

From Dissent to Diplomacy: The Italian Right-Wing Coalition's Journey after the 2022 Elections in Depicting the EU

BSc Public Governance across Borders

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“How and why did the narratives concerning the
European Union of the Italian parties Fratelli d'Italia,
Forza Italia and Lega change after joining the
governing coalition in 2022?”

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the evolution of Eurosceptic narratives among the Italian parties Fratelli d'Italia, Forza Italia and Lega per Salvini Premier between 2018 and 2024, with a particular focus on the period after the parties joined the governing coalition in 2022. The main aim of this study is to provide an understanding of how and why these parties' narratives concerning the European Union have changed, using the Inclusion-Moderation Theory and the Selectorate Theory as analytical frameworks. An analysis of electoral programs, speeches and third data such as Eurobarometer and electoral results will be utilized by employing a mixed-method approach, including textual analysis. This shall produce a comprehensive overview of the Eurosceptic discourse and its shifts.

Considering the findings, the results are nuanced, as Fratelli d'Italia show a slight moderation and Forza Italia undergoes a shift towards pro-European positions, while the Lega maintained a hardline Euroscepticism. The shifts, analyzed in the context of political survival strategies, internal party dynamics, and broader electoral incentives, contribute to the understanding of Euroscepticism within the Italian right-wing party landscape. Moreover, the study provides a reconstruction of the implications of Eurosceptic narratives for the internal cohesion of the European Union and future policymaking, just as offering insights for academic research and practical policy considerations.

Future research is encouraged for a more comprehensive understanding of long-term trends and the impact of recent political events on the narratives promoted by Eurosceptic parties.

Introduction

With the formal execution of the Eurozone, the European Union reached a new dimension of integration, representing a novelty within the international community with its mere existence.

As with every newly introduced or long-standing system, there comes a time in which crises may cause doubts concerning the functionality and legitimacy of a structure. For the European Union this time came with the euro crisis, which followed the financial crisis of 2008, causing mass insecurities amongst Europeans and numerous partners of the EU. Even though eurosceptic narratives cannot be considered a new phenomenon, the sequence of crises between the late 2000s and the early 2010s provided fertile ground for such narratives and sentiments amongst all member states of the EU.

National politics within the EU became a stage for contentious debates and ideological clashes concerning the functionality of the European Union, as a system *sui generis*.

The discontent among the voters was not left unnoticed, as various eurosceptic parties emerged consequently. During that time the party landscape saw the founding of numerous parties proposing policies ranging from a mere focus on changes in domestic policies to a potential EU exit, accompanied by a strong appraisal of national values and identity.

One of the most prominent examples of such parties is the German “Alternative für Deutschland” (AfD), founded in 2013, with the primary goal of returning to a European economic cooperation, with particular opposition to further European integration.

The same year another eurosceptic party emerged in Italy, called “Fratelli d’Italia” (FdI), which translates to “the brothers of Italy”. It was formally created after the bigger right-wing coalition “Il Popolo della Libertà” (PdL), which means “the people of freedom” fell apart. For six years the PdL served as a political stage for well-known politicians such as Silvio Berlusconi, Ignazio La Russa¹ or Giorgio Crosetto², while

¹ Current President of the Italian Senate

² Current Italian Minister of Defense

also introducing political newcomers to national politics, such as Giorgia Meloni, the current prime minister. However, in 2013, La Russa, Meloni and Crosetto split from the PdL, co-founding the earlier mentioned FdI, which quickly found resonance in the Italian party landscape.

While FdI's members describe the party's ideology as mainstream conservative, academics' description ranges from conservative, national-conservative and right-wing, to post-fascist and anti-immigrant. Noteworthy is that while they employ eurosceptic narratives, they maintain a strong Atlanticism (Baldini, et al., 2022; Newth et al., 2021).

The second relevant party for this thesis is Forza Italia (FI), which translates to "Go Italy!", a prominent political party in Italy, founded in 1994 in the midst of a period of significant turmoil within Italian politics. FI quickly positioned itself as a center-right, pro-business party, advocating for liberal economic reforms, lower taxes, and reduced government intervention in the economy. Just as FdI, FI was also part of the PdL, but instead of emerging out of it, FI joined the center-right coalition. In 2013, the national council of the PdL decided to relaunch FI, which ultimately led to the dissolution of the coalition, as numerous members followed Berlusconi into FI. Currently Antonio Tajani³ is leading this party.

The third coalition member, the political party "Lega", originally known as "Lega Nord" and nowadays known as "Lega per Salvini Premier" emerged from the amalgamation of regionalist parties, advocating for greater autonomy of Northern Italy. Under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, who assumed office in 2013, the party underwent a minor rebranding to appeal to a broader audience, nonetheless, the party is known for its Eurosceptic and nationalist ideology.

The success of Eurosceptic parties in Italy is worthy of mention, as it has always been one of the loudest supporters of European Integration in addition to being a founding Member of the Community (Lucarelli, 2015). After World War II Italy was long considered to be a particularly Europhile country; however, this seems to have changed over the past decades, with a rise in Eurosceptic narratives during the 90s.

³ Current Italian Minister of Foreign affairs

These narratives were especially concerned with securing the national economic interests (Conti et. al. 2020).

As discussed in various academic publications⁴, the Italian party landscape has undergone significant evolution and numerous changes over the past 30 years, deeply influencing party stances on the EU. Many scholars identify 1994 as a pivotal year that marked fundamental changes in this landscape. This period saw severe fragmentation of the party system, which persisted until the early 2010s.

Succinctly, as the Italian center-left parties maintained a positive attitude towards the EU and further integration, the political right moved towards a more Eurosceptic stance, being particularly concerned with the loss of sovereignty, national economic interests, and the defense of national identity.

Moving away from the party landscape, an analysis of Eurobarometer data reveals a significant decline in public support for the EU in Italy, with diminishing trust in the EU, feelings of attachment to the EU, and perception of the benefits a EU membership's holds. This can be attributed to economic concerns, threats to national identity due to globalization and immigration, and the constraints imposed by the EU's Economic and Monetary Union, which have fueled euroscepticism among Italians (Conti et. al., 2020).

As these concerns found fertile ground in Italian politics, particularly over the past years, Italy's right-wing parties have often polarized with aggressive Euroscepticism. The Lega has been the most outspoken Eurosceptic party. However, after the fragmentation of the PDL and FdI came into existence, it joined the Lega in its anti-European politics and sentiment (Conti et. al., 2020).

Eurosceptic narratives have been taking up a significant amount of space within the electoral programs of these center-right parties for a long time, but one could only guess what a formal execution of their policy proposals would have looked like. With the 2022 elections and the formation of a governing coalition composed of center-right parties, it is clear, that most of their previous proposals were not actually put into practice. This is especially striking when it comes to Italy's relation with the European

⁴ Conti et. al. (2020); Valbruzzi (2013); Sani & Segatti (2001)

Union, as the diplomatic relationship between the Italian Prime minister and the President of the European Commission have stayed consistent. Behavioral shifts of extremist parties after ascension to power are a common phenomenon and have been heavily theorized. Within social sciences the inclusion-moderation thesis works with the assumption, that extremist parties will become and act more like mainstream ones, once they go from opposition to being in government⁵. Considering the attitude of the governing parties in Italy, an interesting shift in these Eurosceptic narratives can be observed.

The following research delves into the transformation of Eurosceptic discourse within the Italian political landscape, specifically examining the shifts in narrative by the parties Fdl, FI and Lega between 2018 and 2022 and after their ascension to power through coalition governance in 2022. The central research question for this work is: “How and why did the narratives concerning the European Union of the Italian parties “Fratelli d’Italia”, “Forza Italia” and “Lega” change after joining the governing coalition in 2022?”.

By applying the Inclusion-Moderation Theory and the Selectorate Theory, it will be assessed whether a correlation between the use of Eurosceptic narratives and political survival exists. Therefore, three fundamental sub-questions will be addressed: (1) “Did Eurosceptic party narratives increase before the elections?”, (2) “Did Eurosceptic party narratives decrease after government formation?” and (3) “Do all parties follow the same trend or are there differences?”.

This thesis aims to explore how these narratives have changed between 2018 and 2022 and how this has made the ascension to power for the first extreme right-wing coalition possible. What makes the case of Italy interesting for these two theories, is the differentiated use of eurosceptic narratives amongst the coalition members, as they do not present a consistent approach to the EU.

To provide a clear overview, the stance of the Italian government towards the European Union is complex and multifaceted. Within the coalition, there is no unified position, particularly regarding the European Commission. Each coalition party holds different views on the EU, which have evolved over time and have been significantly

⁵ Tepe, (2019); Capaul, (2021); Bernhard, (2020)

influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic. Forza Italia notably shifted to a more moderate and pro-European stance during the pandemic, while the Lega became a vocal critic of the EU and past governments. Meanwhile, FdI has maintained a consistent Eurosceptic position throughout the crisis (Albertazzi et al., 2021).

