2020

Inequality and voting in Italy's regions

Francesco Bloise
Daniela Chironi
Mario Pianta

Inequality and voting in Italy's regions

Francesco Bloise , Daniela Chironi & Mario Pianta

Published online: 05 Nov 2020.

Submit your article to this journal ⌇

View related articles ⌇

View Crossmark data ⌇

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Regional Studies
Association

Check for updates

Inequality and voting in Italy's regions

Francesco Bloise [a], Daniela Chironi [b] and Mario Pianta [c]

ABSTRACT
In the last 20 years Italy has experienced major political upheavals, which have been explained by a variety of political and social processes. This paper analyses the role played by economic conditions in a period of stagnation and widespread impoverishment. The evolution of voting in Italy's general elections from 1994 to 2018 is investigated at the regional level, exploring the role of inequality, changes in incomes, wealth levels and the precarization of jobs and unemployment. Using a novel regional database combining voting results, incomes of employees, and household revenues and wealth, we explore the drivers of non-voting, and of the shares of votes for mainstream parties, the Lega, and the Five Star Movement in the total number of electors. The results of our econometric models show that inequality, lack of wealth and precarization are closely associated with the regional patterns of Italy's electoral change. While political, ideological and cultural variables are important factors in Italy's political upheavals, we find that a key played has been played by inequality and economic conditions.

KEYWORDS
electoral politics; political upheaval; inequality; economic conditions; Italian regions; territorial divides

INTRODUCTION

Italy has experienced successive waves of political upheaval, with major changes in its party system, first in 1994 with the rise of the 'Second Republic' and its bipolar system, second in 2018 with a strong anti-elite vote and the emergence of the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Lega as main parties. Similar developments have occurred in other European countries with the success of anti-elite, populist or 'challenger' parties (della Porta et al., 2017; Hobolt & Tilley, 2016; Kriesi, 2014). Explanations for such upheavals in Italy have focused, on the one hand, on party system change, considering the evolution of party strategies, the role of leaders and the impact of political communication (Bellucci et al., 2017; Emanuele & Chiaramonte, 2020; Garzia, 2014). On the other hand, the economic and social bases of political transformations in European countries have been explored. Several scholars have argued that while voting does not follow traditional class lines, new cleavages are increasingly important (Dalton, 2008; Jansen et al., 2013; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). Inequality and conditions of economic distress have been identified

CONTACT
[a] ✉ francesco.bloise@uniroma3.it
Dipartimento di Giurisprudenza, Università Roma Tre, Rome, Italy.
[b] ✉ daniela.chironi@sns.it
Scuola Normale Superiore, Facoltà di scienze politico-sociali, Florence, Italy.
[c] **(Corresponding author)** ✉ mario.pianta@sns.it
Facoltà di scienze politico-sociali, Florence, Italy

as novel factors shaping voting behaviour and a specific stream of research has studied the economic determinants of 'populism' (Algan et al., 2017; Ardeni, 2020; Guiso et al., 2017; Kriesi & Pappas, 2015; Piketty, 2018).

The aim in this paper is to analyse the role played by economic conditions in Italian political change, with an approach that is at the intersection of three fields of research: electoral studies, studies on inequality and its impact, and the political economy of Italy's regions. We consider a period first characterized by economic expansion, then marked by the crisis of 2008 and followed by a decade of recession and stagnation that has not yet ended. While political, ideological and cultural factors are crucial for explaining electoral trends in Italy, we consider here economic conditions alone, and the role they may have played.

Our focus is on voting in general elections from 1994 to 2018 in the Italian regions, traditionally characterized by strong specificities in their political cultures (Agnew, 2007; Agnew & Shin, 2017). The period under investigation starts with the emergence of the so-called 'Second Republic' in 1994 after the dissolution and transformation of most post-war political parties (Cotta & Verzichelli, 2016). The period 1994–2011 has been marked by the alternation in power between centre-left and centre-right coalitions, coalesced around the Democratic Party (and its predecessors) for the centre-left and around Forza Italia for the centre-right. In 2011, the pressure of the financial crisis led to the formation of a 'technocratic' government supported in parliament by a bipartisan majority (2011–13). The 2013 elections saw the temporary emergence of a tripolar system due to the sudden growth of the new-born Five Star Movement (obtaining 26% of the vote) (Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2013; Mosca & Tronconi, 2019). As no major party had a clear majority, a period of instability followed, with the Democratic Party acting as the pivot of 'centrist' coalition governments (2013–18). In 2018, the Five Star Movement and the Lega emerged as the parties with the highest votes (33% and 18%, respectively) and launched a short-lived government coalition that collapsed in the summer of 2019 and was followed by a government headed by the same Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, and supported by the Five Star Movement, the Democratic Party and minor groups (Ceccarini & Newell, 2019; Chiaramonte & De Sio, 2019). Moreover, in the last 20 years abstention in general elections has continued to increase, reaching 27% in 2018.

The key political developments that characterized the years 1994–2018 and that will be at the centre of our analysis include the major increase in non-voting; a collapse of the vote for the parties that have alternated in government for most of this period; the rise of votes for the M5S and the Lega. Our hypothesis is that behind Italy's electoral changes a significant role has been played by economic conditions, in particular inequality and impoverishment affecting specific social groups and regions.

Over the same years, income per capita barely increased; among employees in the private sector, in 2018 the wealthiest 10% had the same gross incomes in real terms as in 1994; the median wage decreased in real terms by 10%; for the poorer 25% the loss was 20%. The percentage of employees with temporary contracts doubled to 22%. Considering net household incomes, inequality declined until 2008 (the Gini index fell from 0.31 in 1994 to 0.28 in 2008) and has rebounded since the crisis (the index reached 0.30 in 2016); in terms of territorial patterns, income disparities are higher in metropolitan areas and in southern regions. The economic crisis and fiscal austerity have reduced the room for redistributive policies, leading to overall stagnation and widespread impoverishment.[1]

High inequality, worsening incomes, increasing poverty, precarization and unemployment have deeply affected the Italian economy and society, with strong disparities across regions. Building on the literature that has explored the same issues in Europe, we set out to investigate the associations that may emerge between various dimensions of economic distress and electoral outcomes. In order to carry out this analysis, we have developed a novel database combining the SNS electoral database for regions with INPS Losai data on employee incomes and the Bank of

Italy's Survey on Household Income and Wealth (SHIW). These data (described in detail below) provide a new picture of the patterns of inequality and voting, highlighting strong and persisting differences across regions.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on the connection between inequality and changes in voting trends in Europe; particular attention is given to works dealing with regional patterns in electoral behaviour and inequality in Italy. In the following section we present our electoral and economic data and provide a set of figures that describe key regional patterns in electoral outcomes and inequality in Italy. Next, we build a model to test the association between inequality and electoral behaviour in the Italian regions; we then discuss the results obtained. In the concluding section we summarize our findings and contribution to the existing literature.

THE STATE OF THE ART

This paper contributes to the literature on the relationship between economic dynamics and political developments in Western democracies. Specifically, it focuses on the consequences of inequality on voting trends through a territorial analysis of the Italian case. In this section we first address recent works in the economic and political literature that have investigated political change, the crisis of mainstream parties and the rise of challengers, which are often defined as 'populist' parties. Second, we focus on studies that have examined voting dynamics in Italy, and particularly in the Italian regions.

Inequality and voting

Studies on the connection between inequality and voting trends have been on the rise in recent years, complementing the classic 'class voting' approach. This is a well-established tradition in political science, which has analysed the influence of social class, understood in terms of occupational categories, on citizens' electoral behaviour. Since the 1980s, empirical analyses in the field have documented a progressive decline of voting along class lines, though with considerable variation in time and space (Jansen et al., 2013). Scholars associated this decline with a series of social transformations – such as increased levels of education, increased social mobility, the diffusion of new 'identity' cleavages and values, and the homogenization of life experiences – all leading to the blurring of class divisions (Dalton, 2008).

While class identities have weakened, partially losing their role in shaping voting behaviour, economic divides linked to income and wealth have increased in most advanced countries with wide-ranging social and political consequences.[2] A growing stream of literature has emerged to explore these processes by adopting an interdisciplinary perspective that bridges economics and political science concepts and methods.

Piketty (2018, 2019) studied the effects of long-run inequality dynamics on the structure of political cleavages in France, Britain and the United States over the 1948–2017 period. Based on post-electoral individual surveys conducted after nearly every national election,[3] the connections between multidimensional inequality – measured by income, wealth and education – and voting trends in the three countries are examined. He finds that in the 1950s–60s, a 'class-based' party system was in place: lower education and lower income voters tended to vote for left-wing parties, while upper and middle-class voters tended to vote for centrist or right-wing parties. Since the 1970s–80s, the left-wing vote has gradually become associated with higher education voters, giving rise to a 'multiple-elite' party system in the 2000s–10s: high-education elites now vote for the left, while high-income/high-wealth elites still vote for the right. As for abstention, the massive increase in non-voting is related to the behaviour of lower education and lower income groups who do not feel represented in the 'multiple-elite' party system. The analysis of Piketty identifies educational level as the most important factor in the evolution of centre-left voting, but does not

provide a comprehensive explanation for the overall changes in voting behaviour in the countries he investigates.

A set of interdisciplinary studies has addressed the rise of novel parties, looking for the structural reasons for what is problematically described as a 'populist challenge' (Kriesi, 2014). Interest in populism has grown in recent years and, while a shared definition is still missing,[4] scholars have often come to include in this category all parties whose success has altered the traditional competitive dynamic of two-party (or two-poles) systems (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016). Though considerable for their effort to bring back economic factors into political analysis, the interdisciplinary works reviewed in this section are all examples of this tendency to overstretch the concept.

Acemoglu et al. (2013) understand populism as a political strategy for redistributive policies that used to be typical of left-wing politics, and that can also be adopted by conservative politicians. Similarly, Guiso et al. (2017) define as populist those parties – both left and right – that champion short-term protection policies, and identify them by applying the broad classification of Van Kessel (2015)[5] that includes radical right parties, anti-establishment parties and radical left parties. Algan et al. (2017) build a broad 'anti-establishment' category that includes all parties that are critical of the elite: extreme right, nationalist parties; radical left parties; populist parties; Eurosceptic and separatist parties.

As summarized by Caiani (2019), the literature on the reasons for 'populism' has developed along three analytical perspectives, all linked to the notion of crisis. The first approach focuses on a political crisis: the inability of mainstream parties to represent citizens' interests and the lack of responsiveness of political institutions have opened up spaces for new parties to emerge (Rovira Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2016). For the second approach populism is a reaction to a cultural crisis: while post-industrial developments went along with more progressive politics, once-predominant sectors of the population have been losing status and have provided a pool of supporters for a populist backlash (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). The third approach emphasizes the consequences of economic crises, arguing that rising economic insecurity and social deprivation among the left-behind have fuelled popular resentment towards the political establishment, favouring populist challengers (Kriesi, 2014).

