

# Re-shaping the political space: continuity and alignment of parties in the Italian parliament

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## ABSTRACT

This article adopts an inductive approach to the study of party positions in the Italian Parliament during the centre-left governments of Enrico Letta (2013–2014) and Matteo Renzi (2014–2016), as they emerge from the investiture vote. This is a unique moment in the relationship between Parliament and Government because the parliamentary groups debate the Government's programme before delivering their first confidence vote. The research aim is to assess the alignment of the Italian parties in Parliament following the decline of the traditional left-right cleavage and the rise of populism. A content analysis of the texts of the speeches delivered during the parliamentary debate before the confidence votes confirming the investiture of the Letta and Renzi governments provides a survey of the political themes addressed by the latter and by the main Italian parliamentary groups. The findings highlight the multidimensional character of the competition space and show how party alignment is affected by the interplay between the supranational dimension (European integration) and the state's capacity to provide services and guarantee citizens' rights. It is argued that the emergence of new parties has favoured the re-establishment of a multi-polar pattern of competition, but without clear ideological connotations, in contrast with the situation of the earlier post-war period.

## KEYWORDS

Political space; Italian party system; parliamentary debate

## Introduction

The purpose of this research is to assess the distinctive character of Italy's multi-dimensional policy space, and to interpret the current dynamic of the Italian party system, using an analytical framework and a methodology already applied in previous work (Ieraci 2006, 2008). The data collected here concern two of the three coalition governments – namely Enrico Letta's (28 April 2013–14 February 2014) and Matteo Renzi's (22 February 2014–7 December 2016) – formed during the seventeenth legislature (2013–2018). During this legislature there was a third government – formed by Paolo Gentiloni after Matteo Renzi's resignation – but his was excluded from the research because it was – to use the standard Italian political expression – *un governo di scopo* (literally, 'a government of purpose'), meaning a government appointed with the sole aim of presiding over the affairs of state until the end of the legislative term. Gentiloni's government did not

therefore have a clearly defined policy profile and is, hence, not comparable with the governments led by Letta and Renzi during the remaining four fifths of the legislative term. Moreover, the two centre-left governments led by Letta and Renzi were the ones that gave the seventeenth legislature its distinctive politico-historical profile, and they raised a number of questions about the cohesion of the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD), about the capacity of the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five-star Movement, M5s) to offer a reliable and credible governing alternative, and about the future of the centre right in light of the fading political fortunes of Berlusconi.

Through a content analysis of the texts of the speeches delivered during the parliamentary debates leading up to the confidence votes confirming the investiture of Letta's and Renzi's governments, the research aims to: a) identify the main policy dimensions of Italy's 'multilateral distribution' of parties; b) provide a measure of the policy distances of the parties on each dimension; c) show how the decline of the old party alignment has generated a multi-dimensional and continuously changing competition space, due to the tactical moves of the parties within it.

Whilst the primary goal is to describe party interaction in a multi-dimensional policy space, I also propose to test the hypothesis that the emergence of populist parties accompanying the decline of the old left-right party alignment has brought about a remodelling of the competition space along new dimensions – among which, the supranational dimension (European integration), and the dimension related to the state's capacity to provide services and guarantee citizens' rights, play a central role.

This hypothesis is compatible with the findings of recent research on the impact of populist parties on the Italian party system. This research has pointed to the significance of the European issue in the emergence and growth of populism in Italian politics (Giannetti, Pedrazzi, and Pinto 2017), and to its role in exacerbating M5s voters' disenchantment with the party system and political élites (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018). The original contribution of the present research lies in its proposal of a spatial model of interaction between the Italian parties in the parliamentary contest and in the detection of the actual distances between the parties. These new points are then analysed and interpreted.

## **Spatial analysis of party competition**

Mainstream approaches to party systems analysis<sup>1</sup> have assumed the spaces of competition to be unidimensional, following the tradition inaugurated by Downs (1957) and developed by Sartori (1976). The reliability of the unidimensional paradigm has been repeatedly questioned, particularly since the turn of the twentieth century as the economic and class-centred ideologies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g. capitalism, liberalism, communism, socialism, and fascism) have faded and European party systems have experienced turbulent phases of realignment along new cleavages.

The frequent use of the metaphor 'competition space' is problematic,<sup>2</sup> in that at least three different uses of it can be discerned. As a policy space, it can be treated as a position space and can generate cardinal measures of the ideal policy points of the actors. In a policy space the actors may incline towards negotiation over their relative positions and ideal policy points. As an ideological space, the competition space

becomes a valence space (Stokes 1963) and the actors' positions are more rigid and non-negotiable. Finally, as a party-defined space (Budge and Farlie 1977) the competition space retains the rigidity of ideological alignments, because party identification implies the establishment of links between parties and voters, based on relatively rigid factors such as socialisation, political culture and socio-economic class. On the one hand, flexible dimensions (over policies) and rigid dimensions (over ideology and/or identifications) might conflict, therefore making the interplay of actors more difficult.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, even if a policy space perspective is adopted, policies cannot be aligned on a single dimension and they tend to interfere with each other or combine in variable ways. This is even more evident as the simplifying effect of the left-right ideological cleavage wanes.

The paradox of the Downs-Sartori research tradition lies in the fact that respondents are asked to express their positions in terms of measurable distance from the party offers (position issue) while their answers are reduced by the researcher to a matter of affective or emotional identification (valence issue). The solution in tackling this problem has been to define *a priori* what is 'left' and what is 'right' in terms of policies. If, for example, it is held that 'keeping down the number of immigrants' is a right-wing policy while 'extending opportunities and solidarity to immigrants' is a left-wing policy, the researcher who creates a left-right policy scale on that issue can be confident that a clear cut political position will be recorded, regardless of the respondent's ability to make rational calculations and resist emotions. It is hard to understand how these difficulties can be overcome by selecting certain 'reference texts', 'whose policy positions on well-defined *a priori* dimensions are 'known' to the analyst, in the sense that these can be either estimated with confidence from independent sources or assumed uncontroversially' (Laver and Benoit 2003, 313; Benoit and Laver 2005, 2007). If the dimensions are 'known' to the analyst (estimated or assumed), the investigation risks being biased *a priori* by these estimations and assumptions, no matter how uncontroversial they may appear.

