

Generational gap and post-ideological politics in Italy (POSTGEN): A generation-aware analysis of ideological destructuring and political change in the Italian case

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Abstract

Recent political upheavals, such as Brexit, Trump's election, the rise of challenger parties in Europe, and Italy's first "populist" government in 2018, challenge traditional theories of voting behaviour and party competition. Conventional explanations often point to populism and voter irrationality. However, recent research highlights that challenger parties leverage issue opportunities that transcend traditional ideological boundaries, suggesting a de-ideologized context where voters are drawn to post-ideological platforms. Despite these insights, a possible de-ideologization process remains insufficiently understood. The POSTGEN project seeks to fill this gap by analysing de-ideologization mechanisms and dynamics, particularly in Italy—a key case of contemporary political transformation. It adopts a generation-focused approach, emphasizing the role of younger generations in the evolving political landscape. The project examines how political attitudes develop and impact individuals, generations, and society over time. It investigates whether political issues integrate into coherent ideological structures or remain fragmented, and how non-political influencers affect these dynamics amid the crisis of traditional epistemic authorities. The project employs a mixed-method, multi-method, longitudinal strategy that features multiple components: from mass surveys, to social media content (also analysed through automated methods), to dedicated surveys aimed at secondary-school students, to qualitative in-depth interviews to young adults. By integrating these methods within a robust theoretical framework, POSTGEN aims to provide insights into the evolution of the Italian political systems, also to help understand broader changes in democratic representation in Western political systems.

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1. Introduction

Looking from the perspective of research on electoral democracy (the broad field covering elections, public opinion and political parties), the 2010-2020 decade has seen in the Western world a number of political facts that challenge existing theories and tools for analysing voting behaviour and party competition. Examples of such disruptive political changes include a marked increase in electoral volatility (accompanied by a substantial decrease in turnout), the rise of challenger parties across Europe after the economic crisis, the Brexit referendum, and the election of Donald Trump in 2016. As regards the Italian case, it is obvious to think at least about the emergence of the challenger, anti-establishment Five-star Movement as Italy's largest party in 2013, leading to an ongoing crisis of the two-bloc party system mechanics that had characterized the Second Republic, culminating in the formation of the first "populist" government in Italy in 2018.

These empirical challenges immediately appeared hard to analyse using long-standing theories and tools such as cleavage theory or the classic left-right schema; hence the proliferation of analyses that relied on more original tools mostly based on new definitions of the concept of populism (Mudde 2004; see also Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2018).

Aiming at more general explanations related to a classic supply-demand interaction centred on policy content (thus still with strong relationship to more traditional approaches), a different strand of comparative research conducted within the Issue Competition Comparative Project – ICCP (De Sio and Lachat 2020a) has instead suggested an ongoing relevance of classic mechanisms, yet possibly under new guises. According to these accounts, new challenger parties have succeeded by rediscovering conflict mobilization on key policy issues, yet under a new, pragmatic approach able to leverage multiple issue opportunities with issue packages that transcend traditional ideological boundaries. This has led to an increasing diffusion of parties materializing a post-ideological party supply, combining classical left-wing positions on some (usually economic) issues with right-wing stances on other (mostly “cultural”) issues (De Sio and Lachat 2020b). That strand of research has offered a possibly convincing account of the success of such parties, without requiring a specific exceptionalist approach.

However, such research efforts have also suggested directions of inquiry that they could not fully explore. Among these, there is an implicit precondition: the emergence of a de-ideologized, possibly post-ideological context, where voters, less reliant on traditional ideological alignments, are able to embrace innovative, post-ideological platforms. What are the characteristics of this post-ideological context? What is (if there is one) this new, post-ideological structure of public opinion in Western publics, the one that has proved receptive to post-ideological party supply? And (perhaps most importantly) what is the process that leads to the emergence of such post-ideological structure of attitudes? Does this process unfold differently across different generations? What are the relevant public sphere actors that foster these developments, and through what content?

