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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Soare, S. (2014). The 2014 Elections in Italy for the European Parliament: an Italian Affair? *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 14(3), 315-332. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-445348>

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The 2014 Elections in Italy for the European Parliament *An Italian Affair?*

SORINA SOARE

In the run up to the 2014 European Parliament (EP) election, pundits, politicians and scholars suggested that the standard theory of EP elections as mid-term contests in which voters cast their votes primarily to punish governing parties should be amended. The first aspect considered was an increased legitimacy and credibility of the EP, given the changed institutional dynamics at the European level. As observed by Corbett, “the EP is in fact now *incontournable* in EU decision-taking [...] This is not a ‘rubber stamp’ Parliament with an acquiescent ‘governing majority’ whose members automatically vote for a proposal by ‘their’ government, as is so often the case in national parliaments”¹. Secondly, in line with the provision of the Lisbon treaty (art. 17(7) TEU)² and the EP resolution of 22 November 2012, for the first time, European political parties were asked to nominate candidates for the Presidency of the Commission, with the explicit aim of “reinforcing the political legitimacy of both Parliament and the Commission by connecting their respective elections more directly to the choice of the voters”³. This strategic investment was supposed to “personalise and Europeanise the elections, raise the salience and stakes of the EP vote, and thus reverse the familiar pattern of low turnouts”⁴. Last but not least, among the potential consequences of Europe’s

¹ Richard Corbett, “European Elections are Second-Order Elections: Is Receive Wisdom Changing?”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, online version first, 2014, p. 1.

² “Consolidated Versions of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union – Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union – Protocols – Declarations Annexed to the Final Act of the Intergovernmental Conference which adopted the Treaty of Lisbon, Signed on 13 December 2007”, Official Journal C 326, 26 October 2012 P. 0001 – 0390, available at: <http://eurlex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12012M/TXT&from=EN>, last accessed 20 September 2014.

³ European Parliament resolution of 22 November 2012 on the elections to the European Parliament in 2014 (2012/2829(RSP)), available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&language=EN&reference=P7-TA-2012-462>, last accessed 29 September 2014.

⁴ Corina Stratulat, Janis A. Emmanouilidis, “The European Parliament Elections 2014 Watershed or, Again, Washed Out?”, European Policy Centre Discussion Papers,

recent economic and financial crisis, EU issues were supposed to become more relevant as voting choices, with direct impact not only on the structure of national party competition, but also on party competition in the EP⁵.

Despite these optimistic premises, in the aftermath of the May 2014 elections, the vulnerability of the European project was once again epitomized not only by the average turnout (below the 2009 EU-27 level of 43%, with a decrease of 0.46%)⁶, but also by the number of seats for extremist platforms both on the far right and far left.

Based on the above, this paper aims to look closely at the empirical evidence from the Italian case. As one of the six founding members of the European Economic Community, the contemporary history of Italy has regularly intersected with the history of the European arena. Significantly, as early as 1941, Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi described their federalist projects in a symbolic Manifesto. A decade after the end of WWII, in Messina, in 1955, and in Venice one year later, decisive inputs to the European project were brought to the political agenda in view of the signature in Rome of the two treaties establishing the EEC and the European Atomic Energy Community. Significant Italian contributions were further linked to the foundation of European agricultural policy in 1962, as well as to the setting-up of the Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in 1975. By the beginning of the 1980s, the so-called Spinelli Plan was to be adopted in the EP, providing a solid basis for EEC institutional reform under the Single European Act (1986), and the Treaty of Maastricht (1992). Note also that the careers of major Italian political and technical figures such as Romano Prodi (president of the European Commission and former prime-minister from 1996-1998, and from 2006-2008), Mario Monti (European commissioner and future prime-minister from 2011-2013), Mario Draghi (president of the European Central Bank) and Federica Mogherini (new high representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) have marked the Brussels' scene. Last but not least, for almost four decades, Italy was renowned as a rather Euro-enthusiastic country, though an emerging decrease in public support for European integration has spread in parallel with a deep disaffection with politics and increasingly visible Euroscepticist and anti-establishment parties and movements such as the Northern League (LN) or the Five Star Movement (M5S).

September 2013, available at: http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_3699_ep_elections_2014.pdf, last accessed 20 September 2014.

⁵ Lorenzo De Sio, Vincenzo Emanuele, Nicola Maggini, "Introduction", in *Idem* (eds.), *The European Parliament Elections of 2014*, CISE, Roma, 2014, available at: <http://cise.luiss.it/cise/2014/07/29/the-european-parliament-elections-of-2014-the-e-book/>, last accessed 29 September 2014.

⁶ See on this topic "The European Parliament. Elected, Yet Strangely Unaccountable", *The Economist*, 17 May 2014, available at: <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21602200-european-elections-will-neither-lend-new-credibility-european-parliament-nor-give>, last accessed 29 September 2014.

Given the above, this article aims to analyze how the EU affected party politics in the 2014 elections for the European Parliament, particularly the discourse used by parties and the positions they adopted. After a brief discussion of the existing literature on the EU elections, the remainder of this article is divided into three sections. First, I look at the general features of party politics in Italy. Second, I delineate the main actors involved in the May 2014 elections by highlighting some of the similarities and differences in relation to the politicization of the EU. Finally, I seek to conceptualize the role of the EU in party politics in Italy, and suggest lines for future research.

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS: NATIONAL AFFAIRS?

