# "*In the end they are all the same!*" party organizational and policy change in Italy (2013-2018)

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the academic debate on the future of party organizations – and, at large of representative democracy – has been revitalised because of the electoral success of populist parties across Europe (Albertazzi and Vampa 2021). This chapter aims at analysing party organizational and positional changes focusing on specific patterns that can be ascribed to the hypothesis of the 'contagion effect' of populism (Roodujin et al. 2014; Schwörer 2018). The contagion effect is defined here as those adaptive processes fostered by non-populist/mainstream parties to respond to the electoral success of populist parties towards *internal disintermediation*, at the organizational level, and an increasing emphasis and policy convergence on cultural and ethical issues, at the positional level.

The two strands of the literature on party organizations and on party positional change often do not talk to each other. Moreover, the lack of comprehensive data and the tentativeness of existing empirical studies do not allow to draw sound conclusions on the kind of relationship between party organizational factors and party positional change (Fagerholm 2015). While we do not explicitly assume any causal relation between organizational features and policy positions, this analysis investigates whether and how party organizational and party positional changes evolve in a context of growing emphasis on the impact of populism, intended here mainly as a political style (Canovan 1993). Italy provides

a very suitable case study given the electoral success of two populist parties in the last two national elections (2013 and 2018): the Five Star Movement (*Movimento Cinque Stelle*, M5S), and the League (*Lega Salvini Premier*, LN).

In the first section we introduce our analytical framework, by referring to the main assumptions underlying the processes of party organizational change and policy convergence. In the second section we formulate our main research hypothesis, and we outline the methodology adopted to address empirically our case. In the third section we present and discuss the results of our investigation.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Towards internally disintermediated organizations?

Political parties have been considered for a long time as specialized agencies (Lawson 1980) through which citizens are linked to governmental institutions. By adopting a functional perspective, Bartolini and Mair (2001) distinguish between representative and procedural/institutional functions. The articulation and aggregation of interests as well as the formulation of policies are the most important functions for the former, while the recruitment of political personnel, the organization and coordination of institutional activities are most relevant for the latter. Parties' capacity and attitude to perform these functions have changed over time, depending on the changing nature of their relationship with the State and civil society (Katz and Mair 2009). Supposedly, political parties have progressively lost interest in their representative functions (the aggregation and articulation of interests), while they have privileged and refined their procedural ones (the recruitment of political personnel as well as the coordination and organization of the institutional arenas). From this perspective, the office-seeking function has 'ascended' (Bardi, Calossi and Pizzimenti 2017) among those pursued by parties: contemporary parties are expected to be primarily interested in public office *per se*, rather than confining themselves to societal representation.

In organizational terms and in line with the cartel party thesis (Katz and Mair 1995; 2009), intra-party power is now expected to be concentrated in the hands of the parliamentary party at the expense of both the party in central office and the party on the ground. Cartel parties are con-

sidered less dependent on members and grass-roots contributions; party activists are disempowered in favour of professional salaried staff; electoral campaigning and other crucial functions of the party in central office have become more centralized and professionalized. At the same time, the role of the party leader has become more prominent: contemporary parties are characterized – albeit to different extents and with significant inter-party variance – by an increased autonomy of the leadership to the detriment of the intermediate organizational layers (Cross and Pilet 2015).

Apparently in contrast with these trends, in the last twenty years party central elites have devolved significant powers to the party on the ground. As Katz and Mair argue, such 'democratization paradox' is the by-product of a deliberate strategy elaborated by the party leadership: by using a plebiscitary and direct appeal, the leadership tends to override the intermediate party structures and the middle level elites. The extension of the boundaries set to join the party has produced a dispossession of power at the intermediate level of the party organization (Detterbeck 2012: 84; Rahat 2009; Rahat and Hazan 2010), whose role in the decision-making process has been restricted or totally by-passed (Mair 1994).

These changes have been recently addressed by the literature on 'political disintermediation', intended as the process of change in political representation towards more direct forms of political mediation (Biancalana 2018). Derived from the literature on finance and marketing theory and widely used in the studies on the Internet economy, the concept of disintermediation may be briefly illustrated as the removal or bypassing of intermediaries in the relationship between consumers and producers and, more broadly, in any supply chain or transaction. In political science, this concept has been used mainly by scholars engaged with the study of Internet politics (Chadwick 2007; Chadwick and Howard 2009).

In this vein, changes in the external role and the internal organization of contemporary parties are investigated side by side. At systemic level the role of political parties as gatekeepers has changed towards new forms of political mediation (the so called 'external' disintermediation). At the same time, because of broader socio-economic and technological challenges, 'internal' disintermediation has changed party organizations as envisaged by the cartel party thesis.

The concept of political disintermediation has flaws and virtues (Pizzimenti et al. 2020). On the one hand, it has the merit of framing jointly

and parsimoniously both the systemic role and the internal dimensions of party organizations. On the other, by considering political disintermediation as a process of change, the approach entails a virtual comparison between a currently observed situation (characterized by internal and external disintermediation) and a past situation, when political intermediation was supposedly higher both within party organization and in terms of parties' external role.

