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# Political Space and Party System in Italy (2018-2020)

## *A Content Analysis of the Parliamentary Debates over the Investiture Speeches of two Populist Governments*

The paper presents a study of the party positions in the Italian Parliament based on an inductive approach to the parliamentary debate and votes of investiture on the two governments led by G. Conte (2018-2020). Through a content analysis of the parliamentary debate on the votes of investiture of these two governments, a survey is provided of the political themes tackled by the government incumbents and by the main Italian parliamentary groups. The scope of the research is to assess the alignments of the Italian parties after the decline of the traditional left-to-right cleavage and the rise of the populist trend. Firstly, the multidimensional character of the space of competition is highlighted. The findings show, secondly, that the party alignments are affected by the interplay of the Supranational Dimension (European integration) and of the populist “mood”, on one hand, with the State capacity to provide services and guarantee rights, on the other. Finally, it is argued that the emergence of a multi-polar pattern of competition, and the positioning of populist parties in the alignments have hindered the reduction of the polarization of the Italian party system.

**KEYWORDS** *political space, Italian party system, parliamentary debate, party polarization.*

This research employs an analytical framework and a methodology already applied in previous works (Ieraci, 2006; 2008a; 2008b; 2019). The data collected here concern two coalition governments formed during the current XVIII Italian parliamentary legislature (2018-2013), both of them led by Giuseppe Conte. The first government remained in office from 01.06.2018

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to 20.08.2019 and the second from 05.09.2019 to 26.01.2021. These the two governments pivoted around the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S), which has held a decisive role in the two Houses of the Italian parliament during the XVIII legislature. Currently, the M5S holds 190 out of 630 seats in the lower house (*Camera dei Deputati*) and 92 out of 315 in the upper house (*Senato*)<sup>1</sup>, and since the 2018 elections no government majority can be formed without the participation of the M5S. The two governments led by Conte were supported respectively by a coalition between M5S and *Legha Nord* (LN), called «yellow-green» (Conte I), and by a coalition between M5S and the *Partito Democratico* (PD), called «yellow-red» (Conte II). If Conte I had an openly populist character, Conte II partially moderated these tones, following the replacement in the coalition of the LN with the PD. Nonetheless, since the Covid-19 pandemic emergency that broke out in February 2020, serious doubts have been raised from a constitutional point of view by the conduct of the government, which used the instrument of decree (Decrees of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, DPCM) to bypass the parliamentary procedure and in fact govern without parliamentary scrutiny.

The aim of this research is to assess the particularity of the Italian multi-dimensional policy space and to trace an interpretation of the current dynamic of the Italian party system during the populist phase. Through the content analysis of the parliamentary debates over the investiture votes the two governments Conte I and II, this research aims at:

- a) Identifying the main policy dimensions of the Italian «multilateral distribution» (Ieraci, 2012) of parties in this political phase;
- b) Providing a measure of the policy distances of the parties on each dimension;
- c) Showing in which way the Italian pattern of multi-dimensional competition has been affected by the populist wave;
- d) Sketching a comparative picture of the polarization of the Italian party systems since the 1990's.

Although the scope of this study is primarily the description of the model of interaction of the Italian parties in a multi-dimensional policy space, a comparative sketch will be provided to assess the varying measures of polarization of the Italian party system in the last 25 years. The research strengthens the hypothesis that the emergence of populist parties goes side by side with the decline of the old left-right party alignment and brings about a remodelling of the competition space along new dimensions which feature the interplay between the supranational dimension (European in-

<sup>1</sup> These figures were drawn from [www.parlamento.it](http://www.parlamento.it) on 12.02.2021.

tegration) and the State capacity to provide services and guarantee rights (Ieraci, 2019).

The relevance of the European issue in the emergence of the populist trend in Italian politics is not an unknown factor (Giannetti, Pedrazzi and Pinto, 2017; Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018). The positive contribution of this research lies in the presentation of a multidimensional spatial model of interaction between the Italian parties in the parliamentary game and in the detection of the actual distances between the parties. These acquisitions are subject to a conclusive interpretative analysis that reveals two main aspects. In the first place, the European crisis has rekindled the neo-isolationist tendencies of the European states and also of Italy. In the two-year period 2018-2019 all the major Italian parties accentuated their criticisms of the EU and pushed for a strengthening of the state control over public policies and resource management. Secondly, the electoral decline of the M5S after the 2019 European elections and the creation of a new «yellow-red» coalition did not reduce the anti-European controversy, although the European issue became less central in the investiture debate of the Conte II government.

## Spatial analysis of party competition

The mainstream of the party system analysis has dealt with unidimensional spaces of competition (Downs, 1957; Sartori, 1976), although the reliability of this paradigm has been frequently questioned. The conceptual difficulties are increased by the multiple use of the concept of the «space of competition» (Dinas and Gemenis, 2010; Gemenis, 2013; Zulianello, 2017). As *policy space* it generates cardinal measures of the ideal policy points of the actors, as an *ideological space* or «valence space» (Stokes, 1963) it reveals the rigidity and non-negotiability of the position of the actors, and finally, as *party-defined space* (Budge and Farlie, 1977; 1978) it implies the establishment of some bonds of identification between parties and voters. Nonetheless, flexibility over policies and rigidity over ideology and/or identifications might interfere, as pointed out some decades ago by D'Alimonte (1978) with the dynamics of the polarized party systems, therefore making the interplay of the actors more difficult. Furthermore, the adoption of a *positional* policy perspective forces the researcher to employ multi-dimensional spaces of competition or confrontation which may interfere with each other or combine in variable ways, particularly when the left-to-right simplifying ideological criterion is missing.

Incidentally, the latter is the perspective adopted by our research, which rests on a multidimensional analysis of the positioning of parties. The

paradox of the Downs-Sartori tradition of research lies in the fact that the respondents are asked to express their positions in terms of measurable distance between the party offers (position issue) while their answer is reduced by the researcher to a matter of affective or emotional identification (as right-left valence issue). To tackle this apparent inconsistency the solution has been to define a priori what is «left» and what is «right» in terms of policies or of general issues, so that whatever type are the answers of the respondents (either rational or emotional) reliable self-positions are obtained. 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 the respondents (samples of the masse electorates) to position themselves (in Sartori's approach), or through an articulated codification of the programme 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)<sup>2</sup>.