As appears obvious, such questions inevitably required a dedicated processual focus, and a multi-actor (and possibly multi-method) approach that was never part of the original aims of the ICCP project. Hence the idea of developing a project dedicated to

these research questions, which was submitted in January 2021 to the 2020 call of the Italian PRIN (Projects of Relevant National Interest) funding scheme, titled “Generational gap and post-ideological politics in Italy (POSTGEN). A generation-aware analysis of ideological destructuring and political change in the Italian case”. Following positive evaluation, the proposed three-year project was funded and started its activity in June 2022, involving four project units (Luiss Rome, Università Statale di Milano, Università di Bologna, Università di Pavia) with Lorenzo De Sio (Luiss Rome) as principal investigator.

In a nutshell, the POSTGEN project aims to address the aforementioned gaps by providing an in-depth analysis of de-ideologization characteristics, mechanisms and dynamics through the lens of the Italian case, i.e. in a country at the forefront of disruptive political change. The project adopts a generation-centric perspective, especially emphasizing younger generations, and focuses on the dynamics of political attitude formation. As a result, a specific focus is on time and its impact on the development of political attitudes at individual, generational, and collective levels. The project also explores the meanings associated with various political issues, scrutinizing whether these issues coalesce into coherent ideological structures or remain fragmented. Furthermore, it investigates the increasing influence of non-political actors and influencers, particularly in an era marked by a crisis of traditional epistemic authorities.

As a result, POSTGEN seeks to understand whether different generations exhibit variations in the ideological structuring of their political attitudes and how this is exploited by party strategies, leading to political change. To answer these questions, the project employs a mixed-method, multi-method, longitudinal strategy. It first analyzes the communication landscape, focusing on how political issues are discussed by mass media and social media influencers through a combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses and algorithm-based methods. It then captures citizens’ political attitudes and their structural dynamics (along with possible reception of mass and social media messages) using representative surveys, in-depth qualitative interviews, and innovative in-school events and surveys tailored to secondary school students.

This short article aims at providing a first, still partly prospective (the project is still at the beginning of its data analysis stage) overview of the project in terms of its scope, research question, general theoretical foundations, data collection and methodology, in order to present the possible developments of the project and how it can contribute with new knowledge (and possibly new methodological approaches) to a deeper understanding of the future development of the Italian political system, and possibly offering valuable perspectives on the future of democratic representation in the Western world. The remainder of this article is structured in four sections, which respectively cover theoretical framework, objectives, methodology and expected results.

2. State of the art

Ideological alignments were key to understand voting behaviour and party competition in the 20th century. Party systems emerged in Western Europe after consolidation of political conflict along various social cleavages (Lipset & Rokkan 1967). Amongst others, the class divide was most prominent, leading to a competition model with two main rival

parties (or blocs) in a unidimensional space, usually identified with a left-right continuum (Fuchs & Klingemann 1990; Knutsen 1995). Still, due to the high complexity of the original cleavage structure of Western democracies, citizen attitudes kept a more complex structure, which could at most be simplified in a two-dimensional space defined by separate economic and cultural dimensions (Middendorp 1978; Fleishman 1988). In fact, this socially constructed, unidimensional left-right simplification of the political space (Laponce 1981; Fuchs & Klingemann 1990; Knutsen 1995) was effectively situated in the above two-dimensional space in terms of a diagonal-shaped, “progressive-conservative” antithesis (Middendorp 1978) defined by a “progressive”, “left” pole combining aspirations to economic equality and cultural pluralism vs. a “conservative”, “right” pole emphasizing economic freedom and cultural uniformity. The dynamic nature of this construct allowed change through time, with slight changes in meaning from the absorption of new conflicts (Fuchs & Klingemann 1990), as mainstream parties survived the decline of cleavage politics recasting their original class-based appeal to issue-based platforms (Franklin et al. 1992). Still, the progressive-conservative opposition retained its fundamental diagonal orientation in a two-dimensional, economic-cultural space (Hooghe, Marks & Wilson 2002). This opposition is the most parsimonious ideal type of ideological alignments in Western politics in the second half of the 20th century (Budge 2015). It clearly presents ideological characteristics: a system of beliefs (Converse 1964) about man and society; a focus on few fundamental values; a doctrine adhered to by specific groups.

