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**AVAILABILITY OR DISENGAGEMENT?
HOW ITALIAN CITIZENS REACTED TO THE
TWO-FACED PARLIAMENTARY GRAND COALITION
SUPPORTING THE MONTI GOVERNMENT**

1. *Introduction: Grand Coalition, Italian Style*

Times may come in which democracies have to suspend electoral competition for the sake of the general interest. Wars, divisive memories of past conflicts, a prolonged economic crisis, but also electoral outcomes without a clear and politically viable governing majority are the challenges that may oblige ideologically distant parties to join forces in a *grand coalition government*. In 2011, Italian parties found themselves in such a situation. Starting in the summer, the Italian financial situation worsened to the point that, between October and November 2011, the risk of a sovereign default was tangible. The common wisdom within as well as outside the country was clear. Italy needed urgent structural reforms capable of restoring confidence among its Eu partners and financial investors. The expectation was that only a grand coalition between the main parties would have been able to overcome the several veto points that over the years have led Italy to the edge of the cliff.

Although such a decision might have been seen as necessary, this is a difficult move for any party in any country, since it may alter the conditions under which voters usually make their voting choices at the following election. When the contraposition between government and opposition is suspended, voters might find it hard to take into account what has been done and who is responsible for what. Moreover, when this comes together with the discovery of a vast web of political scandals, citizens' political disengagement is likely to further increase.

Nonetheless, the way Italian parties decided to respond to the challenge was highly peculiar in four aspects, at least in comparison with the

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experience of grand coalitions in Germany and Austria over the last fifty years. First, in 2011 a coalition between the main political parties was not an option that emerged after a competitive election, where voters could have taken into account what the incumbent government did over the previous years, as happened in Germany and Austria¹. Rather, it turned out to be an *alternative* to calling for a new election. At the beginning of November 2011, Berlusconi resigned from his role as Prime minister given the collapse of his majority. Instead of calling for a new election, the President of the Republic nominated a highly-respected economist and former Eu Commissioner as new Prime minister: Mario Monti².

Second, although the President of the Republic urged the main political parties to join the government, they only accepted to support the government in Parliament. Thus, instead of a *governing grand coalition*, the result of these manoeuvres turned out to be a *technocratic* cabinet, composed exclusively of non-political figures but supported by an oversized *parliamentary coalition* that included the two major rival parties, the left-wing Partito Democratico (Democratic Party – Pd) and the right-wing Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom party – Pdl), as well as a relatively small centrist party, the Unione di Centro (Union of the Centre – Udc).

Third, the two main parties, often internally divided, kept on endlessly quarrelling with each other in public, often criticising what the technocratic government was doing. This peculiar pattern of coalitional behaviour lasted until December 2012, when Berlusconi decided to stop the support of his party for the Monti cabinet, paving the way for new elections the following February.

All in all, the management of the crucial linkage between the cabinet and the oversized parliamentary majority was very different from the typical pattern seen with German and Austrian grand coalitions. Miller and Müller (2011) reported that three management mechanisms have frequently been used in the German and Austrian experiences: public coalition agreement, coalition committees, and *watchdog* junior ministers belonging to different parties from the «senior» ministers. All of these are helpful mechanisms to pre-empt the constant risk of conflict between coalition parties, and no less importantly, to reduce the risk that

¹ The German grand coalition 1966-69 between Cdu-Csu and Spd was the result of the collapse of the previous coalition between the former and the Fdp.

² Just a few days before being nominated Prime minister he was nominated a senator for life by the President of the Republic.

cabinet members would feel free to follow their own agenda instead of the government platform parties agreed on. However, according to what was reported by the media during those days, none of these mechanisms seemed to be in place in the case of the Monti government and its *strana maggioranza* («odd majority», as pundits labelled it).

Parties seemed to motivate such a *two-faced coalitional behaviour* on the basis of the notion that their voters were unlikely to understand and to finally accept their joint responsibility in the government. It is hard to know what their voters would actually have preferred. Nonetheless, one might put forward an opposite opinion from the one that the parties had. The parties' decision to stand half-way, supporting the government in Parliament but not taking any governing responsibility for it – or, even worse, jointly agreeing behind the Tv screen on what they were going to quarrel about in front of the public – made it even harder for voters to understand what was going on. In this context, voters were exposed to a chaotic flow of information. The only accessible and robust piece of evidence for many voters was the fact that the main parties coalesced in supporting a technocratic government, while at the same time they were constantly fighting with each other. In a climate of rampant negative feelings towards politics, this behaviour could be easily interpreted as evidence that parties were misleading the electorate.

2. *Expectations from a Two-Faced Coalitional Behaviour*

Literature on government coalitions and related party and voter behaviour is vast. A large part of it is devoted to coalition building and the selection of ministers. Studies that focus on the electoral consequences of the coalitions and the grand coalition in particular are less common. The main findings suggest that coalition governments may hamper the clarity of responsibility that make it possible for the voters to get a rascal out of office (Hobolt and Karp 2010; Maravall 2010). In the case of grand coalitions, the literature refers almost exclusively to the German experience, and shows that the electoral price that parties pay for joining a grand coalition government is generally rather high. Careful coalition management may reduce it, but only up to a certain point. Scarrow (2012) shows that, in the elections immediately following the 2005–2009 German grand coalition, turnout decreased, volatility rose, party fragmentation increased and protest voting became more vibrant. On the same line, Banazsak and Doerschler (2012) reports that, in elections after grand coalitions, voters tend to move away from the coalitional par-

ties towards opposition parties, and this movement is more likely among the more radical voters of the parties.

