

Positional or Valence Populism?

A Cognitive and Inductive Approach to Governments, Political Space and the Party System in Contemporary Italy

The paper presents a study of the party positions in the Italian Parliament based on an inductive approach to the parliamentary debate and investiture votes of the government led by G. Meloni (2022-). Through a content analysis of the parliamentary debate on the investiture votes, a survey is provided of political themes tackled by G. Meloni and by the main Italian parliamentary groups. The scope of the research is to assess the alignments of the Italian parties after the decline of the traditional left-to-right cleavage and the rise of the populist trend. The multidimensional character of the space of competition is highlighted and, through a comparison with the policy content of the investiture debates of governments led by S. Berlusconi (1994-2005) and recently G. Conte (2018-2020), the paper tackles the controversy of whether populist parties are “valence” or “positional”. Populist parties in Italy do take policy positions when they are called to assume executive accountability and the differences between the two moods emerge as a particular declension of the political discourse in an era of the demise of politics.

KEYWORDS Political Space, Populism, Italian Party System, Parliamentary Debate, Party Polarization

1. Introduction

The last three Italian *political* governments (Conte I and II, and Meloni) can be chosen as examples of populist governments in power, although the coalitions supporting them varied in the two political phases. The two governments led by Conte were supported respectively by a coalition of *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S) and *Lega Nord* (LN), called “yellow-green” (Conte I), and by a coalition of M5S and the *Partito Democratico* (PD), called “yellow-red” (Conte II), whilst after the 2022 elections the M5S lost its pivotal role in the Italian Legislature when the political axis clearly shifted to the right with the affirmation of Giorgia Meloni’s party *Fratelli d’Italia* (FdI). Limiting the observation to the *Camera dei Deputati* (Lower House) and the proportional share of the Italian mixed electoral system, in the centre-right coalition FdI obtained 26% of the votes (but a total of 119 seats), LN 8.8% (66 seats) and *Forza Italia* (FI) 8.1% (45 seats). There was no centre-left coalition opposing the centre-right, because the PD and M5S did not run together, and obtain respectively 19% of the votes (69 seats) and 15.4% (52 seats).

The reasons for the interest in the Meloni government are manifold. G. Meloni is the first woman to lead an Italian government, moreover this is the first case of a government with a radical right-wing leader. Berlusconi could not be considered an extreme right-wing leader, nor could Conte, who on the contrary provided an example of populist left-wing leader. Before G. Meloni, G. Fini's was a previous case of a right-wing leader in Italy to assume a primary government role, and his experience was relevant in the political history of G. Meloni, because by founding *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN) he attempted to transform the post-fascist Italian Social Movement (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*), in which G. Meloni took her first political steps, into a party of the 'national right' based on the European examples of conservative parties. Fini remained an ally of Berlusconi, holding government positions of responsibility (Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister in the Berlusconi II government), as proved by his decision in 2008 to dissolve *Alleanza Nazionale* and merge it with the *Popolo della Libertà* (PdL), the new party created by Berlusconi. However, the break and conflict with S. Berlusconi in 2010, with G. Fini's exit from the PdL, opened a new season for the Italian right.

The interest in the political figure of G. Meloni lies in her populist background too, and in the fact that she succeeded in her aim of replacing G. Fini as leader of the Italian right. Her family was of modest origins, and her childhood and adolescence were spent in the working-class neighbourhoods of Rome. Her schooling was also relatively modest and stopped at the high school diploma. At the age of 15, she joined the *Fronte della Gioventù*, the youth organisation of the *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, becoming active in the student movement that in 1992-93 protested against the school reform project promoted by at the time minister Rosa Russo Iervolino. Ultimately, if we exclude the parenthesis of her militancy in Fini's party (in 1996 she became leader of *Azione Studentesca*, a student movement of AN), G. Meloni's political history well represents the path of a leader of the radical far-right. G. Meloni has had no subordinate position and, after an initial experience in the Berlusconi IV government (when she was Minister for Youth, 2008-2011), she broke with the PdL and presented herself as an autonomous leader of the Italian radical right. The party founded by G. Meloni and others in 2012, *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI), which she has chaired since 2014, has presented itself from the outset as a party outside the mainstream and systematically in opposition on the right of the spectrum.

After the conceptual note in the section 2, aimed at clarifying the supposed different nature of position-oriented and valence-oriented parties, and a brief methodological note in section 3, section 4 presents the results of the content analysis of the debate over the investiture vote of G. Meloni's government. The scopes of this paper are:

- a) to identify the main policy dimensions of the Italian political space during the current far-right “populist phase”;
- b) to provide a measure of the policy distances of the parties on each policy dimension;
- c) to describe the content of the far-right populist policy offer and compare it with some previous Italian populist governments.

Through an analytical description of the multi-dimensional space shaped by the policy offers of the Italian parties, this research strengthens the hypothesis that the emergence of populist parties goes side by side with the decline of the old left-right party alignment (Ieraci, 2019). Finally, in the conclusion drawn in paragraph 5, the assumption that populist parties are essentially valence-oriented is contested. Drawn into the parliamentary arena, after having crossed over the executive threshold, the Italian “left” (M5S) and “right” (FdI and LN) populists do assume policy positions. Some previous content analyses of the investiture speeches of three governments led by the precursor of the Italian populism, S. Berlusconi I (1994), II (2001) and III (2005), and over the governments led by Conte I (2018) and II (2019) were compared with content analysis of Meloni’s investiture speech held at the *Camera dei Deputati* on October 25th 2022. This comparative analysis enlightens the symbolic and value shift amidst the six populist governments in Italy. Therefore, there is a further scope in this investigation, which is:

- d) questioning whether the populist parties are “valence parties” with scarcely or no pragmatical attitudes.

If a research question were to be made explicit for this endeavour, it should run as such: Do populist parties refuse to adopt identifiable policy positions? The evidence provided by this research is negative, populist parties do take policy positions and make their symbolic and value options clear. A hypothetical explanation of the “positional” character of populist parties is that when they are called to assume executive accountability, they are forced to provide pragmatical answers to political problems and issues which imply a distribution of benefits and allocation of costs that cannot be simply reduced to “valence formulation” in terms of positive or negative evaluation.

2. Position-oriented and valence-oriented parties

The assumption that populist parties are not positional is doubtful. Even the populist parties tend to compete on the political space adopting policy positions and can be placed on “positional” dimensions that allow relative measurements. This possibility has recently been challenged by

Zulianello and Larsen (2023). As is known, Stokes criticized Downs' approach (1957) because it ignored the "presence of several dimensions of political conflict" (Stokes, 1963: 370), because it unrealistically assumed that the structure of competition was stable, while "different weights should be given dimensions at different times" (ib.: 372), and finally because if we took into consideration the issues that constitute the dimensions it should appear evident "that some at least are not dimensions in any ordinary sense", as in the case of corruption (ib.). On these premises, Stokes formulated his famous distinction between "position-issues" based on "a set of alternatives over which a distribution of voter preferences is defined", and "valence-issues" which are merely expressed as "positively or negatively valued by the electorate" (ib.: 373) and that Downs would have excluded from the party competition. Corruption is also considered by Zulianello and Larsen (2023) as a typical value issue that populist parties would emphasize to the highest degree, to the detriment of economic and socio-cultural positional dimensions.

However, the explicit result of this research contradicts the assumption that populist parties are mainly "valence-issue parties". On the contrary they do assume policy positions, if one takes care to break down the dimensions of party competition into the underlying issues as suggested by a coherent application of Stokes' criticisms to Downs. The implicit argument which I would like to put forward is that the populist parties may seem as ideologically ambiguous when observed at their points of origin or when they are campaigning, but if and when they cross the threshold of executive power they are forced to advance some policy proposals and therefore to adopt some recognizable policy positions.

