

Italy in the Council of the European Union: votes and statements

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The Council of the European Union is considered to be ‘a consensus machine’. Yet, disagreements still happen at the voting stage, with abstentions, oppositions, and statements defining the positions of national delegations even at the end of long bargaining processes. This article adopts a longitudinal perspective to explore the attitudes and behaviours of Italian representatives in the Council from 1995 to 2019. The analysis uses roll call data to test some expectations emerging from the previous comparative literature in the context of this more demanding within-country research design. Amongst these hypotheses, the results confirm that chairing the Council and the partisanship of governments on the ideological and EU integration dimensions are systematically associated with various ways in which opposition and dissent are expressed. Furthermore, we find that caretaker cabinets and government heterogeneity also reduce the likelihood of Italian disagreements in the Council.

Keywords: Italy, Council of the EU, voting, roll call

Introduction

‘The Council is an essential EU decision-maker’. This is how this fundamental institution of the European Union (EU) presents itself on its official website. The Council of the EU is the intergovernmental collective veto-player, sharing its legislative power in the ordinary procedure with the EU Parliament, on the basis of proposals advanced by the EU Commission (Hodson *et al.* 2021; Nugent 2017; Tsebelis *et al.* 2001).

The Council vote, with national ministers eventually adopting regulations, directives and decisions, is only the final stage of a complex process in which domestic representatives and civil servants meet and discuss at length the draft policies at different levels of administrative and political responsibility. Also because of these multiple layers of discussion, in which different national preferences have been considered and possibly accommodated, the final Council vote is often a mere

formality. The level of agreement at that last stage has been always very high, as demonstrated also by the large share of legislative acts adopted by unanimity (Mattila 2009; Mattila and Lane 2001). However, there are exceptions to that normalcy, and contested decisions have captured the attention of scholars looking for systematic patterns of opposition in the Council (Bailer *et al.* 2015; Mattila 2004; Wrátil and Hobolt 2019).

The Italian government is certainly a major player in the ‘games that governments play in Brussels’ (Naurin and Wallace 2008). It is so for several reasons. As a founding member of the European Communities, it has contributed to establishing the convention of consensus practices and continuous bargaining in the Council – a sort of ‘socialization’ that has influenced the behaviour of the more recent member states (Lewis 1998). Secondly, as one of the largest countries, it has always enjoyed some sort of privileged position in those processes, not least because of its formal voting powers (Holler and Widgrén 1999; Lane and Berg 1999). Finally, in this cooperative environment, Italy has often played the role of mediator, given its ability to overcome the limitations of immediate returns in favour of long-term positive-sum games (Fabbrini and Piattoni 2004).

On the other hand, the Italian participation in EU affairs has often been considered merely ceremonial, with the political vices largely outweighing the national virtues (Noël 1990; Willis 1971). The constant turnover of Italian cabinets and ministers bargaining in Brussels, the preference often assigned to the domestic instead of the European political arena, Italy’s poor record in implementing EU laws: these are all factors that have contributed to the lack of credibility of Italian policy-makers in the EU, and thus to their reduced bargaining capacity in the Council.

However, while Italy's coordination of its EU policy has long received the attention that it deserves (Bindi 2011; 2021; Della Cananea 2000; 2001; Giuliani 2000; 2006; Hine 2000), the behaviour of its representatives in the Council of the European Union has remained largely understudied. If we exclude detailed accounts of particular events, like intergovernmental conferences and EU Councils (Bonvicini and Gallo 1997; Carbone 2009; Quaglia 2007), or qualitative reconstructions of the position on specific policies (see, for example, Bressanelli and Quaglia (2021) or the special issue introduced by Fabbrini and Piattoni (2004)), there has been no systematic investigation of the Italian vote in the Council of the European Union.

This study fills this gap in the literature with a quantitative analysis of the voting behaviour of Italian representatives in the Council between 1995 and 2019. Our investigation is both a descriptive exploration of the conduct of Italian ministers across a wide range of different cabinets, and an explicit test of hypotheses derived from the comparative literature in a within-country longitudinal setting. Besides analysing support, opposition and abstentions on EU legislation, the study takes into consideration also the recorded statements that national delegations sometimes add to their position.

