

# Euroscepticism and Populism in Italy Among Party Elites and the Public

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## Abstract:

*The recent history of European politics has been characterised by the mounting phenomena of populism and Euroscepticism. Some recent analyses discuss the possible convergence between the two, exemplified, above all, by the increased success of Eurosceptic and populist parties. Conceptually and historically, Euroscepticism and populism are two distinct ideological realms. To what extent do they develop in parallel or converge, both at the elite and mass levels? We address this question by looking at the Italian case, where populism and Euroscepticism have apparently progressed simultaneously. Through an analysis of the attitudes of political elites and the public, we argue that the two phenomena actually move in parallel and in general do not converge, with the main exception of the Five Star Movement where a convergence is instead visible. Finally, by observing the effects of Euroscepticism and populism on the voting choices of citizens, we find a high level of congruence in the political system between demand and supply, hence between voters and their representatives.*

## Keywords:

Italian MPs, Italian Public Opinion, EU attitudes, Euroscepticism, Populism, Survey.

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## Introduction

Euroscepticism and populism are two key phenomena of contemporary European politics that can often be observed in tandem. During the last two decades, they appear to have progressed jointly within national political spaces and party systems (Harmsen, 2010). Both phenomena were nourished by the emergence of new political entrepreneurs (mainly parties, but also social movements and interest groups) that challenged ‘mainstream’ parties by eroding their electoral support (De Vries and Hobolt, 2012; Meijers, 2017) and by influencing the national policy agenda (among others see Schumacher and Van Kersbergen, 2016; Di Mauro & Verzichelli, 2020; Biard, 2019; Pirro & Taggart, 2018). Scholars agree on the point that Euroscepticism and populism remain two distinct subjects at both the theoretical and empirical levels (Rooduijn, 2019). Despite this conclusion, recent research shows an increasing connection between the two (Kneuer, 2019). Especially under the effects of the Great Recession and the so-called refugee reception crisis (Ambrosini et al., 2019), populists started to carry the flag of anti-EU establishment, while Eurosceptic radical left and radical right parties converged on anti-elitism and an emphasis on people’s centrality (Polk et al., 2017; Basile and Mazzoleni, 2020).

Despite the relevance of the topic, from an empirical point of view the relationship between Euroscepticism and populism remains under-investigated in the literature, especially at the elite level. *Do Euroscepticism and populism meet within the national political elite and the public? Are these two stances influential on the voting choices of citizens?* We aim to address these questions and provide empirical evidence by analysing the Italian case in depth. This is a key example of how both Euroscepticism and populism can enjoy unprecedented success, resulting in their chief political entrepreneurs winning the national elections of 2018 and forming the first (although short-lived) Eurosceptic-populist government in Italy (Conti et al. 2020a).

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, we review recent patterns of convergence between Euroscepticism and populism in Italy. We then present our framework for analysis and introduce the question of why the electoral success of anti-establishment parties may lead to erroneous conclusions about the relationship between Euroscepticism and populism. In the subsequent sections we present our data based both on an *ad hoc* elite survey and a broader public survey and introduce our findings. Some conclusive remarks discuss the main results of our work.

## **Eurocepticism and Populism in Italy: Converging or Parallel Phenomena?**

In the past, Europhilia flourished among Italy's political elite, especially among those politicians serving in public office. The wide support for European integration in this country was the result of a deep-rooted consensus established between the elites and the masses (Conti, 2017; Isernia, 2008). With the permissive consensus of citizens, Italian policy makers signed onto all major European rules with a belief that this would favour the country's modernisation and its overcoming of an inefficient national government (Dyson & Featherstone 1996; Radaelli, 2002). But in recent times, as in other countries, more critical views have also emerged here. Multiple (financial, migration) crises affected Italy as one of the most exposed countries in Europe and contributed to determining a peak in opposition to the EU and its capacity to handle different crises. The fall in public support for the EU, in particular, is impressive (Lucarelli, 2015). Thus, a large electoral market available for a Eurosceptic platform has progressively materialised and parties have started to look at this market – and to capitalise on the anti-EU motivations of voters – with greater interest (Conti et al., 2021; Giannetti et al., 2017; Serricchio, 2018).

After the Maastricht Treaty and the launch of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) the EU certainly started to produce a more evident impact on the member states, particularly on Italy. Beyond the many advantages, the EU-led retrenchment measures inflicted sacrifices on Italian society and the competitive pressures within the Single Market created concern among citizens. Especially during the Great Recession, EU constraints materialised through the bitter medicine imposed on Italy by the technocratic Monti government, which implemented EU conditionality resolutely despite its lack of popular legitimacy and weak anchorage with Italian society (Culpepper, 2014). It is especially at this critical juncture – when the scope of EU conditionality and its impact on Italy proved so ample in affecting the country's social and political stability (Fabbrini, 2019; Matthijs, 2017; Sacchi, 2015) – that the functional dissonances that arose from the incomplete EMU architecture turned out to be more macroscopic. At this point, the associated costs of EU membership were perceived, at least by some segments of Italian society, as outweighing the gains. Indeed, in the presence of adverse economic conditions, Italians responded more intensely to the EU and to its regulatory capacity. This phenomenon occurred at the mass level (Balestrini, 2012) and had implications at the elite level as well (Conti et al., 2020b).

National governments have had to manage a high number of *stress tests* and EU constraints on the domestic economic system. Because much of the popular discontent with EU policy has been directed toward national executives (especially in the context of the Great Recession: on this point see Bosco & Verney, 2012), these elites have learned that when citizens are unhappy with EU

policies, delegation to the EU level is something that could easily be thrown back on them. As a result, some sectors of the Italian elite which used to be more Europhile, as well as some newly emerged elites, have become more reluctant to accept further integration if this undermines their capacity to fulfil their most substantive goals – i.e. sustaining tenure that requires electoral success and fostering ties with strategic constituencies (Conti, 2017). Concerns about the economic impact of the EU process have paired with tensions on the issue of immigration, especially where immigrants are perceived as competing for the same resources as natives and these resources are scarcer, such as in times of retrenchment politics (Caponio & Cappiali, 2018). In the end, issues such as the competitive pressures within the Single Market, the severity of EU conditionality, the widening gap in prosperity between the Eurozone's core and periphery members, the reduced levels of EU funding to Italy after enlargement to Central-Eastern Europe, and the attractiveness of Italy as an arrival destination in Europe for migrants, are all factors that have opened up a space in this country for an increased Euroscepticism that targets, in particular, EU policy and the EU's capacity as chief manager of different crises.