Stokes's final argument is that valence-issues have no place in Downs's spatial model, while "there is no logically necessary reason why the space of voters and of parties should be identical" (Stokes, 1963: 374). Thus, a "unified theory of voter behaviour and party positioning" would not be possible because the perceptions of the electors do not depend on whether or not the parties are positioned in an ideological space, but precisely on the type of perceptions they have. This leads Stokes (ib.: 376) to the conclusion that "cognitive phenomena" should be introduced into the analysis, even sacrificing the parsimony and elegance of the model. Given this possible gap between the nature of voters' perceptions (which may be of valence type) and the tendency of parties to seek and offer policy positions, a first debatable aspect is whether it is possible to conceive of the parties themselves as valence-parties. As mentioned above following Stokes, a similar character would imply the renunciation of any positioning and the definition of any issue in terms of the "positive-negative" dichotomy.

The problem of cognitive dissonance between voters and parties (i.e. party leaders) is serious and from Downs onwards there have not been many attempts to formulate a unified theory of electoral

behaviour (Strom, 1990). Normally, spatial theories of competition adopt either the perspective of the parties or that of the voters, treating their behaviours as homogeneous. In the same way this research assumes that all parties are “position-oriented”, rather than “valence-oriented”. However, Zulianello and Larsen (2023) argued that cognitive dissonances can arise even between the same class of actors, as in the case of populist parties that “see” or favour only valence issues in opposition to mainstream parties that remain “positional”.

Ultimately, it is not clear whether valence is an ontological trait of certain parties or simply a modality of communication and political style. Stokes himself admits that a valence issue can become positional and vice versa. For example, corruption or immigration can present themselves as typical valence issues (i.e., seen as good or bad things in themselves), but when parties or voters are called upon to formulate preferences regarding the decisions to be taken to preserve a “good thing” or to transform or eradicate a “bad thing”, even a valence conflict will end up transforming into a series of issue conflicts about which concrete measures must be followed to obtain the desired valence results. This is typically the problem that populist parties have to face once in power: “what should be done” to resolve the various valence issues, that is to change the “bad” things into “good”? When they fail to find any answers, and maintain their character as valence parties, the result might be inaction or failure, when instead they provide answers they inevitably transform into positional parties.

It is possible to show that in turn a positional issue can transform into a valence issue, using the notion of ideal policy position (Laver and Shepsle, 1996). If we assume any positional issue, that each party initially has an ideal policy point on this issue, and that no party has a dominant position, we can imagine an indefinite series of repositioning of the parties, following negotiations on the decisions to be made, as in the formulation of the “chaos theorem” by McKelvey (1976). However, even in a hypothetically indefinite sequence of repositioning, it cannot be excluded that the parties will eventually occupy some “no longer negotiable” positions, from which they are not prepared to move. A more or less prolonged phase of stalemate, or even heated conflict, may follow. When this happens, it is likely that the inability of the parties to continue the negotiation indicates the (temporary) transformation of that position issue into a valence issue. Policy solutions that had previously been negotiated and conceived as variable “positionings” have now transformed into valence.

The main argument of this paper is that populist parties do become “position-parties” when they assume executive accountability and are forced to provide answers to political problems and issues. Therefore, valence is not necessarily an ontological trait of the populist parties but rather a modality

of their communication and political style when they are confined in the opposition and are exempt from assuming political accountability.

3. Spatial analysis of party competition. A methodological note

This research employs a methodology applied in previous works (Ieraci, 2006; 2008; 2019; Ieraci and Pericolo 2021) to which can be used for further references. The present study aims at reconstructing the political space *as the political actors see it and represent it*, therefore moving away from the mainstream of the unidimensional analysis of the spaces of competition, which implies a listing of left and right pre-classified categories (Downs, 1957; Sartori, 1976; Budge and Farlie, 1977, 1978; Budge 2001)¹. According to the Constitutional procedure, Italian governments receive their parliamentary investiture through an initial vote of confidence, after the *Presidente della Repubblica* (Head of State) has sworn in the *Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri* (President of the Council of the Ministers, PCM) and the Ministers. Usually, some days after that formal investiture, the newly formed government receives a collegial vote of confidence from both the Lower House – *Camera dei Deputati* – and the Upper House – *Senato* – of the Italian Parliament².

The parliamentary debate over the quest for a vote of investiture by the government was conceived as a dialogue between the appointed PCM (G. Meloni) and the party representatives in Parliament, both from the government majority and from the opposition. Such an investiture game is regularly characterized by the following sequence: A. The PCM delivers an investiture speech; B. the representatives of parties reply; C. the vote of investiture is delivered. The survey consists of the content analysis of the investiture speech of the PCM and of the relative replies of the other party representatives. Firstly, the political themes presented by the PCM were recorded, together with the evaluations (either positive or negative) attached to them (see the Appendix, Sections A-B, for the complete list of the recorded political themes, their scores and their relative acronyms). A frequency of the occurrences for each political theme and a frequency of their evaluations (positive or negative) were obtained. A maximum of five positive and five negative evaluations of each theme were counted in order to standardize the scoring from -5 to +5. It was therefore assumed that for each political theme the score +5 corresponded to a maximum of positive preferences (five or more *positive* occurrences) for it, while the score -5 corresponded to a maximum of negative preferences for it (five or more *negative* occurrences). Subsequently, the same procedure was applied to the

¹ For a reappraisal of the comparative manifesto data project, see: Dinas and Gemenis, 2010; Gemenis, 2013; Zulianello, 2014.

² The content analysis on which this research is based was conducted on the debates held in the *Camera dei Deputati* on 25.10.2022. See Appendix.

replies of the party representatives, who reacted to the framework of the political themes advanced by the PCM.

This first phase of the survey was mixed quantitative-qualitative and obtained with a computer-based technique, in that each recorded political theme was simultaneously submitted to the research qualitative evaluation in order to assess its positive or negative value. The classification of the political themes as either positive or negative depended on any relative attributions attached to them (“good”, “bad”, “right”, “wrong” and similar) and on the performative character of each sentence revealed by the use of verbal formulas such as “it should/should not”, “it must/must not”, “it would/would not be better if” and similar. All the sentences which conveyed merely descriptive meanings were discharged from the analysis. For instance, sentences such as “The inflation rate in Italy has risen in the last six months from 1.2% to 2.5%”, or “The national transport network has been extended by 35%” were not recorded and analytically treated.

The subsequent second phase of the research design was mostly qualitative. The themes introduced by the PCM were indeed meaningfully combined on ten point-scales or political dimensions (from - 5 to +5 according to the scoring system above described) and the relative combined scores were calculated. This procedure was then applied to the scores on each dimension of the party representatives too. The political dimensions were therefore ‘shaped’ by the speakers themselves, that is by the PCM and by party representatives who replied, and the puzzle of declaring what is “left” and what is “right” was deliberately avoided

4. Research Strategy and Content Analysis of Parliamentary debate on confidence votes

If we look at the whole list of political themes (see Appendix, Tab. A.), with the relative scores, presented by G. Meloni in her investiture speech, we could agree with Battegazzorre (2024) that we are in the presence of a ‘democratic nationalism’ with clear elements of contact with the recent tradition of right-wing governments in Italy, starting with Berlusconi I (1994). However, it is worth emphasising some peculiarities of G. Meloni’s approach. The purely liberal conception of economics and politics was certainly affirmed. Of the 16 references to the ‘market economy’ (EM), only one was negative (score = 4), while the 8 references to the ‘direct legitimacy of the leadership’ (LDL, score = 5), and the 14 references to ‘freedom’ (score = 5) were all positive. Similarly, the 9 references to “justice”, 8 of which negative (GIU, score = - 4), were in line with the tradition of Berlusconi’s political message. As in the mainstream of *berlusconismo*, ‘taxation’ was seen as an absolute evil in 14 out of 15 references (TAX, score = - 4), similarly with ‘bureaucracy’ with 9 negative references (BUR, score = - 5), while – as with Berlusconi years before – G. Meloni tried to

reassurance about her reliability in the management of ‘public expenditure and budget’ (17 references to FPB, score = 5). Some differences with regard to the Italian conservative right of the 1990’s and early 2000’s were to be found in the negative references to the role of ‘banks and finance’ (BKFIN, score = - 3), in the 3 positive references to ‘social economy and solidarity’ (ESS, score = 3) and the two positive references to “equality” (EQU, score = 2), and in the 17 references to ‘education and labour’ (FOR, score = 5), where G. Meloni as leader of the ‘populist right’ seemed to match the ‘populist left’. Other deviations from that message were the clear-cut judgement on ‘international relations and the EU’ which recorded 22 references, 9 negative and 13 positive (INTEUR, score = 0). The family remained at the heart of G. Meloni’s discourse (FAM, 11 positive references, score = 5), as did the condition of women (WOM, 10 positive references, score = 5), which shows how this theme was ultimately anchored to a traditional and conservative vision (women *and* family).

