Leaders as cognitive shortcuts: the role of reliability ratings in voting behavior at the 2014 European elections

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Abstract
The trend towards the personalisation and presidentialization of politics seems to have become (in Italy, Europe and Advanced Western democracies) a response to the decline of party identification and party mobilization, with increasing consequences of partisan dealignment. After all, at the level of party politics, we are in the era of parties without partisans (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Scarrow 2000). However, examining the triumph of the “Renzi's Party” at the 2014 European elections only through the lens of the personalization of politics is not enough. In fact, ideological factors such as the left-right ideological dimension still matter in the Italian electoral context (Itanes 2013; Salvati 2014). Moreover, any dealignment is often followed by a subsequent realignment between parties and voters in any democratic context (Wenzel and Inglehart 2011). All this lead us to conceptualize leaders not simply as a synthesis of personal traits and characteristics, but also as cognitive shortcuts that encourage political judgments and decisions (Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991). Within such interpretative framework, this paper is aimed at investigating how Italian voters were differentiated in adopting specific representations of the political competition in the last European elections. Reliability ratings of the leaders by the voters will be crucial under this point of view. Once established that voters use their ratings towards leaders as a kind of heuristic, we will test the extent to which such information is able to work as a summary measure of different representations of the political debate. Ultimately, we expect from the analysis the confirmation of the existence of different rating patterns within the electorate, of which we will try to reconstruct the general features and mechanisms of development.

Key words
2014 European elections, voting behaviour, political behaviour, political parties, Matteo Renzi, leadership, personalisation of politics, deviating elections, valence images, left-right political continuum, cognitive shortcuts, majority/opposition scheme

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In any case, we have the full responsibility of the contents presented in the following pages.
Leaders as cognitive shortcuts: the role of reliability ratings in voting behavior at the 2014 European elections

Introduction

The Italian results of the last European elections have often been framed as an "anomaly" by most of the national commentators. This is mainly due to the huge success of the Democratic Party, whose broad consensus (40,8% of the total votes) has been interpreted as an indicator of an upstream and anti-cyclical vote (Tronconi and Valbruzzi 2014).

Some scholars have tried to explain such phenomenon by focusing on specific contextual factors. First among these is the perceived credibility of different political actors in solving a number of social and economic problems (De Sio 2014). However, by following this argument, we run the risk of falling into a sort of tautological explanation of voting behavior. As a matter of fact, the act of attributing credibility seems to be the outcome, rather than the input, of the reasoning process leading to the electoral choice. This is because it is based in turn on a set of predispositions, belief systems and schemes of judgment (Zaller 1992).

What just said has led us to focus on the explanatory importance of the way in which individuals perceive and represent the political reality. Citizens’ confidence in the main competing leaders will take a central role from this point of view. Starting in fact from the hypothesis that leaders work as cognitive shortcuts, allowing voters to make judgments and political decisions, our goal will be to test the extent to which reliability ratings towards them behave as a summary measure of specific representations of the political competition.

Before proceeding in this way, however, we will first provide a general overview of how this issue has been addressed in the national political science debate on the last European elections. Furthermore, we will reserve attention to the theoretical arguments concerning the impact of leaders on both the parties and the choices of voters. This strategy will allow us to frame at best the issues that we intend to deal with. Indeed, trying to clarify “who” really won the electoral competition (as well as “how” and “why” he did it) can help us to better understand the problem at the center of our analysis. Establishing “who” won is crucial for democratic dynamics, as well as for parties and their leaders. However, for those concerned with the study of political and electoral behavior, it is clear that "how" and "why" someone won while others did not is a matter of primary importance.

In turn, explaining the causes of an election result can be more complex than describing its dynamics. It is precisely on this aspect that we will focus in the first paragraphs of this contribution, based on the theoretical arguments and the empirical evidences of the national and international political science literature. In the remaining sections we will deal, instead, with the empirical core of this essay.
1. Leaders without parties or leaders’ parties? Leadership and personalisation of politics in political science debate on Italian results at the 2014 European elections

1.1. To what extent do leaders matter in vote choices and party performances? A theoretical framework concerning personalisation of politics

According to the literature on political parties and party systems, we are in the era of parties without partisans. After all, the trend towards the personalisation and presidentialization of politics seems to have become (in Italy, Europe and Advanced Western democracies) a response to the decline of party identification and party mobilization, with increasing consequences on partisan dealignment between parties and voters. Thus, increasing electoral volatility represents a salient trait of politics nowadays (Bardi, Ignazi and Massari 2007, 2014; Dalton 2000, 2013; Dalton, McAllister and Wattenberg 2000; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Scarrow 2000; Wattenberg 2000; Fiorina 2002; Mair, Müller and Plasser 2004; Pogunke and Webb 2005; Blondel et al. 2010; Dalton, Farrell and McAllister 2011; Welzel and Inglehart 2011; Pasquino 2012; Dalton 2013; Cavataio and Fasano 2014; Maggini 2014b).