The individual shifts in behavior of the governing parties can be explained through a number of existing theories, however, a knowledge gap exists regarding the differential utilization of Eurosceptic narratives within the coalition government, particularly regarding the divergence observed among the three parties.

This research employs a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively analyze the interplay between Eurosceptic discourse and voter reactions, by working with data from qualitative and quantitative sources. Through an analysis of the electoral programs this thesis aims to create a comprehensive overview of how eurosceptic narratives carried out by the governing coalition's parties have evolved between 2018 and 2022 and if they have been used as a strategic tool for political survival. Moreover, and most importantly, it will test if the behavior of the parties after the 2022 elections can be explained by the Inclusion-Moderation Theory or the Selectorate Theory.

Theory

Before delving into the theoretical framework of this thesis, it is crucial to define Euroscepticism and Eurosceptic narratives. "The Routledge Handbook of Euroscepticism" will serve as a fundamental resource for this section and throughout the entire thesis.

Defining Euroscepticism proves challenging due to its origins as a term coined by journalists in the UK during the mid-1980s to describe skepticism towards European integration among Conservative Members of Parliament. The term has evolved to encapsulate a broad, negative stance against various aspects of European integration, influenced by diverse ideologies, which contributes to its complex nature. The study and understanding of Euroscepticism are fragmented across different academic disciplines, making it difficult to develop a unified theory or understand its full impact on public policy and discourse (Leruth et al., 2018, pp. 3-10).

In political discourse, Euroscepticism broadly encapsulates all opinions that range from the opposition of European integration to the opposition of the EU itself. The term's adaptation by political scientists for analysis has faced challenges, particularly in comparative studies, due to its broad and generic application. Efforts to refine the definition have led to distinctions between principled (hard) and contingent (soft) opposition, with further developments focusing on parties' underlying positions on the EU's principles and trajectory rather than the mere opinion on an EU membership (Leruth et. al., 2018, pp. 11-21).

For this thesis the inclusion-moderation theory will be especially relevant. This theory, as mentioned in the introduction, is based on the assumption that competitive electoral processes temper radical ideas, turning extremist parties into more moderate ones. Its approach outlines a casual process, in which parties tend to shift extreme ideological positions towards more acceptable ones, in order to be successful within a competitive system (Tepe, 2019). The inclusion-moderation theory is particularly relevant for the case of Italy, since it can answer the question of how and why antiestablishment parties function within democratic systems or even make an effort to function within systems they deny. Moreover, the theory's approach can aid in understanding certain paradoxes of the democratic system, which can be found in the case of Italy. In its

essence, the theory suggests that the democratic inclusion of radical parties' triggers processes like negotiation and competition, leading to their moderation. Additionally, it argues that it is not the politicians or the actors within the system that soften extremist ideologies, rather the mere competitiveness of the democratic system suffices, to tame such ideologies (Tepe, 2019).

As mentioned above, the following thesis is concerned with the evolution of eurosceptic narratives within the parties of the Italian governing coalition that came into power after the 2022 elections. The inclusion-moderation hypothesis serves as a tool to explain the differences in attitude of the Italian government parties before and after joining the governing coalition.

Hence, the results of the coding will be examined also through the lens of the inclusion-moderation theory, in order to understand whether there has been a change in the narratives and proposals brought forward by the parties between the two elections. Particularly it will be interesting to see, how the government guarantees its survival after these changes and the diverging positions on the EU.

Another relevant theory for this thesis will be the Selectorate Theory. This theory details a mathematical model to understand how political institutions shape incentives through an infinitely repeated game among leaders, selectors, and residents. The model examines the dynamics of power, focusing on how leaders gain, maintain, or lose support and the roles taxation, public and private good allocation and domestic realignments play in this context (De Mesquita et. al., 2005, pp. 124-126).

Before delving deeper into the topic of the Selectorate Theory, there will be a brief explanation as to why it is fitting for this thesis. The theory presented by De Mesquita, Smith, Siverson and Morrow in the book "The Logic of Political Survival" (2005) offers a theoretical approach to understand power dynamics between voters and the voted. What is especially emphasized in the theory, which makes it interesting for the case of Italy, is the assumption that there is calculable pay-off for the voters that guarantee an incumbent to stay in office or to bring a challenger in power.

As the country with the highest government volatility (Matthijs, 2014), Italy is known for its unstable governments and for a divided civic culture. At its core Italy struggles due to the deep differences between the north and the south of the country, this is

reflected in civic culture, political participation, social capital, trust in institutions and attitudes of political apathy (Bordandini et. al., 2024; Putnam, 1994). Within the last 76 years there have been 68 governments, which gives the average Italian government a lifespan of 1.1 years (Euronews, 2022). However, the current government formed by an alliance of right-wing parties, has somehow maintained solid support by voters and has now effectively been in government for longer than the average Italian government.

Circling back to the Selectorate Theory, it will be used to evaluate the results of the coding process. The tie between this theory, my thesis and the case of Italy is established through two main factors. On the one hand, through one phase of the model the theory establishes, namely the moment in which the incumbent faces the so-called challenger, in other words when the leader, that is currently in office faces the opposition before and in an election. The Selectorate Theory's reasoning is that both the incumbent and the challenger propose a certain provision of public and private goods to the Selectorate. The Selectorate is the "the set of people with a say in choosing leaders and with a prospect of gaining access to special privileges doled out by leaders" (De Mesquita et. al., 2005, pp. XVI). Once the incumbent and the challenger have presented their proposals, the Selectorate has the chance to choose between the two, in a democratic system this is the voting process.

This focus on domestic policy is interesting for the case of Italy and specifically for the elections in 2022, due to the big emphasis that was put on domestic policy realignments by the parties currently in government. The undeniable economic difficulties of Italy are easily blamed on EU policy and particularly within the economic realm, blame-shifting is a common attitude to attract voters. In example, a topic with which Matteo Salvini polarized the public discourse prior to joining the governing coalition, was the wealth tax, which he publicly declared an attack against Italians (Salvini, 2021).

Secondly, the government coalition discussed in this thesis is the government that has implemented and proposed the most decrees compared to any other Italian government (Openpolis, 2023). This is an interesting factor when considering the concept of "Winning Coalition" presented by the Selectorate. This group is a subgroup of the actual Selectorate that maintains an incumbent in power, meaning that the

incumbent owes them special privileges (De Mesquita et. al., 2005, pp. XVI). I believe that decrees and laws in this case can be considered special treatment as such. The number of decrees and laws set into place by the current government can be a critical data point to understand why Eurosceptic narratives and/ or a moderation of such narratives can be beneficial to each party's winning coalition. The Selectorate Theory assumes that within a democracy there is no real need for direct bribery of the Selectorate, what is however done to satisfy the winning coalition is to pool money and direct it into the implementation of a set of policies that will prove beneficial to the winning coalition.

All in all, this work aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of eurosceptic narratives within the Italian governing coalition parties that came to be after the 2022 elections. By primarily applying the inclusion-moderation theory, the thesis seeks to understand and explain the observed changes in attitude towards the European Union of these parties between the elections 2018 and after the ones in 2022. The inclusion-moderation hypothesis will serve as a crucial tool to examine the shifts in narratives and proposals, highlighting the impact of competitive electoral processes on tempering radical ideologies. Additionally, the Selectorate Theory offers a tool to evaluate the strategic usage of eurosceptic narratives as a tool for political survival. The theory's focus on the dynamics between leaders, selectors and residents offers a framework to understand how political incentives shape party behavior, particularly in the context of Italy's volatile political government landscape.

A pairing of these two theories offers a more nuanced understanding of party behavior, moreover it addresses the critiques that both theories face. Together, these theories provide a balanced and comprehensive approach to understanding the behavior of the Italian governing coalition parties, offering insights into the interplay between ideological moderation and strategic narrative-use in their quest for political survival.

Methodology

As mentioned above, this thesis will examine the utilization of Eurosceptic narratives within the parties of the governing coalition in Italy. More precisely there will be an examination and illustration of the changes that occurred within the narratives concerning the European Union. Euroscepticism within the right-wing governing coalition in Italy is an interesting phenomenon, worthy of special attention, due to the developments and shifts in perspectives that happened over the years, particularly between 2018 and 2022.

It seems as if Euroscepticism has somehow been part of all three political movements, however its utilization and the degree of skepticism has always been different. The economic difficulties Italy has been facing over the past 30 years have strengthened eurosceptic narratives, leading to narratives primarily focused on economic-Euroscepticism (Quaglia, 2011). Nevertheless, the political parties that will be analyzed in this research have also shown forms or waves of moderation within more recent years, making the case of Italy so relevant for the inclusion-moderation theory.