There were, however, several elements more in line with a radical right-wing reading, which were not found in Berlusconi’s language. “Immigration” had 14 references, but only one positive (IMM, score = - 4), furthermore immigration was often contrasted with “security” to which G. Meloni referred 8 times (SIC, score = 5). Islam was mentioned only once, as “Islamic radicalism” in a negative way (ISLAM, score = - 1), and the themes of “Christianity” (CRI, score = 2) and “Western civilization” (WCIV, score = 3) were contrasted with it. Overall, however, the theme of “national interest” stood out, referred to 23 times and always positively (NAZ, score = 5). G. Meloni’s effort to present herself as a leader of the democratic right was also evident when she distanced herself 5 times from “fascism and totalitarianism” as historical legacies (FASCTOT, score = - 5).

Finally, other themes appeared more the result of political contingency. For example, “environmentalism” was positively evaluated (7 times), but there was also evidence of negative evaluation (2 times) for its impact on economic development (with a resulting score = 3 for AMB), while there were positive references (4 times) to “sustainable development” (SUSDEV, score = 4). Finally, the international crisis led G. Meloni to 4 positive references to the role of the “military” (MIL, score = 4), one negative evaluation each to W. Putin and the Russian Federation, two positive ones for Ukraine, and 3 pro “NATO” references.

Through their qualitative combination, the identification of fourteen sets of issues and relative dimensions was possible, as shown Tab. 1, where the political themes were qualitatively arranged as conceptual and meaningful sets of antinomies:

- I: DEMOCRACY: ‘Citizens and populism’ versus ‘Majoritarian’;
- II: ‘OLD’ POLITICS: ‘Continuity’ versus ‘Reforms’;
- III: ECONOMY&MOD.: ‘Solidarity and social economy’ versus ‘Market and globalization’;
- IV: WELFARE: ‘Welfare state’ versus ‘Budget balance’;
- V: STATE: ‘State active role’ versus ‘Minimal role’;

- VI: JUDICIARY: ‘Legality’ versus ‘Security’;
- VII: REG. & FED.: ‘Centralization’ versus ‘Devolution’;
- VIII: INTERNATIONAL CRISIS: ‘Peace’ versus ‘Confrontation’;
- IX: POLITICAL ETHICS: ‘Political Ethics’ versus ‘Corruption’;
- X: GENDER & MINORITIES versus ‘Tradition’;
- XI: GOVERNMENT: ‘Opposition’ versus ‘Government’
- XII: ENVIRONMENTALISM versus ‘Energy’;
- XIII: FASCIST LEGACY;
- XIV: EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: ‘Supranational’ versus ‘State-centred’.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

It should be noted that on some of these dimensions (V, VI, VIII, IX, X, XI, XII, and XIV) G. Meloni’s position was maximally polarized, but the average of her positions on the 14 dimensions was ultimately moderate (.86). It can also be noted how the two major parties of the government coalition (FdI and LN) followed the polarizing push of G. Meloni only on the VI dimension, that of the antinomy between “Security” and “Legality” and on the XIV, where the state-centred conception linked to national interests was opposed to the “Supranational” principles of European integration. On the dimension of the “International Crisis” (VIII), G. Meloni appeared singularly isolated in her radicalism even within her own government coalition, as we will remark further on. Also significant was the polarization of the Italian political space towards the left, due to the positioning of the *Alleanza Verdi Sinistra* (Green Left Alliance, AVS), of the PD and of the M5S. Overall, the maximum party distance was recorded between AVS on the left and FI on the right (Party Distance = 4.0; party Polarization = 0.4).

The multi-dimensional configurations of the policy space which were obtained through the content analysis of the investiture debates of G. Meloni’s government offer a plenitude of possible cross-comparisons among the eleven identified dimensions. Figs. 1-3 cross European Integration versus International Crisis (Fig. 1), Market-Solidarity versus Environmentalism-Energy (Fig. 2), and Budget-Welfare versus Opposition-Government (Fig. 3) generating three two-dimensional spaces.

[FIG. 1 HERE]

The intersection of the European Integration and International Crisis dimensions (Fig. 1) clearly highlights G. Meloni’s radical attitude to current foreign policy issues. On the one hand, her conception was state-centred because it was tied to the rhetoric of national interest and highly critical of the actions of supranational actors, in particular the EU. Moreover, the anti-Russian stance and unconditional support for Ukraine oriented G. Meloni towards a logic of confrontation

rather than appeasement. It should be noted that in her government coalition only her own party (FdI) was willing to follow this intransigent line, while FI inclined both towards less state-centred and more appeasement-seeking conceptions, as shown by the relatively high FI-GOV distance, and even LN seemed reluctant to follow G. Meloni once the relative distances on this two-dimensional space are taken into account (respectively, FI-GOV = 4.9; LN-GOV = 4.0). The distance between the position of Meloni's government from the opposition parties (*Moderati*, Mod, *Più Europa*, +EU, AVS and PD) became evident on international policy issues, both because these parties espoused a more openly pro-European stance, and because for them the support for Ukraine could not be reduced to the military aspect alone.

[FIG. 2 HERE]

The intersection of Market-Solidarity versus Environmentalism-Energy (Fig. 2), on the other hand, shows the conditioning of political positioning by the 'spirit of the times' or rather the contingencies of the political debate. These positions were probably the result of the energy crisis brought about by the Russian-Ukrainian war, which led the Italian parties to adopt a critical view of fossil energy and to imagine Italy's energy future in a more environmentalist key. All parties in fact occupied the bottom left quadrant, where environmentalist tendencies and the solidarity conception of the economy were combined. Even G. Meloni fully embraced an environmentalist and sustainable vision of economic growth. The positions of the three major opposition parties (AVS, PD, and M5S) were very close and almost overlapped. Distances inside the government coalition were less evident on this two-dimensional space (FI-GOV = 4.0; LN-GOV = 2.0).

[FIG. 3 HERE]

Finally, some arguments can be developed regarding the combination of the Budget-Welfare versus Opposition-Government dimensions (Fig. 3). Here the polarization between the opposition and government parties was greatest. The two sides clearly distanced themselves, while within the government coalition the centrifugal positioning of the LN with respect to the perpendicular "Budget-Welfare" dimension was quite evident. In fact, the LN representatives emphasized on several occasions in response to G. Meloni's speech their disagreement with regard to some social policies, in particular those related to the pension schemes, that should have been defended and maintained. This was made evident by the relative policy distance between LN and GOV (5.4) on this two-dimensional space. In turn, FI and FdI showed full coherence with the line traced by G.

Meloni on these two dimensions, which was that of seeking a compromise between respecting the budget constraints and maintaining welfare guarantees.

The previous analysis of three given combinations (Figs. 1-3) made clear that G. Meloni as government leader found herself facing some tension with the other two allies right from the start, and since 2022 episodes of verbal disagreements or critical positions taken by these two allies have not been lacking. FI did not fully accept the anti-Putin line that G. Meloni proposed since her investiture speech (see Fig. 1) and furthermore did not accept the renunciation of a prospect of solving the crisis through the action of supranational actors. FI (see Fig. 2) also showed itself reluctant to accept G. Meloni's "environmentalist turn". With the LN the tensions seemed even more marked, perhaps also due to the antagonism between G. Meloni and M. Salvini. In fact, even the LN (see Fig. 1) did not fully accept the logic of the "Atlantic" confrontation against Russia, and above all (see Fig. 3) intended to affirm its role in defence of the status quo on the pension issue, as already remarked.