When dealing with the topic of the elections for the EP a recurrent, though not consensual⁷, element in the literature refers to European elections as “additional national second-order elections” (*Nebenwahlen*), which are not only determined more by domestic political cleavages than by European issues, but also tend to be less important than the major electoral stake: the national elections⁸. Accordingly, the EP is depicted as “mid-term contests in the battle to win national government office, and so voters primarily use these elections to punish governing parties”⁹. In other words, what influences the electorate’s decisions is mainly the dynamics of national politics. In direct consequence, this model tends to interpret voting behavior in EP elections in relation to three constant elements. EP elections tend to:

(1) be characterized by a rather low turnout compared with national competitions because there is “less at stake”;

(2) provide major opportunities for smaller parties to be represented, given that citizens have the opportunity to express a sincere vote rather than a strategic one, and hence to cast their vote for parties closer to their preferences, and that have smaller or no chances of forming a (national) government. Hence large parties tend to perform worse, whether in government or in opposition, while smaller parties outperform;

(3) be a test for governing parties that generally perform worse, losing votes in favor of the opposition.

In all, from the supply level, the standard theory of the EP considers that parties’ and politicians’ main concern is to secure national government offices,

⁷ Nick Clark, Robert Rohrschneider, “Second-Order Elections Versus First Order Thinking: How Voters Perceive the Representation Process in a Multi-Layered System of Governance”, *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 31, no. 5, 2009, pp. 645-664.

⁸ Karlheinz Reif, Hermann Schmitt, “Nine Second-Order National Elections. A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results”, *European Journal for Political Research*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1980, p. 3.

⁹ Simon Hix, Michael Marsh, “Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament Elections”, *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2007, p. 495.

and as such tend to invest fewer resources in EP campaigns. On the demand side, the assumption is that there are consequently fewer incentives for voters less familiar with EU issues and politicians to take part in these contests.¹⁰ In brief, “voters cast their votes not only as a result of conditions present within the specific context of the second-order arena, but also on the basis of factors in the main political arena of the nation”¹¹, both in terms of the domestic economic situation and, in general, government performance or in relation to other issues that characterize the domestic competition among parties¹². The EP elections are thus secondary in relation not only to the main contest arena – elections for the makeup of national governments – but also to the national dimension of the topics of debates¹³.

These general trends are conditioned by variability in timing: in those cases in which EP elections are organized immediately after a national election, though turnout might be lower, the governing formula should be able to control the wave of satisfaction after the recently organized elections. On the contrary, if EP elections are organized before the upcoming national election, the level of mobilization of both supply and demand will be higher¹⁴. Over the last decade, this classic view of European elections has been partially amended. Kousser, for example, finds evidence in favor of an increasing number of defectors as the time between domestic and EP contests grows¹⁵. Varying evidence has been found in relation to the standard assumption according to which governing parties lose and opposition parties gain¹⁶. Hix and Marsh’s analysis of the 2009 European elections confirmed the early 1980’s framework of analysis within contests monopolized more by domestic issues and government performance than EU topics, and the positions of the political groups in the EP or the performance of individual MEPs¹⁷, though important nuances were suggested in relation to the shared bad performance of socialist parties, whether in government or opposition. The two scholars suggest a possible reassessment of the classic assumption according to which “a genuinely ‘European’ election

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 496.

¹¹ Karlheinz Reif, Hermann Schmitt, “Nine Second-Order National Elections...cit.”, p. 9.

¹² Similar conclusions are provided, among others, by scholars such as Michael Marsh, “Testing the Second-Order Election Model after Four European Elections”, *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 284, 1998, pp. 591-607 or Simon Hix, Michael Marsh, “Punishment or Protest?...cit”.

¹³ Simon Hix, Michael Marsh, “Punishment or Protest?...cit.”, p. 496.

¹⁴ Karlheinz Reif, “National Election Cycles and European Elections, 1979 and 1984”, *Electoral Studies*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1984, pp. 244-255.

¹⁵ Thaddeus Kousser, “Retrospective Voting and Strategic Behavior in European Parliament Elections”, *Electoral Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2004, pp. 1-21.

¹⁶ Federico Ferrara, J. Timo Weishaupt, “Get Your Act Together: Party Performance in European Parliament Elections”, *European Union Politics*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2004, pp. 283-306.

¹⁷ Simon Hix, Michael Marsh, “Second-Order Effects Plus Pan-European Political Swings: An Analysis of European Parliament Elections Across Time”, *Electoral Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2011, pp. 4-15.

might not in fact be an election where citizens are motivated by their attitudes towards the European Union [...] but rather a contest where across Europe citizens respond to current policy concerns in similar ways"¹⁸. The same scholars, in a 2007 research, also observe that "there is some evidence to suggest that parties' positions towards the EU influence which parties gain or lose votes in these elections"¹⁹. Similar nuances were advanced in a study by Hobolt, Spoon and Tilley²⁰, pointing toward rather complex empirical evidence and divergent explanations. In particular, the three scholars suggested an alternative explanation to the second-order election framework, and argued instead that voters tend to defect because parties in government tend to be more pro-European, while the campaigns express Eurosceptic sentiments. For scholars like de Vries and Tillman²¹, there is increased evidence of the relevance of European issues for understanding the parties' results in EP elections; it is mainly in the context of the post-communist countries that the EU issue seems to be more salient.