The Research Question for this thesis will be explored through the triangulation of textual analysis of the electoral programs of the parties Fratelli d'Italia, Forza Italia and Lega Salvini Premier and its resulting data generated through ATLAS.ti, the textual analysis of different speeches of the three leaders of these parties, survey data from the Eurobarometer and a concluding evaluation through the Inclusion-Moderation Theory and the Selectorate Theory.

Triangulation has been proven as an effective way to understand a phenomenon in depth and to avoid deficiencies of one single method (Tzagkarakis & Kritas, 2023). The documents for this research will be analyzed in their original language Italian and citations will be translated autonomously. If necessary, the coded documents can be requested and provided to the supervisors.

Research Design

For this thesis, a mixed-method approach will be employed while conducting textual analysis. Utilizing ATLAS.ti, an affirmed tool for data analysis in the social sciences

(Hwang, 2008), the electoral programs of the parties Fdl, FI, and Lega from 2018 and 2022 will be analyzed. Additionally, one speech per party leader, delivered after joining the governing coalition, will be selected for analysis. For one the analysis will focus on frequency, meaning that a closer look will be taken at how often the European Union and certain buzzwords are mentioned. In addition to that, the context in which the EU is mentioned will be taken into consideration. These two dimensions will give a comprehensive data set, with which shifts in the dynamics can be properly portrayed. The data will be analyzed in order to understand what changed have occurred in the selected time span and how these changes might be different for each party.

The selected timeframe is relevant, because it includes two elections with major differences in outcome. During the 2018 elections the parties had very different degrees of success, which is partly due to the relative age the parties had at the time. Fratelli d'Italia and the Lega were well established parties at the time, while Fratelli d'Italia was only five years old, making it difficult to determine overall success. However, the mere results reveal that the 2018 elections marked an important success for the Lega, which reached a total of 17,4% of the total votes. This made Salvini's party the most successful right-wing party during the election. FI, with its former president Silvio Berlusconi, totaled 14%, while Giorgia Meloni's Fdl merely reached 4,3% (La Repubblica, 2018).

The most recent elections in 2022 ended in an overwhelming success for Fdl, which won the elections by far, reaching a strong 26%, while the Lega and FI both underperformed in comparison. The Lega lost a total of 9% compared to the previous elections and merely reached 8,9% and FI, still led by Berlusconi, dropped down to 8,3% (La Repubblica, 2022).

This type of analysis will help determine whether there has been a shift in discourse concerning the European Union. Additionally, it will facilitate understanding the relationship between any potential changes in discourse and electoral results.

Data Collection

The main data for the thesis will obviously be the electoral programs of the three governing parties. This involves the following electoral programs:

	2018	2022
Fratelli d'Italia	Il Voto che Unisce l'Italia "Le Priorità in 15 punti"	"Il Programma- Pronti a risolvere l'Italia"
Forza Italia	"Un Programma per L'Italia" Per la crescita, la sicurezza, le famiglie e la piena occupazione	"Oggi più che mai Una Scelta di Campo"
Lega Salvini Premier	Elezioni 2018- Programma di Governo: Salvini Premier "La Rivoluzione del Buonsenso"	Elezioni politiche 2022 "Programma di Governo"

Data will be retrieved both in Italian and English, which will assure a broad variety of information. The most important sets of data next to the electoral programs which will be analyzed with ATLAS.ti will be the electoral results and data from the Eurobarometer, particularly those surveys that give information concerning the view of the citizens of the European Union, such as the standard Eurobarometer editions between 2018 and 2022 and special editions such as "Understanding Europeans' views on reform needs" (2023), "Socio-demographic trends Edition 10 (2007-2023) Italy" (2024) or the "Public Opinion in the EU Regions- National report Italy" (2018).

These last documents will be interesting to take into consideration together with the electoral results, to further investigate a potential relationship between the attitudes of the chosen parties, voter behavior and voter attitude towards the EU.

Additionally, to guarantee an adequate overview of how the discourse concerning the EU has changed after the election there will be a textual analysis of six public appearances of the leaders of the governing parties. These are all to be found at the end of the Bibliography.

For Giorgia Meloni, the current Prime minister of Italy I have chosen an Interview from 2019 in which she commented on the current situation of the European Union during a conference of her party. In addition, I chose a speech she held at the Italian chamber of deputies in 2024, in which she emphasized the importance of European cooperation.

Concerning the leader of Lega Salvini Premier, Matteo Salvini, I have chosen two short public appearances from 2018 in which he talks about the European Union pretty negatively and one more recent public appearance from 2023, in which he completely excludes leaving the European Union.

Concerning the third party, Forza Italia, the task is slightly more complicated, due to the change in party leader that occurred in 2023 after the death of former president Silvio Berlusconi. The two personalities of Berlusconi and Tajani are very distinct and their attitude towards the European Union is an especially complicated topic, considering Antonio Tajani's presidency of the European Parliament between 2017 and 2019. For this case I will analyze one public appearance of Silvio Berlusconi as president of the party and one of Tajani since becoming head of the party.

Method of Data Analysis

As mentioned before, to conduct the textual analysis of the electoral programs, I will be using ATLAS.ti with a deductive approach, hence through a predefined coding scheme. For the first round of coding, I will merely look at the frequency of the codes, to determine if there has been a change in frequency between 2018 and 2022. Deductive approaches offer various advantages, but most importantly it proves to be an approach that guarantees high validity (Clarke & Primo, 2007). Below the provisional codes I intend to use for this first round of coding:

Contingent Euroscepticism	Principled Euroscepticism	Serving the winning Coalition	Positive attitude towards the EU
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Critique of the Legal Framework - Economic Euroscepticism - Political Euroscepticism - Critique of the Eurozone - Excessive Bureaucracy - Cultural Euroscepticism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Critique of the Legal Framework - Denial of the Legal identity of the EU - Exit of the EU - False Reference - Lack of Legitimacy of the EU - Patronization by the EU - Perceived endangered Identity - Returning to the "Pre-Maastricht Conditions" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Critique of previous governments - Critique of previously implemented policies - Defense of national identity - Defense of national interests - Defense of specific interests - Mention of culprits for national issues - Negotiating with the EU - Proposal of solutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Benefits of the EU to Italy - Compliance with EU laws and rules - Defense of European values - Europeanism - Further European Integration - Willingness to cooperate with the EU

The above-mentioned codes are partly derived from the two theories utilized for this thesis and partly targeted to answer the main and sub-questions.

The first two code-groups “Contingent Euroscepticism” and “Principled Euroscepticism” are intended to determine how eurosceptic the parties forming the Italian governing coalition are. The sub-codes for these two categories are meant to give a comprehensive understanding of when eurosceptic narratives come into play and which topics and policy areas are mostly concerned. Moreover, these two groups will be used together in order to create a visualization of how eurosceptic the different parties are and how their positions might have changed over the analyzed period of time.

The third group of codes “Serving the winning coalition” is derived from the Selectorate Theory with which I will evaluate the Data in a further moment of the Thesis. With this group of codes, I want to examine to what extent the fundamental voter basis of the parties is already being served/ planned to be served. The sub-codes describe different realms that are likely to be important to the winning coalition of these parties/ that I expect to be important to them. Having an overview of these codes will give me a good perception of how intentionally the winning coalition is considered in documents such as the electoral programs or speeches.

Lastly, the fourth group “Positive attitude towards the EU” is derived from the inclusion-moderation theory, with which I will look at the behavior of the parties after coming into office. This Code-Group will be primarily relevant to see if there might have been a shift towards more moderate approaches before joining the governing coalition and further to check if there has been moderation after the election. Hence, I expect this code group to be rather important during the coding of the electoral programs of 2022 and the speeches after FdI, FI and Lega joined the governing coalition.

In case the coding scheme should not cover all aspects of interest, the scheme will be adapted and filled with codes that will then be inductively developed, as Friese and Sorratto (2018) suggest.

In the second round of coding, I will look at these codes within their context to establish a trend between 2018 and 2022. I will again look at the same codes but determine if the way the topics are treated has changed. In example, I could take the code “Legitimacy of the European Union” and check if in one electoral program the discourse surrounding legitimacy hints at the belief of the EU being a legitimate entity or not and if that belief has changed.

At first, I will compare the electoral programs from 2018 to the ones from 2022 of the individual parties and then I will compare the results amongst each other. This will give me a) an insight into how the individual parties depiction of the European Union has changed and b) how the depiction of the EU varies amongst the parties.

In short, the coding will help my thesis in grasping if a change in narratives has occurred and how this might have occurred. Afterwards the Selectorate Theory shall provide a possible answer as to why these changes might have occurred, meanwhile a look at the electoral results and surveys by the Eurobarometer will tell if these changes have had a measurable effect.

Reflecting on these methods I will employ in my thesis; I believe that the chosen approach should prove functional and feasible to answer the main questions of the thesis.

