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Russo, Luana; Valbruzzi, Marco

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# The impact of the pandemic on the Italian party system. The Draghi government and the ‘new’ polarisation

Luana Russo <sup>a</sup> and Marco Valbruzzi <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences - Department of Political Science, Maastricht University, Maastricht, Netherlands; <sup>b</sup>Department of Social Sciences, University of Naples Federico II, Naples, Italy

## ABSTRACT

In 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic dominated the agenda of Italian politics as much as it had done in 2020. Political conflicts within the parties were relegated to the background or else were heavily influenced by the debate concerning management of the health emergency. The global scale of the pandemic and the measures taken at European level to mitigate the economic impact helped first to put an end to the Conte II government and then to bring to office a government of national unity led by Mario Draghi. All the parties represented in Parliament joined the government with the sole exception of Brothers of Italy, which decided to remain in opposition. In this context, the parties found themselves having to grapple with the need to cooperate as governing partners while also maintaining their recognizable profiles. Moreover, the effective absence of the coalitions with which they had previously been associated forced the parties to consider potentially new alliances and what they would mean for future political equilibria. This article will explore the state of the Italian party system, taking as our point of departure these circumstances, which are of considerable significance both nationally and internationally. First, we shall consider the dynamics of the party system as a whole and then, in more detail, we will explore the dynamics within the main parties and their respective coalitions.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Italian party system;  
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In 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic dominated the agenda of Italian politics as much as it had done in 2020 (Giovannini and A Cura Dimosca 2021). Political conflicts within the parties were relegated to the background or else were heavily influenced by the debate concerning management of the health emergency. The global scale of the pandemic and the measures taken at European level to mitigate the economic impact (specifically, the opportunity for Italy to access the resources of the Recovery Fund) helped first to put an end to the Conte II government and then to bring to office a government of national unity led by Mario Draghi, who had been president of the European Central Bank from 2011 to 2019. All the parties represented in Parliament joined the government with the sole exception of Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI), which decided to remain in opposition. This led to temporary divisions within the coalitions based on the traditional programmatic and ideological commonalities.

**CONTACT** Luana Russo  [l.russo@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:l.russo@maastrichtuniversity.nl)  Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences - Department of Political Science, Maastricht University, Grote Gracht 90-92 (room B2.14), Maastricht 6211 SZ, Netherlands

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The Draghi government took office with a clear mandate concerning two objectives that were intimately connected. One concerned management of the pandemic and implementation of the measures to contain it; the other had to do with management of the resources made available by the Recovery Fund. With regard to the first objective, the two containment measures adopted in 2021 were the vaccination campaign and the introduction of the so-called green (or Green Pass) vaccination certification requirements. With over 80% of the adult population having been fully vaccinated, Italy is one of the countries with the highest rates of vaccination in Europe – higher, for example, than France, Germany, Austria and the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> It is also the European country with the severest restrictions on access not only to recreational activities but also to places of employment.<sup>2</sup> If, as we shall see, support for these measures is considerable and (to varying degrees) independent of party-political affiliations, it is also case that the measures have given rise to numerous protests. As a consequence, political debate at the national level has shifted from the traditional issues dividing parties with ideological affiliations familiar to voters, to the cross-cutting issue of containment of the pandemic – an issue which, thanks to its salience, has a massive affective load and is therefore highly polarizing. When, in such cases, the degree of affect and hence polarization reaches critical levels, the consequence is an increase in the volume of political activism and in the likelihood that such activism is potentially dangerous (Mason 2018).

The second objective, i.e. management of the conspicuous resources made available by Europe, while it was decisive in bringing about the fall of the Conte II government (Cotta 2020; Garzia and Karremans 2021), during 2021 was on the whole relegated to the background. Attention was mainly focussed on the launch of the vaccination campaign (and on the growing scepticism of the ‘anti-vaxers’) – as well as on management of the easing of restrictions at the beginning of the summer and, from November onwards, on management of the fourth wave.

In this context, the parties found themselves having to grapple with the need to cooperate as governing partners while also maintaining their recognizable profiles and therefore distinguishing themselves effectively from their competitors in order not to lose contact with their voters. Moreover, the effective absence of the coalitions with which they had previously been associated – coalitions that had already been undermined and forced to redefine themselves thanks to the election of 2018 (Valbruzzi and A Cura Di Vignatie 2018; Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2019) – forced the parties to consider potentially new alliances and what they would mean for future political equilibria.

In this article, we shall explore the state of the Italian party system, taking as our point of departure these circumstances, which are of considerable significance both nationally and internationally. First, we shall consider the dynamics of the party system as a whole and then, in more detail, we shall explore the dynamics within the main parties and their respective coalitions.

### **The external pressures on the party system: Covid, the European Union and the impact of Draghi**

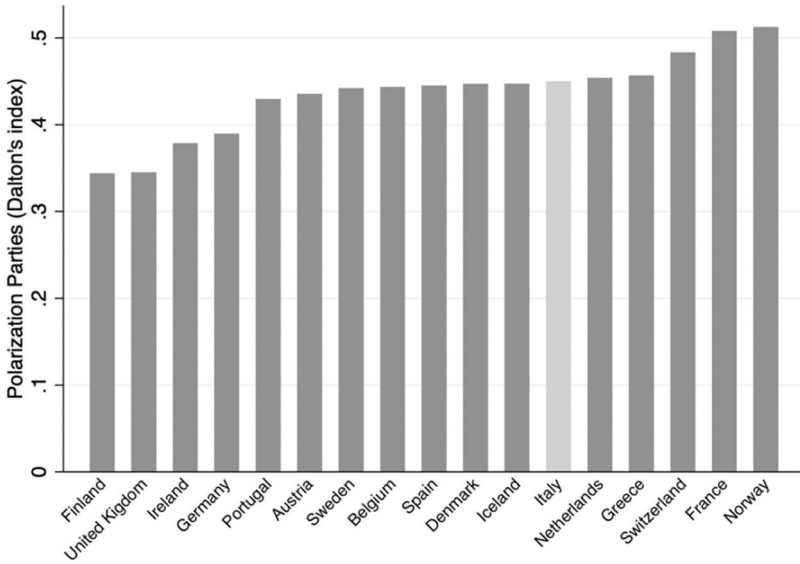
The political events leading to the formation of the Draghi government were ones that arose, broadly speaking, from both national and European requirements. The severity of the health and economic crises caused by the pandemic placed the parties under pressure to cooperate in the national interest. This made it necessary for them to soft peddle the

competition between themselves so that they could work together under the leadership of a high-profile individual, Mario Draghi. He would have the two-fold task of building domestic support (among the population and within the parties or at least a large majority of them) and building confidence among Italy's European partners in order to obtain the resources provided by the Recovery Fund.

