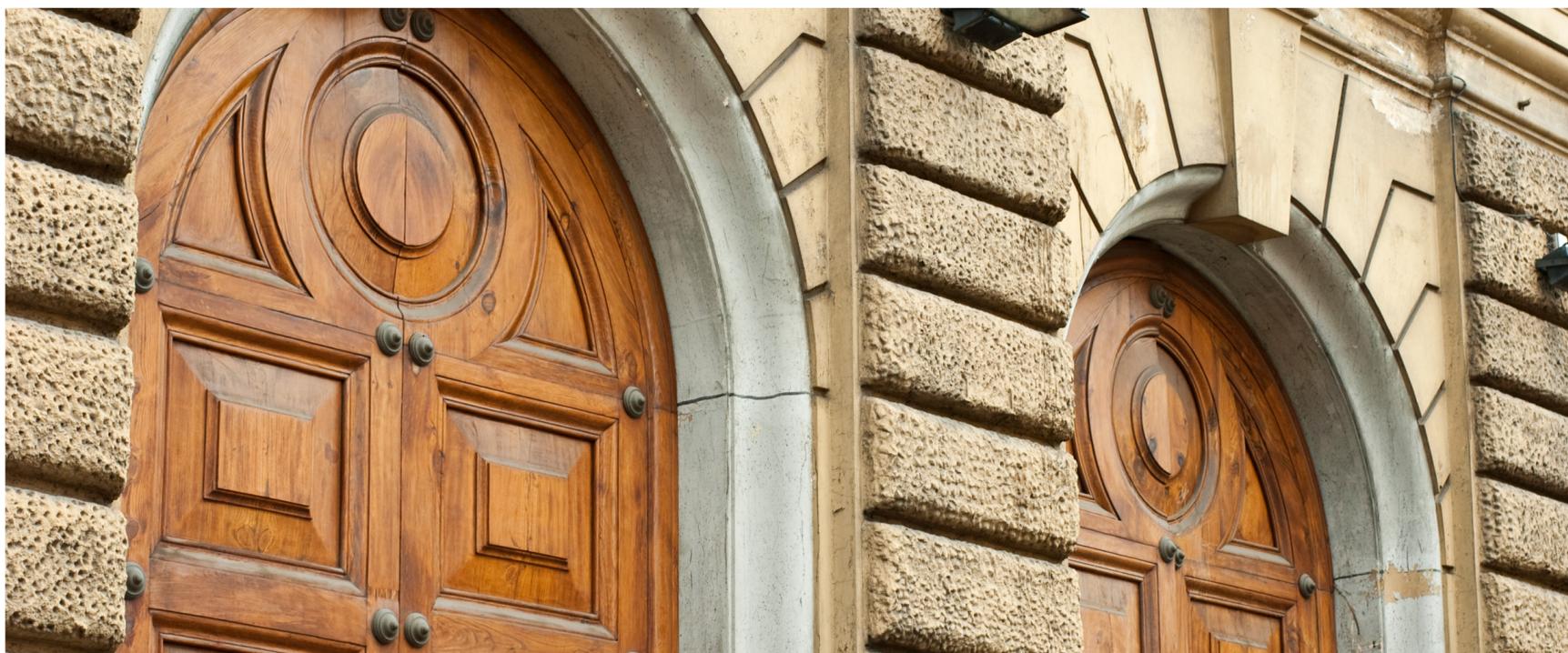




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# THE RE-SHAPING OF THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN TIMES OF CRISES

## THE ITALIAN LABORATORY



### Summary

During the last decade, European party systems have experienced a profound overhaul. The emergence of new populist parties – in both the right and left-wing side of the political spectrum, the increasing salience of new issues and the reliance on new modes of communication have radically transformed mainstream political discourse. The Covid-19 pandemic has likewise reshuffled all previous political priorities and compelled officeholders and party leaders to calibrate their political discourse accordingly.

Against such a background, the authors build on their recently published book **“Changing political discourse in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis: the case of Italy”** to outline the many reasons for which Italy can be considered a laboratory for the rest of Europe. The southern-European country offers a unique angle to comprehend how populist parties – chiefly Salvini’s Lega and Movimento 5 Stelle – have displayed an impressive agenda-setting power, capable of re-shaping fundamental nodes of political competition.

The authors present an appraisal of the discursive stance of Italy’s main political parties through three different lenses: i) representative institutions, ii) notions of citizenship and iii) foreign policy.

Crucially, this FEPS Covid Response Paper elucidates how the Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted the sovereignist and nationalist discourse of populist forces in Italy at a time when issues of health and the strengthening of the state have gained prominent importance.

The paper yields findings useful for the management of political communication by progressive forces across Europe. It offers recommendations on what Italy’s main progressive party, the Partito Democratico, should do in order to increase its ability to determine Italy’s political agenda: a better use of digital platforms, replacing neutral language with political-charged vocabulary, and the embracement of consistent frames and narratives.

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# The re-shaping of the political discourse in times of crises: the Italian laboratory

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## Table of contents

1. Introduction.....	2
2. The conundrum of democracy and institutions.....	2
3. Contesting the boundaries of citizenship: a map.....	1
3.1. <i>Migration, security and citizenship</i> .....	1
3.2. <i>Culture</i> .....	3
4. Foreign and European policy.....	2
5. Conclusions: an agenda for European progressives in times of Covid-19 ....	5
About the authors .....	3

## 1. Introduction

For politicians, pundits and ordinary citizens interested in the changing landscape of politics in European countries since the Great Recession, the case of Italy is noteworthy and – in some respects – even paradigmatic. Characterised until recent years by a population displaying widespread support for the EU and by political elites largely mirroring such Europhile leanings, Italy was hit hard by the sovereign debt crisis and then greatly affected by soaring migration flows in the 2010s. Coming on top of domestic circumstances, these two crises played a part in breaking the mould of the Italian party system, paving the way for the rise of two ‘challenger’ parties – the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) and Salvini’s rebooted Lega – which, after the 2018 general election, would even go on to form the first self-described populist government in a founding member of the European communities.

There are grounds to believe that the last decade of Italian politics provides a particularly vivid example of trends that have involved many other European member states as well. The patterns of competition between political forces have become more blurred and less linear amidst greater volatility, dragging in the EU as a bone of contention in its own right and giving birth to previously unseen coalitions. There have been profound transformations in the agenda of salient issues and in the resonance of political discourse, and the very language of politics has been dramatically swayed. The parties of the centre-left and the centre-right, seemingly incapable of either buttressing their policy platforms or reframing them in persuasive ways, have faced at different times an erosion in their respective public support. Last but not least, re-emerging demands for social protection have been met by ‘challenger’ political forces – and especially by nationalist ones – with exclusionary rearticulations of ideas on the welfare state and access to it.