The article is organised as follows. The next section reconstructs the theoretical debate on voting in the Council of the EU, and it generates the hypotheses that are tested in the quantitative analysis. Section 3 illustrates the behaviour of Italian delegates in the 25 years covered by the analysis, introduces the operationalization of the main variables, and illustrates the models used. Section 4 puts our hypotheses to the test of the empirical data, and it comments on the results of the analysis. The last section concludes and reflects on possible ways forward.

The theory: voting in the Council of the European Union

The Council of the EU is an intergovernmental institution characterized by cooperation and positive-sum games: ‘At the voting stage, the Council is a consensus machine’ (Veen 2011, 118). Although its protagonists explicitly represent different and often conflicting national preferences, its legislative decisions are mostly approved by unanimity or with unnecessary large majorities.

There is a set of reasons that explain the consensual character of the Council within what many scholars recognize as being a consociational institutional setting (Bogaards and Crepaz 2002; Costa and Magnette 2003). Consensus-reaching is the typical way in which decisions are taken in small groups, relatively secluded from the general public,¹ that meet constantly and develop appropriate informal procedures (Heisenberg 2005; Lewis 2003). This approach – that seems confirmed by the fact that, on many occasions, votes are not formally taken – coupled with the different intensity of the preferences on the same policy by the different national delegations, favours reciprocity. Countries give up on issues that are not particularly salient domestically, even when they are not convinced by the solution found, in order to be supported by ministers of the other countries on parallel issues, package deals, or on future policies (Sherrington 2000).

Contested votes are thus rare, and in most of them just one country abstains or objects, so that a general agreement is reached even when unanimity is not the formal rule applied (Hayes-Renshaw *et al.* 2006). The abundance of uncontested decisions is favoured by the attitude of the presidency, which, assisted by the EU secretariat, postpones the vote if not sufficiently certain about the lack of any blocking minorities, thus giving superficial support to any anti-rationalist interpretation of voting outcomes (König and Junge 2008).

Within this framework of generalized consensus, Italy belongs in the group of countries that have contested more than the average, this being generally attributed to its size in terms of population. Before the 2004 enlargement, in the European Union with 15 member states, the Italian government abstained on approximately 1% of the legislative acts, and explicitly opposed another 2% (Heisenberg 2005; Mattila 2004). In the first years after the enlargement, the overall level of contestation was even lower, but Italy remained among the top positions in terms of share of abstentions and oppositions (Hosli *et al.* 2011).

The explanation of the differentiated pattern of contestation was the second theoretical and empirical challenge tackled by scholars after that of justifying the diffusion of cooperative behaviour. Some factors, like size, age of membership and geographical location, are relevant solely in a cross-country setting, while others cannot be applied in a within-country one because of their limited longitudinal variation, such as structural economic factors, the budget balance with the Union, or the domestic supervision of EU affairs (Bailer *et al.* 2015; Hagemann *et al.* 2019; Zimmer *et al.* 2005).

However, much research has focused on issues that consistently vary also in a single country, and thus lend themselves to this type of replication as well. The most important one is certainly the political leaning of the cabinet, the national actor that directly negotiates in Brussels with the other EU partners, and that eventually votes on (or informally approves) the European legislation. Here, the literature agrees on the existence of two major dimensions of the political space: the first is the traditional left-right ideological continuum; the second is the national-integration dimension that refers to the degree of support for the EU.

It is safe to assume that Eurosceptic governments oppose much EU legislation, also independently from its actual policy-content, while the ideological left-right dimension does not have such a clearcut association with a systematic pattern of contestation: for example, leftist cabinets may support the extension of common social policies while opposing pro-market instruments, while the opposite could be said for rightist ones. It also depends on the operationalization of these two dimensions, with most scholars looking exclusively at government preferences, while others include also the preference of the opposition or of the general public, or suppose non-linear associations (Hosli *et al.* 2011; Pircher and Farjam 2021). Finally, some scholars test their hypotheses using party locations and regression models, while others interpret the relevant political dimensions that emerge bottom-up from applying multi-dimensional scaling to roll-call votes.

