

**T**he outcome of the Italian national election held on the 4th of March this year marked the success of two major Eurosceptic parties in the country. The anti-establishment Five Stars Movement (M5S) became the strongest party in the newly-elected parliament (with around 31% of the votes), and the radical right-wing League quadrupled the share of votes obtained in the 2013 election (18%), surpassing for the first time its ally party: Silvio Berlusconi's Go Italy (FI). The Centre-left Democratic Party (PD), on the other hand, suffered a major setback, reaching the lowest share of votes in its history (just below 19%). Both the centre-right coalition led by the League and M5S claim the right to be appointed as government *formateur*, but neither of them obtained a majority of seats in the parliament. It is not yet clear how the president of the republic, Sergio Mattarella, will respond to this deadlock.

**The current hung parliament is setting the stage for political uncertainty, and forces different parties to take part in complex bargaining processes to form a sufficiently stable coalition.** Pay attention, commentators! Especially with regards to the pivotal role that M5S will play in this phase. Will M5S join the League, and possibly the other centre-right parties, in a Eurosceptic government? Or will it try to find a political agreement with PD? These questions stem from the ambiguous policy positions that M5S take on several issues, such as immigration or labour market regulation, and from the differences that often emerge between party leaders, the parliamentary group and its electorate (see [Tronconi 2015](#)).

**This article explores various policy agendas of the Italian voter, investigating which issues are considered more important by demographically and geographically different groups of Italian citizens. In particular, it analyses the differences between various agendas from different parties.** In the last part, the article focuses on the importance of immigration during the electoral campaign and its striking effect on attitudes towards the European Union (EU). To conduct our analysis, we resorted to the results of a pre-electoral national survey conducted by the Pastel2018 project of the University of Milan and [IPSOS](#) in collaboration with [ITANES](#), and [RESceU](#). The survey was carried out by a sample of 1,323 voters categorised by age, gender, and area of residence through the CAWI method between the 24th of January and 13th of February 2018.

## The most salient issues on polling day

Respondents were asked to select, from a list of twelve issues, the two most important problems Italy is facing today. Table 1 ranks each of the twelve issues by

popularity/importance, according to the respondents. Furthermore, it presents a breakdown by age and geographic area of residence.

