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The general election of 2022: the return of bipolarity?

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ABSTRACT

The 2022 Italian parliamentary elections were largely pictured, especially by the foreign press, as an alarming victory for the extreme right. In this article, we argue that though the 26% obtained by Brothers of Italy was surely an outstanding result, it does not automatically imply that the Italian electorate shifted further to the right in terms of its preferences and ideology. The evidence we present seems rather to suggest that this result is the consequence of Brothers of Italy's electoral partners, the Lega and Forza Italia, losing their appeal among the centre right's voters. This, along with an electoral law that favours bipolarity, and division among the remaining coalitions, led to an outstanding victory for the centre right (right-centre?).

KEYWORDS

Italy; 2022 elections; electoral behaviour; electoral choice

1. Introduction

On 26 September 2022, the day after the elections for the nineteenth Italian legislature, the headlines of the international press testified to the existence of a sensationalist climate of worry and concern. The victory of the coalition of the right, headed by Giorgia Meloni, was described in all quarters as a victory for the extreme right, and speculation concerning the possible government that would be formed did not shy away from more or less thinly veiled references to fascism (see, for example, Roberts and Leali 2022; Kirby 2022). Aside from the debate about how to define Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI), which we will not dwell upon here, the elections of 2022 were in fact the first in Italy's republican history at which the most-voted party was the one perceived as lying further to the right than all of the others. It was a party to which the prefix 'centre', widely used in Italian political discourses, could most certainly not be applied. In fact, the 26% obtained by FdI – which at the previous general election had obtained less than 5% and which in 2022 found itself leading the winning coalition and nominating the Prime Minister – must be considered as an outstanding result, on a par with the upward trajectory taken by Matteo Salvini's Lega (League) in the period up to 2019. At the same time, the 'populist wave' that had overtaken Italy first in 2013 and again in 2018, bringing a temporary restructuring of the party system (Chiaromonte 2014; Vassallo and Shin 2019), seems at the very least to have subsided

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somewhat, as the modest result achieved by the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five-star Movement, M5s) suggests. To understand the result of the elections of 2022 therefore means to understand whether the Italian electorate in fact shifted further to the right in terms of its preferences, or whether the Meloni government is not, rather, the result of an ordinary election all things considered – one that that produced a result that is only apparently extraordinary.

In this article, we will consider a number of descriptive and empirical elements useful for understanding the context in which the elections took place, and we shall attempt to develop an interpretation of the outcome itself. Our argument is that while the elections of 2022 resulted in a victory for the centre right, the victory rested on bases very similar to those of earlier elections, such as those of 2008, of 2001 or even of 1994. From this perspective, the surprising result achieved by FdI was in all probability due to a flow of votes within the coalition of the centre right: a reorganization of the distribution of power among the different forces coming together under the same political ‘umbrella’. The decisive shift, however – the one that led the centre right to obtain 44% of the vote – took place in the period between the general election of 2018 and the European elections of 2019.

The article begins with a description of the historical context leading up to the 2022 elections, before proceeding to a discussion of the electoral law and the main parties among which voters were called upon to choose. It then considers some empirical data concerning the aggregate preferences of voters and their political identities during the course of the eighteenth legislature. We conclude by providing a summary of the results emerging from our analysis.

2. The historical context: the Draghi government

The Draghi government took office in February 2021 following the fall of the Conte government, an event brought about by internal conflicts between left and right concerning the administration of justice, the lockdown measures and the lack of involvement of firms in development of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP: see Marangoni and Kreppel 2022). The new government could count on the support of a broad range of parliamentary parties from which only FdI was excluded, the party having decided, from the start, to remain in opposition (Marangoni and Kreppel 2022; Russo, Sandri, and Seddone 2022). Initially, the state of emergency and Draghi’s reputation were sufficiently compelling to bring together all the parties represented in Parliament (with the exception of FdI, as mentioned) in a government of national unity in spite of their differences. However, these centripetal forces became weaker as the months went by with the result that the difficulties of holding together parties with political agendas that were divergent and even contradictory eventually became impossible to overcome.

Without exception, all the parties sustaining the Draghi government had to grapple with the difficulties involved in being both governing allies and political adversaries. In the extraordinary circumstances of a pandemic, the capacity to come together in a common effort is undoubtedly to be considered something positive. However, in the broader circumstances of a consolidated democracy, a certain degree of conflict is endemic and indeed necessary (Schattschneider 1960). The concept of democracy itself is based on the idea of alternating legislatures (and governments) proposing

contrasting visions of society (Lijphart 1999). Those responsible for such alternation – brought about by choosing between the alternative visions of society presented to them – are of course the electors, who must however, be placed in a position to choose between distinct alternatives. From this point of view, it is essential that the parties be able to indicate clearly their positions concerning the policies and political issues that are salient at any given moment (Carmines 1991). This is not only a requirement of the parties, one arising from their efforts to mobilize support, but also of electors; for it facilitates the process whereby, on the basis of the signals sent by the parties, the voter is able to make choices in line with her preferences (Russo, Franklin, and Beyens 2021).