It is against such a background that our book, recently published by FEPS, [Changing political discourse in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis:](#)

[the case of Italy](#), was conceived. There we set out to retrace the transformation of political discourse in Italy between 2013 and 2019, considering wider changes in Italian politics through the lens of the communication streams put forward by the main parties. In doing so, we focused on four leading parties ranging from the right to the left: **Lega**, **Forza Italia**, **Movimento 5 Stelle** and **Partito Democratico (PD)**. We first prepared the way by reviewing the complex conceptual relations between populism, nationalism and self-described ‘sovereignism’, before pointing to long-standing historical roots that have created a fertile breeding ground for the contemporary populist challengers in Italy. The book then features three chapters dealing with broad policy domains: *Democracy and Institutions*, covering the relationship of citizens with the state, its institutions and the political class; *Boundaries of Citizenship*, mainly tackling welfare, immigration and security; and *Foreign and European Policy*, including the European dimension and international relations.

Since the end point of the evidence analysed in our book, marked changes have once more taken place in the Italian political system. As things now stand, Salvini’s Lega tops the polls with a slowly declining 25 per cent of the vote, followed by the stagnating Partito Democratico with 20 per cent, and by the Movimento 5 Stelle which has stabilised at 16 per cent. While the appeal of Forza Italia has been reduced to well below 10 per cent, the radical right group Fratelli d’Italia is now the second-largest party on the right, polling more than 15 per cent of voting intentions. The main change in Italian politics since last year, anyway, has been the downfall of one government and the birth of another. In August 2019, Salvini’s abrupt decision to pull the plug brought down the so-called ‘yellow-green’ government. The surprising result of the ensuing crisis, however, was the establishment of a new ‘yellow-red’ government, again led by Giuseppe Conte and involving an uneasy coalition between the Movimento 5 Stelle and



the Partito Democratico, together with a few minor parties.

The outbreak of Covid-19 then brought a dramatic change in the situation. Once again Italy turned out to be a laboratory, as it was the first European country needing to arrange a response to the raging pandemic. For this reason, highlighting the reaction of the Italian political system to Covid-19 is extremely interesting. The discourse of nationalist and populist forces was profoundly disrupted by the crisis, especially in the lockdown phase of the pandemic. Nevertheless, a context of fragility – both in the institutions and in the parties' political culture – was clearly revealed. The difficulties faced by political parties and by the institutional system in converging on a shared view of the common interest and in developing overall strategies to counter the disease led to a centralisation of the response in the hands of the government. At the same time, as the political debate seemingly froze and the role of the Italian Parliament grew

fainter, a crucial place was entrusted to the communication of the prime minister. Finally, with the pandemic bringing experts and scientific knowledge to the fore, virologists quickly became public figures in their own right, although their insulation from party political struggles soon wore off in the strong debates between them.

This policy paper aims to pinpoint the main findings of the research carried out in our book, and also to suggest how the pandemic has influenced Italian political discourse during the recent months. Therefore, the following three sections of the paper both summarise the outcomes of our analysis in the three aforementioned domains and update the picture with reference to the aftermath of the Covid-19 outbreak. The concluding section then draws a few significant lessons that will be of use – or so we hope – to the political communication of progressive forces across the European continent.

## 2. The conundrum of democracy and institutions

The first chapter of our book focused on the attitudes towards representative democracy and institutions shown by Italy's main political forces between 2013 and 2019. The conception of democracy is indeed a privileged battlefield between 'established' parties and movements keen to employ narratives and discourse considered as 'populist'. Our analysis took into account the attitude of political forces towards several aspects related to these forces' conception of democracy and institutions – aspects such as people and the political class, the party system and the funding of politics, and also institutions and their reform.

In the conception of the **Movimento 5 Stelle**, a negative consideration of parties and collective organisations should first of all be underlined. The role of elites is frequently a core argument within the narrative of populist and/or nationalist forces. Pitting people or

common citizens against elites is often a key feature of the political discourse delivered by movements that tend to present themselves as outsiders and anti-establishment. For the Movimento 5 Stelle, criticism of the political class was really a founding issue. Historically, in the discourse constructed by the party, representation of the political class is framed mainly through the concept of 'caste'. The underlying idea is that politicians do not really carry out the task of representing the electorate or of acting in the best interest of the people, but instead systematically behave in the interest of their own profit, aiming to collect benefits and advantages for themselves. Political parties are the main target of the disapproval voiced by the M5S, which expresses skepticism towards political ideas and ideological cleavages. Behind the harsh criticism of the party system made by M5S is the underlying idea that political parties are not necessary for democracy. Indeed, public funding to the parties is categorically



excluded. The attempt of the M5S to reduce the costs of politics is related to the idea that this could help bring politics closer to the needs and to the sentiment of common people. Furthermore, it is quite evident that the critique of the Movimento 5 Stelle is not limited to the parties, but also involves the institutional system itself. In the view of the M5S, institutions are partly seen as a means used by the parties to safeguard their power. With regard to the role of the parliament, the narrative of the M5S is quite ambivalent. On the one hand, the parliament is theoretically valued as the place where the will of the people can be expressed by the M5S representatives. On the other hand, the parliament's role is considered to be lost, since the parties have emptied it of its functions and powers. According to one of the core ideas of the M5S, members of the parliament should not 'represent' the electorate but be free to play their role according to their own judgment. They should therefore be considered as 'employees' of the citizens, thus emphasising the binding commitment to their mandate received from the electorate. It should be noted that, according to the Italian Constitution (Article 67), members of parliament have no mandate constraints.

For Salvini's **Lega**, 'the people' are considered as a community defined on a national basis. This community of people should be defended from the multiple threats coming from outside (immigration) and from on top (European and supranational elites). The Lega's critique of the supranational establishment is linked to the global-national identity cleavage. Furthermore, there is disapproval of national politicians insofar as they are allegedly detached from their community, being pro-European and promoting globalisation, immigration, global citizenship, and cosmopolitan values. Immigration has a key role in this narrative as it is seen as a part of a project of people replacement, in line with a typical extreme-right narrative framework. Furthermore, certain experts and intellectuals who oppose the Lega's ideas and projects are often targets of criticism along with politicians. In opposition to these allegedly 'anti-national'

figures, Salvini presents himself and his party as embodying common sense. He uses a discursive strategy aimed at presenting specific and very radical political ideas as something acceptable and close to the sentiment of the people.