**Table 1: Most salient policy issues in our sample by respondents' age and geographic area of residence**

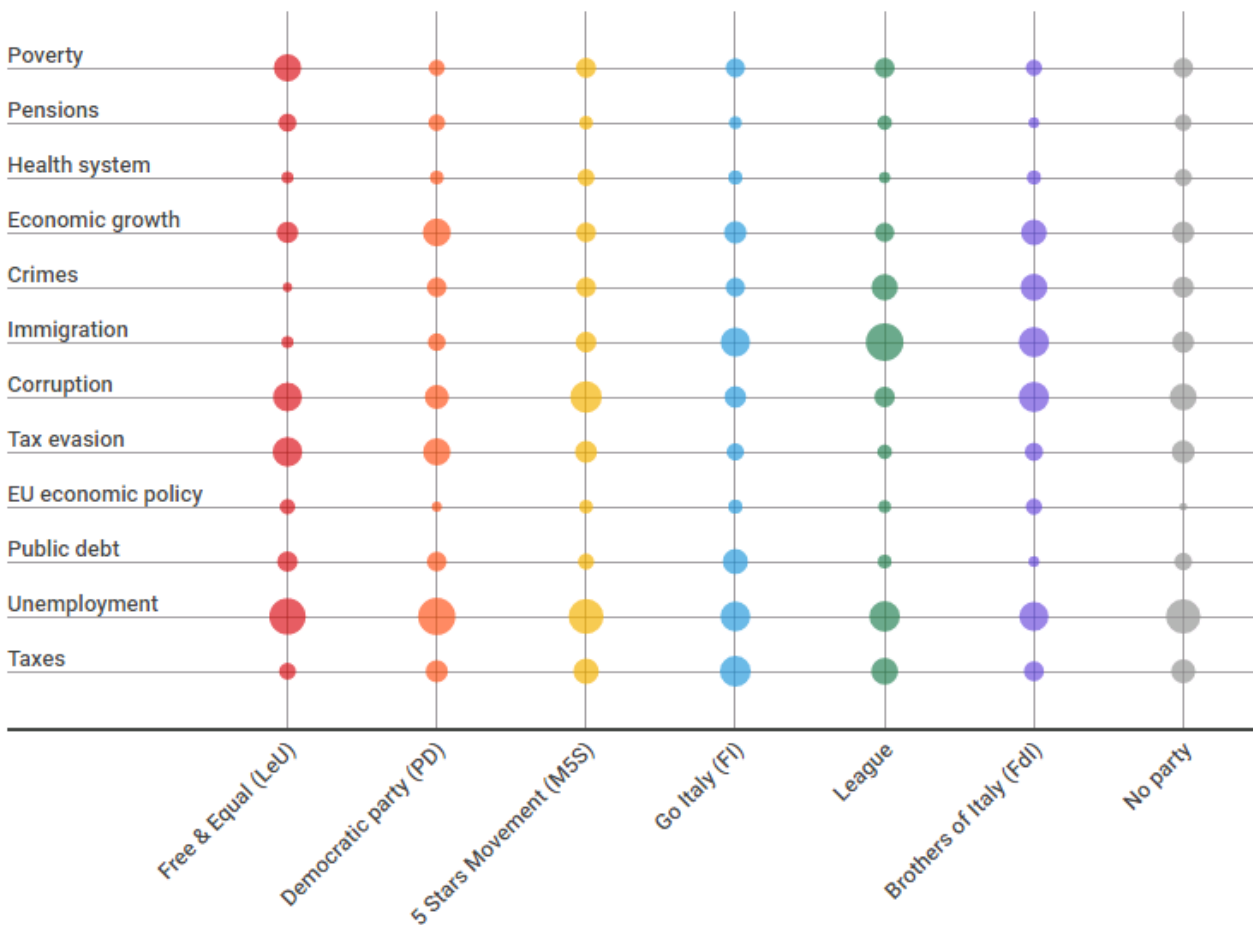
Issue	Total	18-34	35-54	55+	North	Centre	South & Islands
Taxes	9.96	10.43	10.7	8.38	9.66	10.16	10.23
Unemployment	22.07	26.78	20.13	21.73	20	22.76	24.33
Public debt	4.84	4	4.44	6.15	5.17	5.89	3.88
EU economic policy	1.73	2.09	1.51	1.83	1.86	2.64	1.08
Tax evasion	8.96	9.39	6.26	13.09	10.34	9.96	6.67
Corruption	13.49	9.91	14.1	15.18	14.41	12.2	13.02
Immigration	8.84	7.83	9.51	8.51	10.08	8.33	7.53
Crimes	6.92	5.91	8.64	4.84	6.69	6.1	7.64
Economic growth	8.46	6.96	9.35	8.12	9.07	7.93	7.97
Health system	3.54	3.65	3.96	2.75	2.37	2.85	5.38
Pensions	3.27	3.3	2.93	3.8	2.88	4.27	3.23
Poverty	6.19	6.78	6.74	4.84	5.42	5.28	7.64

Note: sample of 1,323 respondents. 0.31% believe that others are most important problems that Italy faces and 1.42% refused to answer

**Even five years after the peak of the economic recession, unemployment is by far perceived as the most serious problem by 22% of respondents.** The problems deemed most important were: corruption (13.5%), taxes (10%), tax evasion (9%), and immigration (9%). Although the League and M5S campaigned for the repeal of the latest pension reform (the so-called “Fornero Law”), only 3% of respondents prioritise pensions as the most important problem. Finally, slightly less than 2% of respondents consider EU economic policy as important nowadays. The prioritisation of unemployment is closely linked to respondents who experience more difficulties in finding quality jobs, such as young citizens (18-34 years old) and those living in the south of Italy. The elderly are more concerned about corruption and tax evasion, compared to their younger counterparts. Although differences are not particularly high, respondents living in northern and central regions are more worried about immigration and economic growth than those living in the southern regions are, while the latter consider poverty and the improvement of the healthcare system priorities. Agendas seem to be driven by the daily concerns that affect each sub-group in a different way,

according to structural socio-economic and regional differences.

**Figure 1: Most salient issues by respondents' vote intention**



Note: sample of 1,323 respondents. 0.31% believe that others are most important problems that Italy faces and 1.42% refused to answer. The category "No party" includes those who were uncertain, those who declared that they would have not voted or that would have voted blank or null.