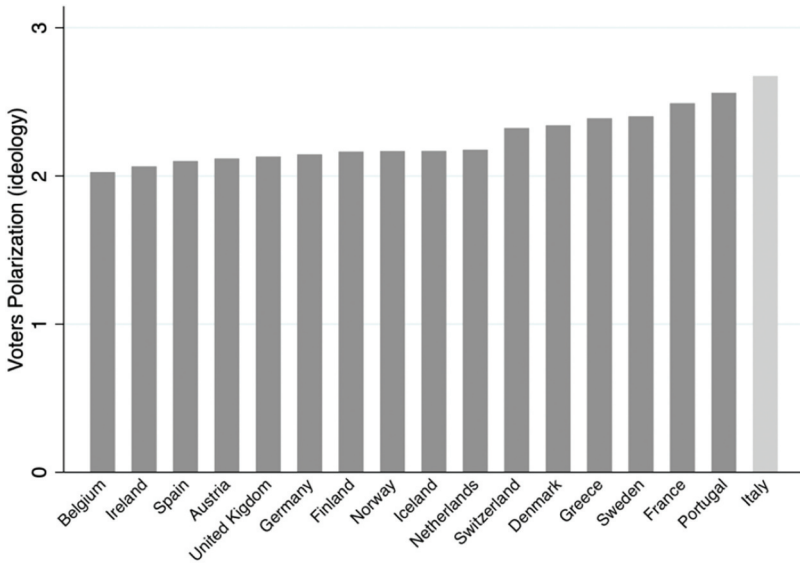
Draghi's was not the first government to be formed in the wake of a financial crisis. The events that led to the formation of the Monti government in November 2011 were to a degree similar and took place against the background of a party system with the same structural characteristics, and of a similar emergency situation (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2012; McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014). The political space available to parties to reach the agreements and find the solutions needed to enable them to form governments of national unity or grand coalitions (as has happened on three occasions in the last four legislatures in Germany), depends to a large extent on the degree of polarization among the elites – and therefore among the parties – but also among the electorate more broadly. There is little or no consensus in the existing academic literature concerning the extent to which or how these two elements of polarization are interconnected (see, for example, Aldrich 2012; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005). Nevertheless, examining them in parallel provides a perspective from which to explore the most recent changes in the Italian party system. As is well known, the concept of political polarization is multidimensional and takes place at a number of different levels. Thus, not only can it be applied to both parties and voters, but it can also be distinguished qualitatively in terms of ideological polarization (based on where on the left-right spectrum parties or voters are located) (Carroll and Kubo 2018) or affective polarization (based on the intensity of the hostility felt towards political adversaries) (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). As Figure 1 shows, in terms of the ideological polarization of parties,<sup>3</sup> Italy, when compared with the other European democracies, has values on the middle-to-high side.

If we consider the degree of ideological polarization among the population (Figure 2),<sup>4</sup> we see that the Italian electorate has the highest values among this group of European countries. It can be suggested that this is due to the fact that Italy has for long (since before the success of the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five-star Movement, M5s)) been divided by a distinct ideological cleavage (Itanes 2006) due to both historical and institutional factors. For example, the fact that Italy, unlike other European democracies, completely incorporated a recourse to pre-electoral coalitions is an indicator of the ideological affinities of the parties making up such coalitions (Golder 2006). Indeed, in contrast to what has happened in situations of electoral stalemate in Germany (with the first, the third and the fourth Merkel government's), grand coalitions in Italy have been possible only when a political actor lacking a clear ideological profile (Pirro 2018; Mosca and Tronconi 2019; Zulianello 2020), as in the case of the M5s in 2013 and 2018, has undermined the bipolar equilibrium. On those occasions, the Movement's location outside the traditional left-right spectrum attracted voters from both political line-ups (Russo, Riera, and Verthé 2017) and obliged the other parties to seek allies outside the established electoral coalitions, which until then had marked and reinforced the ideological polarization of their voters.

Moreover, given the high levels of ideological polarization in Italy, it seems clear that participating in a government of national unity (with the necessary differences in terms of discontent among their respective followers) is potentially counterproductive for the parties

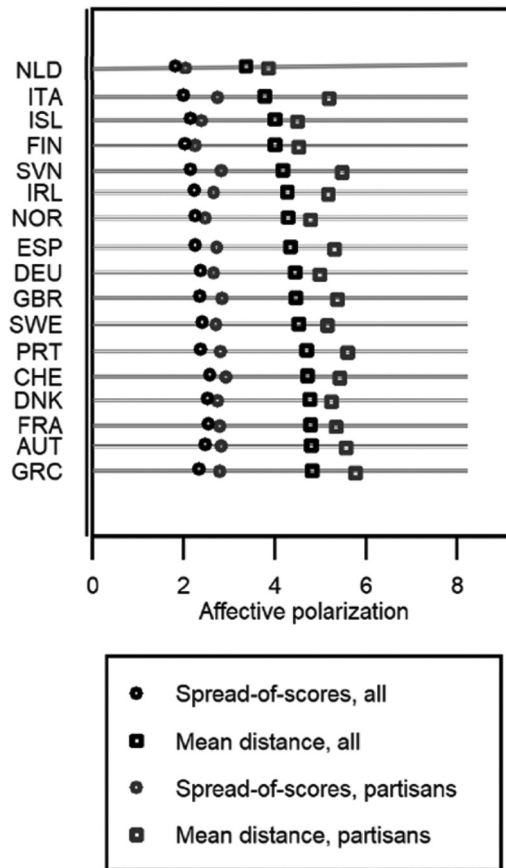


**Figure 1.** Polarization of the parties in seventeen European countries. Source: Authors' elaboration of data provided by ParlGov (Döring and Manow 2021) – Eurobarometer (2014–2019).