The identification of «certain categories as belonging theoretically to the right» or to the «left» raises new problems. The meaning of «left» and «right» has to be predetermined, that is the researcher is forced to attribute any issue to the supposed true category (for instance, free enterprise to the right, whilst economic planning to the left etc.), even when the correct attribution can be doubtful. There is the risk not to measure objective party positions but rather subjective (the respondent) reactions to certain stimuli. Although «left» and «right» may have universal character (for example, left may be associated with desire for equality, whilst right may be associated with preservation of traditions), their contents in terms of policies are necessarily historically (during which time?) and spatially (in which context or even country?) determined, something which makes cross-time and cross-national comparison rather misleading. To put it straightforwardly, if left and right are treated as sets of issues or policies we might find out, for example, that «to dislike immigrants», which was at one time a rightist attitude, is now

<sup>2</sup> It is hard to understand how these difficulties can be avoided by selecting some "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 by these estimations and assumptions, no matter how uncontroversial they might appear.

also a leftist attitude, or that «free enterprise» is now a political value commonly shared through all the political spectrum.

## Methodological note

These well-known difficulties in representing a space of competition or a policy space<sup>3</sup> suggested the adoption of an original approach aiming at reconstructing the political space *as the political actors see it and represent it*. We did not resort to any left or right pre-classified category and rather recorded the political themes as they were articulated by the political actors during the parliamentary debates over the investiture votes of the governments Conte I and II. These political themes were treated as proxy of their preferences on various policy dimensions. According to the Constitution procedure, the Italian governments receive their parliamentary investiture through an initial vote of confidence, after the *Presidente della Repubblica* (Head of State) has sworn in the *Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri* (President of the Council of the Ministers) and his Ministers. Usually some days after that formal investiture, the newly formed government receives a collegial vote of confidence from both the Lower House – *Camera dei Deputati* – and the Upper House – *Senato* – of the Italian Parliament<sup>4</sup>.

The parliamentary debates over the quest for a vote of investiture by the two governments were conceived as dialogues between the current government incumbent and the party representatives in Parliament, both from the government majority and from the opposition. The confrontation between government and parties was reduced to an investiture game, characterized by the following sequence of play: A. President of the Council of the Ministers delivers an investiture speech; B. the representatives of parties reply; C. the vote of investiture is delivered. The survey consisted of the content analysis of the investiture speech of the President of the Council of the Ministers and of the relative replies of the other party representatives. The political themes presented by the President of the Council of the Ministers were recorded, together with the evaluations (either positive or negative) attached to them (see the Appendix, Section C, for the complete list of the recorded political themes and their relative acronyms). We obtained a frequency of the occurrences for each political theme (how many?) and a frequency of their evaluations (how many positive?, and how many nega-

<sup>3</sup> In a stream of literature, cfr. Downs (1957), Stokes (1963), Barry (1971), Sartori (1976; 1982), Sartori and Sani (1978; 1982), Castles and Mair (1984), Budge, Robertson and Hearl (1987), Budge et al. (2001a).

<sup>4</sup> The content analysis on which this research is based was conducted over the debates held in the Senate. See Appendix.

tive?). The political themes were hence combined on ten point-scales (from -5 to +5), where the intensity of the preference of the talking actor was revealed by the frequencies of the positive and negative evaluations of the various themes and policy. This procedure was applied to investiture votes over the two governments above mentioned, and eventually the relative scores of 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 be dealt with and the subsequent manipulation of the researcher was reduced as much as possible. There was therefore no pre-defined (by the researcher) left-to-right policy or ideological scale, and the puzzle of declaring what is «left» and what is «right» was deliberately avoided, and the analysis resulted multi-dimensional.

## Research Strategy and Content Analysis of Parliamentary debate on confidence votes

The political themes advanced by G. Conte presenting the programme of his two governments are wholly listed in the *Appendix*, Tab. A (Conte I, 2018) and B (Conte II, 2019). Compared to previous researches (Giannetti, Pedrazzi and Pinto, 2017; Ieraci, 2019), the European issue, with its influence on domestic affairs, retained its centrality but it appeared now more intertwined with concerns about the transformation of the democratic process (towards an openly populist conception). The novelty in this new phase was that a fundamental Euro-skepticism took possession of all parties, although obviously the intensity of this attitude varied considerably amid the parties. This feeling depended on both the emergency created at the beginning of 2020 by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the following quest for an integrated European response to the crisis. In the Italian case, one main issue has proved to be the opportunity to resort to the European Stability Mechanism as a complement to the Recovery Plan for Europe to trigger a new economic take-off after the pandemic.

Emphasis on federalism and regionalism has drastically declined, arguably as a result of the rediscovery of the national interest as opposed to the conditioning exercised on the national sovereignty by the European framework and by global market. Several themes very much connected with conflicting conceptions of the economy emerged in the political debate. Conte emphasized his choice for the free market in both his investiture speeches, but at the same time he mitigated this option declaring his engagement in favour of social policies and economic solidarity. Overall, Conte's attitude with regard to the trend towards globalization of the market and finance was

very cautious. Labour policies and education occupied core positions above all in Conte II's programme (2019). Not surprisingly, the slowness of the Italian economic recovery cast some shade over the sustainability of the Italian budget, and in his two investiture speeches Conte tried to give reassurance that the strong commitment of his coalition governments to the Welfare State issues would be responsible and respectful of the European fiscal compact.

Finally, democracy ('Citizens and populism' versus 'Majoritarian') was a crucial political theme in the 2018-2019 debates. Conte and the M5S could be clearly located at one of the extremes of the political spectrum, and in both debates their option in favour of a populist conception of democracy was undisputable (i.e., political themes such as 'Populus', 'Citizenship' and 'Direct democracy' scored high in Conte's speeches and in the replies of the representatives of the M5S) (see Tabs. 1 and 2). However, as a sign of the conceptual confusion and of the contradictory aspects of the debates, in 2018 *Lega Nord* (LN) and *Partito Democratico* (PD) did not disguise their preference for some forms of direct legitimization of the leadership through the electoral contest, whilst *Forza Italia* (FI) and *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) chose to position themselves on the opposite pole of the continuum, therefore opting for a 'majoritarian' conception of democracy. As we know, Conte had no background as a political leader and was ultimately completely unknown to the political world. In the stalemate phase following the 2018 elections, with a parliament without a coherent majority, the solution of a "yellow-green» coalition government (LN and M5S) was found by identifying an outsider *Presidente del Consiglio*, who was not vetoed by the LN.