Empirically speaking, the party-politics debate around who dissents more is still open. Some studies have found support only for the relevance of the ideological dimensions; some only for the integration dimension; and some for both. The dissent may sometimes also concern the direction of the relationship. For the EU-15, Mattila (2004, 41) reported that ‘left-wing governments are less likely to vote negatively in the Council than their right-wing counterparts’, whereas a few years later Hosli *et al.* (2011, 1261) found that ‘governments located right-of-centre are less likely to contest proposals discussed in the Council than are more leftist governments’. Hagemann *et al.* (2017) agree with the latter position, also regarding the oppositional effect due to relatively more Eurosceptic cabinets – something that, again, Mattila (2004) did not find years before, if not as a conditional variable in an interaction of the two dimensions.

Clearly, the partially different periods covered, control variables and research designs have shaped the instability of the empirical results; and these are factors that a

25-year long sample and a within-country research strategy should be better able to control. Against the background of these comparative results, our first two hypotheses concern the political leaning of the cabinet. Alongside the most recent findings summarized above, we expect that:

Hp 1. The more leftist the Italian cabinet, the more frequent its oppositional behaviour;

Hp 2. The more Eurosceptic the Italian cabinet, the more frequent its oppositional behaviour.²

A fact normally underestimated in this literature is that governments do not necessarily have a unitary character, and thus a unitary position. Whilst this has long been acknowledged in the comparative analysis of legislatures, it is odd to see it systematically disregarded by analyses of policy approval in the Council of the EU. Without necessarily underestimating the potential for ministerial drift, it is evident that the decision to raise voice in Brussels cannot be taken idiosyncratically by individual ministers. All other things being equal, the more heterogeneous the government, the more difficult it becomes to agree to oppose a policy in an institutional environment that favours consensus. The most likely situation is that at least some actors within the cabinet prefer to continue bargaining instead of shutting the door and appearing on the losing side of the vote (Novak 2013). Thus, all other things being equal:

Hp 3. The more heterogeneous the Italian cabinet on the left-right dimension, the less frequent its oppositional behaviour;

Hp 4. The more heterogeneous the Italian cabinet on the integration dimension, the less frequent its oppositional behaviour.

Most institutional elements are ill suited to a within-country comparison because of their lack of variation. However, there are some exceptions. The most important one

recognized by the specialized literature depends on the special duties of a country during its six-month presidency of the Council. In that role, a country is expected to act as a broker fostering negotiations and agreements amongst the other member states (Tallberg 2008). During that semester, the success of the presidency is often measured in terms of the number of policies that are finally agreed, since their preparation often takes much more than six months (Van Gruisen *et al.* 2019). For this reason, during that semester, countries chairing the institution have been found to systematically reduce the frequency of their disagreements. This is also our expectation for Italy:

Hp 5. During the semesters of presidency of the Council, Italian governments have less frequent oppositional behaviour.

As is clear from the previous reconstruction, abstaining from or opposing EU legislation is a significant political choice that goes beyond the policy substance of the agreement. For this reason, technocratic caretaker governments may restrain themselves from taking such unusual decisions:

Hp 6. Italian caretaker governments have less frequent oppositional behaviour.

This hypothesis cannot be tested together with the ones regarding the political dimensions because technocratic cabinets are not party governments, and thus cannot be placed on the ideological or integration spectrum. There is however a period in which even party cabinets are not entirely in their political capacities, and this happens whenever a new election has already taken place but the new government has not yet been formed. During that interlude, the previous cabinet is responsible for the management of current affairs but may not consider itself as having full political power. We will not formulate an explicit hypothesis in this regard, also considering the usually short duration of these periods, but we will control for it in the empirical models as a sort of derived version of hypothesis 6 for political governments.

Data and method: exploring 25 years of voting behaviour

‘Before 1992, the Council of Ministers was known as a secretive, diplomacy-based, decision-making institution. Sometimes, decisions remained wholly unpublicised, and citizens had no right of access to documents’ (Hillebrandt *et al.* 2014, 1). This explains why there are no systematic voting records dating to before the mid-1990s. The first dataset analysed by Mattila and Lane (2001) contained information derived from the ‘Monthly summaries of Council acts’, which were available only from the Council Secretariat upon request. Our exploration starts with the year 1995, employing those same data, and ends in 2019, when the content of those documents changed, no longer containing country statements. Furthermore, the final period of our analysis almost corresponds with the beginning of the 2020 pandemic, which may have impacted also on the types of problems tackled in the Union, and confounding the usual political dynamics experienced in the Council