In this sense, as noted by Russo and Valbruzzi (2022), all the parties supporting the Draghi government found themselves in difficulty. The main issue they had to grapple with was management of the pandemic in relation to which the only party capable of taking a position that was recognizable and distinct was, obviously, the one party that had placed itself in opposition: FdI. Though its position with regard to the pandemic was not endorsed by a majority of the electorate (Russo and Valbruzzi 2022), FdI clearly distinguished itself, sending a clear and easily identifiable signal to those citizens who disagreed with the policies being implemented by the Draghi government. In the medium term, this led to growing unrest within the League, FdI's direct competitor for leadership of the coalition of the right. But it also led to a further decline in support for the M5s, which had historically based its identity on its distinctiveness from all of the other parties and which now found itself having to support a government of national unity. Both these parties performed badly at the local elections of 2021 with the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD) managing to take control of a number of large cities (Vassallo 2022); and one may reasonably suppose that the difficulties just mentioned were at least partly responsible.

With the arrival of the summer, with the vaccines roll-out well underway and with the receding political salience of the pandemic, the League and the M5s began to show clear signs of unhappiness, both being driven by the need to distinguish themselves. This arose, in the first case, from the internal competition with FdI, and in the second case from the requirement for differentiation all round but especially from the PD, its potential ally. The crisis, which many believed to be absurd and inexplicable,¹ was initially triggered by the M5s, which had decided not to support the Government in a vote on the so-called *Decreto Aiuti*,² which Draghi had decided to make a matter of confidence and which contained a number of measures opposed by the party. They included the dispatch of arms to Ukraine, the construction of a waste incinerator in Rome, and changes to the citizenship income: all issues in terms of which the M5s sought to distinguish itself from the other parties.

However, in light of the outcome of the confidence vote, Draghi resigned, finding his resignation rejected by the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella. Draghi appeared once more before the Senate on 20 July, making a very forthright speech in which he condemned what he called a 'progressive disintegration of the majority'. The actors catalysing the crisis now became the Forza Italia (FI) and the League, driven as they were by measures unwanted by some of the governing parties, especially proposed reforms of the land registry and of the franchises for the running of bathing establishments (especially dear to the centre right). Again, it was apparent that the parties' needs

to defend certain positions, especially in the context of an unusually inclusive coalition, was an important factor determining the nature of the interaction between them.

The governing parties of the centre right then took the initiative, telling Draghi that their conditions for continued support of his premiership included the formation of a new government with new ministers, without the M5s, and a programme revised in the light of these changes. Draghi for his part had stated on several occasions during the preceding months that in the absence of national unity (and therefore without the M5s) he was not willing to carry on. He therefore insisted that the points included in his speech be made subject to a vote of confidence in which he obtained the support of the PD and of *Liberi e Uguali* (Free and Equal, LeU), as well as the parties of the centre. FI, the League and the M5s refused to participate in the vote bringing about the fall of the government.³

3. The institutional context: the Rosato law

The election of 25 September was the second to be held on the basis of the Rosato electoral law (the so-called ‘Rosatellum’). The electoral law, because it sets out the rules of the game, has a significant influence on the strategies of both parties and voters (Norris 2004). However, as we shall see, only some of the competing parties had either the desire or the ability to adapt themselves to the incentives created by the Rosato law, and this had a significant impact on the composition of the legislature emerging from the elections. We shall therefore start by briefly outlining the electoral system in order to understand the incentives it creates for parties and voters.

The Rosato law, widely referred to as the ‘Rosatellum’, is a mixed electoral system, one with a majoritarian and a proportional component – as has been the case with all the electoral laws adopted since the end of the First Republic, following the precedent set by the Mattarella law. The majoritarian component is applied to the election of around one-third of the seats in single-member districts (SMDs) where candidates are supported by lists that can be composed of a single party or a coalition. The proportional component is used to elect the remaining two-third of parliamentarians, with seats being distributed on the basis of the distribution of the vote nationally.

It is well known that majoritarian systems are designed to meet both the need to give voters a clear choice between two distinct alternatives, and the requirement of governing stability, while proportional systems are designed to ensure that as many voters as possible are represented by a party as close as possible to their specific preferences (Lijphart 1999). Majoritarian systems clearly accentuate competition (by virtue of the fact that it is sufficient for a party to have just one vote more than the others to win) and give priority to governing stability over greater representativeness. Majoritarian systems tend, moreover, to influence the strategies of parties and voters in a reciprocal manner. On the one hand, the parties are induced to reduce the number of candidates as much as possible in order to concentrate as much as possible the votes cast. With the Rosato law, this is made possible by the presentation of common coalition candidates in the SMDs. On the other hand, electors are induced to vote for a political force (party or coalition) that is actually competitive within the SMD in question in order to have the reasonable certainty that thereby she will not waste her vote. Majoritarian electoral laws, therefore, favour the presence of ‘strong’ parties, either throughout the national territory, or else in specific areas (as in the case of the SVP in Alto Adige, for example). Proportional systems

do not create these kinds of incentives insofar as they leave party competition and electors' choices relatively unconstrained by strategic considerations. In general, proportional systems emphasize the 'interlocutory' relationship between parties and voters inasmuch as they favour the recognition of a wide range of political programmes and societal visions and their representation in the legislature where they must then seek compromise and agreement between each other. In this case, the voter's decision is more difficult, given that the alternatives amount to more than two; but – one may reasonably assume – it is also one that results in a choice close to her actual preferences.