The volume edited by Kriesi and Pappas (2015) stands as the first large-scale comparative work on the impact of the Great Recession on European populism, examining how the interplay between the economic and the political crises influenced the patterns of populist development across 17 countries over the 2001–13 period. Indicators for the economic crisis are unemployment rates, growth rates and public debt; the political crisis is signalled by electoral volatility, trust in parliament and satisfaction with democracy.[6] The analysis documents overall pre- and post-crisis trends and compares them with the electoral fortunes of 25 populist parties, finding that while both economic and political crises had a positive effect on populism, this was most intense when the two types of crisis occurred together. While providing an important overview on European populism in times of crisis, their analysis lacks a detailed account of the role of economic factors regarding electoral outcomes.

A few studies have taken into account inequality as a determining factor for populism. Acemoglu et al. (2013) have approached this issue providing formal models. They define populism 'as the implementation of policies receiving support from a significant fraction of the population, but ultimately hurting the economic interests of this majority' (p. 1). Populism here applies mostly to pro-redistribution positions, when leaders use populist language in order to signal to ordinary voters that they are not beholden to big economic interests. This largely corresponds to the recent Latin American experience with populism, which in the authors' view is linked with the weaknesses of democratic institutions.

Using a political economics approach, Guiso et al. (2017) analyse the drivers of the populist vote – defined as the demand for short-term protection policies – in 24 European countries covered by the European Social Survey (ESS) (2002–17).[7] Specifically, they test whether economic

insecurity and low levels of trust in traditional parties can induce people not to turn out, and if they vote, to vote for a populist party. They find that lower income, financial distress and higher economic insecurity from exposure to globalization and competition of immigrants are drivers of the populist vote. Economic insecurity shocks also have an indirect effect inducing lower trust in incumbents. All these variables push voters simultaneously in two directions: to abstain from voting and, if they participate, to vote more for the more populist candidates. Negative economic shocks (such as the 2008 crisis and its aftermath) and the collapse of trust in traditional politics they induce, drive the demand for populist policies.

An interesting work taking into account the subnational level is that of Algan at al. (2017) in which voting for 'anti-establishment' parties and the fall in trust in political institutions are related with the post-2008 increase in unemployment. They first offer a descriptive analysis of the evolution of unemployment, voting and trust–beliefs across 26 European countries before (2000–08) and after (2009–17) the Great Recession, showing that the economic crisis has moved in tandem with a political trust crisis and the rise of the anti-establishment vote. They then study the relationship between unemployment and anti-establishment voting through regional comparisons, and analyse the impact of the recession on political trust using individual-level survey data.[8] Results show that rising voting shares for anti-establishment parties follow increases in unemployment. It is the change in unemployment, rather than its level, that correlates with voting for non-mainstream parties, suggesting that individuals are mostly sensitive to economic losses. A relationship is also found between the change in regional unemployment and a decline in trust towards the European and national parliaments and political parties.

Other studies have investigated the relationship between inequality and the rise of radical right parties.

Focusing on 16 European countries, Han (2016) tests whether income inequality has dissimilar effects on different social groups' voting for radical right parties, understood as those that support a hierarchic social order, authoritarianism and nationalism. The Gini coefficient for income inequality and an index for individual income are related to voting behaviour.[9] Using a multilevel analysis, he finds support for his 'social identity' argument, showing that income inequality encourages poor people to vote for radical right parties, while it concurrently discourages wealthy people from doing so.

Burgoon et al. (2018) define radical right populist parties as those embracing autarchic nationalism and anti-elite populism, and test whether their electoral rise in Europe is shaped by new measurements of deprivation and inequality based on growth-incidence curves. First, they expect radical right populism to be more likely among individuals facing greater 'positional deprivation' – that is, belonging to an income decile that has experienced lower income gains than those of other deciles. Second, they expect that greater support for radical right parties is associated with higher 'positional inequality' – that is, the situation where the gap between the income growth of wealthier deciles and that of poorer deciles is wider. The paper tests these expectations using individual level survey data from 16 European countries between the 1980s and the 2000s.[10] The results yield support for both arguments, particularly for 'positional deprivation', which correlates with a higher propensity to vote for radical right parties and for those that incorporate nationalist claims in their party manifestos.

Adopting a class voting approach, Oesch and Rennwald (2018) study the passage from a bipolar to a tripolar electoral competition between left, centre-right and radical-right considering nine European countries between 2000 and 2015. They study 20 national elections using seven rounds of the ESS, documenting processes of realignment between classes and parties. They find that the left is broadly supported by workers in socio-cultural professions and by the working class; the right is supported by managers, small business owners and the self-employed; the radical right competes with the centre-right for the votes of the latter, and challenges the left over its working-class stronghold. Old and new patterns of class voting therefore coexist; old patterns are structured by the labour–capital

conflict; new cleavages – opening up the political space for the radical right – are structured by cultural conflicts over immigration, multiculturalism and European integration.

Finally, it is worth noting that inequality was also proved to have affected citizens' trust in political institutions. A negative relationship has been found between worsening economic conditions and support for democracy at the national level (Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014). Citizens with lower economic conditions appear to have lost trust in the European Parliament to a greater extent than have citizens with higher incomes (Dotti Sani & Magistro, 2016).

Voting in Italy and regional patterns

A stream of studies on Italian electoral politics has investigated the role of social class and occupational categories; less attention has been devoted to the relevance of inequality and economic conditions.

Studies of the electoral support for Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia at the start of the 'Second Republic' showed that a wide consensus came from the self-employed (Barisione & De Luca, 2018; Caciagli & Corbetta, 2002; Heath & Bellucci, 2013; Maraffi, 2008; Pisati, 2010), while middle-class employees tended to vote for the parties of the centre-left and the working class split in half between centre-left and centre-right (Maraffi et al., 2011). Explanations for these patterns relied on the redefinition of the 'supply' of political representation (Bellucci, 2001; Bellucci & Heath, 2012) rather than considering the structural transformations of the country.

A decade later, in 2013, the self-employed mainly voted for the Five Star Movement,[11] with the centre-right coalition as a second choice. The working class moved further away from the Democratic Party (Maraffi et al., 2013).

These trends accelerated in the 2018 elections, when the Five Star Movement obtained a wide consensus from a range of social groups. Post-election polls showed that low skilled white-collar workers and highly skilled blue-collar workers overwhelmingly voted for the Five Star Movement, with a similar support also from 'housewives' and the unemployed. The Democratic Party maintained an above-average consensus from pensioners, managers, employees with higher skills, teachers and university students. Conversely, the Lega was able to attract at the same time highly skilled and unskilled white-collar workers, as well as unskilled manual workers; the self-employed confirmed their preference for centre-right parties, the Lega first and Forza Italia second, bringing about a radical shift in the balance of power within the centre-right coalition (Maraffi, 2018).

In studies of Italian political developments the issue of 'territory' has been widely considered. Scholars have identified four main geopolitical areas (the north-west, north-east, centre and south) characterized by strong voting stability (Capecchi et al., 1968). In spite of the move from the 'First' to the 'Second Republic', electoral dynamics at the regional level have maintained some continuity with the past (Diamanti, 2009; Shin & Agnew, 2008).

Two 'territorial political subcultures' have been identified, with a strong prevalence of particular political affiliations. The socialist–communist subculture prevailed in central regions (Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria and Marche); and the Catholic subculture prevailed in north-eastern regions (Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Trentino-Alto Adige) (Baccetti & Messina, 2009). During the 'Second Republic', variability in voting within the geopolitical areas increased, for instance, with the Lega making inroads in several areas of central Italy (Diamanti, 2009, 2020; Shin & Agnew, 2011), but at least until the 2008 elections the geographical dimension appeared to remain the key variable for understanding electoral outcomes (Vezzoni, 2008). As argued by Agnew (2007), the north was marked by competitive bipolarism due to the Lega Nord's incorporation into the centre-right coalition; central Italy remained dominated by the centre-left; and a new dynamic place configuration appeared in the south, which became an area of competition between the main coalitions.

With the votes of 2013 and 2018 a new political geography emerged, with the Lega dominating northern Italy and the M5S dominating the south. As argued by Agnew and Shin

([2017](), p. 16), the national project of 'politics without mediation, either institutional or geographical' developed by these parties has failed to overcome the strength of north–south political and economic differences. In 2018 the Five Star Movement had 32.7% of the votes and became the largest national party. The Lega (17.4% of national votes) became the main right-wing party, overtaking a declining Forza Italia (14%). The Democratic Party (18.8%) remained the dominant party in selected areas of its older regional strongholds, and in the centre of the largest metropolitan areas – Turin, Milan and Rome, in particular (Vassallo & Shin, [2018]()). According to some interpretations, this outcome can be explained by the relevance that voters assigned to the issues emphasized by the two winners. Based on individual-level post-electoral data, Vassallo and Shin ([2018]()) show that for the Lega voters the priorities were immigration, anti-Europe attitudes and the need for a strong leader. For the Five Star Movement voters, instead, the priority was redistribution. The two parties' constituencies converged on a similar anti-elitist attitude and on mistrust for the political establishment.

So far, more structural explanations are missing. Ardeni ([2020]()) investigated at the municipal level the relationship between income distribution and voting for the centre-left, the Five Star Movement and the Lega in 2018. Data on tax statements are used to calculate the relative concentration of income classes, which is then linked to electoral districts.[12] Regression results show a strong variability of regional patterns. In the north-west the Lega has higher shares of votes in municipalities where there is a concentration of both high and low incomes, and is weaker where medium incomes are relevant. In the north-east medium–low incomes are strongly associated with support for the Lega; elsewhere associations are much weaker. The Five Star Movement has the strongest associations with medium and low incomes in the regions of the south and centre. The centre-left finds greater support in municipalities with a larger share of high and medium incomes in the north and central regions (Ardeni, [2020](), p. 246).

Additional research on the territorial patterns of income inequality by Acciari and Mocetti ([2013]()) has investigated differences in income inequality among Italian provinces using tax records, showing that regional disparities have increased, especially after the Great Recession. Income inequality is higher in the south because of the very low income held by those in the tail end of the distribution. Ciani and Torrini ([2019]()) have used the Bank of Italy's SHIW database to show that most of the upward trend in income inequality comes from greater 'within area' inequality starting with the 2008 crisis; conversely, between-area inequality has remained basically stable since the early 2000s. The links between inequality and mobility were analysed by Acciari et al. ([2019]()) using tax records and by Barbieri et al. ([2019]()) using administrative data; they find that the south of Italy has the highest levels of current inequality, the highest levels of intergenerational inequality and the lowest levels of mobility from one generation to the next.