Between January 1995 and November 2019, we counted 4087 legislative acts – regulations, directives and decisions. A large majority of them, 78.6%, were approved unanimously, another 8.4% received at worst some abstentions, and the remaining 13% had at least one country that voted against them. In the online appendix we also present the longitudinal trend of these quantities, which exhibits a stable situation for approximately the first 15 years of the sample, and then a slight decrease in consensus practices, with unanimous voting recently falling below 60%. The situation partially depends on the enlargement process that occurred during the observed period, which increases the likelihood of some kind of opposition due to mere statistical factors.

*** Figure 1 here

Figure 1 Percentage of legislation with Italian opposition and statements (1995-2019)

Figure 1, which presents the trend for Italy, shows the opposite dynamic. The average percentage of opposed legislation is approximately 2.1% – composed by 1.4% of negative votes and another 0.7% of abstentions. This pattern is similar to the one reported in the previous literature; but in the second half of our sample there is a visible decrease in adversarial attitudes. This dissent is complemented by an average 4.8% of legislation in which Italy advanced a series of comments. These statements are usually considered in the literature to be manifestations of weaker forms of disagreement (Hagemann 2008; Hagemann *et al.* 2019; Van Gruisen and Crombez 2019), and Italy has used them quite frequently, much more than opposition votes, even in recent years.

Opposition and statements by Italian delegates in Brussels are exactly what we want to explain. Using legislative acts as units of analysis, ‘Opposition’ is a dummy dependent variable that takes the value of 1 each time the country resisted the adoption of the EU policy, either abstaining or voting against it, and 0 otherwise.³ The same applies to ‘Statements’: 1 for their presence and 0 otherwise. In addition, we have devised an ordinal scale representing different degrees of opposition in the position of the Italian delegation. The reference category of a fully favourable vote is coded with 0; the value 1 refers to the presence of statements without further forms of opposition; 2 corresponds to abstentions; and 3 to negative votes.

There are two sets of independent variables: institutional and partisan. The institutional set consists entirely of dummy variables. ‘Presidency’ takes the value of 1 when an Italian government chaired the Council, and 0 in all the other periods. Italy held the presidency of the Council three times during the period covered by the analysis: in 1996, first with Dini and then with Prodi as prime ministers; in 2003, during the second Berlusconi cabinet; and in 2014, with Renzi as prime minister. ‘Caretaker’

takes the value of 1 when the Italian governments were led by Lamberto Dini and Mario Monti, two economists with rich executive and international experience, and 0 for all the other cabinets. Finally, as already illustrated, the ‘lame duck’ period before the formation of the first government of a new legislature is captured by the variable ‘Postelection’, which takes the value of 1 in those temporary circumstances and 0 otherwise.

The set of partisan variables requires the location of each government party along the relevant ideological or integration spectrum. There are two major options in this regard: using expert placements or considering party manifestos. We opted for the first alternative because, in some circumstances, electoral alliances presented unitary platforms, making it impossible to compute the heterogeneity of the governing coalition.⁴ More specifically, we used the 0-10 left-right scale produced by the closest Chapel Hill survey for the ideological dimension, and the 1-7 scale on the overall orientation towards European integration (from strongly opposed to strongly in favour) for the integration dimension (Bakker *et al.* 2020). To measure the cabinet’s location on those two dimensions, we computed the average of the positions of the parties making up the government, weighted for their share of seats. Following Tsebelis (2001), we measured the government’s heterogeneity as the range between the two most extreme government parties.

Finally, we controlled for the change in the number of member states due to the EU enlargement, and for the change in the required majority after the Nice and Lisbon Treaties. Both factors may feed back on delegations’ evaluations of their chances of further improving the policy in a cooperative game. Given the dummy status of the dependent variables, we used logistic regressions to account for the decision to oppose a policy or to advance a statement, whereas we used ordered logistic regression for the

ordinal scale summarizing the increasing disagreement in the position taken by the Italian delegation. Since each government tries to adopt a coherent and coordinated attitude in its bargaining in Brussels, it is likely that their positions are somehow related to each other. For this reason each model presents standard errors clustered by cabinet.