2.1. Challenges to classic ideological schemes

While a first challenge to traditional ideology coming from post-materialist issues (Inglehart 1977) was largely absorbed within the left-right conflict (Fuchs & Klingemann 1990), the crisis of this scheme was prepared by a first push towards de-ideologization, ironically started by mainstream parties at the end of the 20th century. Starting with Mitterrand’s “U-turn” in the early 1980s (Northcutt 1988), mainstream parties internalized the constraints towards moderate (and later neoliberal) economic policy derived from increasing international interdependence and adopted catch-all strategies, de-emphasizing ideological alignments and focusing on governing ability and technocratic competence (Manin 1997; De Sio & Lachat 2020b). This move favoured de-ideologization further: cross-ideological voter availability emerged in terms of an increased relevance of issue voting since the 90's (Thomassen 2005), with new “challenger” actors politicizing specific issues among less ideologically constrained publics, but this time with an emphasis on *conflict*. Still, these changes were still confined to small parties and specific issues (Aardal & van Wijnen 2005) and framed in terms of issue-specific theories such as *issue ownership* and *entrepreneurship* (Petrocik 1996; De Vries & Hobolt 2012).

The scale of these changes however skyrocketed with the explosion of new challenger parties in the 2010s, throughout the financial and migration crises. Attempts emerged to revive and adapt cleavage-based schemes (Kriesi et al. 2006), but we argue that such schemes (still partly relying on the ideological lenses of the 20th century) were in fact not fully able to parsimoniously understand these new (often single- or few-issue) actors; hence, in our view, there emerged a proliferation of explanations that relied on

(possibly overstretched versions of) the concept of “populism” (Mény & Surel 2002, Mudde 2004, Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2018).

Yet, a novel perspective on these changes was promoted by the Issue Competition Comparative Project – ICCP (De Sio & Lachat 2020a). Based on the innovative *issue yield* framework (De Sio & Weber 2014; De Sio *et al.* 2016, 2017), through issue-items-rich surveys and campaign Twitter monitoring in 6 countries (including Italy) in 2017/2018, ICCP revealed a transition towards broader *issue competition*, where cross-ideological voter availability offers opportunities for new, cross-ideological party issue strategies (De Sio & Lachat 2020b); often exploited by challenger parties in terms of *post-ideological conflict mobilization* (De Sio & Weber 2020; see also Schadee, Segatti & Vezzoni 2019). While providing an understanding of contemporary party competition that is more parsimonious and broader than populism-based explanations, these accounts also clearly document *de-ideologization* among citizens, and point to its importance in producing disruptive political change.

2.2. A novel media environment

These changes also took place in a changed media environment. From the 80’s onwards, the proliferation of cable, satellite, and Internet technologies dramatically impacted the media landscape, allowing the public to engage in highly personalized information and entertainment diets based on individual preferences. Today, traditional media compete directly with a plethora of digitally native information sources and – notably – social media platforms, in what has been called a high-choice media environment (Van Aelst *et al.* 2017).

In a debate focused on polarization of media content and use, authors have suggested how increased media choice might lead to growth of opinion echo chambers and polarization (Sunstein 2007). While the extent of the effects on mass polarization are still debated (Persily & Tucker 2020), an overlooked aspect regards impact on the political agenda. Recent studies (Edy & Meirick 2018) show an increased fragmentation of the public agenda when citizens are exposed to customized media diets - in terms of ideological slant, content, and issue specificity.