In conclusion, the comparison of the programmes of Conte's two coalition governments (see Appendix, Tabs. A-B) led to the identification of eleven sets of issues and relative dimensions and the scores of the parties on each dimension are shown in Tabs. 1 and 2:

- I. *Democracy*: 'Citizens and populism' versus 'Majoritarian';
- II. *Politics*: 'Continuity' versus 'New Politics';
- III. *Economy and Modernization*: 'Solidarity and social economy' versus 'Market and globalization';
- IV. *Welfare*: 'Welfare state' versus 'Budget balance';
- V. *State*: 'State active role' versus 'Minimal role';
- VI. *Judiciary*: 'Legality and justice' versus 'Security';
- VII. *Regionalism and Federalism*: 'Centralization' versus 'Devolution';
- VIII. *International*: 'Supranational' versus 'State-centred';
- IX. *Political ethics*: 'Political ethics' versus 'Corruption';
- X. *Gender and Minorities*: 'Women and ethnic minorities' versus 'Tradition';
- XI. *Government*.

TABLE 1 – G. Conte's I Government and Parties Positions (Source: Senato, 05.06.2018)<sup>a</sup>

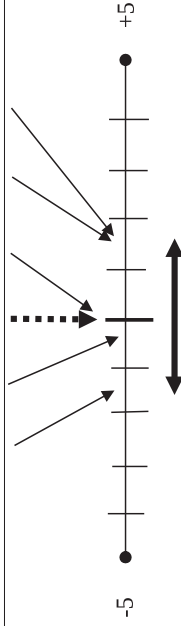
Dimensions	Political Themes	PARTIES:							Political Themes
		M5S	LN	GOV	PD	Fdi	FI		
I: DEMOCRACY	Citizens and populism: CITT, DDEM, POP	-5	0	-5	1	3	4	Majoritarian: LDL, BIP	
II: POLITICS	Continuity: LD, DMP	2	3	0	-5	-5	-3	'New Politics': TRANS, INFWEB	
III: ECONOMY&MOD.	Solidarity: AMB, EQU, ESS, SUSDEV, TECH	-5	-2	-2	-2	1	3	Market: EM, GLOB, BKFIN	
IV: WELFARE	Welfare: W, FOR, FAM	-3	-4	-2	-3	4	-1	Budget: FPB, TAX	
V: STATE	Active: INTS, BUR, MEZ	-4	1	1			-4	Minimal	
VI: JUDICIARY	Legality: GIU	5		5	2	1	4	Security: SIC, CRIM	
VII: REG. & FED.	Centralization	1	2	4		1	1	Devolution: FREL	
VIII: INTERNATIONAL	Supranational: INTEUR, IMM	4	5	4	2	5	2	State-centred: NAZ	
IX: POLITICAL ETHICS	Political Ethics: POL, TRASP, RESPPOL, COMMG	-5	-2	-5		-3		Corruption: CASTA, CORR, CI	
X: GENDER & MIN.	WOM, ETN	-1	2	5		2	1	Tradition: NEWFAM, WCIV, CRI	
XI: GOVERNMENT	GOV	-5	-5	-5	0	5	5	Opposition	
	Other								
	<b>Averages</b>	<b>-1.5</b>	<b>-0.3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>1.5</b>		

Other:

LN: PD, M. Renzi;

M5S: M. Salvini, I. La Russa, LN, M5S;

FI: FI, LN, M5S, P. Davigo.



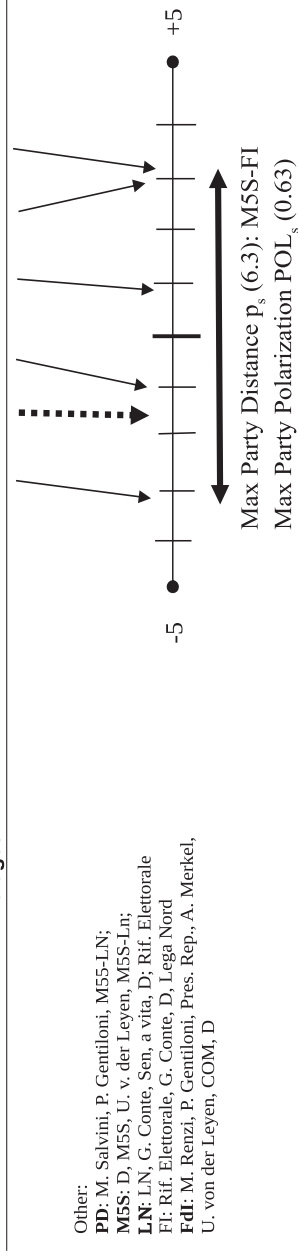
Max Party Distance  $p_s$  (3.0): M5S-FI  
 Max Party Polarization  $POL_s$  (0.3)

<sup>a</sup> Blanks indicates no statements on the relative political themes and dimensions



Tab. 2 – G. Conte's II Government and Parties Positions (Source: Senato, 09-10.09.2019)<sup>a</sup>

Dimensions	Political Themes	M5S	GOV	PD	LN	FdI	FI	Political Themes
I: DEMOCRACY	Citizens and populism: CITT, DDEM, POP, DIRCIV, MEDIA	-5	-5	0	-3	1	4	Majoritarian: LDL, BIP
II: POLITICS	Continuity: LD, DMP, DMC, DEM	1	0	-5	-3	3	4	'New Politics': TRANS, INFWEB, WEBDEM
III: ECONOMY & MOD.	Solidarity: AGR, AMB, EQU, ESS, SUSDEV, TECH	-5	0	1	1	1	1	Market: EM, GLOB, BKFIN
IV: WELFARE	Welfare: W, FOR, FAM	-5	0	-4	-1	1	5	Budget: FPB, TAX
V: STATE	Active: INTS, BUR, MEZ, CULT	-5	-5	-4	1	1	-4	Minimal
VI: JUDICIARY	Legality: GIU		-3		5		5	Security: SIC, CRIM
VII: REG. & FED.	Centralization		-4				3	Devolution: FREL
VIII: INTERNATIONAL	Supranational: INTEUR, IMM, NATO, MED		1	-1	4		5	State-centred: NAZ, PROT
IX: POLITICAL ETHICS	Political Ethics: POL, TRASP, COMMG	-3	-4	-4	1		0	Corruption: CASTA, CORR, CI
X: GENDER & MIN.	WOM, ETN	1	-5	-5	5		5	Tradition: NEWFAM, WCIV, CRI
XI: GOVERNMENT	GOV	-5	-5	-5	5	5	5	Opposition
	Other	-5			5	5	5	
	<b>Averages</b>	<b>-3.1</b>	<b>-2.7</b>	<b>-2.2</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>3.2</b>	



<sup>a</sup> Blanks indicates no statements on the relative political themes and dimensions

