

When responsibility is blurred

Italian national elections in times of economic crisis, technocratic government, and ever-growing populism

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1. The Italian election of 2013: the end of bipolarism?

In the decades after the Second World War, electoral competition in Italy was constantly organized along the lines of left-right ideological divisions (see Bellucci and Segatti 2011). However, the parliamentary election of 2013 seems to have broken this tradition. The greatest symptom of the left-right parties' failure to provide citizens with guidance for their voting decisions is the significant and largely unexpected success of a new political subject that has deliberately positioned itself outside of the traditional ideological dialectics: the Five Star Movement (M5s). Founded in 2009 by the comedian Beppe Grillo, the M5s is the political derivative of a grassroots movement mainly based on the web, which emphasizes in its program issues such as free access to the internet and on-line deliberation as an alternative to representative democracy (Biorcio and Natale 2013; Corbetta and Gualmini 2013).

Since its foundation, the M5s has been claiming to be «neither left nor right», a position justified by the assumption that the ideological labels are just tools employed by the political parties to *fool* the electorate. In fact, this position comes in conjunction with a straightforward accusation that the main parties are colluding with each other against the people's will, which has increasingly strengthened the movement's reputation as an «anti-politics» party. Previous local elections had signaled the growing electoral success of the M5s. In March 2010, at the regional elections in Piedmont, the party was accused of taking votes away from the left-wing, after the right-wing candidate won against the incumbent governor with a margin of 0.4% of the votes. On that occasion the M5s obtained 4% of the votes. In 2011 and early 2012 the party

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ran for other second-order elections, eventually obtaining almost 15% of the votes at the regional elections in Sicily. Given these priors, a good performance of the M5s was widely expected at the national level too. However, the 25.6% of valid votes for the low chamber obtained by the party at the election in February 2013 represented an unprecedented event in Italian republican history. It was the first time a party admittedly extraneous to both «left» and «right» identifications had obtained such a great electoral success. Thus, it is unsurprising that this has been interpreted by many as a collapse of the traditional political divisions.

In light of the impressive breakout of the M5s, pundits have argued that Italian politics has moved on from the strong emphasis on left-right distinctions that characterized its dialectics during the Second Republic. In particular, the elections of 2013 have shown a consistent decline in social-structural and territorial voting (Diamanti 2013; D'Alimonte and Maggini 2013; Maggini 2013), two quite common patterns of political behavior among Italian citizens (Bellucci and Segatti 2011; Galli and Prandi 1970). Other scholars have highlighted an increased tendency among survey respondents to refuse to place themselves on a left-right political continuum (Marini 2013; for a different view see Segatti 2013). To be sure, in Italian political discourse, the ideological labels «left» and «right» are not always employed to refer to actual policy or issue-based distinctions. For instance, Diamanti (2009) defined a communicative trait of the former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi as «anti-communism without communism», referring to his habit of designating as *communist* everyone who publicly criticizes him or threatens his position, such as left-wing politicians, journalists and judges. Yet evidence from political psychology points out that ideological labels do not actually need to have a strong policy content to effectively help citizens in making political decisions (Conover and Feldman 1981; Levitin and Miller 1979). Regardless of their content, ideological labels have been a prominent heuristic used by Italian voters to orientate themselves among different party-blocks during the Second Republic. Thus, claiming that they have disappeared, or that they have become relatively diluted among other types of considerations, implies the assumption that Italian voters have undergone rather important changes in their perception of the political space.

All in all, the idea that ideological considerations are losing importance is making its way as a brand-new narrative of Italian politics. This is due in part to the unprecedented success of a «third party» such as the M5s, and in part to a general weakening of the well-established ideologically-based party loyalties. Such a narrative implicitly assumes a change in the voters' minds, so that ideological considerations have lost their relevance as a criterion to evaluate the political options. However, nothing is known about, first, the

causes of this alleged change in people's minds and, second, whether or not the observed electoral turmoil is due to a *top-down process* instead.

2. The macro-context of the elections

We argue in this study that two characteristics of the macro context in which the election of 2013 was held can help explain the electoral change. The first and most obvious factor is the deep *economic recession* that has been affecting Italy since the early months of the global financial crisis in 2008-2009. While economic hard times represent a threat to political institutions per se (e.g. Newton and Norris 2000), the current global crisis has had, in Italy, some additional political implications, mainly due to the escalation of the European sovereign debt crisis. The impact of the recession on the Italian economy made the country's debt-to-GDP ratio grow to exceptionally high levels as of 2010. In a similar way to other Southern-European countries, such as Greece, Spain and Portugal, the high Italian debt increased investors' fear of a sovereign default, leading in turn to further growing bond yields. The increasing severity of the situation was reflected by the differential between the Italian 10-years benchmark bonds (BTP) and the German Bund, the so-called «*spread*», which has grown dramatically since July 2011 and reached alarming peaks in November 2011.

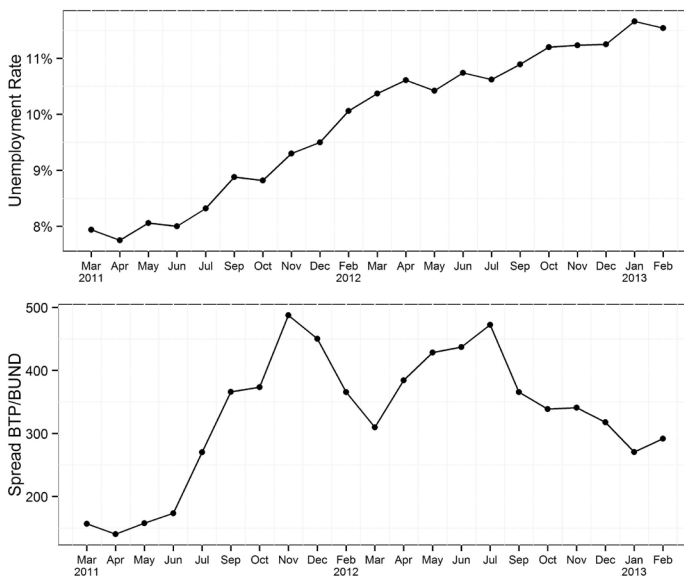


FIGURE 1. *Unemployment rate (%) and spread PTB/Bund 10y overtime.*

Source: Own elaboration of Istat and Thomson-Reuters data.

