The Left: LeU in 2018-Mar. 2019; The Left at the 2019 European election.

PD: with Siamo Europei at the 2019 European election.

+Europa: with Centro Democratico in 2018-Mar. 2019; with Italia in Comune at the 2019 European election.

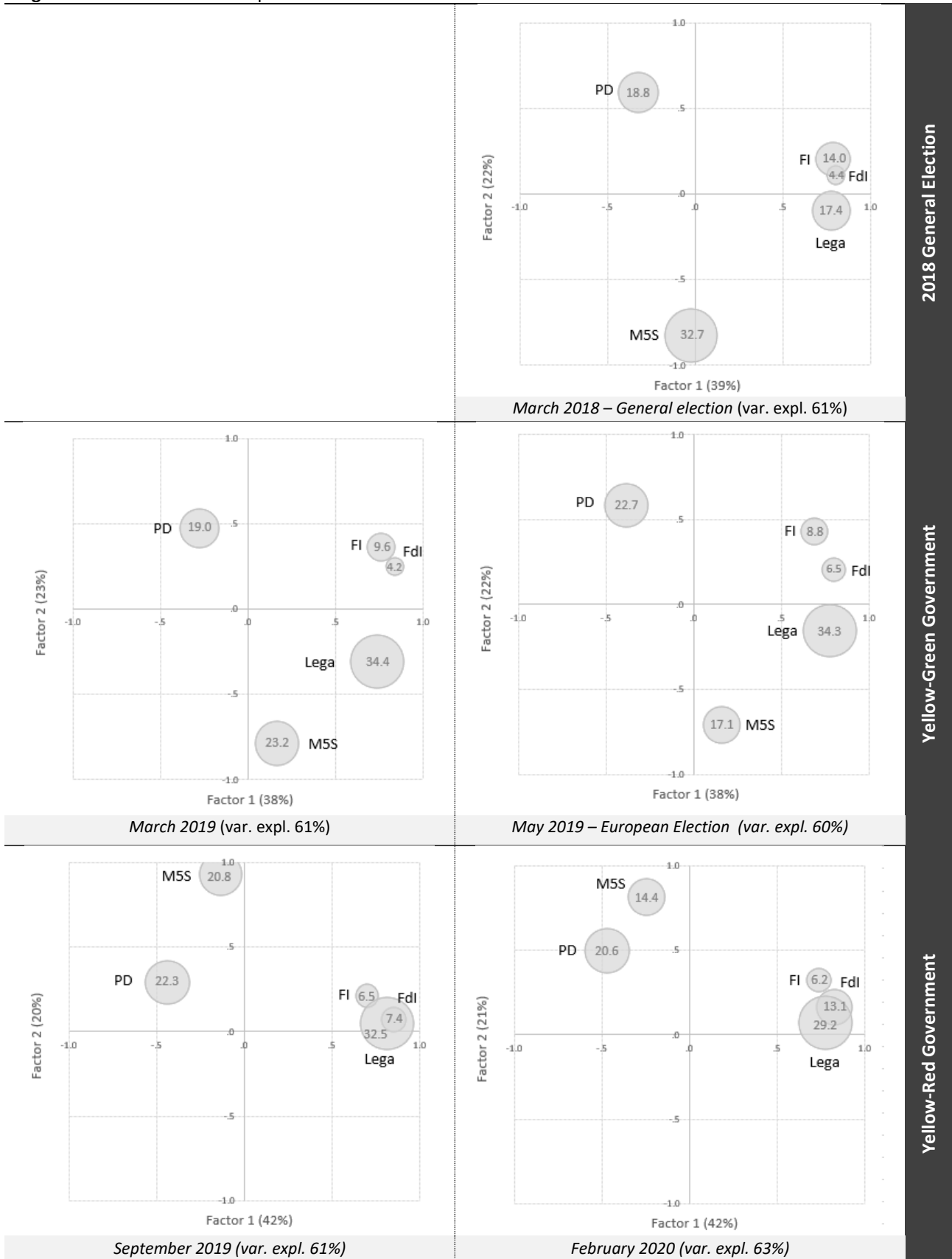
Table 2. Italian Leaders' Favourability Ratings 2018-2020 (%)