In opposition to this standard framework, there are fewer scholars voicing in favor of a rather vague "Europe matters" camp. In this area, Corbett, for example, suggests that the EU *does* matter to the electorate. While agreeing that turnout for European elections has drastically declined over a thirty-year period, Corbett suggests that this decline is smaller than the figures registered in sixteen Member States for national elections over a similar period. Additionally, the influence of European issues on party competition has increased, in particular during the current economic crisis, and debate over immigration policies²². In parallel, within a post-functionalist frame, scholars like Hooghe and Marks posit that the post-Maastricht European arena has become the object of increased politicization at a national level. In other words, the EU is no longer seen as an exclusive domain of political elites, but as a rather controversial issue debated in the electoral competitions and in a wider arena of protest²³. The EU seems increasingly to be a topic of political conflict²⁴; this line of research

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁹ Simon Hix, Michael Marsh, "Punishment or Protest?...cit.", p. 495.

²⁰ Sara B. Hobolt, Jae-Jae Spoon, James Tilley, "A Vote Against Europe? Explaining Defection at the 1999 and 2004 European Parliament Elections", *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 39, 2008, pp. 93-115.

²¹ Catherine E. de Vries, Erik R Tillman, "European Union Issue Voting in East and West Europe: The Role of Political Context", *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 9, 2011, pp.1-17

²² Richard Corbett, "European Elections are Second-Order Elections...cit.", pp. 1-2.

²³ Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, "A Postfunctional Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus", *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1-23.

²⁴ Catherine de Vries, Wouter van der Brug, Marcel van Egmond, Cees van der Eijk, "Individual and Contextual Variation in EU Issue Voting: The Role of Political Information", *Electoral Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2011, pp. 16-28.

indirectly challenges the view that EP elections are primarily national rather than European contests.

Thirty-five years after the first direct election of the EP, the literature tended to point towards a rather complex frame of understanding of voters' choices in EP elections. On the one hand, there is evidence supporting the idea that EU issues are more frequently raised by political actors in public debates in parallel with an expansion of the (non)political players involved in these public debates. On the other hand, there is clear proof that it is necessary to differentiate this process across countries according to their different national histories²⁵. Similarly, an institutional focus underscores increased EP competencies, in particular in relation to the power over the election of the president of the EU Commission. On the other side, empirical evidence in terms of electoral behavior still confirms the previously observed features: EU issues have a rather weak effect compared with other electoral determinants (in particular left/right positions or the perceptions of economic benefit and social identity)²⁶, the prevalent dimension of interpreting voter choice seems to remain the voters' opportunity to mark their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the incumbent national government²⁷. This converges with the recent analysis by Bartkowska and Tiemann: the two scholars point out the fact that specific economic policies are quite vaguely defined, and voters have difficulties not only in attributing responsibility at the national and EU level, but also in evaluating alternative programs²⁸.

ELECTIONS UNDER THREAT OF POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS

In order to introduce the topic of the May 2014 elections for the EP in Italy, several introductory elements are needed. First there are the features of the party politics in Italy. Among the causes for the breakdown of the First Republic²⁹, scholars such as Calise have pointed to the crisis of the parties, which had been the main pillars of the overall political system (within

²⁵ Swen Hutter, Edgar Grande, "Politicizing Europe in the National Electoral Arena: A Comparative Analysis of Five West European Countries, 1970–2010", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 32, n. 5, 2014, pp. 1002- 1018.

²⁶ Catherine de Vries, Wouter van der Brug, Marcel van Egmond, Cees van der Eijk, "Individual and Contextual Variation in EU Issue Voting:...cit."

²⁷ Monika Bartkowska, Guido Tiemann, "The Impact of Economic Perceptions on Voting Behaviour in European Parliamentary Elections", *The Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2014, first published online, p. 1.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ During the period from 1948 to 1993.

Parliament, but also within the state machinery) since the late 1940s³⁰. While the First Republic's powerful Italian parties failed to assure their survival, and disintegrated, the political landscape of the Second Republic³¹ has been characterized by a tense and highly polarized climate in which "a collection of fragile, fluctuating, litigious associations of ambitious leaders proliferated"³². In parallel, after the 1993 abolition of the proportional electoral system of the First Republic, and the adoption of a mixed system, a bonus-adjusted proportional electoral system was implemented in 2005. Fruits of strategic electoral engineering, both reforms "contributed to the (re)shaping not so much of Italian parties and the party system, but of the electoral and the governing coalitions"³³. Hence, as noted by Valbruzzi, "extreme fluidity and personalization are the keywords for the correct understanding of the Italian second party system"³⁴ within a party landscape dominated by two unstable and fragmented coalitions (center-right vs. center-left) that regularly alternate in power, with changing names and configurations of partners³⁵.

Beyond these aspects, there are also the avatars of what Bull and Newell refer to as the unsolved debate over fundamental institutional reform³⁶. Considering the contentious character of the debated institutional reforms, together with the personalization of politics³⁷, it looked as if Italy's Second Republic was somehow *lost in transition*³⁸. Finally, an understanding of current Italian party politics has to take into account the consequences of a pervasive and financial and sovereign debt crisis since 2008.

It makes sense to consider that Italy has been living under a permanent electoral campaign since the political stalemate that characterized the last months of Berlusconi's 4th Cabinet (2008-2011). Moreover, the Italian political and economic crisis put the entire EU under siege, given that Berlusconi's resignation occurred several days after the fall of Greek Prime-Minister Papandreou, and in a context of similar economic emergency. Since 2011, Italy

³⁰ Mauro Calise, "Into the Third Republic. Parties without Presidents and Presidents without Parties", *Studia Politica. Romanian Journal of Political Science*, vol. XIII, n. 4, 2013, p. 711

³¹ The period after 1993.

³² Gianfranco Pasquino, "Democracy at Stake", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. XIII, no. 4, 2013, p. 611.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 608.