Italy has also been seriously shaken by the rise of populism in recent years. The electoral success of a variety of populist parties has altered the established interactions within the national party system and has created a new challenge to politicians, confronting them with the problem of either ignoring or attacking populist challengers or else accommodating their rhetoric and communication style to theirs. As a reflection of its widespread diffusion, Italy has been considered as being permeated with populism. Indeed, the Italian political system has been defined as affected by 'endemic populism' (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018); a 'promised land' (Tarchi, 2015), and a 'breeding ground' (Bobba & Legnante, 2016) for populists, and a system that expands the varieties of populism, developing some innovative, mutating and durable forms (Bobba & Roncarolo, 2018, Verbeek & Zaslove, 2016). According to some authors, the generality of Italian parties has shown some signs of populism with the intensification of populist features strongly linked to the exacerbation of the financial and economic crisis and its governance (Caiani & Graziano, 2016).

We know that the rise of populist parties is a key factor that may (negatively) affect elite consensus on the EU (Pirro & Taggart, 2018). Indeed, populists often voice their opposition to the EU on the basis of a composite series of arguments, and those politicians representing populist parties are more often outside the traditional elite consensus and may well represent a main threat to the EU integration process within national institutions (De Vries & Edwards, 2009; Taggart, 1998). Also at the mass level, attitudes towards the EU and populism can be connected to each other (Gómez-Reino & Llamazares, 2013).

In the article, we explore whether the prospect of a merger of the two stances of populism and Euroscepticism has really materialised. We do this using Italy as a case study by reason of being a country that has recently been permeated by both stances (Pirro & Van Kessel, 2018). Moreover, we explore whether Euroscepticism and populism are factors affecting political behaviour by linking voters and parties. More precisely, we assess whether Euroscepticism and populism consistently contributed to determining the voting preferences of citizens and to aggregating election results. The analysis of the Italian case adds to a theoretical debate that has not yet reached any definite conclusion on the relationship between Euroscepticism and populism and about their significance for voting behaviour.

### **Framework for analysis**

At least in the last two decades, Italian politics has been characterised by the rising success of Eurosceptic and anti-elite/establishment sentiments. At the elite level, Salvini's *Lega* and the Five Star Movement epitomised this process by gaining unprecedented electoral success and government leadership in 2018. Both of them, although sometimes with deep differences, have been defined as populist parties: the former of the 'classical' radical right family while the latter of the *Polyvalent* type (Pirro, 2018). Similarly, these two parties have been considered as falling within the Eurosceptic side of political supply, with the League clearly focused on the defence of natives' cultural/economic prerogatives and the Five Star Movement (M5S) on anti-elitist claims (Carlotti & Gianfreda, 2018). Pirro and Kessel (2018) include these parties in the category of *Eurosceptic populists*. According to these authors, the multiple crises affecting the EU from the 2010s – namely the Great Recession, Brexit and the refugee crisis – pushed towards a convergence of frames on the Eurosceptic side. Indeed, both M5S and the League launched campaigns against the Euro currency, converged on rejection of immigrants during the most acute years of the refugee crisis (with the League making the point its own 'flag') and considered Brexit as the affirmation of the people's will to protect their own identity (League) and own democracy (M5S) (Pirro & Kessel, 2018).

However, it is important to recall that opposition to the EU and populism are two distinct phenomena that may also point to different stances and motivations (Gianfreda & Carlotti, 2018). Euroscepticism originates from a mix of motivations (among others, nationalism, sovereignism, rejection of foreign citizens, and the division between winners/losers of EU integration). Populism is instead a reaction to a perceived corrupt elite in defence of the popular will. In this work, we address the problem of a populist/Eurosceptic convergence testing, empirically, whether *Euroscepticism and*

*populism are dependent on each other or are postures that run in parallel.* Theoretically, the two phenomena do not necessarily converge but could run in parallel for, at least, three main reasons.

First, Eurosceptics advocate the primacy of the nation state and a re-appropriation of decision-making powers against EU institutions. Populists' main concern is instead about flaws in national politics stemming from misconduct and the lack of attention of corrupt elites to citizens' rights and demands. Although these two stances emphasise the re-appropriation of power, populists aim primarily to overturn the status quo at the national level while Eurosceptics aim to block the foreign/external influence.

Second, these two phenomena may well originate from different traditions. In Italy, for instance, anti-elite rhetoric has deep roots in peoples' sentiments of distrust towards corrupt and self-advantaging politics that go back to the eve of the Republic. Different political parties have in the past benefited from those sentiments of aversion against elites. Among them, the flag of anti-elitism has been carried by anti-system parties (Sartori, 1976; Bardi, 1996) but also by populist leaders at their political acme such as Silvio Berlusconi (Ruzza & Fella, 2011). Euroscepticism is, in comparison, a more recent phenomenon. Italy has long been considered a Europhile country with a very minoritarian opposition at both party and public level. Regionalist parties and movements (such as the League; on this point see Basile, 2015) have instead attempted to mobilise citizens against the (domestic) centre, accused of despoiling regions of their resources and peculiar traits. It is also true, however, that the shift of Salvini's 'new' League (Albertazzi et al., 2018) to Euroscepticism has followed a different representation of centre, based, in his view, in the EU institutions. In Salvini's representation of threats, immigrants and technocrats in Brussels have become the new enemies who despoil Italian citizens of their resources and of their freedom to decide their own destiny.