	Mar. 2018 post- electoral survey	Sep. 2018	Mar. 2019	Jul 2019 post- electoral survey	Sep. 2019	Feb. 2020
G. Grasso (LeU)	23	32	30	---	---	---
R. Speranza (LeU)	---	---	---	---	27	26
N. Zingaretti (PD)	---	33	44	39	41	37
M. Renzi (PD / IV)	25	23	23	23	25	24
E. Bonino (+Eu)	---	43	46	43	37	44
L. Di Maio (M5S)	48	57	42	45	35	31
B. Grillo (M5S)	28	32	24	21	23	15
G. Conte (Ind)	---	61	58	64	55	52
S. Berlusconi (FI)	28	29	28	31	26	28
M. Salvini (Lega)	46	60	59	54	46	44
G. Meloni (Fdl)	37	39	42	45	44	46

Source: Demos & Pi – LaPolis (University of Urbino) surveys

Note: percentages of positive evaluations (6-10) on a 1-10 scale.

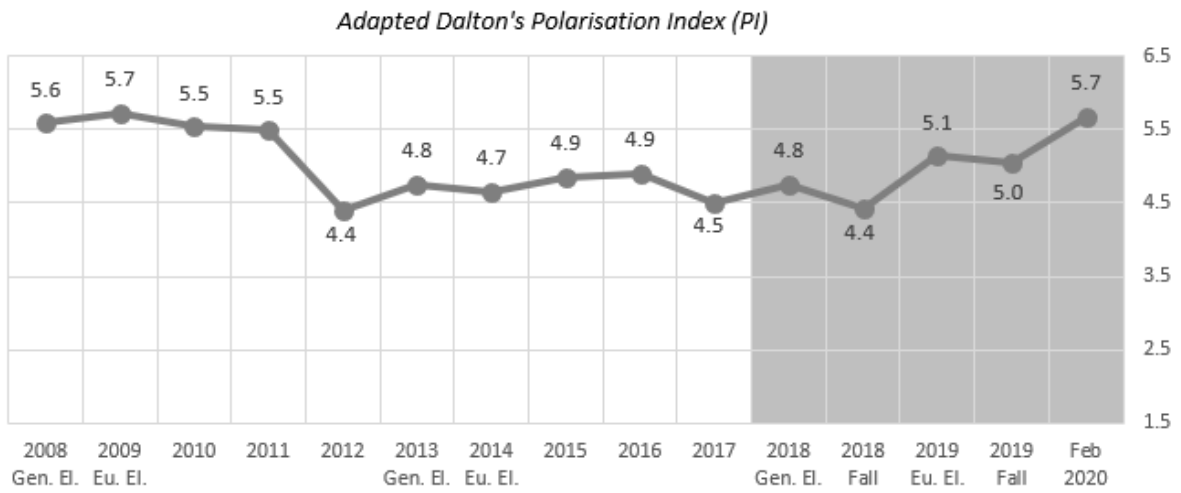
Figure 1. The Italian Political Space 2018-2020



Source: Demos & Pi – LaPolis (University of Urbino) surveys

Note: The table illustrates, for five distinct time points, the results of a factor analysis on voters' declared proximity to the parties over 4%. Each scatter plot displays the factor weights for factors with an eigenvalue over 1. The points representing each party have been transformed into bubbles illustrating the party's electoral strength – in terms of survey estimates or election results. Explained variance for the two main factors (and for each factor) is reported in brackets.

Figure 2. Ideological Polarisation in Italy (2008-2020)