Figure 1 displays the most important problems for different categories of respondents based on their voting intentions. We took into account the six major parties represented in parliament - Free and Equal (LeU), PD, M5S, FI, League, and Brothers of Italy (Fdi) - and grouped all uncertain respondents and all those who declared they wouldn't vote, or vote blank, in the "no party" category. All else equal **centre-left voters are more concerned**

**with “valence” rather than “positional” issues like unemployment (LeU 25% and PD 26.5%) and tax evasion (LeU 16% and PD 13%), compared to other electorate groups.** Furthermore, more than the 13% of voters of LeU consider poverty to be a serious problem, while 14% of PD voters are concerned about economic growth. **Supporters of the centre-right coalition are instead much more worried about a positional issue that shaped the electoral campaign: immigration.** Voters of the League (27%) are particularly concerned about increasing migrant flows, followed by Fdl (17%) and FI voters (16%). The introduction of restrictions to immigration was indeed one of their most relevant promises in their electoral campaign. Respondents who have declared to vote for League and FI are also particularly concerned about the high level of taxation (FI 17.5% and League 13%), another positional policy topic on which the two parties campaigned proposed the introduction of a flat tax. **As expected, M5S voters give higher priority than others to the problem of corruption (18.5%).** Interestingly, the most important policy issue for M5S voters is unemployment (23%), and the third highest share of M5S voters (11.3%) have chosen taxes as one of the two most serious problems, just as FI and League voters did. The agenda of priorities concerning non- or blank-voters (“no party”) reflects the ranking of problems over the entire sample, indicating a homogeneous distribution of ‘lost’ voters among different parties.

**Table 2: Issue convergence and correlation between the propensity to vote for different parties**

Party A	Party B	Convergence	PTV correlation
FI	League	79.8	0.654***
M5S	PD	79.5	-0.261***
LeU	PD	78.8	0.424***
Fdl	League	76.2	0.667***
LeU	M5S	75.7	-0.014
Fdl	FI	75.6	0.675***
FI	M5S	75.5	-0.053*
Fdl	M5S	74.8	-0.002
League	M5S	72.0	0.011
FI	PD	70.9	-0.148***
Fdl	PD	69.2	-0.153***
League	PD	63.4	-0.267***
FI	LeU	61.5	-0.124***
Fdl	LeU	61.1	-0.092***
League	LeU	54.7	-0.185***

Note: \*\*\* p<0.01; \*\* p<0.05; \* p<0.1

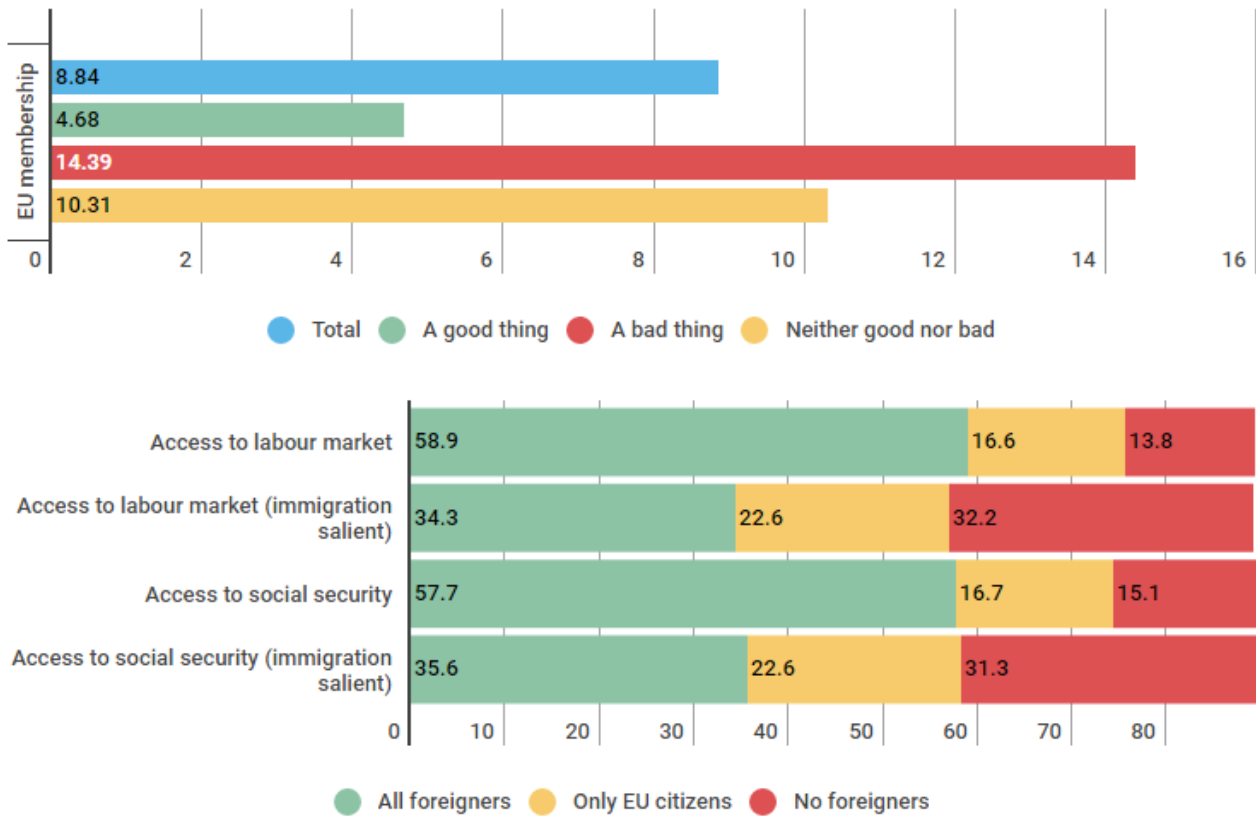
To investigate more in depth similarities and differences between the agendas of different voters, we computed a measure of issue convergence between each couple of parties represented in the parliament based on [Sigelman and Buell \(2004\)](#). This indicator is based on the relative priority of every single issue in the eyes of each political party and ranges from 0 (no convergence at all) to 100 (perfect convergence). Results are displayed in Table 2. The average level of issue convergence among each combination of parties is 71%. Looking at the parties composing the centre-right coalition (FI, League, and Fdl) and parties located in the centre-left of the political spectrum (PD and Leu), as expected, we have found evidence of a high level of intra-block issue convergence and a low level of inter-block convergence. This suggests that partisanship is still a determining factor when it comes to agenda-setting. Given the electoral success of the M5S and the pivotal position of the latter within the new parliament, it is worth analysing the convergence between its agenda and the one of other parties' voters. Interestingly, results show that **there is a higher level of issue convergence between M5S and PD voters (79.5%) than between M5S and FI voters**