The Lega's sovereignism is far more centred on countering alleged internal and external threats to national sovereignty itself, than on the concrete functioning mechanisms and decision-making processes within the state and the democratic system (which remain 'behind the scenes'). Party-related and institutional issues are considered far from the real problems of the people. Indeed, the Lega does not stress the issue of party funding very significantly in its narrative – most likely because the party itself is quite vulnerable on this. The core of Salvini's narrative is a strong claim to 'recover sovereignty', but this claim is played mostly against external targets, like the EU or migrants. According to Salvini's vision, the state should on the one hand defend the citizen from internal and external threats (crime and an "invasion" of migrants). On the other hand, however, the action of the state should be limited as much as possible. For the Lega, the task of politics is to solve a minimal set of alleged 'problems of the people', and to limit any other intervention by the state in citizens' lives. Any discussion on the political and institutional process that could enable such solutions remains vague. For this reason, there is little or no interest in safeguarding institutional equilibria and the balance of powers. Indeed, this was clearly visible in the behaviour of Salvini as interior minister. His disrespect for the limits of competences related to a specific role, his repeated and unrepentant legally borderline behaviour, and his lack of institutional attitude and *gravitas* are all signs of a conception of institutions as a simple means to be used in order to fulfil an alleged will of the people.

For the **Popolo della Libertà** – which was re-established by Silvio Berlusconi as **Forza Italia** in late 2013 – 'the people' are composed of common people, ordinary men and women, consumers, producers, family members and



homeowners. Citizenship is mainly defined not in relation to politics or political participation, but rather to economic activity and the private sphere. The issue of common sense is very relevant for Silvio Berlusconi's parties, as well as for the Lega. Meanwhile, Berlusconi's attitude towards the political class and anti-political narratives, like that of the Movimento 5 Stelle, is complex, swinging between an anti-establishment and pro-establishment attitude. The main line of criticism of the party system raised by the Popolo della Libertà/Forza Italia is about the system's fragmentation and ineffectiveness. Indeed, Berlusconi claims to have struggled to create a two-party system in order to counter the instability of governments and the leverage of small parties, as he considers these to be the main problems of the Italian political system. The main source of funding for Forza Italia and the Popolo della Libertà has always been Berlusconi's personal wealth. Pledges about the "abolition of public funding to parties" and the "halving of the costs related to politics" feature in the 2013 electoral programme of the Popolo della Libertà, although the inclusion of such issues in the programme was probably aimed at countering the Movimento 5 Stelle narrative.

With regard to the **Partito Democratico**, it is not easy to ascertain a clear position on the above-mentioned issues related to democracy and institutions, and this is for different reasons. On the one hand, there are different tendencies within the party; on the other hand, positions change over the time frame considered. For the PD, citizenship at the national level is generally seen as compatible with multiple levels of identity: local, European, global. The Partito Democratico's discourse on the political class is different from that of the other parties, given that it does not feature any general attack on the political class or on the elite. The PD's communication exhibits a clear awareness both of the deep delegitimisation incurred by the political class, and of the need to develop a strategy to counter the attacks from the other political forces and rebuild a connection between citizens and the political elite. For the PD, institutional reforms are thus considered a tool

to build a new legitimisation for the political class by increasing the efficiency of the political process.

Generally speaking, the Partito Democratico defends the parties as the main channel of political participation and as an important element of a democratic system, even though a reform of how they function is regarded as necessary to increase internal democracy. In fact, the issue of participation has always been an important topic in the narrative of the Partito Democratico. In particular, the PD has consistently claimed to be the political force giving more room to party democracy and real participation. This is enacted through the tool of primary elections, even if these elections are the subject of discussion and sometimes of criticism. Although the narrative of the Partito Democratico emphasises the importance of the party system for political participation and democracy, the functioning of the party is nevertheless a matter of internal debate. The PD could be seen, on the one hand, as the main defender of the time-honoured role of parties and of their importance in making democracy work. On the other hand, however, since the foundation of the PD this tendency has coexisted with a different one – a tendency that has focused on stressing the need to find new and different forms of political participation, and that has believed traditional party mechanisms to be mostly outdated. This latter set of ideas was strongly supported by Matteo Renzi even before his spell as party leader. Indeed, Renzi's main catchphrase in this regard was the "scrapping" of the "old" ruling class of the party. He thus introduced a narrative based on an old/new cleavage, disintermediation, disruption, a light party organisation, and a rejection of the traditional ways of selection and internal dialectic. He also sketched a different vision of the people – a narrative which divided the Italian people between those who are hard-working, who are willing to embrace change, and those who want to block the renewal of the country. Renzi's narrative sometimes used tones which partly recall those of the populist critique. This was also reflected in a partly different approach to institutional reforms. While the



reforms were seen as a tool to strengthen the political system, the discourse used to justify them partly included anti-political arguments. Conversely, other representatives of the PD called for a reorganisation of the party in a more classical way.

The issue of institutional reforms assumed a central position in the 2013-18 legislature for a variety of reasons. This was partly because, for a political system faced with the rise of the Movimento 5 Stelle, institutional reforms were largely seen as a means to reframe the citizen-institutions relationship, improving the effectiveness of the state in providing answers to the needs of citizens. The reforms were thus, to some extent, considered a suitable answer to the anti-political challenge. At the same time, the tone of the discussion on such reforms was sometimes affected by the anti-political atmosphere itself, borrowing some of its slogans and proposals. Particularly significant was the debate on the abolition of reimbursement for electoral spending, as well as the tones of the discussion on the wide-ranging institutional reform which led to the 2016 constitutional referendum. Especially under the leadership of Renzi, the PD was particularly keen to use anti-political patterns, such as the demarcation between 'new' and 'old', corresponding to 'yes' or 'no'. The position of the Popolo della Libertà/Forza Italia was meanwhile ambiguous. While on the one hand Berlusconi expressed the will to be part of a common design for a new shared framework of rules, he and his customary discourse were not alien to the anti-political culture. All in all, the attempt of the PD and Popolo della Libertà/Forza Italia to tackle the populist challenge was carried out with a mixed strategy of contrast and inclusion of many of the proposals made by the Movimento 5 Stelle.

Looking at the entire 2013-19 time frame considered in our book, the existing institutional and party system can be seen ultimately to have had few or no defenders, in the face of an anti-establishment push that was sometimes hardly contained by political forces, sometimes accompanied by them, and

sometimes even actively promoted by them. Over the seven-year time frame, the debate on the crisis of the political system appears to have been significantly influenced by the agenda-setting of the anti-political forces. However, there are some arguably crucial elements that are completely missing from the discussion that took place: a comprehensive vision of how to regenerate and better regulate the party system; and a serious debate on the funding of politics, on mechanisms to train the ruling class, on think tanks and other structures necessary to produce a political culture, and on the lack of support for democratic institutions and a democratic culture in the country.