5. The Italian populists on government. Conclusion

Through a content analysis of the parliamentary debate over the investiture votes on the government led by G. Meloni (2022-), the identification of the main policy dimensions of the Italian space of competition and the measurement of the policy distances of the parties on each dimension, we tried to show how even populist parties (namely, FI, FdI and LN) were pushed to take positions on many policies and how their prevailing "valence" character disappears or is greatly attenuated when they are in the government and are forced to decide on the solutions to be sought with respect to various issues.³ As Stokes (1963) predicted, valence issues might as well be reduced into position issues when the cognitive aspects of politics and the contingencies are taken into consideration. These aspects were also highlighted by the previous populist experiences in Italy, the *ante litteram* populist governments of Berlusconi in the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s, and recently the two governments led by G. Conte, with the prominent position of the leftist populist M5S (2018-2021). The analysis also revealed that the emergence of populist parties goes alongside the decline of the old left-right party alignment and brings about a remodelling of the competition space along new dimensions. The polarization of the Italian political space (overall distance measured from the first to the last aligned party) has kept relatively high during the long phase ranging from Berlusconi I to G. Meloni's government and the present days (1994-2022, see Tab. 2), there is no evidence of the persistence of the traditional left-to-right cleavages and the previous analysis of the space of

³ For an overall evaluation of the first experiences of the populist parties in government, see Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015).

competition after 2022 election confirmed that the Italian parties do not align on an ideologically identifiable left-to-right continuum.

[TAB. 2 HERE]

Did the content of the populist policy offer and “symbolology” alter between the affirmation of S. Berlusconi (1994) and the ascent of G. Meloni in 2022?

[FIGG. 5-9 HERE]

Berlusconi in his debut (1994) mainly emphasised the turn towards the market and liberalism that he intended to impart to Italy, moving away from its bureaucratic rigidity, the dominant role of party-government (*'partitocrazia'*), wastefulness and inefficiency of welfare (see Fig. 4). On his return to power in 2001 (see Fig. 5), after the interlude of the centre-left governments Prodi I, D'alema and Amato II, those issues were less central, because all his attention was now turned to the attempt to affirm the principle of democratic leadership, which he felt had been violated. However, even in 2001, bureaucracy and the State were still his two favourite targets in what remained of his 'liberal revolution'. Finally, in 2005 (see Fig. 6), it became difficult to distinguish those traits, but this was perhaps due to the decline of Berlusconi's own political season.

Conte I in 2018 was indeed the first openly populist government in Italy and the framework of political themes changed drastically when compared to the preceding Berlusconi governments (see Fig. 7). Welfare, citizens, parliamentary democracy, the innovations of 'digital democracy', political transition and - of course - the 'people' were at the centre of the political agenda. There was still room for the market economy, but balanced by the call for social solidarity. Strangely, justice was still presented as one of Italy's problems and immigration as a potential threat; this is evidently a theme shared by both left-wing and right-wing populisms. A year later (see Fig. 8), when the M5S-LN coalition broke up and Conte II gave birth to the 'yellow-red government' with the PD, there was a partial change of tone. Immigration was no longer seen in a completely negative light, there was a strong emphasis on social equity (later made concrete with the institution of the 'citizenship income'), and finally, typical themes of Italian centre-left discourse reappeared, such as the 'south' (*il Mezzogiorno*), the Mediterranean, state intervention, education and youth policies.

As we have already had the opportunity to mention, G. Meloni's populism exhibited at its debut very different connotations (see Fig. 9). Some elements of *berlusconismo* remained, such as the criticism of bureaucracy, the role of the inefficient state, of justice, and conversely the emphasis on

the market, liberalism and the democratic legitimation of the leadership. However, the truly distinctive feature of G. Meloni's investiture speech became the rhetoric of the nation and the family, which was accompanied by criticism of immigration and the role of the EU. The other negative connotations of G. Meloni's 2022 investiture speech concerned bureaucracy (which has always been considered by Italian political leaders as a factor in slowing down the economy), the EU, the judiciary and taxation. From a certain point of view, one could say that G. Meloni's conservatism or right-wing vision corresponded quite well to the tradition inaugurated by S. Berlusconi. However, the strong emphasis on the nation and on 'Italian interests' was a prominent and novel element, as was the focus on environmentalism and the reference to education and youth policies, perhaps a tribute to her past as Minister of Youth in the Berlusconi IV government. Finally, G. Meloni felt obliged to make it clear that her right-wing government denied any ideal link with 20th Century fascism and totalitarianism.

Can we concede that G. Meloni's populist government and her policy positions, as derived from her investiture speech, were 'blurred' as believed to be typically the case with 'valence populist parties' (Zulianello and Larsen 2023; Rovny, 2013; Rovny and Polk 2020)? The answer is negative. This research showed that the ruling populist parties, at least in the Italian cases offered by G. Meloni and before by the M5S, take positions on a very broad set of political themes and issues, and do not avoid taking positions at all if one takes care to portray the policy space in all its complexity. As we have already argued, rising to government power involves providing answers to problems so that populist parties can hardly avoid taking positions and providing indications on how they intend to act. "Problem-solving" cannot be addressed by taking refuge in attitudes of valence and the experience of populist parties in power, particularly in the Italian case, seems to confirm this hypothesis.

It may be that a simplification of the policy space into only two dimensions ('economic' and 'non-economic') helps to generate a different image of populist parties, as if they were incapable of taking clear positions, but this solution is ultimately a violation of the recommendation by Stokes (1963) to develop multi-dimensional descriptions of the policy space, which are able to capture with more precision the cognitive states of parties and their leaders and the interactions between the policy dimensions implied by their political and rhetorical arguments. In the Italian case, in this hectic period (2018-2024), we have witnessed the transformation of the right-wing (FdI) and left-wing (M5S) populist parties from "blackmailing parties", with considerable parliamentary weight but little or no political appeal and therefore low "coalition potential" (see Ieraci 2021: 301), to parties with significant, if not even indispensable, coalition potential. This transformation could be the basis of the now clear profiling of their political programs and lines of action. Maintaining

blurred and valence positions is profitable in the electoral arena and for attracting new dissatisfied voters, but it cannot be a viable strategy once the threshold of executive power has been crossed.

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Appendix

The content analysis over the investiture of the government currently led by G. Meloni was conducted on the debates which took place in the *Camera dei Deputati* (Lower House), where she delivered her first investiture speech (Tab. A in this Appendix) on 25.10.2022. G. Meloni's investiture speech counted 8533 words. The lengths of the replays varied and in order to keep some uniformity they were selected ranging from a lower limit of about 1000 words to a top limit of about 1500 words, as follows:

Cesa L. and Semenzano M., (M-NM), 925 words.
 Magi R. and Della Vedova B., (Misto + Europa), 1208 words.
 Ricciardi R., (M5S), 1125 words.
 Serracchiani D., (PD), 1131 words.
 Molinari R., (LN), 1546 words.
 Mulè G. and Polidori C., (FI-PPE), 1347 words.
 Ferro W., (FdI), 1555 words.
 Soumahoro A. and Grimaldi M., (Gr. Misto-AVS), 943 words.

[Source:

<https://www.camera.it/leg19/410?idSeduta=0004&tipo=stenografico#sed0004.stenografico.tit00020.int00010>]

Tab. A lists the political themes addressed by G. Meloni together with their corresponding occurrences and codes. Tab. B presents the complete list of the used code with reference to the relative political themes.