In the case of 'mixed' electoral systems, like the Rosatellum, a 'contamination effect' has been observed. This is one that involves results in the proportional arena being influenced by the distortions arising from the strategic considerations produced by the majoritarian component (Herron and Nishikawa 2001). This contamination is in all probability further accentuated in the case of the Rosato law by the fact that the voter cannot engage in 'split ticket' voting. That is, she cannot choose, in the majoritarian arena, a candidate affiliated with a party list other than the one chosen in the proportional arena and vice versa (something that is possible in the cases of most mixed systems used around the world and was possible with the Mattarella law). With the Rosato law, the elector can vote in one of the three ways. She can place a cross over her chosen party symbol, thereby voting automatically for the candidate supported by the party in the SMD of residence and increasing the 'weight' of her chosen party in the proportional arena. She can place a cross over her chosen party symbol and over the name of the candidate supported by the party, producing exactly the same result as a vote expressed using the first approach. Alternatively, she can place a cross over the name of the chosen SMD candidate only. In that case, her vote, along with the others expressed in this way, is automatically distributed, in the proportional arena, among all the parties supporting the chosen candidate, with the party lists receiving the votes in proportion to the number of votes 'directly' cast for them in the multimember district within which the SMD is located. The elector cannot, therefore, decide to vote for an SMD candidate affiliated with a coalition she does not support. This constraint augments the incentives associated with the majoritarian component over those associated with the proportional component of the law.

However, Italy's electoral system, unlike other mixed systems (such as the German) has this peculiarity: the majoritarian component – as has been the case with all of the electoral systems, including the Mattarella law, introduced since the start of the Second Republic – operates at the level of coalitions, not parties. The intention has been to preserve a wide choice for the elector and the representation of a broad range of political outlooks while also encouraging governing stability, exploiting the clear division between left and right ideological outlooks that have always been present in the Italian political system (Vegetti and Širinić 2019). Given, as we have seen, that electoral systems structure both the competition between parties and the choices of voters, this policy has had an impact both on the party system and on the political loyalties of citizens. As far as the former is concerned, there has since the beginning of the Second Republic, been a bipolar dynamic to party competition, with two coalitions competing with each other for overall majorities of parliamentary seats (Bartolini, Chiaramonte, and D'alimonte 2004). This has enabled parties to combine varied and changing political programmes with rigid, block, structures governed by 'left' and 'right' ideological outlooks. As far as electors are

concerned, the mixed system has encouraged voters to think of their choices as ones taking place at two levels. First, through the choice of a coalition, the voter decides which of them she wishes to form the government. Second through a choice of party, the voter influences the distribution of power within the coalition. In the following two sections, we shall consider how these two elements help us to understand the result of the election of 2022.

4. The competitive context: two, three or four poles?

The bipolarity of the Italian party system, progressively consolidated over the course of the five elections from 1994 to 2008, was for a long time characterized by a political supply that was rigidly structured by the two poles of left and right. However, from the beginning of the new millennium, the structure began to show signs of disintegrating: first in 2011, with the grand coalition supporting the Monti government, which saw the eternal adversaries of centre left and centre right – then represented by the PD and the Popolo della libertà (People of Freedom, Pdl) – support the same government (Vegetti, Poletti, and Segatti 2014). Then, 2013 saw the explosive emergence of a party, the M5s, which explicitly placed itself outside the two blocks of left and right (Chiaromonte and De Sio 2014).

In particular, the arrival on the scene of the M5s, whose position was consolidated in 2018, seems to have shifted political competition in a tri-polar direction. After the elections of 2013 and 2018, it seemed that voters had turned their backs on the bipolar competition that had characterized party competition since the start of the Second Republic. However, the tri-polarity inaugurated with the arrival of the M5s seemed to be the result less of stable changes in the structure of party competition, than of a distribution of votes that in 2018 was especially skewed geographically. While the coalition of the centre right was victorious in most of the SMDs of the North, the M5s was victorious in all those of the South, while the centre left remained strong only in the areas of the former ‘Red belt’ (Cavallaro et al. 2018). In 2022, the situation – one that was already apparent before the election – was very different.