Both Sartori (Sartori and Sani 1978, 1982) and the Manifesto Research Group (Budge 2001) defined *a priori* what left and right mean, either selecting a set of 'rightist' and 'leftist' issues and asking respondents (samples of the mass electorate) to position themselves (in Sartori's approach), or through a detailed coding of manifesto sentences into 'leftist' and 'rightist' policy categories: 'The percentages of sentences coded into each category constitute the data used in further statistical analysis, such as the Left-Right scales [...] these identified certain categories as belonging theoretically to the right ('free enterprise', for example) and certain to the left (such as 'economic planning')' (Budge 2001, 78).

Nonetheless, new problems arise. Firstly, there is the risk that, rather than 'objective' (party) positions, 'subjective' (respondent) reactions to certain stimuli are measured. Secondly, although 'left' and 'right' positions may have a universal character (for example, left may be associated with 'eagerness for equality', whilst right may be associated with 'preservation of traditions'), their contents are necessarily historically (during which time?) and spatially (in which context or even country?) determined, something which makes over-time and cross-national comparison rather awkward. To put it simply, if left and right are treated as sets of issues or policies, we might discover, for example, that 'to dislike immigrants', which was at one time a rightist attitude, is now also a leftist attitude, or that 'free enterprise' is now a political value shared along the whole political spectrum.

## Methodological note

According to Italy's constitutional stipulations, governments receive their parliamentary investitures through an initial vote of confidence after the President of the Republic, as head of state, has sworn in the *Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri* (President of the Council of Ministers) and his Ministers. Following its swearing in, the newly formed government receives a vote of confidence from both the lower house – the *Camera dei Deputati* – and the upper house – the *Senato* – of the Italian Parliament.

The parliamentary debates leading up to the confidence votes for the two governments were here conceived as dialogues between the incumbent government and parliamentary representatives from both the government majority and opposition. The debates were structured as 'investiture contests', having the following sequence of moves: a. the President of the Council of the Ministers delivers an investiture speech; b. the party representatives reply; c. the vote of confidence is taken. A content analysis was conducted of the texts of the investiture speech of the President of the Council of Ministers and of the responses of the other party representatives. The political themes presented by the President of the Council of Ministers were recorded, together with the positive or negative evaluations attached to them (see the appendix, [Table A3](#), for the complete list of recorded political themes and their relative acronyms). I obtained the frequency of occurrence of each political theme and the frequency of its positive and negative evaluations. The political themes were then combined on ten point-scales (from -5 to +5), where the intensity of the speaker's preference was revealed by the frequency of the positive and negative evaluations of the various themes and policies. This procedure was applied to the confidence votes for the two governments, and the relative scores on each dimension were reduced to averages. The political dimensions were therefore 'shaped' by the speakers themselves, who selected through their speeches the political themes to address. The problem of determining what is 'left' and what is 'right' was thus deliberately avoided, and with no left-right policy or ideological scale pre-defined (by the researcher), the resulting analysis was multi-dimensional.

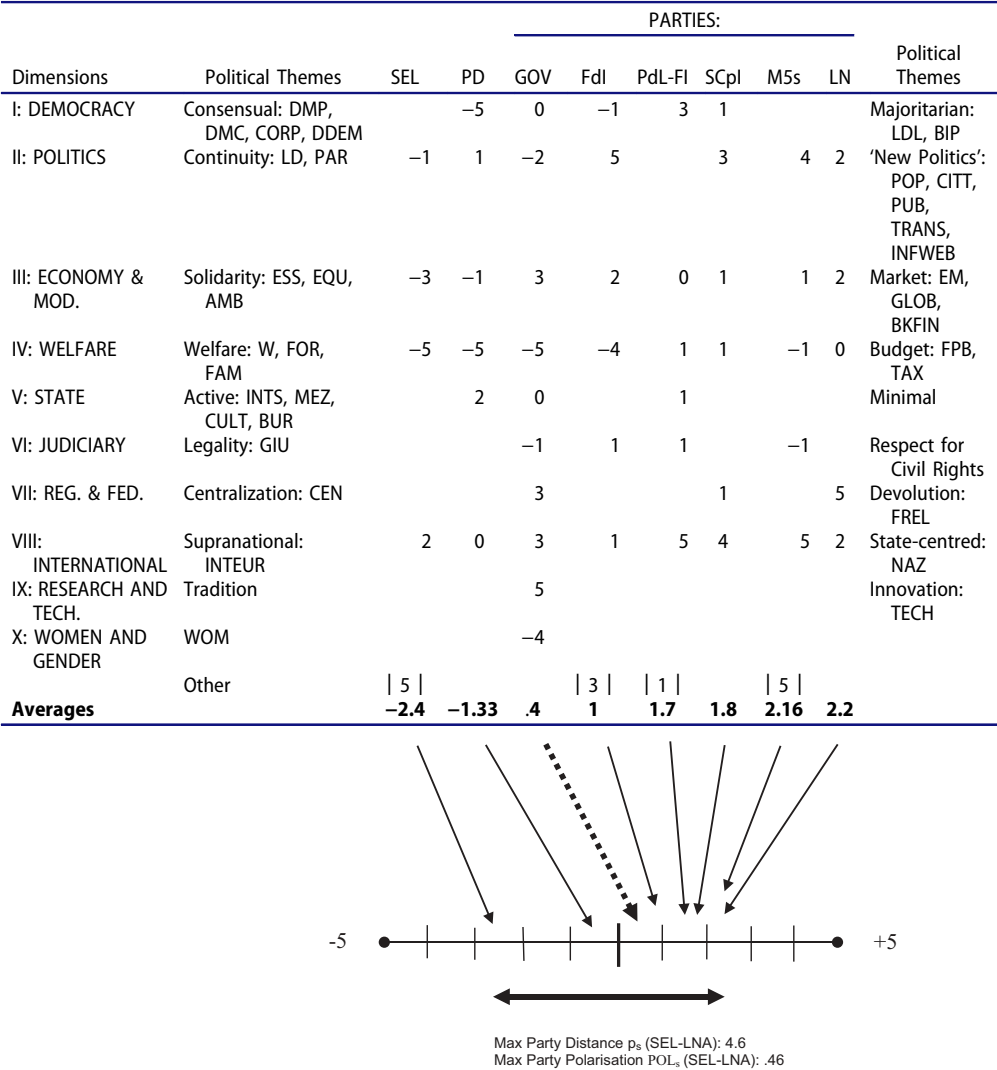
## Research strategy and content analysis of parliamentary debate on confidence votes

The main political themes discussed by the two government leaders in 2013–2014 are listed in [Tables A1](#) and [A2](#) in the appendix. As other researchers have recently argued (Giannetti, Pedrazzi, and Pinto 2017), the European issue and its influence on domestic affairs have become crucial. Italy's international role and its position and influence in the EU had already been specific concerns of the centre-left and centre-right coalition governments of the early 1990s (Ieraci 2006, 2008). The novelty in this new phase is that Eurosceptical attitudes have now spread to most parties, and emphases on federalism and regionalism have drastically declined. Several themes closely connected with conflicting conceptions of the economy have emerged in political debates. Letta emphasised his preference for the free market, whilst Renzi tempered his commitment to the theme by declaring his support for social policies and economic solidarity. Labour-market policies and education occupied core positions in the two centre-left programmes, and there was a reduced emphasis on the budget.