The chosen methodologies align closely with the objectives of the research, enabling a thorough examination of the subject matter. Additionally, their applicability to the type and scope of data under consideration ensures that the research can be conducted efficiently and effectively, leading to reliable and insightful findings. This alignment between methods, data, and research questions is fundamental to the study's success.

Scientific and Societal Relevance

Discussing Euroscepticism in Italy is both scientifically and societally relevant within political sciences for several reasons. Scientifically, it offers an interesting case study into how EU member states interact with the Union, especially in contexts of rising nationalism and populism. Italy's fluctuating relationship with the EU provides insights into the dynamics between national sovereignty and supranational governance, serving as a critical data point for theories of integration and disintegration. Societally, understanding Euroscepticism in Italy is crucial for addressing the challenges it poses to the EU's cohesion and the implications for policy-making and citizen engagement within the Union.

As Italy is a founding EU member with significant economic and political influence, its Eurosceptic movements can impact the EU's direction and stability, making it essential to analyze these trends for informed public discourse and policy decisions within the EU itself and other EU member states. An examination of the circumstances under which such Eurosceptic narratives come to be, might help in anticipating future developments in EU-Italy relations, thus holding considerable significance for both academic research and practical policymaking within the fields of political sciences and European studies.

Findings and Analysis

Findings for “Lega per Salvini Premier”

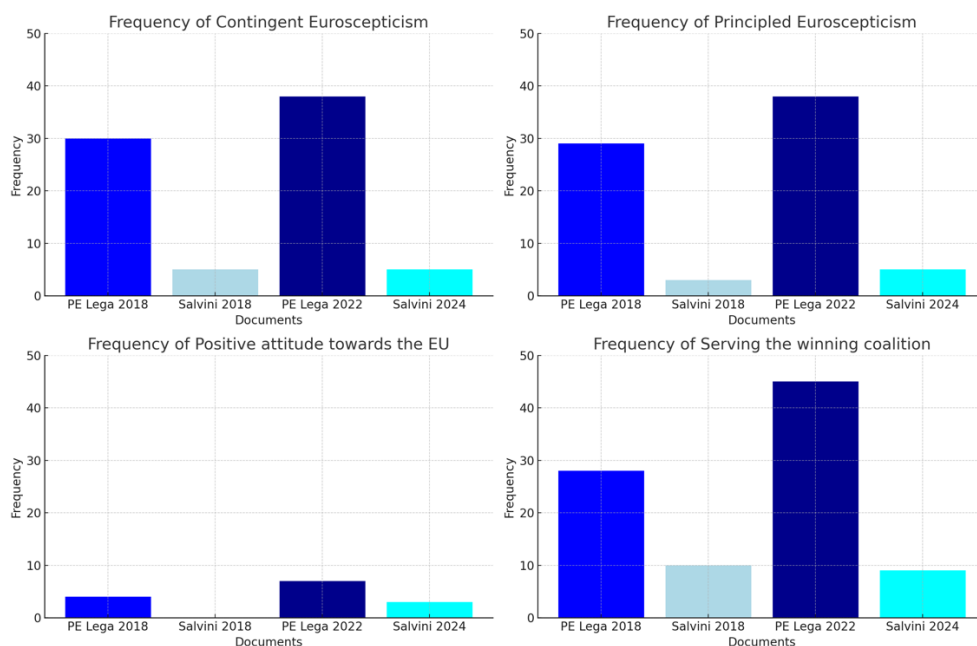


Figure 1: Overall Code-Group Frequency Lega

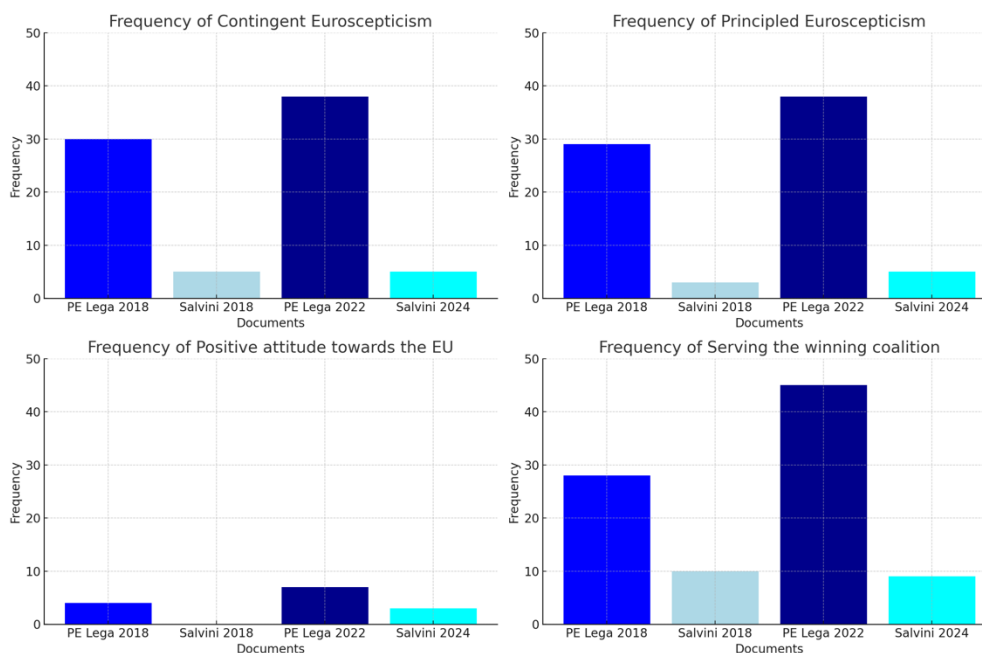


Figure 2: Code-Group Frequency Lega, normalized per 1.000

Between the elections of 2018 and 2022, the electoral programs of the party “Lega per Salvini Premier” underwent significant changes, ranging from the length of the programs to the specific content and thematic priorities. The most striking difference is the length, with the 2018 program being 74 pages long, while the 2022 program expanded to 201 pages. This increase reflects a higher level of formalization within

the party, aligning with the findings of Scarrow et al. (2022), who suggest that longer political programs often indicate a party's broader focus and comprehensive policy positions.

The visual representation of the electoral programs remains consistent, with the party's characteristic colors prominently displayed throughout both documents. However, the layout saw a significant shift, as the 2022 program adopted a question-and-answer format, addressing main concerns in chapters that first outline general issues and then present the Lega's policy proposals to tackle the discussed issues. This display is in contrast with the version from 2018, in which the proposals and topical emphasis was candid.

When examining the coding results, a few trends stand out. The chapter dedicated to the European Union in the 2022 program is only marginally longer than that in the 2018 program. However, the term "European Union" is used more frequently in the 2022 document, often interchangeably with "Europe". This shift suggests an increasing prominence of EU-related themes within the agenda of the party.

The most frequent codes in the 2018 document are "Defense of national identity" and "Economic Euroscepticism", suggesting a strong skepticism towards the EU. Concerning to the overall perspective, the most frequent topic group for the statute was "Serving the Winning Coalition", emphasizing that a Eurosceptic narrative aligns with the electorate of the party.

By 2022, the frequency of codes related to Principled Euroscepticism remained high, indicating continuity in the party's stance. Anew, "Defense of national interests" is the most present code, thus continuing the thematic focus on national interests, already presented in the electoral program of 2018. However, a mild increase in positive attitude towards the European Union was observable. Although it constitutes a minor change in the attitude towards the EU, in the case of the Lega, this is a noteworthy fact, considering the particularly negative attitude towards the Union. The data thus suggests a light softening within the party's stance towards the European Union between 2018 and 2022.

The Lega's evolution can be understood in the context of its internal changes and realignments, including a rebranding under the name “Lega per Salvini Premier.” This transformation reflects its journey towards greater formalization within the Italian political landscape. Despite maintaining a critical view of the EU, the 2022 program includes more proposals for laws and arrangements with the EU, indicating a new, nuanced judgement towards cooperation.

In summary, the comparison of the 2018 and 2022 electoral programs of the Lega reveals a development worth of notice, in the party's approach to EU relations and internal policy formalization. The increase in program length and the inclusion of more structured policy proposals suggest an effort to appeal to a broader electorate while maintaining core Eurosceptic values. This evolution highlights the party's adaptability and strategic shifts in response to changing political dynamics and the need to solidify its position within the broader Italian political spectrum.

“Did Eurosceptic party narratives increase before the elections?”

In the case of the Lega, considering all coded documents, an increase in eurosceptic narratives before the elections can be positively affirmed, as in both electoral programs the level of principled Euroscepticism is considerable. Even though the data reveals that there was a slight increase in positive attitude between the electoral programs of 2018 and 2022, the general attitude of principled Euroscepticism remained prominent in both.