If we look at the score in Tabs. 1-2, there is evidence that while Conte I displayed a remarkable moderate or centripetal attitude ( $GOV_{Conte\ I} = 0$ ), Conte II ( $GOV_{Conte\ II} = -2.7$ ) was shown in a centrifugal position. The centre of the spectrum proved to be crowded according to 2018 positioning (LN, GOV and PD were located in a relatively short range and around the median of the space), consequently with a degree of party polarization that was relatively moderate (0.3). The move from the “yellow-green» coalition (2018) to the “yellow-red» one (2019) polarized the positioning of the centre-right parties (LN, FI and FdI) with a resulting increase of the party polarization (0.63). This is enough evidence that the Italian political debate maintains the immoderate features of its past and that some parties tend to occupy eccentric positions on the space and therefore they generate a systemic polarizing effect. This could be the case of the M5S (-1.5 in 2018 and -3.1 in 2019), of the LN (1.8 in 2019), FdI (1.4 in 2018, 3.0 in 2019) and FI (1.5 in 2018, 3.2 in 2019). It is arguable that the political tensions and the circumstances which led in 2019 to the changeover of the coalition government had a polarizing effect, inducing a centrifugal drive to the system as an effect of the re-positioning of LN, FdI and FI. Conte was recurrently criticized during the debates over the investiture of his governments for not enjoying any democratic electoral legitimacy. This criticism was addressed to him particularly by FI and FdI.

There was undoubtedly a considerable degree of policy continuity between Conte I and II<sup>5</sup>, particularly on Dimension I and II with regard to which Conte adhered to a populist conception of democracy, while he kept a balancing position with regard to the dichotomy ‘Continuity’ versus ‘New Politics’. Particularly in 2018, Conte stressed his commitment to the defense of the Welfare state, of the labour market and the family (Tabs. 1-2, Dimension IV,  $GOV_{Conte\ I} = -2$  and  $GOV_{Conte\ II} = 0$ ). However, some noticeable differences between the programs of the two governments were disclosed over Dimensions V, VI and VIII. On Dimension V, Conte I did not take a clear cut position over the dilemma ‘Active versus Minimal’ State (Tab. 1,  $GOV_{Conte\ I} = 1$ ), while Conte II shifted noticeably towards a pro-active conception of the State once LN was substituted by PD in the coalition (Tab. 2,  $GOV_{Conte\ II} = -5$ ). The most striking difference between the two programs is on Dimension VI (Tabb. 1-2,  $GOV_{Conte\ I} = 4$ ;  $GOV_{Conte\ II} = -3$ ), evidence which reinforces the impression that the shift from the «yellow-green» to the «yellow-red» coalition redirected the attention of G. Conte from themes like ‘security’ and ‘criminality’ (2018) to the respect of the rule of law and the defence of the judicial system. Finally, on Dimension VIII Conte shifted from a nett nationalism and Euro-sceptical perspective to a more moderate one (Tabs. 1-2,  $GOV_{Conte\ I} = 4$ ;  $GOV_{Conte\ II} = 1$ ), and this trend is balanced by the

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Tabs. A-B in the Appendix for a detailed list of Conte’s political themes.

reinforcement in 2019 of a centralized conception of the state (Dimension VII, Tabs. 1-2,  $GOV_{Conte I} = 4$ ;  $GOV_{Conte II} = -4$ ).

The multi-dimensional configurations of the policy space which were obtained through the content analysis of the investiture debates of the two governments led by Conte offer a plentitude of possible cross-comparisons among the eleven identified dimensions. Figs. 1-3 cross Market-Solidarity versus Majoritarian-Populist Democracy (Fig. 1), State centred-Supranational versus Welfare-Budget (Fig. 2) and Market-Solidarity versus Majoritarian-Populist Democracy (Fig. 3). Two bi-dimensional spaces are drawn and the relative distances among all parties are provided.<sup>6</sup> These dimensions are worth crossing because in 2018-19 they were the only ones which received attention during the debate by all the party speakers. Moreover, the impact of the conception of democracy (populist versus majoritarian) and of the conception of the state (state-centred versus supranational) over national policies, and particularly over economic and welfare policies, was generally recognized and became a dominant focus in the parliamentary debate.

Figs. 1-2 (referring to the policy position in the investiture debate over Conte I, 2018) does not leave much room for doubt whether the «yellow-green» coalition may be labelled as a populist one (Fig. 1) or whether Italian parties have moved on to Euro-sceptical positions (Fig. 2). Apart from PD and FI that showed some moderation, FdI also positioned itself in the upper right quadrant of the bi-dimensional space traced in Fig. 2, and similarly the two parties of the «yellow-green» coalition supporting Conte I radically adhered to a state-centred and anti-EU vision (upper left quadrant). Giuseppe Conte seemed to be drawn to the same radical position by his allies. The scores of M5S, LN and GOV in Tab. 1 on Dimension VIII (respectively, 4, 5, 4) were polarized towards the ‘State-centred’ end of the continuum, as in the case of FdI (score 5). In other words, critical perspectives towards the EU were spread among the Italian parties. The government core (dotted lines in Figs. 1-2) of the «yellow-green» coalition (M5S, LN) which supported Conte I’s executive was much more smaller once the ‘State-centred versus Supranational’ Dimension is taken into consideration (as in Fig. 2) than when the Dimension ‘Populism versus Majoritarian democracy’ is introduced (Fig. 1). In both pictures, the eccentric position of FdI is very noticeable. In other words, the coalition axis between GOV (Conte) and M5S was relatively coherent in terms of policy positions in both scenarios, whilst the LN proved more distant from both GOV and M5S mainly because of its inclination towards the pro-market and pro-majoritarian orientations. The absolute dis-

<sup>6</sup> 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 couple of considered parties (i.e.,  $p_x$  and  $p_y$ ) on the two given axes.

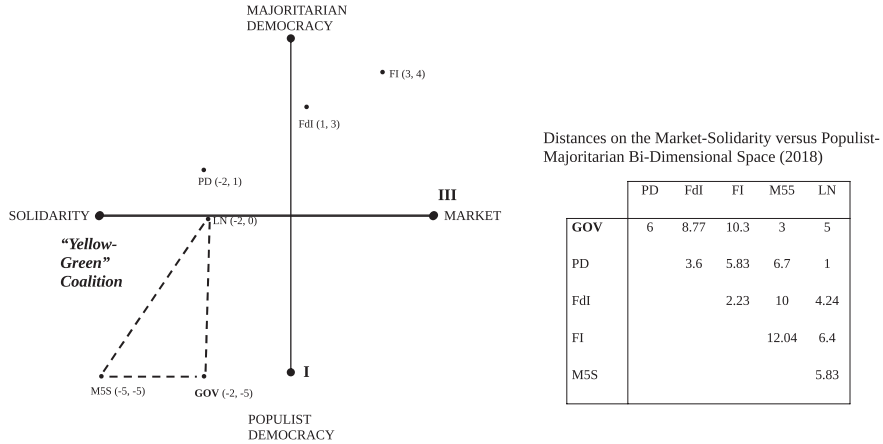


FIG. 1 – Market-Solidarity versus Populism-Majoritarian. Government and Parties Positions on a Bi-Dimensional Space (2018).