We start from an observation of a general nature: in the context of the 2022 election, the competition between the parties was one that divided the centre right, on the one hand, from all the remaining parties on the other. Faced with rules of the game that were bipolar, the centre right adopted a strategy that was also bipolar. Despite the divisions, the backbiting and the tensions (especially between FdI and the League), the centre right, consistent with a tradition extending back over two decades (at least with regard to national elections) decided to compete as a coalition. In doing so it counted on the loyalty of voters to their chosen coalition if not their parties, a situation that had brought changes to the leadership of the coalition (especially during the two previous parliamentary sessions) while leaving the coalition itself unchanged. For this reason, Giorgia Meloni, as the leader of the party whose victory was widely anticipated, adopted a more moderate and pragmatic profile during the election campaign. This was a profile she would continue to adopt during the initial months of her term as Prime Minister, seeking to pursue measures, which, while not extreme, were well in line with the right’s traditional themes. They included an increase in the size of payments that could legitimately be

made with cash, and below which retailers could legitimately refuse to accept payments by card.

While the parties of the centre right were united, their adversaries found the process of alliance formation more complicated. The leaders of the centre left had tried on a number of occasions to construct a broad coalition. In the aftermath of the fall of the Draghi government, the PD had excluded an alliance with the M5s even though the two had been partners in the second Conte government and had collaborated in a number of local contests.⁴ In contrast, the PD sought an alliance with Carlo Calenda's Azione, but it lasted no more than a few days. Calenda, for his part, was unwilling to have the Sinistra Italiana (Italian Left) and the Verdi (Greens)⁵ as coalition partners, so he defected to form an alliance with Matteo Renzi's Italia Viva (IV), giving life to the so-called 'Third Pole'. Since the general election of 2018, the M5s had positioned itself as a political actor refusing to define itself in left-right terms and rejecting alliances with other parties. Despite this, in the aftermath of the election it had formed the so-called 'yellow-green' coalition with the League, giving birth to the first Conte government, and then the 'yellow-red' coalition with the PD in support of the second Conte government. However, at the election of 2022, the M5s ran in isolation, fielding its own candidates in the SMDs. Moreover, as we shall see in more detail in the next section, the 2018 election, when the party was so popular it obtained 33% of the vote, was but a distant memory. The decline in support for the M5s had first become apparent at the European Parliament election of 2019, when the party had obtained 17% of the vote. The decline continued during the subsequent years, though less rapidly than it had done during the first year of the Conte government. At the outset of the 2022 elections, the M5s no longer seemed capable of competing single-handedly with the centre right, not even in those Southern SMDs that had contributed so much to its success in 2018 (see Vegetti and Russo 2023).

In 2022, therefore, the tri-polar format emerging from the elections of 2013 and 2018 appeared to change yet again. The party lists that seemed to be competitive in the SMDs and therefore strong enough to win seats were those of the centre right, the centre left and the M5s. To these we can add those of the coalition between Azione and IV, which, though it failed to win any SMD, was able to take seats thanks to the proportional component of the Rosatellum. Such a party-system format is difficult to define. On the one hand, the centre right was able to exploit the incentives of the Rosato law better than its adversaries, this by presenting a united front that emerged ahead of its rivals in most of the SMDs. On the other hand, its adversaries decided (or were obliged to accept the decisions of others) not to form a competitive 'second pole' to oppose the right, one that was able to be competitive in the bipolar context citizens had become used to since the beginning of the Second Republic. The combination of these elements, that is the weakened state of the M5s (especially in the South) and the absence of any desire or ability of the forces of the centre and the left to form a coalition, led to a crushing victory for the centre right, which was also assisted by the majoritarian implications of the Rosato law.

5. The context of voters' preferences: a choice on two levels

In order to understand the 2022 election result and why it was so different as compared to that of 2018, it is useful to begin by considering how the voting decisions of citizens

changed during the course of the eighteenth legislature. **Figure 1** shows the moving averages of the results of all the polls that asked respondents about their voting intentions taken in Italy from half-way through March 2018 through to November 2022 as reported by the website, *Europe Elects*.⁶

The first of the two graphs shows the percentages of the vote obtained by the largest parties, while in the second graph the percentages for the parties of the coalition of the centre right (FdI, the League and FI) have been aggregated. The dotted vertical lines represent the most important political events of the legislature, including the various changes of government, the European elections of 2019 and the general election of 2022. The light grey dots represent the actual results of the polls in question, while the lines,