The survey of the state of the art reveals a gap between studies of electoral politics, which have generally devoted modest attention to economic factors, and studies of inequality, which have stopped short of exploring its political consequences. Moreover, studies on the Italian regions have provided a detailed picture of economic structures and political outcomes, but again with no attempt to jointly consider economic disparities and voting patterns. Our investigation fills a gap in the political and economic literature and tests the hypothesis that economic factors – including inequality, income and wealth disparities, and measurements of economic distress – contribute to explaining the evolution of voting patterns in the Italian regions from the rise of the Second Republic to the present. The next section presents the empirical tools of our analysis.

DATA AND DESCRIPTIVE EVIDENCE

In order to combine the political and economic analysis of the Italian regions, we have built a novel data set integrating different databases on election outcomes, employee incomes, household incomes and wealth, and other socioeconomic characteristics. Data refer to 17 regions

and seven rounds of national elections.[13] Electoral data are available at a much finer territorial disaggregation – municipalities and provinces – but at those levels economic variables on incomes and wealth are not available. As the latter are built through the aggregation of micro-data, a large number is needed in order to maintain significance; the regional level was therefore the only viable option as unit of observation. A detailed description of each database used for our analysis is presented below.

Data on elections in the Italian regions come from an SNS database that provides an original systematization of the official data recorded by the Italian Ministry of Interior for seven rounds of national parliamentary elections (1994, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2008, 2013 and 2018). The database considers only the political formations (be they political parties or electoral lists) that have obtained seats in the national parliament. The votes of the lists that did not succeed in entering parliament are excluded from the analysis; this choice is due to the need to focus on major political forces and to ensure comparability over time and regions. The SNS electoral database includes data for all main political parties and coalitions. In this paper we consider four political variables: the share of electors who decided not to exercise their right to vote; the share of electors who voted for mainstream parties; the share of electors who voted for the Lega; the share of electors who voted for the Five Star Movement. By using the share of electors rather than the share of voters, we take into account in all variables the rise of non-voters, allowing for a closer comparison with the economic and social conditions that affect all Italians and not just those who cast their vote; in fact, the share of non-voters is particularly important to identify dissatisfaction with the political system, as argued by other studies (Guiso et al., 2017; Piketty, 2018).

The variable 'mainstream parties' is meant to register satisfaction with the political system; it refers to total voting for the parties that have had a government role during most of the period under consideration, which was characterized by the alternation in power between 'centre-left' and 'centre-right' coalitions. We include within the 'mainstream parties': Berlusconi's Forza Italia (running as Popolo delle Libertà in 2008 and 2013); the Democratic Party (in 2008, 2013 and 2018) and its predecessors (the Democratic Party of the Left in 1994 and 1996, and Democrats of the Left in 2001 and 2006); and the galaxy of centrist parties. Also in terms of policies, centre-right and centre-left coalitions have shown more continuity than change in most areas of government action, including the harsh austerity policies implemented after the 2008 crisis (Pianta, 2012). These similarities notwithstanding, we expect that centre-right and centre-left voting have distinct dynamics, and we devote a separate paper (Bloise et al., 2020) to compare the relationships between economic conditions and voting for centre-right and centre-left coalitions over this same 1994–2018 period.

Here, the voting trends of the Lega and the Five Star Movement are analysed separately as they have been the two parties able to challenge the political system of the Second Republic;[14] investigating the economic and social basis of their rise is a key goal of this analysis. The Lega has contested the elections considered in most regions; for the Five Star Movement electoral data regard the two rounds in 2013 and 2018 only (for details, see the Appendix in the supplemental data online).

Voting behaviour is related to a set of socioeconomic characteristics of the Italian regions, drawing from two main data sources that are representative of the Italian population at the regional level. The first group of variables regards employees of the private sector and provides information on various measurements of labour income, inequality and type of job contract. They are drawn from a very large administrative panel from INPS Social Security archives, containing about 1/15 of the Italian population working in the salaried private sector (Longitudinal Sample INPS – Losai). Within the data set, we find information on the individual yearly employment history in the private sector from 1993 to 2016.

The second group of variables is obtained from the Bank of Italy's SHIW, using the waves from 1993 to 2016; this survey is the best source of information in Italy on incomes, wealth

and other socioeconomic characteristics of a representative sample of Italian households and individuals interviewed every two years. We use SHIW data to compute information regarding equivalized household disposable income, which includes annual labour and capital revenue flows, net of taxes, and all public transfers. Inequality indexes within regions are calculated on this variable taking into account all types of household incomes. SHIW also provides data on net household wealth – that is, the sum of financial and real assets, minus liabilities; we calculate here the mean household wealth within regions. Moreover, all SHIW waves provide detailed socioeconomic information on the Italian population useful to compute the share of regional workers with a tertiary degree and unemployment rates. Given that the SHIW is conducted every two years only, we obtain an imputed value for each year in which the Bank of Italy's survey is not conducted by performing a cubic spline interpolation. Accordingly, all yearly values between 1993 and 2016 are available in our data set.

The full list of variables we consider in this analysis and their definition are presented in Table 1. Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics.

In order to simplify the description of regional patterns, we consider three groups of Italian regions characterized by commonalities in economic structures and inequality patterns:

- *Metropolitan regions* (Piedmont, Lombardy, Liguria, Lazio) are characterized by the presence of large metropolitan areas (Turin, Milan, Genoa, Rome); here we find the country's highest income levels, and high inequality, with a wide distance between the richest decile and median incomes. A wide literature has pointed out that in post-industrial economies major metropolitan areas play a dominant role as the location of high-level, globally connected economic activities (Crouch, 2020, in this issue); these areas tend to concentrate the country's economic gains and experience the highest increases in incomes and wealth, with widening economic and social disparities.
- *'Third Italy' regions* (Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria, Marche) are characterized by intermediate income levels and lower inequality than in other areas. This definition goes back to Bagnasco (1976) and is based on commonalities in economic structures – a dominant role of small and medium-sized firms, a lack of advanced service activities, and a less polarized class composition. In political terms, however, these regions are divided between the Catholic orientation in the north-east and the traditional Left dominance in central Italian regions, as discussed above.
- *Southern regions* (Abruzzo–Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata–Calabria, Sardinia, Sicily) are characterized by the lowest incomes and the highest inequality. The structural backwardness of the economy of the south is documented by SVIMEZ (2019) and Asso (2020, in this issue); geographical patterns of inequality are reported by Acciari and Mocetti (2013).

The territorial diversity of the Italian regions has long been investigated, as discussed above. The aggregation we use here for descriptive purposes is based on economic characteristics and trends in inequality, but can shed a new light on electoral behaviour too, as we focus on the contrast between mainstream and challenger parties.

The set of figures we provide summarizes the key patterns in electoral outcomes and inequality in the Italian regions. Figure 1 maps for the latest national elections held in 2018 the share of electors who did not vote, who voted for mainstream parties, who voted for the Lega and who voted for the Five Star Movement. The regional structure of political affiliations in Italy is crucial in shaping the country's patterns: non-voting appears strong in metropolitan and southern regions; mainstream parties are strong in Third Italy and metropolitan regions; the Lega is strong across the north with inroads in the centre; and the Five Star Movement is strong in the south.

Figure 2 shows the evolution over time of voting patterns in these three areas. Abstention in metropolitan and Third Italy regions started from a 10% level in 1994 and has constantly increased in parallel, with the single exception of 2006, at a faster pace in metropolitan regions,

Table 1. Variables.

Variable	Definition	Source
Electoral outcomes		
Non-voters	Share of electors	SNS voting database
Vote for mainstream parties	Share of electors	SNS voting database
Vote for the Lega	Share of electors	SNS voting database
Vote for the M5S	Share of electors	SNS voting database
Economic variables		
Median gross income of employees	Euros at 2012 prices	INPS LoSai database
Share of rich employees	Share of regional employees in the top decile of the national distribution of gross employee income	INPS LoSai database
Shares of employees in relative poverty	Share of regional employees < 60% of the median national gross employee income	INPS LoSai database
P90/P50 ratio for employee income	90th over 50th of the regional gross employee income distribution	INPS LoSai database
P50/P10 ratio for employee income	50th over 10th percentile of the regional gross employee income distribution	INPS LoSai database
Mean of net wealth	Euros at 2012 prices	SHIW
Share of part time employees	Share of employees with a part time contract	INPS LoSai database
Unemployment rate	Share of regional labour force	SHIW
Other variables		
Graduate share	Share of regional population	SHIW
Mean age	Years	SHIW

Note: SHIW, Bank of Italy's Survey on Household Income and Wealth; INPS - National Institute of Social Security; Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale; SNS - Scuola Normale Superiore.

where it reached 25% in 2018. In 1994, abstention in the south amounted to a share of electors close to that the above regions have today, with a growth that reached 32% in 2018, with reductions in 2002 and 2006.

The combined voting for mainstream parties has a remarkable trajectory. In metropolitan and Third Italy regions it was > 50% of the electorate until 2008 (with the exception of 2006), with a collapse to 25–30% in 2018. In the south, the mainstream vote has never surpassed the 50% mark, with the same collapse after 2008 to < 25% in 2018.

Conversely, the Lega has oscillated between 5% and 15% in metropolitan regions and between 5% and 10% in Third Italy regions, while in the south it reached 5% in 2018 only. The Five Star Movement was stable at 20% of electors in metropolitan and Third Italy regions in 2013 and 2018, jumping in the south alone to close to 30% in 2018. What we need to explain

Table 2. Descriptive statistics.

	Mean	SD	Observations
(a) Descriptive statistics of electoral outcomes			
Non-voters	0.197	0.069	119
Mainstream	0.457	0.099	119
Lega	0.069	0.067	88
M5S	0.211	0.050	34
	Mean	**SD**	
(b) Descriptive statistics of covariates			
Gini index on disposable income	0.295	0.035	
Share of rich employees	0.087	0.027	
Shares of employees in relative poverty	0.309	0.061	
P90/P50 for employee income	2.005	0.173	
P50/P25 for employee income $(t-1)$	1.979	0.229	
Mean of net wealth log $(t-1)$	12.390	0.329	
Share of part time employees $(t-1)$	0.165	0.089	
Unemployment rate	0.076	0.052	
Age	42.051	3.135	
Share of graduates	0.075	0.033	
Sample size	119	119	

Sources: Losai data on employee income (INPS), Bank of Italy's Survey on Household Income and Wealth (SHIW) data, SNS electoral database for regions.

is, therefore, a complex pattern over time and space, which is the result of multiple dynamics – political, cultural, social, regional and economic – among which we focus on the role played by economic and inequality factors.

Figure 3 summarizes the structural differences among the Italian regions in terms of income levels. We consider here gross incomes of employees, which is a more reliable indicator as it is not affected by under-reporting of the self-employed (see above for a discussion of this indicator). We consider the income level above which we find the richest 10% of employees (P90), median income (dividing in half the distribution of employees) and the income below which we find the poorest 25% of employees. These are gross incomes of individuals, before taxes and redistribution.