Finally, politics (in the sense of 'Continuity' versus 'New Politics') was a crucial theme in the 2013–2014 debates. While *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy, *FdI*) could be

correctly located on the right of the political spectrum, the M5s shows no identifiable ideological connotation although in both debates it adopts positions in favour of the ‘New Politics’ (i.e., political themes such as ‘the people’, ‘citizenship’, ‘public ethics’ and ‘political transition’ scored high in the replies of M5s representatives). However, it was indicative of the contradictory aspects of the debates that neither Letta nor Renzi were particularly supportive of the consociational features of Italian politics and certainly did not disguise their preference for some forms of direct legitimation of government leaders by general election outcomes. In conclusion, as seen in [Tables A1](#) and [A2](#) in the appendix, comparison of the programmes of Letta’s and Renzi’s centre-left coalition governments led to the identification of ten major sets of issues and relative dimensions. The scores of the parties on each dimension are shown in [Tables 1](#) and [2](#):

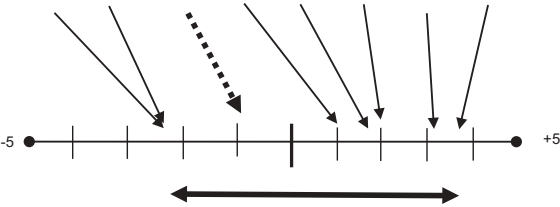
**Table 1.** Letta’s government and parties’ positions (Source: Camera dei Deputati, Seduta n. 1, 29 aprile 2013)<sup>a</sup>



Blanks indicate no statements on the relevant political themes or dimensions.

**Table 2.** Renzi’s government and parties positions (Source: Camera del Deputati, Seduta n. 178, 24 febbraio 2014)<sup>a</sup>.

		PARTIES:									
Dimensions	Political Themes	SEL	PD	GOV	FdI	PdL-FI	SCpl	LN	M5s	Political Themes	
I: DEMOCRACY	Consensual: DMP, DMC, CORP, DDEM		-3	3			2		3	1	Majoritarian: LDL, BIP
II: POLITICS	Continuity: LD, PAR	1	-1	2	5	1		2	5		'New Politics': POP, CITT, PUB, TRANS, INFWEB
III: ECONOMY & MOD.	Solidarity: ESS, EQU, AMB	-5	-2	-2	-5		5				Market: EM, GLOB, BKFIN
IV: WELFARE	Welfare: W, FOR, FAM	-5	-5	-5	1	4	0				Budget: FPB, TAX
V: STATE	Active: INTS, MEZ, CULT, BUR	1	1	0		0	1	1			Minimal
VI: JUDICIARY	Legality: GIU			4		4					Respect for Civil Rights
VII: REG. & FED.	Centralisation: CEN			-4				3			Devolution: FREL
VIII: Supranational: INTEUR, IMM	-1	-4	-5	2	-1	2	5	4	State-		INTERNATIONAL centred: NAZ
IX: RESEARCH AND TECH.	Tradition	-1		-1							Innovation: TECH
X: WOMEN AND GENDER	WOM			-1							
	Other	5	1		5	3		5	5		
Averages		-2.14	-2.14	-0.9	1.6	1.85	2.0	3.16	3.75		



Max Party Distance  $p_8$  (SEL-M5S): 5.89  
Max Party Polarisation  $POL_8$  ((SEL-M5S): .589

Blanks indicate nò statements on the relevant political themes or dimensions.

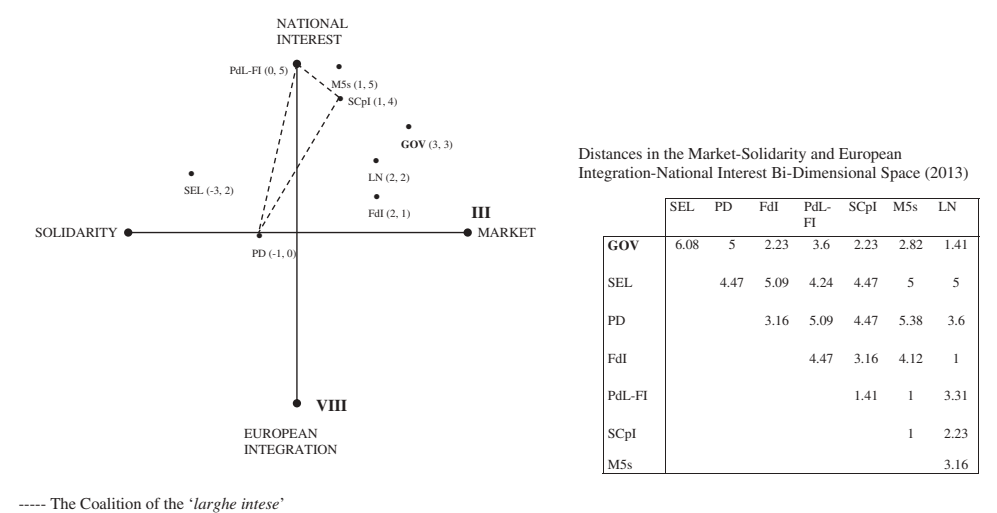
- I. *Democracy*: ‘Consensual’ versus ‘Majoritarian democracy’;
- II. *Politics*: ‘Continuity’ versus ‘New Politics’;
- III. *Economy and Modernisation*: ‘Solidarity and social economy’ versus ‘Market and globalisation’;
- IV. *Welfare*: ‘Welfare state’ versus ‘Balanced budgets’;
- V. *State*: ‘Active role for the state’ versus ‘Minimal role’;
- VI. *Judiciary*: ‘Legality and justice’ versus ‘Respect for civil rights’;
- VII. *Regionalism and Federalism*: ‘Centralisation’ versus ‘Devolution’;
- VIII. *International*: ‘Supranational’ versus ‘State-centred’;
- IX. *Research and Technology*: ‘Tradition’ versus ‘Innovation’;