Tab. A: G. Meloni's Government Programme (2022)

Code	Political Themes	+	-	n	Scores
AGR	AGRICULTURE AND TERRITORY	1	0	1	1
AMB	ENVIRONMENTALISM	7	2	9	3
ANTFASC	MILITANT ANTIFASCISM	0	1	1	-1
BKFIN	BANKS AND FINANCE	0	3	3	-3
BUR	BUREAUCRACY	0	9	9	-5
CASTA	ESTABLISHMENT AND POLITICAL CLASS	0	2	2	-2
CITT	CITIZENSHIP	6	1	7	4
CORR	CORRUPTION	0	2	2	-2
CRI	CHRISTIANITY	2	0	2	2
CRIM	CRIMINALITY	0	5	5	-5
CULT	CULTURE AND HERITAGE	0	4	4	-4
DEM	DEMOCRACY	2	0	2	2
DMP	PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY	6	1	7	4
DSDEM	DEMOCRATIC RIGHT	7	0	7	5
EM	MARKET ECONOMY	15	1	16	4
ENERFOSS	FOSSIL ENERGY	2	1	3	1
EQU	EQUALITY	2	0	2	2
ESS	SOCIAL ECONOMY AND SOLIDARITY	3	0	3	3
FAM	FAMILY	11	0	11	5
FASCTOT	FASCISM AND TOTALITARIANISM	0	5	5	-5
FOR	EDUCATION AND LABOUR	17	0	17	5
FPB	PUBLIC EXPENDITURE AND BUDGET	0	3	3	-3
FREL	FEDERALISM, REGIONS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	2	0	2	2
GIU	JUSTICE	1	8	9	-4
GLOB	GLOBALIZATION	1	1	2	0
GOV	COALITION GOVERNMENT AND PROGRAMME	8	0	8	5
IMM	IMMIGRATION	1	13	14	-4
INSTPOL	POLITICAL INSTABILITY	0	3	3	-3
INTEUR	INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND UE	9	13	22	0
INTS	STATE INTERVENTION AND INFRASTRUCTURE	4	4	8	0
ISLAM	ISLAMIC RADICALISM	0	1	1	-1
LD	DEMOCRATIC AND CONSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMACY	7	0	7	5
LDL	DIRECT LEGITIMACY OF THE LEADERSHIP	8	0	8	5
LIB	FREEDOM	14	0	14	5
MED	MEDITERRANEAN AREA	3	0	3	3
MEZ	SOUTHERN ITALY	7	0	7	5
MIL	MILITARY	4	0	4	4
NATO	INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND NATO	3	0	3	3
NAZ	NATIONAL INTEREST	23	0	23	5
PANDEMIA	COVID PANDEMIA	0	5	5	-5
People	S. Mattarella	1	0	1	1
People	P. Borsellino	3	0	3	3
People	Pope Francis	1	0	1	1
People	Pope John Paul II	1	0	1	1
People	E. Mattei	1	0	1	1
People	M. Draghi	1	0	1	1
People	W. Putin	0	1	1	1
People	Healthcare personnel	5	0	5	5
People	Victims of the mafia	1	0	1	1
PNRR	NATIONAL PLAN OF RESISTENCE AND RESILIENCE	3	0	3	3
PRES	PRESIDENTIALISM	3	0	3	3
RIFCOST	CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM	3	0	3	3
RUS	RUSSIAN FEDERATION	0	1	1	-1
SIC	SECURITY	8	0	8	5
SUSDEV	SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT	4	0	4	4
STATE	STATE	1	2	3	-1

TAX	TAXATION	1	14	15	-4
TECH	RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY	3	0	3	3
TRASP	TRANSPARENCY	1	0	1	1
UKR	UKRAINE	2	0	2	2
W	WELFARE	3	2	5	1
WCIV	WESTERN CIVILIZATION	3	0	3	3
WOM	WOMEN	10	0	10	5

Tab. B: List of the Political Themes and Codes

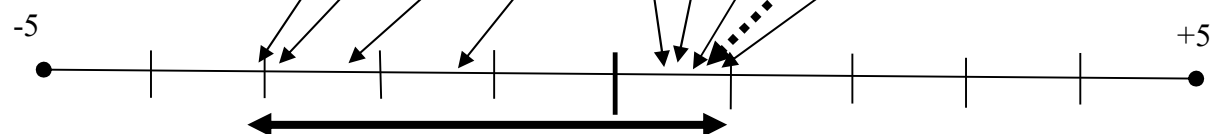
Codes	Political Themes	Codes	Political Themes
AGR	Agriculture and territory protection	GLOB	Globalization
AMB	Environmentalism	GOV	Coalition government and programme
ANTFASC	Militant Antifascism	GOVTEC	Technical Government
ANTIPOL	Antipolitics	IMM	Immigration
BIP	Bipolarism	INFWEB	News via web and informatization
BKFIN	Banks and Finance	INTEUR	State intervention and infrastructure
BUR	Bureaucracy	INTS	Democratic and Constitutional Legitimacy
CASTA	Establishment and political class	LD	Democratic and Constitutional Legitimacy
CEN	Centralism and State	LDL	Direct Legitimacy of the Leadership
CI	Conflict of Interest	LIB	Freedom
CITT	Citizenship	LOCPOL	Local Politics
COL	Colonialism	MED	Mediterranean area
COM	Communism	MEDIA	Media and alternative sources of information
COMMG	Common Goods	MER	Meritocracy
CONS	Conservatism	MEZ	Southern Italy
CORP	Corporatism	MINWAG	Minimum Wage
CORR	Corruption	NATO	International relations and NATO
CRI	Christianity	NAZ	National Interest
CRIM	Criminality	NEWFAM	New family
CSR	Centre-left and Reforms	PAR	Party Government
CULT	Culture and Heritage	POL	Political Ethics
D	Rights	POP	Populus
DDEM	Direct Democracy	PROT	Protectionism
DEM	Democracy	RAZZ	Racism
DIRCIV	Civil Rights	RESPPOL	Political responsibility
DMC	Consociational Democracy	RIF	Reformism
DMP	Parliamentary Democracy	RIFCOST	Constitutional reform
DSDEM	Democratic Right	SIC	Security
EM	Market Economy	SOFTDR	Soft drugs
ENERFOSS	Fossil Energy	SUSDEV	Sustainable Development
EQU	Equality	TAX	Taxation
ESS	Social Economy and Solidarity	TECH	Research and Technology
ETN	Ethnic Minorities	TRANS	Political Transition
FAM	Family	TRASP	Transparency
FOR	Education and labour	W	Welfare
FPB	Public Expenditure and Budget	WCIV	Western Civilization
FREL	Federalism, Regions and Local Government	WEBDEM	Democracy via web
GIU	Justice	WOM	Women

Tab. 1: G. Meloni's Government and Parties Positions

(Source: <https://www.camera.it/leg19/410?idSeduta=0004&tipo=stenografico#sed0004.stenografico.tit00020.int00010>)^a

		PARTIES:										
Dimensions	Political Themes	AVS	PD	M5S	+EU	MOD	FdI	LN	GOV	FI	Political Themes	
I: DEMOCRACY	Citizenship and democracy: CITT, DEM	-2				-1		2	-1		Majoritarian: LDL	
II: ‘OLD’ POLITICS	Continuity: LD, DMP, CORP	-2			2	-1	0	-3	0	5	Reforms: PRES, RIFCOST, INSTPOL	
III: ECONOMY&MOD.	Solidarity: EQU, ESS	-5	-5	-4		1	0	-1	-1	-1	Market: GLOB, TECH, BKFIN, EM	
IV: WELFARE	Welfare: W, FOR, TAX	-5	-4	-1		1	1	-5	0	1	Budget: FPB	
V: STATE	Active: BUR				2	1			5	1	Minimal: LIB	
VI: JUDICIARY	Legality: GIU			1	1	1	5	5	5	3	Security: SIC, CRIM, ISLAM	
VII: REG. & FED.	Centralization: STATE, MEZ		-2	-1		1	-2	4	-2	1	Devolution: FREL	
VIII: INTERNATIONAL CRISIS	Peace	-1	1		1	5	2	1	5		Confrontation: NATO, UKR, MIL, RUS	
IX: POLITICAL ETHICS	Political Ethics: TRASP, CASTA							-1	-5	-3	Corruption: CORR	
X: GENDER & MIN.	WOM	-2	-2			0	-1	-1	5	-3	Tradition: WCIV, CRI, FAM	
XI: GOVERNMENT	Opposition		-3	-4	-5	-1	3	3	5	5	GOV, DSDEM	
XII: ENVIRONMENTALISM	AMB, AGR, SUSDEV	-4	-5	-5		-2	-1	-3	-5	-1	Energy: ENERFOSS	
XIII: FASCIST LEGACY	ANTFASC			-1					-4		FASCTOT	
XIV: EUROPEAN INTEGRATION	Supranational: IMM, INTEUR	-2		3	-5	-3	5	5	5	2	State-centred: NAZ, CULT, MED	
Others		-5		-5	-5	4	4	5				
Averages		-3.1	-2.9	-2.3	-1.3	.5	.7	.84	.86	.9		