In this chapter, we share the assumptions of the cartel party thesis (Katz and Mair 1995; 2009), in particular, the notion of party penetration of the State and its consequences in organizational terms: political parties have changed their very nature into alleged state agencies. That is why, in our opinion, the concept of party 'external disintermediation' does not catch the kind of the long established (and empirically verified) relationship between State, civil society and the parties, that is one where institutionally incorporated parties may be considered "full-grown institutions of the State" (Katz and Mair 2009). On the contrary, the concept of 'internal disintermediation' condenses most of the hypothesised organizational changes raised by the cartel party thesis (Pizzimenti et al 2020). Moreover, as recent contributions on the digitalization of politics have shown (e.g., Gerbaudo 2019), internal disintermediation may be fruitfully considered as an orienting guideline for those parties that openly intend to 'break up' with the established organizational templates.

## 2.2. Party positional change: the predominance of the cultural-ethical dimension?

Many authors have investigated the interaction between political parties' 'old' economic stances on markets and welfare and 'new' post-materialistic issues pertaining to a 'progressivism' vs 'conservatism' dimension of political competition, with the aim of discovering new patterns of party polarisation or even the emergence of new cleavages (e.g., Hooghe and Marks 2018; Kriesi et al. 2008; 2012).

Changes in mass beliefs were observed as early as the last three decades of the 20th century and interpreted as evidence of the emergence

of a new dimension of political competition[1]. This dimension has been variously labelled as postmaterialist/materialist (Inglehart 1977; 1984), ethical (Bardi 1987; 1989), new politics/old politics (Müller-Rommel 1989; Franklin 1992), value-based (Ignazi 1992; 2003) left libertarian/authoritarian (Kitschelt 1994; 1998), Green/Alternative/Libertarian (GAL) /Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalism (TAN) (Hooghe et al. 2002).

In this chapter we identify two dimensions of the political space: Left/Right and Cultural-Ethical[2]. This choice allows for a more consistent and generally applicable definition of the two dimensions of political competition as they are distinguished based on the motives (value/ethics vs economic interest) of individuals' and groups' political attitudes and behaviour. Conversely, other categories, such as materialist/postmaterialist' category (for a critical analysis of the materialistic/post-materialistic dichotomy see Bardi 1989) or new politics/old politics are defined based on party positions on contingently relevant policy issues and therefore can be applied only to cases that are limited in time or political setting. In this chapter, we use the 'ethical' category to identify a dimension of political competition pertaining to 'new' 'progressive' vs 'conservative' values and opposed to the 'old' economic left-right dimension.

## 2.3. Party organizational change and party policy positioning: the missing link

It can be surmised that changes in the very nature of parties – towards convergent organizational templates or otherwise – are accompanied by changes in the patterns of political competition. Political competition among parties and candidates pertains to the representative function of political parties as it allows voters to identify which of the policy options offered to them best suits their values and interests, and to cast their vote accordingly. To date, however, little attention has been devoted to the

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[1]    In reality the existence of multiple dimensions of party competition had already been detected by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) who identified four different potentially conflictual societal cleavages. The difference in this case was that the "new" dimension seemed to erode part of the competitive space of the traditional (economic) left/right dimension.

[2]    In this contribution we resort to the label 'Ethic-Cultural' which condenses most of the dimensions identified in the specialized literature.

study of the link between party organizational change and party positional changes.

There are essentially two major traditions regarding party positional change. The first tradition was initiated by Ian Budge (1994) and it largely draws upon Anthony Downs' (1957) spatial theory of political competition, which assumes the centrality of ideology in limiting party movements. More relevant to the aims of this chapter is the tradition started by Robert Harmel and Kenneth Janda in the early 1990s. Building on Angelo Panebianco's (1988) research on party organization, Harmel and Janda (1994; see also Janda 1990) developed an 'integrated theory of party goals and party change' to explain party positional shifts.

According to this theory, political parties are conservative organizations that tend to resist change. Nevertheless, positional change may be triggered by internal factors such as leadership change or intra-party factions change, as well as by external factors such as an electoral defeat (Harmel and Janda 1994: 266-68).

The study of the relationship between parties' policy positions and organizations has gained an increasing relevance in recent years. This topic has been addressed, among others, by Schumacher et al. (2013), but also by scholars interested in the analysis of the congruence between parties and voters (Giger, Schumacher 2019); in the study of how parties react to changes in the median voter position (Bischof, Wagner 2017); in the scope of parties' issues agenda (van Heck 2018); as well as in the manifesto-building processes and intra-party democracy (Gauja 2013; Harmel 2016).

Similarly, two recent studies (Meyer 2013; Schumacher 2013) argue that a party's internal structure affects its ability to shift positions. Studying parties from ten Western European countries, Meyer found evidence that parties with high mass organisational strength, hierarchical decision-making processes are better equipped to change their policy positions. Similarly, Schumacher (2013) finds statistical support for the expectation that parties with strong activists and weak leaders respond to their environment in a different way compared to parties with strong leaders and weak activists. In addition, these scholars find evidence that a party's governmental status affects its ability to shift policy positions. According to Meyer, government parties are less prone to change their policy positions due to the higher media attention than opposition parties. Similarly,

Schumacher (2013) suggest that opposition parties are more likely to shift policy positions than parties in government if they have strong organisations (i.e., are policy-seeking).