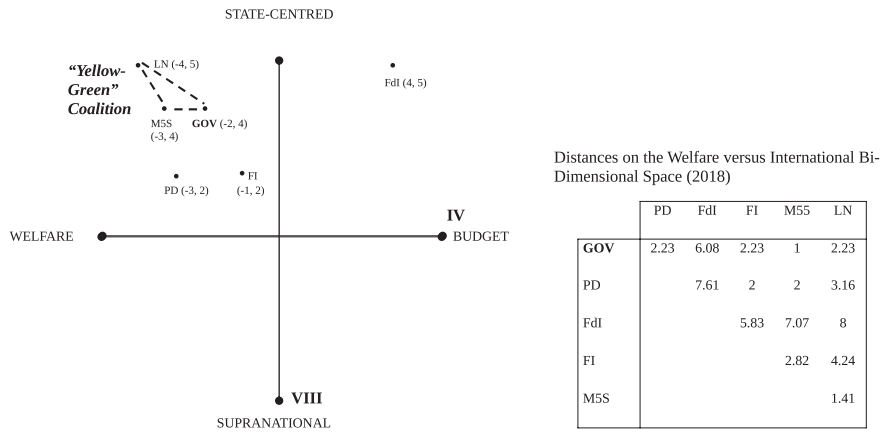


FIG. 2 – Welfare versus International. Government and Parties Positions on a Bi-Dimensional Space (2018).

tances between GOV, M5S and LN are moderate in the scenario pictured in Fig. 2 (GOV-M5S = 1; GOV-LN = 2.23), but in the bi-dimensional configuration of Fig. 1 both the distance GOV-LN and M5S-LN were relatively high (respectively, 5 and 5.83).

These latent tensions fully manifested themselves after the 2019 European elections, which marked a dramatic electoral decline of the M5S (in

comparison with the results of the Italian political elections in 2018) and an advance of the LN. An impressionistic comparison between the results of the 2018 elections and of the European Parliament elections in 2019 suggests that the haemorrhage of votes from the M5S favored the right, particularly the LN and FdI. In 2018 Italian general elections the M5S gained 32.7% of the votes, the PD 18.8, the LN 17.3 and FdI 4.3 (Chiaramonte and De Sio, 2019). A year later, in the 2019 elections for the European parliament, the M5S halved its votes that dropped to 17%, the PD increased them to 22.7, while the LN doubled them to 34.2%. It is difficult not to infer that about 15% of the electorate leaving the M5S flowed mainly towards the right, favoring Salvini's great success in the European elections and also the growth of FdI, today estimated at over 15% of the votes according to polls. The dizzying rise of the M5S in the 2013-18 phase was due to the ability to intercept the broad anti-political and protest vote, which was also right-winged. In one year almost everything changed and, especially in the South, at the 2019 European elections this right-wing vote left the Movement and shifted back towards the LN. In Campania the LN gained 19.2% of the votes in the 2019 European elections (compared to 2.9 in the 2018 Italian general elections), in Sicily 21%, in Abruzzo 35.5%, and in Calabria 22.6%<sup>7</sup>. Evidently, the PD did not reap any reward from this ebb, the right-winged voters abandoned the Movement but they did not veer towards the PD. Eager to capitalize on his momentary success, on 08.08.2019, M. Salvini announced that the LN would leave the coalition and ask for a return to the polls. On 20.08.2019, President Conte reported to the Senate on the crisis; following a heated parliamentary debate, despite the withdrawal of the no-confidence motion by the LN during the session, Conte resigned to the President of the Republic, remaining in office for the handling of current affairs.

The picture drawn in Fig. 3 crosses Dimension I, which regards the conflicting conception of Democracy ('Populist versus Majoritarian democracy'), with Dimension III concerning economy and modernization ('Solidarity versus Market'). Political themes such as 'Environmentalism' (AMB), 'Equality' (EQU), 'Solidarity and economics' (ESS), 'Sustainable development' (SUSDEV) were added to the Italian political agenda by the M5S. Ieraci and Toffoletto (2018) showed that the Movement is a melting pot of disparate themes, from the environmentalist – dominant ones – to those related to economic and social solidarity, to the controversy against global finance and the institutions, up to the chimeras about the affirmation of a new democratic conception, based on the direct expression of the «popular will». It is no surprise that the distance PD-M5S resulted in 2019 very high (7.81),

<sup>7</sup> On the Centre-right coalition and its electoral performance at the Regional level, see De Giorgi and Dias (2020).

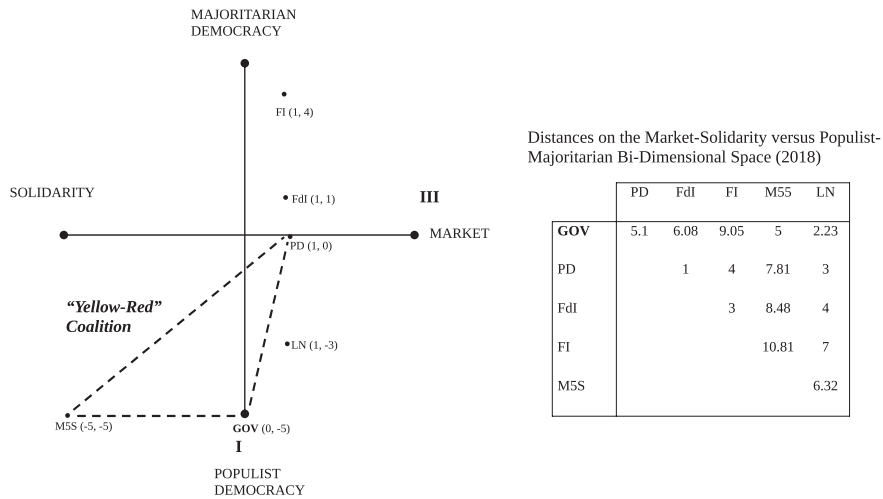


FIG. 3 – Market-Solidarity versus Populism-Majoritarian. Government and Parties Positions on a Bi-Dimensional Space (2019).

because of the difficulty of the PD to follow the M5S in its extreme vocation for populism and economic solidarity (which actually meant an anti-market attitude). In this scenario, Conte’s position (GOV = 0.5) reflected the attempt to provide a *trait d’union* between M5S and PD. It is remarkable that in his second investiture speech (2019, see Tab. B in the Appendix) Conte moderated the euro-sceptical tones, although he still presented the ‘National interest’ (NAZ) as a focus of the action of his new cabinet.