An offshoot of the party discussions and processes that did take place, however, was the creation of a government formed by a coalition of two forces which do not believe in the 'democracy of the parties', and which became successful through disintermediation and distrust towards institutions. The Movimento 5 Stelle and the Lega, albeit for different reasons, have little interest in respecting or safeguarding institutional mechanisms or representative democracy. This was particularly evident in the chain of events that led to the formation of the so-called 'Government of Change' in 2018. The agreement between the two forces was not defined as a political alliance. Instead, the government was based on a 'government contract' signed between their two 'political leaders', Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini. Furthermore, the choice to install a non-partisan prime minister expressly portrayed as the 'people's lawyer' was highly significant because it showed an intention to deny that the government was a result of political mediation – which is deprecated. The model was instead one of private bargaining.

Salvini's Lega played a key role in the Conte I, 'yellow-green' government, gradually overshadowing the discourse of the M5S, especially by doubling down on the issue of immigration. Using his position as interior minister and his propaganda ability, Matteo Salvini managed to gain dominance within the



government, vis-à-vis the centre-left coalition, and partly also at the European level in the gathering of sovereigntist parties. His consensus continued to grow until summer 2019, when he suddenly decided to bring down the government, calling for “full powers” and demanding new elections. His attempt failed, however, leading to the formation of a new government by the Movimento 5 Stelle and Partito Democratico. This new coalition was not formed on the basis of real and strong political convergence, but rather in order to prevent Salvini from taking over the government. The new government was chaired by the same prime minister as the previous one, Giuseppe Conte.

Given that the new government was not built on a clear political deal, Conte came to play a crucial role as the link between the two political forces, and his strong role became even more important after the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak. The emergency health situation raised a need to protect citizens, and a new role for the state thus came to the fore with the onset of the pandemic. This was an emergency role, related to the executive power, implementing extraordinary measures and even suspending constitutional rights because of the state of emergency. The demand for protection was detached from the habitual democratic participation and parliamentary discussion – during the lockdown it was not even possible to organise demonstrations or mobilisations, so public debate was carried out entirely through the media and on the internet. This was a disruptive situation for all political forces. Salvini’s Lega faced difficulties in reshaping his political discourse because the new threat posed by Covid-19 – and the new kind of security citizens asked for – were profoundly different from the idea of security against the external enemies (migrants, supranational elites) previously identified by the Lega. Furthermore, when confronted with the Covid-19 emergency, the classical anti-political discourse of the Movimento 5 Stelle also lost part of its significance. With the role of the parliament significantly overshadowed by the emergency health situation during the

lockdown, debate on the extraordinary powers taken up by the government in order to address the pandemic was intense. While the Partito Democratico supported the effort of the government to counter the pandemic, it also sometimes criticised the self-referential attitude of the very popular prime minister, which did not involve parties in the decision-making process. Forza Italia and also the Lega strongly criticised the alleged self-reference of the government, accusing it of not involving parliament and the opposition in its decisions. Curiously, Salvini – who had called for “full powers” in the summer of 2019 – now criticised the government for centralising powers and limiting freedom.

Generally speaking, in the first phase of the Covid-19 emergency, the sovereigntist and nationalist discourses were significantly disrupted. Even if attempts were made to link the threat from the pandemic to China, to specific foreign countries or to migrants, the global character of the issue was evident – as was the requirement for the state to be strengthened in order to counter the pandemic. This requirement was focused on the issue of health (and the public sector) and was not related to the typical pillars of populist discourse. Things may nevertheless change in ‘phase 2’ or in prospective further stages of the pandemic. The profound social and economic crisis fuelled by the lockdown could lead to mass social discontent, which is indeed likely to be exploited by populist and nationalist forces.

### 3. Contesting the boundaries of citizenship: a map

In order to make sense of the populist discourse on migration and citizenship, our book considers the weight of the sociopolitical elements of cleavage that shape the 'bounded community' of citizens as voiced by populist discourse.

Drawing from our empirical analysis, two dimensions seem especially relevant:

- an *external* dimension, pitting those who belong in the national community against everyone who is not a member (migrants, foreign political and economic powers, supranational institutions);
- an *internal* dimension, within the national community, characterised by the interaction of multiple divides (socio-economic milieu, North and South, older and younger generations, the people and the elite).

Populist discourse combines the external and internal dimensions (outside vs. inside the nation) with both horizontal and vertical oppositions, building a multi-dimensional configuration of identity. For example, in the discourse of the Lega and the Movimento 5 Stelle 'the people' are 'sovereign' with regard to both non-citizens and to some categories of citizens. At this intersection, the community that populists claim to represent is the subset of native, common people. One of the main findings in our book is that, while boundaries are built in a fairly similar manner by the two main populist parties (the Lega and the Movimento 5 Stelle), for what concerns the 'world outside the nation', cleavages within the nation are interpreted in rather different ways.

Our book thus devised the main themes that, for the discourse of the political parties in question, were likely to have the potential to shape this process of constructing citizen identity. Interestingly, several of these topics and sub-topics have become increasingly salient over the past few months since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

#### 3.1. Migration, security and citizenship

The discursive construction of the debate on migration, and especially on irregular migrants landing on Italian shores, develops along the horizontal cleavage that separates foreigners from natives, and is closely linked to the question of welfare. Almost inseparable from the debate on migration, the question of security grew to become one of the most pivotal subjects of the Italian political debate between 2013 and 2018.

Throughout the 2013-19 time frame, the political discourse of the Lega was pervaded by the rhetoric of 'invasion' and of the 'overloading' of Italian cities, neighbourhoods and even preschool classes. A violent process of crowding out the local natives is depicted, which intersects with the costs of social provisions in what we have labelled a true 'welfare trade-off', in which social provisions are framed as a zero-sum game and the 'racist' label is reversed to designate the discrimination against Italian citizens, who are deemed to be deprived of their socio-economic rights. The 'Italians first' slogan (employed with different nuances by Forza Italia and also the M5S) was reiterated constantly, and applied to a wide range of issues – from welfare to marketable goods and trade.

The Lega's narrative also entailed persistent references to the climate of insecurity, micro-criminality and violence that the presence of migrants allegedly spawns in Italian local communities. This was achieved through a crude and violent imagery based on news stories involving foreign nationals, who are portrayed as endangering the Italian culture and way of life, the security of citizens and especially the security of fragile social categories who are unable to defend themselves.

In the discourse of the Movimento 5 Stelle over the same period, socio-economic indicators were part of the argument on the structural impossibility for Italy to welcome incoming migrants. The controversy was shifted away from migrants themselves (removing the need to express a specific position on the matter) onto cooperatives and



accommodation facilities allegedly benefitting from the ‘immigration business’ (which, by contrast, could be straightforwardly condemned by the M5S).