This leads to likely implications in terms of issue fragmentation, with citizens less exposed to broad ideological visions, and more to piecemeal, issue-specific messages, thus removing requirements of ideological consistency for political actors and influencers. These developments also call for further investigation on: “who sets the agenda” in a high-choice media environment; and on generational differences in the issue fragmentation and ideological structuring of public agendas.

2.3. Generational perspective

Finally, a processual focus on de-ideologization requires the lens of generational change. Change can simultaneously affect all the population (period effect), but in general it is expected to be driven by new generations. First, for a life cycle effect: young people voting for the first time have no political experience and are more prone to external influences (Plutzer 2002). Combined with the high instability of social rules fulfilling different needs (e.g. employment, forming a family) this produces a weaker political identity compared to older generations (García-Albacete 2014; Tuorto 2014). Second, for a cohort

effect, pointing to socialization processes. Voting is a habit learnt over time (Franklin 2004) and political opinions formed during youth are more stable afterwards. Recent cohorts show a weak political socialization, with generation replacement explaining long term political change (Franklin & Wessels 2002). Since the '80s (Miller & Shanks 1996), voters socialized in times of change or crisis show lower turnout and a weaker involvement in politics (Rubenson et al. 2004). Also, value change and the rise of post-materialism (Inglehart 1977; Welzel, Inglehart & Klingemann 2003) have produced sophisticated yet more apartisan citizens (Dalton 1984). Furthermore, discontinuity means that generations mentally organize the political space in different ways, or with similar terms referring to different meanings, with youth showing today a loss of meanings of traditional political anchors (Tuorto 2018).

Hence, the mechanism behind the disruptive developments of the Italian political system might lie in intergenerational differences in a process of de-ideologization accelerated by communication fragmentation. Among Italians socialized in the Second Republic (who massively voted the M5S in 2013), the left-right division has partially lost relevance. This is in part due to changes in youth-adult transition and political socialisation, leading to weakening of the intergenerational transmission of political identities (Corbetta et al. 2013). Together with de-structuring, re-structuring takes place, with new linkages between issues. Young people increasingly see a partial decoupling of the libertarian-authoritarian and left-right divides (Maggini 2016); and left-right meanings with unusual relationships with traditional economic issues (Tuorto 2018).

Finally, new conflicts arising from the economic crisis (e.g. Kriesi et al. 2006) have been identified as sources of generational divide (Arber & Attias-Donfut 2000). Especially in Italy, where young people represent a marginalised group: low demographic importance, unfavourable job market conditions, reduced social mobility, under-representation in the political debate and in the distribution of welfare resources (Livi Bacci 2008; Pitti and Tuorto 2021), leading to the popular argument of older generations' dreams of equity and social security realised at the expense of today's youth (Esping-Andersen & Sarasa 2002). Yet, this conflict must not be taken for granted: there is evidence of continuity of the so-called 'long family' model (Cavalli & Galland 1996), with the obstacles to transition to adulthood yielding prolonged family support and resulting in a potential suppression of conflict.

In contextual terms, these processes took place in the political turmoil ignited in Italy by the economic crisis of 2008 and the sovereign debt crisis of 2011. Inadequate response by mainstream parties led to a crisis of the political establishment. This can be framed as a specific instance of a broader crisis of epistemic authorities; and more strongly perceived by youth, contributing to further de-structuring the political space in this social group (Schadee, Segatti & Vezzoni 2019).

This reinforces the relevance of a generational lens in analysing political change in Italy. In addition, from 2013 on, generational discontinuities emerged; with young people, traditionally limited to "loyalty" or "exit" electoral options, being offered serious "voice" options (especially the M5S, but later even Lega and Fratelli d'Italia), which they strongly rewarded, partly against older cohorts which became the stronghold of mainstream parties. In the first European case where anti-establishment parties

reached more than 50% of votes, a generational drill-down appears then necessary for making sense of the political transformation of which Italy is still at the forefront.

