

Conclusions¹

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We opened this book with a number of research hypotheses, in order to outline an interpretation of the results of the 2014 EP elections. Has the economic crisis (together with the strengthening of the European Parliament following the Lisbon Treaty) challenged the well-established *second-order elections* theory (Reif and Schmitt, 1980)? Are the 2014 EP elections the *first truly European elections*, understood as elections where the national campaign in each member state is more focused on European issues than on domestic issues? An overall answer to these hypotheses would require further analysis, also definitely requiring individual-level data. However, the pieces of research included in this book, based primarily (though not exclusively) on aggregate data, allow us to say that the answer to the hypothesis of the 2014 EP elections as *first-order* elections is complex. It is not a single answer, and it is geographically differentiated.

As a first point, second-order elections theory claims that the level of voter turnout of EP elections will be lower than in general elections as the stake in EP elections is lower (the national government is not at stake). From this point of view, overall turnout has not changed compared to the previous EP elections. Nonetheless, looking at overall, EU-wide turnout tells us little as there is wide internal variability among countries. In some countries, turnout has *increased* compared to 2009 (Lithuania, Greece, and Germany) while in others, it has decreased (Cyprus, Latvia, and Czech Republic). This variability seems to suggest that the importance of these elections is mediated by the national economic and political context, as well as by other long-term characteristics, like voters' electoral and turnout habits in each individual country (especially when comparing Western with Central and Eastern Europe).

As a second point, second-order elections theory deals with the electoral performance of governing parties: they are expected to lose votes compared to

¹ This piece is unpublished.

general elections, especially when EP elections fall towards the middle of the national electoral cycle (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). With respect to this point, the 2014 EP elections are not an exception but rather a confirmation of the theory. In the vast majority of countries, ruling parties have lost ground. In some cases, they have experienced a real electoral collapse (as in France, United Kingdom, and Denmark).

As the analyses on individual countries show, even the salience of European issues has been differentiated throughout EU countries. In some cases, European issues have been almost entirely absent from the campaign (Belgium, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Hungary) while in other contexts, they have played a prominent role (Greece, Czech Republic, and France). Yet, it has to be observed that in the majority of countries, European issues—even when at the centre of the debate—have been politicised mainly with a *negative emphasis*: those who have mentioned Europe often have done it by indicating the negative consequences of the membership to the EU or to the Eurozone. As a consequence, parties of the populist and Eurosceptic right have taken centre stage, experiencing a general increase of their support as expected. Therefore, these parties have been the most capable to politicise the European issues—in a negative way and in terms of anti-system protest—taking advantage of the widespread discontent caused by austerity policies. On the contrary, Europhile mainstream parties, fearing to move on a slippery ground, have generally preferred not to emphasise but rather depoliticise the issues related to the EU, preferring to shift the attention of voters on national issues.

Indeed, it should be strongly emphasised that the success of Eurosceptic parties has not been homogeneous in the 28 member countries. In the *Introduction*, we had hypothesised that the performance of Eurosceptic parties would have been linked to the macroeconomic features of individual countries. In particular, the electoral success of these parties would have been greater—inside the Eurozone—both among debtor states (namely, those put under the Troika's economic control) and among the richest creditor states, forced to finance debtor countries, while outside the Eurozone, we expected a stronger success of the Eurosceptic parties in those more developed Western European countries, whose economy is stronger and less dependent from EU structural funds. The results tell us that there has been actually an internal differentiation of the electoral performance of Eurosceptic parties, but their success has not followed the suggested pattern.

Rather than linked to the features of the economic context, the emergence of European issues in the national electoral campaigns (mainly with a negative emphasis) seems to be instead closely related to the structure of the *political supply* in the individual countries. With this term, we refer to all the main characteristics of the whole set of parties contesting the election, along with their electoral strategies (i.e., the issues parties have chosen to emphasise in

their campaign). In other words, an economic problem or a social conflict of any kind is not enough: to become a salient issue, it requires political actors who decide to politicise and electorally exploit it. And in this pattern, we see a new relevance of old theories: as in the traditional Rokkanian scheme, based on a series of social cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), in any given country, a cleavage can emerge as relevant and structure the party system only provided that it is politicised by a party.