**Figure 2.** Ideological polarization of the electorate in seventeen European countries. Source: Authors' elaboration of CSES (Comparative Study of Electoral Systems) data. Note: Average value for all waves – Eurobarometer (2014–2019).

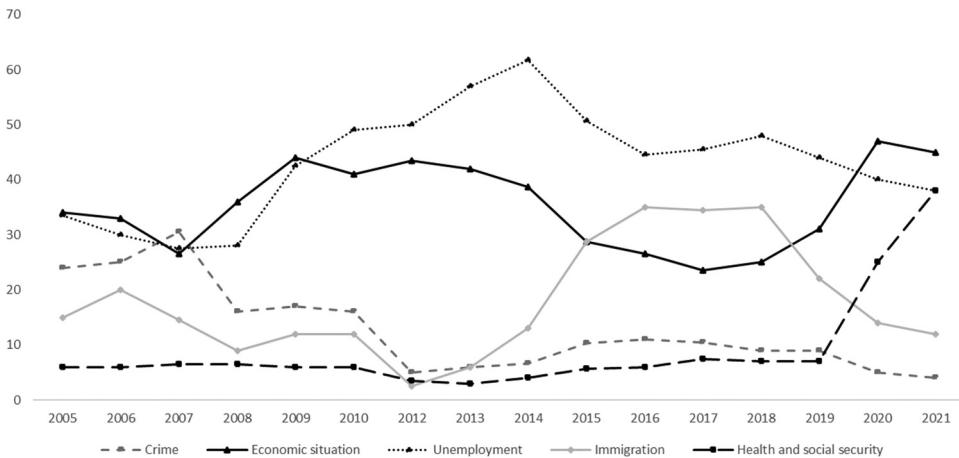
concerned. However, there are two aspects that must be taken account of. First, when we consider the affective component of polarization, as shown in Figure 3,<sup>5</sup> Italy has high values among party identifiers, but among the lowest values in Europe for the electorate as a whole (Dalton 2002). Second, as can be seen from Figure 4, the pandemic had the effect of



**Figure 3.** Affective polarization in seventeen European countries. Source: Authors' elaboration of CSES M5 (2016–2021) data taken from Wagner (2021).

shifting the axis of polarization from the dimension of party ideology to a new, purely issue-based dimension, cross-cutting the ideological positions of parties and voters, that is, the dimension relating to the management and containment of the pandemic. This shift, together with the considerable support for Draghi as Prime Minister, went a long way in enabling parties that were ideologically opposed, and whose supporters had a considerable aversion for each other, to come together in a government of national unity. At the same time, all the parties (with the exception of FdI) had to get to grips with the two-fold requirement of supporting the measures of the government of which they were part – a government led by a prime minister enjoying considerable support nationally (Diamanti 2021) and internationally – while also communicating clearly with their voters.

On the one hand, providing clearly differentiated political alternatives as has happened in Italy, increases ideological polarization (Grossmann 2014) with potentially negative consequences, if only because ideological and affective polarization are clearly correlated (Reiljan 2020). On the other hand, it facilitates correct sorting on the part of voters as it sends clear heuristic messages helping voters to make choices that are consistent with their actual preferences (Russo, Franklin, and Beyens 2021).

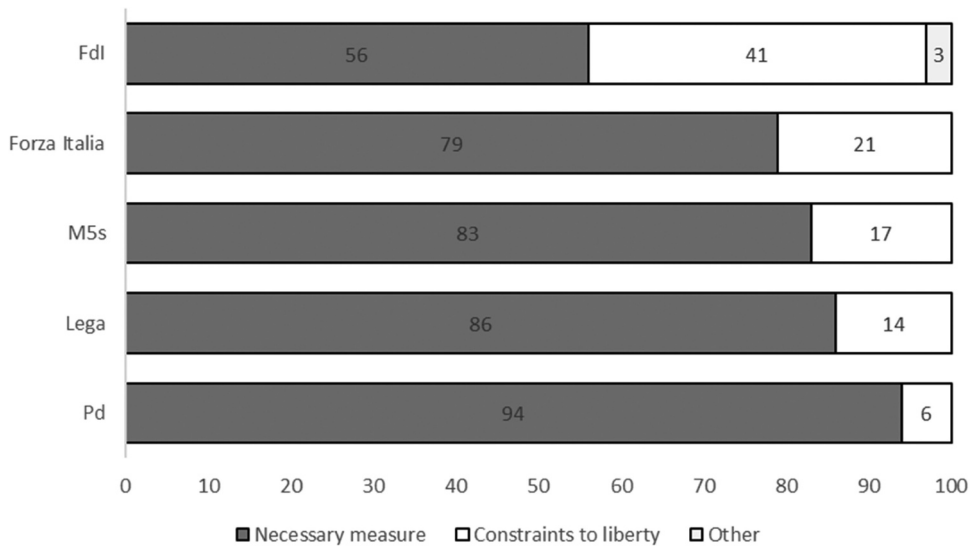


**Figure 4.** Issues perceived by Italian voters as the most important ones facing the country. Source: Authors' elaboration of Eurobarometer data. Note: Figure based on responses to the question: 'What, in your opinion, are the two most important issues facing the country at the present moment?' N = around 1,000 for each wave.

The parties' difficulty concerning the sudden emergence of (management of) the pandemic as a political issue, was that it was not one that created an immediate and 'natural' division of positions on the left-right spectrum. Yet this, notwithstanding the appearance of the M5s on the Italian political stage, remained for voters the principal conceptual device used for making sense of politics (Vegetti and Širinić 2019). In other words, management of the pandemic was not what Dias and Lelkes (2021) call a 'party-branded-issue'. We know that voters make spontaneous connections between parties and specific issues (Walgrave, Lefevere, and Tresch 2012): it is enough to think, for example, of immigration, welfare or the rights of homosexual couples. This phenomenon, referred to in the literature as 'issue ownership', makes it possible to predict the policy preferences of a citizen knowing his/her choice of party and vice versa. The emergence of a non-party-branded issue is a rather rare event, and yet when it happens it can have extreme consequences because, though not resulting in ideological polarization (as it cross-cuts the left-right divide), it can create a deep social division. A recent precedent is Brexit, which cannot be explained in terms of the division between Labour and the Conservatives, but which triggered a considerable degree of affective polarization (Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2021).