3. Project objectives

Building on this previous theoretical perspective and aiming to get a deeper understanding of this alleged post-ideological context, the POSTGEN project in fact aims to explore three different aspects.

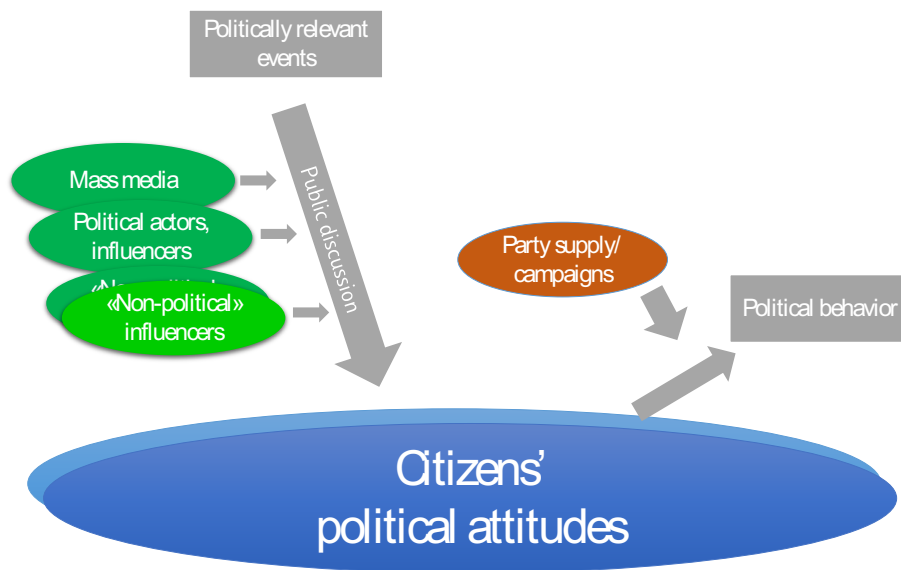
1. Firstly, it aims to investigate, in the Italian case, the generation-specific connection between political discussion, ideological de-structuring, and disruptive political change. POSTGEN features further theoretical elaboration and the development of a mixed, multi-method, longitudinal data collection and analysis effort to present a detailed, cross-generational picture of the changing dimensionality of the political space. According to our vision, the impact of public debate on political attitudes stems from a conceptualization where public debate is the vehicle for the indirect effects exerted on citizens by various actors: mass media; political actors; non-political actors and influencers; ordinary social media users. These last two categories of actors are also conceptualized as generation-specific; with the assumption that different generations may be influenced by different non-political figures and contexts of social media users (likely from the same generation). As a result, the project tries to assess the agenda-setting ability of different actors, i.e. their ability to influence citizens' attention on specific issues of the political debate and the framing of such issues; and will follow with analyses of the issue breadth and ideological structure of issue emphasis and attitudes across influencing actors.

2. Secondly, POSTGEN aims at investigating the (possible lack of) ideological structuring of political attitudes across generations. This is done by focusing on relationships of consistency across opinions and meanings in different issue domains, assessed through a mixed-methods perspective. To this scope, the project relies on panel, representative-sample mass surveys, in-depth qualitative interviews with young adults, and innovative in-school events (and surveys) with students in secondary schools.

3. Thirdly, the project assesses the impact of (de-)ideologized attitude structuring on political behaviour. In particular, it aims to provide a broad understanding of how the (lack of) ideological structuring of political attitudes interacts with a possibly de-ideologized political supply, producing political behaviour that cuts across ideological lines. The project leverages ICCP-derived data collection focused on both citizens and party supply at campaign time, with an analysis enriched by a generational perspective and innovative quantitative analyses leveraging issue yield theory.

Finally, a common main feature of different components of the project is a focus on contemporary young generations: as ideological orientations structure party choices (Thomassen 2005), a lack of structure among the younger will likely make voting more volatile in the long run, with potential implications for the quality of democracy and the stability of the political system.