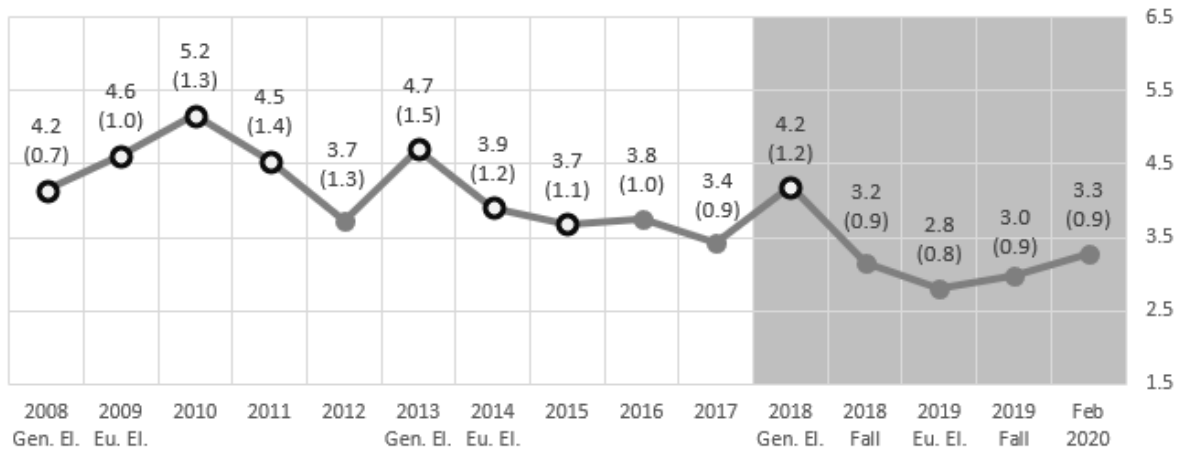


Source: Demos & Pi – LaPolis (University of Urbino) surveys

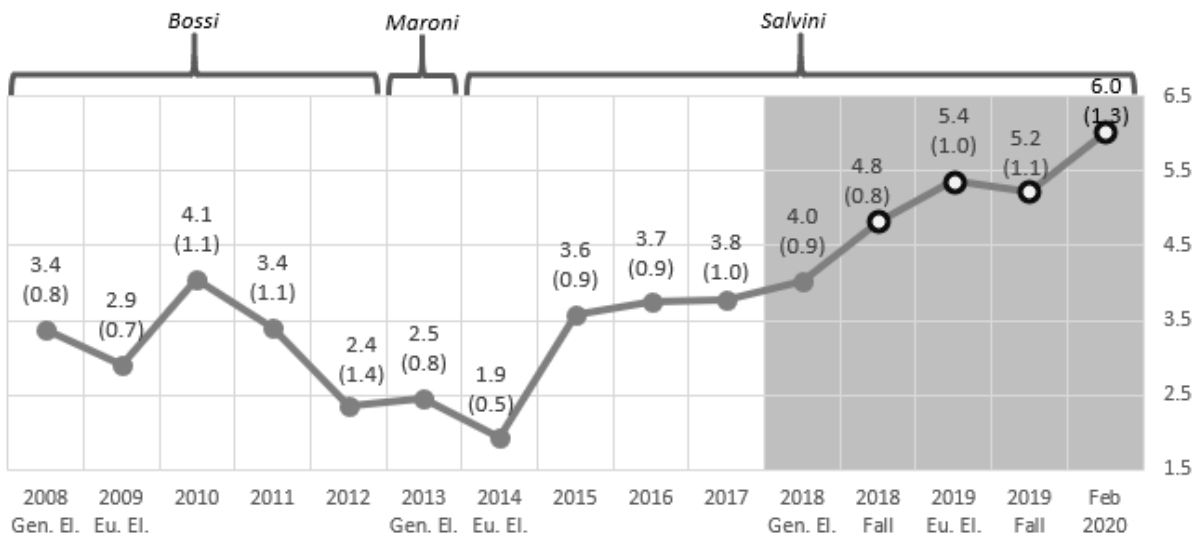
Note: each point on the time axis represents one year, except for the last part of the graph (concerning the period 2018-20 and highlighted in grey), which displays two points for each year. See Table A1 in the online appendix for methodological information about the surveys used in these analyses.

Figure 3. Leader polarisation in Italy (2008-2020)