Moreover, an analysis of the context in which Eurosceptic narrative are particularly prominent, the topical focus stays consistent. The code-group “principled Euroscepticism” has been frequently applied throughout the analysis of both statutes, indicating a consistent framework and particular importance of such narratives to the target audience of the party.

Citations utilizing the code-group “principled Euroscepticism” reveal a strong opposition to further integration, emphasizing the importance of national identity and its perceived endangerment within the modern European Union.

“Il primo interesse nazionale è quello a preservare la propria sovranità: sovranità vuol dire esser padroni a casa nostra e rivendicare il diritto a costruirci un futuro al riparo dalle ingerenze estere più ingombranti. In tal senso non si dovrebbero assecondare i progetti di “Stati Uniti d’Europa”, che porterebbero alla cancellazione dell’individualità italiana, né

tutti i passi intermedi che espropriano il Parlamento nazionale (e dunque il popolo italiano) di competenze fondamentali.” (1:26 p22 in Programma elettorale Lega 2018.pdf)

This citation roughly translates to “the first interest of our country should be to preserve its sovereignty, while making sure to be the sovereign in our own home and defending ourselves from projects such as the “United states of Europe”, which would ruin the individual identity of Italy”. The citation shows a clear framing of the Lega as if there was an ongoing conflict between the European and the Italian identity, unable to be combined.

There are various citations similar to this one, in which a clear demarcation is drawn between the two identities, while simultaneously putting them into conflict.

In example, the statute of 2022 offers this interesting citation:

“Non v'è dubbio che lo Stato italiano abbia subito un'erosione di sovranità da parte delle istituzioni sovranazionali, in particolare da parte dell'Unione europea. Al suo interno l'essenza della statualità è tuttavia rappresentata da un pluralismo territoriale e sociale, culturale e identitario, economico e produttivo, che veniva enfatizzato già nel cuore dell'Ottocento. E che si configura come un valore, come una grande risorsa sulla quale fare leva.”(2:4 p 146 in Programma elettorale Lega 2022.pdf)

In this citation an “erosion” of the Italian sovereignty by the supranational institutions is depicted. In this image, the Italian identity and culture is once again at stake due to the European Union. Except for the lack of evidence or actual examples, the train of thought seems to be the same as in the previous electoral program.

Generally, I would say that, while considering the difference in length between the two statutes, there has been a slight increase in Eurosceptic narratives. Moreover, both party programs show a significant level of Euroscepticism, hence why I would assume that, given these two samples, in both cases the party seems to be pushing a more radical Euroscepticism before the elections.

[“Did Eurosceptic party narratives decrease after government formation?”](#)

The case of the Lega shows a notable trend in maintaining a consistent amount of principled Euroscepticism, as there are only a low number of instances, in which a receptive attitude towards cooperation with the European Union is observable. In all four coded samples, nor the parties, nor the leader, Matteo Salvini, express willingness to cooperate or a positive attitude towards the Union.

Considering the theoretical framework, it is however fundamental, to take Lega's the ascension to government through coalition with the parties "Movimento 5 Stelle" and the "Movimento Associativo Italiani all'Estero" into consideration.

When these three parties joined forces in 2018, the Conte I government was formed, which lasted from June 2018 until August 2019. Thus, Salvini's party attitude towards the European Union deserves particular mention, when working with the Inclusion-Moderation Theory. Not only does the Lega not operate according to the assumptions the theory makes after joining the governing coalition in 2022, but it had already presented the same behavior in 2018.

Considering the inclusion-moderation hypothesis one would expect a more moderate standing towards the European Union, however in both cases, Matteo Salvini, presented a rather harsh positioning of his party.

As previously stated, the case of the Lega is a particular one, due to its participation in both government formations, yet the frequency analysis disproves the inclusion-moderation theory in this case, as the expected shift in attitude towards more moderate behavior remains unfulfilled, while the level of principled Euroscepticism remains prominent throughout 2018 to 2022.

When taking a closer look at the two public appearances used for this thesis, a speech in the European Parliament in 2018 and an official interview to the Roman daily journal shortly before the European Elections of 2024, were used. On both occasions the leader of the party seems keen on separating the European from the Italian identity.

"For me and for the League, Italians come first" (7:1 p 2 in Salvini 2018)

This citation is his final statement in his 2018 speech at the European Parliament, in which he particularly emphasised his concern for national identities within the European Union. Multiple times during his speech he expressed his concern regarding further integration of eastern countries in the EU and the lack of regard for the individual national identity of Italy. Moreover, he accuses the EU of hypocrisy and the lack of democracy in its decisions.

During his most recent interview in 2024 this rather hard line of distrust towards the EU stayed consistent. During the Interview, Salvini emphasises particular distrust towards the behavior of the European Union within its borders and with third parties. An example which summarises his concerns well is the following:

It (the European Union) must withdraw absurd regulations and directives against Italian cars and homes, which are just gifts to China for electric cars imposed by Brussels and to banks for property taxes. (8:2 p 1 in Salvini 2024)

The interview shows his persistent fundamental doubts concerning the legitimacy and functioning of the European Union. All things considered, the data thus shows an increase of Eurosceptic narratives before the elections, noticeable through the prevalence of principled (and contingent) Eurosceptic narratives, as well as no actual decrease after government formation, due to the continuity of these narratives. Additionally, the party sets a strong focus on interest advocacy, as there is frequent and reoccurring proposal of new laws, decrees and agreements aimed to satisfy national and specific interests.

Findings for “Fratelli d’Italia”

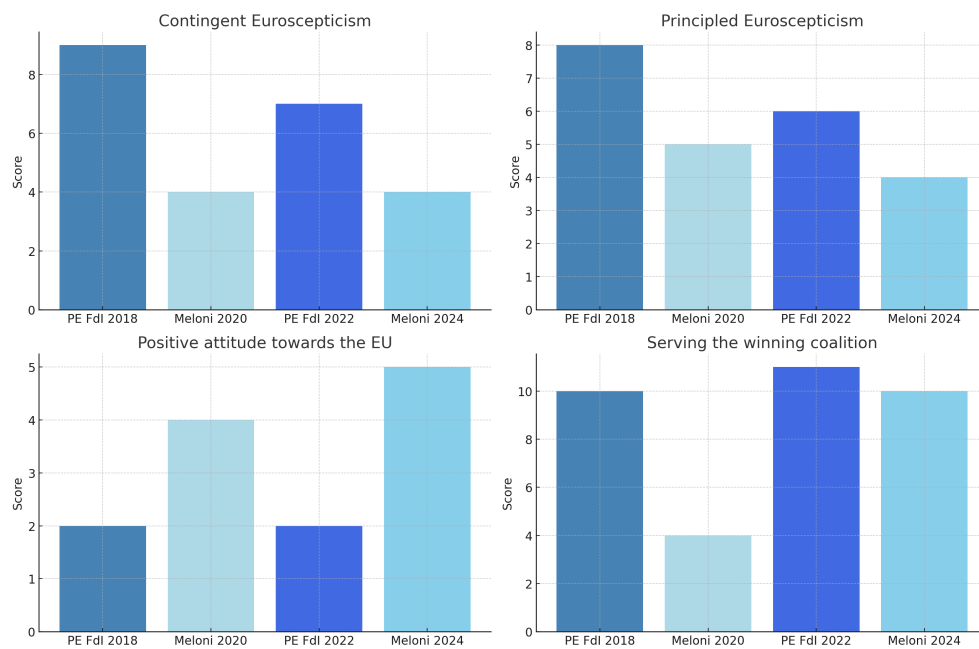


Figure 3: Overall Code-Group Frequency Fdl

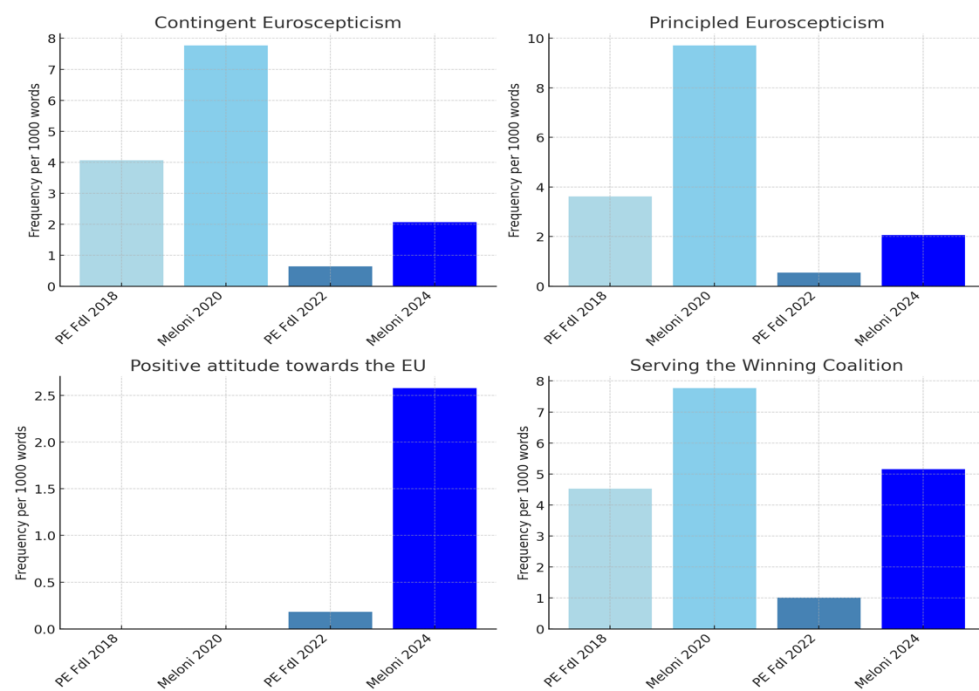


Figure 4: Overall Code-Group Frequency Fdl, normalized per 1.000

The case of Fratelli d’Italia is different, as both electoral programs are more concise compared to the ones of the Lega. Subsequently, the frequency analysis happens on a different, smaller scale. The two statutes are visually similar, as in the previous case, displaying the typical blue color of the party and both are divided into bullet points with brief explanations concerning their thematic focal points and policy proposals.