However, while the analyses of the strategies adopted by parties for the development of their policy proposals and electoral manifestos are deeply rooted in the organizational literature, those more specifically centred on the relationship between parties' organizational features and their policy positions (or in their issue strategies) adopt a rather unsatisfying approach to address this hypothesised relation. In fact, while at the theoretical level the distinction between activist- or leadership-dominated parties (Schumacher et al 2013; Giger, Schumacher 2019) seems convincing to assess the organizational impacts on policy positions' change, the ways in which this relation has been measured empirically is problematic. All these studies resort to a couple of answers provided by party scholars in an expert survey carried out in 1989 by Laver and Hunt. Without questioning expert survey as a methodological tool, a diachronic analysis covering several decades which is based on a constant value of the organizational variables cannot be considered revealing of the organizational impact on policy positions, issue strategies etc. Even if parties, like any other organization, tend to be conservative it does not mean that they never modify significantly their organizational profile, over time. Moreover, party organizational dimensions that may have an impact on policy preferences are numerous and their different combinations can bring to unexpected results, both within and across countries. All in all, the organizational foundations of these very elegant researches need to be questioned: on the contrary, other crucial aspects of their designs – such as the classification of mainstream parties and challenger parties depending on their past continuity in government or opposition (Van Heck 2018); or concepts like horizontal and vertical integration (Giger, Schumacher 2019) – can be fruitfully exploited to improve the quality of a more organizational-oriented analysis.

## 3. Research question and method

### 3.1. Case selection and research hypotheses

This study focuses on the Italian case from 2013 to 2018. In comparative party research, the Italian case has traditionally been depicted as an outlier. In recent years, the high level of party mortality, the dealignment between parties and voters and the related volatility of voting behaviour have contributed to further increase the complexity of the Italian party system (Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2014). At party level, most of the parties born after the collapse of the so called First Republic, but even many of those born in the new Millennium have not been able to consolidate or expand their organizations, nor their electorate. At electoral level, the 2013 national elections have been defined as an 'earthquake' (Chiaramonte and De Sio 2014), as they have marked the end of the bipolar dynamic of the First Republic. Five years later, in 2018, despite changes in the electoral law[3], the national election results confirmed the progressive decline of the bipolar mechanic of the party system.

The empirical analysis includes parties that obtained parliamentary representation in the 2013 and 2018 national elections: Lega Nord (LN)[4], Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), Popolo della Libertà-Forza Italia (FI), Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), Partito Democratico (PD), Sinistra Ecologia Libertà-Movimento Democratico e Progressista (MDP).

Our analytical framework relies on two sets of variables. The first set consists of variables pertaining to elements of change in party organization and party policy positioning. The second group of variables consists of party characteristics (party family[5], party age[6]) that can be used for clas-

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[3]    In 2017 a new electoral law was introduced. It is informally known as Rosatellum, after Ettore Rosato, the Democratic leader in the Chamber of Deputies who first proposed it). It is a mixed system, with 37% of the seats being allocated in first past the post single-member constituencies and 63% in multi-member constituencies with proportional representation.

[4]    The party changed its name into 'Lega' in 2017. For simplicity, we use its original denomination throughout the paper.

[5]    We consider the following party families: Christian Democrats/Conservatives; Social Democrats; Liberals; Greens; Left Socialists; Right-wing (populists); Far right (extreme right); Regionalist; Not applicable.

[6]    We classify party age according to parties' foundation year.

sification. We consider as dependent variables – the main objects of our empirical investigation whose variation is *per se* of interest for our analysis – those related to organizational change and policy positioning. Those in the other group – albeit short of qualifying as fully fledged independent variables, owing to the still undeveloped state of the theory – will serve the purpose of directing our analysis across parties, with the aim of identifying patterns and regularities.

We assume that parallel changes occur between party organization and policy positions. Thus, according to the hypothesis of the 'contagion effect' of populism, we expect to observe adaptive tendencies towards internally disintermediated organizational profiles as well as increasing emphasis on the cultural/ethical issues; two more crucial factors, namely party age and party family, are also deemed relevant in explaining party change.

Our study mixes different sources of original data. The data collected through the Political Party Database Project, primarily based on the analysis of parties' official story, will enable us to measure the level of Italian parties' internal disintermediation, in 2013 and 2018. The analysis of parties' policy positioning will be conducted by resorting to different datasets. For the 2013 general elections, besides the customary survey of secondary sources in the literature (Di Virgilio et al. 2015; Giannetti, Pedrazzani and Pinto 2017), we codified party manifestos, party official websites and party leaders' press releases, by focusing on two dimensions of the political competition: the economic left-right divide (i.e., 'state intervention' vs 'free market') and the 'Ethical-Cultural' dimension ('progressivism' vs 'conservatism'). In line with a consolidated literature (Green-Pedersen 2007; Kriesi 2007; Kriesi et al. 2006), we considered 7 policy fields (Immigration, European Union, Privacy and Security, Values and Rights; and Economic Policy, Welfare, Public Services), for a total of 27 policy statements (14 related to the Cultural-Ethical Dimension, 13 to the Left-Right Dimension). The same approach has been adopted for the analysis of the 2018 general elections, based on the results generated by the NavigatoreElettorale.it, a Voting Advice Application (VAA)[7] developed

[7]    We identified 32 statements including the most salient and frequently discussed issues raised by political parties and their leaders running in the Italian 2018 General Elections. The main source to code parties' positions on the 32 items were the official manifestos of the political parties, while secondary authoritative sources were

by the Observatory on Politics and Institutions (OPI)[8] and Kieskompas. These results have been integrated with the expert survey[9] 'Mapping Populism in Europe' (MAPE), fielded by the OPI in 2018 and administered to the Italian Political Science community.