The two trends reported in Figure 1 show the escalation of the economic and financial crisis in Italy from early 2011 until the elections in late February 2013. The panel at the top shows the unemployment rate among the whole population¹. This is a rather standard indicator of economic performance that is expected to affect the citizens in a more direct manner compared to others, such as e.g. GDP growth. The panel at the bottom shows the spread, i.e. the differential between the yield of the Italian 10-year bonds and the German Bund multiplied by one-hundred². The latter indicator is not tied to the actual economic performance of the country, but it rather depends on the investors' choices. In this sense, it is to be read as an indicator of the degree of confidence that the economic agents have in the capacity of the Italian state to pay back its debt, compared to a highly-reliable state (i.e. Germany) as a reference point. In spite of its virtual nature, the spread BTP/Bund was the indicator on which the media were most-heavily referring to in their narration of the crisis in the second half of 2011³. The most evident information provided by the picture is, on the one hand, the constant growth of unemployment since early 2011 until the election, indicating an increasingly poor performance of the *real* economy, and on the other hand, a rather volatile attitude of the financial markets towards the Italian debt. In spite of the importance of the real economy, the latter indicator became the one responsible for important political choices. On November 12, 2011, the government led by the Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi resigned from office, handing the lead to a *technocratic government* guided by the economist and former EU commissioner Mario Monti. The aim of substituting a government elected by the citizens with a government of technocrats was essentially to reassure investors about the trustworthiness of Italian politics, and to implement some fairly unpopular reforms. However, this was not possible without the support of the parliament. Thus, Monti's cabinet came together with a «call for responsibility» among all the parties in parliament to support the government's action, which was accepted by all parties but two, the right-wing Northern League and the Italy of Values.

This leads to the second peculiarity of the circumstances in which the election of 2013 was held. From November 2011 to the election day in Febru-

¹ Data filtered from seasonal effects, obtained from Istat (see <<http://www.istat.it/it/lavoro>>).

² This is a standard way to report this type of indicator. Data obtained from Thomson Reuters Datastream (see <<https://forms.thomsonreuters.com/datastream/>>).

³ A weak indicator of the growing relevance of the spread for the Italian public opinion since mid-2011 is the tendency reported by Google Trends, which shows no activity before July and a great peak in November. See: <<http://www.google.de/trends/explere?q=pread+bund+ptb#q=spread%20bund%20btp&geo=IT&date=1%2F2011%2027m&cmpt=q>>, last accessed 29/09/2013.

ary 2013, the two main parties in the political system and traditional coalition leaders of the ideological blocks, the Democratic Party (Pd) on the left and the People of Freedom (Pdl) on the right, were *both supporting the government*. While coalition governments are rather common in Italian politics, a coalition between the two main opposing parties was an unprecedented event, especially after the attempts to establish a *bipolar* competition between left and right poles after the end of the First Republic in the early 1990s. This created an anomalous situation where the two parties, arch-enemies for almost twenty years, were standing together supporting the same executive. Moreover, the technocratic government implemented a number of highly unpopular reforms, such as a particularly tough pension cut and the introduction of a brand new property tax. The recognition of the government's uncomfortable role in doing the «dirty work» on the one hand, and the forced responsibility taking due to the exceptional economic crisis on the other, led the two parties to establish a rather ambivalent interaction, which consisted of frequent reciprocal public attacks on one another and of general cooperative behavior in the legislative context. All in all, for about fourteen months, the two principal alternatives on the Italian political landscape were sharing the responsibility and supporting an unpopular government in times of economic crisis. This fact, in spite of more or less explicit attempts to distance themselves from the government, may have been perceived by the electorate, and affected their political behavior.

3. Two mechanisms to explain the crisis of ideology

We propose two mechanisms by which the political context may have reduced the importance of ideology distinctions, and particularly of the single left-right dimension, in the eyes of the voters⁴. The first refers to the effect of the joint support of the government by both the Pd and the Pdl on voters' perceptions of ideological differences. As Fortunato and Stevenson (2013) show, coalition partners are perceived by the general public as more ideologically similar than they actually are. In the same way, the coalition between the Pd and the Pdl may have led citizens to perceive them as ideologically close to each other. As the two parties have traditionally been the coalition leaders of the two ideological blocks, a perceived convergence between them could have led citizens to discount ideological considerations as criteria to discern between the possible alternatives at the time of the election. Such a mechanism is es-

⁴ We use left-right as synonymous of ideology since in Western Europe left-right is usually considered as the most important dimension of the broader concept of ideology (Benoit and Laver 2006; Inglehart and Klingemann 1976).

entially the inverse of the *salience effect* of party polarization on issue and ideological considerations that is well established in political science literature (Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Dalton 2008; Kroh 2009; Lachat 2008, 2011; van der Eijk *et al.* 2005).

A second mechanism relates to the negative economic conditions in which elections were held. Literature on economic voting has long since established the reward-punish hypothesis: voters tend to punish the government when economic conditions are bad (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007; Duch and Stevenson 2008). Given the bipolar competition that characterized Italian politics in the Second Republic, Italian voters in 2013 are generally used to a pattern of alternation between ideologically-homogeneous left and right wing governments. Thus, until the Monti government, both ideological and economic considerations would put one block against the other. This implied that, during economic hard times, whoever was in opposition could use ideological arguments to blame the government for its negative performance, and whoever was in government could use ideological arguments to argue that the opposition would have done worse. However, in 2013 Italian voters were confronted for the first time with a scenario where flaunted ideological differences were in fact contradicted by an actual shared (negative) performance in office. For this reason, the bad economic performance registered in Italy in the months before the election could have given Italian voters a «cold shower», waking them up from the widely-used narrative of the ideological conflict and showing them that, in fact, both ideological sides are equally defenseless in front of the economic crisis.

