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Love, convenience, or respectability? Understanding the alliances of the Five Star Movement in the European Parliament

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Abstract

The Five Star Movement (M5S) formed the Eurosceptic EFDD Group when it first elected its members in the European Parliament (EP) in 2014. Two and a half years later, the M5S sought, without success, to leave the Eurosceptics and join the Liberal group. This attempted change of transnational affiliation is puzzling: why has the M5S tried to leave the Eurosceptic group to ally with the most Europhile group in the EP? How could this U-turn be explained? Relying on several different data – the EUANDI party dataset, official EP data, and original interviews with members of the EP – this article provides a systematic answer to these questions. We test three general hypotheses on group membership in the EP, using the M5S as a case-study. We show that neither policy congruence nor the pursuit of office fully explain the M5S's observed or attempted alliances. We suggest, instead, that 'domestic politics' is the key driver of the M5S's behaviour in the EP. Political group membership is functional to the Movement's strategic objectives at home. This article shows that national-level explanations of transnational affiliation need to be given more consideration, and highlights the 'second order' importance of the EU arena with respect to 'first order' national strategic objectives.

Key words

European Union, Italy, multi-level governance, political parties.

Introduction

In January 2017, when the leader of the Five Star Movement (hereafter: M5S) Beppe Grillo attempted to switch political group in the European Parliament (EP), moving his contingent of 17 deputies from the Eurosceptic Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group to the very pro-European Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe (ALDE), several members and observers of the M5S raised their eyebrows. Why would one of the most Eurosceptic parties in the Italian party system seek to enter one of the most pro-EU political groups? What was the rationale behind such a surprising decision?

The academic attention for the origins, electoral success and ideology of the M5S has steadily grown (i.e. Conti and Memoli 2015; Manucci and Amsler, 2017; Passarelli and Tuorto 2016). The bulk of research has focused on domestic politics, with only scattered attention paid to its EU activities. The notable exception has been its Euroscepticism, with empirical work on its discourse and voting behaviour in the EP (Corbetta and Vignati 2014; Franzosi et al. 2015). This article shifts the focus on the M5S in Europe, analysing the contentious issues of its transnational affiliation. It seeks to understand why Grillo's Movement entered an alliance with Nigel Farage's United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in 2014, and attempted (without success) to break it in early 2017.

This work is a case-study of political group affiliation in the EP. Theoretical arguments on the motives for political parties to choose their 'home' in the EU are applied to the case of the M5S. Building on the literature on political group formation in the EP (Benoit and McElroy 2010; Bressanelli 2012; McDonnell and Werner 2017), national parties are expected to join a political group for ideological/policy compatibility; for the office gains that membership in a (large) group brings in the EP; or to pursue their vote or office-seeking objectives at the national level. In this sense, this article not only aims to provide a better understanding of the behaviour of the M5S in the EU, but also

contributes to research on the politics of group affiliation in the EP – placing its analytical focus on the motivations of national parties in their choice of transnational allies.

The theoretical arguments are assessed triangulating different data: from the EUANDI data on the position of political parties in Europe to official data of the EP; from original interviews with members of the EP (MEPs) to declarations to the press or in Beppe Grillo's blog. In a nutshell, what this article argues is that neither policy nor office considerations at the EU-level can fully explain the transnational affiliations (observed and attempted) of the M5S in the EP. The real drivers of its choices were strategic considerations at the domestic level. In other words, for the M5S group membership was functional to the pursuit of more prominent domestic goals. Be it the expansion of its electoral support with more Eurosceptic voters in 2014, be it its governing ambitions after the failed constitutional referendum of December 2016, the 'second-order' EU-related choices of the Movement have been instrumental to its changing, 'first-order' domestic goals.

This paper proceeds as follows. After presenting some background information on the affiliations of the M5S in the EP (Section 2), three theoretical arguments on group membership are advanced (Section 3). Their empirical assessment is presented in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 discusses the broader implications of the findings, and what they mean both for the nature of the M5S and for transnational affiliation in the EP.

Choosing partners in the European Parliament

In June 2014, the *grillini* – so are called the supporters of Grillo's M5S – were asked to cast their online vote via Grillo's blog to decide which political group should be joined by the 17, newly-elected M5S MEPs. Three options were given: the EFD group, comprising right-wing, Eurosceptic parties including, most prominently, the UKIP; the European Conservatives and Reformists group, whose

largest national delegation are the British Tories; and the non-attached. For the M5S statute, its MEPs shall refrain from joining any political group, unless there is “the possibility of setting up, in the European Parliament, a political group with members from other European countries who share M5S’ fundamental values”. Should this occur, Beppe Grillo, in his capacity as political leader, shall submit a proposal to M5S registered members for online ratification.

Grillo’s preferred option was the EFD group. In a blog post published on the same day of the poll, the M5S leader stressed that, within the EFD, M5S MEPs would enjoy freedom of votes. Furthermore, he maintained that:

[The EFD] has represented in the previous legislature the most strenuous opposition to a federalism based on austerity and to the concentration of power in the hands of unelected bureaucrats in Brussels. The EFD is against the euro which has caused poverty and unemployment. (Grillo 2014b)

In the same piece, Grillo highlighted how UKIP, the biggest party in the EFD group, supported direct democracy and stood against ethnic discrimination, big banks, multinational corporations and excessive bureaucracy. Nonetheless, these arguments failed to persuade numerous M5S supporters, who blamed the decision to join a political group comprising national parties renowned for their nationalistic and anti-migration stance. Moreover, the M5S leadership was reproached for excluding from the options given in the online poll the Greens/EFA group (G/EFA), whose political platform was perceived as close to the M5S’ stance on environmental issues. Grillo addressed this criticism by pointing that it was the G/EFA group to cross out, in the first place, the possibility that the M5S delegation might join its ranks. However, an analysis of news accounts suggests that the G/EFA group was officially approached by the M5S leadership only after talks started with UKIP. On May 28, three days after EP elections, Grillo flew to Brussels to meet with Farage. Two days later, the co-chair of

the European Green Party - the extra parliamentary equivalent of the G/EFA group - declared to the Italian press that doors were still open for talks with the M5S.¹ Nevertheless, the official request to the Greens was sent on June 3 only. The following day, the G/EFA Secretary general replied:

According to our information, the agreement between the Five Star Movement and Nigel Farage is now in its final phase. It is precisely for this reason that we have doubts on whether its request for dialogue is genuine or simply a front for a decision which has already been taken. [...] Our group will not be able to meet you until your relationship with Farage's group is clarified. (quoted in Grillo 2014d)

The above provides evidence to claim that, independently from the G/EFA's refusal, the political marriage with UKIP was Grillo's preferred choice. This option obtained eventually most of the votes in the online poll. The M5S joined the UKIP and other small parties (see Table 1), and the EFD was lately renamed Europe for Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD).