Furthermore, for the Movimento 5 Stelle, security constitutes a relevant political topic, but it was articulated through a very different lens from that of the Lega. The central arguments of the M5S discourse on this subject appeared to be about making infrastructure and buildings safe, protection from natural calamities such as floods and earthquakes, the need for secure working places and the right to a healthy living environment.

For Forza Italia meanwhile, the regulation of immigration is necessary to avoid riots and public disorder. In party discourse, the distinction was also repeatedly made between migrants fleeing war or persecution and economic migrants. Again, the socio-economic dimension appeared to come into play, and the argument was clear: Italy is not provided with the economic well-being and development that would be required in order to offer a future to anyone other than its citizens.

In Forza Italia’s discourse, the security theme was mainly (if not exclusively) developed in reference to the question of immigration and was linked to three main discursive lines: health risks, street crime and terrorism. The subject of security was raised especially as a means of underlining the inability of incumbent governments and the lax stance of the Left on the matter of immigration.

The Partito Democratico’s position on these questions meanwhile appeared more nuanced. The party started in 2013 by firmly criticising the ‘exclusively securitarian’ approach propounded by the Right, and instead introduced elements of humanity, stressing the need for proper integration. Under Renzi’s leadership, a stronger effort was made to escalate the matter to the EU level, and this included the issue of solidarity contributions. A stronger effort was also made to propose a different PD narrative on

immigration, closely linked to security. The degree of efficacy of each adversary in reducing the number of migrant landings therefore became the terrain of political opposition (especially against Matteo Salvini). A more inclusive shift in discourse appears to have occurred with the leadership of Nicola Zingaretti, yet no univocal party discourse can be retraced for the PD on migration, and the inconclusiveness of the analysis increases as we include additional textual units from different prominent party figures.

As far as security is concerned over the 2013-19-time frame, the PD attempted to catch up with its populist adversaries who had been raising the question for some time – but it nevertheless did so by trying to incorporate the topic into a left-wing perspective. Under Matteo Renzi’s leadership, this was embodied by the “for €1 invested in culture, €1 invested in security” slogan, and by PD Interior Minister Marco Minniti’s narrative of security as a right, of which citizens – and especially the economically and socially fragile – are often deprived, and which a leftist party has the duty to defend.

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, migration has ceased to be among the most frequently evoked subjects in the Italian political discourse. Nonetheless, it remains strongly present in the Lega’s discourse, where it is alternately integrated either into security-related social media posts covering criminal news stories, or into the welfare trade-off logic. Incidents involving foreign nationals or migrants are systematically reported in order to compare the treatment of non-natives to the harassment of Italian ‘decent citizens’ (such as shopkeepers fined by the authorities). In April 2020, the Conte II government declared that, due to Covid-19, Italy was no longer a safe haven for migrants. Contrary to what had happened during Salvini’s time as minister, this statement generated little to no public debate, probably due to the extraordinary health emergency that was underway.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the notion of security has come to include a much wider array of concerns, especially related to the area of health and social protection. The fear of what is unknown, different, and foreign, has therefore at times added up in the public sentiment to a more domestic fear – the fear of the virus and by extension the fear of every person. The message now conveyed by the Lega is that any recovery from the economic distress caused by the pandemic needs to go through more security, more discipline, ‘more unkindness’, ‘zero tolerance’ for criminals, and particularly for foreigners and threats to national borders. The work of law enforcement is also regularly praised. The government on the other hand is deemed absent, incapable of addressing the pressing issues of the country in this time of hardship, and is deemed to be ‘abusing the patience of decent citizens’. The questions of national boundaries, security and pandemic somehow merge in the discursive offensive that Lega and Fratelli d’Italia have launched against the threat to national health allegedly posed by migrants, who allegedly could carry and transmit the virus. Other political forces have, by contrast, condemned the threat to public safety allegedly posed by the national demonstration called by the Lega, Forza Italia and Fratelli d’Italia on 2 June, where leaders and activists of the three parties appeared physically close to one another, in clear violation of social distancing protocols.

The question of national boundaries meanwhile crosses the discourse of the entire spectrum of political parties with respect to production, trade, and tourism. However, while the Movimento 5 Stelle encourages the support of goods ‘made in Italy’, the ‘Italians first’ slogan keeps being deployed in the vast majority of Salvini’s social media posts, almost as an ever-relevant mantra, and is employed as the benchmark for drawing the boundaries of those people who should in fact receive help from the government.

The two matters of migration and security are furthermore deeply intertwined with the question of citizenship and rights. Our book

accounts for the debates on citizenship acquisition and the diverging positions of the main parties on this subject over the last few years, but it is worth noting here that a new debate took place near the end of the first Covid-19 lockdown, and this concerned the government’s proposal for an amnesty for irregular domestic and agricultural workers. For the Lega, this proposal equated to rewarding irregular immigrants and would not help in any way to mitigate the effects of the economic standstill triggered by the pandemic. Here once again, the social counterpart of those deemed ‘outside the nation’ (in this case, irregular workers) was common native citizens, and especially vulnerable ones, such as the unemployed.

### *3.2. Culture*

As the configuration of identity built by populist discourse is multi-dimensional, our book tried to explore the elements that, within the same national community, bind certain groups of individuals together and divide others. Culture, here meaning the combination of shared values and ways of life, is a key element in this respect.

In the discourse of both the Lega and the M5S, the narrative resonates of a political ruling class removed from the problems of common people and occupied with matters of little to no relevance. Our book therefore also addresses the use of the ‘common man’ trope (and of the ‘common sense’ trope, distinctively employed by the Lega).

A cleavage clearly emerges from the analysis of the M5S discursive units (although this cleavage also largely applies to the Lega) and this concerns the aspect of education, competence and expertise. A strong conflict is alleged to exist between the common citizen (represented by the party when it speaks) and ‘big professors and technocrats’, who are deemed part of a larger corrupt system of disinformation and manipulation that is built to deceive ‘common citizens’.



The Lega's discourse sees a strong vertical conflict between the 'common man' and the elite. However, the latter does not equal the political class or a privileged older generation as it does for the Movimento 5 Stelle. Rather, it is combined with an ideological element and is consequently embodied by 'radical chic' intellectuals and generally left-wing educated individuals.