X. Women and Gender.

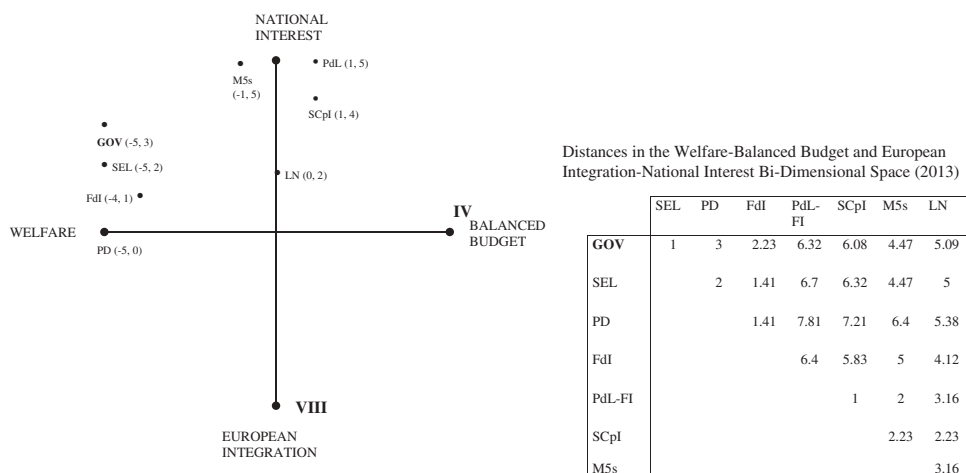
If we look at the scores in [Tables 1 and 2](#), there is evidence that both governments displayed remarkably moderate or centripetal attitudes ( $GOV_{Letta} = 0.4$ ;  $GOV_{Renzi} = -0.9$ ), and although the centre of the spectrum proved crowded in both cases (the PD, the Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom, PdL), FdI, and Scelta Civica per l'Italia (Civic Choice for Italy, SCpI) were located in a relatively short range and around the median of the space),<sup>4</sup> in 2013 party polarisation was quite remarkable (0.46) and particularly so in 2014 (0.59). This is enough evidence to show that Italian political debate retains the immoderate features of its past and that some parties tend to occupy distinctive positions in the space, thus generating a systemic polarising effect. This was true of Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà (the Left, Ecology and Freedom, SEL) (-2.4 in 2013 and -2.14 in 2014), of the M5s (2.16 in 2013 and 3.75 in 2014), and of the Lega Nord (Northern League, LN) (2.2 in 2013 and 3.16 in 2014).

There was undoubtedly a considerable degree of policy continuity between Letta's and Renzi's governments, particularly on dimension IV with regard to which both government leaders stressed their commitment to defence of the welfare state, of workers' rights and the family ([Tables 1 and 2](#),  $GOV_{Letta}$  and  $GOV_{Renzi} = -5$ ). However, some noticeable differences between the programmes of the two governments emerged over dimensions I, III and VIII. On dimension I, Letta did not adopt a clear cut position concerning the choice between consensual and majoritarian democracy ([Table 1](#),  $GOV_{Letta} = 0$ ), although some of the constitutional reforms eventually attempted by Renzi were anticipated by Letta himself,<sup>5</sup> whilst Renzi showed no ambiguity about his preference for a majoritarian conception of democracy ([Table 2](#),  $GOV_{Renzi} = 3$ ), as subsequently confirmed by his government's attempted constitutional reform. The most striking difference between the two programmes is seen with regard to dimension VIII ([Tables 1 and 2](#),  $GOV_{Letta} = 3$ ;  $GOV_{Renzi} = -5$ ), a point to which we shall return later.

The multi-dimensional configuration of the policy space enables many cross-comparisons between the ten identified dimensions. [Figures 1 and 2](#) combine,



**Figure 1.** Market-solidarity and European Integration-National Interest dimensions. Government and party positions in a bi-dimensional space (2013).



**Figure 2.** Welfare-balanced budget and European Integration-National Interest dimensions. Government and party positions in a bi-dimensional space (2013).

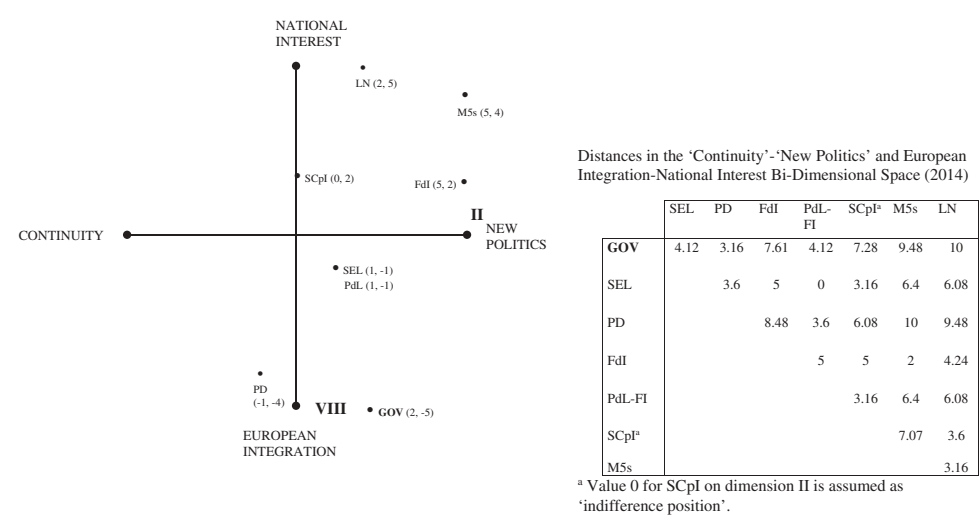
respectively, the Market-Solidarity and European Integration-National Interest dimensions, and the Welfare-Balanced budget and European Integration-National Interest dimensions in 2013. Two bi-dimensional spaces are drawn and the relative distances among all parties are provided.<sup>6</sup> These dimensions are worth combining because in 2013 they were the only ones which received attention from all the party speakers during the debate. Moreover, the influence of supranational governance (i.e., the influence of the EU) over national policies, and particularly over economic and welfare policies, was generally recognised, and this supposed domestic impact of the EU became a dominant focus in the parliamentary debate.