## 3.2. Measurements of party organizational change

Our empirical investigation of party organizational change departs from the concept of Internal Disintermediation, which aims at pinpointing the intra-party changes proposed by the cartel party thesis, with particular attention to: 1) the regulation of party membership (we expect to find easier procedures to join the party for individuals, as 'friends' and/or 'sympathizers'); 2) the relationship between the party and eventual ancillary/collateral organizations (we do not expect to find any formal recognition by the party); 3) the number of party layers between the highest executive body and the party congress, and the composition of the party's highest executive body (we expect to find less stratified organizations, dominated by the representatives of the party in public office); and 4) the extension of the rights and functions assigned to the party leader.

We have formulated an index (IntDis) that provides a synthetic measurement of the level of internal disintermediation exhibited by parties, in 2013 and 2018. For each party, the IntDis Index is built on four clusters of variables (Membership, Collateral Organizations, Party Executive Body, Party Leader – see Appendix 1): the index varies from 0 (meaning that the party is not disintermediated at all) to 1 (the maximum of party internal disintermediation). The data used to calculate the index was collected from party statutes and appropriately coded[10].

represented by official documents on parties' websites, congress documents, party leader's declarations, press releases or social media posts.

[8] The Observatory on Politics and Institutions (OPI) is a research centre based at Department of Political Sciences of the University of Pisa. More info may be found at: http://opi.sp.unipi.it/.

[9] The survey consisted of 16 questions on organizational and policy positioning aspects of the Italian parties. It was sent to a sample of 137 members of the Italian Political Science Association, 48 of whom completed the questionnaire, with a response rate of 35 per cent.

[10] See the appendix for a detailed list of relevant variables and for a description of how the index is exactly calculated.

### 3.3. Measurements of party policy positioning

To determine party policy positioning we first focus on the systemic saliency of the two main dimensions of political competition; and on the systemic saliency of each policy field analysed, in 2013 and 2018. Then we move onto party level, to assess the saliency of each policy field for each of the 6 parties in our sample. We will use a six-point scale (1. totally agree; 2. agree; 3. neither agree nor disagree; 4. disagree; 5. totally disagree; 6. no opinion) across the 27 issues covered by our study in both 2013 and 2018. Answers scoring 1, 2, 4 and 5 will be considered as indicative of issue saliency. The same approach (at systemic and at party level) will be adopted to investigate patterns of convergence in political competition as well as in parties' positioning. We calculate patterns of convergence through a party issue agreement scale: we maintain that parties tend to converge when more than a half of all parties show a similar and/or identical policy position on a single issue. To this end, we will also include answers scoring 3 on our scale.

### 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Patterns of organizational change

The data in Tab. 1 (see below) provides a general overview of the evolution of Italian parties' organizational patterns: whilst the mean values of the IntDis Index are very similar in both the 2013 and 2018 general elections, the overall level of internal intermediation is rather high, being in both years significantly above the .5 threshold. Contrary to what we had expected, there is a slight decline of the index (.02) between the two election years; this is due to diverging trends exhibited by the individual parties included in our analysis (last three columns of Table 2.2). The decline appears to be more significant if one considers that only two parties, PD and LN exhibit positive IntDis Index variations in the last column of the table, whereas we have negative ones for all the other parties. The most significant drops are PDL/FI's and M5S, with respective decreases from .69 to .57 and from .92 to .83. The only possible explanation is that both parties, albeit with very different histories, started as non-parties, being closer to movements with very weak (almost virtual, in the case of M5S) organisations and are progressively becoming more party-like, to the point (in PDL/FI's case) of

becoming almost intermediated. The degree of internal disintermediation displays different levels of variance across the four clusters of variables (party membership, collateral organizations, party executive body, party leadership). Italian parties are more disintermediated with respect to their presence/relevance of collateral organisations, whereas they are less disintermediated with respect to the other three variable clusters. Most notably, in 2018 a resurgence of the importance of parties' executive bodies has brought down that value. Overall, however, of the relevant 48 entries reported in Tab. 2.2, only 7 report individual parties' values for the four variable clusters that fall under .50 and thus indicate persistent intermediation. All 7 either concern the party executive or the party leadership.

| Table 2.1. Internal Disintermediation at system level (Mean Values - Max 1). | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Year | Member-ship | Collateral org. | Party Executive Body | Party Leader | IntDis Index |
| 2013 | .64 | .88 | .60 | .64 | .69 |
| 2018 | .60 | .84 | .52 | .72 | .67 |
| Source: Authors' elaboration. | | | | | |

| Table 2.2. Internal Disintermediation Index by party. | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Member-ship | | Collateral Org. | | Executive | | Leader | | IntDis Index | |
| Part-ies | 2013 | 2018 | 2013 | 2018 | 2013 | 2018 | 2013 | 2018 | 2013 | 2018 |
| PD | .68 | .68 | .72 | .72 | .80 | 1 | .20 | .40 | .60 | .70 |
| SEL/LEU | .52 | .68 | 1 | 1 | .20 | .60 | .80 | .20 | .63 | .62 |
| M5S | .68 | .52 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | .80 | .92 | .83 |
| PDL/FI | .68 | .52 | .88 | .56 | .60 | .60 | .60 | .60 | .69 | .57 |
| FdI | .68 | .68 | .88 | .88 | .60 | .60 | .80 | .60 | .74 | .69 |
| LN | .68 | .68 | .88 | .88 | .40 | .40 | .40 | .60 | .59 | .64 |
| Source: Authors' elaboration. | | | | | | | | | | |