When Italy started to be confronted with the ravaging spread of Covid-19, the long-established dichotomy between mainstream and non-mainstream information resurfaced harshly. All in all, each political force attempted to present its version of scientific expertise as opposed to the versions divulged by its political adversaries, which were ascribed either to 'fake news' that was deployed to manipulate the electorate, or to a governmental conspiracy to keep citizens unaware of the real treatments and to speculate on their misery. Salvini thus repeatedly shares alleged success stories and updates on the plasma treatment for Covid-19, 'despite the skepticism and even blatant hostility of some TV scientists'. On a similar note, the Lega keeps opposing the 'arrogance' and 'inadequacy' of 'intellectuals' and 'schoolmarms' in the government.

This underlying theme of a 'cultural divide' between the people and the elite remains closely linked to the question of political representation, and during the Covid-19 lockdown has become particularly intertwined with how the different political forces frame the role they believe the state should play.

The opposition parties, especially the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, blame the government's delays and inefficiency on its incompetence, and the leaders of the two parties alternately evoke the need both for increased protection for

people having lost their jobs, and for the waiving of restrictions for business owners. Within the government, the Movimento 5 Stelle puts forward a timid discourse based on the actions taken by the executive in response to the Covid-19 emergency, but largely eclipsed by the omnipresence of Conte. A similar pattern can be observed for the Partito Democratico, whose communication presents a merely descriptive representation of the socio-economic reality. Among the most blatant cases of this political discourse was the PD's portrayal of a news story concerning a young woman who, having lost her father due to Covid-19, dropped out of university to take over her late father's business as a news vendor. In a contested Facebook post, the party told the girl's story and only commented on it by describing her choice as "beautiful and empathetic". The absence of both diagnostic and prognostic frames in the communication of the Partito Democratico, namely the absence of in-depth interpretations of the social reality and of the consequent presentation of a clear-cut political vision, has been made particularly evident by the extraordinary Covid-19 situation.



#### 4. Foreign and European policy

Our book pursues a threefold endeavour as regards the patterns of discourse deployed by Italian political parties in the broad domain of international relations. First, it retraces the stances espoused by every major party from 2013 until 2019, uncovering key discursive themes as well as changing ingredients. Second, it pays special attention to the specific elements that are arguably deployed to convey populism, nationalism or sovereigntism. Third, it addresses the analogies in the discursive tropes used by the various parties over the 2013-19 period, casting a look at the overlaps found in these parties' respective streams of communication.

The discourse that a party assumes and promotes on an issue of foreign policy is, of course, the outcome of a constellation of different drivers: the party's ideological outlook, its current location in government or in opposition, the strategies devised by other parties, the timing within the domestic electoral cycle, the geopolitical fundamentals of the country, and so on. While some of these factors pertain to the domestic political arena, others relate more directly to the international context. Some of the former in particular – such as ideology and government status – are likely to create rifts between political parties. Some of the latter, inasmuch as they represent objective or structural circumstances faced by the country, should conversely prompt similar position-taking.

A part of the analysis carried out in our book was devoted to European policy – in other words, to party discourse on Europe, the European Union and the European layer of governance. Despite some swings in its location on the left-right axis, the **Partito Democratico** steadfastly channelled a pro-European discourse all the way through the 2013-19 time frame. The party joined an ideal commitment to the European identity, and to a belief in the EU as part of the solution for Italy, with sets of policy proposals that were actually more peripheral in its communication

aside from electoral manifestos. During Renzi's premiership (2014-16), the 'nothing is possible without Europe' posture was reframed into a more ambitious stance: Italy, now ready to change itself and restore its external credibility, would then be able to act in Europe as a forceful protagonist. Once this optimistic conviction had subsided into crude frustration at the EU by 2017 – due to recurrent budgetary tensions and the continuing stalemate on common approaches to migration – dependence on Renzi's personalised message backfired. In opposition after the 2018 general election and faced with a Eurosceptic government, the PD went into the 2019 European elections as a polyphonic choir united against the threat of sovereigntism.

The mould of the Euroscepticism exhibited by the **Movimento 5 Stelle** originated in the blog of the party's founder, Beppe Grillo. The early party discourse anchored disapproval of the EU in interviews with scholarly sources criticising the eurozone make-up. At the same time, wariness of the EU was also grounded in a mixture of anti-establishment sensationalism, rants against Germany, and coarsely expressed sovereignty concerns. In 2014, the uneasily coalescing requests of the party included a referendum on the common currency, seen as a symbol of the wrongdoings and lack of solidarity within the EU. Later developments added novel ingredients: while the party sought to capitalise on the rising anti-immigration tide, the voices of the M5S MEPs elected in 2014 added policy-specific dimensions to the image of European integration, leading to a more nuanced picture of Europe's opportunities alongside its flaws. Deep contradictions concerning the EU pitted constructive policy chapters against the negative 'high politics' chapters in the 2018 electoral manifesto. As part of the Government of Change after the election itself, the M5S responded with heavy flak to any struggle with the European level, hitting out against "Eurobureaucrats" and the European elites.



As to Silvio Berlusconi's **Forza Italia**, short-term domestic party strategy proved to be an important driver of postures towards Europe in the 2013-19 time frame considered in our book. In 2014, while the party was calling for eurobonds and for common tax and foreign policies, it still dealt with the European election campaign with harsh communication enshrined in the motto "More Italy in Europe, Less Europe in Italy". In later years, against a background of intensified migration flows, budgetary skirmishes between the Renzi cabinet and the European Commission, and terrorist attacks in European cities, the discourse of Forza Italia oscillated between interest-based realism and expectations of European solidarity. However, chastisement of the incumbent government relied on a 'valence politics' perspective, in the hope of presenting Forza Italia as a safe pair of hands. This continued when the party, again cloistered in opposition after the 2018 general election, challenged the Government of Change on the very grounds of national sovereignty and interest. At the same time, Forza Italia sought to revive its links with the European People's Party (EPP), and to reassert its credentials as an influential force. It thus proposed to the European right-wing and centre 'a new European sovereignism', which was meant to unify Europe and the West.

The **Legha** shifted its posture around 2014. In its transformation from a northern regionalist party with government credentials to a national-populist force posing as an outsider, it upgraded the virulence of its outbursts, moving closer to the rhetorical style of its new leader Matteo Salvini. By 2014, the party had developed a rhetoric marked by unapologetic 'bad manners', which was soon to crystallise into a relatively stable discursive arsenal: depictions of Europe as the 'European Soviet Union', but also as the Europe of bankers and of the powers that be, a hard zero-sum view of national interest, constant references to "the people" and to "Italian interest" in opposition to "this Europe", a national breakdown due to the "invasion" of irregular immigrants – at times depicted as "ethnic cleansing" of the native population – and due to the guilt of

treacherous elites pursuing the interests of foreigners. Hashtags such as #stopinvasione, (#stopinvasion) #bastaeuro (#nomoreeuro) and #primagliitaliani (#Italiansfirst) spearheaded the 2018 electoral campaign, following which Salvini – having become the interior minister – did not soften his rough communication on Europe, beginning instead a crusade against the landing of migrant ships in Italian ports. This campaign would very soon reap electoral dividends for the Lega.