The tensions in the «yellow-red» coalition manifested themselves between 18 and 19.01.2020, when Conte narrowly exceeded the votes of confidence in the two houses of the Italian parliament. However, Conte was forced to resign to the President of the Republic on 26.01.2021, due to the withdrawal from his cabinet of the ministers attached to the newly formed group *Italia Viva* led by M. Renzi.

## The Italian party system from the 1990’s and the present day. A conclusion

Through a content analysis of the parliamentary debate over the investiture votes on the two governments led by G. Conte (2018-19), we aimed at identifying the main policy dimensions of the Italian space of competition and at providing a measure of the policy distances of the parties on each

dimension. The analysis revealed that the emergence of populist parties goes alongside the decline of the old left-right party alignment and brings about a remodelling of the competition space along new dimensions featured by the interplay between the Supranational Dimension (European integration) and the State capacity to provide services and guarantee rights. The novelty of this phase is the interference of the dimension related to the conception of democracy ('Majoritarian versus Populist') with the 'State versus Supranational' (referring to the European integration) and with 'Welfare versus Budget' Dimensions. Italian parties moved towards Euro-skeptical positions in 2018 and as a consequence the distance between populist and traditional parties has reduced. Finally, the spatial representation of the policy conflict shows in which way the decline of the old party alignment has generated a multi-dimensional space of competition, that is continuously being remodelled under the tactical moves of the parties deployed on it.

According to Downs, in «a bimodal distribution of voters with modes near each extreme», as was the case of the Italian polarized bipolarism in the 1990 (Ieraci 2006, 2008a, 2008b), 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 finally «the growth of balancing centre parties is unlikely» (Downs, 1957: 120). Unfortunately, these predictions can be applied with some approximation to the Italian case of the present time, and the Italian party system, after the 2018 general elections and the elections for the European parliament in 2019, still inclines toward polarization and instability. High levels of systemic party distance or polarization has nevertheless been a constant feature of the Italian party system since the 1990's (see Tab. 3).

After its transition from movement to party (Ieraci and Toffoletto, 2018; Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013, 2015; Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013; Corbetta, 2017; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015) the M5S is still a headless and horizontal organization. The influence exercised by its membership through the Rousseau web platform and above all by its founder Beppe Grillo was clearly manifest after the fall of Conte II in January 2020. The appointment of Luigi Di Maio as «political leader» in September 2017 was a culminating point in the phase of transition of the movement towards party, which extended until January 2020 when Di Maio resigned from the office. Since then, the internal life of the M5S has been very turbulent and has been characterized by the open challenge to its organizational control launched by A. Di Battista and R. Fico.

Transiting from movement to party, the M5S found itself having to manage the typical struggle for political control over the organization. Moreover, in this struggle the movement wing (Di Battista) has clashed with the

TAB. 3 – *A Comparison of the party polarization indexes from 1994 to 2019*

Governments	Coalitions	Limits of the space by parties	Party Polarization Index
S. Berlusconi I (1994)	Centre-right	PRC-LN	0.58
R. Prodi I (1996)		PRC-FI	0.51
M. D'Alema (1998)	Centre-left	PRC-CCD	0.85
G. Amato II (2000)		PRC-AN and CCD	0.97
S. Berlusconi II (2001)		V-AN	0.60
S. Berlusconi III (2005)	Centre-right	DS-LN	0.69
R. Prodi II (2006)	Centre-left	PRC-FI	0.70
S. Berlusconi IV (2008)	Centre-right	IdV-PdL	0.77
E. Letta (2013)		SeL-LN	0.46
M. Renzi (2014)	Centre-left	SeL-M5S	0.59
G. Conte I (2018)	“yellow-green”	M5S-FI	0.30
G. Conte II (2019)	“yellow-red”	M5S-FI	0.63

Legenda: PRC, *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista*; FI, *Forza Italia*; CCD, *Centro Cristiano Democratico*; V, *Verdi*; DS, *Democratici di Sinistra*; IdV, *Italia dei Valori*; PdL, *Popolo della Libertà*; SeL, *Sinistra e Libertà*; M5S, *Movimento 5 Stelle*.

[Sources: Ieraci, 2008a; 2008b; 2009; 2019]

institutional or party wing (Di Maio). There was an ideological implication too. Di Battista announced a return to the movement's origins of the *pentastellati* and launched a programme of action based on the reassessment of the «culture of the opposition»<sup>8</sup>. The clash between the movement and the institutional souls of the M5S had repeatedly manifested itself in recent years in the parliamentary groups of the M5S with tensions and opposition against the institutional line or the hierarchical organisational control – from the refusal to pay fees to the Rousseau web platform to the management of the alliance with the LN, with the PD and more recently in connection with the formation of a «government of emergency» led by M. Draghi (February 2020). An increasing degree of partyness of the M5S has triggered the struggle for organizational power and has definitely marked the split with the movement of its origin, because since the 2018 elections the M5S has been inexorably dragged into the deadly Italian coalition politics.

Similar tension could be detected in the PD. The defeat in the 2018 elections brought about Renzi's resignation from the post of party political secretary. Subsequently, M. Renzi acted as the leader of an internal minority

<sup>8</sup> After a vote on the Rousseau web platform on 11.02.2021, which gave the «go-ahead» from the members of the M5S to the government led by Mario Draghi with 59.3% in favor, A. Di Battista decided to leave the M5S. M. Draghi sworn in as *Presidente del Consiglio* on 13.02.2021.



inside the PD, until he moved out of it and founded a new party labelled *Italia Viva*. These internal conflicts have been a constant in the life of the PD, which has been characterized by a problematic cohabitation between post-communists and Catholics, as proved by the many other internal splits of the PD during its brief life<sup>9</sup>. On the centre-right, the decline of FI has been matched by the unexpected result of the LN in the 2018 elections. Nonetheless, the centre-right rally declined from 46.8% of the vote obtained in 2008 to about 36% in 2018<sup>10</sup>. Berlusconi's project to establish a national conservative party with a majority vocation eventually failed and his decline has left room for the more radical and populist parties of the right, namely LN and FdI.