Third, most of the literature on EU attitudes documents a double gap. The first gap is between elites and citizens where, contrary to the masses, elites tend to maintain the status quo on the EU (Vogel & Göncz, 2018). Thus, if a convergence between populism and Euroscepticism emerged at the mass level, this is more unlikely to develop at the elite level. In this respect, despite a public discourse that has become very much oriented towards inter-party demarcation on the EU and very inclined to anti-EU sentiments, some recent analyses of elite attitudes in Italy have shown that, in actual fact, they were not as polarised as one might expect. In particular, the results of a survey of Italian MPs conducted in 2014 showed that positive feelings towards the EU survived the crisis years and the changes to the composition of the Italian political elite following the 2013 general elections (Conti, 2017). In this respect, the analysis of elite attitudes has allowed the specification of arguments about the mainstreaming of Euroscepticism (Brack & Startin, 2015), a growing phenomenon in Italy at the level of the rhetoric of political leaders (Brunazzo & Mascitelli, 2021) but manifestly less on

the rise among the elites serving in public office. We can find in the comparative literature a possible interpretation of this apparently contradictory phenomenon. Whereas parties and their leaders are answerable to national electorates and do not want to be punished by their voters for unpopular policies imposed on them by the EU, individuals serving the party in public office may behave differently from the party central office (Charalambous et al., 2018). Actors in different settings face a different strategic calculus, which is shaped in accordance with the resources available to them and the opportunities, constraints, and incentives they face when acting in their respective roles. If a party's public stance can be more sensitive and responsive to the mounting discontent of citizens – a widespread phenomenon that has driven scholarship to replace the concept of a 'permissive consensus' in public opinion towards the EU with the notion of a 'constraining dissensus' (see Hooghe & Marks, 2009) – public office holders can be more impermeable to popular pressures and more influenced by their government's traditions and entrenched approach to the EU. It is worth mentioning that more recent research based on a survey conducted in 2016-2017 found, instead, a good level of congruence between the mass and elite positions on the EU and concluded that Italian MPs have become more responsive to (or in tune with) their national publics as regards their feelings about European integration (Conti et al. 2020b). Apparently, the interchange between mass and elite on the EU is less and less a dialogue of the deaf. Inspired by the most recent findings concerning EU attitudes (and extending them also to populism), in the analysis we test the following hypotheses concerning the electoral effects of those attitudes.

*H1. Citizens ranking high in populist attitudes are more likely to vote for populist parties (and vice versa citizens who rank low in populist attitudes are more likely to vote for parties that reject populism).*

*H2. Citizens who hold more Eurosceptic attitudes are more likely to vote for Eurosceptic parties (and vice versa pro-EU citizens are more likely to vote for Europhile parties).*

*H3. At the individual level, populist and Eurosceptic attitudes have independent effects on voting choices.*

The above hypotheses are far from being tautological. Their validity is actually contended in the literature. Although some authors argue that parties are capable of strongly affecting public perceptions and attitudes regarding EU issues by effectively cueing constituents (Hellström, 2008), other scholars found the nature of EU attitudes to be diverse and often conflicting between parties and their voters (Sorace, 2018; Vasilopoulou & Gattermann, 2013). Indeed, whereas some scholars maintain that EU attitudes have only limited observable effects on national elections (Green-

Pedersen, 2012; Miklin, 2014), also in the Italian context (Maggini & Chiaramonte, 2019), other scholars argue that they have instead contributed to determining the voting preferences of citizens and to aggregating election results (Angelucci & Carrieri; Conti et al. 2021). Similarly, some authors claim that populist attitudes are essential in explaining voters' preferences (Akkerman et al., 2014, Plescia & Moritz Eberl, 2021), while some others maintain that 'the populist voter' simply does not exist (Rooduijn, 2018). Finally, some authors have documented a convergence between Eurosceptic attitudes at the individual level and voting for populist parties, but only in some regions of Europe (Santana et al. 2020) and solely with respect to radical rights parties (Werts et al., 2013). At this point, it becomes relevant to assess, with fresh data on the current legislature (appointed after the 2018 general elections), firstly whether a convergence between Euroscepticism/populism has occurred in Italy, both within the elite segment of society and the masses; secondly, if convergence has also occurred between the demand and supply sides, thus contributing to aggregating election results.

## Data and Method

The analysis that is presented in this article makes use of an original database, collected through a CAWI elite survey conducted between 25 February and 9 August, 2019. The conclusion date of the survey is prior to the fall of the Conte I government, and the subsequent change of majority that took place with the formation of the Conte II government; the reference period is therefore characterised by stability in the government structure and the political alignments within parliament. The survey targeted serving MPs, through a sample of 87 cases (both deputies and senators, equal to 9% of the total) and is representative of the Italian parliament elected in 2018 by political groups and gender. Descriptive data about party membership and socio-demographic variables are reported in the Appendix (Table A1). Considering the elite nature of this survey, the sample size is comparable to, or higher than, that of previous surveys of the same kind and constitutes an international standard in empirical research in the field of parliamentary elites (see in this regard the transnational projects INTUNE and ENEC documented, among others, in the works of Conti, 2017, De Giorgi & Verzichelli 2012 and Roux & Verzichelli, 2010).<sup>1</sup>

From this dataset we selected, among the available ones, 15 questions pertaining to different dimensions of attitudes towards the EU such as those relating to *diffuse support* (benefit from EU

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<sup>1</sup> To guarantee the quality of the survey data, in order to stem the phenomenon of speeders (recurrent in CAWI surveys), we excluded questionnaires with very fragmented or selective responses (i.e. those with response rates below 50 % of the questions contained in the questionnaire) while only complete questionnaires and those with answers greater in number than 50% of the total questions were included.



membership, etc.) and to orientations towards further integration in specific policy areas. Moreover, we included questions targeted to detect populist attitudes (such as those pointing to people-centrism and the divide between the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupted elite’ (Mudde, 2004); charismatic leadership (Taggart, 2000); closed borders to entrench the opposition between “Us” and “Them” (Lamour & Varga, 2020)). The question wording, codes and descriptive statistics of respondents’ answers are presented in the Appendix (Table A2). Table 1 reports the questions and the coefficients of a factor analysis that we ran in order to observe possible correlations between Euroscepticism and populism at the elite level.

Populism and Euroscepticism are two broad concepts sometimes disentangled in lower-level concepts. The definition of such concepts through various categories (such as inclusionary/exclusionary populism and soft/hard Euroscepticism) has generated a plethora of proposals, not necessarily alternative to each other and sometimes difficult to apply to real-life cases. In operational terms, we do not dispose of the data (such as one’s broad and policy-specific stance on the EU to assess different types of Euroscepticism) that may provide simultaneous information on all those dimensions referred to by several categorical definitions. Lacking all the necessary information, one should logically refrain from making use of categorical definitions based on the matched assessment of several aspects. Thus, in this work, we adopt a different measurement of populism and Euroscepticism – based on scaling – that fits well our data. We avoid locking attitudes into pre-established categories of populism and Euroscepticism while we measure the continuum of stances between extreme (positive and negative) positions on the analysed items. This approach, although having the disadvantage of not including all possible indicators of populism and Euroscepticism generated by past definitions, allows the accurate assessment of those mixed views and maverick positions in between the most unambiguous categories (while their measurement would be more difficult through use of definitions based on mutually exclusive categories). The problem of mixed views is indeed relevant, as the diverse and apparently contradictory nature of those attitudes has been documented in cross-national and cross-temporal studies (Henjak et al., 2012).