Through these lenses, we believe we can interpret the possible emergence of a new dimension of political conflict based on issues related to the European Union. This dimension of conflict, just like old social cleavages, needs to be politicised to emerge and structure party systems. Hence, what becomes crucial is the role of those political entrepreneurs who, only in some countries, have used Euroscepticism as a key strategic asset for electoral purposes. This allows to understand the success of Eurosceptic parties even in economic contexts such as France that were in an intermediate, less polarising position in terms of the debtors/creditors dichotomy. At the same time, in contexts that were potentially favourable to the success of Eurosceptic parties, such as Spain and Portugal, there has been no innovative, dynamic, populist political entrepreneurship able to negatively exploit European issues from an electoral standpoint. Finally, the importance of parties' competitive strategies has been confirmed by the lack of success of Eurosceptic parties in those contexts where some mainstream parties have partly absorbed the Eurosceptic issues. This was the case in Finland and Hungary where there were already right-wing populist parties with a sizeable electoral base (respectively Finns Party and *Jobbik*). This notwithstanding, their electoral advance has been successfully contained by mainstream political parties in government, which have been able to strategically focus on some Eurosceptic issues.

Finally, in the European context, Italy is an interesting and peculiar case. The result of the European elections in Italy is unequivocal: the Democratic Party led by Matteo Renzi has won, and it is the only party in government that has increased its votes with respect to the general elections (the CDU-CSU in Germany and *Fidesz* in Hungary have won clearly, but they have lost votes with respect to the general elections). The Democratic Party's electoral success has been clear-cut reaching a record share of 40.8% of the votes, thus becoming the first party in terms of seats within the Socialist Group in the EP. No centre-left party had previously achieved a similar result in Italy. Since the first EP elections in 1979, the PD is the Italian political party that has obtained the highest share of votes ever. As shown by the analysis of vote shifts from the previous 2013 general election, the Democratic Party led by Matteo Renzi has been extremely efficient in keeping its voters and gaining new ones, especially by hollowing out the former centrist coalition led by Mario Monti.

The Five Star Movement has lost about three million votes compared to the 2013 general elections, falling to 21.2%. This result is certainly a defeat for the party led by Beppe Grillo, especially if we take into account that, according to second-order elections theory, EP elections are a very favourable electoral arena for opposition, antiestablishment parties like the M5S. This disappointing result may be explained by the relatively noncooperative attitudes of the M5S towards the other political groups in parliament, combined with the M5S obsession with the privileges of the political class, which may have weakened the credibility of the movement on facing the country's economic problems. And Beppe Grillo's harsh, aggressive electoral campaign certainly has not improved this perception. However, it should be stressed that the M5S—whose performance has been disappointing—still represents, in absolute values, the first antiestablishment party in Europe.

Even Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* has faced a neat loss, falling to 16.8% compared to 21.6% of the general elections and to 35.3% of the 2009 EP elections. In the case of Mr. Berlusconi's party, however, many factors could predict an outcome of this kind, if we consider the split of the New Centre-Right led by Mr. Alfano and the personal situation of Berlusconi himself (sentenced to social services and ineligible). Indeed, *Forza Italia* has managed to retain only its most ideological electorate, being particularly damaged by the strong growth of abstention (-7.8 points). It is also interesting to note that the Northern League has managed to report satisfying results, compared to the disappointing performance of the 2013 general election. Mr. Salvini's party has obtained 6.2%, as result of a campaign centred on the "Stop Euro" slogan, where the historical issues of federalism have been overshadowed by Euroscepticism, seen as a strategic resource for electoral purposes. Not surprisingly, thanks to this new Le Pen-style campaign, the party has also received votes in the central-south regions of the country.

In conclusion, the Italian case—in its specificity—suggests a common interpretation with the other European cases, stressing very strongly the importance of the available *political supply*. Indeed, our initial analyses show the importance of the competitive strategy adopted by the Democratic Party led by Matteo Renzi: a strategy that avoids ideological issues, and clearly focuses on *valence issues*, i.e., on the party's ability to be perceived as credible to address the main problems of Italy. And, last but not least, by using a deliberately simplified and ordinary language, with frequent populist tones. The results show that—confirming the importance of the political supply—an innovative strategy can produce significant vote shifts, being able to challenge and beat Eurosceptic parties on their very ground. Historically—from Mussolini to Grillo, through Berlusconi—Italy has produced political innovations that have often been partially imitated and replicated in many other (not only) European countries. At this point, an interesting question for the future is

Conclusions

whether the particular competitive strategy of Renzi's Democratic Party will have a similar fate—especially if political success will follow the electoral one. We will see.

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