Table 1 about here

In January 2017, the *grillini* were called back to the online polls. This time, half-way through the legislature, their leader was asking them to ratify the decision to leave the EFDD for joining the ALDE group. The other two voting options were either remaining in the EFDD group or joining the non-attached members. The U-turn was announced on the very same day of the vote via the usual blog post, and came as a surprise not only to M5S supporters but to some of the MEPs themselves: "As a M5S MEP, I was not aware [of this decision], just like you activists. I have found out about this news this morning, with astonishment and concern" (Zanni 2017).² Interestingly, it was not long before that Guy Verhofstadt, the ALDE group leader, was defined as "unpresentable" and depicted as "the

¹ Available at: <<http://greenitalia.org/verdi-ue-frassoni-nessuna-chiusura-a-m5s-ma-no-a-chi-sta-con-farage-o-le-pen/>> [Accessed on 7 November 2017].

² We translated into English all excerpts from interviews and other sources.

politician who, within the EP, best embodies the idea of a centralised European super-state” (M5S Europa 2015). The snap online vote raised criticism both among the M5S membership and within the party in public office. Grillo answered them back maintaining that “refusing to join a political group means [...] occupying a seat of power with tied hands: in other words, it means impossibility to work” (Grillo 2017)

At the end, Grillo’s proposal to join the ALDE group won the approval of 78.5% of the voters. Yet, the union between the M5S and the ALDE group eventually failed to materialize due to the latter’s veto. Nonetheless, the question arises of what the rationale behind these antithetical choices is. In other words, why joining a Eurosceptic group in the first place, and opting to leave it in favour of the most Europhile EP group two years and a half later? As Grillo put it, joining the EFDD was “nothing but a marriage of convenience for our mutual advantage” (Grillo 2014a). The dowry of this marriage should consist of EP offices and resources. The divorce was then officially asked on the basis that “recent European events, notably Brexit, ask us [...] to rethink the nature of the EFDD group” (ibid.). But are these justifications corroborated by evidence? We will address this question after reviewing the main scholarly hypotheses put forward to explain transnational affiliation in the EP.

Explaining group choice in the European Parliament

The provisions contained in the EP Rules of Procedures (RoP) on the formation of the political groups are quite loose. Art. 32 only states that “members may form themselves according to their political affinities”. However, the criterion of political affinities is not scrutinized by the EP, which assumes that members forming a group share *by definition* a common platform. Only when political affinities are explicitly denied, the EP may call for the dissolution of a group (cf. Settembri 2004).

The RoP are, instead, much more specific on the numbers needed to form a group. At the beginning of the 2014 term, a political group had to include at least 25 members elected in a quarter of the member states (i.e. seven countries). Therefore, while the RoP provide specific numerical indications, they leave a significant margin of manoeuvre regarding the political affinities between members. Moving beyond the (vague) legal provisions, scholars have therefore suggested three main explanations for group choice in the EP.

A first explanation is that ideological or policy affinities matter, and national parties choose the political group that best matches their ideological or policy position. Traditionally, this argument has been based on the commonality of the cleavages in the (West) European party systems, which ‘produced’ distinct and rather cohesive party families (Mudde and Mair 1998). From this perspective, parties get together because they share common socio-political bases and programmatic identities. To put it metaphorically, ‘birds of a feather flock together’, and enter durable marriages.

More recently, several studies have supported the enduring validity of this explanation. For instance, analysing national election manifestos, Klingemann et al. conclude that political groups “have a strong basis in the old party families” (2006, 28). Hix et al., looking at voting behaviour in the EP, argue: “politics in the European Parliament [...] is driven by the traditional party families” (2007, 181). In a study modelling transnational group affiliation, Benoit and McElroy (2010) test whether policy congruence is the main predictor of party group ‘choice’. They find substantial evidence that this is indeed the case, with the national parties seeking membership in the group closer to their own policy position on the most salient policy dimensions. Finally, studying the formation of the groups at the start of the 2009-14 legislature, Bressanelli (2012) finds that policy or ideological affinity is the most important factor predicting transnational affiliation.

For other observers, instead, the choice of a political group is mostly guided by the pursuit of office goals in the EP. For instance, the British Conservative Party established an alliance with the EPP Group (which was then renamed EPP-ED) even if they deeply disagreed over the EU (Maurer et al.

2008). The regulatory framework in the EP provides strong incentives to form loosely bound political groups. Both the transnational groups and the national parties face strong self-interested incentives to, respectively, include more members and seek membership in the existing groups. Several dispositions in the RoP reward the larger groups more. Votes in the Conference of Presidents – the key executive organ of the EP – are weighted by the number of MEPs in each group. Therefore, the larger a group is, the bigger its ‘voting power’. While the non-attached members are invited, they do not have voting rights. Furthermore, the D’Hondt method – which, albeit proportional, brings better rewards to larger parties – is normally used when allocating office positions like committee chairmanships. The point-system method used to allocate reports at the committee stage also favours the larger groups more. Finally, the RoP (art. 162.3 and 162.4) make clear that the order and the time allocated to speakers in the plenary debates also depends on the size of the groups. Alliances between national parties where opportunistic motives dominate are metaphorically labelled “marriages of convenience” (Maurer et al. 2008).

A third explanation for political group membership looks, instead, at the importance of vote- and office-seeking motivations *at the national level*. While the two arguments presented above place their analytical focus on policy- and office-seeking motivations *at the EU-level*, other research explores the impact that the EU level choices of political parties have on the national arena. Studying four radical right parties, McDonnell and Werner (2017) argue that these parties have compelling reasons to focus on their national electorates when making their EU-level alliances. When mainstream parties create a *cordon sanitaire* and refuse *a priori* cooperation with radical parties, transnational alliances can help the latter to gain ‘respectability’. For instance, both in the case of the Finns Party and the Danish People’s Party, their choice to ally with the European Conservatives and Reformists Group was motivated by their desire to gain legitimacy to widen their electoral appeal and/or strengthen their coalition potential with future partners in the national government. This two-level game is most likely to be played by parties in the ‘shadow’ of a general election.

While radical-right parties provide a particularly good illustration of this argument, there is no reason to restrict a ‘domestic politics’ explanation to this sub-set of parties. For instance, the Italian party *Forza Italia* had long flirted with the EPP Group, before becoming eventually a member, in order to be seen as a respectable governing party (cf. Jansen 2006). Such alliances, where one of the partners seeks an ‘upgrade’ of its status, have been labelled “marriages of respectability” (McDonnell and Werner 2017).

Moreover, ‘respectability’ to pursue office and vote-seeking objectives at home is only one specific instance of a ‘domestic politics’ explanation. In other cases, the domestic goals of the party can be advanced by the ‘publicity’ it gains through transnational affiliation. The UKIP, for instance, has been very effective to use the EP and its group as a springboard to broaden its electoral appeal in the UK (Whitaker and Lynch 2014).