³⁴ Marco Valbruzzi, "Not a Normal Country: Italy and its Party System", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. XIII, no. 4, 2013, p. 626.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ Martin J. Bull, James L. Newell, "Still the Anomalous Democracy? Politics and Institutions in Italy", *Government and Opposition*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2009, pp. 42-67.

³⁷ Mauro Calise, *Il partito personale. I due corpi del leader*, Laterza, Roma & Bari, 2010.

³⁸ Sergio Martini, Mario Quaranta, "An Unresponsive Democracy? Explaining the Dynamics of Italian Political Discontent: 1973-2012", *Paper SISP 2013*, p. 15, available at: <http://www.sisp.it/files/papers/2013/sergio-martini-e-mario-quaranta-1548.pdf>, last accessed 20 September 2014.

has complied with austerity measures in three consecutive cabinets, which stimulated not only the rise of wide social protests, but also anti-establishment movements such as the M5S. In this context, the lack of a clear winner in the 2013 legislative elections led to complex negotiations for the formation of a government. The political deadlock fed by the results of the February 2013 general elections seemed solved for a while by the compromise solution of Enrico Letta's oversized majority-cabinet (initially including Berlusconi's PDL and then its splinter, the New Center Right [NCD]). Still, after less than a year in office, the PD prime-minister had been shoved out of power by his own party and the newly elected party secretary, Matteo Renzi, sworn in as prime-minister, with a government program based on rapid economic and institutional reform (including electoral and constitutional reform) in February 2014. Renzi's cabinet was inaugurated with direct emphasis on the EU, with Renzi calling Italy's presidency of the EU in the second half of 2014 "a gigantic opportunity".

Thus the 2014 elections for the EP were organized by a newly installed cabinet with a rather shaky parliamentary majority under the constant challenge of the anti-establishment M5S, but also of Berlusconi's evergreen center-right Forza Italia. Still, from the very beginning, the electoral campaign was portrayed as a two-party political race, with the center-left PD in poll position, followed closely by Beppe Grillo's M5S, while Berlusconi's Forza Italia came at below 20%³⁹.

European elections were seen as the canvas on which national motivations were dissolved, given that the elections for the EP were rapidly translated into a test for the credibility of the new prime-minister, whose legitimacy was granted by the open primary elections organized by the PD in December 2013⁴⁰. The EP elections were thus a surrogate of national elections, in line with PM Renzi's quest for legitimacy (n.b. – the turnout was a major issue, and this explains the PD's interest in encouraging people to vote

³⁹ Part of the explanations behind this rather meager result is linked to the fact that the party leader, Silvio Berlusconi, was now a convicted felon by the Milan Court of Appeals, which sentenced the former PM to a two-year ban from public office. Although involved in a truculent electoral campaign, Berlusconi could not stand for office or vote. See Carlo Ungaro, "Hubris and Nemesis: The Nine Lives of Mr Berlusconi", *openDemocracy*, 6 May 2014, available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/carlo-ungaro/hubris-and-nemesis-nine-lives-of-mr-berlusconi>, last accessed 20 September 2014.

⁴⁰ Matteo Renzi won the selection for the party leadership (open not only to party members, but also to ordinary voters – a 2.814.881 turnout) with 67.6 percent of the vote, versus 18.2 percent and 14.2 percent, respectively, for his two rivals, Gianni Cuperlo and Giuseppe Civati. Renzi challenged the party leadership from his position as mayor of Florence on the basis of a catchy metaphor – *il rottamatore* (the scrapman) – which translated as his main objective of inducing a renewal of the PD through a generational turnover. For more details see Gianfranco Pasquino, Fulvio Venturino (eds.), *Il Partito Democratico secondo Matteo*, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2014.

strategically for the government)⁴¹. The election campaign echoed the previous 2013 legislative campaign, with constant references to the EU's role in regulating national economies. While the 2006 and 2008 legislative elections had very little to do with Europe, Europe was a major topic of debate in the 2013 general elections: the *fil rouge* was the different positions parties adopted on the fiscal austerity line endorsed by the EU, as well as by the Eurosceptical positions embraced by the Lega Nord and M5S, with recurrent emphasis on a referendum on Italy's Euro membership. In the 2014 European elections, the Lega Nord and M5S maintained a critical view on the EU in relation to both tougher anti-immigration policies and a critical assessment of Italy's Euro membership. Similar positions were endorsed by a small right party, Brothers of Italy (FDI), as well. Note that the parties that endorsed the Tsipras List (The Other Europe) developed a campaign based on a radical critique of the EU-imposed austerity measures. The EU-politically-correct PD focused its campaign on the need for reforms, with catchy objectives eventually endorsed in the program of the Italian Presidency of the Council, such as a review of competition policy to favor EU industries, and a strategy for youth employment (Table 1).

Table 1

Main Themes of the Most Recent Three Parliamentary Elections in Italy⁴²

Election Year	Main themes	Mention of European themes
2006	Taxation; unemployment; immigration; Berlusconi	Not salient
2008	Economy; public spending; bankruptcy of Alitalia; immigration	Not salient
2013	Financial & economic crisis; taxes and fiscal pressure; government instability; corruption & justice system reform; institutional reform & electoral reform	The fiscal austerity policy advocated by the EU; referendum on Italy's Euro membership

⁴¹ On this issue see Gianfranco Pasquino, Marco Valbruzzi, "Il Partito democratico: Renzi sta sereno?", in Marco Valbruzzi, Rinaldo Vignati (eds.), *L'Italia e l'Europa al bivio delle riforme. Le elezioni europee e amministrative del 25 maggio 2014*, Istituto Carlo Cattaneo, Bologna, 2014 pp. 115-117.