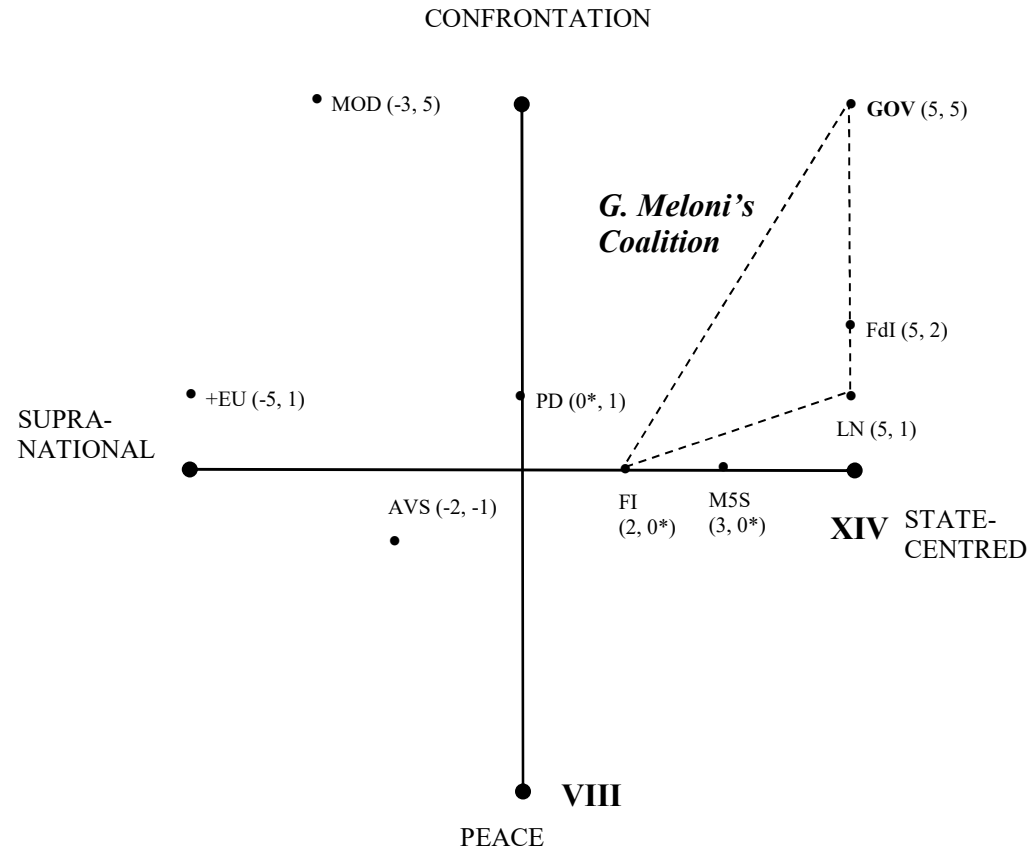
Other:
AVS: COL; DIRCIV; MINWAG; LGTB; RAZZ;
LN: LOCPOL;
M5S: Pnrr, M5S;
FdI: MER;
+EU: D; DIRCIV; SOFTDR;
MOD: Meloni.



Max Party Distance p_s (4.0): AVS-FI
Max Party Polarization POL_s (0.4)

^a Blanks indicate no statements on the relative political themes and dimensions.

Fig. 1: European Integration versus International Crisis. Government and Parties Positions on a Bi-Dimensional Space (2022)



* Score 0 for M5S, FI, and PD refers to no statements on the related dimension.

Fig. 2: Market-Solidarity versus Environmentalism-Energy. Government and Parties Positions on a Bi-Dimensional Space (2022)

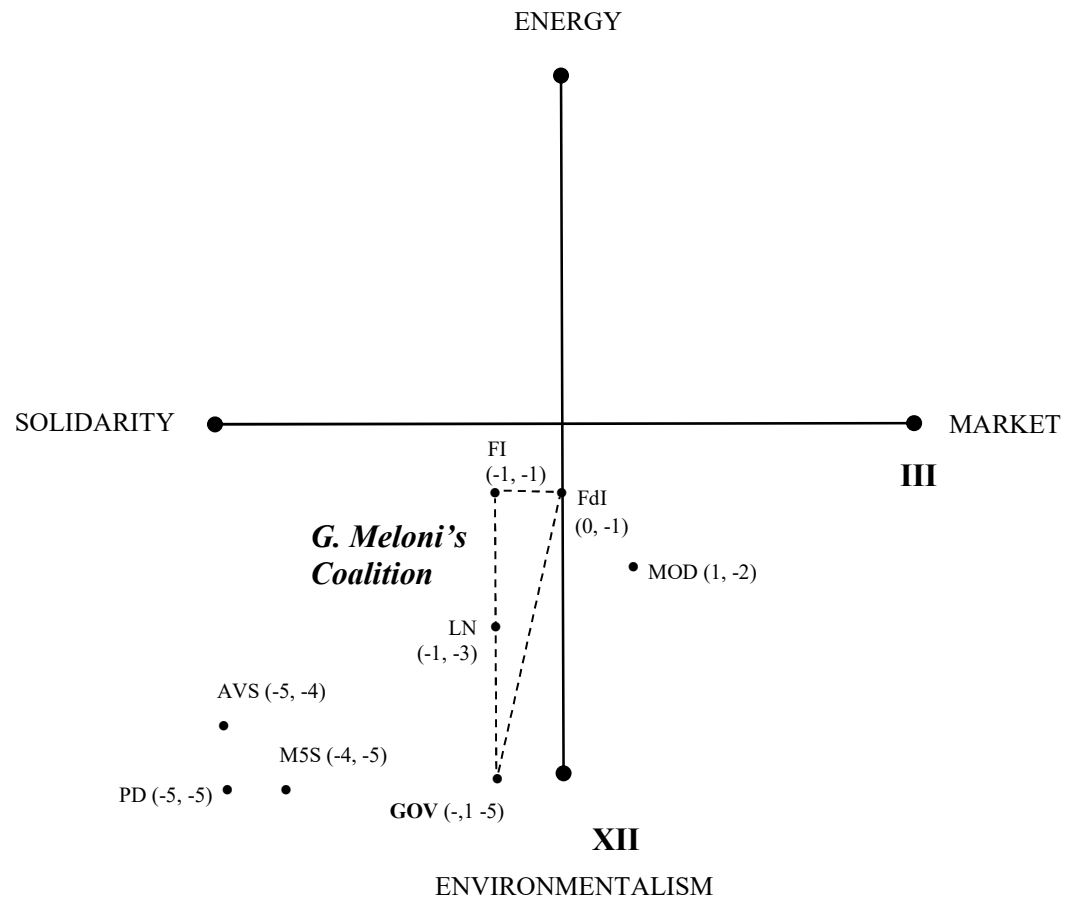
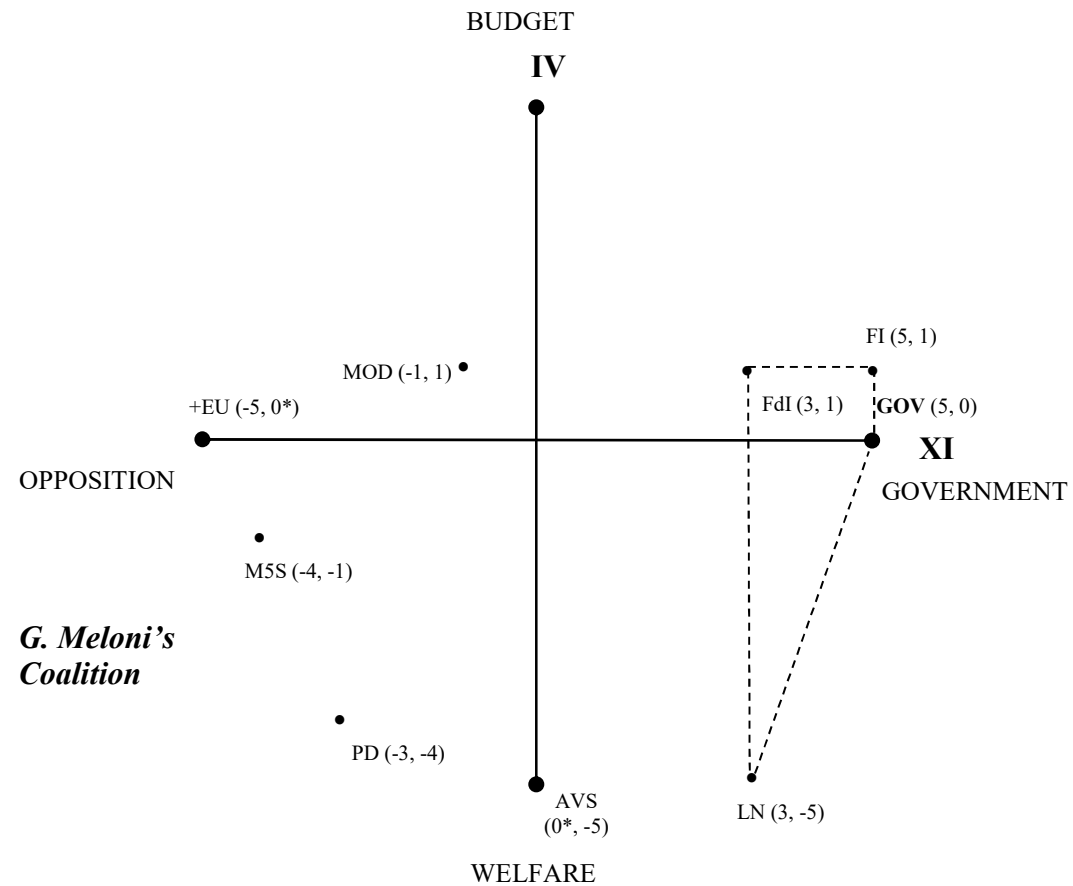