Both mechanisms lead to the same prediction: a reduced importance of ideology in guiding Italian voters' party evaluations. This is in a way different from what pundits have been claiming since just after the election in February, namely that ideology would no longer be a source of political identity for the Italian public. Rather, what we contend here is that the Italian election of 2013 has been characterized by the fact that for many voters, ideological considerations became more *fallible* in helping them distinguish between the two most important Italian parties. This could have helped parties that have been able to distinguish themselves from the status quo by stating their extraneousness from ideological diatribes, such as the M5s. Moreover, this could have weakened some other well-established linkages between parties and voters, such as those based on left-right considerations. In the following sections of this paper we focus on the latter type of indicator, i.e. the role of ideology in influencing people's party preferences. A general theoretical framework to account for this is presented in the next section.

4. Ideology, economy, and the process of voting decision

When studying the process of voting decision, the concept of «party utility» becomes very useful. The origin of this concept goes back to Downs' (1957) economic account of vote choice, which in turn builds on preference models developed in microeconomics. In this framework, *utility* can be defined as the degree of expected satisfaction that an individual attaches to the different options that he/she can choose from, and this determines the outcome of the choice itself⁵. In literature on voting behavior, sources of utility are usually attributed to policy-related considerations (e.g. Downs 1957; Stokes 1963), evaluations of the past performance of the elites in government (Fiorina 1981), attachments to partisan groups (e.g. Campbell *et al.* 1960) and voters' social-structural characteristics (e.g. Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1944; Lipset and Rokkan 1967). All in all, the vote has been conceptualized in this framework as the outcome of a complex process where different considerations enter into play at different steps, converging towards the final choice. This conceptualization is better known as the «funnel of causality» (Campbell *et al.* 1960), as it views the act of voting as the endpoint of a series of causal determinants, in which some factors are closer both temporally and causally to the decision to vote, while others are more distant.

Long-term determinants of voting behavior include social cleavages and political predispositions. While the former refer to the social structural characteristics of people, the latter are understood as factors that find their main sources in parties and politics such as party identifications and ideological self-categorizations. On the opposite end of the funnel, *short-term* determinants include evaluations of candidates during the electoral campaign, opinions on issues that are salient in the political debate at the moment of the election, and, most important for our study, considerations regarding the economic performance of the government. The state of the economy is likely to affect citizens' opinions in a rather direct manner, as when jobs are lacking or prices are rising people will tend to blame the government. In fact, it is widely agreed that when the economic conditions of a country are not satisfactory, the incumbent government will be punished by the voters (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000, 2007; see Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck 2013 for a discussion of policy versus valence-oriented economic voting). All these considerations are expected to influence party utilities, which are in turn assumed to be deterministically linked to the act of voting (van der Eijk *et al.* 2006). In other words, utility evaluations for specific parties are expected to incorporate a mixture

⁵ For a discussion about the link between utility and choice in voting behavior, see Adams *et al.* (2005), ch. 3.

of both the manifestation of citizens' long-term political predispositions and their short-term evaluations (see also Tillie 1999; van der Brug *et al.* 2007).

In Italy, after the end of the Second World War and during the whole of the First Republic, voting choices were mainly a function of long-term cleavages such as religious attendance and social class. This changed during the Second Republic, as the explanatory contribution of social structure on vote choice declined significantly. As a consequence political predispositions, and in particular left-right self-perceptions, as well as economic considerations, have become a far more important predictor of party preferences than in the past (Sani and Segatti 2002; Bellucci 2012). We hypothesize here that the short-term considerations may have moderated the impact of the long-term predispositions due to the exceptional nature of the economic crisis and of the presence of the technocratic government supported in parliament by the main parties. More specifically, as we detailed in the previous section, we argue that the economic crisis, together with the unusual left-right coalition supporting the technocratic government, have led to a shrinkage in the perceived differences of the party coalition leaders of the two ideological blocks (Pd and Pdl). This, in turn, may have resulted in decreased importance given to ideological self-placement in influencing the utility attributed to these parties.

In the framework of the funnel of causality, the focus of our study can be graphically displayed as follows (see Figure 2). Our central question is whether or not this peculiar economic-political context affected the direction and/or strength of the relationship between left-right self-placement and party utility.

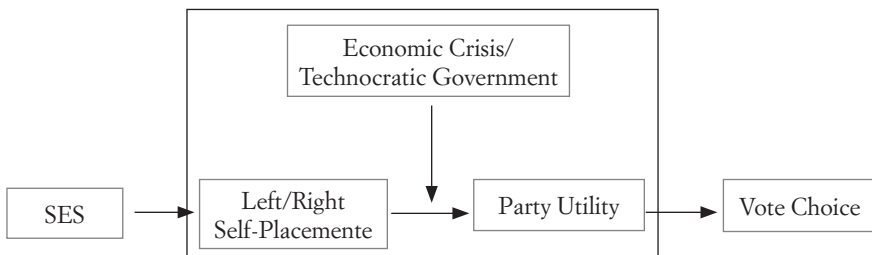


FIGURE 2. *Funnel of Causality and the Moderating Effect of the Macro Context*

Source: Own elaboration.

In short, we expect that, after Silvio Berlusconi resigned from office and a technocratic government supported in parliament by both Pd and Pdl replaced his right-wing government, ideology substantially reduced its impact in explaining the utility of both parties. This is mainly due to the fact that citizens who situated themselves as ideologically closer to either the left or the right needed to deal cognitively with the fact that a) the state of the economy

was poor and b) the main party representing their ideological stance was supporting a technocratic government that was implementing some unpopular reforms in the deep of the economic crisis.