These intra-party conflicts, the decline of the two parties with a majoritarian vocation (PD and FI) and the continuous realignment of the Italian voters set an end to the bi-polar phase of Italian politics culminating in the first decade of the XXI Century. A multilateral distribution of parties with no dominant party or pole (Ieraci 2012: 543) could be the outcome of the last twenty years of realignments on the Italian political space. This party system would resemble the fragmented or atomized party system described by Sartori (1976). It would feature a relatively high degree of polarization, i.e. high political distance between the extremes, and with a number of relevant parties reaching and maybe going beyond the threshold of six-seven. As a matter of fact, the Italian party system has always shown a high Party Polarization Index, normally above the 0.5 threshold, according to our measures (see Tab. 3). Compared to the polarized pluralism system typical of the Italian post WWII political history, the new multilateral distribution would lack any dominant party occupying the metrical centre of the alignment, as was the case of the DC in the past. The centre pole of the new Italian party system would instead be fragmented and would exhibit no common strategy or coherence. The new Italian party system would be polarized but would have no ideological characterization or cleavages.

<sup>9</sup> These splits were provoked mainly by the internal left opposition in the PD and they are a constant in the recent history of the Italian left. In 1991 the *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista* (PRC) was founded in opposition to the dissolution of the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI) and the birth of the *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS). In 2009 some left parties and movements merged in *Sinistra e Libertà* (SeL); in 2017 *Sinistra Italiana* gathered in parliament the various splits of the Italian extreme left; and in the same year, some opponents of M. Renzi left the PD and founded the *Movimento Democratico e Progressista* (2017). In December 2017, the former chairs of the Upper and Lower Houses (P. Grasso and L. Boldrini), together with some internal opposition of the PD, launched *Liberi e Uguali* (LeU) whose electoral performance in 2018 proved rather modest (about 3% of the votes).

<sup>10</sup> In 2018, the centre-right coalition was made of FI (14%), LN (18%), and FdI (4%).

We can attempt to summarize the properties of the working mechanic of this system relying on current observations drawn from the Italian case.

1. The polarization of the political space (overall distance measured from the first to the last aligned party) is relatively high as we have already stated and shown in Tab. 3. This degree of polarization was clearly detected by the previous analysis conducted on the two populist coalitions, although in the «yellow-green» coalition the initial level of coherence between M5S and LN revealed to be relatively high (Party Index Polarization at the debut of Conte I was 0.3).

2. Notwithstanding the fact that the political space is polarized, it is hard to identify any clear ideological cleavages on it. Once again, the previously provided analysis of the space of competition in 2018-2019 confirms that the Italian parties do not align on an ideologically identifiable left-to-right continuum, but they rather shift from one to another dimension of policy confrontation, sometimes without coherence. This is not a new trend, because the left-to-right ideological traditional connotation of the political space had completely vanished in the 1990's and in the following decade. Both free market and democracy are fully accepted by the main Italian party fractions, but particularly after the affirmation of the populist parties (M5S, LN and FdI) some still relevant differences are to be found in issues such as the degree of liberalization of the market (which opposes a «solidarity» attitude to a «free competition» attitude) and the pattern of democracy («consensual» versus «majoritarian» democracy). Position issues are now predominant over valence issues (Stokes, 1963).

3. Although crossing over positions among parties is strictly forbidden by any spatial modelling of party competition, this does not seem to be necessarily the case in systems with multilateral distribution and no dominant party. This does not refer to crossing the floor by MPs, a practice historically widespread among the Italian political class, but to the opportunity for the parties to cross over each other and to establish coalitional links with parties that are not adjacent to them. This is a striking deviation from the assumptions of the spatial analysis, which allows only «ideological connected coalitions» (Axelrod, 1970). If there are no ideological cleavages or disjoints on the space, why should the parties not coalesce freely? The standard assumption that parties could not cross each other depended on the preliminary adoption of a unidimensional space of competition. Nonetheless, if the parties are not bound any more to the XIX century ideological continuum left-to-right and the space of competition becomes multidimensional, based on a plurality of position issues rather than on a single valence issue, there is no reason why it should not be possible for the parties to move freely on the space and to link with each other in terms of shared visions and perspectives

over issues. The «yellow-green» and the subsequent «yellow-red» coalition governments prove that in the age of populism cross-cutting alliances among parties are possible.

4. Finally, in any multilateral distribution with no dominant party or pole the drives of the competition are similarly multidirectional. This depends on the previously discussed properties (multidimensionality and absence of constraint to the movements of the parties), and the propensity of the parties to find shortcuts through the space and to link with each other with regard to sets of issues. At the same time, although no party dominates the game, the relative weight of some of them (like the M5S and the LN after the 2018 elections) might exercise attraction drives in the coalitional game over the smaller parties. The system would work as a set of subsystems where some small parties are orbiting around larger ones, functioning as *anchor points* of the system. Therefore, the overall picture would show a complex interplay of centripetal and centrifugal drives.

[articolo accettato il 18/2/2021]

## APPENDIX

The content analysis over the investiture of the two governments led by G. Conte (2018-2020) was conducted on the debates which took place in the *Senate* (Higher House). Conte delivered his first investiture speech (Tab. A in this Appendix, Conte I) in Senate on 05.06.2018, after which the floor was opened to the replays of the parliamentary parties. G. Conte's first investiture speech counted 5860 words. The lengths of the replays varied and in order to keep some uniformity they were selected ranging from a lower limit of 2000 words to a top limit of 2500 words, as follows:

Morra N., Pellegrini M. (M5S), 2166 words.  
Renzi M. (PD), 2061 words.  
Pillon S., Bagnai A., Tosato P. (LN), 2033 words.  
Malan L., Ronzulli L. (FI), 2052 words.  
La Russa I., Marsilio M. (FdI), 2219 words.

[Source: *Senato della Repubblica, Resoconto stenografico*, 05.06.2018, [http://www.senato.it/japp/bgt/showdoc/18/Resaula/0/1067706/index.html?part=doc\\_dc](http://www.senato.it/japp/bgt/showdoc/18/Resaula/0/1067706/index.html?part=doc_dc)]

Similarly, the content analysis over the investiture of G. Conte's second government (Tab. B in this Appendix, Conte II) was conducted on the debate, which took place in the *Senate* on 09.09.2019. G. Conte's second investiture speech counted 7334 words. The replays ranged from a lower limit of 2000 words to a top limit of 2500 words, as follows:

La Mura V., Granato B.L. (M5S), 2221 words.  
Zanda L., Pinotti R. (PD), 2348 words.  
Salvini M. (LN), 2207 words.  
Perosino M., Dal Mas F., Quagliariello G. (FI), 2178 words.  
Calandrini N., La Russa I., Rauti I. (FdI), 2168 words.