The political groups also have their own incentives to admit or reject an application for membership. Policy- and office-seeking explanations apply to them as well. On the one hand, they may be strict on the ideological compatibility of the new members, making sure that only those parties strictly belonging to the ‘party family’ join – not to undermine their cohesion and capacity to pass legislation. On the other, they have strong incentives not to be overtly demanding on the ideological compatibility of the new members. Financial resources are distributed among the political groups considering both their size (the number of MEPs) and their territorial heterogeneity (the number of member countries). The bigger a group and the more countries are represented in it, the more resources it is endowed with (Corbett et al. 2016). Furthermore, the quota of financial resources the EU extra-parliamentary parties are allocated largely depends on the number of seats of their associated groups in the EP.³ Excluding large national parties from membership entails a direct financial cost for EU-level political parties. Finally, some apical positions in the EP hierarchy are only allocated to the largest, or the pivotal, political groups. While the focus of this article is on the rationale behind the M5S choice to join, or

³ Regulation (EC) no. 2004/2003 of 4 November 2003 (consolidated version).

consider joining, different political groups, it is important to underline that the ‘success’ of the former crucially depends on the willingness of the latter to accept its membership.

In conclusion, there are three main arguments to explain the choice by a national party of a particular transnational group in the EP. Policy congruence accounts for most of the cases, but not all marriages are marriages of ‘love’. Some others are functional to the pursuit of offices in the EP; still others are instrumental to the pursuit of domestic goals. The next section assesses which argument(s) best explains the M5S’s transnational affiliation, and attempts to change it.

Empirical Analysis

Policy congruence

To assess whether policy affinity was the key driver of the choice of the M5S to ally with the UKIP, and later seek to abandon it for the ALDE group, we rely on the EUANDI data (Garzia *et al.* 2017). The EUANDI project created a Voting Advice Application through which voters could match their policy preferences with political parties competing for seats in the 2014 EP elections in the 28 EU member countries. Parties were asked to self-place themselves with respect to 30 salient policy issues grouped in nine policy domains. The party self-placement was double checked by country experts, who coded the position of the parties in case of no-answer or undocumented position, but also had the final word on the coding (i.e. when the party self-placement did not appear convincing to the experts when compared with sources like the EU election manifesto or the party election platform).

This iterative method of party positioning is what distinguishes the EUANDI data from other established data. As Garzia *et al.* note, none of the established techniques to place parties in a policy/ideological space has evolved into a “gold standard” (2017, 334-5). The coding of national and Euro-manifestos, the survey of experts on political parties, the scaling of roll-call votes all have their strengths and weaknesses. Indeed, as one prominent scholar suggested, the weaknesses of the existing methodologies may be overcome “triangulating” different data (Marks 2007). Here lies, instead, the strength of the EUANDI data, which in its design combines the party self-placement and the coding of experts, with the latter also based on a plurality of sources.

Substantively, the EUANDI project was specifically created to study party competition in the 28 member states of the EU ahead of the 2014 elections, including all the parties which were expected to win seats in the EP. This means that even small parties from small member states are part of the dataset, which includes 96 percent of the MEPs (720/751). For both methodological and substantive reasons, the EUANDI data is therefore particularly useful to study the congruence of the M5S in the EFDD group and alternative options.

To compare the position of the parties in the policy space, we used principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation to extract the common underlying dimensions to the 28 policy issues which were coded by the EUANDI team for all EU member states. Each answer to the survey question has values ranging from -2 to 2.⁴ ‘No opinions’ have been merged with neutral answers, and both have been coded as zeros (cf. Borz and Rose 2010).

Following established conventions, we retained all factors with eigenvalue bigger than, or equal to one (Kim and Mueller 1978). On substantive ground, we used in the analysis the first four returned factors, which we interpret as EU Integration, economic left-right, immigration and security, and socio-liberal left-right.⁵ The validity of the former two scales – on EU integration and economic left-right – has been assessed by comparing them with the established measures in the Chapel Hill expert survey (Polk et al. 2017). The correlation between the EU integration scales is strong ($r=0.78$; $p<0.001$), and that between the economic left-right scales is also robust ($r=0.72$; $p<0.001$). These results reassure on the validity of the scales generated from the EUANDI party dataset for use in our analysis.

To assess the policy fit of the M5S with its current political group, and the other options considered by its leadership, we looked at the policy differences among them (Table 2). Based on the EUANDI data, the M5S has a moderately Eurosceptic position, a left-wing political agenda in economic policy and socio-liberal values, but a tougher approach on immigration and security matters. The EUANDI data present a conventional picture of the positions of the political groups, calculated as the (weighted) average of the position of the member parties. Mainstream and fringe political groups are split on the issue of EU integration, while the ALDE group is much closer to the more right-wing

⁴ The original values ranged from -1 to 1.

⁵ The table in the Appendix shows the loadings of the 28 policy items on the four factors, which explain together 58 percent of the variance. Policy items 1, 7, 9, 10, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 26 and 28 in the EUANDI dataset have been reversed to facilitate the interpretation of results.

EPP on economic policies, and to the more left-wing groups (the S&D and the G/EFA) on socio-liberal issues.

In this context, it is hard to say what the best fit for the M5S is. Its position is closer to that of the ECR on EU integration and immigration and security; to the G/EFA on economic left-right, and to the GUE/NGL on socio-liberal issues. On average, the group closer to the M5S on the four dimensions is the GUE/NGL, but the G/EFA is also close. What is, instead, clear is that the M5S poorly fits with its current political group. The EFDD is, together with the EPP, the group with which the M5S has the least in common in terms of policy. Differences are particularly stark on the economic left-right dimension, but the hard-Eurosceptic position of the EFDD group is also quite different from the M5S critical, but more moderate position on the EU.

Table 2 about here

Figure 1 displays the policy positions of the member parties of the ALDE, the G/EFA, and the EFDD group⁶ on the bi-dimensional space defined by two most important policy dimensions in the EP: economic left-right and EU integration (Hix and Lord 1997). Clearly, the M5S and UKIP have two different policy platforms, not only on the left-right dimension, but also on EU integration. This was confirmed during our face-to-face meetings with the UKIP and M5S MEPs.⁷ Consulted on the matter, a UKIP MEP expressed surprise at the fact that the M5S was gaining popularity in Italy as a Eurosceptic party despite exhibiting very little Euroscepticism inside the EP. This stance was confirmed by a EFDD colleague from the M5S, who maintained that:

Over time, different views have emerged between UKIP and us. [...] We have a different approach towards the EU as well. Yes, we do belong to the same Eurosceptic group, but, as

⁶ The EUANDI data allow us to capture the position of all the member parties of the EFDD group, except for the Czech Free Citizens Party (1 MEP) and, obviously, the other independent member from Latvia.