It comes as no surprise that, concerning party membership, our data confirms the general decline of traditional forms of party membership already pointed out by the specialized literature (Fisher et al. 2014; Gauja 2015; Scarrow 2013; Scarrow and Gezgor 2010; Van Biezen et al. 2012). In particular, the majority of the Italian parties in our sample (namely PD, M5S, FdI and LN) had already adopted an 'open membership' model in 2013 and maintained it in 2018 (the only exception is SEL/LEU, which moves to an open membership model only in 2018). Indeed, all their statutes distinguish between party members, with full rights and obligations, and party sympathizers, with reduced rights and obligations. The PDL/FI makes an exception, as in 2018 it moves back to a 'close membership' model, i.e., only one formal category of party membership and no other separate level of formal affiliation. Rather unexpectedly the M5S requirements for membership have become more rigid. This is probably due to the negative impact that the online candidate selection process for the 2013 elections, which in some cases returned rather lackluster candidates, had on the image of the movement.

As already anticipated, the cluster that displays most disintermediation is ancillary/collateral organizations, although all parties but the M5S and SEL/LEU recognize at least one ancillary organization. More specifically, both in 2013 and 2018, the PD formally recognizes the Women's Organization and the Youth Organization, while LN and FdI recognize only the Youth Organization. Most parties show no variation between 2013 and 2018 in the number of formally recognized ancillary organizations. Conversely, however, the PDL/FI increases their number (from 1 to 2).

As for the relationship between the party congress and the party executive, we find, as expected, that all parties but FdI have adopted a less stratified organizational template, by maintaining only one single additional organizational layer between the party congress and the party's highest executive body. More specifically, in all cases, except FdI, most of the members of the party executive are directly elected by the party congress.

Conversely, while it is worth noting that the M5S does not have a clear executive body (Passarelli, Tronconi and Tuorto 2018), FdI and PD still have a high number of public officers in their highest executive bodies, namely the regional party leaders, the Prime Minister when she/he is member of the party, the leader of the party group in the lower house of the legisla-

ture and, only in the case of PD, also government ministers in 2018. The LN appears to be the least disintermediated party in this respect, with only the leaders of regional party as ex officio members.

Against our expectations, the extension of the rights and functions assigned to the party leader increases only in the case of the Democratic Party. For all other parties they remain stable (PDL/FI and LN) or they decrease, (SEL/LEU and FdI). As for the M5S the change can be considered rather important and in the direction of more mediation, as in 2013 the party's so-called non-statute made no mention of the party leader. Conversely, in Art. 3(c) of the now aptly named 'Statute' of 2018 not only is there an explicit mention of the party's 'Political Leader', but one of its main prerogatives gives her/him a specific role in the selection of candidates in that the "Political Leader, after hearing the Guarantor, has the right to assess the compatibility of candidacies with the values and policies of the Five Star Movement, and to possibly express negative binding opinions on the acceptance of the candidacies".

## 4.2. Patterns of policy convergence

The saliency of the two dimensions (Left-Right and Cultural-Ethical) of political competition we considered show very similar mean: whilst the mean values of the Saliency Index are very similar in both the 2013 and 2018 general elections, the overall level of saliency of both dimensions is rather high, being in both years significantly above .5. Contrary to our expectations, a slight increase of the index occurs along both dimensions between the two election years: from .79 to .83 along the Left-Right dimension, and from .80 to .82 along the Cultural-Ethical dimension. By comparing the two elections, the saliency of the issues associated with the Left-Right dimension (Public Services, Welfare, Economy) has increased more, in relative and absolute terms, than those related to the Cultural-Ethical dimension (Rights/Values, Privacy&Security, EU, Immigration), which now appears to be slightly less salient (see Graph 1).

However, the systemic saliency of the policy fields changed significantly between the two elections. In 2018 the most salient issues were, by far, Immigration (.94), Welfare (.91) and Privacy&Security (.89) policies, which instead had occupied the last three positions in the 2013 ranking. On the contrary, in 2013, the issues associated to Rights&Values, to the EU and to the Economy registered the highest scores.
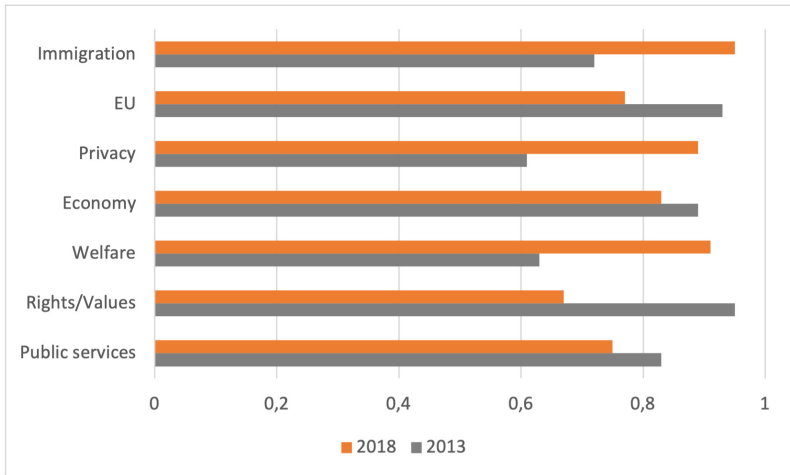
**Fig. 2.1.** The systemic saliency of each policy field (Mean Value - Max 1).