[Source: *Senato della Repubblica, Resoconto stenografico*, 09.09.2019, <http://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/1123318.pdf>; *Senato della Repubblica, Resoconto stenografico*, 10.09.2019, <http://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/1123342.pdf>]

Tab. C presents the complete list of the used code with reference to the relative political themes.

TAB. A – G. Conte's I Government Programme (2018)

Code	Political Themes	+	-	lnl	Scores
AMB	Environmentalism	4	0	4	4
BUR	Bureaucracy	3	13	16	-2
CASTA	Establishment and political class	0	4	4	-4
CI	Conflict of interest	0	4	4	-4
CITT	Citizenship	16	0	16	5
CORR	Corruption	0	7	7	-5
CRIM	Criminality	0	4	4	-4
DDEM	Direct democracy	3	0	3	3
DMP	Parliamentary democracy	13	0	13	5
EM	Market economy	6	2	8	3
EQU	Equality	2	0	2	2
ESS	Social economy and solidarity	6	0	6	5
ETN	Ethnic minorities	1	1	2	0
FAM	Family	3	0	3	3
FOR	Education and labour	11	0	11	5
FPB	Public expenditure and budget	3	2	5	1
FREL	Federalism, regions and local government	4	0	4	4
GIU	Justice	8	13	21	0
GLOB	Globalization	0	1	1	-1
GOV	Coalition government and programme	8	0	8	5
IMM	Immigration	3	11	14	-2
INFWEB	News via web and informatization	2	1	3	1
INTEUR	International relations and eu	3	2	5	1
INTS	State intervention and infrastructure	2	1	3	1
LD	Democratic and constitutional legitimacy	7	1	8	4
NAZ	National interest	3	0	3	3
People	President of the Republic	1	0	1	1
People	Russia	2	0	2	2
POL	Political ethics	2	0	2	2
POP	Populus	6	0	6	5
RESPPOL	Political responsibility	5	0	5	5
SIC	Security	2	0	2	2
SUSDEV	Sustainable development	5	0	5	5
TAX	Taxation	3	6	9	-2
TECH	Research and technology	4	2	6	2
TRANS	Political transition	9	0	9	5
TRASP	Transparency	9	0	9	5
W	Welfare	13	0	13	5
WOM	Women	1	0	1	1

TAB. B – G. Conte's II Government Programme (2019)

Code	Political Themes	+	-	lnl	Scores
AGR	Agriculture and territory	9	0	9	5
AMB	Environmentalism	13	0	13	5
BKFIN	Banks and finance	0	3	3	-3
BUR	Bureaucracy	3	0	3	3
CITT	Citizenship	14	0	14	5
COMMG	Common goods	2	0	0	2
CORP	Corporatism	5	0	5	5
CRIM	Criminality	0	1	1	-1
CULT	Culture and heritage	9	0	9	5
DIRCIV	Civil rights	2	0	2	2
DMC	Consociational democracy	1	1	2	0
DMP	Parliamentary democracy	2	0	2	2
EM	Market economy	12	0	12	5
EQU	Equality	5	0	5	5
ESS	Social economy and solidarity	8	0	8	5
ETN	Ethnic minorities	1	0	1	1
FAM	Family	13	0	13	5
FOR	Education and labour	29	0	29	5
FPB	Public expenditure and budget	8	0	8	5
FREL	Federalism, regions and local government	5	1	6	4
GIU	Justice	1	3	4	-2
GLOB	Globalization	3	2	5	1
GOV	Coalition government and programme	17	0	17	5
IMM	Immigration	2	5	7	-3
INFWEB	Informatization and web	5	0	5	5
INTEUR	International relations and eu	13	13	26	0
INTS	State intervention and infrastructure	16	0	16	5
LD	Democratic and constitutional legitimacy	12	0	12	5
MED	Mediterranean area	5	0	5	5
MEDIA	Media	5	0	5	5
MEZ	Southern italy	11	0	11	5
NATO	International relations and nato	3	0	3	3
NAZ	National interest	10	0	10	5
People	Giuseppe saragat	1	0	1	1
People	President of the Republic	2	0	2	2
POL	Political ethics	3	0	3	3
PROT	Protectionism	0	1	1	-1
RIFCOST	Constitutional reform	7	0	7	5
SUSDEV	Sustainable development	12	0	12	5
TAX	Taxation	4	10	14	-1
TECH	Research and technology	4	0	4	4
TRASP	Transparency	1	0	1	1
W	Welfare	7	0	7	5
WOM	Women	5	0	5	5

TAB. C – *List of the Political Themes and Codes*

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Political Themes</b>
AGR	Agriculture and territory protection
AMB	Environmentalism
BIP	Bipolarism
BKFIN	Banks and Finance
BUR	Bureaucracy
CASTA	Establishment and political class
CI	Conflict of interest
CITT	Citizenship
COM	Communism
COMMG	Common goods
CORP	Corporatism
CORR	Corruption
CRI	Christianity
CRIM	Criminality
CSR	Centre-left and reforms
CULT	Culture and heritage
D	Rights
DDEM	Direct democracy
DEM	Democracy
DIRCIV	Civil rights
DMC	Consociational democracy
DMP	Parliamentary democracy
EM	Market economy
EQU	Equality
ESS	Social economy and solidarity
ETN	Ethnic minorities
FAM	Family
FOR	Education and labour
FPB	Public expenditure and budget
FREL	Federalism, regions and local government
GIU	Justice
GLOB	Globalization
GOV	Coalition government and programme
IMM	Immigration
INFWEB	News via web and informatization
INTEUR	International relations and EU
INTS	State intervention and infrastructure
LD	Democratic and constitutional legitimacy
LDL	Direct legitimacy of the leadership
MED	Mediterranean area
MED	Media and alternative sources of information
MEZ	Southern Italy
NATO	International relations and NATO
NAZ	National interest
NEWFAM	New family
POL	Political ethics
POP	Populus
PROT	Protectionism
RESPPOL	Political responsibility
RIFCOST	Constitutional reform
SIC	Security
SUSDEV	Sustainable development
TAX	Taxation
TECH	Research and technology
TRANS	Political transition
TRASP	Transparency
W	Welfare
WCIV	Western civilization
WEBDEM	Democracy via web
WOM	Women

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