The program is divided into 15 points, of which one is explicitly dedicated to the European Union, however the topic is also treated in other points which are concerned with domestic policies and affairs. The program shows a concise but dense treatment of the topics, as it proposes various policies, a constitutional reform and reformed handling of the economy all within 4 pages.

In the document the most prominent topics are centered around the protection of Italian values, the defense of Italian national identity and the perceived danger to the national identity.

A quote that exemplifies this attitude well is the following:

“(...) Maggiore considerazione delle comunità italiane all'estero e la tutela dell'italianità in tutto il mondo (...)”

“There is the need for greater consideration of Italian communities abroad and protection of Italian identity across the world” (3:7 p 2 in PE FdI 2018)

The program published for the 2022 electoral campaign is 40 pages long, however a noteworthy factor is that this program seems to be less concerned with the European Union compared to its predecessor. The topical focus within this statute is set around negotiation with the European Union, defense of national interests and a strong critique of previous governments.

While in 2018, Fratelli d'Italia seemed much more concerned with the national identity and its protection, fundamentally showing a position that contained a fundamental opposition between the European and the Italian identity, in 2022 their focus shifts on the defense of interests, while criticizing previous decisions which have led to the need of such a defense of the Italian identity/ nation.

In addition, it is interesting to note, however, that the program shows more availability to “negotiate” with the European Union and respectively the Commission. The code still has a negative connotation, since it is mostly used in connection to negotiation to defend national values and identity, however it seems less strict about the denial of the European Union and rather sees it as an entity with which one must cooperate in a mandatory way in order to achieve the set-out goals. Nonetheless, both statutes present the Italian and European values as two conflicting entities.

Amongst the 40 pages, merely one is dedicated specifically to the European Union and otherwise it is only mentioned in five more pages. The difference between the 2018 and the 2022 version is striking, considering the overall page count. As with the Lega, the difference in length can be explained through the process of becoming more affirmed in the national landscape and thus growing their general political output.

After all, both parties have grown over a short period of time, gaining an exponential traction on the voters.

Coming to the code groups, however, the line stays clear. According to the coding, it seems that the Fratelli d'Italia follow a clear line and objective, which can be summarized as serving the winning coalition. The propagated policy priorities are always connected to the defense of interests or, a more extreme approach as in their statute from 2018, the defense of the national Identity as a whole.

Moreover, the few signs of positive attitude towards the European Union of both electoral programs are remarkable.

“Did Eurosceptic party narratives increase before the elections?”

In this case, the data of both electoral programs manifests principled (and contingent) Euroscepticism, making towards an increase of Eurosceptic narratives reasonable, while clearly excluding a decrease of these narratives.

Due to the decrease of concern for the European Union in the statute of 2022, the mere frequency of principled Euroscepticism decreases as well. As can be seen in Figure 4, however, this still hints towards a decrease of the general Euroscepticism, particularly the principled one in comparison to the contingent one. This indicates a slight moderation between the span of 2018 until 2022.

Merely based on the codes one would assume that the statute from 2022 is less Eurosceptic, however this is also due to the length of the previous one. In general, it should be noted that there was a marked increase in hard Euroscepticism leading up to the 2018 elections, whereas a slightly more moderated form of Euroscepticism was observed leading up to the 2022 elections.

“Did Eurosceptic party narratives decrease after government formation?”

Contrary to the case of the Lega, the level of Euroscepticism decreased in the case of Fratelli d'Italia, as shown by the data. After joining the governing coalition in 2022, Giorgia Meloni and thus her party, show a clear decrease of principled Euroscepticism and a much more cooperative approach to the EU.

Concerning her public appearance, while Giorgia Meloni upheld a strong eurosceptic position before ascending to government, this changed drastically in 2024. The data used for this thesis contains an Interview she gave shortly before the European Election, in which she does not seem to see the Italian and the European identity as two distinct things anymore (11:8 p1 in Meloni 2024). Moreover, the interview hints towards a willingness to cooperate and shape the European Union, rather than leaving it.

“European dynamics are more complex than Italian ones, but I believe we would serve Europe and Europeans (...)” (11:6 p2 in Meloni 2024)

For the case of the party Fratelli d'Italia the decrease in Eurosceptic narratives is retraceable with the overall and partial frequency analysis. As shown in Figure 4, the most important factor that needs to be taken into consideration is the decrease of contingent and principled Euroscepticism and the lower score of principled Euroscepticism in comparison to contingent Euroscepticism. Another indicator is the interview given by the Leader of the party, Giorgia Meloni, who maintained a rather positive attitude towards the European Union throughout the entire exchange. What can be seen between 2018 and 2022 is a slow, but progressive moderation, while after joining the governing coalition this progress seems to have sped up. Considering the analyzed documents, the positive depiction of the European Union as done by Meloni in her recent interview is a novelty and points towards a confirmation of the inclusion-moderation theory.