⁷ Semi-structured interviews were conducted in May 2016 in the European Parliament in Brussels. One of the A. – interviewed 20 MEPs from the major British and Italian parties. The names of the interviewees are kept confidential by agreement (full transcript and recording stored by the A.).

you know, they are for withdrawing from the EU and ending the process of European integration tout court. Our Euroscepticism is instead to interpret as a claim to build a different Europe [...] not to destroy it.

(Interview, M5S MEP, 26 May 2016)

Focusing on the two other political groups with which the M5S considered an alliance in EP8, members of the ALDE group have unsurprisingly very different positions on economic policies, but its parties share a pro-EU platform.⁸ On the other hand, the G/EFA members have a more varied position on integration, with some critical positions, and are located on the left of the policy spectrum. On policy-grounds, membership in the G/EFA would appear to be a better fit for the M5S.

Figure 1 about here

The EUANDI data provide a clear picture: it is not policy the glue that made the M5S and the UKIP stick together. To investigate this aspect further, we analyse the voting behaviour of the M5S in the first two years of EP8. We only focus on votes under the ordinary legislative procedure which, after the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, became the standard law-making procedure. We further restrict our sample by studying final votes which, since 2009, must all be by roll-call. In this way, we deal with the bias in the study of roll-call votes in the EP – namely, that they may be called for strategic reasons, and are therefore unrepresentative of the full population of votes (see Mühlböck and Yordanova 2015). Under these restrictions, we analyse 87 votes from July 2014 to July 2016.⁹

We look at the voting agreement of the M5S with the political groups. We consider a case of agreement when a majority of members of the M5S and most members of a political group voted in

⁸ In the ALDE, there are only two member parties placed in the lower side of the integration spectrum: the Swedish Centre Party is a pro-EU party, but opposes the monetary union and the Euro as a currency for Sweden; the Slovak party Freedom and Solidarity is, instead, a truly Eurosceptic party. Indeed, in October 2014 already it left the ALDE group to join the ECR.

⁹ We further excluded repeals of obsolete acts and votes on Stabilisation and Association Agreements

the same way (i.e. they either voted in favour, against, or abstained). We classified our votes in four broad policy categories: ‘EU Integration’, which includes votes on institutional matters and new programmes or funds; ‘Single Market’, with votes on the regulation of the single market; ‘Custom Union’ for trade with non-EU countries, and ‘Home Affairs and Migration’, for legislation on rights and migration.

Once again, the poor fit with the EFDD is evident. Table 3 shows that the overall agreement between the M5S and the EFDD is the lowest of all political groups: in less than half of the legislative votes the M5S and the UKIP voted in the same way. The voting agreement of the M5S is never too high with any of the groups, but it is the highest, at almost 70 percent, with the GUE/NGL. Not surprisingly, when the voting agreement is disaggregated per policy area, the data show that the M5S and the UKIP have a better working relationship on EU Integration issues (voting together about 90 percent of the times), but tend to vote very differently on the regulation of the single market, the custom union and home affairs and migration. In the latter areas, voting agreement scores are higher with the ALDE, the GUE/NGL and, especially, the G/EFA.

Table 3 about here

Office gains

While the decision of the M5S to join the EFDD is not explained by policy congruence, it could pay off in terms of office gains. Has the formation of the EFDD – where the M5S is the second delegation in terms of size – allowed Grillo’s Movement to obtain positions of power and influence in EP8? To shed light on these issues, we have examined the ‘mega-seats’ and legislative reports that the M5S MEPs have partaken since their entry in the EP in July 2014. Below, we first discuss the Movement’s gains and losses in terms of leadership positions in committees. We then focus on the number of legislative reports obtained by its MEPs during the first half-term of EP8.

Mega-seats (Carroll et al. 2006) are the key offices in a legislative assembly. In the context of the EP, the most coveted offices consist of the presidency and vice-presidency of the EP; chair and vice-chair

of parliamentary committees; group leadership and group coordination on committees (see Benedetto 2015, who also includes quaestors). Seeking these key positions once elected is in line with the idea that political parties pursue office goals in addition to vote and policy ones (Strøm 1990). As a matter of fact, “parties neither cease to exist or cease to compete for office when the general election is over” (Carroll et al. 2006, 154). Beppe Grillo seemed aware of this when he dismissed the idea of joining the non-attached members, despite this being presented as the ideal option in the M5S’s statute. As known, the legislative rules in the EP are such that non-attached members remain excluded from the contest for key EP positions, and are allotted very little speaking time. Allegedly, therefore, a marriage between the M5S and UKIP was nothing but “a tactical move” through which “elect Parliament’s Vice-Presidents and committee chairs who can then influence choices” (Di Maio MP, quoted in ANSA 2014). However, if office-goals supposedly drove its group membership, the question remains as to why the Movement joined the EFDD rather than other groups, notably the G/EFA group, larger than the EFDD and closer to the M5S in ideological terms. We show that the M5S has indeed lost in terms of mega-seats by joining the EFDD.

As Carroll et al. point out, the allocation of mega-seats is determined by both formal and informal rules (2006, 156). This is the case in the EP as well, where “the EP’s internal rules make national parties’ group affiliation the defining factor in the distribution of committee seats” (Maurer et al. 2008, 248). More specifically, according to the D’Hondt method, parliamentary power is proportionally distributed in the EP. Yet, the D’Hondt formula is not mentioned in the EP rules of procedure, but it is used following a ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ between the political groups. This agreement was broken at the start of EP8. The M5S bid for four vice-chairs (AGRI, BUDG, ITRE, PECH), for the chair of PETI and for one of the vice-presidencies of the EP. Yet these positions ended up being distributed among S&D, EPP and ALDE members. Most notably, the failure in attaining the chair of PETI, which received considerable resonance on M5S’ web platforms, was provoked by the anti-EFDD coalition between ALDE, EPP and S&D – defined by Grillo as “the Triple” (Grillo 2014c)

– during the ballot for the election of the bureau on the very first session of the PETI committee. The trend was partially reversed at the start of the second half-term, when the M5S secured the vice-chair of JURI, although it did not belong to the EFDD according to the D’Hondt distribution of posts. More systematic insight is provided by comparing the share of mega-seats obtained by the EFDD with that of the other EP groups. In doing this comparison, we consider only those mega-seats assigned via inter-group competition. Hence, group leadership and coordination on committees, whose allocation is determined by intra-group dynamics, are not pertinent here. Mega-seats have been weighted using Votewatch’s weights for assessing MEPs’ influence in the EP (VoteWatch 2016, see Appendix for details). We have then calculated each group’s *mega-seats ratio*, defined as the ratio of mega-seats score and the number of group members.