Figure 1. Overall processual model of the project



Source: own elaboration. Note: Both citizens' attitudes and non-political influencers are represented as multiple ellipses, as they are modelled as different across generations.

3.1. Towards a multi-component, linked processual focus

While the developments we previously described confirm the possible relevance of the ICCP post-ideological perspective, limitations of the ICCP project are clear. A de-ideologized context emerges from there only in terms of a single snapshot, documenting some post-ideological state of public opinion and party strategy at a particular time point, but lacking a perspective over the attitude formation process leading to this outcome. Delving into the analysis of this process requires an in-depth analysis that – by focusing on a specific country case – explores multiple aspects, dimensions, and mechanisms of process.

To do so, POSTGEN both builds on and breaks with ICCP. It shares with ICCP a notion of de-ideologization intended as a loss of the correlation between attitudes on economic and cultural issues that characterized the left-right, progressive-conservative axis in the past. At the same time, it breaks with the ICCP to overcome its limitations, by aiming to: (a) unfold the time dimension to peek into the dynamics of change (at the individual, generational, and collective level); (b) offer insights into the variety and depth of *meanings* associated to the different issues that compose the political debate; (c) capture the influence of the broad media and communication context that influences individual political attitudes, where even non-political actors and influencers occasionally take positions on political issues, with a potentially large impact (Angelucci & De Sio 2023). Still, the different components of the project are designed to support well-defined and reliable inter-component *data linking*, thus allowing to develop multi-level, linked models across all different objects analysed, that lead to a reconstruction of the fundamental unitarity of the process.

Most importantly, POSTGEN's focus on *change* leads to the adoption of a generational focus. This is key, as political change is produced not only by opinion

change, but to a large extent by generational replacement. As a result, the broad research question of POSTGEN becomes: "do generations differ in presence, type and levels of ideological structuring of their political attitudes?" "How is this exploited by parties?". We argue that a contribution to answering this question will provide insights on future developments of the Italian political system, which – with a 2018 election providing a voter majority for anti-establishment parties and a 2022 election bringing a radical right-wing party in power – is still at the forefront of political transformation in Europe. This focus on ideological (de)structuring may not only allow a deeper perspective on past disruptive developments, but also foster the development of more effective tools to study the current and future challenges to Western political systems.