According to several scholars, we are in the era of party crisis. On the contrary, for other academics, political parties have lived a phase of adaptation. As a consequence, this party transformation has entailed effects and consequences on political representation and the quality of democracy more generally (Katz and Mair 1994; Manin 1997; Lawson and Pogunthe 2004; Mack 2010; Revelli 2013; Bardi, Bartolini and Trechsel 2014; Ignazi 2014).

It should be noted that we are also in the era of candidate-oriented politics (Wattenberg 1991) and valence politics (Stokes 1992) in which political leaders’ personal characteristics are crucial for vote choices and party performances. Nowadays, party leader effects also affect parliamentary systems and not only presidential systems. For this reason, party leader effects are visible in all systems although with different intensity. Moreover, according to several scholars, the weight of political leaders should hinge on the overall strength of partisan loyalties: the weaker these loyalties, the greater the expected effect of leaders (Blais 2011). In other words, where parties matter less, leaders tend to matter more. Furthermore, leader effects appear to be stronger in systems and elections where party policies differ a little (Holmberg and Oscarsson 2011).

Despite the decline of partisan loyalties in all Western democracies, the left-right political spectrum continues to be important for voters at the level of political identification. Indeed, the increasing personalisation of politics has not implied the end of political parties, since they still are key institutions for political participation and engagement (Katz 2011). This is because the success of party leaders also depends on to the success of their parties. As a consequence, the assumption that political leaders have become more important for the voters than parties and policies seems not to be confirmed (Aardal and Binder 2011).

In sum, political parties still count in vote choices and party performances. They change with societal changes. And the increasing leadership effects are totally part of these transformations.

In this essay we will examine our research objectives by making reference to the above theoretical arguments and empirical evidences.
1.2. The 2014 European elections as a case of deviating elections? The “added value” of Matteo Renzi’s leadership to PD and the impact of intermittent abstention

The last European elections in Italy have induced a strong debate among political scientists concerning leader effects on vote choices and party performances in order to explain Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi’s triumph.

At the electoral level, these elections have shown Renzi as the first centre-left leader to be an “added value” to its party, the Democratic Party, contrary to other centre-left leaders in the “Second Republic” (since 1994). A significant indicator of this can be found in the high levels of popular confidence gained by Renzi both before and after the EU electoral competition (Fig. 1).

![Confidence in the main Italian political leaders](image)

**Fig. 1 – Confidence in the main Italian political leaders, January-August 2014 (%)**

*Note: *= gen (January), feb (February); mar (March); apr (April); ago (August)

*Source: Our elaboration on survey data by Ixè Institute, selected from the website “Sondaggi Politico-Elettorali”, Dipartimento per l’Informazione e l’Editoria - Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (2014)*

According to several analyses of the Cattaneo Institute (Valbruzzi 2014), the Renzi’s “added value” to the Democratic Party is due to peculiarities of the European electoral competition that encourage *sincere voting*. As a matter of fact, the EU vote has been traditionally considered as a way to show ideological proximity towards the favorite party, contrary to local elections. However, several academics do not agree with these theoretical insights. Regardless of the type of election, indeed, voters generally tend to cast sincere voting, although *strategic voting* and *deviating voting* might be crucial for the outcome of a given election (Cox 1997, 1999; Schadee and Segatti 2008; Cavataio and Fasano 2012).

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2 *Sincere voting* is a voting logic based on the fact that voters choose to vote for their favorite party, apart from any evaluation about its probability of winning.

3 *Strategic voting* is a voting logic in which electors decide to vote strategically for a party that is perceived as having a greater chance of winning in order to avoid the wasted vote, apart from voter’s personal preferences for that given party.

4 *Deviating voting* is a voting logic in favor of a given candidate that is perceived as having important chances of winning, regardless of his party membership. This case is especially widespread in the first-order elections (see Schadee and Segatti 2008).
Within this framework, the last European elections seem to have been characterized by an increasing impact of candidates’ valence images (Stokes 1992; Barisone 2006). This could lead us to consider them as a case of deviating elections (Campbell et al. 1960; Stokes 1962) in which partisan loyalties leave room to a more apartisan mobilization with more direct linkages between voter and candidate-leader (Calise 2010; Aarts, Blais and Schmitt 2011; Dalton 2013). More specifically, the “deviation” might entail the increase of influence of candidate-oriented politics, causing the rise of a new type of vote, the volatile vote, because of the growth of electoral volatility (Parisi 2014).