Tables 4 displays each group’s mega-seats score and ratio during, respectively, the first and second half-term of EP8. Despite a slight improvement during the second term – the 5 points consist of the JURI vice-chair – EFDD’s performance in terms of mega-seats is poor, and Grillo’s office-based explanations behind the choice to join the EFDD are not corroborated by evidence.¹⁰

Table 4 about here

In addition to leadership positions, we also considered the legislative reports obtained by the EFDD. As noted by Yoshinaka, McElroy and Bowler (2010), rapporteurs are indeed very influential legislators in the EP, particularly when they are responsible for legislation negotiated under the ordinary legislative procedure. In order to gauge the different power MEPs hold, in terms of reports, within different groups, we constructed a *report ratio* to compare the success of the EFDD with that

¹⁰ To rule out unfulfilled office expectations as a driver for the M5S’ attempts at changing political group, we compared the EFDD’s mega-seat ratio for EP8-1 against the EFD’s mega-seat ratio for EP7-2. Whilst scoring slightly better in absolute terms (0.29 in EP7-2), the EFD is placed last in the ranking in both cases. Furthermore, its mega-seat ratio is less than half that of the group placed second to last, i.e. GUE/NGL. For details, see the online supplement tables.

of the other political groups. The ratio is calculated by dividing the number of codecision (COD) reports¹¹ obtained by a group by the number of members within that group.

Table 5 about here

Table 5 reveals that the EFDD scores last in terms of reports ratio. Once more, the choice of the EFDD does not seem to pay off as much as other transnational affiliations. True, transnational party membership – and being a large delegation in a political group (Hausemer 2006) – is not the only factor to explain the allocation of reports. Personal characteristics of the rapporteur like, for instance, her seniority in the EP and expertise in the policy field, also matter (Daniel 2013; Yordanova 2011). In our case, the latter may explain why the M5S – despite being only the second largest delegation in the EFDD (see Table 1) – obtained all the codecision reports that were allocated to this group. Yet, particularly in budgetary and – significantly for our purposes – codecision reports, “the party identification of an MEP is crucial for his chances to draft reports” (Hurka and Kaeding 2012, 525; Hurka et al. 2015, 1238). Thus, for instance, the French *Mouvement Démocrate* – a member of the ALDE with only 4 MEPs – has obtained the same number of codecision reports as the M5S. Clearly, membership of the EFDD penalises those members, and parties, which aim to obtain legislative reports.

The above suggests that neither policy congruence nor office gains fully explain the rationale behind the M5S’ group membership in the EP. Thus, the next section explores the argument that domestic considerations were the main driver for the M5S and its leader when choosing which EP group to join.

Domestic politics

¹¹ In line with Yordanova (2011, 109), we considered substantive reports only, excluding codifications and adaptations to new procedures (e.g. comitology). We also excluded shadow reports because they are not allocated via inter-group competition.

Both hypotheses on policy congruence and office benefits focus on activity at the EU level. However, parties may also use transnational membership to pursue domestic goals. In other words, membership in a political group could be functional to other, more important objectives that the party seeks to fulfil at home. If neither policy congruence nor office advantages fully account for the choices of the M5S in the EP, could the explanation for its swinging behaviour be found in Italian politics?

In a context of growing Euroscepticism and saliency of the EU for Italian public opinion (cf. Conti 2016), the EU issue could be used by the M5S to expand its electoral support. Ideological flexibility characterises the M5S' political discourse, which, as result, can strategically adapt to the evolving socio-political context (Manucci & Amsler 2017). Figure 2 may therefore offer some preliminary insights on the decision of the M5S to join the EFDD group in July 2014. After 2011, the share of Italian citizens with a very negative or fairly negative image of the EU has matched that of those with a very positive or fairly positive view. Towards the end of 2013, for the first time ever, the share of negative answers was larger than the share of positive answers.

Thus, membership in the EFDD could be part and parcel of the Movement's strategy to address the demand for anti-EU opposition expressed by a growing share of Italian voters. In other words, the M5S could use "Euroscepticism as a strategic resource to increase public support in a context of growing disillusionment of the Italian public opinion towards the European Union" (Maggini 2014). The hardening of its position vis-à-vis EU integration appeared even more resolute a few months later, when the M5S started the collection of signatures for an advisory referendum on whether the country should leave the Euro. Clearly, joining the EFDD was in line with the M5S' domestic strategy aimed at riding on Italians' growing disaffection with the EU project.

Figure 2 about here

If this explanation for membership in the EFDD is plausible, the attempted change of political group in January 2017 is puzzling. Figure 2 shows that the mood in Italian public opinion did not change, and Italian citizens were as sceptical towards the EU at the end of 2016 as they had been in 2014. What did change in the meanwhile, however, was the overall political context. In early December 2016, the Prime Minister Matteo Renzi lost a referendum to reform the constitution and, consequently, resigned. Suddenly, political parties faced a new political scenario.

Crucially, public opinion appeared to have partly turned away from Renzi and the Democratic Party (PD). Figure 3 provides polling data on voting intentions from May 2014 to March 2017. In May 2014, the Democrats obtained over 40 percent of the votes at the EP elections (see Bressanelli 2015). However, the graph shows that the margin between the M5S and the PD has become progressively narrower. Towards the end of 2016, according to several polls, the M5S had finally become the first Italian party, with the trend consolidating in the early months of 2017.

Figure 3 about here

Arguably, the referendum outcome “[has speeded up] the M5S’ preparations for the climb to the national government” (Perrone 2016). The Democrats’ defeat helped the M5S to considerably increase its blackmail potential, and its elites seemed aware of it. Indeed, hints at the M5S’ change of attitude multiplied between December 2016 and January 2017, in both declarations and actions by leading M5S figures. On the same day as the result of the constitutional referendum was announced, Grillo published a blog post revealing the M5S’ government plan for the energy sector (Grillo 2016). A few days later, Alessandro Di Battista MP told the German newspaper *Die Welt* that the Movement was ready and determined to go to elections as early as possible (Reuscher 2016). The day after, his party colleague and vice-president of the Chamber of Deputies, Luigi Di Maio, stressed the urgency for a new electoral law, considered a necessary, preliminary step for new general elections (Il Sole 24 Ore 2016). Concrete actions soon followed these declarations. Most crucially, on 15 December 2016, Davide Casaleggio, son of the M5S co-founder, published a Facebook post announcing that the

M5S proposed government plan will soon be voted online by registered members (Casaleggio 2016). Later, on 26 January 2017, Grillo sent a letter to the President of Italy, Sergio Mattarella, outlining the necessity to elect a new government as quickly as possible. Hence, between December 2016 and January 2017 the Movement evidently changed tactics and strategies within the domestic arena. As Paolo Becchi, who was once considered the ideologist of the Movement, maintained: “the M5S has now become a liquid party [...] whose only objective is to govern” (Picardi 2017).