⁴² Sources: Tim Haughton, "Money, Margins and the Motors of Politics: The EU and the Development of Party Politics in Central and Eastern Europe", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 52, n. 1, p. 77 and Giorgia Bulli, "Electoral Campaigning in the Italian 2013 Elections. Innovation and Tradition", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. XIII, n. 4, 2013, pp. 659-674.

OLD AND NEW FACES IN THE EP ELECTIONS IN ITALY

2014 European elections were held fifteen months after the national election, in a rather peculiar context. The rhetoric was quite similar – the fiscal austerity and the economic reforms mandated by the EU – though the players changed, at least the principal ones.

First, there was young Prime-Minister Renzi instead of middle-aged former PD Secretary Pierluigi Bersani. Silvio Berlusconi's problems with the judiciary kept him from a total immersion in the electoral campaign, while Forza Italia was weakened by a growing rowing number of defections. Leading figures left the party in November 2013 in an attempt to save Letta's cabinet and, under the leadership of Angelino Alfano, created New Center Right (NCD). Meanwhile, the Lega Nord maintained unchanged positions on the cap on Northern regionalism, and tough stances on immigration, but distanced itself from founding-leader Umberto Bossi, who was involved in a major corruption scandal. Roberto Maroni temporarily took over the party leadership until the party primaries, organized in December 2013, when Matteo Salvini succeeded in defeating Bossi (with 82% of the votes). Immediately after his election, the young leader, Salvini, called for stronger anti-immigration stances, and supported closer ties to parties such as the Front National. The M5S remained stable, with constant emphasis on the need for renewal and revitalization of democracy voiced by former comedian Beppe Grillo.

At this point, parties involved in the elections entered the campaign for the EP with quite different motivations. In the case of Renzi, Alfano, and Salvini, parties invested in this competition in order to reinforce the credibility/legitimacy of their new leadership. In particular, the leader of the government, Renzi, invested in the campaign with the aim of obtaining a higher share of the vote than the previous party secretary had in the 2013 national election, but also of containing the forecasted "populist tide" across Europe on both extremes. Last but not least there was an element of "European" prestige for the prime-minister, who would take over the six-month rotating presidency of the Council of the EU after the May 2014 elections, with a political agenda particularly important for Italy: the stimulation of economic growth, and the struggle against unemployment.

The effect of the timing of the European election in relation to the most recent electoral cycles was *ex ante* depicted as mixed. According to the literature, the number of defectors from the governing party/coalition increases in parallel with the time period between domestic and EP contests. The EP elections were organized in a peculiar context: fifteen months after the most recent national elections but only three months after the installation of the new

cabinet. The Letta government's economic results were rather poor, while Renzi's agenda was full of ambitious projects, with no concrete results available. There were numerous open questions: Was the popularity of the new prime-minister able to shape voting behavior in European elections? Whose government performance would voters evaluate, Letta's or Renzi's? Was the government party in an advantageous position, with elections held fifteen months after the most recent general elections?

Traditionally, EP elections tend to penalize large parties (whether in government or in opposition) while small parties do much better relative to their performance in the national election immediately prior to each European election. On paper, the 2014 EP elections were supposed to be a window of opportunity for new leaderships like Alfano's and Salvini's and their smaller parties. For Grillo's movement, the EP elections were seen as a new opportunity to voice discontent over the establishment, and to employ once again an online mode for selection of 73 candidates⁴³. The M5S was expected to valorize its position as the opposition party, though from a rather difficult position of auto-ostracism, i.e., the constant refusal of any form of collaboration with the mainstream parties (either the PD or the government coalition). While Grillo's Movement was supposed to capitalize on the European tide of Euroscepticism⁴⁴, the stake for Salvini had a rather different European dimension. Indeed, the Lega Nord had been one of the parties involved by the Front National and the Dutch Freedom Party in discussions on forming a new group in the EP⁴⁵. In the case of Berlusconi, the EP elections were seen as the possibility to solve party's

⁴³ Note that in 2009, Beppe Grillo backed the election to the European Parliament of two independent candidates, Luigi De Magistris and Sonia Alfano, in the lists of Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values, IDV). Fabio Bordignon, Luigi Ceccarini, "Five Stars and a Cricket. Beppe Grillo Shakes Italian Politics", *South European Society and Politics*, vol. 18, n. 4, p. 430. For the 2014 online selection see Martina Castigliani, "Europee, pronta la lista dei 73 candidati M5S. Ecco chi sono i volti per Bruxelles", *Il fatto quotidiano*, 4 April 2014, available at: <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2014/04/04/europee-pronte-le-liste-candidati-m5s-per-il-secondo-turmo-hanno-votato-in-33500/939443/>, last accessed 29 September 2014.

⁴⁴ The Five Star Movement was to team up with Nigel Farage's UKIP in an attempt to "bring down Brussels" from within the EP. Bruno Waterfield, "Italy's Beppe Grillo joins Nigel Farage's 'people's army'", *The Telegraph*, 12 June 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/eu/10896432/Italys-Beppe-Grillo-joins-Nigel-Farages-peoples-army.html>, last accessed 20 September 2014.

⁴⁵ The formation of a parliamentary group was described as strategically important not only to voice discontent with EU policies, but also to obtain extra funding, staffing and speaking time. In the aftermath of the May 2014 elections, the alliance between the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and M5S succeeded in forging a parliamentary group with the support of a defector from France's National Front (FN). The populist group led by the FN failed to register an official parliamentary group, due to the refusal to form alliances with parties like Golden Dawn in Greece, Jobbik in Hungary, or the Polish nationalist party (KNP).

internal crisis and allow Berlusconi to once again amaze his critics by overcoming initially dramatic poll results. Forza Italia's campaign had to face the challenge of its leader's ban from public office, as well as the limits due to Berlusconi's judiciary obligations to do social work, though the sentence allowed Berlusconi to benefit from indirect publicity before and during the elections.