Nevertheless, by comparing the results of the 2013 General elections with results of the 2014 European elections, several academics have opposed to the hypothesis concerning a declining relevance of “stickiness factors” in Italian voting and political behavior. In fact, electoral swings among “loyal” voters of the two traditional coalitions have been overall limited during throughout the “Second Republic” (Legnante 2010; Itanes 2013; Colloca and Vignati 2014; Salvati 2014).

On the whole, explaining Renzi’s success at the last European elections only by making reference to “personalized voting” (Baldini and Legnante 2000) and “personal vote” (Calise 2010) might be misleading. On balance, in Italy, as well as in other European countries, there has been a partisan dealignment implying an increase of mobile voters. However, mobility does not necessarily mean electoral shifts (Parisi 1980). Moreover, any dealignment is often followed by a subsequent realignment between parties and voters in any democratic context (Wenzel and Inglehart 2011). This allows us to say that ideological factors, such as the left-right axis, still matter in the Italian electoral context (Itanes 2013; Salvati 2014), as well as, more recently, the establishment/anti-establishment distinction (Corbetta 2014).

In the main, several scholars explained the Renzi’s triumph in the last European elections through two aspects: on the one hand, the high popularity of his valence images in different segments of general electorate and public opinion (Diamanti 2014); on the other hand, the realignment towards the Democratic Party by centre-left voters that turned off or voted for other parties in the previous 2013’s General Elections. This means that the “Renzi’s Party” mostly won among its voters, thanks to its leader’s ability to mobilise his block of supporters, contrary to other lists. As a matter of fact, the 2014’s European elections have not implied the conquest of rightist voters by the party of the Italian Prime Minister (Colloca and Vignati 2014; Gualmini 2014a, 2014b). Rather, they confirmed that the first “engine” of electoral change in Italy continues to be intermittent abstention instead of electoral volatility (Tuorto 2008).

In sum, the Democratic Party won in 2014 thanks to the Renzi’s “added value”, but also thanks to centre-left voters’ mobilization. Likewise, such a mobilization did not occur for centre-right voters because of strategic coordination failure of the related parties.

2. Theoretical intuitions and methodological aspects

2.1 Leadership, ideology and cognitive shortcuts: the reference theoretical framework

What discussed in the previous paragraph gives room for the questions at the center of this analysis. If indeed it is true that in Italy the characteristics of the leaders had an important, but not unlimited, impact on the results of the last European elections, our goal will be to examine in depth that issue, possibly dispelling some of the most common fallacies in this field. In what sense the evaluation of the leaders has been a key element in the last European elections? Are we dealing with individual evaluations towards specific and independent

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5 See also Bellucci and Bartle 2009.
“leaders-objects”, or rather with networks and combinations of ratings, summarized into a sort of collective map of the political objects? And finally: how are these elements tied to the electoral behavior of the voters? One thing, in fact, is to say that ratings towards leaders are due to idiosyncratic and subjective reasons; another is to say that they are driven by ideological factors which play an active role in structuring individual attitudes. Clearly, selecting one or the other option can lead to really different outcomes in the subsequent analysis.

What we intend to do here is trying to go into the second path. As a matter of fact, we are interested in testing if voters have been characterized by a systematic arrangement of ratings towards leaders and not by single (and probably incoherent) evaluations of them. This is because our theoretical perspective is in line with the so-called political cognition, a branch of political science which focuses on how the political debate is perceived and interpreted by the public (e.g. Kuklinski et al. 2001). Our primary goal, then, will be that to reflect on the actual importance of beliefs and opinions in shaping voters’ attitudes and behaviors at the last European elections. Taking this perspective of analysis should allow, at least in our expectations, to verify the existence of consistent patterns of judgments towards competing political actors. Furthermore, such judgments should result in a coherent representation of the political competition among the voters.

It is crucial, under this point of view, the theoretical notion of political space. Usually this concept refers to one or multidimensional cognitive artifacts, functional to a correct mapping and sorting of the political environment. A typical example of these is the left-right ideological continuum. Here we are going to reconstruct a framework with the same one-dimensional structure, but not based on such general and abstract labels. Rather, we will make use of voters’ judgments towards different political leaders and personalities7. Indeed, as it normally happens when placing parties along the left-right axis, even for leaders it is possible to elaborate a systematic organization of evaluations within a cognitive space. This solution should also allow us to test the ability of leadership to work as a summary measure of a complex network of judgments at the base of some political space. Such space will be conceptualized in terms of a unified bipolar concept, extended between the two extremes of a one-dimensional continuum. It has important technical and methodological implications. We are going to explain them in the course of the next paragraph.

2.2 Measuring the space of the leaders: some technical and methodological considerations

A one-dimensional ideological structure needs specific statistical techniques in order to be properly reconstructed. We are not referring here to analytical tools such as cluster or factor analysis. Such solutions, in fact, although very useful in highlighting the hypothetical extremes of an ideological dimension, tend to improperly split it into two different monopolar concepts (Van Schuur, Henk e Kiers 1994)8. This is why we prefer now to focus on instruments such as item analysis and one-dimensional scaling. Indeed, as they are based on the assumption that both subjects (e.g. voters) and stimuli (e.g. judgments towards political objects) can be placed on the same latent dimension, they seem to be very suitable to test the existence of bipolar ideological structures (Van Schuur 1984).