The changes inside the national arena were soon reflected on the M5S’ actions at the supranational level. Indeed, as a M5S MEP put it, for the M5S the national and the supranational arenas are not separate: “The goal is to coordinate more and more, as much as possible, in order to have consistency at different levels – European, national, regional and so on and so forth. [...] The idea is to be as blended and coherent as possible at all levels” (interview, M5S MEP, 26 May 2016). This observation brings support to the idea that the attempted move at the European level might have been driven by the new political scenario which opened up within domestic borders. While the affiliation with the EFDD group could suit well a ‘protest’ party, the ALDE group represented a better fit for a ‘governing’ party. Interestingly, a survey conducted in January 2017 among M5S supporters shows significant support for the idea linking the M5S’ attempt to switch transnational group to changes in domestic circumstances. Specifically, to the question as to why the M5S tried to leave the EFDD group, 33 percent of respondents affirmed: “Because the Movement is transforming more and more into a moderate and [potentially] governing political force”.¹² Further confirmation to this interpretation comes from the ALDE leader himself. Questioned about the rationale for seeking an alliance with Grillo’s Movement, Verhofstadt declared: “The delegation head came to us saying his party no longer wanted to cooperate with Nigel Farage. *He said they wanted to be a 'less classic' anti-*

¹² SWG for Corriere della Sera. 2017. “Per quale motivo, secondo lei, Grillo ha deciso di cambiare gruppo al Parlamento Europeo? (RISPONDE CHI VOTA M5S)”, 12 January 2017, in *Il Movimento 5 Stelle e l’Europa*. Retrieved from www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it. It should also be noted that 36% of respondents answered: “in order to count more within the EP”, thus supporting the claim that joining the EFDD has not helped the M5S to maximise its influence at the EU level.

European party” (quoted in Banks 2017; emphasis added). Verhofstadt’ statement is indirectly supported by influential media outlets. For instance, it is reported that the M5S started looking for new EP allies already in the last few months of 2016. Among them, the ALDE group was the only one to accept – in Beppe Grillo’s words – to “open a dialogue” with the Movement (Corriere della Sera 2017; Pipitone 2017). This evidence supports the claim that the move towards ALDE was initiated by the M5S itself.

In light of the above, the official explanation provided by Grillo to leave the EFDD - namely the outcome of the UK referendum – does not appear compelling. We argue that the answer can be found in domestic politics. With the M5S overcoming the PD in terms of (potential) electoral support, a mainstream affiliation in the EP was a political signal about the ‘respectability’ of the M5S as a party of government. While the affiliation with the EFDD group could suit well a ‘protest’ party, the ALDE group represented a better fit for a ‘governing’ party. Such a chameleonic approach is in line with the idea that populist parties are equipped with a “thin-centred ideology” (Mudde 2004, 544). Thanks to its ideological thinness, the M5S could act as a political chameleon, and make use of the EP arena as an extension of the domestic one. Hence, membership in a transnational group is seen as a tool serving the domestic political needs of the Movement. Or, as the M5S’ slogan for 2014 European elections very aptly put it, “in Europe for Italy”.

Conclusions

This case study adds a piece to the puzzle of political group affiliations in the EP, and enhances our knowledge about the nature and EU activities of the M5S. By triangulating different types of data, we demonstrate that neither policy congruence nor office gains fully explain the M5S' behaviour at the supranational level. We suggest that domestic politics matters instead. Domestic motives orient the behaviour of the M5S delegation in the EP, and provide an explanation for its antithetical choices. Hence, in June 2014, in line with the Italian public's growing dissent over the EU and the process of European integration, the M5S joined a Eurosceptic political group. Two years later, following the profound change within the Italian political scene and the increased popularity of Beppe Grillo's Movement, the latter tries, without success, to move out of the Eurosceptic group to join a more 'respectable' alliance. Three main conclusions can be drawn here.

The first conclusion concerns the nature of the M5S and its attitude to European politics. Notably, this paper indicates that domestic strategic considerations prevail over ideological coherence at the supranational level. In other words, the latter can be sacrificed for the benefit of domestic gains in terms of potential votes and offices. Such a high flexibility of the political platform tells us a great deal about the populist nature of the Movement (Manucci & Amsler 2017), and confirms the rather strategic nature of its Euroscepticism (Franzosi et al. 2015). Just as in national politics, the M5S deftly tailors its European strategy to meet "citizens' most pressing demands" (Conti and Memoli 2015, 528) and maximise its popularity.

A further and related remark concerns the role occupied by the EP in the M5S' strategic toolkit. Such a 'utilitarian' use of the EP resonates with the usual approach of protest parties to EU affairs. As previous research suggests (i.e. Hix 2005, 193), protest parties tend to pay relatively more importance to the EP for this is the arena where they score better thanks to the second-order nature of European elections. For these parties, the supranational arena may work as a springboard to domestic politics. Yet, differently from most protest parties – which tend to be peripheral in their respective

constituencies - the M5S does not occupy the margins of the Italian party system. As a result, for the M5S the EP represents a secondary, but strategically important arena to be used either as a mouthpiece, or as a launching pad for domestic objectives. As Corbetta and Vignati (2014, 56) put it, “The European Union [...] figures in Grillo’s speeches within a chiefly national framework.” The third conclusion concerns transnational group membership in the EP and its broader relevance vis-à-vis the multi-level dimension of the EU. By showing that transnational group membership can serve purposes other than those internal to the EP, this research confirms the increasing interrelation between political parties’ EU and national level choices (cf. McDonnell and Werner 2017). In the case of the M5S, policy and office objectives at the EU level – the two main triggers of group choice identified by the literature – played at best a secondary role to explain its transnational affiliation. As this research demonstrates, the hypothesis that domestic politics drives the M5S’ political group affiliation in the EP appears to have a stronger explanatory value.

Considering the M5S’ core features – i.e. its ‘chameleonic’ approach and ‘liquid’ political platform – the question arises as to whether our explanation applies to other cases. The increasing politicisation of the EU (cf. Grande and Kriesi 2014) has created “the conditions under which politics travels across the EU’s multilevel system” (Koop, Reh and Bressanelli 2017, 3) and fostered the interplay between domestic and supranational arenas. This may suggest that far from being an exceptional case, the M5S’ approach to transnational alliances just reflects the increasingly intertwined character of the EU polity. Further research is welcome to unravel this puzzle by testing the validity of our argument for other parties across the EU.