Another part of the analysis in our book comprised topics of foreign policy such as Italy's relations with world powers, theatres of crisis, other transnational threats like terrorism or global warming, and pillars of the international order such as the United Nations. Clearly, foreign policy matters were less frequent or prominent in Italian party discourse than policy matters related to the European sphere. The **Partito Democratico** proved the most vocal supporter of international cooperation and the one political force staunchly committed to the UN and international networks. References to the agencies and goals of the United Nations were a consistent undercurrent of its discourse, as was a preference for diplomatic multilateralism towards armed conflicts. Defence of human rights was also emphasised, although problematic ambivalence surfaced as to how such principles fed into commitments to foster cooperation with African governments – not least in relation to border controls.

The **Movimento 5 Stelle** initially developed its related foreign policy discourse through a prism heavily centred on sovereignty and rooted in the national interest. Consequently, the party thus opposed sanctions against Russia, the economic penetration of China in Italy – until the memorandum of understanding signed in 2019, when the M5S was in government – and any meddling from the US. Opposition to the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) and to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) coupled left-wing arguments with 'food sovereignty' and anti-



establishment sensationalism. Again, the 2018 electoral manifesto juxtaposed a hard-line sovereigntist posture in its Foreign Affairs chapter, which preached strict non-interference, with multiple policy chapters at ease with the organisations and agencies of the UN as well as with the *acquis* of international law.

**Forza Italia** also voiced a commitment to the UN and to NATO, especially through the party's leader. It was, however, a commitment of sorts, as it called for the inclusion of Russia in the Western bloc, spurred by the interest-based realism that Berlusconi at once promoted and acknowledged in Vladimir Putin. Otherwise, the party showed realist pragmatism – rather than actual dedication – towards the laws and institutions of the international community, which were mostly invoked to solve problems for Italy. One such problem was irregular immigration, whereby the party, while proposing a vague 'Marshall Plan for Africa', was not above decrying an 'invasion'. Finally, the foreign policy posture that was embraced by Berlusconi around the 2019 European election assigned to communist China the role of being the main threat for Europe and the West.

The **Lega** consistently went further than Berlusconi's party in adopting abrasive language, deployed to denounce the clearance sale of the country to foreigners, to link the migration influx from the Mediterranean with deadly terrorist attacks, and so on and so forth. Incidentally, framing the menace of international terrorism as an 'us vs. them' war allowed the party to condemn sanctions against Russia, depicted as a fundamental partner in the conflict. In short, the party's discursive bundle went as far as to deplore – at one point – a "government of puppets manipulated by Europe and steered for use and consumption by terrorists who are welcomed with open arms". The Lega's 2018 manifesto contained an unrestrained espousal of sovereignty and strict national interest – as was fitting for a party unapologetic about supporting Trump and Putin – and presented the UN as endangering the sovereignty of the

people, in line with a trend of rising hostility to the shackles of international law.

Overlaps between the political forces clearly existed. The concept of an 'invasion' of migrants was propagated by all actors except the Partito Democratico. Sensationalist messages were the preserve of the M5S and the Lega, but discursive 'bad manners' were also embraced by Forza Italia. Although avoiding such drifts, Renzi's Partito Democratico fell back on Eurosceptic retorts during tense phases in its European interactions – for example, by mocking the EU's regulation of menial details. Domestic dynamics regularly spurred all governing parties to depict Italy as newly acting in Europe 'with its head held high' or no longer 'hat in hand', whereas parties in opposition portrayed Italy as internationally isolated and incapable of imposing itself. Moreover, amidst vows to change 'this Europe', the ritually evoked but never fleshed out tropes of 'Europe of the peoples' and 'Europe of the bureaucrats' became almost ubiquitous. Under Renzi's leadership, even the Partito Democratico, which avoided the former trope – although the party's advocacy of 'a Europe closer to the citizens' may have appeared to voters just a fainter hue of it – at times performed its own criticism of European bureaucracy and technocracy.

With regard to how this picture has changed over recent months since the Covid-19 outbreak, it is particularly evident in Italy that, while the European sphere has gained new significance in the context of an economy-ravaging pandemic, a focus on the situation within national borders has caused other foreign policy issues to all but recede. Italy has paid a high price in the pandemic – about 244,000 cases of infection and more than 35,000 deaths, according to official data argued to underrate the true figures considerably – and the prosperous region of Lombardy has been distressingly hit. After a two-month lockdown, with all 'non-essential' economic activity suspended between 23 March and 4 May, the country began a 'phase 2' marked by a gradual relaxing of restrictions.



With Italy's GDP predicted to fall by about 10 per cent in 2020 as compared to 2019, no wonder that the discourse of all political parties swiftly included expectations of economic solidarity at the European level. Nevertheless, each of the four political parties analysed in our book has applied its own 'spin' to these expectations: an overview of their communication reveals significant continuity with the past, alongside a few notable breaks with it.

The **Partito Democratico** has entrusted its discourse on European policy to figures such as David Sassoli, the president of the European Parliament (EP); Brando Benifei, the head of the party delegation to the EP; Paolo Gentiloni, the European commissioner for economy; and Italian government ministers Roberto Gualtieri and Enzo Amendola. The party has given special salience to the topic of Europe and particularly the EU, portrayed more than ever as a crucial part of the solution for Italy's predicament, and thus forcefully spurred to demonstrate its drive. Accordingly, signals of openness within the decision-making bodies of the EU – regarding the arrangement or reworking of European instruments such as that for temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE), the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), interventions from the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Central Bank (ECB), as well as the Recovery Fund – have been greeted with optimism. At the same time, when setbacks at the EU level have occurred, exponents of the Partito Democratico have taken pains to highlight how the stumbling blocks stemmed from the selfishness shown by some of the EU member states, such as the Netherlands. In a wider sense, the party has emphasised the belief that 'no country can save itself alone', and it has hailed the tangible assistance and expressions of solidarity sent to Italy from abroad.