7 There are disputes about the real morphology of the political space (Converse 2006 Duckitt 2001 Eagly & Chaiken 1998 Eysenck 1954/1999, Feldman 2003 Kerlinger 1984). In our case, however, a one-dimensional structure seems to be suggested by some preliminary descriptive tests, which show the existence (in the form of two latent dimensions) of two opposite polarities of a continuum, not necessarily linked to the traditional left-right opposition.

8 In socio-political contexts of analysis, for example, some applications of factor analysis have counter-intuitively suggested that “liberalism” and “conservatism” constitute two separate and independent factors, rather than a single bipolar factor (Conover and Feldman 1981; Krosnick and Weisberg 1988; Weisberg 1980).
Clearly, such a choice does not necessarily imply the only use of descriptive techniques. As a matter of fact, inference analysis remains an achievable goal under such analytical conditions, although it will not be pursued here. But let us now consider the critical issues of the present contribution.

First of all, we are going to use data belonging to a representative sample of the Italian population realized some weeks before the election date\(^9\). This fact involves some constraints and implications. With regard to the temporal dimension of the survey, for example, this means not so much the study of actual political behavior, but rather the analysis of intentions which are still likely to change over the next period of the election campaign. In addition, there are several problems typical of any survey, such as the variety of distortions which often afflict them (Natale 2009).

However, it will be on the basis of this unique scientific tool that we will try to test the existence of forms of judgment among the voters, observing whether their reliability ratings towards leaders develop or less systematically. Moreover, we will try to analyze the determinants of such patterns - combinations, so to shed light on the cognitive dynamics governing the use of reliability ratings as an instrument for orientation in the political environment (Sniderman, Brody e Tetlock 1991).

Before proceeding in this way, we summarize below the main objectives of the present analysis:

- To test the existence of specific networks of judgment towards the leaders within the electorate;
- To evaluate if the nature of these judgments is more or less systematic and internally consistent;
- To shed light on the possible determinants of such patterns – combinations.

### 3. Analysis and results: the structure of voters’ judgments towards leaders

#### 3.1 Between competition and cognition: the heterogeneous representation of the Italian public debate in the European elections of 2014

Just above we claimed to be interested in finding out the ideological factors influencing the formulation of attitudes and opinions, to be successively integrated into a general system of beliefs about leaders (van Dijk 1998).

In operational terms, a first step towards this direction consists in the assumption that each leader gets more consensus among the voters of his own party. This can be easily seen through an analysis of the average level of reliability received by each leader, calculated according to the party voted by our respondents\(^10\). Having thus divided the sample into several subgroups, we calculated the average rating addressed to different leaders in each of them (Table 2).

The result is that judgments are somehow related to the party that respondents feel the closest to them. This appears clear not only from the fact that judgments towards the leader of one’s party tend to be particularly positive, but also because the chosen party seems to influence (at least at the aggregate level) the ratings towards all the other leaders.

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\(^9\) The data here presented belong to a representative sample of the Italian electorate, created during a pre-election survey of the Tecnè Institute, realized in April 2014.

\(^10\) In the present survey, respondents have been asked to express their judgments towards according to the following question: «I am going to read out a series of leaders of the current national politics. How much confidence do you have for each of them: a lot, enough, a little or not at all?». 
Tab. 2 – Levels of perceived reliability of the main leaders according to the intention to vote for the main political areas (average values, scale 1-10)\textsuperscript{11}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Renzi” Gov.</th>
<th>Renzi</th>
<th>Napolitano</th>
<th>Alfano</th>
<th>Berlusconi</th>
<th>Grillo</th>
<th>Tot. average ratings</th>
<th>(N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PD – Tspiras’ List</td>
<td>7,5</td>
<td>7,4</td>
<td>7,0</td>
<td>4,4</td>
<td>3,1</td>
<td>3,3</td>
<td>5,5</td>
<td>378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forza Italia – Northern League</td>
<td>5,8</td>
<td>6,1</td>
<td>4,8</td>
<td>4,1</td>
<td>6,9</td>
<td>3,9</td>
<td>5,3</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Brothers of Italy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Star Movement</td>
<td>4,4</td>
<td>4,4</td>
<td>3,8</td>
<td>3,4</td>
<td>3,2</td>
<td>7,1</td>
<td>4,9</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>6,3</td>
<td>6,4</td>
<td>6,5</td>
<td>4,7</td>
<td>3,8</td>
<td>3,8</td>
<td>5,3</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tot. (sample average ratings)</td>
<td>6,2</td>
<td>6,2</td>
<td>5,7</td>
<td>4,1</td>
<td>3,8</td>
<td>4,1</td>
<td>4,9</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Our elaboration of survey data from Tecnè Institute, April 2014 (N.1000)