More in detail, in 2013 the impact of the Rights&Values policy field may be explained as a consequence of the debate on the extension of civil rights (to marry and to adopt) to same sex couples, which "forced" almost every party to take a stand. The reasons for the high saliency of the EU and the Economic dimensions are ~~slightly~~ more self-evident, as has already been stressed by other studies. According to Di Virgilio et al. (2015), 'the involvement of European institutions in Italian domestic affairs was one of the dominant themes of the 2013 election campaign', along with the debate on the future of the Italian Economy in the aftermath of the austerity policies launched by the government led by M. Monti, in 2012. Five years later, the concerns about the Welfare State (and, more in general, redistributive policies) have become more relevant than those related to the national Economy, whose structural conditions had improved during the 2013-2018 period: this shift is also confirmed by the results raised through the expert survey we fielded in 2018. It is worth noting that the high saliency registered in 2018 by the issues associated to Immigration and Privacy&Security policies may be considered somewhat correlated, as the main interpretative frames adopted by most of the parties during the electoral campaign tended to approach immigration through a securitarian perspective (Bobba and Roncarolo 2018).

Moving onto party level (Tab. 2.3), the saliency of the seven policy fields has significantly changed for half of the parties between the two elections. After the collapse of the PDL and the re-foundation of FI, the party led by Silvio Berlusconi shows the same values for only one (scarcely salient) policy field, Public Services, while registering changes in all other fields; also FdI, whose organizational institutionalization began in 2014, shows different values on five policy fields (Privacy&Security and Economy, being the exceptions); finally, in 2018 the M5S considered as salient as in 2013 only three policy fields (Immigration, Economy, Public Services).

| Table 2.3. The saliency of each policy field per party 2013-2018 (Mean Value - Max 1). | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Policy Fields Parties | Immigr. | EU | Privacy/ Security | Eco-nomy | Wel-fare | Rights/ Values | Public Serv. |
| PD (2013) | 1 | 1 | 0 | .83 | .80 | 1 | 1 |
| PD (2018) | 1 | 1 | 1 | .67 | .83 | .67 | 1 |
| SEL/ LEU (2013) | .67 | 1 | .66 | 1 | .8 | 1 | 1 |
| LEU (2018) | 1 | .6 | .67 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| M5S (2013) | .67 | .6 | .33 | .83 | .6 | .67 | 1 |
| M5S (2018) | .67 | .8 | .67 | .83 | .8 | .33 | 1 |
| PDL/FI (2013) | .67 | 1 | .66 | .83 | .6 | 1 | .5 |
| FI (2018) | 1 | .8 | 1 | .67 | 1 | .33 | .5 |
| FdI (2013) | .67 | 1 | 1 | 1 | .4 | 1 | 1 |
| FdI (2018) | 1 | .6 | 1 | 1 | 1 | .67 | .5 |
| LN (2013) | .67 | 1 | 1 | .83 | .6 | 1 | .5 |
| LN (2018) | 1 | .8 | 1 | .83 | .8 | 1 | .5 |
| Source: Authors' elaboration. | | | | | | | |

More in general, the saliency of the policy field Privacy&Security increased for all parties (particularly for PD and M5S) except those placed at the conservative end of the ideological spectrum along the Cultural-Ethical dimension. It is also worth noting how a polarizing policy field such as Rights&Values continued to rank high in 2018 for the two parties placed at the opposite sides of the political competition along the Cultural-Ethical dimension (LEU and LN), while decreasing for all other parties.

The next step of our analysis concerns party positioning, which we observe through the measurement of party convergence on crucial policy issues. Our analysis shows that the level of policy convergence has decreased along the Left-Right dimension (from .47 to .41) and has increased along the Cultural-Ethical dimension (from .40 to .52). Although the overall number of 'No Opinion' positions significantly increased on the Cultural-Ethical Dimension compared to 2013, the data clearly shows that Italian parties' mean positions have converged along this dimension and diverged on the Left-Right dimension. By combining these results with our previous findings on the relative saliency of each dimension, it can be argued that traditional socio-economic issues have proved to be more divisive, while the Cultural-Ethical ones have the potential to make for more centripetal/consociational forms of electoral competition.

A more detailed analysis of individual policy fields (Graph 2) shows that the main drivers of party convergence are in the Privacy&Security domain. In detail, PD, LEU and M5S have converged towards centre-right and right-wing parties' position on the need to increase public funding for Law Enforcement and, in the case of the PD, also on the legitimation of self-defence against intruders. A substantial stability prevails in all other domains, except the EU (as the free circulation of goods and capitals meets less consensus), Economy (as the need to reduce the country's public debt at the cost of cutting public services has become more divisive compared to 2013) and Rights/Moral Values (even if, in this case, the higher number of no specific opinion on women's autonomy in deciding in matters of abortion, compared to 2013, influences the overall result). However, parties' convergence on specific issues has changed ~~within most policy fields~~ generally converging towards positions that are closer to the preferences of the centre-right and right-wing parties. For example, in 2018 most parties disagreed to the statement that legal immigration has made a positive contribution to Italy's economy whereas in 2013 party