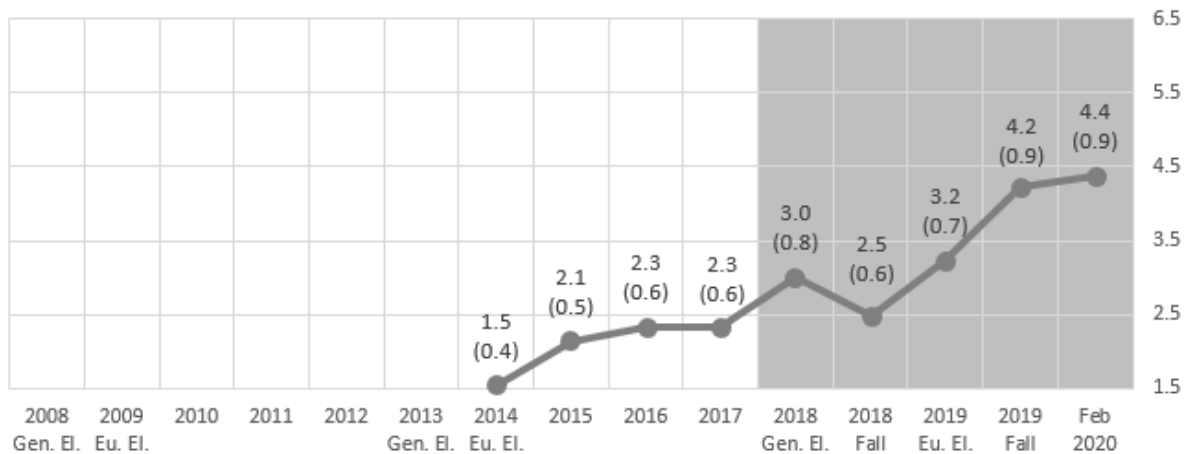
A - Leader Polarisation Index (LPI) and Relative Leader Polarisation Index (RLPI) - PdL / FI (Berlusconi)



B - Leader Polarisation Index (LPI) and Relative Leader Polarisation Index (RLPI) - Lega (Nord)

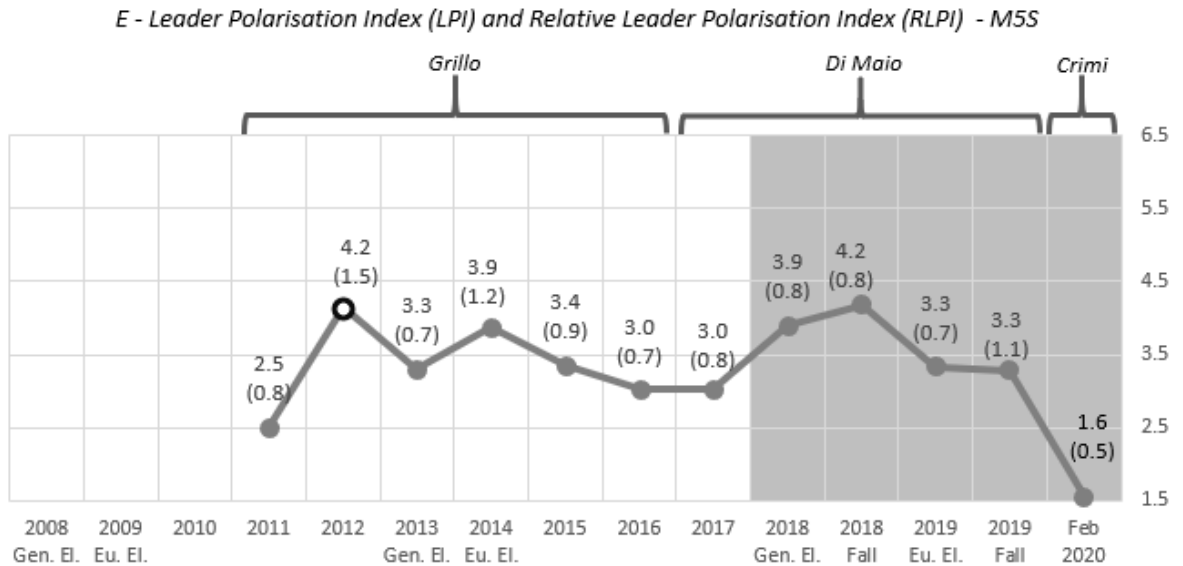
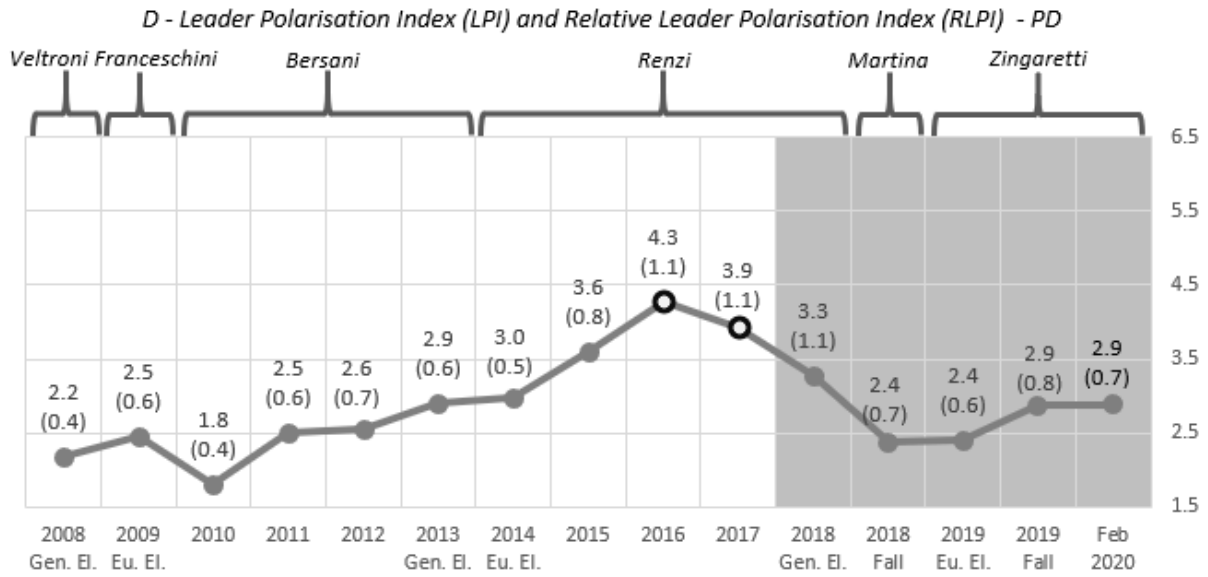