An example of this are certainly the 5 Star Movement’s voters. In that case, in fact, a positive evaluation of Beppe Grillo tends to be systematically opposed to judgments towards all other personalities. A positive evaluation of a leader, therefore, does not only depend on the identification with his political party. On the contrary, it also develops from a network of perceptions and representations that stem from joint evaluations of different personalities and political objects. The same applies to the figures of Matteo Renzi and his government, although characterized by a broader consensus than the alternative political areas. These two items, in fact, reach levels of reliability higher than the sample average not only among centre-left voters, but even among those who feel themselves undecided about their vote. Just below that threshold there are instead centre-right voters, on which the figure of Renzi seems to have a certain appeal, although not seriously undermining the higher levels of confidence in Silvio Berlusconi.

An analysis of the organization of judgments realized through traditional descriptive techniques (factor, cluster and scaling analysis) confirms the plausibility of a placement of leaders into two opposing groups. As mentioned above, we report here in detail the outcome of the one-dimensional scaling and its graphical representation\textsuperscript{12}.

\textbf{Grillo} Berlusconi Alfano Napolitano\textsuperscript{13} Renzi “\textit{Renzi}” Government

Fig. 3 – Arrangement of a series of “leaders-objects” into a one-dimensional space

Source: Our elaboration of survey data from Tecnè Institute, April 2014 (N.1000)

\textsuperscript{11} In each of the political groups reported in the table appear underscored those values that are higher than the average ratings gained by each leader within the sample.

\textsuperscript{12} To accomplish this result, we relied on the ALSCAL (Alternating Least Squares) procedure available on SPSS packages. Specifically, this allowed us to achieve a spatial arrangement of our items based on the computation of their reciprocal distances within a distance matrix. Such a process is normally regulated by a “Stress” algorithm, which compares the distances between the various items within the output space with those present in the original matrix (Kruskal & Wish, 1978; Young, 1970). According to the demanding Kruskal’s parameters, a spatial solution becomes acceptable only when its Stress function is included between 0 and 0.15. In our case, the one-dimensional solution we assumed has a Stress value of 0.03, therefore it is acceptable.

\textsuperscript{13} The inclusion of Giorgio Napolitano within the scale is justified by its moderate correlation with the other items under analysis. As a matter of fact, such correlation has been proven to be positive in relation with government items (“Alfano”, “Renzi” and “Renzi Government”) and negative with opposition items (Berlusconi and especially Grillo).
The Cronbach’s alpha, i.e. the coefficient that measures the level of internal consistency of the obtained sequence, is here equal to 0.63. It would rise to 0.72 in case of exclusion of the item concerning Berlusconi. This provides a useful proof of the basically one-dimensional nature of the scale at issue.\footnote{For a detailed discussion of that statistic, see Cronbach (1951).}

3.2 Between coherence and violation: potential and limits of a "majority/opposition" judgment scheme

In light of the last evidences we should play here some additional considerations. First of all, some items appear much more performing than others in relation with our scale (the one relating to Berlusconi is the worst under this point of view). This could mean that the arrangement of leaders here presented is more shared in specific regions of the political space than in others.

From the conceptual point of view, instead, our one-dimensional “unfolding” model appears closely related to the downsian notion of voter’s utility framed in terms of spatial proximity (Downs 1957). In that framework voters tend to prefer parties which are closer to their ideal point along an ideological continuum. However, our results are somehow inconsistent with a pure criterion of spatial proximity, especially in terms of a “left-right” scheme. Such observation is concerned with both the apparent contradiction between the items "Renzi Government" and "Grillo" (these are the real opposing “stimuli”, the interpretative key able to explain the scale obtained), and the proximity between Renzi and Napolitano, as well as between Grillo and Berlusconi. All these elements lead us to assume the existence of an alternative standard of judgment, not proximity-based but rather consisting in the dichotomy “amicus/hostis”, from now on “majority/opposition”. It is a simple mechanism, in which voters evaluate more or less positively leaders on the side of the government or of the opposition according to the following reasoning algorithm:

- If the “leader-object” belongs to the government (or opposition) side, in which I am identified with \(\rightarrow\) positive judgment
- If the “leader-object” belongs to the government (or opposition) side, in which I am not identified with \(\rightarrow\) negative judgment.