Findings for Forza Italia

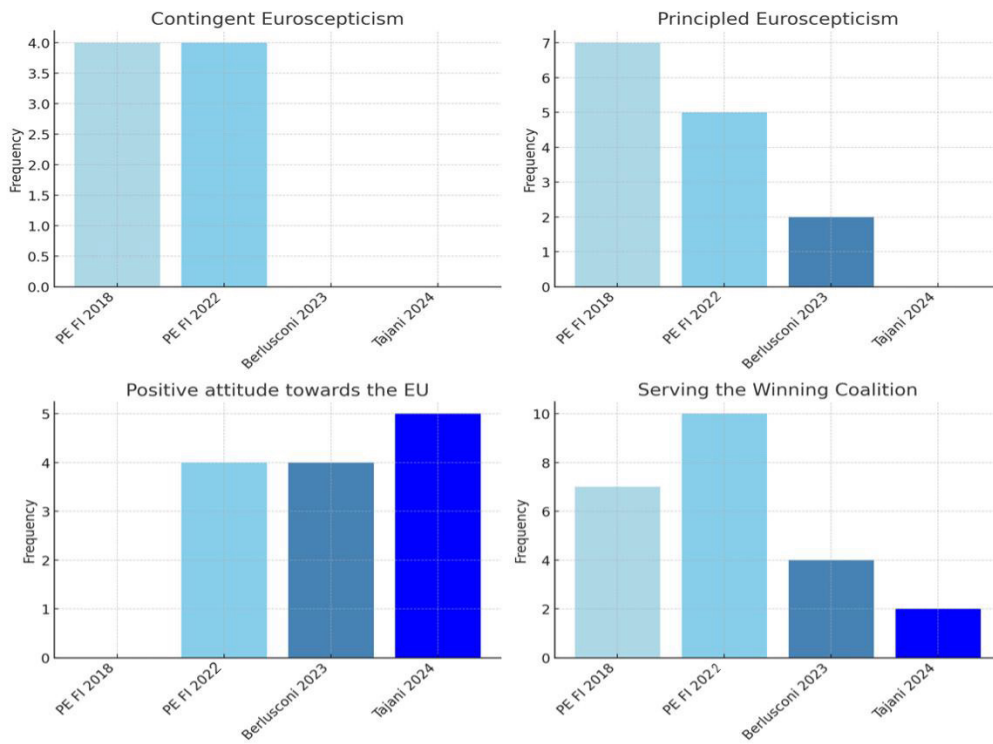


Figure 5: Overall Code Frequency FI

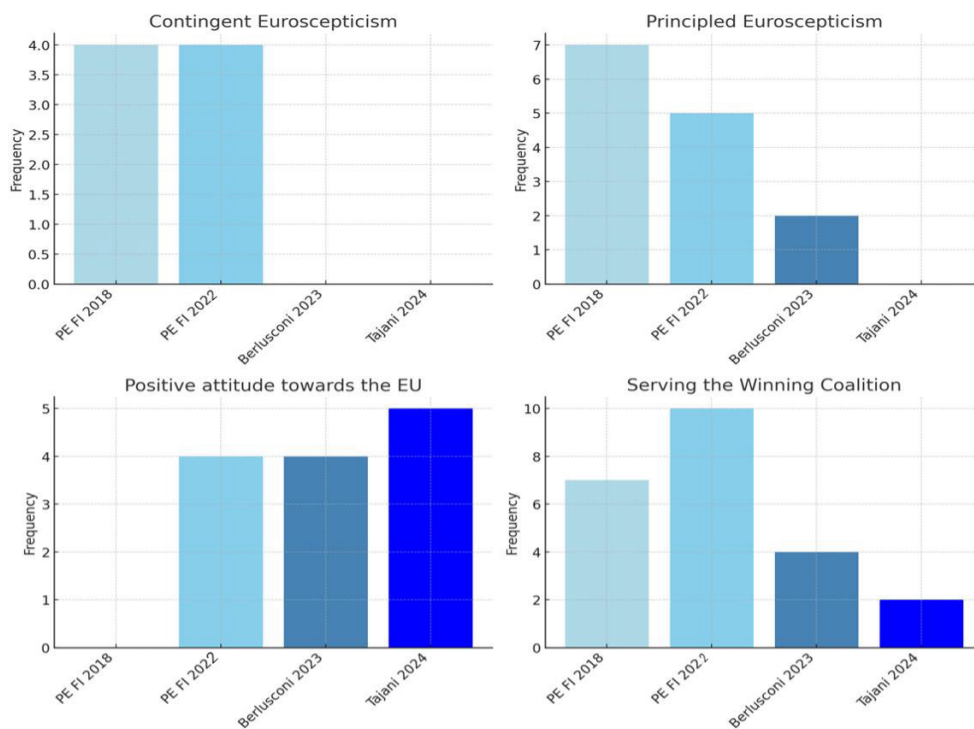


Figure 6: Overall Code-Group Frequency FI, normalized per 1.000

The case of Forza Italia presents itself slightly easier in analysis and comparison, as the electoral programs of 2018 and 2022 are of similar lengths. Firstly, it is relevant to

denote, that the European Union appears to be less frequently mentioned in comparison to the other two parties, moreover, the narrative and context in which the EU is mentioned, is far less negative.

The statute from 2018, divided in 10 bullet points with sub-points, shows a strong focus on economic Euroscepticism, with particular regard to domestic policies and how these interact with the body of laws constituted by the EU. In addition, defense of national interests was frequent within this first program, which seems a recurring theme for all three parties.

The 2022 electoral program is four pages longer but remains just as concise as the previous one. The code-frequency within this program is worthy of particular notice, as it presents a more positive attitude towards the EU, noticeable through the manifestation of citations that fall under the categories “Compliance with EU laws” and “Willingness to cooperate with the EU”. While the topical focal points still remain on interest advocacy, expressed through the promise to negotiate with the EU and the defense of the national interests, the appearance of positive attitude within the electoral programs constitutes a divergence from the statutes of the other coalition members. Overall, the program of 2022 proposes cooperation with the EU as a tool to exercise greater influence within the European institutions.

When comparing the two it is notable, that the general level of Euroscepticism has decreased. Coming to the code groups, the most frequently used are once again “Serving the winning coalition”, since FI also seems to be very focused on defending and representing particular interests. In general, however, also through the usage of the code group “moderation” it is clear that the program from 2022 has a much softer approach to the cooperation with the European Union and promises a rather positive outlook.

“Did Eurosceptic party narratives increase before the elections?”

In this case the Eurosceptic narratives seem to have decreased over time and to have consistently stayed rather less relevant than other topics. The strong focus on the economic factors make the Eurosceptic narratives seem almost utilitarian, rather than true convictions.

“Did Eurosceptic party narratives decrease after government formation?”

The analyzed data points towards a rather slow, but progressive moderation of the party's stance towards the European Union. Notably, the decrease of such narratives started after government formation, with the previous leader of the party, Silvio Berlusconi, and continued with his successor Antonio Tajani.

As previously mentioned, and expected at the beginning of the research, FI is the party propagating the least eurosceptic narratives within the governing coalition. Both electoral programs maintain similar levels of Euroscepticism, while for both Berlusconi and Tajani this attitude changes rather drastically after joining the winning coalition. In example, in the interview utilized for Berlusconi in this research, he proposes a common approach of the Italian governing coalition in European affairs. He expresses hope concerning a possible cooperation between the EPP, FdI and Lega, or even a possible accession of the parties to the European People's Party, thus aiming towards cooperation with the European Union, rather than opposing it.

When looking at the interview given by Antonio Tajani shortly before the European Election 2024, a conservative, yet clearly europhile and europeanist line can be found amongst his answers.

We are Europeans, and it's a matter of cultural and historical identity. This does not mean we must renounce our Italian identity; rather, because we are Italian, we are European. So, I agree with Mattarella. (10:1 p 1 in Tajani 2024)

We are absolutely different; we have a different idea. We are convinced Europeanists. (10:6 p 1 in Tajani 2024)

Declarations as such are rarely seen amongst the governing parties in Italy, thus these statements are of high value and show a clear the moderation of the party towards the European Union. Just as in the case of the Fratelli d'Italia, this moderation is particularly visible after joining the governing coalition. A more mainstream approach towards the relationship with the European Union can be noted.

“Do all parties follow the same trend or are there differences?”

Concludingly, when comparing all parties, all three grow and manifest their Euroscepticism in distinct manners. What unites all three parties, however, is the strong focus on serving the winning coalition. All of them start from a common basis of interests that need to be represented and defended, more specifically these interests gravitate around the defense of the Italian identity, the protection of Italian values in front of the European Union and the protection of the Italian industry/ specific sectors of the Italian economy.

In general, as mentioned before, all parties have a strong focus on serving the winning coalition, as it is the most frequently used code group for all electoral programs and all parties. The following will outline the general overview of the observations made during the evaluation of the analyzed data.

All electoral programs from 2018 are characterized by a stronger frequency of principled Euroscepticism in comparison to the ones published in 2022, denoting a mild moderation amongst the parties. Concerning the public appearances however, the trends diverge for all three parties, as the Lega maintains a line of principled Euroscepticism, Fdl presents progressive but mild moderation and FI shows the strongest moderation.

All in all, the Lega thus seems to maintain said principled Euroscepticism without major changes. Specifically, the context shows a strong component of populist narratives conjoined with the overall Eurosceptic narratives, due to the lack of actual proposals, numbers and references. The content seems repetitive and extensive, due to the discourse-like style in which it is written. Within all analyzed documents, the levels of contingent and principled Euroscepticism are high, even when they are normalized per 1000 words, as shown in figure 1 and 2.

In the case of Fdl, despite the eurosceptic narratives having more substance than the ones of the Lega, the data shows clear signs of moderation after 2022. Looking at Figure 3 and 4, there is a notable decline in both contingent and principled Euroscepticism, with a peak in positive attitude towards the EU during the interview of Giorgia Meloni in 2024. This trend suggests a moderation of Fdl's stance, aligning

with the inclusion moderation theory, while maintaining a focus on serving the winning coalition.

In the case of the Fratelli d'Italia, contrary to my initial belief, the Eurosceptic narratives seem much harsher than the ones of the Lega. This is due to the fact that, even in such a condensed form, their approach seems generally more aggressive and most times their Eurosceptic narratives are expressed more clearly. However, this hard Euroscepticism is not upheld from 2018 to 2022, when the electoral program proposes a slight moderation concerning their stance on the European Union.

In the case of the Forza Italia the data reveals a drastic decrease in Eurosceptic narratives, as visible in Figure 5 and 6, in which it becomes apparent that before joining the governing coalition in 2022 contingent and principled Euroscepticism were more prevalent and conversely, positive attitudes towards the European Union grew significantly, particularly visible in the speech by Antonio Tajani. Just as in the case of the coalition partners, the focus on serving the winning coalition remains consistent, indicating a balance between maintaining core voter support and adopting a more cooperative approach toward the EU.

Discussion

All in all, the findings of this research point towards different typologies of mobility of the eurosceptic narratives within the three parties. As previously stated, the trends show that the approach of the Lega stays rather static, as the eurosceptic narratives seem to remain present, to a similar degree, in all four analyzed documents. When looking at the party of the current Prime minister, the narratives concerning the European Union have softened over time, witnessing an especially strong push towards a more mainstream approach after the 2022 elections. Lastly, Forza Italia, the least eurosceptic party of the coalition, underwent a rather slow, but progressive shift towards an approach that can even be deemed europeanist. All three parties, however, seem to have set a strong focus on connecting with their electorate, through the pooling of money in the direction of specific policies and laws.