C - Leader Polarisation Index (LPI) and Relative Leader Polarisation Index (RLPI) - Fdi (Meloni)



Continues...

Figure 3. ...continues



Source: Demos & Pi – LaPolis (University of Urbino) surveys

Notes:

● most polarising leader. RLPI in brackets.

Each point on the time axis represents one year, except for the last part of the graph (concerning the period 2018-20 and highlighted in grey), which displays two points for each year. See Table A1 in the online appendix for methodological information about the surveys used in these analyses.

Leadership periods for parties with more than one leader in the analysed time-frame

- Lega (Nord): Umberto Bossi (4 December 1989 – 5 April 2012); Roberto Maroni (1 July 2012 – 15 December 2013); Matteo Salvini (15 December 2013 –).

- PD: Walter Veltroni (15 October 2007 – 17 February 2009); Dario Franceschini (21 February 2009 – 7 November 2009); Pier Luigi Bersani (7 November 2009 – 20 April 2013); Matteo Renzi (15 December 2013 – 19 February 2017; 7 May 2017 – 12 March 2018); Maurizio Martina (12 March 2018 – 17 November 2018); Nicola Zingaretti (17 March 2019 –).

- M5S: Since the official foundation of the M5S, Beppe Grillo acted as party leader. During 2017, Luigi Di Maio was already considered by many as the unofficial party leader, although his mandate officially started in September (23 September 2017 – 22 January 2020); Vito Crimi was nominated acting leader after Di Maio's resignation (22 January 2020 –).

ONLINE APPENDIX

'Leader Polarisation: Conflict and Change in the Italian Political System'