After observing populism and Euroscepticism at the elite level, we moved to the analysis of voters in the general elections held in March 2018. In order to do so, we selected data from the Populism Public Opinion Surveys (Grzymala-Busse et al., 2020) run in ten countries during the autumn of 2018. Within this dataset, we selected variables reflecting attitudes about populism and EU integration among Italian citizens. As far as populism is concerned, we selected the variables included in the so called Akkerman scale<sup>2</sup> (Akkerman et al., 2014). This scale represents one of the

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth mentioning that the dataset does not include item 8 of the original scale “Interest groups have too much influence over political decisions”.

most largely applied set of indicators to measure attitudes toward populism<sup>3</sup> (for an overview of different scales, see Roccato et al., 2019). We also selected two indicators of support for the EU, namely confidence in the EU and support for EU regulation in market/labour. Both can be considered as indicators of diffuse support/opposition: the former is a classical indicator of trust (Easton, 1975), while the latter taps into support for more integration through regulation. Finally, we selected socio-demographic variables (age, gender, education, left-right self-positioning, occupation and income) as control variables. Table A3 in the Appendix shows the question wording and the percentage of answers for each indicator of populism and the other selected variables.

The test of the hypotheses followed two successive steps. First, we ran different factor analyses in order to check for multidimensionality in populist and Eurosceptic attitudes at mass level. This first step mirrors the analysis that we conducted before at the elite level. Secondly, we applied logistic regression analysis on the vote declarations in 2018<sup>4</sup> to assess whether the populist and Eurosceptic orientations of the public relate to voting preferences. For each party we created binary dependent variables. For the smallest parties, such as Brothers of Italy and Freedom and Equal (LEU), we added their voting options to those of the closest party in the political space (*Lega* and Democratic Party, respectively). As a result, we ended up with four logistic regression models on the voting declarations for the Five Star Movement, *Lega* plus Brothers of Italy, Democratic Party plus Free and Equal and *Forza Italia* (FI), respectively. Our main independent variables are two additive indexes pointing to populist attitudes and diffuse opposition/support for the EU, respectively. The first is an additive index of Akkerman's indicators of populism; the second is an index adding the individual preferences for the two selected questions on the EU (trust and regulation). Socio-demographic variables are added as controls.

## Analysis

As we announced above, in table 1 we report the results of the factor analysis run on 15 different questions submitted to our sample of national MPs<sup>5</sup>. Results clearly show that, as far as political elites are concerned, EU attitudes and populism build two distinct phenomena<sup>6</sup>. The former can be

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<sup>3</sup> Consistently with the findings of Akkerman and colleagues (Akkerman et al., 2014, p. 1334) we excluded item 6 "Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil" because "respondents had difficulties in interpreting" this question (p. 1335) and because this item is related more to elitism than to populism.

<sup>4</sup> The exact question wording is "Which party did you vote for in the general election this March?"

<sup>5</sup> For coding see table A2 in the appendix.

<sup>6</sup> We also ran three distinct factor analyses for each of the discovered factors. Table A4 in the Appendix shows the results confirming the correlations among the selected items.

characterised through the two dimensions that we labelled Euroscepticism and prospective Europeanism (consisting of attitudes towards perspective integration in specific policy areas). The latter can instead be characterised through a single dimension bringing together attitudes towards strong leadership, people-centrism and closed borders (the protection of the ‘Us’ community from the ‘Them’ enemy is not unique to the Italian case but is often expressed by populists in general through the necessity of closing national borders, on the point see Lamour & Varga 2020).

	<i>Euroscepticism</i>	<i>Prospective Europeanism</i>	<i>Populism</i>
All in all, would you say that Italy has benefited from membership of the European Union or not?	0.639		
<i>Thinking about the EU in the next 10 years, could you tell me how you favour...an EU welfare system</i>		0.823	
An EU fiscal system		0.817	
A larger cohesion programme to reduce inequalities among European regions		0.813	
How desirable it is for the European Union to exercise a strong leadership role in international affairs		0.690	
The EU helps protect us from the negative effects of globalization vs The EU exacerbates the negative effects of globalization	0.766		
Those who decide in the European Union do not take Italy's interests sufficiently into consideration	0.830		
<i>For each of the following indicate to what extent you agree or disagree that states are harmed by the EU:</i>			
The integrity of Italian culture	0.668		
Welfare achievements in Italy	0.847		
Economic growth in Italy	0.870		
The quality of democracy in Italy	0.802		
UE authority on the economy vs. member states' authority	0.613		
Strong Leadership good vs. Strong Leadership danger for democracy			0.604
Professional politicians in Parliament vs. common persons			0.756
Italian borders controlled vs. open borders			0.619
Kaiser – Meyer – Olkin test	0.866		
Barlett's Test (Sig.)	0.000		
Eigenvalue	5.051	3.175	1.580
Cronbach's Alpha	0.839	0.902	0.442

Table 1. Factor Analysis with Varimax rotation.

Source: own elaboration of the Italian MPs dataset, 2019.

Once we assessed that populism and Euroscepticism are two separate dimensions in the minds of political elites – confirming the notion of these two phenomena being separate, thus corroborating our initial expectation for the elite segment of our research – we focused on the stance of the different parties on the three dimensions of Euroscepticism, prospective Europeanism and populism (making use of the three specific indices that we built with factor loadings). As first evidence, we deem it important to underline that the different party groups of the Italian parliament appear far from united and are actually very dispersed, often polarised, across these different stances (figure 1).<sup>7</sup>

We first refer to prospective Europeanism – pointing to a positive stance on the EU – and we show that, as always in the recent past, Europhilia appears the dominant posture of the Italian centre-left. MPs of the two parties in this area champion pro-European stances, with Free and Equal<sup>8</sup> exceeding the score obtained by the Democratic party (traditionally, the most pro-European party in Italy, see Conti, 2017). If one considers this result in combination with the results obtained by these two parties in the index of Euroscepticism – where they both show negative values pointing to a clear disagreement with this posture – we find evidence of the fact that serving MPs of the Italian centre-left still represent nowadays the main stronghold of pro-Europeanism within the Italian Parliament. These two parties coalesced with the Five Star Movement in 2019 (after the breakdown of its short-lived coalition with the League) and have certainly been a major factor in the return of the Italian government to pro-Europeanism, after the troublesome relationship with the EU experienced in the 2018-2019 period (Capati & Improta, 2021).