The arrival of the anti-Covid vaccines created a sharp division between those in favour of vaccination (and the policies aligned with the opinions of the scientific community) and those in favour of free choice, but these two fronts did not correspond with the left-right distinction either at the level of the parties, or even at the level of voters. Figure 5 shows clearly the extent to which the issue of the measures that should be taken to combat the virus cuts across traditional ideological positions. No party, regardless of the position it took concerning adoption of the Green Pass vaccination certification measures, has supporters whose positions are all on one side. The Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD), having positioned itself unambiguously on the side of vaccination and the Green Pass, is the party whose supporters were least divided. Supporters of





**Figure 5.** Italians' opinions concerning the green pass by voting intention (%). Source: Authors' elaboration of data supplied by Demos & Pi. Note: Figure based on responses to the question: 'In your opinion is the Green Pass a measure that is necessary to protect the health of citizens; a limitation of freedom and democracy; other (don't know /no answer)?' N = 1,015. Survey carried out 8–10 November 2021.

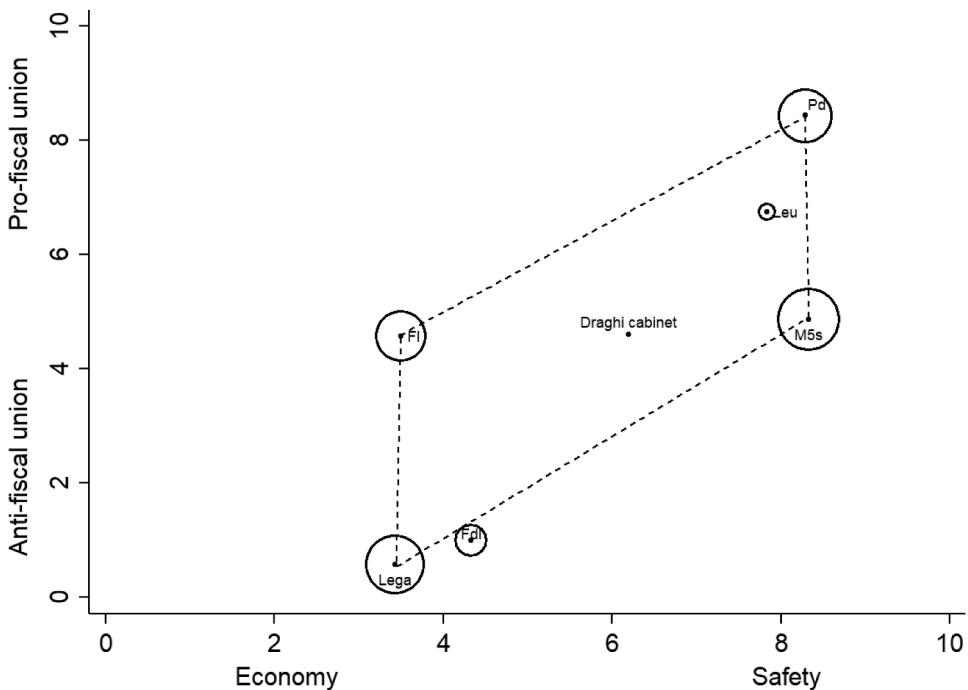
Forza Italia (FI), whose position on the issue was identical to that of the PD, were slightly more divided. The discrepancy between the pro-vaccine, pro-Green Pass positions of the M5s, and those of its supporters, should come as no surprise given the pro-choice position concerning vaccines the party had taken before the outbreak of the pandemic (Casula and Toth 2018). The most interesting cases are those of the Lega (League), which, thanks to this issue among others, suffered internal tensions concerning the leadership as we shall see below, and FdI, the only opposition party (over half of whose sympathizers were nevertheless in favour of the Green Pass according to our data).

The fact that all of the parties represented in Parliament were part of the governing majority except FdI, thus gave rise to two kinds of problem. First and foremost, there was the problem of party profile which, as mentioned, relates to the problem of sorting and in the present case concerned the need to continue searching for the political space necessary to take positions on party-branded issues, but also to search for that required to take positions on the anti-Covid measures. Second, there was the problem – one partly related to the first – of the parties' relationships with their respective coalitions. These, though based on long-standing alliances, were not reflected by the division between governing majority and opposition. They therefore became matters of negotiation and of power distributions more subtle than those arising in situations of clear bipolar confrontation between a governing majority and an opposition minority. As a consequence, the pandemic acted as a catalyst, raising the profile of two issues already on the political agenda in each coalition: the issue of coalition leadership on the centre right and the issue of the boundaries of the coalition of the 'new' centre left.

## The pressures and divisions within the parties

With their coalitions of reference undergoing redefinition and with the pandemic at the centre of political debate, the parties – due to conflict provoked by internal divisions or (also) by differences of view concerning the measures to contain the virus – found themselves having to grapple with changes or divisions concerning their leadership, their policies and their alliances. It seems no accident that the only major party that was spared these problems was FdI, which had placed itself securely in opposition, using a non-ideological issue – the pandemic – to keep alive a degree of polarization that was de facto ideological. Indeed, by remaining outside the government, Georgia Meloni's party had none of the problems the League had in positioning itself unambiguously, in relation to the two main issues that had led to the formation of the Draghi government: on the one hand the 'Covid-19 dilemma' (Mancosu, Vassallo, and Vegetti 2020) concerning the relative priority to be given to public health as compared to support for the economy; on the other hand, the role to be played by the EU, and, in the future, following approval of the Recovery Fund, the possibility of a common European fiscal policy.

As revealed by the data reported in Figure 6, at least until the summer of 2020, the League and FdI had very similar positions on both issues, favouring support for the economy over containment of the virus and displaying considerable hostility to the creation of a supranational fiscal union. With the formation of the Draghi government,



**Figure 6.** Configuration of the political space in Italy during the pandemic. Source: Authors' elaboration of data drawn from the Chapel Hill expert survey (Rovny et al. 2022). Note: The dashed line indicates the area of the Draghi government. The position of the Government is derived from the positions of the individual parties that compose it, weighted by their numerical representation in Parliament.