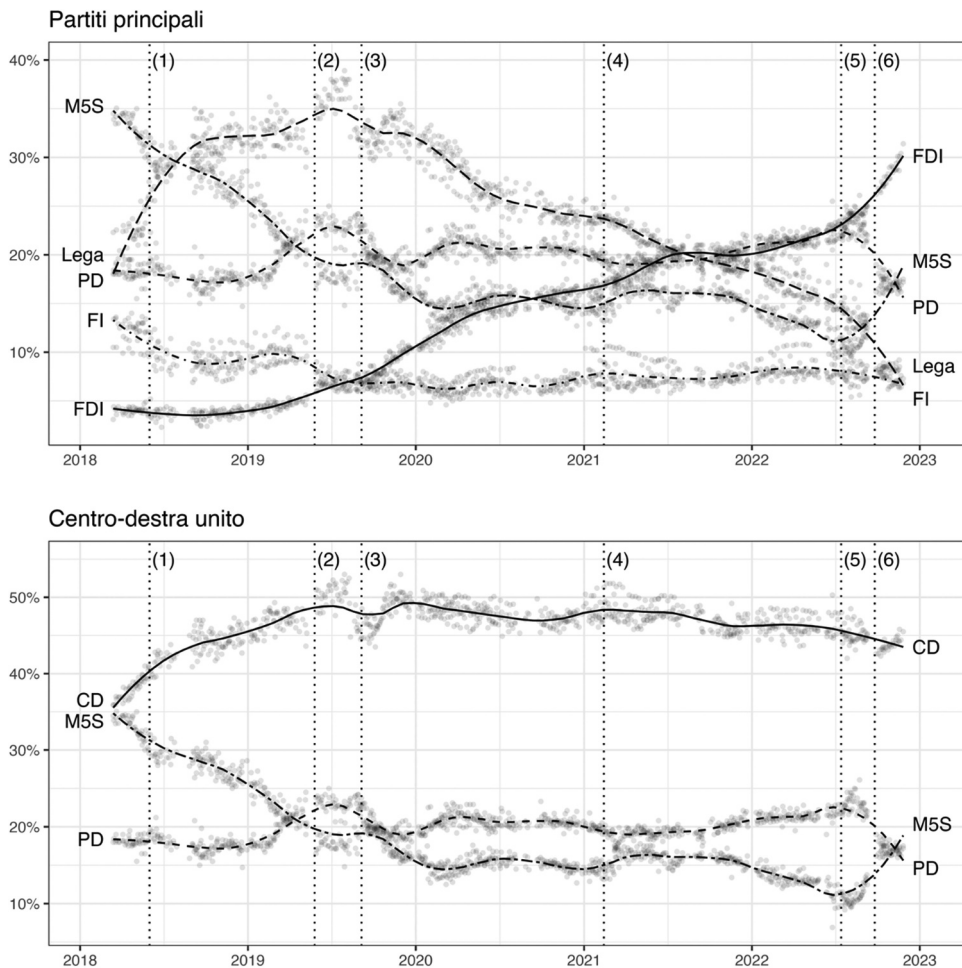


Figure 1. Moving averages of voting intentions for the main parties separately (upper panel) and for the parties of the centre right coalition separately (lower panel) from 14 March 2018 to 26 November 2022. The dotted vertical lines represent the most important political events of the period: (1) the formation of the Conte I government; (2) the European elections of 2019; (3) the formation of the Conte II government; (4) the formation of the Draghi government; (5) the fall of the Draghi government; (6) the general election of 2022. Source: Europe Elects (europeelects.eu).

referring to the parties and coalitions, do not overlap perfectly with the percentages obtained by the latter at the various points in time – for example at elections – because they represent moving averages. The figure is useful essentially for showing the medium- and long-term trends that characterized the preferences of citizens during the course of the eighteenth legislature.

The first graph shows a series of well-known changes, such as the dramatic growth of the League at the election of 2018 and at the European Parliament election of 2019, when it took almost 35% of the vote; the collapse of the M5s during the same period, and the slower growth of FdI up to the 2022 election (and beyond). However, the second graph also shows that support for the coalition of the centre right remained almost constant and indeed that it declined by five percentage points from the start of the Draghi government. In other words, the most significant trend was a redistribution of votes within the coalition. The success of FdI at the 2022 election seems to have mainly come at the expense of the other parties of the coalition of the centre right. This suggests the persistence of a high degree of loyalty to the coalitions combined with a much weaker loyalty to the individual parties (Natale 2021). It thus seems reasonable to suppose that voters for the centre right made a two-fold choice: first a choice of coalition and then a choice of party.

This tendency manifested itself not only at the elections of 2022. Rather, it is consistent with the well-known decline in partisanship (Garzia, Ferreira da Silva, and De Angelis 2022) that has been underway for a number of years both in Italy and other European democracies with the decline in the centrality of parties as objects of political identification. In Italy, however, there continues to exist a form of weak loyalty (Natale 2021) implying that if voters are no longer strongly attached to individual parties, then they continue to be aligned in terms of ideological labels.⁷ In fact, ‘right’ and ‘left’, besides standing for different specific policy packages and for more abstract ideals such as ‘order’, ‘freedom’ and ‘equality’ (Barisione 2021), also provide the basis of group identities; that is, they are associated with symbols, parties and individuals that come to be characterized as belonging to distinct groups (Ellis and Stimson 2012). The symbolic function of ideological labels is particularly relevant in Italy (Vegetti and Širinić 2019).

This reasoning is consistent with the idea that voters make choices at two different levels, as described above: the Italian voter, when called upon to make an electoral choice, decides first which group to vote for and only then decides which party to vote for within the group. This helps us to understand why it was that FdI was so successful, while the centre right as a whole remained essentially stable in terms of its popular support: Italian voters did not shift to the right; or rather, the coalition of the right did not win over new supporters following the elections of 2019. Rather, what happened was that an electorate that was already inclined to support the coalition of the centre right (in terms of its choices at the first level) voted more strongly in favour of FdI than in the past (i.e. in terms of its choices at the second level).