To clarify the effectiveness of this statement we will now ask ourselves about the spread and the degree of specificity of such bipolar organization of judgments. How many (and especially who) are the respondents adopting that pattern of evaluations? With regard to our data, this feature can be inferred from the ratings expressed by voters towards 6 politicians: 4 belonging to the government (Renzi, Government Renzi, Napolitano, Alfano) and 2 belonging to the opposition side (Grillo and Berlusconi). Overall, about the 29% of our respondents adapted to the standard of judgment under analysis. This means that about one out of four of them systematically structured their ratings toward according to a “majority/opposition” scheme.

Yet, the remaining 70% of the voters must have relied on an alternative sorting criterion of the leaders, although not necessarily systematic or inter-subjectively shared. This expectation leads us to deal with two different issues: first, to verify the existence of possible “violations” of a “majority/opposition” scheme; secondly, to identify the possible factors affecting the adoption or the refusal of it. Starting from this latter point, a useful evidence seems to be the one provided in Figure 4. It shows, in fact, that the majority/opposition...
scheme is not equally and independently adopted in all regions of the political space, but rather appears over-represented in a specific section of the continuum.

This does not mean, of course, that the political identities of the voters are the main element affecting the adoption of one form of representation or the other. Indeed, this statement should be validated by even more in-depth analyses. It remains, however, that especially those who say they are close to political parties belonging to the government side (above all those self-placed in the centre-left) show off this logic of representation. This is also (at least partially) reflected on the weak scalar performance of the items related to Grillo, and even more to Berlusconi. At the end of the previous paragraph, in fact, we were arguing about the potentially positive effects of excluding these two items on the internal consistency of the scale at issue. This was clearly due to problems of categorization affecting the two already mentioned leaders within the majority/opposition scheme.

![Fig. 4 – Respondents who adopt the “majority/opposition” scheme according to their ideological self-placement (%)](image)

*Source: Our elaboration of survey data from Tecnè Institute, April 2014 (N.1000)*

Why? Or better yet: by whom? We start, in this sense, from the case of "Berlusconi". Analyzing the graph above it seems reasonable to assume that they are centre-right voters. However, the small size of this set of voters inside our sample (about 5% of the total) does not allow us a reliable verification of that hypothesis. The strategy we followed, then, was to calculate the share of positive judgments towards Berlusconi, Renzi and his government together on the sum of those who feel much or enough confident in one or the other of the competing leaders. The same procedure was repeated by replacing Berlusconi with the item relating to Beppe Grillo. This served to develop a first - very preliminary - idea about the distribution of inconsistent judgments towards leaders among different groups of leader’s supporters.

The results, shown in Figure 5, appear quite interesting and somehow in line with our initial expectations. In the first case, in fact, the highest frequency of jointly positive evaluations towards Berlusconi, Renzi and his government (almost 50% of their total amount) stands exactly within those who are "somewhat" or "very" confident in the leader of Forza Italia. The same applies to Beppe Grillo, although the share of inconsistent judgments among those who are "somewhat" or "very" confident in the Italian comician is overall lower (about 30%). Since this is a quite counter-intuitive scenario, we believe it should be adequately discussed.

As a matter of fact, it presents clear inconsistencies with relation to policy and ideological party positions elaborated by recent expert surveys (e.g. Di Virgilio, Giannetti, Pedrazzani e
Pinto 2014). Moreover, it does not seem to be consistent (especially in the case of Grillo and Renzi) with the high degree of debate polarization during the last election campaign.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Very or somewhat confident in…} \\
\hline \\
\text{Renzi Government} & \text{Renzi} & \text{Napolitano} & \text{Alfano} & \text{Berlusconi} & \text{Grillo} \\
\hline \\
\end{array}
\]

This does not mean, however, that some voters had a "wrong" representation of the political competition during the last European elections. Indeed, violating a pre-arranged sequence of judgments does not necessarily imply an inconsistency in the underlying reasoning process (Baldassarri 2005). Rather, the real question is what has led some of them to adopt that counterintuitive rating pattern. In the case of Berlusconi, contingent issues such as his “blunt” election campaign, marked by his opening to a period of shared political reforms by Forza Italia and the Democratic Party, may have played a significant role in this direction. One might even think, in fact, that the "harmony" between the two parties in the months before the election has led some voters to perceive both Renzi and Berlusconi as part of the same political side. In the case of Grillo, instead, the political predispositions of those who voted for the 5 Star Movement in the previous elections could have counted. Not by chance, some recent analyses have assessed that those who moved from the 5 Star Movement to the Democratic Party in 2014 were already inclined to vote for that party in the previous year (Segatti 2014).

The rise of Renzi to the leadership of the party, then, would have been crucial in inducing these voters to frame the Democratic Party as preferable choice to the 5 Star Movement. If this were true, we might even speculate the existence of an additional one-dimensional way of representing the public debate at the last European elections. More precisely, this would be based on the opposition between "new" and "old" political establishment, with respectively Renzi, Grillo and the current government on one side and Berlusconi, Alfano and Napolitano on the other. Clearly, it is not possible to discuss here what just assumed. Furthermore, it would not be sufficient to acquire knowledge of all possible combination of ratings adopted by Italian voters in 2014. After all, those who adopt the “majority/opposition” scheme represent a significant, but not overwhelming, proportion of our sample (29%).