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Replication data

The replication dataset is available at <http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/ipsr-risp>

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APPENDIX

Table A. Principal Component Factor Analysis of the EUANDI data

	<i>Factor 1</i>	<i>Factor 2</i>	<i>Factor 3</i>	<i>Factor 4</i>
<i>EU Integration</i>				
EU should patrol borders	0.5832	0.0232	0.4029	0.1075
EU tax-raising powers	0.6413	-0.3037	-0.2741	-0.2060
Strengthen EU defence policy	0.7959	0.2248	0.1105	0.0622
One voice for EU foreign policy	0.8336	0.1107	-0.1385	-0.1002
European integration is good	0.8149	0.1451	-0.2835	-0.0659
Introduce Eurobonds	0.5734	-0.4576	-0.1144	-0.1223
Euro is a bad thing	0.7947	0.1439	-0.1338	-0.0971
Less veto power for member states	0.7501	-0.1166	-0.1706	-0.1634
Referendum for any new EU treaty	0.5558	0.2736	-0.2628	0.2463
<i>Economic left-right</i>				
Maintain social programmes	-0.0696	0.7527	0.3565	0.1607
Reduce pension benefits	0.0873	0.5073	-0.1011	-0.0108
Reduce government spending	0.2418	0.5782	0.4064	0.1603
Tax stock market gains	-0.0035	0.7565	0.1299	0.0889
Reduce workers' protection	0.0690	0.7330	0.2447	0.2045
More support for the unemployed	0.0310	0.7339	0.2259	0.1478
Relax austerity policies	0.0549	0.7968	0.0541	0.1840
<i>Immigration and security</i>				
Limit welfare for immigrants	-0.2958	0.2248	0.6148	0.3164
Restrictions to immigration	-0.1415	0.0442	0.7387	0.3284
Acceptance of 'our values'	0.0706	0.1920	0.6326	0.3697
Punish criminals more severely	-0.2146	0.0936	0.6095	0.3534
<i>Socio-liberal left-right</i>				
Same-sex marriages good	-0.1687	0.1506	0.3477	0.7248
Stop stem cell research	0.0313	0.0482	-0.0017	0.7063
Legalisation soft drugs	-0.0627	0.1028	0.2154	0.6201
Legalise euthanasia	-0.1194	0.1937	-0.0445	0.7661
Accept privacy restrictions	0.1020	0.0855	0.1819	0.3268
Restrict access to abortion	-0.1659	0.1480	0.3139	0.7203

Note: Principal component analysis, varimax rotation.

Table B. Scores for the weighting of mega-seats

MEGA-SEATS	SCORE
EP President	40
EP Vice-President	12
Committee Chair of BUDG, ECON, ENVI, IMCO, INTA, ITRE, LIBE	12
Committee Vice-Chair of BUDG, ECON, ENVI, IMCO, INTA, ITRE, LIBE	7
Committee Chair of AGRI, CONT, JURI, PECH, TRAN	10
Committee Vice-Chair of AGRI, CONT, JURI, PECH, TRAN	5
Committee Chair of AFCO, AFET, CULT, DEVE, EMPL, FEMM, PETI, REGI	8
Committee Vice-Chair of AFCO, AFET, CULT, DEVE, EMPL, FEMM, PETI, REGI	3

Source: VoteWatch Europe 2016

Tables and Figures

Table 1. National delegations in the EFDD group (constitutive session: 1st July 2014)

Party	MEPs	Country
United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)	24	UK
Five Star Movement (M5S)	17	Italy
Sweden Democrats (SD)	2	Sweden
Order and Justice (PTIT)	2	Lithuania
Free Citizens' Party	1	Czech Republic
Independent (coalition ZZS)	1	France
Independent	1	Latvia

Source: European Parliament, www.europarl.europa.eu

Table 2. The M5S position and policy difference from the political groups

	EU Integration	Economic Left- right	Immigration and security	Socio-liberal left-right	Average difference
M5S	-0.14	-1.14	0.47	-1.13	
EPP (221)	1.10	0.35	0.19	0.66	1.2
S&D (191)	1.16	-0.92	-0.22	-0.29	0.8
ALDE (57)	0.89	0.34	0.34	-0.75	0.8
G/EFA (43)	0.68	-1.26	-0.77	-0.65	0.7
GUE/NGL (44)	-0.76	-1.36	-0.57	-0.84	0.5
ECR (69)	-0.44	-0.28	0.48	0.44	0.9
EFDD (29)	-1.50	0.96	1.16	-0.74	1.1

Note: policy positions have been weighted by the parliamentary seats of each political party in the EP (in parentheses the total for each group). The count for the EFDD excludes the M5S

Source: elaboration from EUANDI

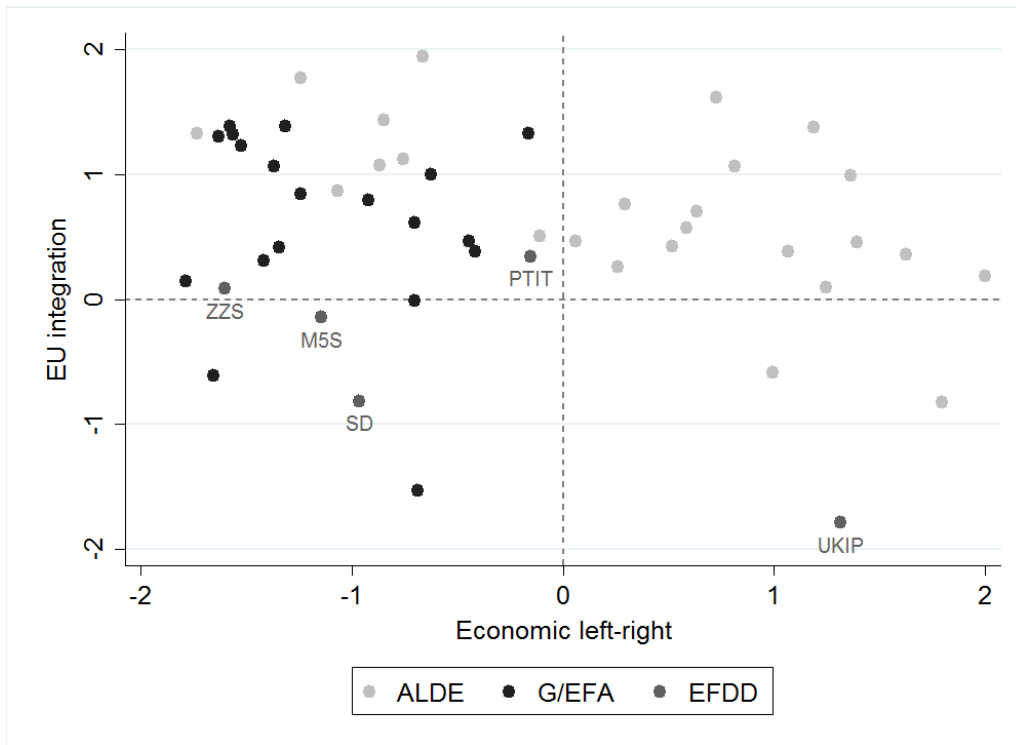


Figure 1. The M5S: current and potential partners in the EP

Table 3. The M5S voting agreement with the political groups (July 2014 – July 2016)