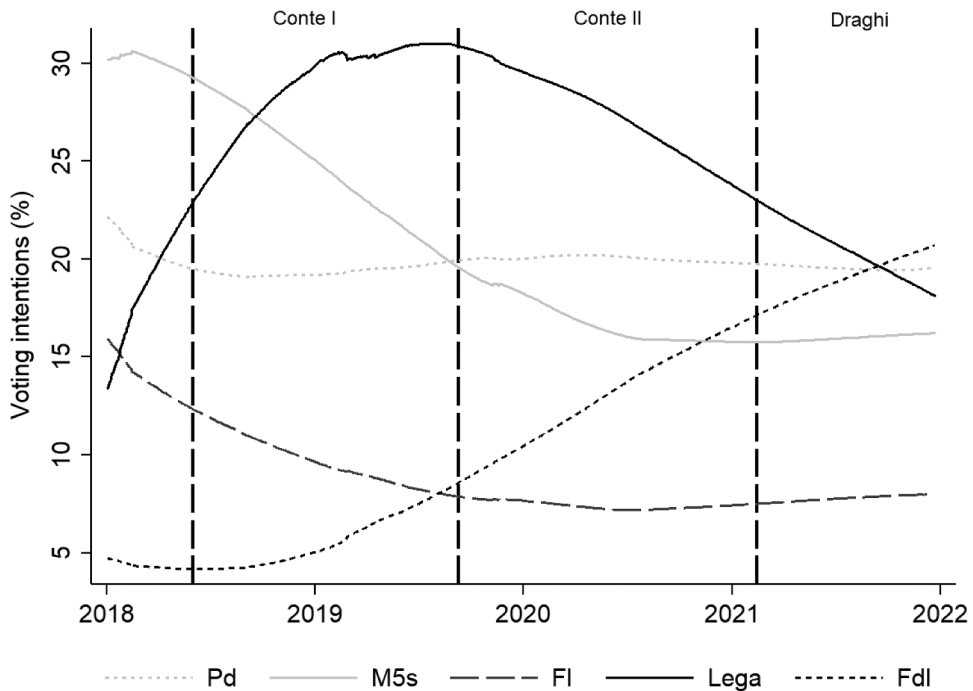
FdI was able to maintain its critical positions concerning both Europe and management of the health emergency, while Matteo Salvini's party was forced to reconsider its positioning in the 'new' political space created by the pandemic and to temper (not without difficulty) its polarizing rhetoric.

Analysed from this perspective, the position of FdI enabled it to use its opposition status to develop ownership of these two (especially salient) issues, immediately activating heuristic devices that enabled voters to sort clearly. Thereby, FdI succeeded in incorporating the cross-cutting issue of management of the pandemic within its ideological and programmatic profile. Despite the fact that large numbers of its supporters, as we saw above, considered the Green Pass a necessary measure, the coherence of its messaging and its decision to remain in opposition – the only party to do so – seems to have paid dividends in terms of its public support. Indeed, as voting intentions data for the last two years reveal, the decision to remain in opposition to all of the governments that have succeeded each other since 2018 has enabled FdI to quadruple its support and, with the formation of the Draghi government, to position itself as the largest party in the coalition of the centre right. This is so despite the fact that a significant majority of its supporters are in favour of the virus containment measures (see [Figure 5](#)). It seems evident that Meloni's strategy of leveraging a degree of polarization that is intrinsic to the party system in Italy has, at least in terms of support for the party, been rewarding.

As compared with the strategic coherence of FdI, the League found itself in a more ambiguous position, both concerning support for the new executive – which Salvini himself described as a 'sacrifice',<sup>6</sup> especially from an electoral viewpoint – and concerning the measures adopted for containment of the pandemic. Such ambiguity created several divisions within the party both at the level of the leadership and at the level of supporters. In relation to the former, the most significant tensions were between the ambiguity of Salvini (supported by most of the League's parliamentarians) and positions more in harmony with the measures adopted by the Government – supported above all by Giancarlo Giorgetti, the minister for economic development and deputy leader of the League, and by most of the League's regional presidents.

These tensions were not limited to internal or 'domestic' issues concerning the national level of politics, but also touched on the possible (new) placement of the party in the supranational arena. Salvini was intent on creating, within the European Parliament, a new group (together with Viktor Orbán's Fidesz, the Polish Law and Justice Party, Alternative for Germany, and Marine Le Pen's National Rally) inspired by principles of sovereigntism. Giorgetti, on the other hand, also thanks to support for the Draghi government, was more interested in exploring the possibility of the League joining the family of centre-right European people's parties. In fact, the internal pressure from high-profile individuals within the League to adopt less polarizing and more moderate positions, appears to be part of a long-term strategy aimed at attracting more centrist voters who are currently represented, on the right, only by Forza Italia.

At the level of the League's voters, tensions arose from the progressive decline in support for the party which had been apparent for two years and which accelerated further during the pandemic. Looking at the data reported in [Figure 7](#), it is apparent that, following its success at the last European elections when it attracted 34%, Salvini's party then declined in terms of voting intentions to below 20% in December 2021. Aside from the decline in support, as important for the League – and for the distribution of power



**Figure 7.** Support for the PD, the M5s, FI, the League and FdI registered by voting intentions polls from 2018 to November 2021 (moving averages of the estimates of the main polling organizations). Source: Authors' elaboration of data taken from the web site <http://sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it/>.

among the parties of the centre-right generally – is the heightened competitiveness of FdI. Indeed, given the fluctuation in voting intentions observed during the first year of the pandemic, ‘the party led by Meloni not only managed increasingly to attract – at the League’s expense – voters willing to support more than one of the parties on the centre right, but it even increased its appeal among potential League voters’ (Pedrazzani 2021, 230). These fluctuations among voters on the centre right created tensions within Salvini’s party, squeezed as it was by the pressure to behave ‘responsibly’ – deriving from the support for the Draghi government demanded by its moderate wing – and the growing pressure triggered by a technically ‘irresponsible’ party, securely in opposition and free of the requirements of accountability for its policy proposals. It was evident that some in the party wanted to encourage a different form of sorting by toning down the most highly polarizing messages, while Salvini for his part sought to stem the loss of support to his right in the direction of FdI.