Results of the longitudinal within-country comparison

Some of the instability of the results reported in the first part of the article may depend on omitted variable bias in a cross-country setting. A within-country comparison like ours avoids most of that risk, suggesting more reliable causal associations. On the other hand, this research strategy does not allow testing some interesting cross-country variations, due for example to diverse institutional setups or economic structures (Neumayer and Plümer 2017).

Tab. 1 Logit regressions for Italian opposition and statements (1995-2019)

	Opposition						Statements					
	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)		(5)		(6)	
Caretaker	-0.33*	(0.17)					-1.34	(0.81)				
Post-election	-0.06	(0.46)			0.19	(0.48)	-0.9	(0.56)			-0.69	(0.58)
Presidency	-0.32**	(0.14)			-0.33**	(0.13)	-0.56**	(0.22)			-0.54**	(0.23)
Left-Right			-0.16	(0.10)	-0.16	(0.10)			-0.19***	(0.04)	-0.18***	(0.04)
EU integration			-0.35	(0.25)	-0.35	(0.24)			-0.45***	(0.08)	-0.43***	(0.09)
Range LR			-0.17	(0.32)	-0.19	(0.31)			-0.06	(0.15)	-0.07	(0.14)
Range EU			-0.25**	(0.12)	-0.24**	(0.11)			-0.38***	(0.04)	-0.36***	(0.04)
EU formula												
EU25	-0.30	(0.19)	-0.05	(0.14)	-0.09	(0.15)	-1.19***	(0.19)	-0.79***	(0.05)	-0.87***	(0.04)
EU27	-0.67	(0.69)	-0.38	(0.95)	-0.39	(0.94)	-0.76**	(0.32)	-0.85*	(0.44)	-0.92**	(0.45)
EU28	-1.68	(1.28)	-1.86	(1.39)	-1.84	(1.38)	-0.65	(0.56)	-0.90	(0.65)	-0.93	(0.62)
Rule												
Nice	-0.22	(0.75)	-0.11	(0.76)	-0.1	(0.75)	0.10	(0.33)	0.11	(0.44)	0.16	(0.42)
Lisbon	0.94	(1.25)	0.72	(1.35)	0.69	(1.33)	0.29	(0.59)	-0.30	(0.67)	-0.24	(0.65)
Constant	-3.48***	(0.19)	0.26	(2.47)	0.33	(2.41)	-2.58***	(0.19)	2.02**	(0.86)	1.83*	(0.96)
Observations	4085		3597		3597		4085		3597		3597	

Note: Clustered standard errors in parentheses: *p < 0.10 **p < 0.05 ***p < 0.01

On the left-hand side of Table 1 we report the results of a series of regressions using the dummy for the Italian negative vote as dependent variable, while on the right-hand side the dependent variable is the formulation of statements by the Italian delegation. Apart from the controls regarding the number of member states (using EU15 as baseline) and the procedure (using the pre-2004 arrangement as reference category), models 1 and 4 use only institutional variables, models 2 and 5 only partisan variables, and models 3 and 6 use both explanatory factors.

To begin with, our control variables are only occasionally significant in all the models, though they mostly show a negative sign. This lack of statistical significance may be due to the fact that they both capture some temporal evolution of the Union, and thus compete for the same explanatory potential. But it may also be due to the fact that the individual decision to defect is not affected by the marginal change in the required majority, or by the presence of a new set of (mostly distant) member states. Being similar to a longitudinal time variable, the predominantly negative signs of our controls are coherent with the observed reduction of adversarial behaviours outlined in Figure 1.

Starting with model 1, we see that both our institutional hypotheses are confirmed. Holding the rotating presidency of the Council systematically reduces the likelihood of abstaining or casting a negative vote ($p < 0.05$), and caretaker governments tend to avoid them ($p < 0.10$). The magnitude of the effect is similar, and the logit coefficients correspond to an approximately 38% less probability of oppositional behaviours in each of the two circumstances compared to other periods. The ‘lame-duck’ corollary regarding post-electoral interludes, in which the previous government should also restrain itself from taking such political decisions, is not corroborated by the data. The coefficient has the expected negative sign, but it is far from being significant,

probably due to the small number of observations that fall within this short period.