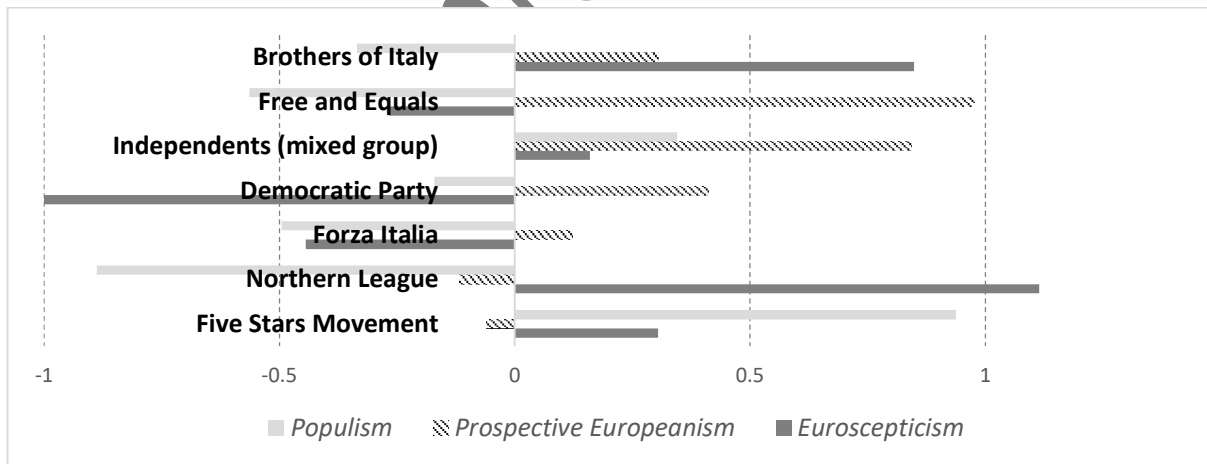


Figure 1 – Average factor scores of Populism, Prospective Europeanism and Euroscepticism by party groups.

Source: own elaboration on the Italian MPs dataset, 2019 (see Factor Analysis Table 1)

<sup>7</sup> We will not comment on the group of Independents as this is made up of a mix of MPs with various ideological belongings and leanings and not a unified voting pattern within parliament.

<sup>8</sup> This party was founded in December 2017, and its MPs are, for the most part, members of a splinter group of the Democratic party.

Silvio Berlusconi's party, *Forza Italia*, which in the past showed rather ambivalent attitudes towards the EU (Conti, 2017), has now openly moved towards pro-Europeanism. This may also be due to the leadership shared by Berlusconi (now less and less involved in politics) with Antonio Tajani, a former President of the European Parliament. Indeed, its MPs locate on the positive side of the scale of Europhilia, although with a lower score than the above two parties. When their score in the index of Euroscepticism is also considered, we find consistent evidence of the fact that this party has certainly reconsidered its position on the EU, de-emphasising its anti-EU rhetoric of the past while embracing, at the same time, a pro-EU posture (although less fervently than the centre-left). Taken together, the serving MPs of the three above parties can be seen within the Italian parliament as the main defenders of the integration process. At the time when the survey was conducted, these three parties together represented just over one third of the seat share within parliament.

Our initial findings suggest that the EU is clearly not a matter of consensus in Italy and that other groups challenge the pro-EU posture embodied by the above three parties. To start with, the score in the index of prospective Europeanism obtained by the MPs of the M5S has a value close to the zero point (but still on the Eurosceptic side of the scale). This makes a big difference compared to the above pro-European parties. Especially if one considers the posture of the M5S – a party that contested nation-wide elections for the first time in 2013 and emerged, in 2018, as the unequivocal winner of the general elections – the new scenario appears inconsistent with a past of elite consensus on the EU within the Italian parliament. This party alone won roughly the same number of seats (just over one third) as the above three pro-EU parties considered together. When we analyse the average score obtained by the MPs of the M5S in the index of Euroscepticism (not the highest score among party groups, but still comparable in size to the score obtained by the Democratic party in the contrasting index of Europhilia), we find clear evidence of the fact that in 2019, when it was part of a government coalition with the League, the Five Star Movement could definitely qualify as a Eurosceptic party.

We know that a lot has changed since, as this party has rapidly changed its trajectory to embrace an alliance with the Democratic Party and Free and Equal, contributing to inaugurating a more harmonised course of action of the Italian government with the EU – also supporting Von der Leyen for appointment as President of the European Commission and contributing fundamentally to the appointment of a Europhile champion, such as Mario Draghi, as the Italian Prime Minister in early 2021. The shift of the Five Star Movement to pro-Europeanism is an established fact that goes together with its overall ideological re-alignment, moving from a past of radicalism to a more mainstream present. Despite this extreme flexibility – one that makes this party a sort of moving target – it is certainly useful to note that at the time of its greatest electoral success, its party branch

in parliament could certainly be qualified as Eurosceptic. Precisely, from our analysis, its posture does not emerge as antagonistic to the EU as that of other parties, but it still locates on the critical anti-EU side, confirming the results of past analyses in this respect (Franzosi et al., 2015). Our results resonate well also with a more specific analysis that shows how Euroscepticism was a relevant factor in the vote choice for the Five Star Movement in the general elections of 2018 (Conti et al., 2021).

The two remaining parties in the analysis may well be defined as Eurosceptic. This is certainly the case of the (resolutely Eurosceptic) League while Brothers of Italy show a more ambivalent posture (high in Euroscepticism but positive in prospective Europeanism).<sup>9</sup> When the survey was conducted, their combined seat share amounted to about one quarter of the Italian parliament (but they have since experienced an impressive growth in vote declarations). It should be noted that these two parties experience extremely volatile public support, with the League ranking third largest party in terms of votes in the 2018 elections but doubling its score in vote intentions at the start of the legislative term (especially at the time when it was in government) to slowly decline afterwards. Brothers of Italy just passed the electoral threshold (3%) to be guaranteed representation in parliament in 2018, but grew in vote intentions to double digits in the following years. Although Euroscepticism should not be considered their unique signature issue and, therefore, the only reason for their success, it is certainly quite remarkable that these two Eurosceptic parties have become so successful within the Italian electorate.