In metropolitan regions the 10% of the most highly paid employees remains for the whole period above a stable line at €43,000 (at constant 2012 prices), a much higher level than top earners in other regions. Median incomes are far below the richest group, receiving less than half in terms of employee income, with a 10% fall in real terms over the period. The level of income of poor employees is much lower and has fallen by 30%, reaching now €10,000 only. Income gaps are huge and have widened.

Third Italy regions have experienced similar trends but with much smaller divides. The most highly paid employees show stable income levels above €37,000, with a modest upward trend. Median incomes are stable at a level slightly above half that of the richest group. Poor employees have similar levels of income to those of the metropolitan regions, with a lower reduction trend. Income gaps here are much lower, and a lesser decline for the middle and bottom of the income distribution is found.
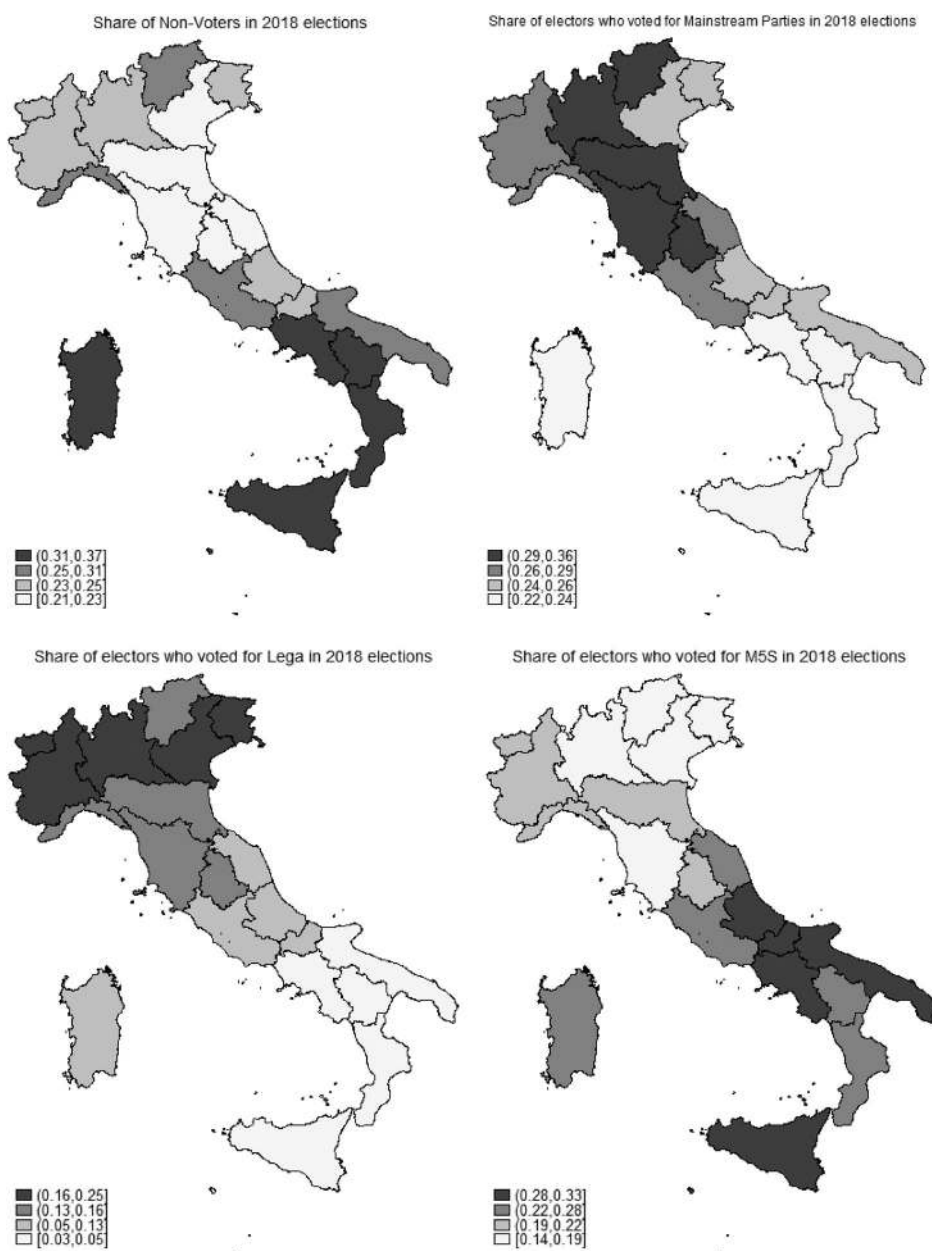
Figure 1. Electoral outcomes in 2018 by region, share of electors.

Southern regions have experienced a serious decline in all income data. In 1993 the level above which we find the richest employees was the same as in the Third Italy; by 2017 it had lost 12%. Median income has also collapsed; in real terms it is now at €15,000, that is, the level the poorest employees had in metropolitan regions 25 years ago. Poor employees in the south are at the bottom of the distribution; 25% of employees earns less than €7000 per year. Part-time work and discontinuous employment, as well as low wages, are a clear problem in this area.

Figure 4 provides an overall picture of inequality in the three areas, showing the Gini index of inequality in disposable household incomes (after tax and public transfers, combining all incomes
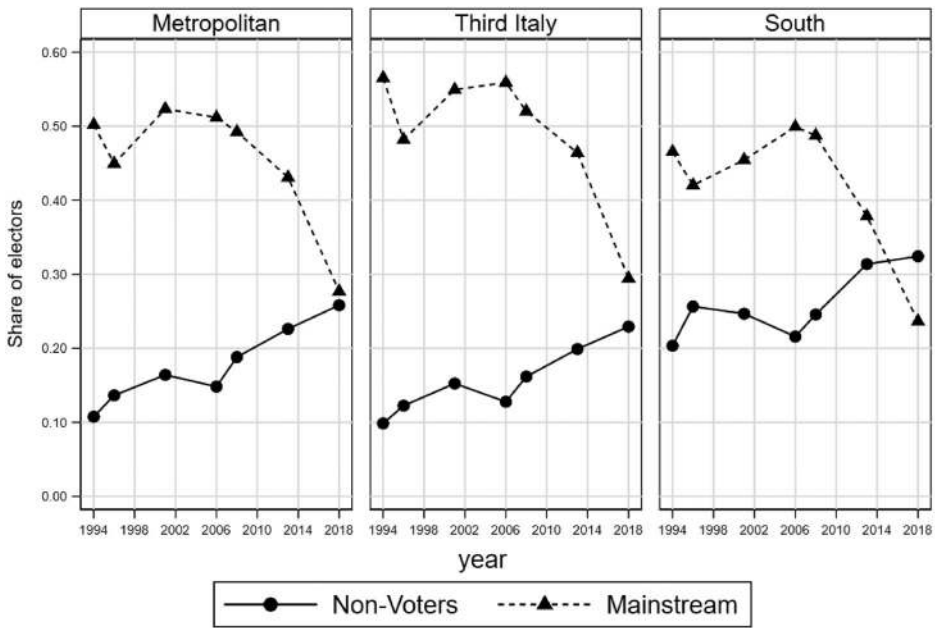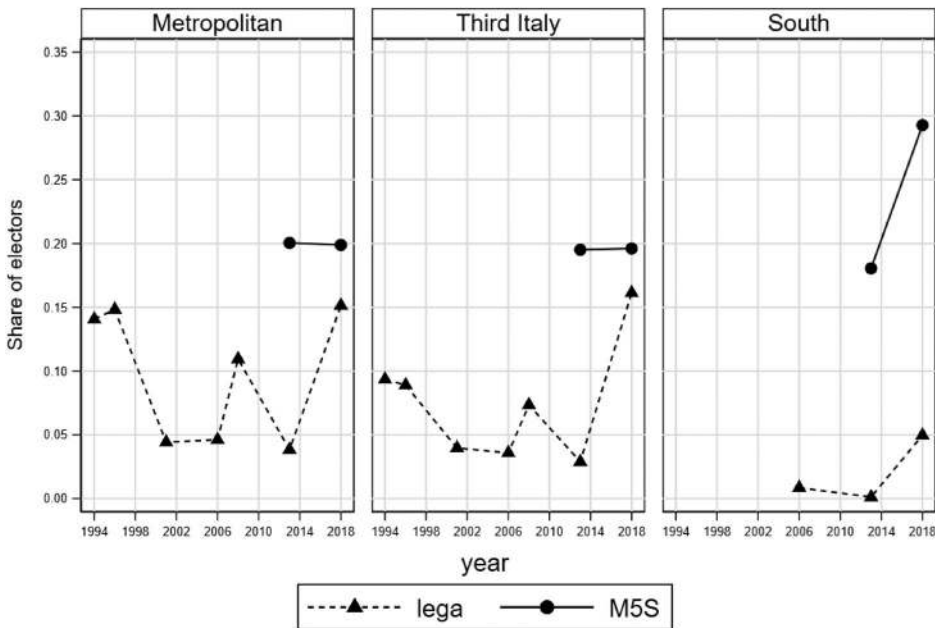
Figure 2. Non-voting, voting for mainstream parties, the Lega and the Five Star Movement, 1994–2018, by area, share of electors.