by Fabio Bordignon

Published in *South European Society and Politics*

Table A1. Surveys used in the article

<i>Period</i>	<i>Waves</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>N. of cases</i>	<i>Mode</i>
2020 - February	Feb. 2020 (1 wave)	18+	1019	Mixed mode (CATI-CAMI-CAWI)
2019 - Fall	Sep.- Dec. 2019 (2 waves)	18+	2282	Mixed mode (CATI-CAMI-CAWI)
2019 - Eur. Election	May – Jul. 2019 (2 waves) ¹	18+	2024	Mixed mode (CATI-CAMI-CAWI)
2019 - March	Mar. 2019 (1 wave)	18+	1005	Mixed mode (CATI-CAMI-CAWI)
2018 - Fall	Sep. – Oct. 2018 (2 waves)	18+	2003	Mixed mode (CATI-CAMI-CAWI)
2018 - Gen. Election	Jan. – Mar. 2018 (3 waves) ²	18+	3523	Mixed mode (CATI-CAMI-CAWI)
2017	Feb. – May 2017 (3 waves)	18+	3039	Mixed mode (CATI-CAMI-CAWI)
2016	Oct. – Nov. 2016 (2 waves)	18+	2444	Mixed mode (CATI-CAMI-CAWI)
2015	Mar. – Nov. 2015 (3 waves)	18+	3350	Mixed mode (CATI-CAMI-CAWI)
2014 - Eur. Election	May – Jun. 2014 (2 waves) ³	18+	2046	Mixed mode (CATI-CAMI-CAWI)
2013 - Gen. Election	Jan. – Mar. 2013 (3 waves) ⁴	18+	3546	Mixed mode (CATI-CAMI-CAWI)
2012	Mar. – May 2012 (2 waves)	18+	2048	Mixed mode (CATI-CAMI-CAWI)
2011	Feb. – Sep. 2011 (3 waves)	18+	3293	Mixed mode (CATI-CAMI-CAWI)
2010	Feb. – Dec. 2010 (4 waves)	18+	4148	Mixed mode (CATI-CAMI-CAWI)
2009 - Eur. Election	Mar. – May 2009 (2 waves) ⁵	18+	2287	Mixed mode (CATI-CAMI-CAWI)
2008 - Gen. Election	May 2008 (1 waves) ⁶	18+	2117	Mixed mode (CATI-CAMI-CAWI)

The choice of the waves reflects different criteria: 1. the availability of the required questions in the questionnaires; 2. the proximity of important election days at the national level; 3. the need (when possible) to arrange large data files.

¹ 1 pre-electoral survey and 1 post-electoral survey.

² 2 pre-electoral surveys and 1 post-electoral survey.

³ 1 pre-electoral survey and 1 post-electoral survey.

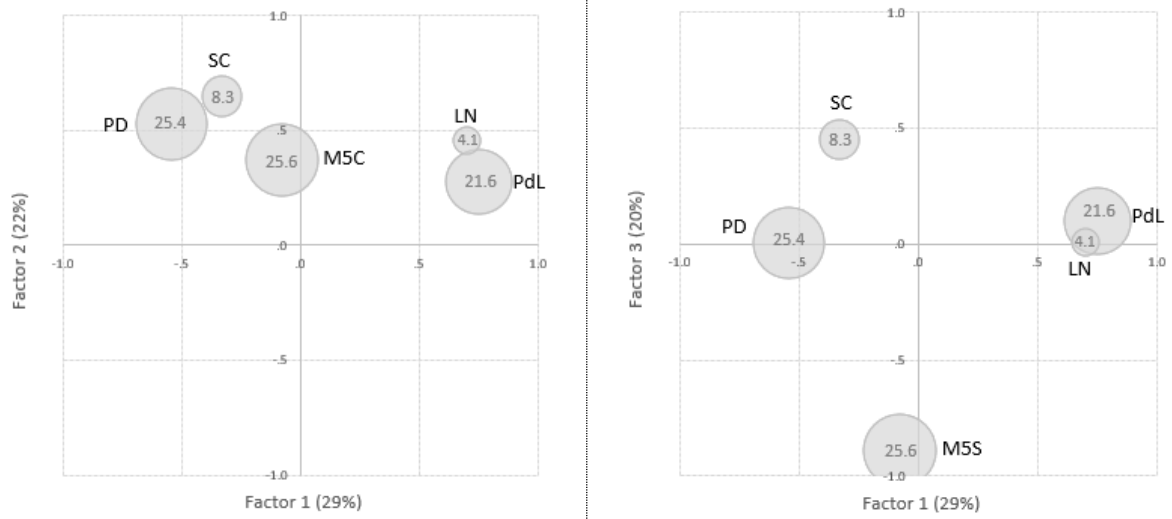
⁴ 2 pre-electoral surveys and 1 post-electoral survey.

⁵ 1 standard survey and 1 pre-electoral survey.

⁶ 1 post-electoral survey.

Figure A1. The Italian political space 2013: the three main factors

February 2013 – General election (var. expl. 72%)



Source: Demos & Pi – LaPolis (University of Urbino) surveys

Note: The table illustrates the results of a factor analysis on voters' declared proximity to the parties over 4%. The scatter plots display the factor weights for factors with an eigenvalue over 1. The points representing each party have been transformed into bubbles illustrating the party's electoral strength. Explained variance for the three main factors (and for each factor) is reported in brackets.