Figure 1 (referring to the policy positions taken in debate preceding the investiture of the Letta government, 2013) leaves little room for doubt about the move of Italian parties towards Eurosceptic positions. Apart from the PD (0, on dimension VIII), which occupies an equidistant position along the axis ‘European integration-National interest’, Italian parties and the government itself adopted critical positions towards the EU. In the case of the PdL-FI, the M5s (both scoring 5 on dimension VIII) and SCpI (scoring 4 on dimension VIII), this is very evident. With respect to the coalition (PD, PdL-FI, ScpI) which supported Letta’s *governo delle larghe intese* (‘government of broad consensus’), the relative size of the ‘government core’ (the dotted lines in Figure 1), the distinctive position of the PD (–1, 0) and of Letta himself (3, 3) are noteworthy. In other words, the coalition axis between the PdL-FI and SCpI was relatively coherent in terms of policy positions, whilst the PD proved more distant from the other two parties and from Letta as well. The absolute distances between the PdL-FI and the PD, and between SCpI and the PD, were 5.09 and 4.47 respectively. The distance between the PD and the PdL-FI on this bi-dimensional configuration (see Figure 1) was the second highest after that between the M5s and the PD (5.38). However, dimension III reveals the pro-market orientation of Italian parties with the noticeable but unsurprising exception of SEL.



The picture changes when dimension VIII is combined with dimension IV (see Figure 2), the ‘Welfare versus Balanced budget’ dimension. EU pressure on member states (like Italy) with a high public debt through imposition of the fiscal compact, limited the Government’s ability further to expand public spending and guarantee the welfare state. In his investiture speech, Letta defended the acquisition of Italian welfare (GOV = -5, on dimension IV) and combined it with a national interest perspective (GOV = 3, on dimension VIII). Similar policy positions were adopted by the PD, SEL and, quite surprisingly, by the right-wing FdI. The maximum recorded distance on this bi-dimensional configuration is once again that between the PD and the PdL-FI (7.81), which cast shadows over the ‘broad consensus’ between these two parties. The bi-dimensional space of Figure 2 confirms that in 2013 Italian parties had adopted a highly critical attitude towards the EU and European integration.

In Figure 3, dimension VIII is combined with dimension II (‘Continuity versus New Politics’), when Renzi became President of the Council of Ministers after a brief and controversial government crisis in February 2014. Dimensions II and VIII were the only two to which all the parties except the SCpI devoted attention. On dimension II, references to ‘Democratic and Constitutional Legitimacy’ and to ‘Party Government’ were combined and contrasted with references to ‘the People’ (POP), ‘Citizenship’ (CITT), ‘Public Ethics’ (PUB), ‘Political Transition’ (TRANS), and ‘Information through the WEB’ (INFWEB). In his investiture speech, Renzi emphasised the role that Italy would soon play in Europe on taking over the EU presidency (GOV = 5, on dimension VIII), and also showed his willingness to accept the criticisms of the old party government system. However, the distances in terms of policy positions between Renzi and the populist forces were very marked (distances of 10 between GOV and LN and 9.48 between GOV and M5s). Figure 3 shows clearly the political opposition that was emerging between the parties of the ‘bipolar model’ (the PD and the PdL-FI, positioned in the two lower quadrants of the bi-dimensional space) and the populist



**Figure 3.** ‘Continuity’-‘new politics’ and European Integration-National Interest dimensions. Government and party positions in a bi-dimensional space (2014).

parties (the LN, the M5s and FdI, located in the upper right quadrant). This opposition became increasingly heated during Renzi's government, and also characterised his political decline in the phase 2016–2017 after the rejection of his proposed constitutional reform in December 2016.

## **Back to the future? The Italian party system after the 2013 and 2018 elections**

According to Downs (1957, 120), in 'a bimodal distribution of voters with modes near each extreme' – as with Italy's polarised bipolarity in the 1990s (Ieraci 2006, 2008) – it is likely that the winning party 'will attempt to implement policy radically opposed to the other party's ideology'. The parties do not converge towards the centre; 'the government policy will be very unstable'; 'democracy is likely to produce chaos', and 'the growth of balancing centre parties is unlikely'. These predictions can be applied with some approximation to the current Italian context, and after the 2013 elections and the referendum on constitutional reform in December 2016, Italian democracy seemed on the verge of degenerating into chaos.

As a last blow for Renzi, the Italian Constitutional Court in January 2017 declared the Italicum, his electoral reform, unconstitutional. If it had been applied, it would have awarded a majority bonus of 340 parliamentary seats (54%) to the party winning at least 40% of the votes, or to the largest of the two parties participating in a second round. A new electoral law was approved by the Italian parliament in November 2017, establishing a mixed proportional representation-majority system (for two thirds and one third of the seats respectively) for the election of both the lower (Camera dei Deputati) and upper (Senato) houses. In the 2018 elections, the M5s and the LN were the winners and subsequently a 'yellow-green' coalition government was formed. In light of this persistent polarisation and almost complete disintegration of the party system, is there any reason to believe that, despite its history of conflict, inconsistency and inefficiency, Italian democracy will survive?

Scenario 1: *Concerning the fate of the M5s*. The elections held in March 2018 were certainly won by the M5s: it grew from 25% of the vote in the 2013 elections to about 35%. The M5s did not gain an absolute majority of the seats in either of the two houses, but its 229 seats in the Camera dei Deputati and 112 in the Senato are enough to enable it to influence the 'parliamentary game' and transform it from a vote-swinging or 'blackmail' party into one with high coalition potential.<sup>7</sup> In its present state of evolution, the M5s looks like a hybrid between a movement and a party (Ieraci and Toffoletto 2018; Corbetta and Gualmini 2013; Corbetta 2017). As a movement, it exhibits the typical dearth of a defined organisational structure. To some extent, the Meetups platform and the blogs are useful tools for coordinating the actions and influencing the attitudes of participants in the movement (Ieraci and Toffoletto 2018). Moreover, the web provides its base with an illusory channel of direct control over the actions of the M5s leaders, compelling them to embrace visibility and transparency. Thus, as a political organisation the M5s appears as a leaderless and horizontal structure, offering its members maximum opportunities for participation and the exercise of influence. Nonetheless, the organisation and its participants have clearly been subject to the control and immense influence of its founder, Beppe Grillo. The presence of such charismatic leadership has bred conflicts within the M5s and among the elected parliamentarians and local administrators, who are struggling to assert their political