This does not prevent us, however, from confirming the existence of a sufficiently shared judgment style within the electorate. Clearly, such an evidence has to coexist with the possible existence of one or more alternative ways of representing the political competition. It remains, however, that leaders are not simply the summary of a set of personal
characteristics, but are also cognitive artifacts used by voters to orient themselves in a complex information environment: the structure of the public debate in a given electoral competition.

Conclusions
At the comparative level\textsuperscript{15}, the 2014 European elections were defined \textit{critical elections} (Gualmini 2014a) because of low voter turnout in many EU countries (Tab. 6) and because of the electoral success of several populist and Eurosceptic parties (Tab. 7 and Fig. 8) in important EU countries, such as France (e.g., FN) and the UK (e.g., UKIP).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>45,4</td>
<td>−0,6</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>48,1</td>
<td>+4,8</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>23,8</td>
<td>−0,7</td>
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<td>89,6</td>
<td>−0,8</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>60,0</td>
<td>+7,4</td>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>33,7</td>
<td>−3,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>35,8</td>
<td>−3,2</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>52,4</td>
<td>−6,2</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>35,4</td>
<td>+0,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>44,0</td>
<td>−15,4</td>
<td>ITALY</td>
<td>57,2</td>
<td>−8,7</td>
<td>Czech Rep.</td>
<td>18,2</td>
<td>−10,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>25,2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>30,2</td>
<td>−23,5</td>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>32,4</td>
<td>+4,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>56,3</td>
<td>−3,2</td>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>47,4</td>
<td>+26,4</td>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>13,1</td>
<td>−6,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>36,5</td>
<td>−7,4</td>
<td>Luxemburg</td>
<td>85,6</td>
<td>−5,2</td>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>24,6</td>
<td>−3,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>41,0</td>
<td>+2,4</td>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>74,8</td>
<td>−4,0</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>43,8</td>
<td>−1,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>42,4</td>
<td>+1,8</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>37,3</td>
<td>+0,6</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>51,1</td>
<td>+5,5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Our elaboration on data by European Parliament (2009-2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country (main governing party)*</th>
<th>2014 EU elections</th>
<th>Diff. 2009/2014</th>
<th>Diff. from main competitors**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France (PS-PRG)</td>
<td>14,0</td>
<td>−2,5</td>
<td>−10,9 (from FN); −6,8 (from UMP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany (CDU/CSU)</td>
<td>35,3</td>
<td>−2,6</td>
<td>+8,0 (from SPD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITALY (PD)</td>
<td>40,8</td>
<td>+14,7</td>
<td>+19,7 (from M5S); +24 (from FI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK (CONS.)</td>
<td>23,3</td>
<td>−3,7</td>
<td>−3,5 (from UKIP); −1,4 (from LAB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain (PP)</td>
<td>26,1</td>
<td>−16,2</td>
<td>+3,1 (from PSOE/PSC)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *= PS-PRG (Parti Socialiste - Parti Radical de Gauche), CDU/CSU (Christlich Demokratische Union/Christlich-Soziale Union), PD (Partito Democratico), CONS. (Conservative Party), PP (Partido Popular)
** = FN (Front National), UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire); SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands); M5S (MoVimento 5 Stelle), FI (Forza Italia); UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party); LAB. (Labour Party); PSOE/PSC (Partido Socialista Obrero Español / Partit Socialista de Catalunya)

Source: Our elaboration on data by European Parliament (2009-2014)

\textsuperscript{15} With regard to European political behavior, elections and institutions, see Blondel, Sinnot and Svensson 1998; Katz and Wessels 1999; Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996, 2009; Schmitt and Thomassen 1999; Thomassen 2005; Van der Brug and Van der Eijk 2007; Gaxie, Hubé and Rowell 2013; Külahci 2014.
**Fig. 8 – 2014 European elections: votes for the first list in the 28 EU countries (%)**