5. Data, Variables, and Methods

We investigate the mechanisms discussed in the previous sections by relying on public opinion data collected from March 2011 to the election month in February 2013, i.e. from four months prior the moment when the «spread crisis» started capturing the attention of the media, and eight months prior the resignation of Silvio Berlusconi as Prime Minister and the subsequent handover of power to Mario Monti⁶. The time scope of our observation allows us to assess the importance of ideological considerations for Italians' party evaluations since before the most dramatic developments in the economic situation, and their political consequences, took place. In other words, our design emphasizes the time variation of some contextual characteristics, i.e. the presence of the technocratic government and the actual fluctuations of macro-economic indicators, and their impact on individual considerations, relying on a demographically-homogeneous sample of Italian citizens. Our individual-level data comes from a repeated cross-sectional survey conducted by Ipsos⁷. Interviews have been conducted following the Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (Cati) method, on a sample drawn via random digit dialing within strata defined by geopolitical area, size of municipality, gender and age. Each month a large number of citizens were contacted and asked the same questions, for a total of 94,224 cases over 21 months (with a sample size spanning from 2,715 respondents in July 2011 to 9,634 in November 2011).

Given our interest in assessing the role of ideology in the evaluations of the two major Italian parties, we focus on the association between left-right self-perceptions and the «propensity to vote» (Ptv) scores that respondents have for the People of Freedom (Pdl) and the Democratic Party (Pd). The Ptv scores are an effective way to measure nuances in party preferences without binding the respondents' assessment to an ipsative (or «forced choice») measure such as the vote choice (van der Eijk *et al.* 2006). While random utility models are often tested on discrete choice data by relying on techniques such as conditional or multinomial logistic models, scholars of political behavior have proposed over time several measures to directly observe party preferences.

⁶ From the monthly time series three months are missing, i.e. August 2011, January 2012 and August 2012.

⁷ Ipsos is a social research institute that collects citizens' public opinion. Data have been bought by the University of Milan thanks to a grant of the Fondazione Cariplo.

Among these, the most common are the «feeling thermometers» widely used by the American National Election Studies (Anes), the «like-dislike» scales used in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (Cses) project, and the «Ptv» scores used, among others, by the European Election Studies (Ees). Although these variables might seem to measure the same construct, it has been shown that Ptv scores are better related to the actual vote choice (van der Eijk and Marsh 2007). Thus, given our interest in observing voting utilities, these variables can be regarded as a more direct measure of party evaluations than party choice (see also Tillie 1995). In our data Ptv's are measured in a fairly standard way, i.e. by asking the respondents to indicate how likely they will ever vote in the future for each of the two parties. The variables are measured on a scale going from 1 (low) to 10 (high) that has been rescaled from 0 (low) to 1 (high) for our analyses.

The covariate of interest for our study is people's *ideological self-positioning*. Given the centrality of the labels «left» and «right» in the political discourse during the Second Republic, we expect respondents' self-placement among these categories to be strongly associated with the Ptv's for both the Pdl and the Pd. We observe this construct by asking respondents to place themselves on a Likert-type scale going from 1 (left) to 7 (right), with an extra option for those who refuse to place themselves. For our models we center the 7-point scale on the value 4, so that 0 becomes the center, positive values reflect right-wing positions and negative values left-wing positions. Given the direction of the scale from left to right, we expect a positive association of the variable with the Ptv of the Pdl, and a negative association with the Ptv of the Pd. Respondents refusing to place themselves have been included in the 0 category. This choice has a substantive and a practical motivation. Substantively, studies indicate that people who do not place themselves on the ideology scale and those who position themselves in the middle share similar characteristics (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976, 247; Vassallo 2006). Practically, as we will see later, including the «non-positioned» allows us to keep in the sample about 20% of respondents each month, who would have otherwise been excluded from the analyses. However, to control for potential heterogeneity we include in the model a dummy variable to identify those cases (1 = refuses to position him/herself; 0 = everybody else)⁸.

According to our theoretical expectations, the correlation between left-right self-placement and the PTVs of the two parties is moderated by two potential modifiers, i.e. Monti's government and the state of the economy. More bluntly, we expect that both the presence of a technocratic government and the worsening of the economic conditions to *reduce* the magnitude

⁸ All the models have been run also excluding those cases from the analysis (i.e. coding them as missing), leading to no substantial change in the results.

of the association between ideology and party preferences⁹. Thus, we code the first variable as a dummy indicating when the *technocratic cabinet* was in place (code 1 = from November 2011 to February 2013) as opposed to when the Pdl-led government was still ruling (code 0 = from March 2011 until October 2011). To observe the variation of economic conditions, we choose to focus on the monthly average *unemployment rate*. This measure has some advantages compared to other economic indicators. First, it offers a picture of the economic situation of the country which is as clean as possible from the effects of short-term political changes. This property does not apply to other indicators that are tied to the trust of the financial markets and therefore strongly endogenous to political events, such as the «spread» between the Italian 10-years benchmark bonds (BTP) and the German Bund¹⁰. Second, a growing unemployment rate is a symptom of the recession that should affect citizens more directly than general measures of wealth, such as the GDP per capita. Finally, by using «objective» economic indicators instead of socio-tropic or ego-tropic evaluations of the economy, we overcome endogeneity problems and ensure better comparability across time.

Control variables included in all models are *age*, measured in years and centered on the sample mean; *gender*, a dummy variable coded 0 for males and 1 for females; five standard *geo-political areas*, which historically vary on their political preferences, as a categorical variable: *North-West* (the reference category, including the regions of Piedmont, Aosta Valley, Lombardy, and Liguria), *North-East* (the so called «white area», including Trentino-Alto Adige/South Tyrol, Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia), *Center-North* (the so called «red belt area», including Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria and the Marches), *Center-South* (Lazio, Abruzzo, Molise and Sardinia), and the *South* (Campania, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, Sicily). *Education* is an ordinal variable with five ascending categories: no education titles, primary school diploma, middle school diploma, 2-3 years professional diploma, 5-years high school diploma, university degree. Finally, frequency of *attendance to religious service* is used as an ordinal variable in four ascending categories: never/almost never,

⁹ Ideally, we would also model the interaction between the two, as the effect of the economy should change depending on the incumbency status of a party, which would vary only for the Pdl with the start of the technocratic government. Unfortunately the number of time points that we have before November 2011 is too small to grant us enough level-2 degrees of freedom to model properly the effect of economy before and after such a threshold. A plausible effect that we would expect to find, but we cannot measure here, is a greater tendency to punish the Pdl before Monti's government, and therefore a strong negative main effect of unemployment on the Ptv for the Pdl.