The Eurozone crisis was supposed to play a very important role in Italy's 2014 EP elections. European issues were visible in the campaign not only in discussions on avoiding the "Greek" path or the need for economic reforms, but also in a Eurosceptic key. Indeed, the M5S put together its traditional anti-corruption appeals with anti-immigration stances and criticisms of Italy's Euro membership. A similar view was encapsulated by the Lega Nord's alliance with Geert Wilders' appeal "to liberate our countries from the 'monster' that is Brussels"⁴⁶. Within the alliance led by Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders, Matteo Salvini voiced in favor of a so-called "iron pact for a different Europe" that is "not based on servitude to the euro and banks, ready to let us die of immigration and unemployment"⁴⁷. In line with the Lega Nord's and M5S's emphasis on stricter measures on immigration, or their criticisms of Brussels technocrats, the campaign experienced a notable turn towards more Eurosceptic stances, justified mainly on cultural grounds, though protectionist stances also emerged in the debates. In the ultimate analysis, the EU played a more explicit role in shaping parties' discourses on Europe, though regularly filtered by national strategies, with the primary objective of politicians and parties to remain in national government office.

In sum, the campaign for the EP became a tribune with two main characters – Renzi and Grillo, each appealing to the image of *homo novus*, and the need for radical change – with various secondary actors in the background. The rhetoric of the two frontrunners was different in content and target audience. While Renzi and the Democratic Party put major emphasis on a message of hope, appealing to the PD's core electoral base (pensioners, public employees), to the elderly, and more in general to those who intend to defend their current socio-economic position, Grillo's M5S made wide use of fear, anger, and alarming tones of voice directed primarily to the younger generation and a large number of small business owners⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ "Wilders-Le Pen Alliance: What Makes It, What Breaks it?", *Euractiv*, 16 May 2014, available at: <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/eu-elections-2014/wilders-le-pen-alliance-what-makes-it-what-breaks-it-302155>, last accessed 29 September 2014.

⁴⁷ Mara Bizzotto, Karin Kadenbach, Giulio Carini, "Populist Snapshots: Lega Nord (Italy)", *OpenDemocracy*, 18 March 2014, available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/mara-bizzotto-karin-kadenbach-giulio-carini/populist-snapshots-lega-nord-italy>, last accessed 29 September 2014.

⁴⁸ Roberto Orsi, "The European Elections in Italy May Be a Signal that Beppe Grillo's Vision Is Simply Too Negative for Italians to Accept in the Long Term", *LSE Blog*, 2014, available at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/06/04/the-european-elections-in-italy->

EU Elections in Italy: A Clear Winner

Following the accession of Croatia, in 2013, the number of seats in the EP rose from 736 to 751; in the process of reallocation of EP seats, Italy obtained one supplementary seat (from 72 to 73). The allocation of the 73 seats is based on the adoption of a proportional representation system applied to five national electoral districts and a threshold set at 4%⁴⁹. Beyond these technicalities, the results of the European election in Italy were certainly surprising. There was a decline in turnout compared with the previous EP elections (- 7,83% with respect to the 2009 EP elections – see Table 2), but also a lower turnout in European than national elections (-17.97% compared with the 2013 legislative elections)⁵⁰. Still, the level of participation was higher than the EU average (+ 14.68%). On the whole, until the 1989 EP elections, Italian voters had a rather high level of participation (an average of 83.06%). In parallel with the disintegration of the First Republic, Italy experienced a homogenization towards lower turnout levels. Still, Italy belongs to the group of countries with relatively high levels of turnout compared with the EU average, and the average turnout rate of the Central and Eastern European Member States (Figure 1).

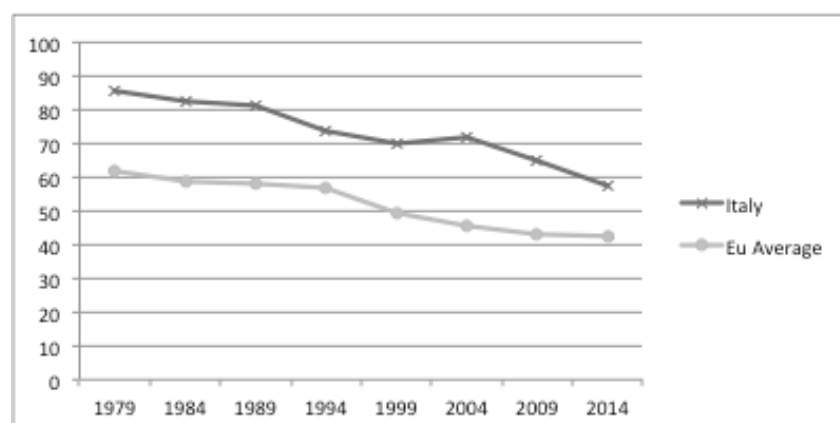


Figure 1. Turnout EU Elections in Italy (1979-2014)⁵¹

may-be-a-signal-that-beppe-grillos-vision-is-simply-too-negative-for-italians-to-accept-in-the-long-term/, last accessed 29 September 2014.

⁴⁹ The mechanism of transformation of votes into seats is based on the Hare quota method. For more details see Filippo Tronconi, Marco Valbruzzi, "Punizione o protesta? Il voto ai governi europei", in Marco Valbruzzi, Rinaldo Vignati (eds.), *L'Italia e l'Europa al bivio delle riforme...cit.*, pp. 15-23.