In this context, between the ambiguity of the League and the immobility of FdI in opposition, FI was the only party on the centre right to support the new executive wholeheartedly. It did so even though a not insignificant proportion of its supporters failed to be entirely convinced of the merits of the measures adopted by the Government in response to the health emergency. Like the League, Silvio Berlusconi’s party too had to deal with internal tensions and conflicts deriving from falls in support registered at elections and by voting intentions data, and from differing degrees of support for the project for government embodied by Mario Draghi.

Electoral, for the first time since Berlusconi created his party in 1994, 2020 and 2021 saw FI being overtaken by both of the other two parties of the centre-right coalition. Berlusconi's party had already been overtaken by the League at the general election of 2018, but from the regional elections of 2020 and subsequently in terms of voting intentions, FI had been overtaken by FdI as well, making it the junior partner in the coalition of the centre right. Forza Italia has always been a nominally moderate party, one whose sorting has taken place above all as a result of its distinctive leader. It was therefore inevitable that the fall in popularity of Berlusconi would have direct repercussions for the support for his party. The lack of electoral success of Berlusconi's party then contributed to other internal tensions, especially those concerning the role of FI within the coalition of the centre right and the possibility of giving life to a new 'federation', if not a fully-fledged political party, together with the League. The principal line of division was one separating FI officials – favouring unconditional support for the Draghi government and receptive to the idea of superseding the traditional party system bipolarity pitching centre left against centre right – from FI parliamentarians without ministerial portfolios. The latter were beginning to suffer the 'costs of government' and of the compromises with the parties of the centre left.

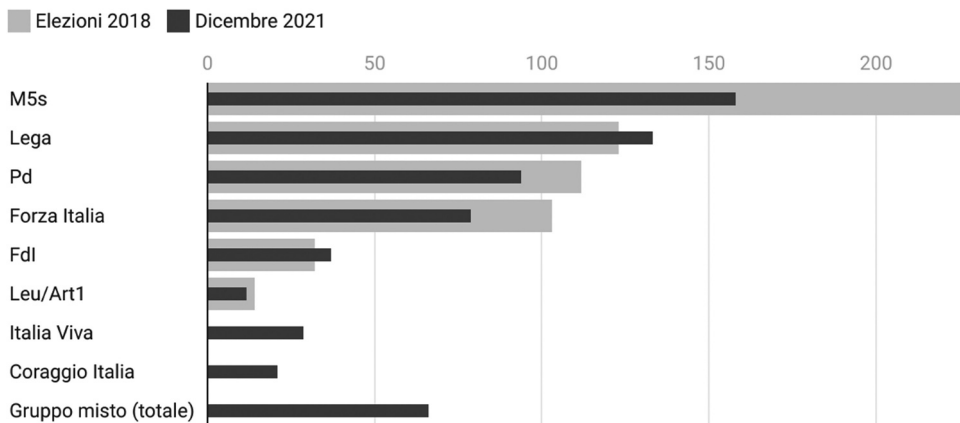
At this moment in the evolution of the party system, the M5s continued to play a role that was crucial. Given that it was placed at the 'centre' of the political space that came to be defined in the aftermath of the elections of 2018, any change it manifested would necessarily have consequences for interparty competition. For, as Kenneth Roberts (2019, 149) has emphasized, where populism – of which the M5s was undoubtedly an example in the Italian context – 'is able to gain a mass following, it massively disrupts traditional political alignments'. Thereby, populism – the more so when it assumes the reins of government – 'rearranges the cards on the table and redraws the political map' (ibidem).

However, the direction of change would depend to a large extent on the choices of the M5s itself, especially those concerning its still incomplete process of institutionalization and its internal reorganization. From this point of view, 2021 was for the party founded by Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio in 2009, a turning point with respect to its organizational, programmatic and electoral evolution. With regard to its internal organization, the fall of the Conte II government and the subsequent less-than-unanimous support for the new executive led by Draghi, led to a redefinition of the Movement's leadership profile and a struggle over the kind of party it would become. As far as the leadership was concerned, the election of Giuseppe Conte as president of the 'new' M5s (renamed the 'Movimento Cinque Stelle 2050') marked a shift – for the first time in the history of the Movement – from a predominantly collective leadership (Campus, Switek, and Valbruzzi 2021) to the leadership of a single individual. This change was resisted both by Grillo, who remained the undisputed 'guarantor' of the Movement, and by Davide Casaleggio who, as head of the association controlling the party's operational platform (Rousseau), retained, until the summer of 2021, ownership of the details of the Movement's members.

As far as the party's internal organization was concerned, the most significant conflicts took place on two fronts. Both were hostile to Conte's idea of seeking to increase the presence of the party on the ground, in the localities; of drawing on the resources made available by the 'two-per-thousand' tax designation system for the public funding of political parties, and of creating a party bureaucracy for the purposes of internal

coordination of party activity. With respect to this idea – criticized by Grillo as one embodying a conception of the party as ‘a one-person entity governed by a seventeenth-century statute’<sup>7</sup> – the first expression of opposition came from Davide Casaleggio. He had an alternative vision of how the organization of the M5s should develop, one more consistent with the idea of a ‘digital party’, without intermediate structures or bureaucracies, whose management would be entrusted to the ‘democracy of the web’ coordinated by the Rousseau platform. The opposition between these two party models led to a breakdown of collaboration between Casaleggio’s Rousseau association and the M5s led by Conte. The second expression of opposition was one bringing together those who saw the M5s as a social movement and who therefore rejected attempts at its institutionalization or ‘normalisation’ (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2015; Tronconi 2018) while defending its original hybrid format as a ‘movement-party’ (Kitschelt 2006) with a collegial style of leadership and weak internal structuring. In this case, the formation of the Draghi government served to heighten the conflict between supporters of the ‘movement’ conception and supporters of the ‘party’ conception of the M5s as it led the former to come out in opposition both to the internal reorganization project proposed by Conte, and to the Movement’s participation in the new government of national unity. This division led, finally, to yet another defection of parliamentarians from the ranks of the M5s, leading to the loss of about a third of the number of representatives it had had at the beginning of the legislature (see Figure 8), to the advantage of the League and, still more, of the so-called ‘Mixed Group’ (for parliamentarians without recognized party affiliations).