Hence, we were able to find a differentiation (even polarisation) with respect to the EU dimension(s) across the party groups in the Italian parliament. This line of division consists of a committed pro-EU pole (Democratic Party, Free and Equal and, more mildly, *Forza Italia*) opposed to a pole with different Eurosceptic nuances represented by the League, the Brothers of Italy and the Five Star Movement.

Finally, we should refer to our last dimension of analysis, namely populism. The results shown in figure 1 are univocal: the MPs of M5S were, at the time of the survey, the true champions of populism within the Italian party system. M5S anti-establishment identity has been a major factor in the breakthrough of this (otherwise eclectic) party (Fonti et al. 2021; Mosca & Tronconi 2019) and, it appears from our analysis, it played enduring effects also on the party public office. Although some contagion effects between parties may have occurred in the past at the level of party leadership and rhetoric, it appears from our analysis that, contrary to what is often implied in the literature (D'Alimonte, 2019; Valbruzzi, 2018), parties such as the League should not be classified as populist. Several of the constitutive components of the definition of populism (which we assessed through our

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<sup>9</sup> Its five respondents show mixed attitudes, in particular with respect to the EU role in cohesion policy and international affairs.

specific index) are indeed missing in its parliamentary branch. This finding recommends the use of a more rigorous operational definition of populism and an empirical verification of its real occurrence within the Italian system.

Now the analysis moves to the examination of the general public. Table 2 reports the results of three factor analyses on Akkerman's selected indicators of populism and the variables on opposition/support for the EU.<sup>10</sup> The factor analyses shown in Table 2 confirm, for the two sets of indicators (i.e. populism and Euroscepticism), that the selected items are strongly correlated and define two unique factors. The third column, where we included both sets of indicators, clearly distinguishes between a factor grabbing populist attitudes and a second factor pointing to Euroscepticism. What is more interesting, however, is that the results of the factor analyses show a clear distinction between populism and attitudes towards EU integration among the general public, in a similar way to what was found for MPs. This is an interesting finding that appears to corroborate our original expectation about Euroscepticism and populism being independent from each other also with respect to the mass level.

	<i>Factor Analysis Populism</i>	<i>Factor Analysis Euroscepticism</i>	<i>Factor Analysis Populism + Euroscepticism</i>	
	<i>Factor 1</i>	<i>Factor 1</i>	<i>Factor 1</i>	<i>Factor 2</i>
The elites are corrupt (corrupt)	0.723		0.689	
I would rather be represented by a citizen than by an elected official (citizens)	0.688		0.706	
Politicians typically look out for their own interest (own issue)	0.780		0.757	
The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people (divide)	0.663		0.698	
The politicians in [Congress/Parliament] need to follow the will of the people (Leg)	0.721		0.702	
The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions (people)	0.811		0.702	
Do you think EU market and labour restrictions should be expanded or reduced?		0.804		0.774
How much confidence do you have in the following institutions? (Europe)		0.804		0.799
Kaiser – Meyer – Olkin test	0.788	0.500	0.766	
Barlett's Test (Sig.)	0.000	0.000	0.000	
Eigenvalue	3.220	1.292	3.235	1.380
Cronbach's Alpha	0.768	0.354	0.768	0.354

Tab 2. Factor Analysis of attitudes on populism (Akkerman's scale) and opposition/support to EU.

Source: Own elaboration based on Populism Public Opinion Surveys, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, the mass survey is rich in questions about populism but it does not include a complete range of attitudes towards the EU like the elite survey (only two indicators of diffuse support for the EU are included).

Table 3 reports the results of our logistic regression on voters' choices for the main Italian parties contesting the 2018 general elections.<sup>11</sup> The first model confirms H1 since the higher the respondents' score on the Populism index<sup>12</sup> the more likely to vote for the Five Stars Movement. In this case, however, also Euroscepticism shows a significant relationship with voting for M5S. Accordingly, the two dimensions play a parallel role on the voting choice for the M5S. It is worth mentioning that also the interviewed MPs of this party showed high levels of populism and some clear Eurosceptic positions (Figure 1), H2 can thus be confirmed. On the opposite side, in the fourth model we find another confirmation about the observed relationships: citizens supporting the EU and those ranking low in the populist scale are more likely to vote for the Democratic Party and LEU. The other two models show more mixed findings. Citizens' populist attitudes significantly relate to voting for *Forza Italia*. Although the party MPs ranked low on populism (Figure 1), their voters showed a greater populist leaning, maybe more in line with the original populist nature of this party and its leadership (Castaldo & Verzichelli, 2020). Finally, coherently with their broad stance (also documented in figure 1) the vote for *Lega* and Brothers of Italy is positively and significantly related with Euroscepticism. Populism and EU attitudes appear a coherent amalgam in the vote choice for the M5S and the Democratic party/Free and Equal, respectively. However, they are also unconnected in the vote choice for *Lega*/Brothers of Italy and *Forza Italia*, thus corroborating H3.

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<sup>11</sup> We grouped the two smaller parties, Brothers of Italy and Free and Equal, for whom we can rely on fewer vote declarations with the party (and electoral ally) closer to their overall stance.

<sup>12</sup> The Populism Index ranges from 0 to 18 (mean 12.64, st. dev. 3.06); the Euroscepticism Index ranges from 0 to 4 (mean 2.09, st. dev. 1.12).