⁵⁰ Idea voter turnout data for Italy, available at: <http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?CountryCode=IT>, last accessed 29 September 2014.

⁵¹ European Parliament Official Data, available at: <http://www.resultselections2014.eu/en/turnout.html>, last accessed 29 September 2014.

The key result is that the main governing party won more votes than the main opposition party, the M5S⁵². Grillo's M5S was the largest political party in the 2013 EU elections and was supposed benefit from its status of opposition party. However, while the PD obtained 40.8% of the votes, the M5S gathered only 21.2%, and a weakened Forza Italia 16.8%. Within these results, the Lega Nord's 6.2% reflects a successful strategy of recovery after a series of corruption scandals.

Table 2

Results of the 2014 EP Elections in Italy⁵³

Party	EP Group	Votes (%)	Seats	Seats (change from 2009) ⁵⁴
Democratic Party	S&D	40.81	31	+10
Five Star Movement	EFDD	21.15	17	n.a
Forza Italia	EPP	16.81	13	-16
Lega Nord	NI	6.15	5	-4
New Center Right –Union of the Center	EPP	4.38	6	-
The Other Europe	GUE/NGL	4.03	6	+4

The Italian results are in sharp opposition to those Europe-wide, where the parties of the prime-ministers got fewer votes than in the previous national election⁵⁵. The data from Table 2 support the theory that European elections held shortly after a national election tend to favor the party in government. The PD's success reflects a still active "honeymoon period" between the party in government and the electorate⁵⁶. The party leading the government coalition

⁵² Note that according to Hix and Marsh, "On average, governments in European Parliament elections were 7.5 per cent down on their vote share in the previous national election. Moreover, government losses were greater the further into the national election cycle the European Parliament elections were held". "Second-Order Effects Plus Pan-European Political Swings...cit.", p. 6.

⁵³ Based on European Parliament official data, available at: <http://www.results-elections2014.eu/en/election-results-2014.html>, last accessed 29 September 2014.

⁵⁴ The compared results in seats obtained by the main political parties in the 2014 EP are rough computations considering that there have been numerous changes in the composition of the electoral lists. For example, the NDC was previously part of the PDL (together with the current Forza Italia). New political actors entered the political scene, among which the M5S but also the NCD.

⁵⁵ Filippo Tronconi, Marco Valbruzzi, "Punizione o protesta?...cit.", p. 18-20.

⁵⁶ D'Alimonte observes that the loyalty rate of PDs electorate in these elections is particularly high, almost all of those who voted for PD in 2013 voted for it again in 2014.

increased its votes with respect not only to the 2009 EP elections, but also to the 2013 national elections⁵⁷. The correlated result is that the PD has become the main party in terms of seats within the S&D group (the Italian delegation constitutes 31 seats of 191, 4 more than the traditionally stronger SPD delegation). In a wider EU perspective, Tronconi and Valbruzzi⁵⁸ observe that the parties in government for less than 180 days (which is Renzi's case) tend to reinforce their vote shares, though with several caveats. While positive results were registered in the case of Latvia's new coalition government, headed by former Minister of Agriculture Laimdota Straujuma, Manuel Valls' government faced a strong defeat, in line with the victory of the Front National.

Based on data from Table 2, the PD's success is undisputable, but the range of the party's success is even wider if we consider that since the first EP elections, held in 1979, the PD is the Italian political party that has obtained the highest share of votes ever recorded⁵⁹. The PD's electoral success is also supported by a rather homogenous territorial coverage, though there were visible electoral feuds in central Italy, in particular in the region of Tuscany (56.4%). As noted by Maggini, the PD was the first political party also in the northeastern regions, an area formerly controlled by the Christian Democrats in the First Republic, and thereafter by Forza Italia and the Lega Nord. In a similar vein, the M5S had greater success in the southern regions; compared with the 2013 general elections, the Movement lost a high number of votes in the northwestern regions⁶⁰. Note that Forza Italia also registered its best performances in the southern areas⁶¹. As observed by Pasquino and Valbruzzi, the geographic distribution of the vote indicates that the PD led by Renzi overcame all the traditional weaknesses of its forebears, the Christian Democrats and the Communist Party, by gaining a homogeneous national distribution of voting: "The PD was first in all Italian regions, and in 107 of 110 provinces. It achieved good results even in areas of the north (both the northwest and the northeast), which have been hostile and almost impenetrable since 1994"⁶².

This successful mobilization is credited first of all to M. Renzi's capacity to bring PD voters and new ones to the polls. Roberto D'Alimonte, "High Fidelity and New Votes for Renzi", in Lorenzo De Sio, Vincenzo Emanuele and Nicola Maggini (eds.), *The European Parliament Elections of 2014*, cit., pp. 99-100.

⁵⁷ Still, this increase has to be contextualized, in view of the rather low turnout.

⁵⁸ Roberto D'Alimonte, "High Fidelity and New Votes for Renzi", cit., p. 20.

⁵⁹ Nicola Maggini, "Electoral Results: The PD from the 'Majoritarian Vocation' to Its Realization", in Lorenzo De Sio, Vincenzo Emanuele and Nicola Maggini (eds.), *The European Parliament Elections of 2014*, cit., pp. 89-90.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

⁶² Gianfranco Pasquino, Marco Valbruzzi, "Il Partito democratico...cit.", p. 121.