Fig. 3: Budget-Welfare versus Opposition-Government. Government and Parties Positions on a Bi-Dimensional Space (2022)



* Score 0 for AVS and +EU refers to no statements on the related dimension.

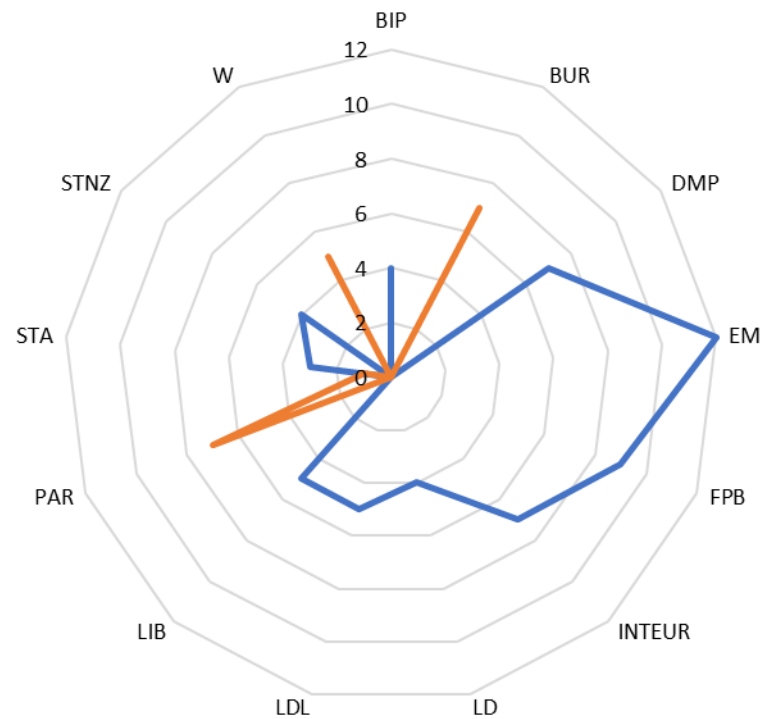
Tab. 2: A Comparison of the party polarization indexes from 1994 to 2022

Governments	Coalitions	Limits of the space by parties	Party Polarization Index
S. Berlusconi I (1994)	Centre-right	PRC-LN	0.58
R. Prodi I (1996)	Centre-left	PRC-FI	0.51
M. D'Alema (1998)		PRC-CCD	0.85
G. Amato II (2000)		PRC-AN and CCD	0.97
S. Berlusconi II (2001)	Centre-right	V-AN	0.60
S. Berlusconi III (2005)		DS-LN	0.69
R. Prodi II (2006)	Centre-left	PRC-FI	0.70
S. Berlusconi IV (2008)	Centre-right	IdV-PdL	0.77
E. Letta (2013)	Centre-left	SeL-LN	0.46
M. Renzi (2014)		SeL-M5S	0.59
G. Conte I (2018)	“yellow-green»	M5S-FI	0.30
G. Conte II (2019)	“yellow-red»	M5S-FI	0.63
G. Meloni (2022)	Right	AVS-FI	0.40

Legenda: PRC, *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista*; FI, *Forza Italia*; CCD, *Centro Cristiano Democratico*; V, *Verdi*; DS, *Democratici di Sinistra*; IdV, *Italia dei Valori*; PdL, *Popolo della Libertà*; SeL, *Sinistra e Libertà*; M5S, *Movimento 5 Stelle*; AVS, *Alleanza Verdi-Sinistra*.

[Sources: Ieraci 2008, 2019; Ieraci and Pericolo 2021]

Fig. 4: S. Berlusconi I - Investiture Speech (1994), Main political Themes



Sources for Figg. 4-9: Elaboration from data by Ieraci 2008, 2019; Ieraci and Pericolo 2021.