The **Movimento 5 Stelle** has mainly emphasised the domestic agency of the government of which it is a part. In relation to this, the party has articulated its European and foreign policy discourse around the respective

merits of Giuseppe Conte, the prime minister, and Luigi Di Maio, the minister of foreign affairs. Undertones linked to the defence of the Italian people and their interests, in regard to ongoing negotiations at the European level, have surfaced especially in the words of party exponents such as the EP vice-president Fabio Massimo Castaldo. However, the party has seemingly transitioned from Euroscepticism to 'Euro-alternativism', in that it has shunned every sort of sovereignty-based discourse. Hence, the M5S wants Europe to prove its nature as a 'community' rather than a mere 'union', and it has urged the EU not to betray the trust of a country that has entrusted significant macroeconomic levers to it. Furthermore, the party has regularly sought to distance itself from sovereignist forces like Salvini's Lega. The discourse of the M5S has included rejection of recourse to the ESM, mainly due to concerns about conditionality, yet, the Recovery Fund proposal advanced by the European Commission has been hailed as a response awaited for years. In short, the party asserts that the Recovery Fund is proof that 'Europe is alive and fights alongside us'. Aside from this the controversial intention of some European countries not to accept tourists from Italy during the summer pushed Di Maio – who once emphatically called for a "D-Day of European tourism" – to deplore any blacklist based on simple interest.

The party discourse of **Forza Italia** – in opposition and extremely weak – has followed trends established over recent years by putting its founder and leader, Silvio Berlusconi, in the limelight, together with Antonio Tajani, the former president of the EP. Since the Covid-19 outbreak, the narrative deployed by Forza Italia has unequivocally focused on economic resources. From this viewpoint the party has urged Europe to "act as Europe", to "do more" and to show "courage" quickly, by suspending the Stability and Growth Pact and by mustering up financial instruments for €1 trillion or €2 trillion. Interestingly, positive developments in the EU-level response to the crisis have been traced to the EPP and to Berlusconi's presence as a MEP. By contrast, Forza Italia – again seeking to present itself as a responsible

opposition – has seized every occasion to depict the Italian government as not having done enough, and to place on it noticeably heavier blame for Italy’s economic difficulties than on the EU. Condemning intra-EU selfishness and sovereignism, Berlusconi’s has again emphasised the political and economic threat represented for the whole of Europe by China.

With regard to the **Lega**, no apparent discontinuity exists in the way the party has articulated its discourse on Europe since the outbreak of Covid-19. The Lega’s discourse therefore continues to revolve around unapologetic, principled Euroscepticism. An important ingredient still consists of anti-establishment sensationalism, whereby Facebook posts in capital letters warn about “what they will not tell you”. Over the course of EU-level negotiations concerning common

economic responses to the negative economic shock caused by the pandemic, any cited signals of openness were dismissed by asking for “real money”, or “facts not words”. Even more tellingly, such developments have been met with general statements suggesting that Europe is not to be trusted too much, Europe does not donate anything, nothing from Europe is ever non-repayable, and the money will never come. Accordingly, when EU commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis proposed to make domestic reform a condition for the Recovery Fund, the Lega described the Commission’s plan as a “Euro-scam”. To give a different example, the Lega’s narrative around Italian tourists being denied entry abroad was framed along the lines that ‘if in Europe they shut their doors on the Italians, Italy will be perfectly fine with its world-leading beaches’.

## 5. Conclusions: an agenda for European progressives in times of Covid-19

The results of the research carried out in our book, together with the observation of how political discourse has evolved throughout the Covid-19 pandemic in yet more recent times, yield findings that will hopefully prove insightful for the management of political communication by progressive forces across Europe.

The key issues identified by investigating Italian political discourse, and some recommendations on how to address these issues, can be summarised in four points.

1) *Agenda-setting*. The first main finding of our research concerns **the difficulty of Italy’s main progressive party, the Partito Democratico, in impacting the political agenda**. Our analysis points to a certain subalternity exhibited by the PD with respect to themes imposed by other – mostly populist – political forces. These themes range from anti-establishment claims to the issue of security. **The**

**progressives appear to fall short in setting the agenda of political discourse and in putting forward their own themes** – rather, they tend to chase after topics imposed by others and, at best, try to frame them differently. As a consequence, they often come off as less convincing in their narrative and leave room for their populist opponents to portray them as detached, removed from the pressing issues faced by the people in their everyday lives.

2) *Language*. One tendency in the PD’s discourse over the last few years – and especially since the end of Renzi’s divisive spell as leader – has been that of shifting to an increasingly neutral language. In other words, the **party appears to have progressively abandoned a politically-charged vocabulary capable of placing the party’s claims, grievances and proposals on the political spectrum**. The lack of clear identifying elements in the party’s

discourse, and of discursive frames unique or specific to the PD, has contributed to weakening the party's overall message. Indeed, its position 'in office', being part of the incumbent government again since September 2019, has played a role in moderating the Partito Democratico's discourse. Instead, particularly since the first lockdown phase of the pandemic – in which the room for new themes was extremely limited, and in which the vast majority of political space was occupied by the figure of Prime Minister Conte and his narrative – **the need for progressives to stand out through their language has become ever more pressing.**

3) *Online effectiveness.* The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has confronted entire societies with the need to rethink work and interaction tools. As has often been pointed out, public communication, politics and consensus-building efforts have also been pervaded by the use of digital media, in what appears to be a rapid acceleration of already established ongoing processes. In this framework, **the question of the instruments of political discourse – namely, the media that are used and leveraged to that end – gains an unprecedented centrality, compelling political parties to become ever more skilled in the use of digital platforms.**

4) *Frames.* In light of all of the considerations above, what appears crucial for the political discourse **of progressive forces is their ability to produce and promote frames that are specific to their narrative and that allow the public to clearly self-identify in these stances and claims.** By intercepting the claims and grievances of citizens, and by processing those preferences and issues through the spectrum of the party's values and objectives, clear and specific communication frames can be shaped,

translating those stances into a distinct political vision, which can be clearly conveyed and reproduced through the use of frames. Some macro-themes stand out from the investigation of the Italian case, and progressives could be advised to focus on these – particularly since Covid-19.

The process of intercepting citizen grievances, the ensuing mediation of those issues through the lens of party values and goals, and the consequent elaboration of a specific political discourse, are all largely informed by the national context for each progressive political force in their respective environment. Although the determination of the most appropriate and effective frames to adopt and promote will depend on contingent and case-specific factors, some key themes of interest can be devised on which European progressives at large might be willing to focus their respective effort. These include:

- the progressive force's approach to the **role of institutions** and the mechanisms shaping the overarching functioning of democracy;
- its stances on **citizenship, inequality and social mobility** – including their ideal criteria, their drivers and challenges, and the concrete policies that should be put in place to attain certain social goals;
- **the role of the state** – by further clarifying the key elements, pinpointing the party's ideas on what the state should be and the functions it should perform in the contemporary economy and society;
- **Europe** – whereby the progressive force should be able to identify viable steps, suitable allies and 'red lines' for the future, so that progressives are not perceived as *plus royalistes que le roi*;
- **the question of national interest**, in the effort to manifestly identify its features and envisage the criteria and ways through which it should be pursued.

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