**(75.5%) or M5S and League voters (72%).** Going further, we tried to understand if issue convergence results in a higher propensity to vote for a party different from the one voters have declared to vote for. To do this, we computed simple correlations between the respondents' propensity to vote for each party on a scale ranging from 0 (not likely at all) to 10 (very likely). Results indicate that, **despite a high level of convergence between their agendas, the propensity to vote for M5S and for PD are negatively and significantly correlated (-0.261). On the contrary, M5S supporters do not demonstrate a foreclosure to vote for League and vice-versa.** Looking at the correlations between the propensities to vote for M5S and all the other parties, the coefficient with League is the only one that presents a positive, though insignificant, outcome.

## **Rising concern for immigration and its association with the EU**

[Eurobarometer data](#) allow us to make a longitudinal comparison with the issues Italian voters have considered as most important in the weeks preceding the last national election in February 2013. In the midst of the economic crisis, unemployment was a priority for a very large share of Italian voters, followed by associated issues of economic growth and taxes. However, since 2014, the share of voters who considered these three issues as serious problems facing Italy has decreased, while **the share of those who were concerned about immigration (an issue that was pretty much absent from the agenda of the Italian voters at the end of 2012) increased throughout the last five years.**

Figure 2: Association between saliency for immigration and anti-EU attitudes



Sample: sample of 1,323 respondents. Those who answered "Don't know" are excluded from the analysis.

Other studies have argued how the issue of immigration dominated the last Italian electoral campaign (Arcostanzo et al. 2018; Bordignon et al. 2018; Newell 2018). Results of our survey confirm this argument, showing that **the majority of respondents tend to believe that Italy receives too many immigrants and about two thirds of them tend to believe that immigrants constitute a threat to the Italian economy.** Furthermore, our survey highlights another interesting aspect: although just about less than 2% of voters considered EU economic policy as a problem Italy is facing, **we detected a strong association between the issue of immigration and the role played by the EU.** As Figure 2 shows, while in the entire sample the share of citizens who consider immigration as one of the most important problems in Italy is 9%, the figure increases to 14.5% among those who believe that Italy's membership in the EU is a bad thing. On the contrary, it decreases to 4.7% among

## Understanding the Italian vote: a matter of policy agendas By Alessandro Pellegata and Francesco Visconti

those who think that the EU membership is good for the country. Moreover, **voters who are concerned about immigration show a high level of support for sovereignist policy initiatives**. While in the entire sample only one respondent out of three agrees with a partial or total limitation of free movement in the EU, more than half of those who consider immigration as one of the most serious problems for Italy want to restrict access to the labour market and to social security benefits to EU citizens or Italians.

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