Though according to the standard theory that large parties, whether in government or opposition, tend to lose votes to smaller parties, the 2014 EP elections in Italy confirmed the electoral appeal of large parties. The M5S sent the second largest Italian delegation to the EP. The M5S's 17 MPs became highly appealing, in particular for those parties aiming to maintain/create parliamentary groups. Grillo decided to leave the decision to an online platform⁶³, and eventually chose the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy group (EFDD) led by the UKIP leader Nigel Farage. The Lega Nord's results were its worst since the 1994 EP elections, losing almost half of its MEPs⁶⁴. Still, on the whole, the new leadership succeeded in surpassing the 4% threshold, with sizable increases in the central and southern regions⁶⁵, and the Lega Nord's results were considered a sign of recovery after a steady decline⁶⁶. Still, the Lega Nord's involvement in the populist alliance fronted by Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders was less successful, considering the failure to gather members from at least seven EU member states.

ITALY, PARTY POLITICS AND THE EU: CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

The principal conclusion based on analysis from the above is that despite the persistent economic crisis and weak political equilibria, the 2014 EP elections were not used by Italian voters to punish governments. Held shortly after the new Renzi cabinet was sworn in, the outstanding results of the leading party of the government coalition confirmed the standard interpretations on the effect of the timing of the European elections in relation to the national electoral cycle. The Renzi-led PD proved to still be in a "honeymoon" period with the Italian voters. Though the turnout was lower (with respect to both the 2009 EP elections and the most recent national elections), the governing party received 2.500.000 votes. As D'Alimonte's analysis illustrates, behind these figures there was first the high level of loyalty among voters, who cast their preference for the PD in both the 2013 national elections and in 2014. The electoral behavior stressed that the main reason for Renzi's success was his ability to bring PD

⁶³ The results of the online procedure were: 23.192 votes in favor out of 29.584 total votes (3.533 votes were cast in favor of the status of non-attached members, and 2.939 for joining the European Conservatives and Reformists.

⁶⁴ Note that in the 2009 EP elections, the Lega achieved its highest national result ever □ slightly higher than the 1996 national elections results □ with 10.2% (9 seats).

⁶⁵ Nicola Maggini, "Electoral Results...cit.", p. 97.

⁶⁶ In the 2013 legislative elections, the Lega obtained 4.1% of the votes in the Chamber and 4.3% in the Senate (0.5% less than the 8.3% in the 2008 national elections).

voters to the polls⁶⁷. There were also important percentages of voters who switched their support to the leading government party. Considering the stake of credibility of the new government, the PD and its prime-minister were highly motivated to try to influence other voters as well. The voting shifts to the PD came from almost all the other parties in the elections, though to different degrees. The most significant shift of preference came from former prime-minister Mario Monti's Civic Choice⁶⁸, and to lesser degrees from M5S, Forza Italia, and even Lega Nord voters.

Overall, then, though EU institutional equilibrium has undergone major changes since the first European Parliament elections, in 1979 (*in primis* the notable increase in the power of the European Parliament), and EU issues have been more relevant in national political debates, the Italian case seems to demonstrate that the primary motivation of both politicians and voters is to position themselves in relation to the national government. As an indicator, electoral campaigns did focus on EU issues and policies, but almost compulsorily through the lenses of the performance of the national government. Hence the debates had little to do with EU politics, and more with the jurisdiction of the EU institutions in relation to sensitive national issues such as management of the financial and sovereign debt crisis. Furthermore, considering that electoral participation is generally seen as an indicator of democratic functioning, the empirical evidence confirms that fewer citizens participated in the 2014 European Elections in Italy, and among those who did participate important vote switching was identified. The classic explanation seems to be valid in this case also: Italian voters were less motivated to turn out because of the prevalent perception that the stakes were lower. This perception was fed by the supply side (party, politicians and media). From a strictly rational perspective, it can be said that considering the costs for both sides (in time, resources, and mobilization for parties or in voting for the citizens), the expected returns were definitely lower in these European elections.

The "party size" variable *per se* mattered less given that, with the exception of the PD, both small and large parties lost part of their voters compared with the previous national elections. As in the rest of Europe, anti-EU parties did still better than average in a campaign in which issues such as immigration and the economic crisis were regularly present. This analysis on

⁶⁷ Roberto D'Alimonte, "High Fidelity and New Votes for Renzi", cit., p. 100. More specifically, in the city where Renzi used to be mayor before being sworn in to government, the PD gained the votes of 95% of its previous electorate. The lowest loyalty rate among the PD voters was registered in the south, in Palermo, though it was still above 70%. For the same cities, D'Alimonte observed that 38% of those who voted for the M5S in 2013 did not vote for it again in Florence during the EP elections and 45% in Palermo did not.

⁶⁸ Data on vote shifts from Roberto D'Alimonte, "High Fidelity and New Votes for Renzi", cit., p. 100.

European Parliament elections in Italy seems to support the classic view that these elections were primarily national contests rather than European ones, considering that national issues – e.g., the legitimacy of the newly born Renzi cabinet – rather than European issues shaped both politicians' and voter's behavior. Nevertheless, there is some evidence to suggest that positions towards the EU influenced Eurosceptic parties, both the Lega Nord and the M5S. If the issue of the EU's legitimacy remains a problem, the 2014 European elections were a suitable instrument for solving the deficit of legitimacy of the incumbent cabinet.

Based on the above, the Italian case provides evidence of a “national stake with a European twist”: the stability of the incumbent government in view of Italy's presidency of the Council of the European Union. As in the past, the national dimension prevailed, given that in the end, though not directly, the Italian vote in the 2014 European elections was a distinctly “Italian Affair”: an ideal window of opportunity to register endorsement of the incumbent government.