of the individuals living in a household; see above for the definition of this measurement). This variable reflects the patterns presented in Figure 3, showing modest oscillations over time (a fall after 1999, a rise after 2008) and significant differences across areas. Third Italy regions have the
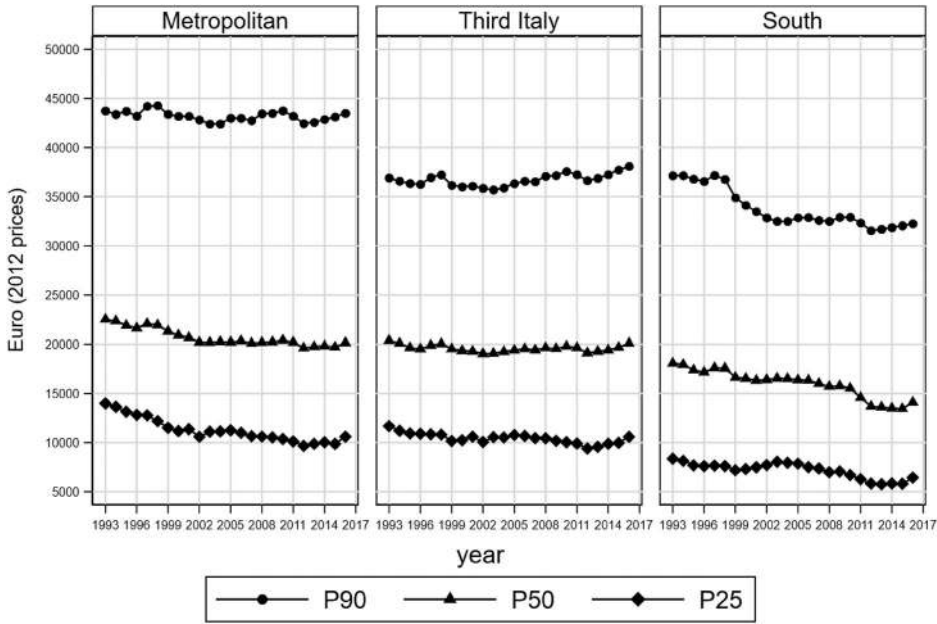
Figure 3. Employee income trends, 1993–2016, high (P90), median (P50) and low (P25) incomes, by area.
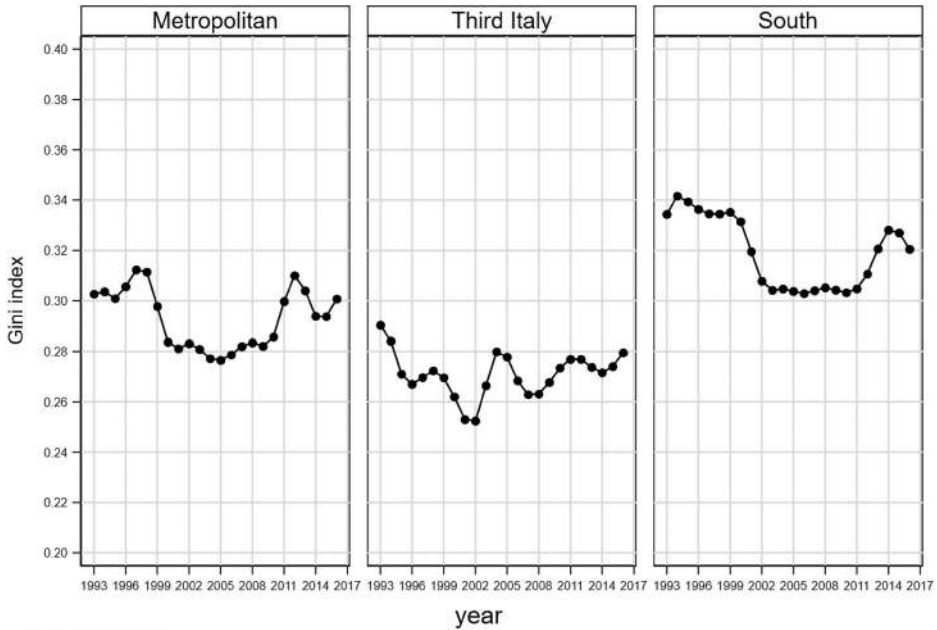

Figure 4. Gini index of inequality in household incomes, 1993–2016, by area.

lowest inequality (Gini index < 0.28), while metropolitan regions had in 2017 an index of 0.30 and southern regions an index of 0.32.

Summing up the regional structure of inequality in the Italian regions, we can argue that metropolitan regions have higher income levels and high inequality; the Third Italy has medium-high incomes and a more compressed income distribution; the south has low and seriously falling incomes, with the highest inequality. How do these inequality patterns relate to voting outcomes?

Figure 5 combines abstention and the Gini index on disposable income, showing a broad positive association, with southern regions clustered at the top right end of the distribution.

Figure 6 shows that mainstream parties obtain a share of electors that is positively associated with the mean net wealth of households, with Third Italy regions at the top-right end of the distribution and southern regions clustered at the bottom-left corner.

Finally, for the Lega and the Five Star Movement, the number of observations available is much lower, as the Lega has not run in national elections in many regions of central and southern Italy, and the Five Star Movement has participated in two elections only (2013 and 2018). Figure 7 shows a close association between the vote for the Lega and the compression of median incomes relatively to the poorest employees – measured by the P50/P25 ratio. In the regions and years when the relative impoverishment of the middle income earners is higher, the vote for the Lega moves up.

Conversely, Figure 8 shows that the vote for the Five Star Movement has a broad positive association with the shares of employees below the national poverty level; a concentration of poverty – mainly in the regions of the south – appears to be associated with a higher vote for the Five Star Movement.

Building on this preliminary descriptive evidence, we can now move towards presenting a model for explaining the impact of inequality and economic conditions on electoral behaviour in the Italian regions.
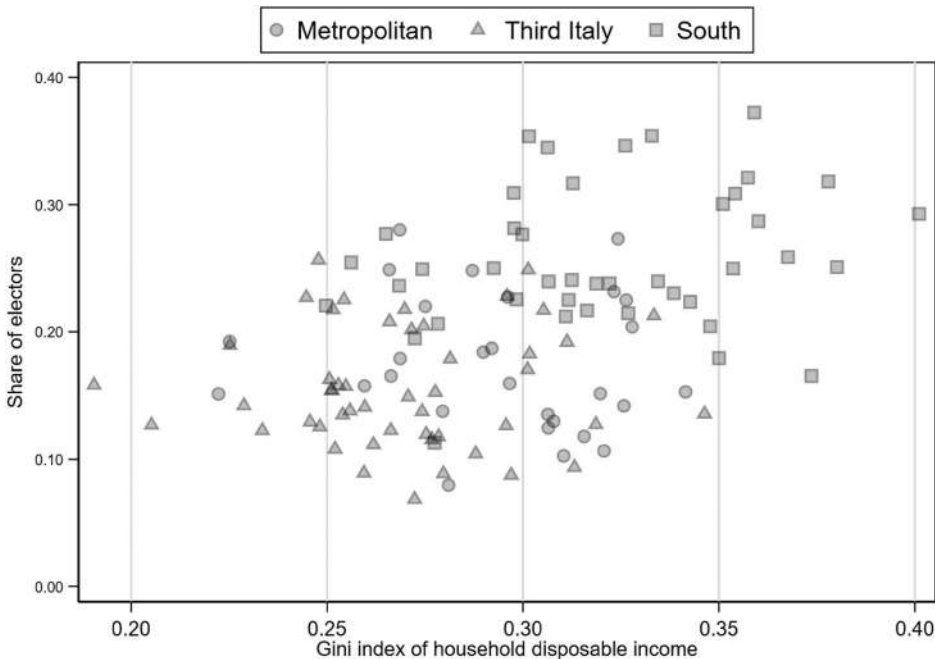

Figure 5. Shares of non-voters and Gini index of inequality in household incomes in regions, 1993–2018.
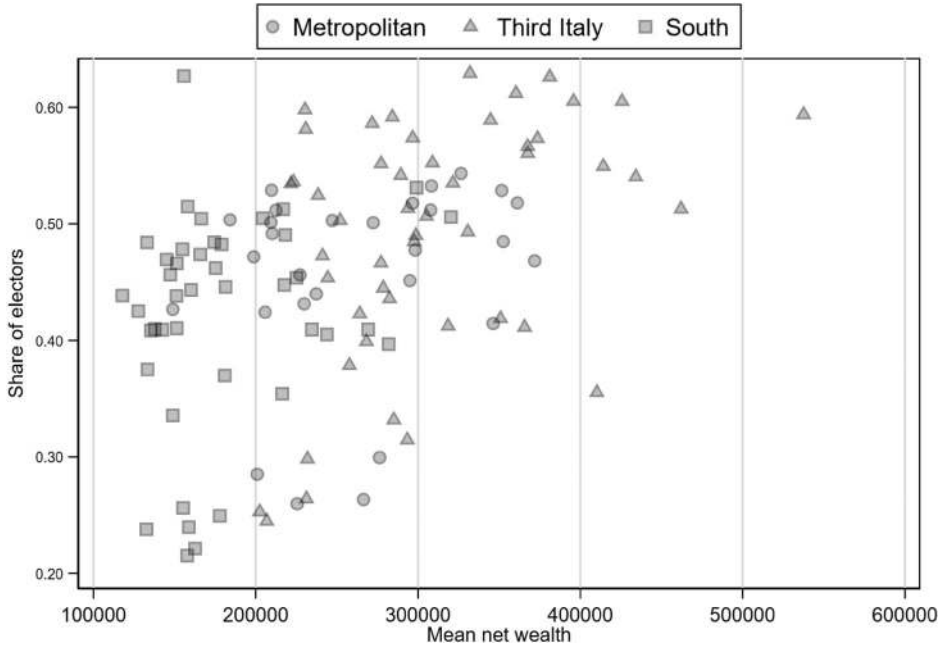
Figure 6. Shares of voters for mainstream parties and mean of household net wealth in regions, 1993–2018.
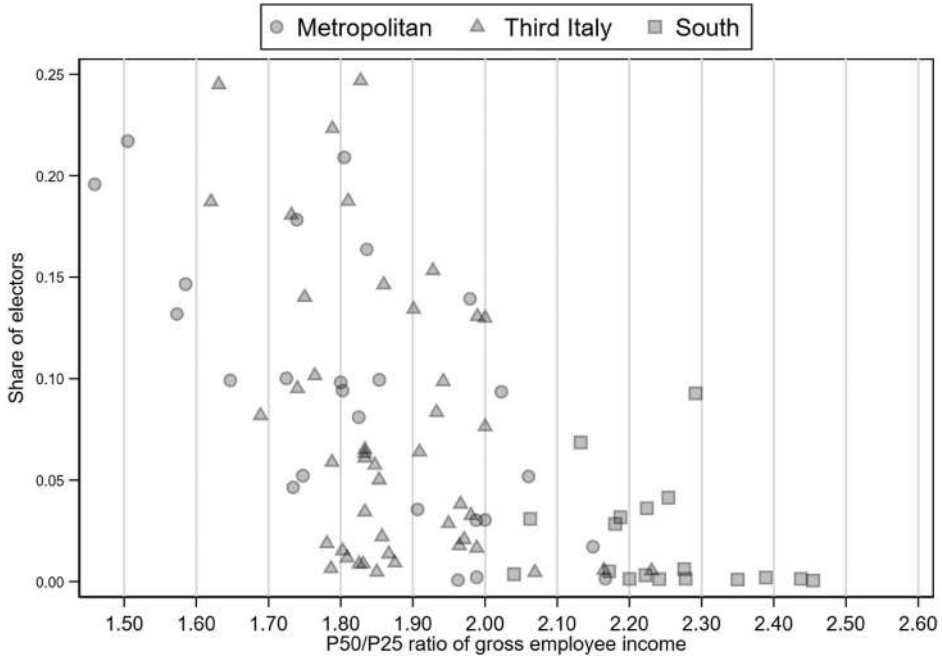