¹⁰ Previous versions of the paper reported additional analyses relying on alternative specifications using the spread as level-2 variable. These analyses led to very similar results to those reported here.

a few times per year, 1-2 times per month, weekly. Both education and church attendance have been centered on their median.

Given the hierarchical structure of our data, the analyses are conducted using a multilevel linear regression technique, with individual respondents nested within months. Next to the «standard» regression coefficients, that are interpreted in the multilevel setting as «fixed effects» (i.e. their magnitude is constant among all time points), this method allows us to estimate a difference intercept for each month, and, possibly, set the magnitude of some individual-level predictors free to vary across months. Both these parameters, i.e. the varying intercepts and the varying slopes, are called «random effects», as they are estimated so that they take a different value for each month. In our case, besides the *random intercept*, we specify the model with a random slope for *left-right self-placement*. Thus, our model will estimate a different intercept (i.e. the average Ptv for the two parties when all predictors are at zero) and a different value of the coefficient of left-right position on the two Ptv for each month. This first step will allow us to describe how the correlation between ideology and party preferences changes over the time span covered by our data. Then, in a second step, this correlation will be interacted with our two contextual variables, namely the technocratic government's dummy and the unemployment rate. This will tell us how much the association between left-right self-positioning and the preferences for Pd and Pdl varies (1) before and after the beginning of Monti's government, and (2) across levels of unemployment. Thus, to sum up, the estimated models will be three for each party's Ptv: one with all the individual-level and context-level predictors, with the random coefficient for left-right self-placement (the «base model») and other two for the two relevant interactions, i.e. one between left-right position and our technocratic government dummy and another between left-right position and the unemployment rate¹¹. Results are discussed in the next section.

6. Results

The first piece of evidence that can inform our discussion regarding the allegedly declining importance of ideology for Italian voters comes from observing people's will to place themselves on the left-right. In fact, the claim that ide-

¹¹ We choose to estimate two separate models for the two interactions to avoid to incur into excessive collinearity between the two interacted variables. In fact, when the two interactions are computed their correlation is rather high (Pearson's $r = 0.895$). Thus, the inclusion of both may lead to unreliable estimates for one of the two interactions. Models are estimated via Restricted Maximum Likelihood (REML) using the package «*lme4*» of the software R.

ology has lost importance can imply different things, including that citizens consider the ideological labels less appropriate for defining their own political identities. Thus, to find an increasing tendency over time among respondents to refuse to position themselves on the left-right would constitute a symptom that the importance of ideological self-identities has diminished during the observed period of time.

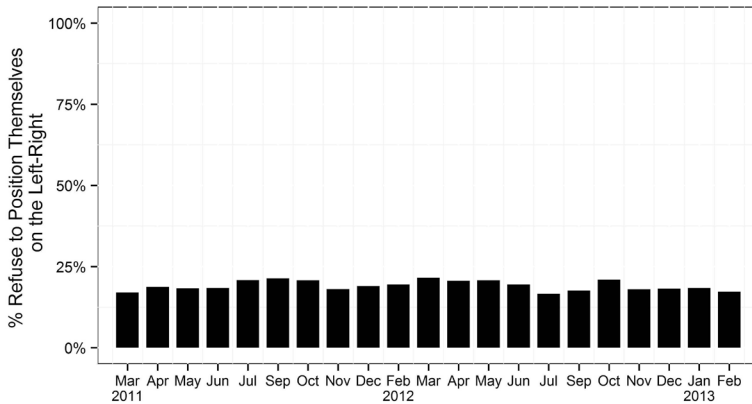


FIGURE 3. *Percentage of respondent who refuse to position themselves on the left-right scale each month.*

Source: Own elaboration of IPSOS.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of refusals in every month of our study. In spite of some fluctuations, mainly due to the differences between samples, the trend is stationary over time. In other words, our data show that from March 2011 to February 2013 there have been no systematic changes in the tendency of Italian voters to ideologically define themselves as left or right. This finding, consistent with what observed also by other studies (see Itanes 2013, Segatti 2013) suggests a first important implication: if ideology has become less important at all, the phenomenon relates to how citizens use it to evaluate parties, not to how they define themselves. Thus, the change must have occurred in the *link* between ideology and party preferences, not in the centrality of the former as a representation of the political space.

To observe whether this is the case, Table 1 shows the result of the three models discussed in the previous section, estimated for both Pd and Pdl. The table reports all the «fixed effects» (i.e. the coefficients associated to the independent variables) and the variance of the «random effects» (i.e. the different intercepts and slopes of left-right position estimated for each month). As a general rule, the models referred to with the letter «a» predict the Ptv for the Pd, and those with the letter «b» predict the Ptv for the Pdl. The estimation and model specification are identical for both parties.

TABLE 1. *Models for propensity to vote for PD & PDL (Standard errors in parentheses).*