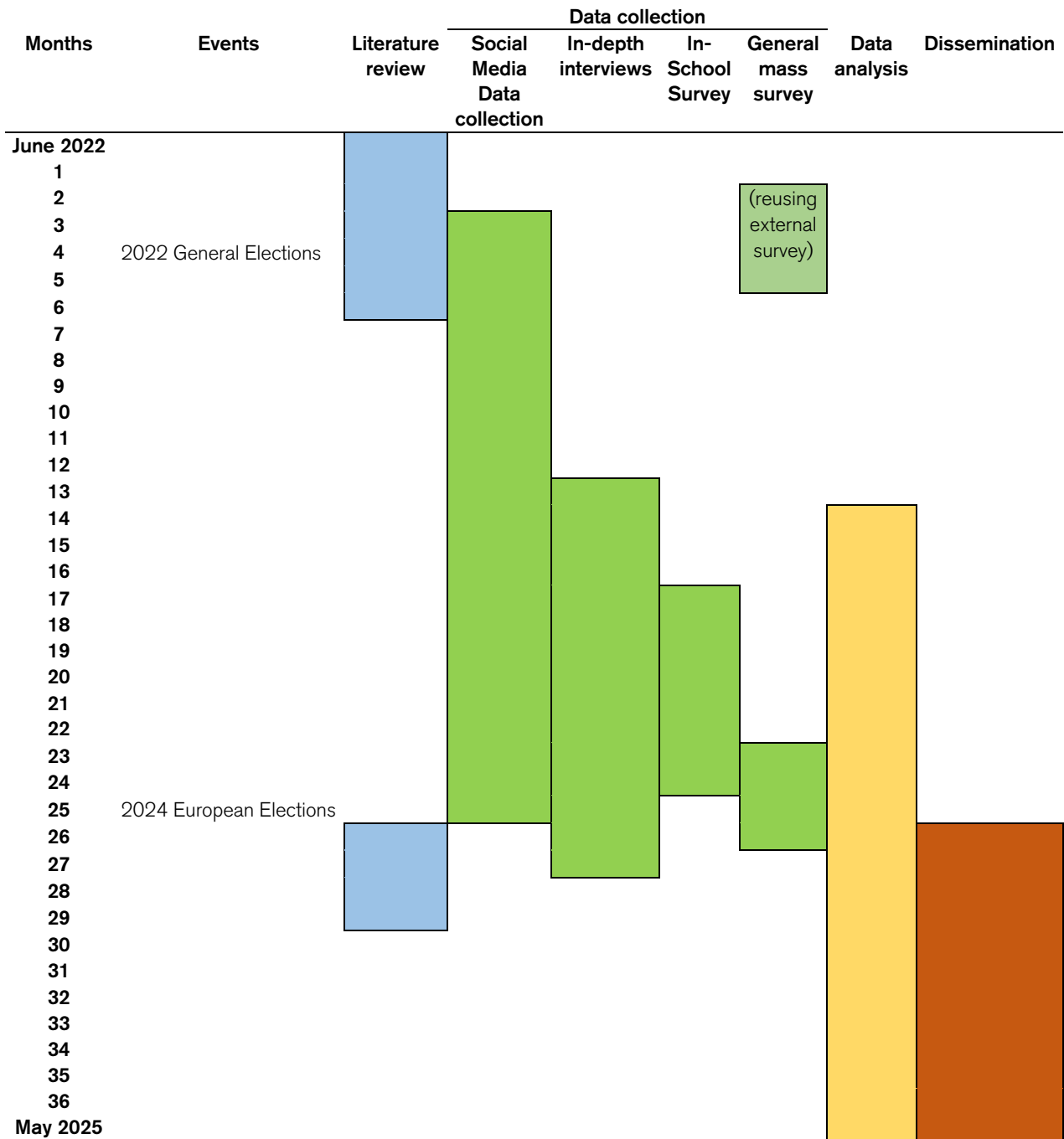
4. Methodology

The project builds on a threefold methodological strategy. Its research design leverages a multi-component nature through a mixed-method approach, including an initial phase of quantitative and qualitative exploration, a general reflection on the results of these preliminary steps, and a concluding quantitative phase. We argue that this mixed-method approach is innovative in addressing the topic: it allows for data triangulation by using survey data and interviews to gather comprehensive information, while the qualitative phase enables an in-depth exploration of the dimensions of the phenomenon, facilitating a more complete investigation during the later quantitative component. Most importantly, the integration and linking of data across different components may lead to the development of significant methodological innovations. More specifically, the study features three main data collection components:

1. A social media component focuses on collecting data on the social media landscape. By gathering observations from social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, it investigates the agenda-setting power of traditional media and political actors while concurrently building a list of the most relevant social media influencers. Algorithm-based methods are then employed to analyse the content of social media activities, assessing various characteristics of political communication and discussion.
2. A citizens component collects mixed-methods data on citizens' political attitudes, particularly among younger generations. It features a mixed-methods development with a two-step time articulation.

An initial exploratory phase is performed through two sub-components: a quantitative component aimed at observing the attribution of content to political concepts, and the definition of political meanings, by administering structured questionnaires (through electronic devices provided by researchers) to classes of high-school students. This component explores the attitudes and values of pupils around their first voting experience, mapping their positions on key issues and reconstructing any presence of ideological organization. This approach provides extensive data on the attitudes, opinions, and political and civic engagement of students not yet fully socialized into the democratic process. Aside to this quantitative exploration, a qualitative exploration is performed (on the slightly older generation of young adults) through in-depth interviews, in order to explore the meanings, they attribute to their political reference points, such as left versus right, progressive versus conservative, etc.