■ / ■ Positive/Negative occurrences

Fig. 5: S. Berlusconi II - Investiture Speech (2001), Main Political Themes

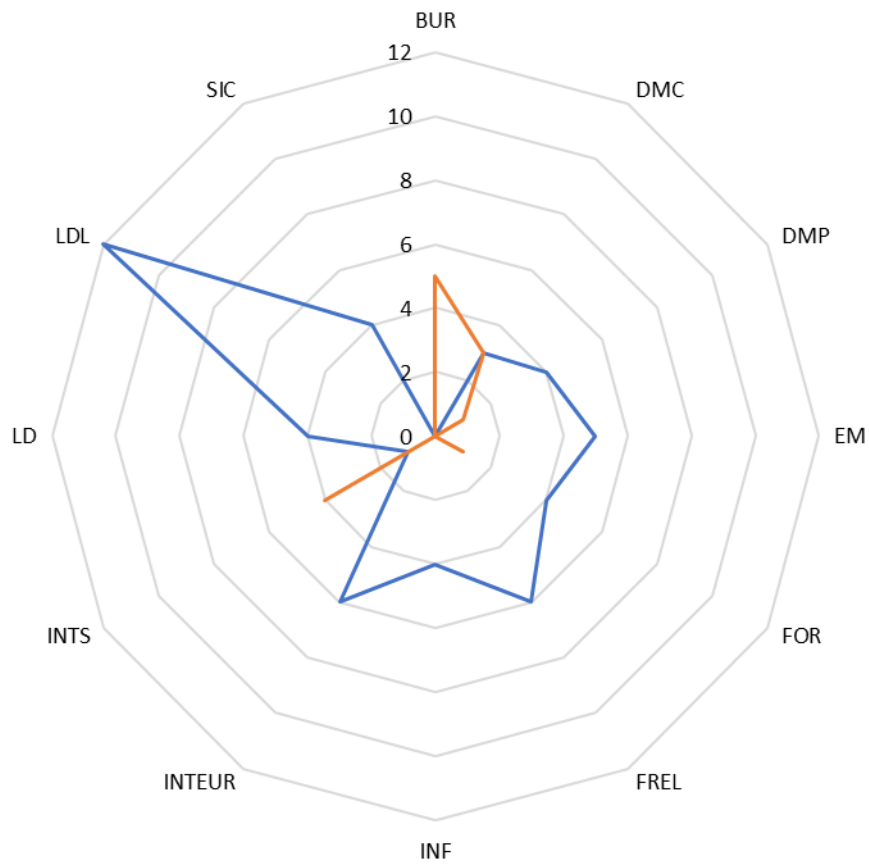


Fig. 6: S. Berlusconi III - Investiture Speech (2005), Main Political Themes

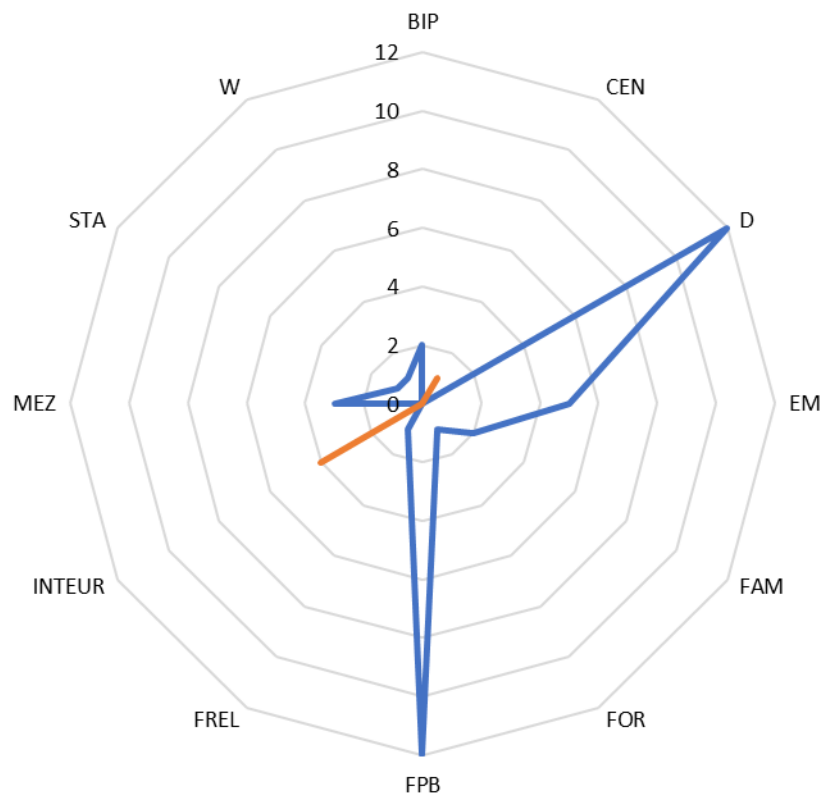


Fig. 7: G. Conte I - Investiture Speech (2018), Main Political Themes

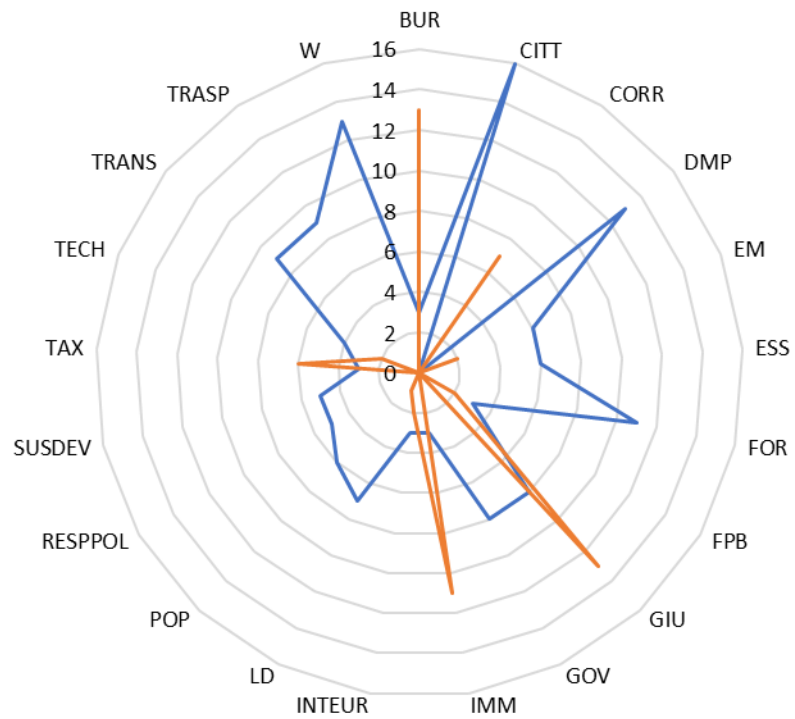


Fig. 8: G. Conte II - Investiture Speech (2019), Main Political Themes

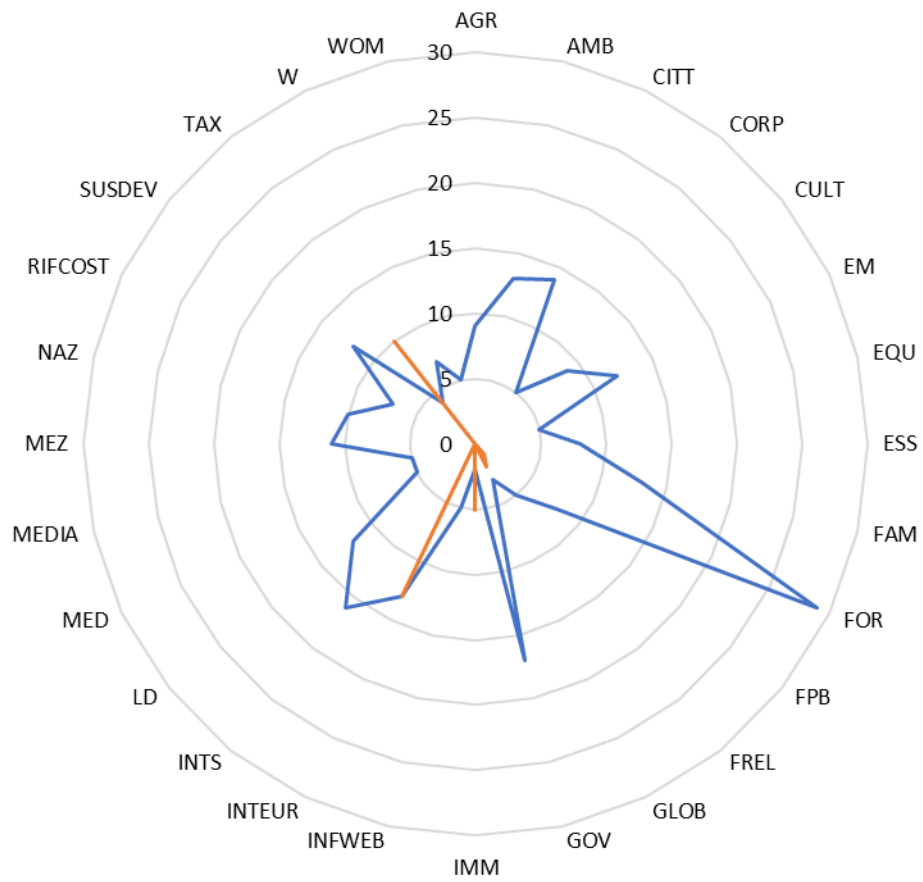


Fig. 9: G. Meloni - Investiture Speech (2022), Main political Themes