	M5S		League-Brothers of Italy		<i>Forza Italia</i>		Democratic party-Free and Equal	
	OR	St. Err.	OR	St. Err.	OR	St. Err.	OR	St. Err.
<i>Populism Index</i>	1.130**	0.040	0.991	0.840	1.047**	0.067	0.883**	0.047
<i>Euro-scepticism Index</i>	1.169*	0.105	1.318**	0.014	0.940	0.152	0.461****	1.484
<i>Age</i>								
30-44	1.827	0.670	1.032	0.479	0.320*	0.208	0.802	0.467
45-64	1.478	0.284	1.199	0.547	0.356*	0.211	1.068	0.618
65+	1.003	0.487	0.935	0.583	0.627	0.371	2.059	1.096
<i>Education (Lower secondary or less)</i>								
Upper secondary or equivalent	0.786	0.228	0.781	0.277	1.097	0.583	1.471	0.659
Higher education or advanced vocational	1.059	0.290	0.602	0.207	0.700	0.371	1.280	0.549
<i>Occupation (Employed)</i>								
Permanently ill or disabled	0.408	0.504	1.394	1.599	1.274	1.582	1	--
Retired	0.873	0.315	0.892	0.410	2.640	1.613	1.030	0.555
Student	1.627	0.743	0.577	0.364	1.725	1.235	1.362	0.941
Taking care of home or family	1.215	0.418	0.452	0.222	0.894	0.672	3.019**	1.439
Unemployed	0.835	0.261	0.975	0.394	0.770	0.499	4.030***	1.920
<i>Income in Euro/month (less than 750)</i>								
750-1100	0.738	0.310	2.610	1.549	0.252**	0.168	2.062	1.644
1101-1400	0.615	0.246	3.357**	1.935	0.232**	0.153	4.681**	3.523
1401-1700	0.539	0.233	2.185	0.874	0.352	0.241	9.774***	7.750
1701-2000	0.520	0.241	2.589	1.287	0.312	0.237	7.601**	6.349
2001-2400	0.820	0.364	2.710	1.304	0.207**	0.166	5.178*	4.369
2401-2900	0.584	0.284	4.646**	2.052	0.220*	0.177	8.857**	7.760
2901-3500	0.450	0.229	2.739	1.335	0.382	0.318	7.530**	6.346
3501-4550	0.333*	0.186	3.050	1.549	0.572	0.488	5.858**	5.106
more than 4550	0.655	0.413	4.500*	3.589	0.129*	0.156	5.757	6.420
Left-right scale	0.808****	0.048	2.184****	0.209	1.806****	0.231	0.527****	0.052
Constant	0.297*	0.212	0.002****	0.002	0.017	0.021	4.007	4.633
Pseudo R square	0.062		0.231		0.188		0.314	
N	498		498		498		494	

Table 3. Regressions on declaration of voting in 2018 national elections.

Note: \*p<0.10, \*\*p<0.05, \*\*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*\*p<0.001

## Conclusions

Different scholars have highlighted a convergence between populism and Euroscepticism both at the level of parties and public opinion. In order to observe this relationship empirically, we focused on Italy, a country where these two stances gained momentum with the establishment of a populist-Eurosceptic government after the 2018 elections.

Our analyses revealed that, in actual fact, the complete overlapping of populism and Euroscepticism has not materialised as it was commonly expected. At the level of political elites serving in public office, the attitudes of MPs shape distinct dimensions of populism and Euroscepticism. Moreover, both the political elites of the most Eurosceptic (*Lega* and Brothers of Italy) and most Europhile (such as PD and Free and Equal) parties have not been substantially caught up by populist contagion. Only in the case of the M5S, populism and Euroscepticism appear to converge at the level of party MPs.

Furthermore, our analysis of Italian public opinion shows that the mass-elite gap on populism and Euroscepticism is probably smaller than in the past. The two concepts are distinct in public minds consistently with what we observed at the elite level. Moreover, they show distinct relationships with voting preferences during the national elections of 2018. Eurosceptic voters declared to vote coherently for Eurosceptic parties and the same is true for the pro-European voters voting for Europhile parties. The relationship between populism and voting is maybe less straightforward. As it was expected, populism was a driving factor in the vote choice for the M5S (and, on the opposite side, its rejection was influential for the choice to vote the Democratic party and LEU). Populism was instead not significant for the decision to vote *Lega* and Brothers of Italy, two parties whose stance – based on the attitudes expressed by their MPs and contrary to what is often assumed in the literature – we defined as not populist. The only mismatch we found was with *Forza Italia* whose electorate still appears motivated by the populist ideas that can be associated to the origins of this party, but not to its current posture.

Finally, in 2018 the M5S appears the only Italian party with a capacity to mobilise the electorate on a mixed populist/Eurosceptic platform and the only one that appears to fit well the definition of Eurosceptic populist of Pirro and Kessel (2018). Beyond this case, we could not find an overall convergence between Euroscepticism/populism in Italy, neither within the elite segment of society nor within the masses. On the opposite, these two stances play an independent effect on the electoral choice of citizens contributing to aggregating election results. In relative terms, from our analysis, populism emerged as a limited phenomenon in Italy, mainly confined to the M5S (still the largest party in the Italian Parliament) and its electorate, its effects on voting are probably smaller than commonly expected and certainly smaller than those of attitudes towards the EU.

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## Appendix

		%
<i>Chamber</i>	Deputies	64.4
	Senators	35.6
	Forza Italia	17.2
	Fratelli d'Italia	5.8
	Lega- Salvini Premier	8.1
	Liberi e Uguali	2.3
	Lega-Salvini Premier-Partito Sardo	10.3
<i>Parliamentary group</i>	Misto	2.3
	Misto-Maie-Italiani all'Estero	1.2
	Misto-Minoranze linguistiche	1.2
	Movimento Cinque Stelle	32.1
	Partito Democratico	19.5
<i>Education</i>	Secondary	21.5
	Bachelor	45.2
	Master and PhD	33.3
Duration of Mandate till the interview	less than 1 year	36.9
	2 or more years	61.9
Age	refuse	1.2
	29-40	27.6
	41-50	45.9
	51-60	25.3
	61+	1.2
Ideological self-positioning	left	22.6
	center	38.7
Employment sector	right	38.7
	unemployed	3.6

public	31.3
industry	16.9
services	43.4
other	4.8

Table A1. Descriptives of interviewed MPs.

Question	Code	% (instead otherwise stated)
All in all, would you say that Italy has benefited from membership of the European Union or not?	Binary: Benefited	71.2
	-Not benefited	28.7
<i>Thinking about the EU in the next 10 years, could you tell me how you favour...an EU welfare system</i>	Strongly in favour	62.1
	Somewhat in favour	24.1
	A little in favour	9.2
	Not at all in favour	4.6
	Strongly in favour	43.7
An EU fiscal system	Somewhat in favour	39.1
	A little in favour	9.2
	Not at all in favour	8.1
A larger cohesion programme to reduce inequalities among European regions	Strongly in favour	62.1
	Somewhat in favour	24.1
	A little in favour	9.2