positions were more diversified; similarly, in 2018 all parties but the PD agreed on the need to lower the retirement age, an issue that was more divisive in 2013; finally, in the last general elections, all parties but LEU converged on the need to increase public funding to the armed forces.
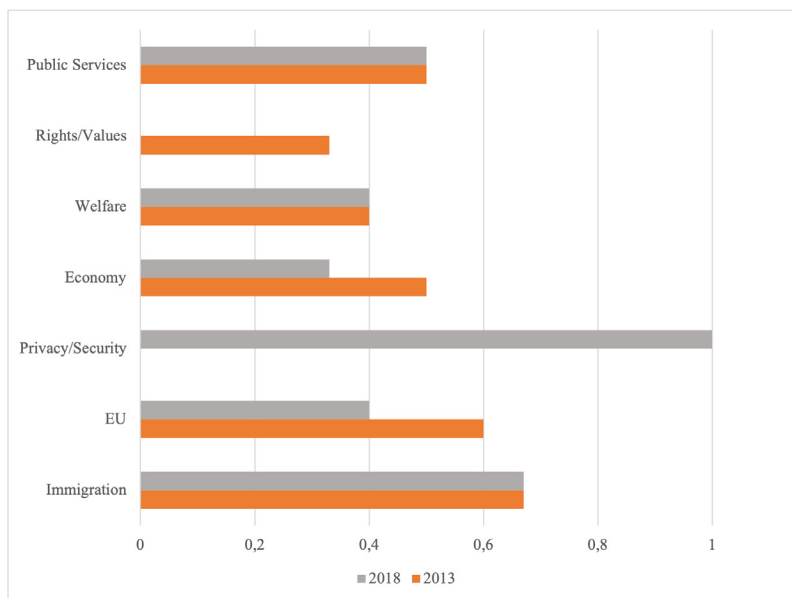


**Fig. 2.2.** Policy convergence per policy field (Mean Value - Max 1).

In 2013, the parties' positioning on the two political dimensions – 'State Intervention' vs 'Free Market' and 'Progressivism' vs 'Conservatism' – was rather coherent with the electoral coalitions running the campaign, as on the left SEL and PD converged on most issues, just like, on the opposite side of the spectrum, PDL and LN (Tab. 2.4).

| Table 2.4. Policy convergence at party level 2013 (Mean Value - Max 1.). | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cultural-Ethical | PD | SEL/LEU | M5S | PDL/FI | LN | FdI |
| PD | # | .79 | .29 | .36 | .29 | .36 |
| SEL/LEU | .79 | # | .43 | .36 | .29 | .29 |
| M5S | .29 | .43 | # | .14 | .36 | .43 |

| PDL/FI | .36 | .36 | .14 | # | .71 | .43 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| LN | .29 | .29 | .36 | .71 | # | .57 |
| FdI | .36 | .29 | .43 | .43 | .57 | # |
| Lef-right | PD | SEL/LEU | M5S | PDL/FI | LN | FdI |
| PD | # | .54 | .31 | .23 | .23 | .38 |
| SEL/LEU | .54 | # | .46 | 0 | .08 | .46 |
| M5S | .31 | .46 | # | .15 | .23 | .31 |
| PDL/FI | .23 | 0 | .15 | # | .62 | .23 |
| LN | .23 | .08 | .23 | .62 | # | .31 |
| FdI | .38 | .46 | .31 | .23 | .31 | # |
| **Source: Authors' elaboration.** | | | | | | |

The policy positions of the M5S, the anti-establishment movement that presented itself as the outsider of the electoral competition, shows an uncertain profile along the Cultural-Ethical dimension (its highest agreement scores being associated with left-wing SEL and right-wing FdI), while it tends to converge with pro State intervention positions on the other dimension (as well as FdI). On the most divisive issues M5S shares the same positions as PD and SEL in two cases (by disagreeing on the need to open the healthcare system to market competition; and by agreeing on the need to provide same sex couples with the same rights as heterosexuals to marry), and converges towards extreme-right parties like LN and FdI in two other cases, both related to the EU (with an overall negative assessment of being part of the EU and with the agreement on the need to drop the Euro as currency).

The 2018 data is more controversial (Tab. 2.5). The positions of M5S along the Cultural-Ethical Dimension have converged towards those of the most moderate parties, PD and FI (whose agreement score is, in fact, rather high = .57). On the contrary, in line with 2013, the position of M5S on the State Intervention-Free Market dimension tends to converge with that of SEL/LEU; in this respect the position of the PD, the incumbent party, looks rather isolated from all the other parties. Coherently with their coalitional strategy, the policy positions of FI, LN and FdI on this dimension are clearly convergent.

**Table 2.5. Policy convergence at party level 2018 (Mean Value - Max 1).**

| Cultu-ral-Ethical | PD | SEL/LEU | M5S | PDL/FI | LN | FdI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| PD | # | .71 | .50 | .57 | .29 | .21 |
| SEL/LEU | .71 | # | .29 | .43 | .21 | .14 |
| M5S | .50 | .29 | # | .50 | .43 | .36 |
| PDL/FI | .57 | .43 | .50 | # | .57 | .50 |
| LN | .29 | .21 | .43 | .57 | # | .79 |
| FdI | .21 | .14 | .36 | .50 | .79 | # |
| Left-right | PD | SEL/LEU | M5S | PDL/FI | LN | FdI |
| PD | # | .31 | .08 | .15 | .08 | .3 |
| SEL/LEU | .31 | # | .54 | .15 | .31 | .31 |
| M5S | .08 | .54 | # | .31 | .38 | .23 |
| PDL/FI | .15 | .15 | .31 | # | .54 | .54 |
| LN | .08 | .31 | .38 | .54 | # | .62 |
| FdI | .31 | .31 | .23 | .54 | .62 | # |

Source: Authors' elaboration.