Table A2. Linear regression models with Factor loadings as dependent variables (b coefficients)

	Mar. 2018		Feb. 2020	
	Dependent Variable		Dependent Variable	
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 1	Factor 2
<i>Bivariate models:</i>				
Self-placement on the left-right axis	+0,536***	-0,063**	+0,506***	-0,069**
R ²	0.406	0.006	0.383	0.007
"Distance" from left-right axis	-0,226***	-0,444***	-0,301***	-0,449***
R ²	0.011	0.042	0.019	0.042
<i>Multivariate models:</i>				
Self-placement on the left-right axis	+0,540***	-0,056*	+0,506***	-0,070**
"Distance" from left-right axis	-0,280***	-0,439***	-0,292***	-0,450***
R ²	0.423	0.047	0.401	0.049
<i>Multivariate models - with socio-demographic control variables:</i>				
Self-placement on the left-right axis	+0,545***	-0,048*	+0,504***	-0,074**
"Distance" from left-right axis	-0,299***	-0,458***	-0,310***	-0,480***
R ²	0.432	0.118	0.435	0.080
<i>Multivariate models – with attitude indicators and socio-demographic control variables:</i>				
Self-placement on the left-right axis	+0,478***	+0,015		
"Distance" from left-right axis	-0,330***	-0,367***		
Satisfaction with national economy (1-10 scale)	-0,049	+0,114		
Satisfaction with household economy (1-10 scale)	+0,090*	+0,010		
Opinion: Immigrants are a threat for security (dich.)	+0,327***	-0,044		
Opinion: Italy should protect its borders (dich.)	+0,157***	-0,258***		
Satisfaction with the way democracy works in Italy (1-10 scale)	+0,002	+0,135*		
Trust in the Eu (dich.)	-0,102*	+0,158**		
R ²	0.473	0.159		

Source: Demos & Pi – LaPolis (University of Urbino) surveys

Note: factor loadings derive from the factor analyses presented in Figure 1; socio-demographic control variables are gender, age, education, geo-political area, occupation (the constant and the coefficients of socio-demographic control variables are not reported in the table).

* p < 0.05

** p < 0.01

*** p < 0.001

Table A3. Linear regression models with Factor loadings as dependent variables (b coefficients)

	Mar. 2018		Feb. 2020	
	Dependent Variable		Dependent Variable	
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 1	Factor 2
<i>PD leader - Multivariate models - with socio-demographic control variables:</i>				
Self-placement on the left-right axis	+0.528***	+0.018	+0.443***	+0.040
"Distance" from left-right axis	-0.331***	-0.333***	-0.368***	-0.371***
PD Leader evaluations	-0.041***	+0.159***	-0,073***	+0.137***
R ²	0.442	0.257	0.457	0.155
<i>M5S leader - Multivariate models - with socio-demographic control variables:</i>				
Self-placement on the left-right axis	+0.544***	-0.051**	+0.499***	-0.039
"Distance" from left-right axis	-0.292***	-0.314***	-0.318***	-0.421***
M5S Leader evaluations	-0.009	-0.186***	-0,022	+0.165***
R ²	0.433	0.364	0.437	0.160
<i>FI leader - Multivariate models - with socio-demographic control variables:</i>				
Self-placement on the left-right axis	+0.410***	-0.130***	+0.416***	-0.135***
"Distance" from left-right axis	-0.211***	-0.405***	-0.219***	-0.417***
FI Leader evaluations	+0.125***	+0.075***	+0,116***	+0.081***
R ²	0.530	0.154	0.510	0.117
<i>Lega leader - Multivariate models - with socio-demographic control variables:</i>				
Self-placement on the left-right axis	+0.376***	-0.005	+0.331***	-0.125***
"Distance" from left-right axis	-0.280***	-0.463***	-0.241***	-0.460***
Lega Leader evaluations	+0.134***	-0.034**	+0.136***	+0.040**
R ²	0.538	0.125	0.554	0.090
<i>Fdl leader - Multivariate models - with socio-demographic control variables:</i>				
Self-placement on the left-right axis	+0.391***	-0.077**	+0.364***	-0.136***
"Distance" from left-right axis	-0.167***	-0.433***	-0.236***	-0.447***
Fdl Leader evaluations	+0.144***	+0.027*	+0.141***	+0.063***
R ²	0.528	0.122	0.548	0.102
<i>All party leaders - Multivariate models - with socio-demographic control variables:</i>				
Self-placement on the left-right axis	+0.263***	-0.058**	+0.217***	-0.031
"Distance" from left-right axis	-0.188***	-0.140**	-0.259***	-0.332***
PD Leader evaluations	-0.065***	+0.144***	-0.077***	+0.090***
M5S Leader evaluations	-0.045***	-0.183***	-0.045***	+0.099***
FI Leader evaluations	+0.064***	+0.068***	+0.070***	+0.033*
Lega Leader evaluations	+0.081***	-0.023*	+0.067***	-0.002
Fdl Leader evaluations	+0.077***	+0.021	+0.076***	+0.032*
R ²	0.615	0.525	0.625	0.203