Figure 2. Temporal development of the project



Source: own elaboration.

Through semi-structured interviews, the project investigates aspects related to political socialization, participation profiles in formal and non-formal political environments, electoral behaviour including party choice and reasons for non-voting, the structure of political attitudes, conceptualization of the political space, meanings and significance of ideological references, representation of political and social conflicts, perception of adult society, generational relationships, and prevailing rhetoric on the

role of young people in the public domain. The aim is clearly to explore and understand the structuring of political meanings and attitudes among individuals that have mostly completed their political socialization process.

Upon completion of this exploration, results are assessed and lead to the development of the main quantitative component, i.e. a mass survey administered to a representative sample of the electoral population at the occasion of the 2024 European Parliament Elections, with a pre-post panel design, precisely aimed at assessing the structure and organization of political attitudes with a specific generational focus.

3. Finally, a party supply component collects data about political parties and their campaign issue strategies during elections, analysed through their social media communication.

The temporal development of the data collection tasks is essentially centered on the 2024 European Parliament elections. Thus, a first phase, primarily involving the social media component, focused on identifying relevant actors in the social sphere (starting from the 2022 general election, throughout the 2024 EP campaign and election). The qualitative and quantitative exploratory stages then took place between 2023 and the beginning of 2024, in order to allow a first assessment able to influence the development of the Spring 2024 survey fieldwork, prior to the EP election.

Data analysis (started in summer 2024, after preliminary exploratory work initiated in summer 2023) will develop along different lines. Regarding the social media component, the collection of data and observations from social networks like Facebook and Instagram allows to investigate the agenda-setting power of traditional media, political actors and non-political influencers. Algorithm-based methods will be used to analyse the content of social media activity and their issue focus. Most importantly, the different quantitative components (social media, mass survey, school surveys, party campaign data) all include common linkage points related to references to political parties and social media influencers. These will effectively allow data linkage, that will be a key resource leveraged in the data analysis process, allowing to assess research questions spanning across different levels and different actors.

5. Expected Results and Research Challenges

The three objectives of the project will unfold into detailed analyses providing empirically grounded answers to more detailed questions:

What is the media landscape that influences attitudes and attitude organization? Do political (and non-political) influencers present messages that are ideologically consistent? Do they focus on issues across different dimensions, or do they only cover very specific issues? What dimensions (economic vs. cultural) are covered more often? Who influences and who follows? What is the agenda-setting ability of different actors?

How do different generations relate to the dimensionality of the political space? Does a uni-dimensional, left-right political axis still exist? Do different generations interpret terms such as “left” and “right” similarly? Does a correlation of cultural attitudes with economic attitudes still exist? Are issues in these two domains equally salient to different generations?

How do citizen attitudes translate into political behaviour, by interacting with party supply? Do party constituencies adopt ideologically consistent issue stances? And does

this apply across generations (especially among younger cohorts)? Do parties dare to be post-ideological, leveraging issue opportunities even when their combinations challenge classic ideology? Are some parties more post-ideological than others? Are these better rewarded by the polls?

Thus, the aim of the project is to provide a detailed landscape of Italians' political attitudes, of their organization, and of the interaction with party supply, leading to a deep and nuanced picture of a possible ideological (de)structuring across different generations. Such material will fuel the development of the final theoretical stage of the project: a broader theory which, starting from an in-depth single case analysis and introducing innovative analysis tools, might account for the impact of contemporary societal transformations on the structure of political space through generational replacement, leading to a parsimonious yet powerful understanding of political change. The project will address several research challenges, such as the integration of qualitative and quantitative components, mapping the sphere of influencers on social media and analyzing related data, and linking different quantitative datasets involved.

We argue that, building on the successful case of the comparative ICCP project (which originated from an Italian pilot study), POSTGEN may contribute to a new framework for analysing political change in comparative perspective in the Western world.

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