	Dependent variable:					
	PTV PD			PTV PDL		
	(1a)	(2a)	(3a)	(1b)	(2b)	(3b)
Age	0.001*** (0.0001)	0.001*** (0.0001)	0.001*** (0.0001)	0.0003*** (0.0001)	0.0003*** (0.0001)	0.0003*** (0.0001)
Gender (Female)	0.015*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.003)	0.006** (0.002)	0.006** (0.002)	0.006** (0.002)
Education	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.013*** (0.001)	-0.013*** (0.001)	-0.013*** (0.001)
Church Attendance	0.006*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.001)	0.016*** (0.001)	0.016*** (0.001)	0.016*** (0.001)
North-East	0.002 (0.005)	0.002 (0.005)	0.002 (0.005)	-0.017*** (0.004)	-0.017*** (0.004)	-0.017*** (0.004)
Center-North	0.015*** (0.004)	0.015*** (0.004)	0.015*** (0.004)	-0.010** (0.004)	-0.010** (0.004)	-0.010** (0.004)
Center-South	0.001 (0.004)	0.001 (0.004)	0.001 (0.004)	0.012*** (0.003)	0.012*** (0.003)	0.012*** (0.003)
South	0.010** (0.004)	0.010** (0.004)	0.010** (0.004)	0.015*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.003)
Left-Right Position	-0.112*** (0.003)	-0.118*** (0.004)	-0.139*** (0.019)	0.123*** (0.004)	0.140*** (0.005)	0.226*** (0.021)
Not Positioned on L-R	-0.173*** (0.004)	-0.173*** (0.004)	-0.173*** (0.004)	-0.129*** (0.003)	-0.129*** (0.003)	-0.129*** (0.003)
Monti Government	-0.026 (0.016)	-0.036* (0.017)	-0.026 (0.016)	0.004 (0.011)	-0.016 (0.012)	0.005 (0.011)
Unemployment Rate	0.010 (0.006)	0.009 (0.006)	0.006 (0.006)	-0.015*** (0.004)	-0.015*** (0.004)	-0.024*** (0.004)
L-R Position *Monti Government		0.009 (0.005)			-0.026*** (0.007)	
L-R Position *Unemployment Rate			0.003 (0.002)			-0.010*** (0.002)
Intercept	0.316*** (0.047)	0.325*** (0.048)	0.350*** (0.053)	0.427*** (0.032)	0.443*** (0.032)	0.513*** (0.036)
Var Intercept	0.0004	0.0004	0.0004	0.0003	0.0002	0.0002
Var L-R Position	0.0001	0.0001	0.0001	0.0003	0.0002	0.0001
Var Residual	0.0811	0.0811	0.0811	0.0653	0.0653	0.0653
Observations	48930	48930	48930	48998	48998	48998
Groups (Months)	21	21	21	21	21	21
Log Likelihood	-8057	-8060	-8062	-2787	-2786	-2784
Akaike Inf. Crit.	16149	16156	16159	5609	5607	5605
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	16298	16315	16318	5758	5766	5763

Note: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

Source: Own elaboration of IPSOS – Istat data.

Models 1a and 1b include all the predictors except the interactions. As expected, given the direction of the variable, the coefficient of left-right self-placement is negative for the Pd and positive for the Pdl. More in detail, moving one step on the right is reflected in a reduction of about 0.112 points (on the 0-1 scale) in propensity to vote for the Pd, and an increase of 0.123 points in the propensity to vote for the Pdl. These values refer to the *average* association between left-right self-placement and the Ptv across the time periods. However, given the random slope specification, it is possible to observe how the association between left-right and the Ptv varies along our time period. This is done in Figure 4.

The points in the picture represent the coefficients of left-right position for each month in our time period. The 95% confidence intervals are computed based on the standard errors associated for each random effect, as returned by the model. The horizontal black lines correspond to the average coefficients, or «fixed effects», i.e. the same values reported in Table 1. The y-axes of the two plots are set to the same magnitude, so that the two panels are immediately comparable. This shows that, in the time period considered, the association between ideology and Ptv varies much more for the Pdl (with a range of about 0.06 points) than for the Pd (with a range of about 0.035 points). Substantively, this may indicate that the role of ideology is more stable for the evaluation of the Pd than of the Pdl.

The vertical dotted lines represent some relevant events happened during the time period that may have had an impact on the association between ideology and party preferences. November 2011 (1) is when PM Berlusconi resigned and Monti government supported by a Pd-Pdl coalition started. As the picture clearly shows, from that point in time the association between ideology and Ptv becomes significantly weaker for both the Pdl and the Pd. However, from mid-September 2012 (2), it starts becoming increasingly stronger for both parties, with a significant leap between September and October for the Pd. This is the effective start of the campaign for the primary elections of the left-wing coalition, when the most of the competitors presented their candidacy. The primaries seem to have in part «closed the ranks» of left-wing voters, increasing the connection between their ideological self-identification and their evaluation of the Pd. Since the fall of 2012 the magnitude of the coefficients grows in a fairly constant fashion until the elections in February 2013 (5). Two other relevant events happened in November and December 2012, although they do not seem to exert particular shocks on the trend. These are the regional elections in Sicily (3), with the first breakout success of the M5s, and the anticipated withdraw of the Pdl support from Monti government (4). While the latter event essentially marked the beginning of the electoral campaign, the increase in importance of ideology on the vote for both parties seems to start rather with the primaries of the Pd.

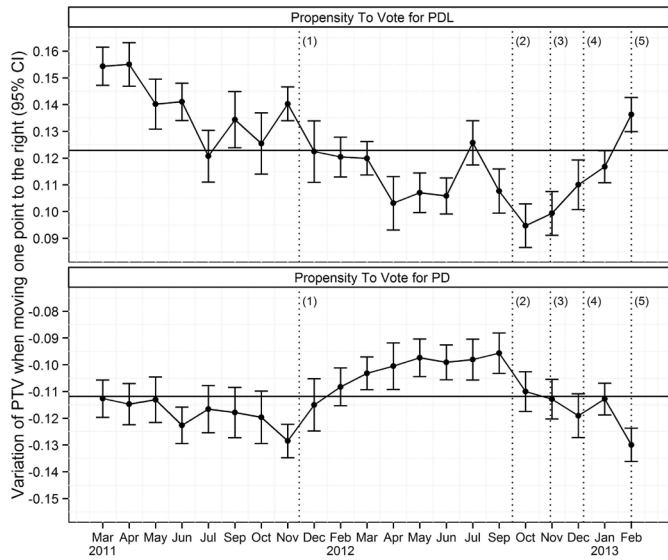


FIGURE 4. *Random Effects of Ideology on Ptv's over Time.*

Source: Own elaboration of IPSOS and Istat data.

Models 2a and 2b in Table 1 show the moderating impact of the left-right support for the Monti government on the association between ideology and party evaluations. For both parties, the sign of the interaction (positive for Pd and negative for Pdl) is opposite to the sign of the main effect of ideology (negative for Pd and positive for Pdl), indicating a reduced association during the grand coalition's endorsement of the technocratic government. This confirms in part what shown in Figure 4. On the other hand, the effect is significant and substantial only for the Pdl, while almost non existent for the Pd. The marginal effects of ideology for the two values of the dummy are plotted in Figure 5.