Figure 7. Shares of voters for the Lega and ratio of median employee incomes to incomes of poor employees in regions, 1993–2018.
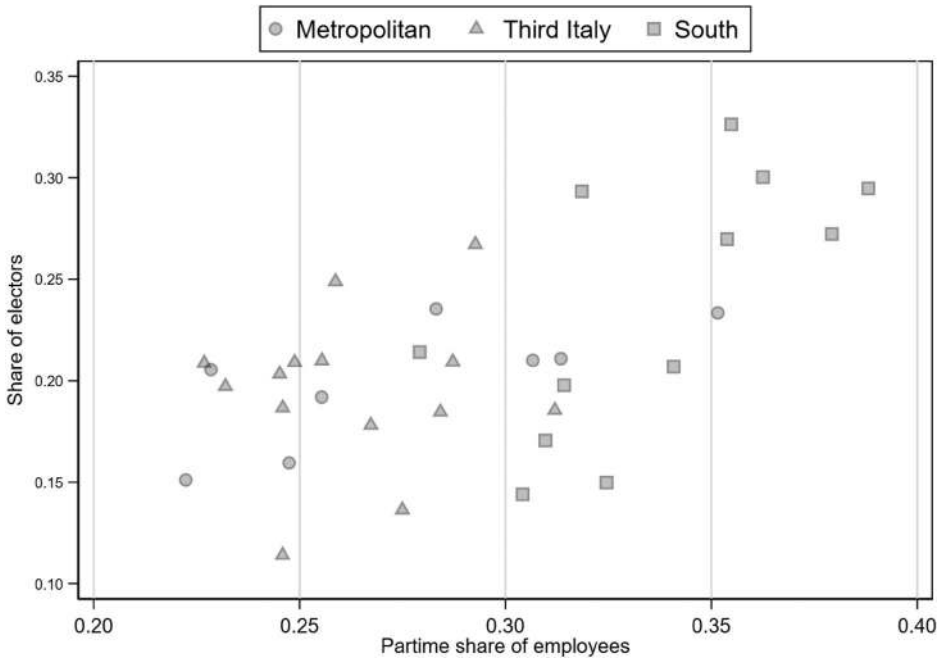
Figure 8. Shares of voters for the Five Star Movement and shares of part-time employees in regions, 2013–18.

MODELS AND ECONOMETRIC STRATEGY

We analyse the association between the four variables on electoral outcomes and the economic ones presented in the third section by estimating different versions of the following regression model:

$$\text{Electoral share}_{it} = \alpha_i + \beta \text{Economic}_{it-1} + \theta X_{it-1} + \gamma \text{Period} + \varepsilon_{it} \tag{1}$$

where for each region i and year of election t, our dependent variables are the share of electors who did not vote, the share of electors who voted for mainstream parties, the share of electors who voted for the Lega and the share of electors who voted for the Five Star Movement. On the right-hand side, $Economic_{it-1}$ is the row vector of economic variables or our interest which includes the Gini index of disposable income as a measurement of overall inequality, the share of rich employees, the share of relatively poor employees, the log mean net wealth used as a proxy of permanent economic status of households, the share of employees with a part time contract, used as a proxy of precarization of jobs, and the unemployment rate. X_{it-1} is then a row vector of control variables which includes the share of the population with a university degree and mean age.

Additionally, we estimate an alternative model in which we include in the vector $Economic_{it-1}$ the two ratios P90/P50 and P50/P25 as proxies of inequality in different part of the employee income distribution, in place of the shares of rich and poor employees.

We have tested for possible multicollinearity among the independent variables using the variance inflation factor (VIF); results are reported in Table A in Appendix A in the supplemental data online, showing that multicollinearity is not an issue in either of the two models.

Moreover, we check for all time-invariant regional characteristics by including regional fixed effects α_i and a dummy that assumes the value of 1 starting from 2008, and 0 otherwise.[15] This

Period dummy is necessary to take into account the effect of the financial crisis that started in that year. Given that all elections occurring between 1994 and 2018 took place in the first five months of the year, we observe all variables on the right-hand side of equation (1) one year before the election year in order to better capture the association between economic conditions and electoral decisions.

Even though our specification prevents our estimated coefficients from being biased by regional structural heterogeneity and by the likely discontinuity in electoral preferences deriving from the 2008 crisis, we do not claim that the estimated coefficient could be interpreted as the causal impact of a specific indicator of inequality, poverty or other socioeconomic variable on electoral outcomes. More specifically, the error term ε_{it} may include a set of time-varying political, institutional, social and cultural factors that may affect voting alongside our economic variables. The main goal of our empirical approach is to interpret all estimated coefficients as associations between electoral and economic outcomes within each region, while we check for the structural diversity of regions.

RESULTS

Tables 3 and 4 present the main results of the models. A further robustness check is provided in Table A in Appendix A in the supplemental data online. The results obtained from estimating the four models based on equation (1) can be summarized as follows.

First, overall income inequality measured by the Gini index has a significant negative association with the vote for mainstream parties: an increase of 10 percentage points in inequality (equivalent to about 3 SD (standard deviations) in our sample) is associated with a 7 percentage point fall in their votes as a share of the electorate (Table 3). A weaker relationship emerges with the share of non-voters (significant in the models of Table 4 and see Appendix A in the supplemental data online), with non-voters increasing alongside higher inequality.

Second, an increase in the share of the most highly paid employees (those in the richest 10% in terms of labour income at the national level who happen to live in the region) is closely associated with higher shares of non-voters. Conversely, the share of votes for the Lega increases as the presence of richest Italians becomes lower (Table 3). In general, larger variations in the share of richest employees are mainly found in the regions with metropolitan areas, where the vote for the Lega is lagging behind.

Third, at the opposite end of income distribution, an increase in the share of poorest Italians (the share of employees in the region with a gross labour income < 60% of median national employee income) is associated with greater abstention in elections, greater votes for the Five Star Movement and lower consensus for the Lega (Table 3). In particular, an increase of 1 SD of this ratio is associated with a raise of about 3 percentage points in abstention and > 30 percentage points in the Five Star Movement votes. Greater poverty leads to disenchantment with electoral politics and to more votes for the challenger party that has campaigned on the need to provide a minimum income, obtaining in fact a wide support in the regions of the south.

Fourth, in Table 4 the evolution of employee incomes can be documented using the P90/50 and P50/25 ratios – that is, the distance between the richest and median incomes, and between the incomes of the median and of the poor. The share of votes for the Lega increases as the distance between the rich and the middle classes decreases. At the same time, the Lega votes increase where the middle classes are impoverished and their distance from those in poverty falls; a reduction of 1 SD of this ratio is associated with a 4 percentage point increase in votes for the Lega. Conversely, the share of abstention increases where the P50/P25 ratio is greater and the poorest increase their distance from the median (an effect that is parallel to the impact of employees in relative poverty in Table 3).

Table 3. Inequality and voting in Italian regions, 1994–2018.

	Non-voters	**Mainstream**	**Lega**	**M5S**
Gini index on disposable income ($t - 1$)	0.174	−0.730***	0.132	−0.055
	[0.112]	[0.272]	[0.218]	[0.530]
Share of rich employees ($t - 1$)	1.217***	−1.107	−2.201***	8.652
	[0.323]	[0.780]	[0.678]	[4.755]
Share of employees in relative poverty ($t - 1$)	0.517***	0.354	−1.591***	5.567**
	[0.162]	[0.392]	[0.330]	[1.733]
Mean of net wealth log ($t - 1$)	−0.014	0.166***	−0.093***	−0.028
	[0.014]	[0.035]	[0.028]	[0.046]
Share of part time employees ($t - 1$)	0.204**	−0.787***	0.368**	1.150***
	[0.079]	[0.191]	[0.169]	[0.293]
Unemployment rate ($t - 1$)	0.194**	−0.389*	0.251	−0.178
	[0.096]	[0.233]	[0.205]	[0.236]
Period 2008–18	0.024***	−0.023	0.033**	–
	[0.008]	[0.020]	[0.016]	–
Regional fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	119	119	88	34
R^2	0.905	0.733	0.774	0.917

Notes: Values are the regression of shares of electors on regional economic variables including the shares of wealthy and poor employees.

Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses. Additional regional checks included in all specifications, but which are not shown: mean age ($t - 1$) and graduate share ($t - 1$).

Sources: Losai data on employee income (INPS), Bank of Italy's Survey on Household Income and Wealth (SHIW) data, SNS electoral database for regions.

Fifth, the average net wealth of households in regions is a further indicator that is required to integrate income data. In fact, net wealth is the only positive driver of the vote for mainstream parties in all our results. The reduction in taxation on wealth (liberalization of financial investment; separate non-progressive taxation of incomes from finance and real estate; elimination of tax on home ownership; large cuts in estate taxes, etc.) and the refusals to levy taxes on wealth were cornerstones of policies by both centre-right and centre-left government coalitions in the 1994–2018 period. The protection of wealth appears to have played a dominant role in guiding the choices of mainstream voters. Regions with lower growth in average wealth (again, far from metropolitan areas) are those where the Lega obtains higher votes (Tables 2 and 3).

Sixth, precarious employment emerges as a very strong factor in shaping voting behaviour. The share of part time employees (which is highly correlated with the share of fixed-term employees, for which we do not have data for the full period) increased rapidly in the period under consideration with a strong positive association with abstention and votes for both the Lega and the Five Star Movement, and, on the other hand, a negative association with the share of votes for mainstream parties. These results also capture the vote of young workers, who are overwhelmingly in precarious jobs.

Seventh, unemployment matters in increasing the distance from the political system, being associated with greater abstention and lower votes for mainstream parties in Table 3 alone.

Finally, the dummy variable for the post-crisis period 2008–18 positively and significantly affects the non-voting and the Lega vote, while it also has a negative association with the

Table 4. Inequality and voting in Italian regions, 1994–2018.

	Non-voters	Mainstream	Lega	M5S
Gini index on disposable income ($t-1$)	0.220*	−0.737***	−0.001	0.069
	[0.116]	[0.278]	[0.219]	[0.728]
P90/P50 for employee income ($t-1$)	0.061	−0.066	−0.190**	0.632
	[0.044]	[0.105]	[0.093]	[0.602]
P50/P25 for employee income ($t-1$)	0.055**	0.058	−0.202***	0.573
	[0.026]	[0.061]	[0.054]	[0.345]
Mean of net wealth log ($t-1$)	−0.021	0.180***	−0.086***	0.004
	[0.015]	[0.035]	[0.028]	[0.060]
Share of part time employees ($t-1$)	0.215**	−0.566***	0.305	1.655**
	[0.086]	[0.206]	[0.184]	[0.712]
Unemployment rate ($t-1$)	0.15	−0.333	0.277	−0.072
	[0.100]	[0.238]	[0.201]	[0.322]
Period 2008–18	0.027**	−0.034*	0.037**	–
	[0.008]	[0.020]	[0.016]	–
Regional fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	119	119	88	34
R^2	0.900	0.723	0.775	0.859

Notes: Values are regression of shares of electors on regional economic variables including distance from rich, median and poor employees.

Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses. Additional regional checks included in all specifications, but which are not shown: mean age ($t-1$) and graduate share ($t-1$).

Sources: Losai data on employee income (INPS), Bank of Italy's Survey on Household Income and Wealth (SHIW) data, SNS electoral database for regions.

mainstream vote in Table 4. The complex impact of the crisis operating through a variety of unobserved factors emerges with a relevant association with the rise of non-voting and consensus for the Lega.

In our models we also included an education variable (share of residents with a university degree) and an age variable (average age of residents in regions) as further checks, which have never resulted as being significant.

The robustness check in Table B in Appendix B in the supplemental data online considers as key variables the change in the income levels of rich, median and poor employees over the previous two years before the election. The strongest results are that in the regions and periods when the incomes of the middle classes have fallen most, an increase in votes for the Lega and a reduction in those for the Five Star Movement can be found. Conversely, where the incomes of poorest employees have fallen most, an increase in votes for the Five Star Movement and a reduction in votes for the Lega can be found.

In all our estimates, results do not change significantly when the share of voters is used instead of the share of electors for mainstream parties, the Lega and the Five Star Movement.[16]

We have used several variables to measure disparities and economic distress. We have found consistent results for both employee incomes and total household incomes; for measurements of general inequality (Gini index) and of distance among income deciles (P90/P50 and P50/P25); for regional indicators and for measurements relating regional values to national standards (share of rich and poor employees); for both income and wealth measurements. Such a range of indicators confirms the robustness of our findings.

Inequality, the levels and changes in incomes and wealth, precarization and joblessness all appear to be important factors associated with voting in Italy. Disillusionment with electoral politics as documented by the share of non-voters is mainly associated with overall inequality, the polarization of incomes with more rich and more poor employees compared to the national average, the high presence of part-time jobs and high unemployment.

An opposite picture emerges for the vote for mainstream parties, those who have governed over the period 1994–2018; higher electoral shares for them are found where average net wealth increases, while a negative effect is found where inequality, part-time jobs and unemployment are higher.

The votes for the Lega and those for the Five Star Movement are related to very different factors, casting doubt upon the studies that have lumped them together under the notion of 'populism' (Guiso et al., 2017). The Lega has greater consensus where the incomes of the middle classes are driven down and move closer to those of the poor, and where the distance between middle classes and the most highly paid employees is lower. The Lega votes are also higher where there is a lower average wealth, and a larger share of precarious jobs. Support for the Five Star Movement is clearly characterized by income poverty and precarization. However, our findings for the Lega, and for the Five Star Movement in particular, are subject to a lower number of observations and the econometric results are therefore weaker.

In a parallel study on the same database (Bloise et al., 2020) we investigated in greater detail the political processes of Italy's electoral geography; we split mainstream voting, considering electoral consensus for centre-left and centre-right separately, and we further explored the impact of the 2008 crisis, estimating the relationships between economic conditions and voting separately for the two sub-periods (before and after the crisis).

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. We focus on the structural factors that shape economic conditions at the regional level and explore their impact on voting behaviour. This research strategy differs from that of most interdisciplinary studies, which are essentially based on individual-level post-electoral surveys and therefore have the respondents' characteristics and perceptions at the centre of their explanations. We bring a new attention to inequality in income and wealth among the broader conditions of economic distress that previous studies have already found to influence political upheavals in Europe and beyond (Algan et al., 2017; Han, 2016; Piketty, 2018).

With regard to the literature on electoral politics, our findings complement studies on the role of class and other cleavages (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018), helping to identify the social base of political parties. We confirm the relevance of economic factors in political upheavals and shed a new light on the Italian case. However, we find no evidence of a general 'populist' wave (as suggested, among others, by Guiso et al., 2017; and Kriesi, 2014). Rather, we find that economic distress leads to different specific drivers – economic as well as territorial – of the vote for the two 'challenger' parties, that is, the Five Star Movement and the Lega. These parties, therefore, are different not only in their organizational and communication models but also in their social bases.

With regard to the literature on Italian politics and its regional patterns, we highlight the economic basis of voting, complementing studies of political processes (Ceccarini & Newell, 2019; Chiaramonte & De Sio, 2019). We also provide stronger evidence on class realignments and the effects of inequalities (Ardeni, 2020; Maraffi, 2018; Maraffi et al., 2013), and we confirm the importance of regional differences in economic and political dynamics (Agnew & Shin, 2017; Diamanti, 2009, 2020).

Our findings document the diversity of economic and political dynamics across Italian regions. We have shown that the upheavals in the national parliamentary elections are closely

associated with the rise in inequality, the levels and changes in incomes and wealth, precarization and joblessness. Disillusionment with electoral politics has taken various forms in the last 25 years in Italy. The increase in non-voting, falling support for mainstream parties and an increase in the vote for the Lega and the Five Star Movement as 'challenger' parties have common roots in a more polarized, impoverished and unequal society. There are specific economic and social factors behind each of these dynamics, and they cannot be reduced to a generalized 'populist wave'. We have shown that higher abstention is associated with greater overall income inequality, a more polarized income structure, a high presence of part-time jobs and a high unemployment. The rise of consensus for the Lega has roots in the 'squeezing' and downward pressure on the income of the middle classes, in lower levels of average household wealth and in precarization of work. The rise of consensus for the Five Star Movement has clear roots in conditions of poverty, in the impoverishment of lower income groups and in the rise of precarious employment. All these factors appear to contribute to a lower consensus for mainstream parties, which remain strong only where average household wealth is higher.

As argued elsewhere (Pianta, 2012), the 'economics of privilege' has been the hallmark of policies by both centre-right and centre-left coalition governments in the last 25 years. The protection of financial and real estate wealth, which is much more concentrated than are incomes, and the interests of a small wealthy elite have dominated Italian political economy both in the expansion up to 2008 and in the long recession and stagnation that followed the crisis, at the price of lower growth – or, more often, real decline – in incomes and wages.

The political upheaval in recent Italian elections reflects the discontent of the 'unwealthy' majority, with different trajectories for the vote to the Lega (rooted in the middle classes in northern and central regions) and to the Five Star Movement (rooted in poorer social groups and in the southern regions).

While political, ideological and cultural factors are key explanatory factors for electoral trends in Italy, the economic and social conditions we have investigated in this paper show how important inequality, lack of wealth and precarization have been in shaping political change.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

NOTES

1. Data on wages are drawn from the INPS Losai database on private sector employees; and data on household income are drawn from the Bank of Italy's Survey on Household Income and Wealth (SHIW). Both sources are used for building the database adopted in this paper. For analyses of Italy's economic problems, see Pianta (2012, 2020); for patterns of inequality, see Franzini and Pianta (2015).

2.   Among a very wide literature, see Atkinson and Bourguignon (2014), Piketty (2013), Milanovic (2016) and Franzini and Pianta (2015).

3.   Data sources are the following institutes: CDSP/ADISP (French data archives for the social sciences); BES (British Election Study); and ANES (American National Election Studies), and US NEP (National Exit Polls).

4.   The most widely accepted is that of Mudde (2004, p. 562): 'a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people'.

5.   This includes 57 populist parties distributed in 26 European countries (out of the 33 he considers) active at different points in time in the 2000–13 period. Of these, only 25 are defined as populist in the more stringent classification of Inglehart and Norris (2016).

6.   Data sources are Eurostat for economic data and Eurobarometer surveys for political data.

7.   The data set includes 134,834 observations (with data for all variables) combining all countries, parties and periods.

8.   Eurostat is used for information on regional unemployment, covering 215 regions in 26 countries. Data for national elections come from country-specific electoral archives and information about political parties' orientation from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) and other online resources. Data on trust come from the European Social Survey (ESS), considering seven rounds from 2000 to 2014; the final ESS sample covers 183 NUTS-2 regions in 24 countries.

9.   Data sources are six rounds of the ESS (2002–12; 96,572 observations) and five rounds of the European Value Survey (EVS) and the World Value Survey (WVS) (1990–2008; 50,249 observations).

10.   Data sources are the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) and five waves of ESS data (2002–10). The LIS and ESS data are also matched with data on the contents of party platforms from the Manifesto Project Database (MPD). This allows authors to judge respondents' party preferences in terms of systematic coding of the anti-globalization, nationalist and authoritarian content of a given party's platform – including over-time variation and the positioning of all parties, radical right and mainstream. The final sample includes 86,627 observations; data on voting choices are available for 66,852 respondents.

11.   For studies on the Five Star Movement, see, for example, Ceccarini and Bordignon (2016), Biorcio and Natale (2018) and Mosca and Tronconi (2019). For a mapping of Italy's political behaviour, see Diamanti (2009, 2020). The rise of 'movement parties' in Europe as a result of the crisis is the object of della Porta et al. (2017).

12.   The Tax Statements Database comes from the Ministry of Finance and covers some 7970 municipalities over 20 Italian regions.

13.   We have combined Valle d'Aosta and Piedmont, Abruzzo and Molise, Basilicata and Calabria, obtaining a panel of 17 regions. The grouping of the smallest regions was needed in order to maintain a high number of cases for the construction of the economic variables that are obtained from the micro-data. Data on electoral outcomes exclude Valle d'Aosta due to the lack of information on electoral data.

14.   The Lega has assumed the nature of a 'challenger' party, even though it has been part of centre-right coalitions in the past. In these coalitions it often had an unpredictable role; in 1995, for instance, the withdrawal of support of the Lega caused the end of the centre-right coalition supporting the first Berlusconi government. Overall, the Lega has had government responsibility for a total of nine years over the 1994–2018 period: 1994–95, 2001–05 and 2008–11, always with Berlusconi as Prime Minister.

15.   We estimate all models by means of the least square dummy variables (LSDV) estimator; when – as in our case – the panel data set is balanced, all estimated coefficients are equal to those that could be obtained through the Within estimator.

16.   Results of these additional robustness checks are available from the authors upon request.

ORCID

Francesco Bloise http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4588-7739
Daniela Chironi http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0739-7461
Mario Pianta http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4111-0447

REFERENCES

Acciari, P., & Mocetti, S. (2013). The geography of income inequality in Italy. In *Questioni di economia e finanza* (p. 208). Banca d'Italia.

Acciari, P., Polo, A., & Violante, G. L. (2019). *'And yet it moves': Intergenerational mobility in Italy* (National Bureau of Economic Research, working paper no. 25732).