role. Its electoral successes have forced the M5s to become a party with a nationwide organisation and representatives on local councils and above all, in Parliament. We are thus witnessing organisational tension and growing distance between the virtual, on-line party, and the institutional party with its MPs and local administrators. Although it is a transparent and functional tool for monitoring and coordinating a movement, the web loses its power in institutional arenas (such as the legislature) where the latter's rules, roles and expectations predominate: this means that the institutionalised parliamentary groups become autonomous from the movement. Their effectiveness demands leadership in the parliamentary arena, and close co-ordination of the deputies' actions (Ieraci and Toffoletto 2018).

The transformation of the M5s into a party, whatever form it may take (Corbetta 2017),<sup>8</sup> will raise a further series of questions. The process will trigger a struggle for organisational power and definitely mark a split with the original movement. Given the outcome and aftermath of the 2018 elections the M5s will be inexorably dragged into the deadly politics of Italian coalition governments, and this in turn could bring about deep internal conflict over the tactics to be followed and over the choice of eligible allies. As a party, the M5s could find itself subject to the same criticisms and delegitimising messages it directed at the parties of the old establishment. This critical phase has now begun, since the M5s has passed the threshold of the executive. As a government incumbent, will the M5s prove able to withstand its own anti-party and anti-government rhetoric?

Scenario 2: *Concerning the fate of the Democratic Party (PD) and the end of 'Berlusconism'*. Defeat in the 2018 elections brought about Renzi's resignation from the post of party secretary, and his political decline.

Before speculating on the fate of the PD, let us reflect briefly on its genesis and its historical role. After the election victories of the two centre-left coalitions – the Ulivo and the Unione led by Romano Prodi in the 1990s – Prodi promoted the idea of founding a party embodying the spirit of that political experience. The new party (the PD) would appeal to voters widely spread across the left-right spectrum from the post-communist left to the Catholic centre and including the space occupied by voters who had supported the former so-called 'minor lay parties' (the Social Democrats, Republicans and Socialists). It could be said that the PD gives party status to the 'historic compromise' between Communists and Catholics,<sup>9</sup> which had long been sought after the end of the centre-left coalition governments of the early 1970s and the tumultuous years of conflict which followed (Ieraci 2013). Since the beginning, cohabitation between post-communists and Catholics within the PD has been problematic, as is confirmed by the many party splits that have taken place during the PD's brief existence,<sup>10</sup> even though none of the resulting new parties to the left of the PD have yet proved able to cross the threshold of political significance.

The future of the centre-right is no less uncertain. Silvio Berlusconi has reached the twilight years of his political life. His election victories in 1994, 2001, and 2008 were followed by heavy defeats (in 1996, 2006, 2013 and 2018), and among the leading European democracies he represents the fairly unique case of a government leader who has never achieved re-election whilst in power. This is a clear sign of the gap between the expectations created and the results achieved by his governments. The centre-right collapse in the 2013 elections and the results achieved in 2018 by Forza Italia (as the PdL-FI was renamed in November 2013) were very disappointing, so that for the first time Berlusconi's party could no longer claim the

leading role within the centre-right coalition. This outcome is certainly connected to the rise of the M5s and the unexpectedly positive result achieved by the Lega at the last election. Suffice it to say that the centre-right coalition declined from 46.8% of the vote in 2008 to about 36% in 2018.<sup>11</sup> Berlusconi's project to establish a national conservative party with a majority vocation – appealing to all sectors of society – ultimately failed. The decline of the PdL and its dissolution left more room for the more radical and populist parties of the right, namely the LN and FdI.

What type of party system will emerge from these developments? The outcome of realignments in the Italian political space over the past twenty years could be a multilateral distribution of parties with no dominant party or pole (Ieraci 2012, 543). This party system would resemble the fragmented or atomised party system described by Sartori (1976). It would feature a relatively high degree of polarisation, with the number of significant parties reaching or perhaps exceeding the threshold of six or seven. Compared to the polarised pluralist system that characterised the initial period of Italy's post-war history, the new multilateral distribution would lack any dominant party occupying the centre of the political spectrum, as the Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democrats, DC) did in the past. The centre pole of the new Italian party system would instead be fragmented and exhibit no common strategy or coherence. The system would be polarised but have no ideological characterisation or cleavages. The vote-swinging or blackmail potential of the populist parties and above all of the M5s, though not ideologically grounded, would act as a strong conditioning factor in Italian politics.

We are left with two analytical queries. Firstly, how would a party system with a multilateral distribution and no dominant party or pole work? Secondly, what would sustainable government coalitions in this game look like?

Sartori (1976) offers no insight into the working of fragmented or atomised party systems. We can attempt to summarise the properties of the actual mechanics of such a system by drawing on current observations from the Italian case.

- (1) The polarisation of the political space (the overall distance between the first and the last aligned party) is relatively high because of the crowding of the parties in it. This high polarisation was clearly pinpointed by the above analysis. The polarising effect corresponds to what Sartori pointed out forty years ago as the property of the elasticity of the competition space; the larger the number of parties aligned on a continuum, the higher the overall distance measured between the two ends.
- (2) Notwithstanding the polarisation of the political space, it is hard to identify any clear ideological cleavages in it. Once again, the above analysis of the competition space in 2013–2014 confirms that Italian parties are not aligned along an ideologically identifiable left-right continuum, but rather that they shift from one dimension of the policy debate to another, sometimes incoherently. This is not a new trend, because the traditional left-right ideological connotation of the political space disappeared in the 1990s and 2000s. Both the free market and democracy are fully accepted by the main Italian party actors, with minor differences now confined to issues such as the degree of liberalisation of the market (solidarity versus free competition) and the pattern of democracy

(consensual versus majoritarian democracy). Position issues now predominate over valence issues (Stokes 1963).