In order to show the importance of the ideological labels and of the coalitions for Italian voters, we considered their party and ideological identifications by drawing on a survey carried out in March 2022 by the *Bilendi & Respondi* institute using an Online Access Panel,⁸ respondents being asked explicitly whether they identified with (1) a party and (2) a political outlook (such as the ‘right’, the ‘left’, the ‘centre right’ or the ‘centre left’). The first of the two questions is often used to measure the party attachments of

respondents, while the second adopts the same wording but uses the ideological in place of the party labels. This distinguishes it from the classic variable measured by asking respondents to place themselves on the left-right spectrum often used in surveys (see Fonda and Vassallo 2023, for a recent ideological ‘profiling’ of voters for the various parties) and makes it more comparable with the party identification variable.

In the first place, the results show that only 37.9% of Italians feel attached to a party, while a larger proportion, 54.4%, identify with a political outlook defined in terms of an ideological position on the left-right spectrum. If we consider the proportions identifying with a party and/or an ideological group among voters for the main parties, then some noteworthy differences emerge, as shown in Figure 2.

The graph shows (on the vertical axis) the percentages of voters for the six largest parties at the 2022 election (FdI, the League, FI, the M5s, the PD and LeU/Articolo1⁹) that identified with their party and (on the horizontal axis) that identified with an ideological outlook consistent with that of their chosen party. The consistent outlooks are ‘right’ and ‘centre right’ in the case of voters for FdI, the League and FI; ‘left’ and ‘centre left’ in the case of voters for the PD and formations to its left (i.e. LeU/Articolo 1, when the survey was administered and the Green/Italian Left alliance at the election of 2022)¹⁰; none in the case of voters for the M5s. The latter decision was motivated by the fact that the M5s has always claimed to be neither right nor left wing.¹¹ The diagonal line represents the positions the parties’ voters would take if the proportions identifying with the parties were exactly matched by the proportions identifying with the appropriate ideological outlook and vice versa.

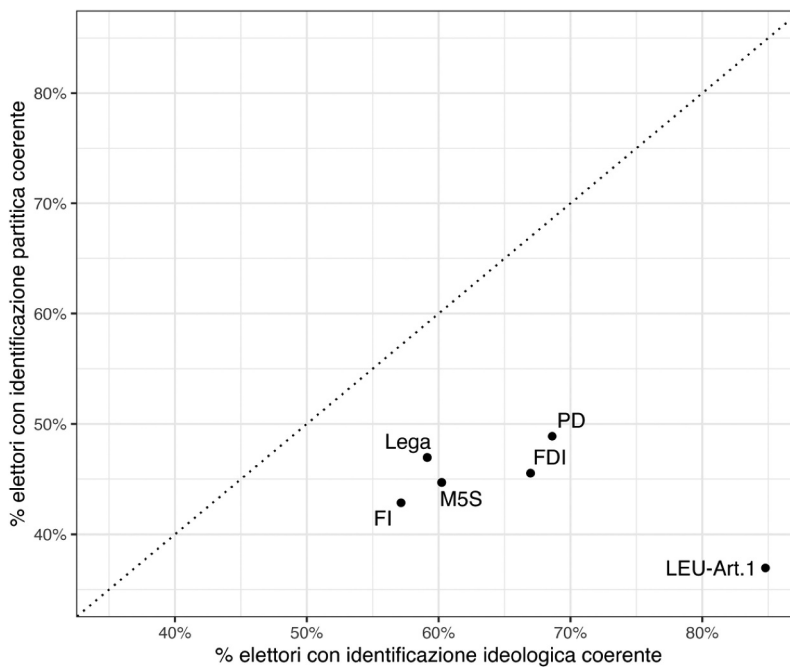


Figure 2. Proportions of party and ideological identifiers among supporters of the five largest parties. March 2022. Source: original data.

Figure 2 shows that voters for all the parties were more likely to identify with an ideological outlook appropriate to the party than they were to identify with the party itself. Moreover, the two variables are positively correlated. This suggests that in general the two identities are in some way linked. Voters for the PD are those most likely to identify with their chosen party (49%), while 69% identified with the left or centre left political outlooks. Voters for the formation to the left of the PD – at the time of the survey LeU/Articolo 1 – are those most likely to have an identification with an appropriate ideological outlook and least likely to identify with their chosen party. This is not surprising given the high degree of instability of such political formations, which frequently emerge and disappear from one election to the next. 45% of voters for the M5s identify with their chosen party and as many as 60% refuse any kind of ideological identification. This is no great surprise either, as it is consistent with the narrative of the party itself and with its nature as a post-ideological entity.