As the figure shows, the bipartisan support for Monti government exerts a small but significant moderation on the association between ideology and the propensity to vote for the Pdl. On average, the coefficient is reduced by almost 0.03 points (on the 0-1 scale) during the technocratic government in respect to the months before. The figure also shows that there is no real impact concerning the Pd. All in all, our first expectation is only in part corroborated by the data: being a coalition partner with the major exponent of the rival ideological block in supporting the technocratic government reduced the magnitude of ideological considerations for the evaluation of the Pdl, but not for the evaluation of the Pd.

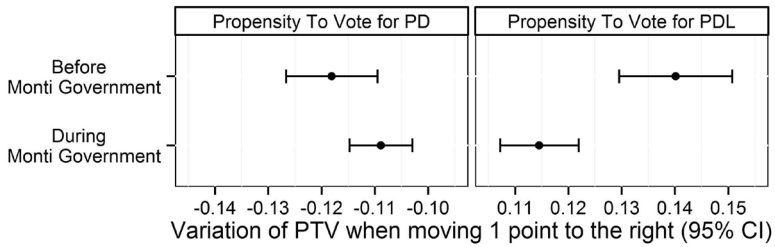


FIGURE 5. *Marginal Effects of Ideology (left-right) in interaction with Technocratic Government on Ptv.*

Source: Own elaboration of IPSOS and Istat data.

The coefficients in models 3a and 3b tell a similar story. Concerning the Pdl, the interaction effect is negative and significant. Thus, the worse the economic conditions, as reflected by a higher unemployment rate, the weaker the association between ideology and the Ptv of the center-right party. Conversely, the interaction effect is essentially null for the Pd, indicating that the influence of ideological considerations among Italian voters as they evaluated the Pd were not influenced by its support of Monti's cabinet in the months before the 2013 election. The two marginal effects are plotted in Figure 6. The plots represent how moving one step to the right is associated to a variation of the Ptv for the two parties, as unemployment rate goes from the minimum (about 7.75%) to the maximum (about 11.66%) of the time period observed. As the figure shows, as the unemployment rate increases of about four percentage points, the association between ideology and the propensity to vote for the Pdl drops of about 0.04 points (on the 0-1 scale). Once more, the effect is absent for the Pd, for which the plot shows essentially a straight line. Thus, if the importance of ideological considerations in guiding Italians' vote in 2013 has been reduced at all, this happened only for their evaluations of the Pdl.

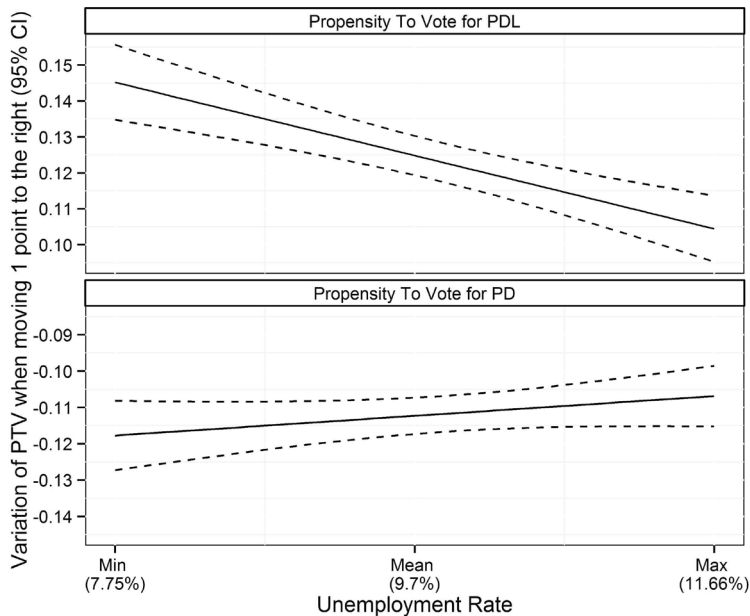


FIGURE 6. *Marginal Effects of Ideology (left-right) in interaction with Unemployment Rate on Ptv.*

Source: Own elaboration of IPSOS and Istat data.

7. Conclusions

The premise of this study was that the Italian parliamentary elections of February 2013 have been held in a context in which there was a dramatic lack of orientation for public opinion. The failure of the major parties to provide citizens with guidance for their voting decisions resulted in the unexpected success of a new political subject, the Five Star Movement, which seems to have led to the end of the Pdl-Pd bipolarism of Italian politics. This was interpreted by pundits and media as a sign of the fact that ideological considerations are no longer important *at all* for the voters. In this study we propose and test two mechanisms by which ideological considerations could have lost their guiding role among Italian voters' political considerations. We start by discussing two factors of the macro context that have particularly characterized these elections. One is the economic recession that has been affecting Italy since the start of the global crisis in 2008-2009. Another is the political crisis, largely determined by the economic one, which led to a technocratic government supported in parliament by all the most important parties, including the

main right-wing and left-wing coalition leaders, i.e. the Pdl and the Pd. We hypothesize two mechanisms by which the macro context could have had a negative influence on the ability of ideology to predict the vote choice. The first draws on the impact of coalition participation on citizens' perception of *ideological similarity* between parties (Fortunato and Stevenson 2013), and argues that an increased perceived similarity may have convinced voters that left-right considerations are no longer relevant for discerning among parties. The second builds on the reward-punishment hypothesis, which expects that voters tend to punish incumbents when economic conditions are bad (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007). Given the deep economic crisis that has characterized the recent Italian context, and the fact that both the Pdl and the Pd were supporting the technocratic government in parliament, we argue that this decision, and the way it was enacted by the two major parties over the period, may have reduced the perceived scope of ideological differences.