Aside from these changes in the organization of the M5s – changes that are still underway – the most significant aspects of the party’s transformation are those concerning its electoral decline and its policy shifts. The fall in support was apparent from the results of local elections in particular (that is, the regional elections in 2020 and the municipal elections in 2021) (Tronconi and Valbruzzi 2020) and further confirmed by opinion polls, which currently place the M5s at around 15% in terms of voting



**Figure 8.** Composition of the parliamentary groups in the Chamber of Deputies (comparison of the situation at the beginning of the legislature with that in December 2021). Source: Authors’ elaboration of data taken from the web site of the Chamber of Deputies ([www.camera.it](http://www.camera.it)).

intentions. Understood in the light of the endemic polarization of the Italian political system, this decline is not surprising. At the election of 2018, the M5s had in fact presented itself as a post-ideological actor; but once it had joined the government, it had had to accept the logic of a system that was entirely governed by the rules of a competition that was ideological (and highly polarized). Forming an alliance with parties on one or the other side implicitly defined which side it was on, especially in the medium to long term.

However, the most striking change in the evolutions of the M5s was the one concerning its change of programmatic profile. As Bordignon and Ceccarini (2021, 57) have noted, the M5s is ‘the party that has undergone the most profound transformation during the period examined: a party of protest that rapidly became a party of government’. Indeed, to be more explicit, it is an anti-establishment party that found itself catapulted into the heart of the establishment, the senior partner in three different governments, the most recent of which is led by the most authentic representative of the political and economic elites of the European Union. This rapid change led above all to the loss of the party’s anti-establishment profile – a profile that had been at the heart of its political communication and the main driver of the ‘valence populism’ (that is, a populism based, not on position issues, but predominantly on imperative questions involving shared values) thanks to which it had been able to win support across the political spectrum. Secondly, the neutralization of its anti-elite rhetoric, together with the exercise of political power, obliged the M5s to take positions on divisive (redistributive or positional) issues, thereby shifting its ideological centre of gravity progressively towards the left, especially on socioeconomic issues. This new placement on the part of the party led by Conte led to a correspondingly new strategy for rebuilding the coalition of the centre left, which was now to be broadened to include the M5s; but it also led to more direct competition with the PD for support in a pool of voters the two partly shared.

On the centre left, then, the most significant changes were those that took place within the PD with the sudden and unanticipated change of leadership that took place in March 2021 when the resignation of Nicola Zingaretti – thanks to internal divisions arising partly from the complexities of the shift from the Conte II to the Draghi government – led to his replacement by the former prime minister, Enrico Letta. Aside from the change in the leadership of the party, the new general secretary retained the strategy of his predecessor in seeking to reinforce party-system bipolarity through the construction of a broad coalition of the centre left that would include the M5s. This was a strategy which, though not systematically implemented, was adopted from the outset at the municipal elections that were held in October 2021.

Besides this alliance strategy, Letta also sought to overhaul the party’s ideological profile by drawing on distinctively left-wing party-branded issues, especially those concerning cultural matters or extensions of civil liberties (as in the case of the proposed *ius culturae* citizenship law or the bill sponsored by the party’s Alessandro Zan against homophobia and transgender prejudice). Given the ‘freezing’ of polarization on the traditional left-right dimension with the inauguration of the Draghi government, the progressive, or ‘libertarian’ issues promoted by the PD helped to encourage a sorting which, especially on the left, could not be activated at this point in time in relation to the decisions concerning the Green Pass, the vaccinations and containment of the virus,



much less in relation to economic matters where decisions were constrained by the requirement to respect the criteria for disbursement of the subsidies and loans made available through the Recovery Fund.

Redefinition of the parameters of the centre left, including the new positioning on the part of the PD, also had consequences for relationships between the parties of the coalition, both those on the left and those located closer to the centre of the political spectrum. On the left, the formation of the Draghi government led to a split in *Liberi e uguali* (Free and Equal, *Leu*) between the *Sinistra italiana* (Italian Left) component, opposed to supporting the new executive, and the exponents of *Articolo 1-Movimento democratico e progressista* (Article 1-Democratic and Progressive Movement, *Art. 1-Mdp*), led by the minister of health, Roberto Speranza, who supported the new government. Besides this division, the left was also confronted with the challenge constituted by competition, on a number of its traditional issues, from other political actors – such as the *M5s* in the field of welfare and poverty reduction and the PD in the field of civil liberties.

Finally, among the more moderate parties of the coalition of the centre left, there were a plethora of designations and leaders without clear strategic profiles as far as their location within the party system was concerned or as far as the selection of issues that would clearly distinguish them from others was concerned. At the time of writing, formations such as Carlo Calenda's *Azione*, Matteo Renzi's *Italia Viva* or the constellation of post-radicals gravitating around *+Europa* have set themselves the objective of undermining bipolar competition between alternative potentially governing coalitions and promoting a neo-centrist strategy that would involve excluding from government participation both the populists (the *M5s*) and the sovereigntists (the *League* and *FdI*). Besides their different interpretations of this strategic turn, the parties of the centre were without their own party-branded issues and, during the pandemic seemed to have embraced wholeheartedly the 'Draghi agenda'. However, it is not clear what the programmatic profile of these parties will be once the Draghi government comes to an end.

## Conclusion

The fall of the 'yellow-red' government led by Giuseppe Conte and its replacement in February 2021 by the new government of national unity led by the technocrat Mario Draghi, represented not just a 'normal' change of government in a parliamentary democracy, but also a redefinition of the political space in terms of new dimensions of political division. Prior to the advent of the Draghi government, the issues surrounding management of the pandemic and revival of the economy were essentially aligned with, or superimposed on, the traditional dimension of left-right conflict describing the classic competition between a majority (in this case of the centre left extended to include the *M5s*) and an opposition (of the centre right). If on the one hand this implied a high level of system polarization, on the other hand it enabled the parties to position themselves, almost automatically, concerning a broad range of traditional and current issues (concerning employment, civil liberties and so on).