A small, but interesting difference is the one we notice between voters for parties of the coalition of the centre right in particular, between voters for FdI and for the League. In fact, while the propensity of these groups to identify with their chosen parties is similar (46% and 47%, respectively), voters for FdI identify with the right or centre right to a greater extent than do voters for the League (the relevant percentages being 67% and 59% respectively). Voters for FI, on the other hand, identify less both with their chosen party (43%) and with the appropriate ideological outlook (57%). This can be interpreted as evidence of ‘weak loyalty’ on the part of voters for FdI, as an indication that though they are clearly attached to the relevant ideological outlook, they do not have as strong an attachment to their chosen party.

These data testify to the importance for most voters of the choice made at the first level – the choice of ideological outlook – which in the case of the centre right corresponds to the coalition that presented itself at the elections. As we have said, the importance of the first level reinforces bipolarity, which is further reinforced by an electoral law such as the Rosatellum. However, at the elections of 2022, only the parties of the centre right decided to take advantage of the incentives inherent in the electoral law. As ever, they presented themselves as a united coalition, despite the contrasting positions they had taken with regard to the Draghi government, which had seen FdI in opposition and the League and FI as parties of the majority.

On the other hand, our analysis throws doubt on the actual existence of a ‘second pole’ as cohesive as the coalition of the centre right. While voters for the PD are strongly identified with a (centre left and left) ideological outlook, voters for the M5s – a major party which many considered to be a possible ally of the PD before the 2022 elections – continue to be strongly attached to a ‘non-ideological’ outlook. This raises the question of the ideological outlook of the 40% of M5s voters who do *not* reject an ideological attachment. Figure 3 therefore shows the distribution of ideological identifications among voters for each of the six parties we have considered.

The first noteworthy finding revealed by Figure 3 is the similarity of voters for the three parties of the centre right, which are – with a very small number of exceptions that can be safely ignored – very similar in that, in the vast majority of cases, they identify with the centre right and the right. However, those that do not identify with any ideological category represent significant proportions of voters for these parties, ranging from a low of 31% among voters for FdI to a high of 42% among voters for FI. This contrasts with the

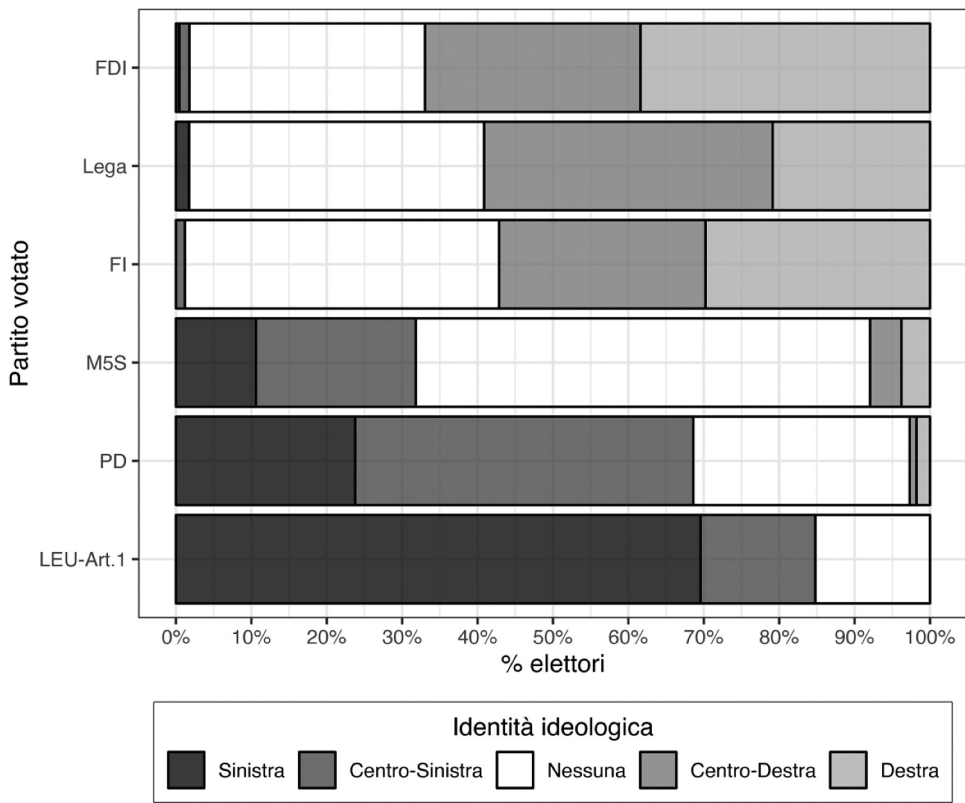


Figure 3. Proportions identifying with ideological outlooks among voters for the major Italian parties, March 2022. Source: original data.

situation for the two parties of the left. 70% of those who vote for parties to the left of the PD identify with the left and only 15% with the centre left. We come, finally, to the M5s. If, on the one hand, a large majority (60%) of this party's voters identify with no ideological category, then on the other hand, 32% identify with the left and centre left, as against 8% who identify with the right and centre right. This therefore places voters for the M5s much closer to the coalition of the centre left than to that of the centre right, even though they are much less ideological.