We investigated such hypotheses using a repeated cross-sectional study monitoring public opinion since March 2011 to February 2013. By employing multilevel regression analysis, with individuals nested within months, tested the moderating effect that the presence of the technocratic government and the looming economic crisis had on the relationship between left-right self-placement and the propensity to vote (Ptv) for the coalitions leaders of the two rival ideological blocks: Pd and Pdl. Our results only partially support our expectations. First, we find that (1) the proportion of people that refuse to place themselves on the left-right scale has remained constant over the time period considered and (2) ideology is still a strong predictor of the propensity to vote for the Pd and the Pdl. Second, we find mixed results for the moderating effects of the macro context. Our data show that the joint support for the technocratic government significantly reduced the association between ideology and the Ptv of the right-wing Pdl, but not of the left-wing Pd. The same result emerges when the moderating impact of the worsening of the economic crisis, measured by observing the unemployment rate, is considered. While higher unemployment means a weaker correlation between left-right self-placement and the propensity to vote for the Pdl, no such effect is observed for the Pd.

The fact that our expectations hold for the evaluations of Pdl but not for the Pd is rather counterintuitive if this result is seen through the glasses of two general theories such as the perceived ideological similarity of coalition partners (Fortunato and Stevenson 2013) and the economic voting (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007). However, when a more detailed perspective on the Italian political landscape is taken, our results are not necessarily incompatible with the theoretical expectations discussed earlier in the article. In this respect we suggest two possible explanations. The first relates to the use of the left-right rhetoric in the current Italian political debate. As mentioned in

the first section, the emphasis on the ideological («left» and «right») labels is a rather central component of the political rhetorics of the former prime minister and guide of the Pdl Silvio Berlusconi since his entrance in politics in 1994 (Diamanti 2009). In fact, the political «right» identity (usually associated with the prefix «center-» to convey moderation) became popular in Italy only after his appearance in the Second Republic with the party «*Forza Italia*», which later merged into the Pdl. On the contrary, the «left» identity may be much more stable, as it was widely employed since long before the appearance of the Pd, whose roots can be broadly traced back to the major left-wing party in the First Republic (the Pci, i.e. the Italian Communist Party). The relatively younger age of the «right-wing» self-identity may have led to a greater *volatility* of its relevance in the recognition and the evaluation of the Pdl (as suggested by the larger variance of the random slopes, if compared to the Pd, as observed in Figure 4) and in general to a greater sensitivity to other short-term factors such as economic evaluations. Given the scope of our data, this explanation should be regarded here as a simple speculation. However, a potentially fruitful field where future research could focus regards the nature of the ideological identities in the Italian electorate, i.e. their social and psychological bases, as well as the role played by the political actors in shaping them over time.

A second explanation relates to the blame for the crisis attributed by citizens on the left and the right of the political spectrum. More specifically we argue that, when the political situation prior the technocratic government is taken into account, our results are fairly congruent with the economic voting theory. On the left side, the bipartisan coalition supporting the technocratic government might have been rationalized as the «bitter medicine» to take for the «good of the country», as a consequence of the economic damage caused by the opponent's government. In this sense, even during the rule of the technocratic government, the blame for the negative economic performance was directed mainly towards the previous right-wing government led by the Pdl, as the main effect of unemployment observed in Table 1 suggests. This could be somewhat corroborated by the fact that this interpretation was, more or less, implicitly recognized by other European countries and also, at least at the beginning of Monti's government, by the main referent newspaper for the center-left *La Repubblica*. Conversely, on the right side, the economic crisis and the subsequent technocratic government may have had a much larger impact. In this sense, the widely agreed-upon blame of the former government for a poor management of the economic crisis may have translated into a major disappointment of right-wing voters, or at least of part of them, who recognized and accepted the negative performance of «their own» government as the main reason for the current state of affairs. This may have led them to defect not much from the Pdl itself (i.e. from admitting a propensity to vote

for it) but rather from the narrative, largely promoted by its leader, positing that ideological identities intrinsically carry the recipe for a good governance. In other words, the strength of the argument according to which the importance of ideological considerations for party preferences was moderated by the technocratic government and by the economic crisis is to be assessed considering the rather short life of Monti's government itself (to explain the relatively small magnitude of the effects observed in our data) and the fact that voters probably kept memory of who was the incumbent until November 2011 (to explain the presence of significant effects for the Pdl only)¹².

These are only speculations that need to be tested in further studies, where other factors will need to be taken into account. The current study represents just a first step in the direction of a better understanding of the role that ideological orientations played in the parliamentary elections of February 2013. Yet, the picture to be drawn is much more complex than what discussed here. First, other events may have impacted on citizens' evaluations of the Pdl and the Pd, such as for instance the costs reimbursement scandal in the Lazio Region that involved the Pdl coordinator Franco Fiorito, or the great losses of one of the major Italian banks, Monte dei Paschi di Siena, and fraud investigations addressed to the Pd. Second, in addition to studying the evaluations of the two main coalition leaders, a more accurate explanation should take into account the active role played by other political parties, most notably the M5s. Indeed, the relevant question to be investigated by further research are the reasons of the 25% of the voters who chose a new party that deliberately placed itself outside of the traditional left-right scale, while the effect of left-right ideology remained stable and significant for the two coalition-leader parties. Was this result due to an occasional deviation from the «normal» vote that affected only these elections? Or are the electoral results indicating that there has been a *dealignment* among the electorate (i.e. a process whereby a large portion of the electorate abandons its previous affiliation, without developing a new one to replace it, see Dalton *et al.* 1984)? Most likely, the current Italian scenario is in between these two extremes. In this respect, what we can think at this stage to be a crucial element that needs to be accounted for in future studies is the impact of *anti-politics* orientations on the vote choice, a feeling that has been successfully utilized in the electoral campaign by the leader of the M5s, Beppe Grillo. All in all, the puzzle raised by this study and the indications for future studies point out that still much needs to be done in order to understand what role these elections had in the cycle of the Second Republic. What we show here is that left-right considerations are still a relevant factor among citizens' vote choice, a factor that new

¹² We are grateful to two of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this reading.

actors will need to confront themselves with if they want to consolidate their role in the ever-changing Italian political scenery.

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