Source: Demos & Pi – LaPolis (University of Urbino) surveys

Note: factor loadings derive from the factor analyses presented in Figure 1; socio-demographic control variables are gender, age, education, geo-political area, occupation (the constant and the coefficients of socio-demographic control variables are not reported in the table).

* p < 0.05

** p < 0.01

*** p < 0.001

Table A4. Total and partial correlations between party leader evaluations and self-placement on the left-right scale, controlled by voted party

	Pd Leader		M5S Leader		FI Leader		Lega Leader		Fdi Leader	
	Total	Partial	Total	Partial	Total	Partial	Total	Partial	Total	Partial
	↓ Veltroni ↓				↓ Berlusconi ↓		↓ Bossi ↓			
2008 - Gen. El.	-0.39	-0.13			+0.60	+0.15	+0.51	+0.17		
	↓ Franceschini ↓									
2009 - Eu. El.	-0.48	-0.16			+0.63	+0.28	+0.40	+0.08		
	↓ Bersani ↓									
2010	-0.33	-0.11			+0.61	+0.20	+0.51	+0.14		
			↓ Grillo ↓							
2011	-0.43	-0.15	-0.22	-0.07	+0.60	+0.31	+0.49	+0.17		
2012	-0.30	-0.14	-0.10	-0.07	+0.50	+0.25	+0.31	+0.11		
							↓ Maroni ↓			
2013 - Gen. El.	-0.41	-0.18	-0.04	+0.02	+0.52	+0.23	+0.36	+0.14		
	↓ Renzi ↓						↓ Salvini ↓		↓ Meloni ↓	
2014 - Eu. El.	-0.18	+0.02	-0.03	-0.03	+0.48	+0.25	+0.33	+0.21	+0.22	+0.12
2015	-0.24	+0.04	+0.04	+0.02	+0.47	+0.26	+0.42	+0.23	+0.27	+0.17
2016	-0.31	-0.09	+0.07	+0.02	+0.46	+0.27	+0.51	+0.29	+0.33	+0.15
			↓ Di Maio ↓							
2017	-0.26	-0.03	+0.07	-0.01	+0.43	+0.23	+0.50	+0.28	+0.38	+0.22
2018 - Gen. El.	-0.28	-0.13	-0.06	-0.08	+0.47	+0.21	+0.48	+0.21	+0.40	+0.17
	↓ Martina ↓									
2018 - Fall	-0.31	-0.13	+0.32	0.15	+0.25	+0.05	+0.57	+0.29	+0.43	+0.21
	↓ Zingaretti ↓									
2019 - Eu. El.	-0.37	-0.14	+0.20	+0.01	+0.34	+0.13	+0.59	+0.21	+0.49	+0.20
2019 - Fall	-0.48	-0.21	-0.23	-0.16	+0.28	+0.05	+0.53	+0.15	+0.54	+0.24
			↓ Crimi ↓							
2020 - Feb	-0.51	-0.26	-0.18	-0.14	+0.42	+0.13	+0.57	+0.09	+0.50	+0.18

Source: Demos & Pi – LaPolis (University of Urbino) surveys

Note: In order to match the results on ideological and leader polarisation, these analyses regard the sub-population(s) casting a valid vote – excluding non-respondents, undecided and abstainers.

Fabio Bordignon teaches Political Science at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo, where he carries out research at the Laboratory of Social and Political Studies. His main areas of interest are electoral behaviour and the personalisation of politics. Recent publications include: with Luigi Ceccarini and Ilvo Diamanti, *Le divergenze parallele. L'Italia: dal voto devoto al voto liquido* (Laterza 2018) and *Il partito del capo. Da Berlusconi a Renzi* (Maggioli 2014).

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