6. Conclusion

An analysis of the context in which the 2022 elections took place has enabled us to identify a number of elements making it possible to see that an apparently surprising result was probably the result of the interaction of a number of well-known features of the Italian political system. Proceeding from the micro to the macro level, we have shown, first of all, that Italian voters are for the most part much more strongly attached to ideological categories than to parties, as the data presented in Figures 2 and 3 reveal. This finding is helpful for understanding the significance of a second one, namely, that from the 2019 European elections until the 2022 general election, support for FdI grew while

the overall level of support for the coalition of the centre right remained stable. These two findings together make it reasonable to suppose that ‘voters for FdI’ are principally ‘voters for the coalition of the centre right’, who between 2019 and 2022, simply decided to change the leadership of their group. From this point of view, the result of the 2022 election was apparent for the first time at the European Parliament election of 2019.

The fact remains – it might be objected – that 26% of voters chose a party considered to be on the extreme right. This brings us to the second question: why did voters for the coalition of the centre right chose FdI rather than the other two parties, shifting massively in the direction of FdI between 2019 and 2022? One possible answer is that during the course of the eighteenth legislature FdI remained permanently in opposition, while the other parties at various times during the legislature supported the government in office. However, this explanation cannot be generalized in that it appears to be falsified by the growth of the League when it was in office between 2018 and 2019. A second possible explanation is that the League lost credibility following its ‘stunt’ during the summer of 2019, when it brought down the first Conte government in the hope of forcing fresh elections. [Figure 1](#) shows that the growth of FdI coincided with the collapse of the League from the formation of the second Conte government onwards. We can therefore suppose that voters for the centre right shifted progressively from the League to FdI because among other things the former party wasted the opportunity given to it by government office, revealing that it was incapable of managing its alliances effectively.

The third finding concerns that greater capacity of the centre right as compared to its adversaries to exploit the aggregating pressures inherent in the Rosato law. As we have seen, the majoritarian component of the law rewards those parties capable of forming broad coalitions, even though this feature seems to have been ignored by the centre left, the M5s and the ‘third pole’. It remains an open question whether the adversaries of the centre right actually represent a group with sufficient cohesion to form a credible and durable alliance. The data shown in [Figure 3](#) suggest that they have something in common as far as the ideological identifications of their voters are concerned, even though these commonalities are much less in evidence than they are among voters for the centre right.

Notes

1. See, for example, *Il Post*, 21 July 2022: <https://www.ilpost.it/2022/07/21/governo-perche-come-caduto/>.
2. The standing orders of the Chamber and Senate are different. In the Chamber, the M5s had voted against the decree but positively in the vote of confidence. In the Senate, it was not possible to hold separate votes. Therefore, the M5s voted against, explaining that, in line with the positions it had taken in the Chamber, it was opposed to the decree while not wishing to deny its support for the Government.
3. A novel aspect of the 2022 elections was the fact that for the first time since the War, voting took place in September. All of the previous thirteen elections had taken place between March and June. The reason voting had never previously taken place in September has to do with the requirements associated with approval of the annual finance law. The finance law is probably the most important measure a government takes (as it sets out how the state’s resources for the year to come will be acquired and spent). In accordance with the timetable previously applied, the final draft of the law had been completed by the end of September in order to meet the 15 October deadline for submitting to the European Commission the

programmed Budget document (containing a summary of the proposed legislation). The detailed proposals are presented to Parliament by 20 October, to enable them to be debated and revised in detail by 31 December, the deadline by which they must be approved. Bearing in mind that around one month passes between the holding of an election and the swearing in of a new government, holding the election at the end of September meant that the finance law would have to be finalized extremely rapidly. Therefore, for this reason among others, when the Draghi government fell, it was by no means obvious that the President of the Republic would opt for an election to be held in September.

4. See *Il Post* July 2022: <https://www.ilpost.it/2022/07/24/enrico-letta-pd-M5S/>.
5. See *il Post* 8 August 2022: <https://www.ilpost.it/2022/08/08/calenda-letta-azione-pd/>.
6. The data are available at: <https://europeelects.eu/italy/>.
7. The fact that the M5s refused to locate itself in left-right terms, or in terms of one or the other of the ideological line-ups, made it easier for voters to abandon the coalitions with which they previously identified. Indeed, as it grew in popularity, the M5s progressively drained support away from both the right and the left (Russo, Riera, and Verthé 2017).
8. Quota sample with controls for age, gender and region. $N = 1,440$.
9. At the time the survey was conducted, LeU – the formation furthest to the left among the main parties at the 2018 election – was renamed Articolo 1. In order to be certain that respondents correctly identified the political formation when questioned, the label ‘LeU/Articolo 1’ was adopted.
10. At the election of 2022, Articolo 1 fielded a joint list together with the PD among others. The space to the left of the PD was therefore occupied by the alliance of the Greens and the Italian Left.
11. Note, however, that the question does not distinguish between those who refuse all ideological placements and those who place themselves precisely in the centre, in that way denying that they tend either to the left or to the right. As Fonda and Vassallo (2023) have recently shown, these citizens’ voting behaviour differs from those who refuse to place themselves at all.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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