Since this specific variable shows the same pattern in all the other regressions, we will not further comment on it.

Moving to model 2, all the partisan covariates show the expected negative signs. However, only the one regarding the heterogeneity of the coalition partners on the European integration dimension is statistically significant at the standard level. It is more difficult to take the decision to oppose a EU policy if the various members of the cabinet diverge: each one point difference on the 1-7 scale reduces the likelihood of resistance and disapproval by 22%. In model 3, joint consideration of institutional and partisan variables requires cancelling the impact of caretaker governments. However, among the institutional factors, the semester of presidency maintains intact both the magnitude and statistical significance of its moderating effect on the probability of opposing a policy with a vote, and the same can be said for EU heterogeneity among the partisan factors. The coefficients of the residual political variables keep their expected negative sign, but their statistical significance does not improve sufficiently to reach standard levels.

To summarize these first findings on the dependent variable most frequently tested in the relevant literature, only the last three hypotheses, regarding the EU heterogeneity of the coalition and two institutional factors, received confirmation, while the first three hypotheses did not. This is somewhat disappointing, considering that government partisanship has been the focus of much of the debate, and found no confirmation in the more demanding research design of a within-country longitudinal study. However, introducing more subtle forms of disagreement, like statements, and including them in a more sensitive measure of disapproval may yield some interesting positive findings.

In model 4 of Table 1, the issue of statements that comment on voting decisions is negatively affected by the turn of presidency, but caretakers do not systematically restrain themselves from making them, presumably because of their less demanding status compared to abstentions and negative votes. Model 5 interestingly demonstrates that issuing a statement is a politically relevant decision, with government partisanship playing an important role in it. Rightist government tend not to present statements, and the same applies to cabinets favouring European integration. The two relationships are both highly significant and the logit coefficients correspond to a reduction in the probability of commenting on voting decisions for each point on the respective scales of, respectively, 18% and 36%. The heterogeneity on the EU dimensions continues to systematically play the moderating role already shown for voting decisions, and all these associations are further confirmed in significance and magnitude when institutional and partisan factors are mixed in model 6.

From these results we obtain significant methodological advice. Relying on a dichotomous measure which mixes somewhat different forms of opposition like abstentions and negative votes seems not to reflect the range of opportunities to express disagreement that delegations have in Brussels in the final stages of a policy process. Taking them separately is not opportune either, because it would further reduce the already rare occurrences of oppositional behaviour. The introduction of statements is a partial answer to these limitations, in terms of both number of observations and sensitivity of the measure. A slightly more sophisticated ordinal dependent variable, like the scale illustrated in the previous section, may furnish even more consistent results, accounting on the one hand for the intensity of the opposition, and assuring sufficient variability in the sample on the other. The results of these final analyses are presented in Table 2.

As before, the first regression is exclusively institutional; the second one is based on partisan factors; and the last one presents both sets of variables. We had to cancel in the right-hand side of the equation the post-election variable, which had anyway proved its irrelevance in all the previous models, because it breached the assumption of proportionality of the effects in ordinal regressions.⁵

Table 2. Ordered logistic regressions for the ordinal scale of Italian opposition

	Scale of opposition					
	(7)		(8)		(9)	
Caretaker	-0.97**	(0.41)				
Presidency	-0.39**	(0.17)			-0.39***	(0.14)
Left-Right			-0.14***	(0.05)	-0.13***	(0.05)
EU integration			-0.37***	(0.12)	-0.37***	(0.12)
Range LR			-0.13	(0.20)	-0.15	(0.19)
Range EU			-0.37***	(0.05)	-0.36***	(0.05)
EU formula						
EU25	-1.04***	(0.18)	-0.72***	(0.04)	-0.77***	(0.04)
EU27	-0.96**	(0.39)	-0.98	(0.61)	-0.99*	(0.60)
EU28	-0.99	(0.64)	-1.35*	(0.70)	-1.35**	(0.68)
Rule						
Nice	0.16	(0.46)	0.30	(0.52)	0.32	(0.51)
Lisbon	0.46	(0.63)	0.22	(0.69)	0.21	(0.67)
/cut 1	2.31	(0.18)	-1.69	(1.27)	-1.7	(1.24)
/cut 2	3.44	(0.17)	-0.49	(1.26)	-0.51	(1.23)
/cut 3	3.89	(0.22)	-0.07	(1.24)	-0.08	(1.21)
Observations	4085		3597		3597	