Acemoglu, D., Egorov, G., & Sonin, K. (2013). A political theory of populism. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *128*(2), 771–805. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjs077

Agnew, J. (2007). Remaking Italy? Place configurations and Italian electoral politics under the 'second republic'. *Modern Italy*, *12*(1), 17–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/13532940601134791

Agnew, J., & Shin, M. (2017). Spatializing populism: Taking politics to the people in Italy. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, *107*(4), 915–933. https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2016.1270194

Algan, Y., Guriev, S., Papaioannou, E., & Passari, E. (2017). The European trust crisis and the rise of populism. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, *2017*, 309–400. https://doi.org/10.1353/eca.2017.0015

Ardeni, P. G. (2020). *Le radici del populismo*. Laterza.

Armingeon, K., & Guthmann, K. (2014). Democracy in crisis? The declining support for national democracy in European countries, 2007–2011. *European Journal of Political Research*, *53*(3), 423–442. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12046

Asso, P. F. (2020). New perspectives on old inequalities: Italy's North–South divide, Territory, Politics, Governance. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, special issue on *Inequalities, Territorial Politics, Nationalism* (this issue).

Atkinson, A., & Bourguignon, F. (Eds.). (2014). *Handbook of income distribution* (Vol. 2 A, B). Elsevier.

Baccetti, C., & Messina, P. (Eds.). (2009). *L'eredità. Le subculture politiche della Toscana e del Veneto*. Liviana.

Bagnasco, A. (1976). *Tre Italie. La problematica territoriale dello sviluppo italiano*. Il Mulino.

Barbieri, T., Bloise, F., & Raitano, M. (2019). Intergenerational earnings inequality: New evidence from Italy. *Review of Income and Wealth*. https://doi.org/10.1111/roiw.12420

Barisione, M., & De Luca, D. (2018). Do the self-employed still vote for centre-right parties? The cases of the UK, Italy and Spain. *Electoral Studies*, *52*(April 2018), 8493. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2018.01.009

Bellucci, P. (2001). Un declino precocemente annunciato? Il voto di classe in Italia, 1968–1996. *POLIS πόλις*, *15*(2), 203–225. https://doi.org/10.1424/2889

Bellucci, P., Garzia, D., & Lewis-Beck, M. S. (2017). Understanding electoral politics in contemporary Italy: Policy preferences, personalisation, partisanship and the economy. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, *9*(1), 3–7. https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2017.1284480

Bellucci, P., & Heath, O. (2012). The structure of party-organization linkages and the electoral strength of cleavages in Italy, 1963–2008. *British Journal of Political Science*, *42*(1), 107–135. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123411000226

Biorcio, R., & Natale, P. (2018). *Il Movimento 5 Stelle: dalla protesta al governo*. Mimesis.

Bloise, F., Chironi, D., della Porta, D., & Pianta, M. (2020). *The political consequences of inequality in Italy, 1994–2018* (MPRA working paper).

Burgoon, B., van Noort, S., Rooduijn, M., & Underhill, G. (2018). *Radical right populism and the role of positional deprivation and inequality* (Economic policy working paper). http://www.economic-policy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/995_Radical-Right-Populism.pdf

Caciagli, M., & Corbetta, P. (2002). *Le Ragioni dell'elettore*. Il Mulino.

Caiani, M. (2019). I partiti populisti e il loro successo elettorale: differenti cause per differenti populismi? In E. Bressanelli & D. Natali (Eds.), *Politica in Italia. I fatti dell'anno e le interpretazioni. Edizione 2019* (pp. 73–91). Il Mulino.

Capecchi, V., Cioni Polacchini, V., Galli, G., & Sivini, G. (1968). *Il comportamento elettorale in Italia. Una indagine ecologica sulle elezioni in Italia fra il 1946 e il 1963*. Il Mulino.

Ceccarini, L., & Bordignon, F. (2016). The five stars continue to shine: The consolidation of Grillo's 'movement party' in Italy'. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, *8*(2), 131–159. https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2016.1202667

Ceccarini, L., & Newell, J. L. (2019). *The Italian general election of 2018. Italy in uncharted territory*. Palgrave.

Chiaramonte, A., & De Sio, L. (2019). *Il voto del cambiamento. Le elezioni politiche del 2018*. Il Mulino.

Chiaramonte, A., & Emanuele, V. (2013). Volatile e tripolare: il nuovo sistema partitico italiano. In L. De Sio, M. Cataldi, & F. De Lucia (Eds.), *Le Elezioni Politiche 2013* (pp. 95–100). Dossier CISE 4.

Ciani, E., & Torrini, R. (2019). The geography of Italian income inequality: Recent trends and the role of employment. *Politica economica*, *35*(2), 173–208. https://doi.org/10.1429/94536

Cotta, M., & Verzichelli, L. (2016). *Il sistema politico italiano*. Il Mulino.

Crouch, C. (2020). Territorial inequalities and xenophobic movements in post-industrial societies. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, special issue on Inequalities, territorial politics, nationalism (this issue).

Dalton, R. J. (2008). The quantity and the quality of party systems: Party system polarization, its measurement, and its consequences. *Comparative Political Studies*, *41*(7), 899–920. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414008315860

della Porta, D., Fernandez, J., Kouki, H., & Mosca, L. (2017). *Movement parties in times of austerity*. Polity.

Diamanti, I. (2009). *Mappe dell'Italia politica*. Il Mulino. Retrieved from http://www.demos.it/mappe.php

Diamanti, I. (2020). *Le mappe di Ilvo Diamanti. La geografia degli orientamenti culturali, sociali e politici degli italiani, tracciata dagli articoli di Ilvo Diamanti per La Repubblica*. http://www.demos.it/mappe.php

Dotti Sani, G. M., & Magistro, B. (2016). Increasingly unequal? The economic crisis, social inequalities and trust in the European parliament in 20 European countries. *European Journal of Political Research*, *55*(2), 246–264. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12126

Emanuele, V., & Chiaramonte, A. (2020). Going out of the ordinary. The de-institutionalization of the Italian party system in comparative perspective. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, *12*(1), 4–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2020.1711608

Franzini, M., & Pianta, M. (2015). *Explaining inequality*. Routledge.

Garzia, D. (2014). *Personalization of politics and electoral change*. Palgrave.

Guiso, L., Herrera, H., Morelli, M., & Sonno, T. (2017). *Demand and supply of populism* (CEPR discussion paper 11871). https://cepr.org/active/publications/discussion_papers/dp.php?dpno=11871

Han, K. J. (2016). Income inequality and voting for radical right-wing parties. *Electoral Studies*, *42*, 54–64. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2016.02.001

Heath, O., & Bellucci, P. (2013). Class and religious voting in Italy: The rise of policy responsiveness. In G. Evans & N. D. de Graaf (Eds.), *Political choice matters: Explaining the strength of class and religious cleavages in cross-national perspective* (pp. 309–334). Oxford University Press.

Hobolt, S. B., & Tilley, J. (2016). Fleeing the centre: The rise of challenger parties in the aftermath of the euro crisis. *West European Politics*, *39*(5), 971–991. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2016.1181871

Inglehart, R., & Norris, P. (2016). *Trump, Brexit, and the rise of populism: Economic have-nots and cultural backlash* (Faculty Research working paper series n. RWP16-026). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.

Jansen, G., Evans, G., & de Graaf, N. D. (2013). Class voting and left–right party positions: A comparative study of 15 western democracies, 1960–2005. *Social Science Research*, *42*(2), 376–400. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2012.09.007

Kriesi, H. (2014). The populist challenge. *West European Politics*, *37*(2), 361–378. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2014.887879

Kriesi, H., & Pappas, T. (Eds.). (2015). *European populism in the shadow of the great recession*. ECPR Press.

Maraffi, M. (2008). Chi ha votato chi? In *Itanes, Il ritorno di Berlusconi. Vincitori e sconfitti nelle elezioni del 2008* (pp. 83–96). Il Mulino.

Maraffi, M. (2018). Le basi sociali del voto 2018: fra continuità e cambiamento. In *Itanes, Vox populi. Il voto a voce alta del 2018* (pp. 79–93). Il Mulino.

Maraffi, M., Pedrazzani, A., & Pinto, L. (2013). Le basi sociali del voto. In *Itanes, Voto amaro. Disincanto e crisi economica nelle elezioni del 2013* (pp. 57–70). Il Mulino.

Maraffi, M., Schadee, H., Vezzoni, C., & Ballarino, G. (2011). Le fratture sociali: classe, religione, territorio. In P. Bellucci & P. Segatti (Eds.), *Votare in Italia: 1968–2008* (pp. 149–186). Il Mulino.

Milanovic, B. (2016). *Global inequality*. Harvard University Press.

Mosca, L., & Tronconi, F. (2019). Beyond left and right: The eclectic populism of the five star movement. *West European Politics*, *42*(6), 1258–1283. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1596691

Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, *39*(4), 541–563. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x

Oesch, D., & Rennwald, L. (2018). Electoral competition in Europe's new tripolar political space: Class voting for the left, centre-right and radical right. *European Journal of Political Research*, *57*(4), 783–807. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12259

Pianta, M. (2012). *Nove su dieci. Perché stiamo (quasi) tutti peggio di 10 anni fa*. Laterza.

Pianta, M. (2020). Italy's political upheaval and the consequences of inequality. *Intereconomics*, *55*(1), 13–17. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10272-020-0862-8

Piketty, T. (2013). *Le capital au XXI siècle*. Seuil. English translation (2014). *Capital in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Piketty, T. (2018). *Brahmin left vs merchant right: rising inequality & the changing structure of political conflict* (WID.world working paper series no. 2018/7). http://www.piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/Piketty2018.pdf

Piketty, T. (2019). *Capital et idéologie*. Seuil.

Pisati, M. (2010). *Voto di classe*. Il Mulino.

Rovira Kaltwasser, C., & Taggart, P. (2016). Dealing with populists in government: A framework for analysis. *Democratization*, *23*(2), 201–220. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1058785

Shin, M., & Agnew, J. (2008). *Berlusconi's Italy: Mapping contemporary Italian politics*. Temple University Press.

Shin, M., & Agnew, J. (2011). Spatial regression for electoral studies: The case of the Italian Lega Nord. In B. Warf & J. Leib (Eds.), *Revitalizing electoral geography* (pp. 59–74). Ashgate.

SVIMEZ. (2019). *Rapporto SVIMEZ 2019. L'economia e la società del Mezzogiorno*.

Van Kessel, S. (2015). *Populist parties in Europe. Agents of discontent?* Palgrave Macmillan.

Vassallo, S., & Shin, M. (2018). La nuova mappa del consenso politico. Cosa c'è di nuovo nell'ondata populista? In E. Bressanelli & D. Natali (Eds.), *Politica in Italia. I fatti dell'anno e le interpretazioni. Edizione 2019* (pp. 73–91). Il Mulino.

Vezzoni, C. (2008). Territorio e tradizioni politiche. In *Itanes, Il ritorno di Berlusconi. Vincitori e sconfitti nelle elezioni del 2008* (pp. 97–108). Il Mulino.