The pandemic and the consequent formation of the new, national unity government undermined preceding political assumptions and, as we have seen, completely reconfigured the political space and the terrain of electoral competition. In particular, the advent



of the Draghi government temporarily ‘froze’, or neutralized competition on the left-right dimension, triggering a shift of the polarization between parties and voters from one based on ideology to one based on an issue linked primarily to the health emergency and its economic consequences.

In this article, we have shown that this transformation in the nature of polarization in Italy (from ideological to issue-based conflict) had direct and rapidly felt repercussions within the parties, within their respective coalitions and, more generally, in terms of the dynamics of competition and collaboration in the party system. With regard to change within the parties, we have seen that the formation of the Draghi government created new divisions within the main parties, especially in those which, since the outbreak of the pandemic, had been critical of the virus-containment measures and of the proposals for economic revival coming from the EU. The deepest divisions were those appearing within the League – divisions counter-posing the component closest to the Draghi government and represented by the deputy general secretary, Giancarlo Giorgetti, and the League’s regional presidents, and the component associated with League leader, Matteo Salvini, who often displayed his dissatisfaction with measures, introduced to contain the spread of the virus, he perceived as excessively restrictive of personal liberties.

The League’s ambiguity in this respect also derived, as we have seen, from its need to get to grips with the increasingly effective competition of FdI, the only party that succeeded in taking ownership of issues concerning the pandemic from a position of opposition to the Draghi government. Consequently, the division created by Covid was not limited to a single party but came to engulf the whole of the coalition of the centre right, separating the supporters and opponents of the new executive.

However, the reconfiguration of the political space triggered by the health emergency and the formation of the Draghi government had repercussions that went beyond the coalition of the centre right. Similar divisions and lacerations could also be seen within the ‘new’ coalition of the centre left, above all within the M5s where Giuseppe Conte’s leadership had to come to terms with an internal minority opposed to the decision to join the new government of national unity and critical of the party’s evolution more generally, of its institutionalization and of the possibility of an organic alliance with the PD. And, as on the centre right, so too on the centre left, the divisions within the parties engulfed the entire coalition, with growing tensions between the parties (the PD, Art. 1 and the M5s) of the so-called ‘nuovo Ulivo’ or ‘new Olive-tree coalition’, and the archipelago of centrist, liberal and moderate lists.

Besides these consequences for the parties and coalitions, the effects of the pandemic and the advent of the Draghi government made themselves felt also at the level of the party system as a whole. These effects were ones that impacted not only relations between the parties – significant as such impacts were, this thanks to the fact that they worked to the advantage of the most radical components of the coalitions, at least on the centre right. But, the effects also extended to the dynamics of competition between the parties and therefore to the mode of functioning and the performance of Italian democracy itself (Morlino and Raniolo 2018). From this point of view, it is too early to say how the Italian party system will evolve once the pandemic and the government formed to manage it have come to an end. However, from our current vantage point, it is possible to suggest a number of possible lines of development. In the immediate term, against the background of the pandemic and with management of the economic revival residing in the

hands of the Prime Minister, it is likely that the governing parties will seek to exploit post-material, cultural issues and issues of civil liberties in order to mark their differences and to provide voters with clues as to their ideological profiles.

In the medium and longer term, in contrast, the evolution of the party system will depend mainly on the duration of the emergency and on the greater or lesser impact of the Draghi government and its agenda on the parties and their alliances. In the event of a temporary suspension of the competition typically associated with ideological polarization, it is reasonable to expect a post-pandemic reconfiguration along the traditional lines of division between opposing coalitions, with a gradual absorption of the M5s within the coalition of the centre left. In such a 'neo-bipolar' context, the moderate-liberal actors would find themselves excluded from the main electoral coalitions or obliged to choose between one or the other of them.

Alternatively, in the event that the pandemic and the Draghi government have a more profound and enduring effect on the dynamics of inter-party competition, it is possible to imagine a realignment of parties along the lines of division that have been apparent throughout the emergency, especially those concerning the increasingly significant and 'invasive' role of the European Union in domestic politics. In that event, it cannot be excluded that there will be a reconfiguration of a neo-centrist kind, one built around a nucleus of mainstream parties with the exclusion of the old and new anti-establishment parties. Obviously this would be a more disruptive change than the neo-bipolar one described above, one that would lead to a break-up of the two existing coalitions which in one form or another have alternated in government for the last twenty-five years. For the moment it remains a conjecture, but the 'structural de-structuration' of the Italian party system has taught us not to underestimate the likelihood of electoral 'earthquakes' taking place.

## Notes

1. European Center for Disease Prevention and Control. The data refer to 14 November 2021, <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/infographic-covid-19-vaccination-eueea> (last accessed, January 2022).
2. See, for example, A. Giuffrida, "I Need to Work": Italy's Green Pass Rule Triggers Rise in Covid Job Uptake', the *Guardian*, 22 October 2021.
3. The polarization of the parties is calculated using Dalton's (2008, 906) index calculated as,  $PI = \text{SQRT}\{\sum(\text{party vote share}_i) * ([\text{party L/R score}_i - \text{party system average L/R score}]/5)^2\}$ , where the subscripts stand for the individual parties. This index can be compared with the standard deviation and is similar to previously developed indices. It takes a value of 0 when all parties occupy the same position on the left-right dimension, and 10 when the parties are equally distributed at the extremes of the spectrum. The values of the index are time-invariant, and revisited only in the aftermath of significant changes.
4. The polarization of voters is calculated using the index proposed by Ezrow, Tavits, and Homola (2014), which corresponds to the country standard deviation of the self-placement of individual respondents on the left-right dimension.
5. Data available only for the fourth round of interviews.
6. Cfr. 'Lo sfogo di Salvini: «Stare al governo ci fa perdere voti»', *La Stampa*, 27 November 2021, p. 12.
7. 'Una bozza e via', article posted by Beppe Grillo on 29 June 2021 on his blog located at: <https://beppegrillo.it/una-bozza-e-via/?fbclid=IwAR1UHLp2ZZxpr3LPJX8pO1-qy603hWKi23t7ELLqy6RJUGSUYPW5eK7Wsw> (last accessed, November 2021).

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## ORCID

Luana Russo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1237-7310>

Marco Valbruzzi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8019-1024>

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