Note: Clustered standard errors in parentheses: *p < 0.10 **p < 0.05 ***p < 0.01

In model 7, all our original institutional hypotheses are confirmed, and this time, differently from Table 1, both the coefficients reach the standard significance level. Caretaker cabinets, and cabinets during the semester of Italian presidency, are systematically more consensual and less prone to exhibit increasing forms of

disagreement with the EU partners. The technocratic and problem-solving attitude expected from caretaker governments prevents them from cutting short any EU bargaining, or explicitly exhibiting their dissatisfaction. The cooperative character of the Council depends also on its repeated games, and any defection could affect future position-taking on other deals. This clearly goes beyond the task attributed to caretakers because it is intrinsically more a political decision. Since the coefficients of ordinal regressions are expressed in log of the odds, their interpretation is not immediate. In this case, compared to a political cabinet, and all other things being equal, the odds that a technocratic government will opt for some form of opposition rather than unequivocal support for the policy are 42% smaller.⁶

In its turn, chairing the Council means also acting as a broker encouraging compromise and mitigating disagreements. A task that would be clearly contradicted if a country chose to express some dissent with a deal that it was supposed to conclude. The reduction in the likelihood of that event occurring during the six months of the country's presidency is approximately 32%, a substantial amount that is confirmed also in the complete model in the last columns of Table 2.

Model 8 substitutes the institutional variables with the political ones. The results confirm three out of the four expectations regarding the impact of partisanship, with coefficients that are always highly significant. Rightist parties and parties favouring European integration make increasingly less use of some form of dissent – from statements, to abstentions, to negative votes. Besides being systematic, the decrease is also significant in magnitude, being respectively 13% and 31%.

Testing the two political dimensions together is also relevant to disentangling their respective contributions to the model. The left-right dimension on its own has no systematic association with the outcome; but on keeping the European dimension

constant its influence emerges with clarity, confirming the most recent literature on the matter. The same does not happen with EU integration. Interestingly, pro-EU parties always refrain from opposing EU policies, even when the model excludes the ideological dimension.⁷ Furthermore, as in the previous analyses, government heterogeneity matters, but only on the EU dimension.

Model 9 brings together the two groups of variables, confirming, if not increasing, their statistical significance and the magnitude of the effect. Chairing the Council is confirmed as being a mediating role that leaves no space for any form of dissent; rightist and pro-European parties tend to avoid expressing any form of disagreement; and intra-coalition divergencies on the EU dimension restrict the space for deciding weaker or stronger manifestations of opposition. Finally, the control variables regarding the size of the Union, which also implicitly represent a temporal dimension, confirm that, keeping all the other things constant, there has been a decreasing trend in the use of the entire range of possible oppositional behaviours. Viewed from a different perspective, the enlargement of the Union has given Italy the opportunity to act effectively to remain on the winning side of an increasing number of policy processes.

Conclusions and prospects

In this concluding section we summarize our findings, acknowledge their limitations, and reflect on ways forward.

The first contribution of this study is its confirmation of some of the previous findings regarding the role of institutional and political factors. This was by no means certain. A within-country longitudinal research design has not been previously adopted in the literature, and it is now available also because of the long period covered by the

update sample of roll calls. These results should be of interest to both Italian specialists and the larger community of European scholars, because of the much more stringent controls on omitted variable bias furnished by this type of analysis. The study also validates the importance of statements accompanying national positions – a topic taken into consideration by only a minority of previous studies (Hagemann 2008; Hagemann *et al.* 2019; Hagemann *et al.* 2017) – and their status as the first step on a scale defined by increasing opposition intensity. Finally, our analysis has highlighted the importance of a cabinet’s heterogeneity, an important factor in countries characterized by coalition governments that has been overlooked by the previous literature.