Interpretation of the data

Firstly, the data gathered during this research, provides insight to the eurosceptic narratives of the three parties currently governing Italy and how these narratives have shifted over the years. Light is shed onto the diverging progression of eurosceptic narratives within the three parties, showing that two parties have gone through a similar evolution on different scales, while one party seems to have remained rather static.

Moreover, the data gives an understanding of how the voter basis of the governing parties have changed. It seems as if FdI and FI might have specifically aimed to enlarge their voter basis and adapted to the broader spectrum they had attracted after the 2022 election.

Meanwhile, the Lega's positions have not gone through a significant change, in fact their voter basis remained the same and has rather shrunk between the 2018 election and the one in 2022. Especially for the party of the Prime minister, the progressive changes in attitude (not only towards the EU) notable within the electoral programs, but particularly visible in her latest speeches, must have attracted a larger voter basis. Considering the assumptions the inclusion moderation theory poses, there is an interesting interplay between the results of the latest European Election and the steady

support FdI still receives after almost two years in government. Fratelli d'Italia remained the strongest force of the country even after the European election and even after their narratives have slowly adapted to the ones of rather mainstream parties. The relationship between Italy and the European Union has not deteriorated, as much, as many academics, politicians and experts expected, which suggests that FdI has successfully broadened their electoral basis and at the same time, softened their eurosceptic narratives. Similar things can be said for the party of Antonio Tajani, that has gone through a much minor increase in electoral success, however the progression between 2018, 2022 and 2024 is a positive one. The research done for this paper shows an increase in positive attitude towards the European Union and a slight increase in electoral success. The inclusion moderation's assumption thus works on the case of FI just as they do in the case of FdI, even though they were less eurosceptic from the beginning.

In conclusion, the data suggests that these two parties have gone through a process of moderation.

Lastly, for the case of the Lega, neither have the eurosceptic narratives become more severe, nor have they become softer. Within the scope of this work, the data shows that the eurosceptic narrative of the Lega has remained the same and that a principled Euroscepticism is a fundamental part of their electoral program and party ideology. In this case the assumptions of the inclusion-moderation theory cannot be verified, as there is no notable shift towards more mainstream or moderate positions, particularly concerning their stance on the European Union. In this case, the assumptions of the selectorate theory can aid in understanding this line of behavior.

Implications

The inclusion moderation theory suggests that political parties become more moderate when they gain power or influence, as they need to appeal to a broader electorate and govern effectively. This theory applies to Fratelli d'Italia post-2022 elections, where the party has adopted a more moderate stance, especially regarding the EU. Historically Eurosceptic, Fratelli d'Italia has softened its position to support Italy's membership in the EU and the Eurozone, recognizing the economic and political benefits of alignment with European partners. This moderation helps the party to gain broader acceptance and legitimacy on the international stage.

From its birth, FI has been a pro-European party, but over the years, it faced internal and external pressures that pushed it towards more populist and Eurosceptic rhetoric. After the 2022 elections, FI's need to appeal to a broader electorate and play a constructive role in coalition politics led to a renewed emphasis on their pro-EU stance. This moderation reflects the necessity to maintain political relevance and attract centrist voters, ensuring a stable and supportive electorate. Moreover, it is a result of the change in leadership of the party. With its current leader being former president of the European Parliament, Tajani has shifted the focus of the party towards an even more positive approach towards the EU. By championing EU membership and collaboration, FI aims to balance national interests with broader European integration, thus broadening its appeal and solidifying its position within Italy's political landscape.

Lega maintained a strong Eurosceptic stance after the 2022 elections due to the composition of its electorate, which consists of nationalist and Eurosceptic voters. This core support base necessitates a firm anti-EU position to ensure their continued loyalty. Additionally, Lega distinguishes itself from Fratelli d'Italia and Forza Italia by emphasizing Euroscepticism, maintaining a unique political identity. Internal party dynamics, particularly under Matteo Salvini's leadership, reinforce this stance. Strategically, this approach secures Lega's share of the right-wing electorate, critical for its political survival and influence.

Strengths and Limitations

The employed research design on the use of Eurosceptic narratives within the governing coalition of the Italian government presents several strengths, particularly the mixed-method approach. Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data ensures a comprehensive analysis of the subject. Moreover, the software ATLAS.ti is a recognized tool for textual analysis which ensures a systematic and replicable (within the scope of such a thesis) method for the examination of shifts in political narratives. The triangulation through an outlook to additional data such as the Eurobarometer or the recent European elections enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, allowing for cross-verification of the results.

Concerning the weaknesses, the usage of one sample for the verification of the inclusion-moderation thesis may not capture the complete extent of internal party

dynamics and informal political strategies. Using merely one speech per party leader is to be attributed to the scope of the work, as more extensive research would not have been fitting for such a thesis. Secondly, the chosen timeframe may give a solid overview of the latest trends and their reason to be, yet they cannot fully account for long-term trends. Lastly, the coding process of such documents might be subject to researcher bias, as there was only one person involved in conducting the process.

In general, while the chosen approach is well-suited for the objectives and the scope of the paper, it is necessary to contextualize the findings and to suggest further research. Further research should include a broader time- frame and a larger sample size, in order to guarantee generalizability and applicability to different governments.

Conclusion

With the developments of the Italian political landscape, the shifts in Eurosceptic narratives among FdI, FI and the Lega after the 2022 elections offer profound insight into the interplay between ideological moderation and strategic electoral considerations.

As the main research question posed the question of how and why the depiction of the EU by the governing parties in Italy changed after ascending to power, the findings indicate that while all three parties maintained some degree of Euroscepticism, significant changes occurred in their narratives.

FdI showed a moderate softening in Eurosceptic rhetoric, most evidently after joining the governing coalition, aligning with the assumptions of the inclusion-moderation theory. FI demonstrated a strong pro-EU shift in narrative, likely influenced by its new leader. In contrast, the Lega maintained a Eurosceptic stance, showing slight signs of moderation, which can be explained by the parties need to cater to its nationalist and Eurosceptic base as per Selectorate theory.

The findings generally align with various previous papers⁶ and research that highlight the assumptions of the inclusion-moderation theory through the effect ascension to power has on radical parties. The process FdI went through in the researched time frame reflects a pragmatic shift, balancing the Eurosceptic stances of the party with the realities of governance and the necessity to maintain solid interrelation to the European Union. This partially substantiates the work of Tepe (2019) and Bernhard (2020) who have conducted similar research on such dynamics in differing political contexts. The results gathered for FI on the other hand, reinforce the notion that leadership changed the course of a party, as seen by Albertazzi (2021). Both parties serve as firm examples for the Inclusion-Moderation Theory.

Meanwhile the Lega's development analyzed within the scope of this research might challenge certain aspects of the inclusion-moderation theory, it highlights the importance of the selectorate theory in this context. It appears that the values and

⁶ Tibi (2013); Buehler (2013); Greene (2015)

narratives tied to a principled Euroscepticism are of fundamental importance for the survival of the party and influence the party's core voter basis substantially.

As mentioned in the introduction, this study identifies a knowledge gap when it comes to understanding the internal dynamics and decision-making processes that drive shifts in eurosceptic narratives. For future research it would be recommendable to include the role of internal party politics, leadership influence and external pressure to the scope of the analysis, to achieve a more comprehensive overview and outlook of the specific case. A longitudinal study would be beneficial, in order to examine the behaviors over an extended period of time.

Nonetheless, the findings of this thesis entail practical implications such as the understanding of motivations and constraints of coalitions, which can aid policymakers in effectively engaging with the Italian governing coalition. For instance, recognizing the levels of Euroscepticism and understanding their underlying causes can be used by political strategists to gain further insight into Eurosceptic Parties within the European Union. For instance, EU policymakers can engage more effectively with Italian parties by recognizing the different levels of Euroscepticism and their underlying causes. Political strategists can use further insight into Eurosceptic Parties within the European Union.

The interaction of the inclusion-moderation theory and the selectorate theory provide a robust framework concerning the analysis of party behavior in coalition governments, through the focus on both internal and external political pressure in understanding narrative shifts.

The differential application of Eurosceptic narratives by FdI, FI, and the Lega highlights the complexity of political adaptation and survival strategies. These insights contribute to the broader field of political science by offering a nuanced understanding of how extremist and mainstream parties navigate the challenges of governance in a multi-layered political environment like the EU.

Concludingly, the insights given by the research provide a comprehensive analysis of how and why the Italian parties in government have gone through strategic moderation, as they faced challenges, responsibilities and path-dependencies after joining the governing coalition. The shifts observed in the narratives of FdI and FI,

reflect a strategic moderation, while the Lega's firm principled Euroscepticism highlights the importance of the electoral base.

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