	Not at all in favour	4.6
	Very	41.4
How desirable it is for the European Union to exercise a strong leadership role in international affairs	Somewhat	36.8
	A little	14.9
	Not at all	6.9
The EU helps protect us from the negative effects of globalization vs The EU exacerbates the negative effects of globalization	Binary	52.4 vs 47.6
Those who decide in the European Union do not take Italy's interests sufficiently into consideration	Binary (agree/disagree)	70.1 vs 29.9
<i>For each of the following indicate to what extent you agree or disagree that states are harmed by the EU:</i>	Strongly agree	12.7
The integrity of Italian culture	Somewhat agree	19.5
	Somewhat disagree	33.3
	Strongly disagree	34.5
	Strongly agree	18.4
	Somewhat agree	31.0
Welfare achievements in Italy	Somewhat disagree	27.6
	Strongly disagree	23.0
	Strongly agree	25.3
	Somewhat agree	32.2
Economic growth in Italy	Somewhat disagree	24.1
	Strongly disagree	18.4
	Strongly agree	11.6
The quality of democracy in Italy	Somewhat agree	19.5

	Somewhat disagree	35.6
	Strongly disagree	33.3
UE authority on the economy vs. member states' authority	1 (EU more authority) to 10 (Member states' authority)	Mean = 6.49
Strong Leadership good vs. Strong Leadership danger for democracy	1 (strong leadership good) to 10 (strong leadership dangerous)	Mean = 4.218
Professional politicians in Parliament vs. common persons	1 (common people) to 10 (professional politicians)	Mean = 2.33
Italian borders controlled vs. open borders	Binary	Item 1: 51.19 Item 2: 47.62

Table 2A. Questions with coding from the Italian MPs dataset, 2019.

Question	Code	%
Q1: The interests of the people are represented well by the political elites	Agree	23.0
	Disagree	63.0
	DK	14.0
Q2: The political elites have the best interests of the nation/people in mind	Agree	19.2
	Disagree	69.6
	DK	11.2
The elites are corrupt (corrupt)	Strongly disagree	2.4
	Somewhat disagree	20.4
	Somewhat agree	47.5
	Strongly agree	29.7
I would rather be represented by a citizen than by an elected officials (citizens)	Strongly disagree	8.4
	Somewhat disagree	40.5
	Somewhat agree	32.2
	Strongly agree	18.9
Politicians typically look out for their own interest (own issue)	Strongly disagree	8.8
	Somewhat disagree	7.5
	Somewhat agree	44.0
	Strongly agree	47.7
The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people (divide)	Strongly disagree	2.0
	Somewhat disagree	15.8
	Somewhat agree	53.0
	Strongly agree	29.2
	Strongly disagree	1.2



The politicians in [Congress/Parliament] need to follow the will of the people (people)	Somewhat disagree	4.5
	Somewhat agree	40.2
	Strongly agree	54.1
The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions (Leg)	Strongly disagree	3.7
	Somewhat disagree	21.3
	Somewhat agree	43.3
	Strongly agree	31.7
How much confidence do you have in the following institutions? European Union	none	21.4
	a little	38.5
	some	31.0
	a lot	9.1
Q6: Do you think EU market and labour restrictions should be expanded or reduced?	<1> Expanded greatly	5.0
	<2> Expanded somewhat	17.2
	<3> Kept at its current level	22.5
	<4> Reduced somewhat	30.5
	<5> Reduced greatly	6.2
	<6> Not sure	18.6
Age (categories)	18-29	17.4
	30-44	25.4
	45-64	40.2

	65+	17.0
Education: What is the highest level of education you have completed?	<1> Did not attend or complete elementary school	0.6
	<2> Elementary School	3.5
	<3> Lower secondary school (middle school)	41.3
	<4> Upper secondary school (high school)	39.3
	<5> Post-diploma professional specialization	5.7
	<6> Bachelor's degree or equivalent	5.3
	<7> Single cycle master's degree+PhD	4.3
Occupation: Which of the following best describes your current employment status?	<1> Employed	40.6
	<2> Unemployed	0.8
	<3> Student	18.0

	<4> Permanently ill or disabled	10.1
	<5> Retired	12.3
	<6> Taking care of home or family	18.2
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	<1> Less than € 750	13.7
	<2> € 750 - € 1.100	3.2
	<3> € 1.101 - € 1.400	15.5
	<4> € 1.401 - € 1.700	13.8
	<5> € 1.701 - € 2.000	10.7
Income: What is your monthly family income	<6> € 2.001 - € 2.400	11.3
	<7> € 2.401 - € 2.900	7.6
	<8> € 2.901 - € 3.500	5.8
	<9> € 3.501 - € 4.550	4.1
	<10> More than € 4.550	14.3
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Which party did you vote for in the general election this March?	+Europa	1.36

Forza Italia (FI)	6.48
Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)	2.19
Lega	17.35
Liberi e Uguali (LeU)	3.97
Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S)	32.50
Partito Democratico (PD)	11.81
Other	7.63
Did not vote	16.72
DK-NO Answer	6.27

Table 3A. Questions with coding from the Populism Public Opinion Surveys.

	<i>Euroscepticism</i>
All in all, would you say that Italy has benefited from membership of the European Union or not?	0.708
The EU helps protect us from the negative effects of globalization vs The EU exacerbates the negative effects of globalization	0.818
Those who decide in the European Union do not take Italy's interests sufficiently into consideration	0.843
<i>For each of the following indicate to what extent you agree or disagree that states are harmed by the EU:</i>	0.728
The integrity of Italian culture	
Welfare achievements in Italy	0.854
Economic growth in Italy	0.884
The quality of democracy in Italy	0.806
UE authority on the economy vs. member states' authority	0.759
Kaiser – Meyer – Olkin test	0.912
Barlett's Test (Sig.)	0.000
Eigenvalue	5.150
Cronbach's Alpha	0.839
	<i>Prospective Europeanism</i>
<i>Thinking about the EU in the next 10 years, could you tell me how you favour...an EU welfare system</i>	0.846
An EU fiscal system	0.828
A larger cohesion programme to reduce inequalities among European regions	0.843
How desirable it is for the European Union to exercise a strong leadership role in international affairs	0.777

Kaiser – Meyer – Olkin test	0.797
Barlett’s Test (Sig.)	0.000
Eigenvalue	2.716
Cronbach’s Alpha	0.902
<b><i>Populism</i></b>	
Strong Leadership good vs. Strong Leadership danger for democracy	0.373
Professional politicians in Parliament vs. common persons	0.837
Italian borders controlled vs. open borders	0.782
Kaiser – Meyer – Olkin test	0.502
Barlett’s Test (Sig.)	0.000
Eigenvalue	1.452
Cronbach’s Alpha	0.442

Table A4. Factor analyses on each set of indicators observed from the selected variables.

Source: own elaboration of the Italian MPs dataset, 2019.

Just Accepted - Early View