This study has its limitations. By definition, focusing on a single country does not prevent, yet reinforces, the external validity of its conclusions. However, the robustness of its findings comes at the cost of inhibiting certain research questions. Any cross-country institutional or structural hypothesis cannot be tested because this requires a solid multilevel comparative investigation. Furthermore, like all the studies cited by this article, the dataset only includes legislation that has been eventually approved. It says nothing about non-decisions, about bargaining that did not succeed, policies that became trapped in the process without the consensus necessary for joint decision-making (Bachrach and Baratz 1963; Falkner 2011; Scharpf 1988). This ‘dark side’ of the process is inaccessible to studies based on actual roll call voting, because the presidency puts a policy to a vote only when the outcome is certain and its support sufficient.

One direction in which the present research could develop further, without necessarily reverting to a more traditional cross-country analysis, would be to better embed each decision in its international environment. Vote does not happen in a void, and international alliances are at least as important as domestic factors. Voting

coalitions may depend on ideological contiguity (Hagemann and Hoyland 2008), common economic interests (Bailer *et al.* 2015), or some geographical configuration (Mattila 2009). In this latter regard, a cluster analysis whose results are reported in the appendix demonstrates that the voting pattern of Italy resembles that of other South-European countries.

For a EU country, it is always desirable not to remain alone in resisting a common policy. In approximately half of the occurrences, opposition was shared by at least two member states. In the case of statements, the sharing was even more frequent. Another complementary analysis in the appendix shows that the opposition of at least one other Southern member state increases twofold the likelihood of an Italian opposition. This is between two and four times more than the effect of having an ally in one Northern or Western European country, while the effect of an Eastern opposition is negligible and non-systematic.

This study has also some political implications for the foreseeable future of Italian relationships with its European partners and the EU itself. As such, Italian rightist governments have not opposed the agreements reached in Brussels more than governments with the opposite leaning, quite the opposite. However, the Euroscepticism of the parties composing the cabinet has been, and could still be, a factor triggering resistance in the EU arena. At the same time, negotiators swiftly learn that the best way to defend national interests, even if they are dispassionate about pushing forward European integration, is not to remain on the losing side of a vote; because this is what, at the end of the day, opposition entails.

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¹ According to the logic of two-level games, if governments need to systematically respond to the parliament for their positions, negotiators have fewer margins for compromise (Putnam 1988). As a consequence, the opaqueness of the Council is supposed to favour consensus and reduce the polarization of the bargaining positions (Cross 2013). On the other hand, transparency increases the credibility of international commitments, thus reducing the possibility of gridlocks and the frequency of untenable threats (Finke 2017; Hagemann and Franchino 2016).

² We are well aware that leftist government parties in Italy have long embraced pro-European positions, while their rightist counterparts have been more ambiguous on this front (Bellucci 2005; Conti and Verzichelli 2005). Even though our two expectations seem to point in the opposite directions, this is a good reason for testing both of them in the same model. Moreover, governments may oppose a European compromise also because they consider it insufficiently supranational.

³ Abstention is entirely equivalent to a ‘nay’ in the event of a qualified majority. In the relatively few cases in which the procedure has required a unanimous vote, abstention has not formally prevented the final approval, but in the consensual environment of the Council it represents a substantive disapproval anyway. For this reason, the literature often uses the sum of the two occurrences as the dependent variable measuring opposition.

⁴ In the online appendix we present the result of the same models using party manifesto placements. In the case of common alliance platforms, we had to assume that those coalitions are similar to single-party governments without any internal heterogeneity. The effects of the governments’ location are similar but, not surprisingly, those of their heterogeneity levels are not.

⁵ The proportional odds assumption states that no input variable should have a disproportional effect on a specific level of the dependent variable, so that the estimates of the coefficients should be similar across all pairs of outcomes. Using the Stata ‘omodel’ command and the

Brant test, we found that the postelection variable violated this assumption, compromising the overall interpretation of the model, whereas without it our regression was not problematic. In the online appendix we report the results of the full model, including that institutional factor, but with a simpler dependent variable characterized by only three levels instead of four. The substantive results of this further equation are entirely similar to the ones presented in Table 2.

⁶ For the proportionality assumption, the same reduction applies to abstention and negative votes (together) vs. positive votes (with or without statements), and to negative votes vs. the occurrences of the first three levels together.

⁷ These further tests are reported in the online appendix.