- (3) While party position crossing is excluded by any spatial modelling of party competition, it can be accommodated in a modelling of systems with multilateral distribution and no dominant party. Party position crossing refers here not to crossing the floor by MPs, a historically widespread practice among the Italian political class, but to the opportunity for parties to intersect and establish coalitional links with non-adjacent parties. This is a striking deviation from the assumptions of spatial analysis, which allows only for ‘ideologically connected coalitions’ (Axelrod 1970). If there are no ideological cleavages or breaks in the space, why should the parties not coalesce freely? The standard assumption that there could be no crossover between parties depended on the preliminary adoption of a unidimensional space of competition. However, if parties are no longer bound to the nineteenth century left-right ideological continuum and the competition space becomes multidimensional, based on a plurality of position issues rather than on a single valence issue, there is no reason why they should not move freely in the space and connect with one another in terms of shared visions and perspectives. Italy’s newly formed ‘yellow-green’ coalition government confirms that in the age of populism, cross-cutting alliances between parties are possible.
- (4) Finally, in any multilateral distribution with no dominant party, the competition forces are similarly multidirectional. This depends on the above-discussed properties of multidimensionality and an absence of constraints on party movement, enabling parties to find shortcuts through the space and to interconnect on sets of issues. At the same time, although no party dominates the game, the relative weight of some (like the M5s and the Lega after the 2018 elections) might exert a force of attraction over the smaller parties in the coalition game. The system would work like a set of subsystems where some small parties were orbiting around larger ones, functioning as anchor points of the system. The overall picture would thus show a complex interplay of centripetal and centrifugal drives.

## Conclusion

Through content analysis of the speeches made in the parliamentary debate preceding the confidence votes leading to the investiture of the two centre-left governments led by Enrico Letta (year 2013) and Matteo Renzi (year 2014), we aimed to identify the main policy dimensions of Italian politics and to provide a measure of the policy distance of the parties on each dimension. The analysis revealed that the emergence of populist parties which has accompanied the decline of the old left-right party alignment has brought about a remodelling of the competition space along new dimensions. The supranational dimension (European integration) interplays with the dimension relative to the state’s capacity to provide services and guarantee citizens’ rights. By combining these two dimensions, it was possible to highlight the distance between populist and traditional parties. Finally, the spatial representation offered here throws into relief the decline of the old party alignment and reveals a multi-dimensional structure of party competition.

## Notes

1. In a steady stream of publications, cfr. Stokes (1963), Barry (1971), Sartori (1982), Sartori and Sani (1978, 1982), Castles and Mair (1984), Budge, Robertson, and Hearl (1987), Budge (2001).
2. For an introduction to the debate and the more recent critical evaluation of the spatial approach, see Dinas and Gemenis (2010), Gemenis (2013), Zulianello (2014).
3. A similar criticism with regard to Sartori's theory of polarised pluralism was made by D'Alimonte (1978).
4. The distance between the PD's (-1.33) position and that of SCpI (1.8) was 3.13 in 2013, and in 2014 it increased to 4.14 (PD = -2.14; SCpI = 2.0) (see Tables 1 and 2). SCpI was founded at the beginning of 2013 by the former President of the Council of Ministers, Mario Monti.
5. See Table A1 in the appendix for a detailed list of Letta's political themes.
6. These distances were simply calculated as:  $\sqrt{(x_2 - x_1)^2 + (y_2 - y_1)^2}$ , where  $x_{1,2}$  and  $y_{1,2}$  are the coordinates (policy positions) of each pair of considered parties (i.e.,  $p_x$  and  $p_y$ ) on the two given axes.
7. For the distinction between a 'blackmail' (vote-swinging) party and a 'party with high coalition potential', see Ieraci (2017): both have considerable parliamentary weight (i.e. large percentages of seats in the legislature), but the former is too remote in terms of policy positions to act as a pivot in any coalition.
8. With regard to the transformation of populist parties once in power, see Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015).
9. For a theoretically oriented reconstruction of the 'historic compromise', see D'Alimonte (1999).
10. These splits were all provoked by the internal left opposition within the PD and they have been a constant feature of the recent history of the Italian left: in 1991 the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (Party of Communist Refoundation, PRC) was established in opposition to the dissolution of the Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party, PCI) and the birth of the Partito Democratico della Sinistra (Democratic Party of the Left, PDS); in 2009, a number of left-wing parties and movements merged to form SEL; in 2017 Sinistra Italiana (the Italian Left) brought together, in Parliament, the various splinter groups of the Italian extreme left; in the same year, a number of Renzi's opponents left the PD and founded the Movimento Democratico e Progressista (Democratic and Progressive Movement); finally, in December 2017, the former presidents of the upper and lower houses (Pietro Grasso and Laura Boldrini), together with a number of representatives of the PD's internal opposition, launched Liberi e Uguali (Free and Equal, LeU) whose electoral performance in 2018 proved rather modest (about 3% of the vote).
11. In 2018, the centre-right coalition was made up of FI (14%), the Lega (18%), and FdI (4%).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## Appendix

The content analysis related to the investiture of Enrico Letta's government (Table A1) was based on the parliamentary debate which took place in the Camera dei Deputati (lower house). On 28 April 2013, Letta delivered his programmatic presentation speech and on 29 April 2013 the debate was opened to the replies of the parliamentary parties. Letta's speech was 5,774 words long. The length of the replies varied and in order to keep some uniformity they were selected in such a way as to yield between approximately 1,000 and 1,500 words of text per party, as follows:

G. Meloni (FdI), Vote declaration, 1,583 words.

L. Dellai (SCpI), Reply, 1,021 words.

S. Fassina (PD), Reply, 1,755 words.

G. Airaud and C. Fava (SEL), Replies, 626 and 667 words.

A. Colletti, A. Di Battista, F. Dadone, and D. Nesci (M5s), Replies, 286, 376, 406, 425 words.

M. Bragantini and R.F. Marguerettaz (LN), Replies, 872 and 448 words.

M. Gelmini (PdL), Reply, 1,538 words.

Source: [http://www.camera.it/leg17/410?idSeduta = 0010&tipo = alfabetico\\_stenografico#](http://www.camera.it/leg17/410?idSeduta = 0010&tipo = alfabetico_stenografico#)

Similarly, the content analysis related to the investiture of Renzi's government (Table A2) was based on the parliamentary debate which took place in the Camera dei Deputati (lower house) on 24 February 2014. The length of Renzi's speech was 8,064 words. The replies chosen provided between 1,000 and 1,500 words per party, as follows:

G. Meloni (FdI), Reply, 1,690 words.

A. Romano and G. Librandi (SCpI), Replies, 952 and 659 words.

S. Fassina (PD), Reply, 1,308 words.

N. Fratoianni (SEL), Reply, 1,244 words.

R. Fico, A. Colletti (M5s), Replies, 896 and 711 words.

G. Giorgetti (LN), Vote declaration, 1,241 words.

R. Brunetta and R. Polverini (PdL), Replies, 954 and 695 words.

Source: <http://www.camera.it/leg17/410?idSeduta = 0178&tipo = stenografico#sed0178.stenografico.tit00040>

**Table A1.** Enrico Letta's government programme (2013).

Code	Political Themes	+	-	n	Scores
AMB	ENVIRONMENTALISM	0	1	1	-1
BUR	BUREAUCRACY	0	6	6	-5
CITT	CITIZENSHIP	2	0	2	2
CORP	CORPORATISM	3	0	3	3
CULT	CULTURE AND HERITAGE	7	0	7	5
DDEM	DIRECT DEMOCRACY	0	1	1	-1
DMP	PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY	5	6	11	0
EM	MARKET ECONOMY	6	0	6	5
EQU	EQUALITY	1	0	1	1
ESS	SOCIAL ECONOMY AND SOLIDARITY	2	0	2	2
Events	Milan Expo	1	0	1	0
FAM	FAMILY	2	0	2	2
FOR	EDUCATION AND LABOUR	16	0	16	5
FPB	PUBLIC EXPENDITURE AND BUDGET	6	1	7	4
FREL	FEDERALISM, REGIONS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	3	0	3	3
GIU	JUSTICE	2	1	3	1
GLOB	GLOBALISATION	1	0	1	1
INFWEB	NEWS VIA WEB	0	2	2	-2
INST	STATE INTERVENTION AND INFRASTRUCTURE	6	0	6	5
INTEUR	INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND EU	13	6	19	0
LD	DEMOCRATIC AND CONSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMACY	1	0	1	1
LDL	DIRECT LEGITIMACY OF THE LEADERSHIP	2	0	2	2
MEZ	SOUTHERN ITALY	2	0	2	2
NAZ	NATIONAL INTEREST	3	0	3	3

(Continued)

**Table A1.** (Continued).

Code	Political Themes	+	-	n	Scores
PAR	PARTY GOVERNMENT	0	4	4	-4
People	Napolitano	2	0	2	2
People	Grasso, Boldrini [as Speakers of the Houses]	1	0	1	1
People	Bersani	1	0	1	1
People	Police and Carabinieri	3	0	3	0
PUB	PUBLIC ETHICS	7	0	7	5
TAX	TAXATION	1	7	8	-4
TECH	RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY	5	0	5	5
TRANS	POLITICAL TRANSITION	0	2	2	-2
W	WELFARE	4	1	5	3
WOM	WOMEN AND GENDER ISSUES	4	0	4	4

**Table A2.** Matteo Renzi's government programme (2014).

Code	Political Themes	+	-	n	Scores
AMB	ENVIRONMENTALISM	2		2	2
BUR	BUREAUCRACY		10	10	-5
CEN	CENTRALISM AND STATISM		1	1	-1
CULT	CULTURE AND HERITAGE	4		4	4
DMC	CONSOCIATIONAL DEMOCRACY	2		2	2
DMP	PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY		9	9	-5
FOR	EDUCATION AND LABOUR	10		10	5
FPB	PUBLIC EXPENDITURE AND BUDGET	1	2	3	-1
FREL	FEDERALISM, REGIONS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT		6	6	-5
GIU	JUSTICE		4	4	-4
IMM	IMMIGRATION	1		1	1
INST	STATE INTERVENTION AND INFRASTRUCTURE	1		1	1
INTEUR	INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND EU	5		5	5
LDL	DIRECT LEGITIMACY OF THE LEADERSHIP	1		1	1
NAZ	NATIONAL INTERESTS		2	2	-2
PAR	PARTY GOVERNMENT	1	2	3	-1
POP	THE PEOPLE	1		1	1
TAX	TAXATION		1	1	-1
TECH	RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY	1		1	1
WOM	WOMEN AND GENDER ISSUES	1		1	1
People	[Teachers]	2		2	2
People	Letta	1		1	1
People	Pd	2		2	2
People	Piano	1		1	1
Events	Senato	2		2	2

**Table A3.** List of the political themes and codes.

Codes	Political Themes
ABO	Abortion
AMB	Environmentalism
AUTH	Authorities
BIP	Bipolarisation
BKFIN	Banks and Finance
BUR	Bureaucracy
CDC	Centre and Christian Democracy
CEN	Centralism
CHI	State-Church Relations
CI	Conflicts of Interest
CITT	Citizenship
CIV	Clash of Civilizations
COM	Communism
CORP	Corporatism
CRI	Christianity

*(Continued)*

**Table A3.** (Continued).

Codes	Political Themes
CSR	Centre-Left and Reforms
CULT	Cultural and Artistic Heritage
D	Right
DDEM	Direct Democracy
DMC	Consociational Democracy
DMP	Parliamentary Democracy
EM	Market
EQU	Equality
ESS	Economy and Social Solidarity
ETN	Ethnic Minorities
FAM	Family
FASC	Fascism
FOR	Labour Policy and Education
FPB	Public Expenditure and Budget
FREL	Federalism, Regions and Local Gov.
GIU	Justice
GLOB	Globalisation
IMM	Immigration
Codes	Political Themes
INF	Digital Divide
INFWEB	Web Information
INTEUR	International Relations and EU
INTS	State Intervention
LD	Democratic Legitimacy and Constitution
LDL	Direct Legitimacy of the Leadership
LIB	Freedom
MAGG	Majoritarian Democracy
MEDIA	Media
MEZ	Southern Italy
MIL	Military Expenditure
NATO	International Relations and Nato
NAZ	National Interest
NORD	Northern Italy
PADANIA	Devolution and Padania
PAR	Party Government
POP	The People
PROT	Protectionism
PUB	Public Ethics
REP	'I Republic'
RES	'Resistenza'
S	Left
SCIO	Strikes and Labour
SIC	Security
SOC	Society
STA	State Reform
STNZ	State-Nation
TAX	Taxation
TECH	Research and Technology
TRANS	Political Transition
TVC	Commercial TV
W	Welfare
WOM	Women and Gender Issues