## 4.3. Discussion and Conclusion

This study has attempted at finding empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis that party organizational and positional changes in Italy between 2013 and 2018 have been affected by a possible 'contagion effect' of populism. We expected to observe adaptive tendencies towards internally disintermediated organizational profiles as well as an increasing emphasis and policy convergence on the Cultural/Ethical dimension of political competition. We also expected these patterns to vary according to party age and party family.

Tab. 2.6 shows that, on average, political parties in Italy are highly internally disintermediated, as all of them present mean IntDis values higher than .5. An interesting tendency towards a re-intermediation is registered, since in 2013 the mean IntDIS was higher than in 2018. In this respect, among populist parties, only LN further increased its disintermediated profile, while the only non-populist party that has been still "affected" by the populist contagion is the PD, in particular because of the empowerment of the party leader. In general, however, no clear relationships emerge between IntDis and party age nor party family. At a first glance, the two parties showing the highest IntDis (M5S and FdI) values are also

among the youngest ones in our sample; while LN – which is the oldest
party analysed – presents the lowest value. However, both SEL/LeU and
FI – parties that significantly differ in terms of party age – score the same
IntDis value. This observation has implications for another relationship
considered ~~in the hypothesis~~, the one between party family and internal
disintermediation. Party family, in fact, does not seem to be a relevant de-
terminant of organizational disintermediation either, except for the M5S,
by far the most disintermediated party of the lot, not belonging to any
recognised party family. However, this appears to be too little to even im-
agine possible generalisations.

| Table 2.6. Parties' classification according to party age, party family and IntDis. | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Part**y | Founding year | Party Age (years) | Party Family | IntDis (Mean 2013-18) |
| SEL/ LEU | 2009 | 9 | New Left | .63 (-0,05) |
| PD | 2007 | 12 | Social Demo-crats | .65 (+0,1) |
| M5S | 2009 | 9 | Not Applicable | .88 (-0,09) |
| PDL/FI | 1994 | 24 | Liberal | .63 (-0,12) |
| LN | 1991 | 27 | Regionalist/ Far Right | .62 (+0,05) |
| FdI | 2014 | 4 | Far Right | .72 (-0,05) |
| **Source: Authors' elaboration.** | | | | |

As far as policy positional changes are concerned, in Tab. 2.7 we report
the combinations of parties' policy convergence along the two dimensions
of political competition considered, in 2013 and 2018. In this respect, our
data shows that party family ideological affinity is more promising for ex-
plaining convergence.

| Table 2.7. Party policy convergence (2013-2018). | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cultural-Ethical | PD | SEL/LEU | M5S | PDL/FI | LN | FdI |
| PD | # | Conv | # | # | # | # |
| SEL/LEU | Conv | # | # | # | # | # |
| M5S | Conv | Conv | # | Conv | # | Conv |
| PDL/FI | Conv | # | # | # | Conv | # |
| LN | # | # | # | Conv | # | Conv |

| FdI | # | # | # | # | Conv | # |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lef-right | PD | SEL/LEU | M5S | PDL/FI | LN | FdI |
| PD | # | Conv | # | # | # | # |
| SEL/LEU | Conv | # | Conv | # | # | # |
| M5S | # | Conv | # | # | # | # |
| PDL/FI | # | # | # | # | Conv | Conv |
| LN | # | # | # | Conv | # | Conv |
| FdI | # | Conv | # | # | Conv | # |
| **Source: Authors' elaboration.** | | | | | | |

All in all, we have total convergence on both dimensions between PD and SEL/LEU, the only two parties of the Left. Interestingly, whilst the PD does not share any convergences with non-Left parties, SEL/LEU has 3, with M5S on both dimensions and with FdI on the economic Left/Right, probably in this case because of FdI's social-right heritage. On the right there are 5 convergences out of 6, the exception being for the PDL/FI-FdI combination on the Cultural-Ethical dimension. Finally, the M5S confirms its nature as an ideological maverick by exhibiting 5 convergences out of a possible 10 with the other parties (4 on the Cultural-Ethical dimension and 1 on the economic Left/Right one). If anything, M5S appears to be leaning more towards the Left, not only because of the total convergence it exhibits with SEL/LEU (including the only convergence with any party on the Left/Right dimension) but also because of the total lack of convergence with LN. This is extremely interesting and even ironic, considering that both these parties have been M5S' partners in two subsequent governmental coalitions.

Summing up, the populist "virus" had already affected Italian parties' organizational profiles before the 2013 national elections, irrespective of party age and family; on the contrary, ideological affiliation remains a fundamental factor in shaping party policy orientations since the saliency of the issues associated with the Left-Right dimension has increased more than those related to the Cultural-Ethical dimension – even if the systemic saliency of the policy fields changed significantly between the two elections. Admittedly, the data at the basis of this tentative conclusion is very limited and needs to be confirmed after a more extensive comparative study.