	Overall (87)	EU Integration (9)	Single Market (42)	Custom Union (21)	Home Affairs & Migration (15)
EPP	0.62	0.22	0.55	0.86	0.73
S&D	0.62	0.22	0.55	0.86	0.73
ALDE	0.61	0.22	0.52	0.86	0.73
G/EFA	0.64	0.33	0.57	0.81	0.80
GUE/NGL	0.66	0.56	0.60	0.76	0.73
ECR	0.56	0.33	0.45	0.86	0.60
EFDD	0.49	0.89	0.43	0.52	0.40

Note: votes are plenary votes on the whole text under the ordinary legislative procedure. In bold the highest voting agreement with the M5S

Source: elaboration from VoteWatch.eu

Table 4. Mega-seats in EP8

POLITICAL GROUP	MEPs ¹³		MEGA-SEATS SCORE		MEGA-SEATS RATIO	
	EP8-1	EP8-2	EP8-1	EP8-2	EP8-1	EP8-2
EPP	221	217	278	266	1.26	1.23
S&D	191	189	265	239	1.39	1.26
ECR	70	74	67	67	0.96	0.90
ALDE	67	68	85	89	1.27	1.31
GUE/NGL	52	52	42	42	0.81	0.81
G/EFA	50	51	56	56	1.12	1.10
EFDD	48	42	0	5	0	0.12
ENF	-	40	-	0	-	0

Note: EP8-1 and EP8-2 indicate, respectively, the first and the second half-term of EP-8

Source: elaboration of data retrieved from the European Parliament's website. See Appendix for details

¹³ Group seats for EP8-1 as of 25th November 2014; group seats for EP8-2 as of 20th January 2017. The ENF is not considered as this group was formed on 15 June 2015

Table 5. Report allocation in the 1st half-term of EP8

GROUP	N. MEPS	N. COD REPORTS	REPORT RATIO
ALDE	68	28	0.41
EPP	219	88	0.40
S&D	191	72	0.38
ECR	71	22	0.31
G/EFA	50	10	0.2
GUE/NGL	52	7	0.13
EFDD	48	4	0.08

Source: elaboration of data retrieved from the European Parliament's website

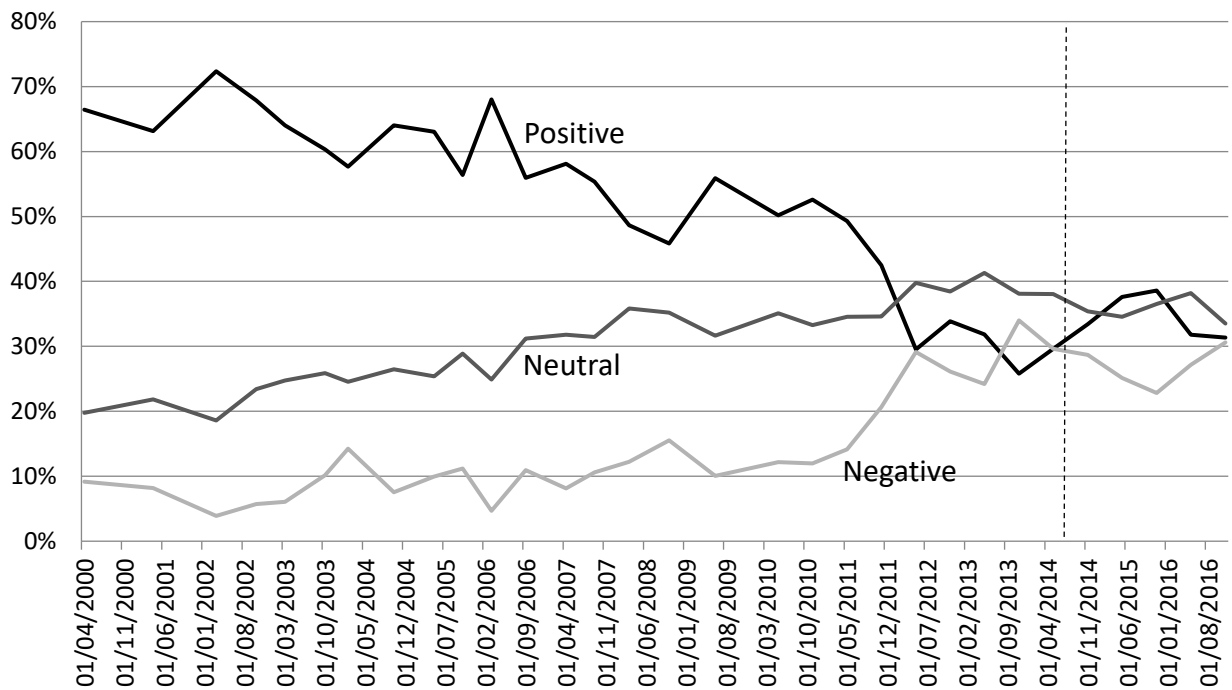


Figure 2. The image of the EU in Italy

Source: Eurobarometer. Note: 'Don't know' answers are excluded

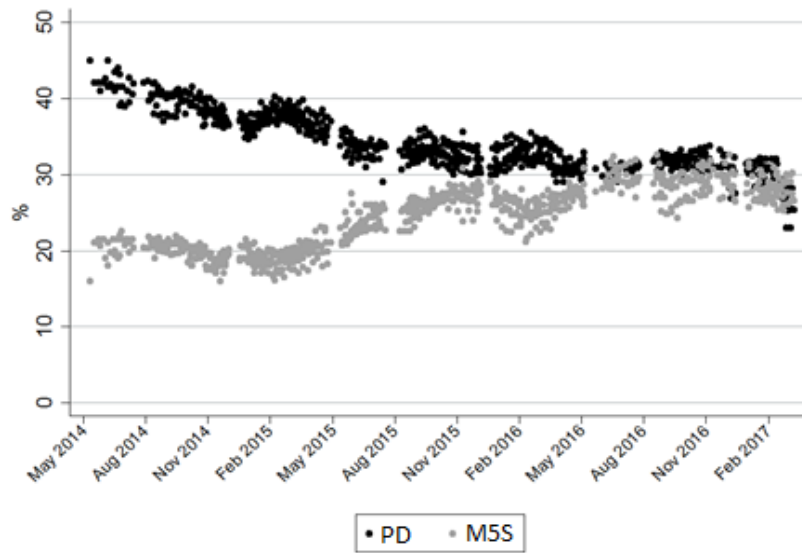


Figure 3. Voting intentions

Note: elaboration of polling data from www.termometropolitico.it