*Source: Our elaboration on data by European Parliament (2014)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>List</th>
<th>% (lista)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>ÖVP</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgio</td>
<td>N-VA</td>
<td>16,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>GERB</td>
<td>30,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cipro</td>
<td>HDZ+HSP AS</td>
<td>37,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croazia</td>
<td>ΔΗΣΥ/DISY</td>
<td>41,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danimarca</td>
<td>O. (DF)</td>
<td>24,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>ER</td>
<td>26,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finlandia</td>
<td>KOS</td>
<td>22,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francia</td>
<td>FN</td>
<td>24,9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germania</td>
<td>CDU/CSU</td>
<td>35,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grecia</td>
<td>ΣΥ.Π.Ι.ΖΑ.</td>
<td>26,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irlanda</td>
<td>IND. + OTHER PARTIES</td>
<td>25,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italia</td>
<td>PD</td>
<td>40,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lettonia</td>
<td>V.</td>
<td>46,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lussemburg</td>
<td>CSV/PCS</td>
<td>37,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>PL/MLP</td>
<td>53,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paesi Bassi</td>
<td>D66</td>
<td>15,5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Polonia</td>
<td>PO</td>
<td>32,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portogallo</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>31,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regno Unito</td>
<td>UKIP</td>
<td>26,8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rep. Ceca</td>
<td>ANO2011</td>
<td>16,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>PSD+PC+UNPR</td>
<td>37,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovacchia</td>
<td>SMER-SD</td>
<td>24,1</td>
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<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>SDS</td>
<td>24,9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spagna</td>
<td>PP</td>
<td>26,1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Swezia</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>24,4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ungheria</td>
<td>FIDESZ-KDNP</td>
<td>51,5</td>
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In Italy, the 2014 European elections were the elections in which the Democratic Party came to the realization of its “majoritarian vocation” (Maggini 2014b). As a matter of fact, the Renzi’s Party, by overtaking the 40% of total votes (Tab. 9), achieved the best electoral result in the history of the EU elections in Italy. Nevertheless, the voter turnout was very low, although above the European average (Fig. 10).

Tab. 9 – Votes for Italian parties that achieved at least 10% in European elections, 1979-2014 (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DC</td>
<td>36,5</td>
<td>33,0</td>
<td>32,9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>PCI</td>
<td>29,6</td>
<td>33,3</td>
<td>27,6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>PSI</td>
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<td>11,2</td>
<td>14,8</td>
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<td>AN</td>
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<td>12,4</td>
<td>10,3</td>
<td>11,5</td>
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<td>FI</td>
<td></td>
<td>30,6</td>
<td>25,2</td>
<td>20,9</td>
<td>16,8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LN</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10,2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>35,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDS/DS</td>
<td></td>
<td>19,1</td>
<td>17,3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10,0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniti nell’Ulivo/PD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>31,8</td>
<td>26,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M5S</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21,2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DC (Democrazia Cristiana); PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano); PSI (Partito Socialista Italiano); AN (Alleanza Nazionale); FI (Forza Italia); LN (Lega Nord); PDL (Popolo della Libertà); PDS (Partito Democratico della Sinistra); DS (Democratici di SInistra); PPI (Partito Popolare Italiano), PD (Partito Democratico); M5S (MoVimento 5 Stelle)

Source: Our elaboration on data by Ministry of Interior (1979-2014)

Fig. 10 – Voter turnout in European elections, 1979-2014: Italy in comparison with European average (%)

Source: Our elaboration on data by Ministry of Interior (1979-2014)
In general, explaining the electoral results is not easy. Political science academics provided different explanations with regard to the Renzi’s success at the last European elections. According to several scholars, the triumph of the Democratic Party was due to the impact of leader effects concerning his valence images. As a consequence, the young Italian Prime Minister would have been able to achieve a personal and transversal confidence within the electorate, regardless of voters’ party identification.

In contrast, according to other scholars\textsuperscript{17}, the Renzi’s success in 2014 was due to realignment dynamics towards the Democratic Party mainly involving centre-left voters that turned off or voted for other parties at the 2013 General elections. This would confirm that the first “engine” of electoral change in Italy continues to be intermittent abstention instead of electoral volatility.

These two different explanations are not necessarily divergent between them. As a matter of fact, at the last European elections there has actually been an electoral change, due to Renzi’s leader effects and to vulnerability of centre-right parties, but also persistent dynamics (voter turnout, intermittent abstention and “impermeability” between the two traditional coalitions).

Within this general framework, we tried to test some hypotheses concerning the linkage between these two interpretative trails. Our main objective, indeed, was to investigate the linkage between orientation toward leaders and political predispositions, also involving the perception of electoral competition. Within this framework, our initial expectations have been substantially confirmed. As a matter of fact, the analyses showed the existence of different rating patterns within the electorate. Moreover, leaders appeared as summary measures (or shortcuts) of a specific representation of the political debate (the majority/opposition scheme), exactly as expected.

References


\textsuperscript{17} The reference is to the electoral swings analyses realized by the Cattaneo Institute between the 2013 General elections and the 2014 European elections (Colloca and Vignati 2014; Gualmini 2014b).


Ma non ha vinto con i voti di destra, in “La Stampa”, May 28.


—, (2014), *A Compared Analysis of the European vote*, Presentation realized at the School of Political Culture of Milano, Module 1 “The European democracy and the populist wave”, October 19.