Studies on the Italian elections of February 2013 showed similar phenomena, albeit larger in magnitude. Turnout decline was unprecedented, as Diamanti (2013) and Itanes (2013) have documented. Electoral volatility was so high that the 2013 election ranks first among the most volatile Italian post-second world war elections. The two main parties that supported the Monti government were the most strongly affected by voter defection. The Pd and Pdl combined have lost almost ten million votes since 2008 (3.5 million and 6.5 million respectively). Moreover, approximately one out of four valid votes went to a new party that claimed to be outside the traditional left-right ideological divisions, namely the Movimento 5 Stelle (5 Star Movement – M5s).

Individual-level analyses offered some more detailed insights. As Baldassari (2013) and De Sio and Schadee (2013) show, Italian voters still think of left-right as the predominant dimension of the national political space, regardless of the massive electoral change. In addition, a comparison between voters who remained loyal to the Pd and the Pdl since 2008 and those who defected shows that the policy preferences of the fleeing voters are quite moderate and different from the loyal voters, while their negative sentiments towards politics are stronger. Finally, the Pd and Pdl defectors are not on the fringe of the left and right continuum, but are rather located around the centre (Passarelli and Tuorto 2013; Vezzoni 2013). This is quite a different scenario from the above-mentioned effects of the German grand coalition.

Bellucci and Segatti (2013) recently argued that voters' party choice during the 2013 election might have been conditioned by the context in which Italians made their decisions. They referred to three key context characteristics: the economic crisis, the wave of disengagement from politics nurtured by scandals and the abuse of public money, and the joint support by the main parties for the Monti government which rendered the attribution of blame harder for voters. The latter contextual characteristic is particularly important for our study. While no empirical evidence has been provided on the effects of these phenomena on people's preferences, previous studies have empirically shown how patterns of competition might be altered by contextual factors such as polarization (Dahlberg 2009; Lachat 2008; 2011; Van der Eijk, Schmitt and Binder 2005). Building upon these authors' intuition, we aim to provide a first empirical assessment of how Italian voters have been reacting to the experience of an inter-block parliamentary coalition in the period before the elections. Although in this study we are not able to provide a

proper measurement for polarisation, we argue that voters have most likely seen the parliamentary support to the Monti government by the two main parties (from November 2011 to December 2012) as a behavioural indicator of decreasing party *polarisation*. This expectation is drawn from literature on the impact of coalition governments on the perceptions of party ideologies, showing that members of the same coalitions tend to be seen as ideologically more similar than they actually are (Fortunato and Stevenson 2013). Naturally, relying solely on this assumption does not allow us to categorically exclude that voters still perceived the Pd and the Pdl as quite apart from each other. However, we show in a different study that the months of the technocratic government were characterized by a decrease in the correlation between people's ideological positions and their evaluations of the two parties (Vegetti, Poletti and Segatti 2013).

Given this assumption, we formulate two expectations. First, during the time span in which the Pd and the Pdl jointly supported the Monti government, the suspension of their usual reciprocal hostility may have diminished the ideological *distinctiveness* of the two parties, at least in the perceptions of their peripheral voters. In turn, this may have increased voter *openness* to the appeals coming from the opposite ideological side, enhancing the *reciprocal availability* of the two main parties' electorates (Bartolini 1999). Second, the inconsistencies between how parties behaved in Parliament – supporting the government – and in other public arena – fighting on a daily basis – (what we call *two-faced behaviour*) may have led part of the public to think that the parties were trying to fool voters. Thus, over the months prior to the 2013 election, the coalitional behaviour mismatch of Pd and Pdl, together with blatant cases of corruption and the abuse of public money over the period, may have actually increased the disengagement of citizens from political parties. In other words, the parties' two-faced behaviour, far from being understood by the voters as a way of keeping the parties' reputation high, may have been interpreted as a strategy to mislead the public from what party elites were really doing.

Both expectations rest on the assumption that ideology has lost ground in constraining some determinants of the voting calculus, even though these same voters are still using the left-right continuum as a representation of the political space (Baldassari 2013; Segatti 2013; Vegetti, Poletti and Segatti 2013).

3. *Assessing electoral availability using propensity to vote scores*

We offer an empirical exploration of the public's response to the political events taking place between the summer of 2011 and the elections of February 2013, using data from a repeated cross-sectional survey conducted by Ipsos³. Our sample consists of 49,901 respondents of a survey conducted every week on a fresh sample from March 2011 to February 2013⁴. The survey was conducted by following the Computer assisted telephone interviewing (Cati) method, on a sample drawn by random digit dialling and corrected by gender, age, region and municipality size.

In order to measure party evaluations, we rely on a type of rating scale known as *propensity to vote* (Ptv) scores. Similar to other variables created over the years to observe respondents' evaluations of the major political parties, Ptv's are ordered scales (in our case ranging from one to ten) where respondents are asked to say «how likely» it is that they will «ever» vote for each party (see Tillie 1995 and van der Eijk *et al.* 2006 for a more focused discussion on the psychological bases of Ptv's and their empirical validation). In a broad sense, Ptv's measure the extent to which a respondent is *considering* voting for a party, without constraining this consideration into a single ipsative choice, as is the case for the more common «vote choice» or «vote intention» variable. Naturally, voting itself is an ipsative act, insomuch as it forces the voter to choose for one and only one option⁵. Nevertheless, one of the aims of public

³ Ipsos is a social research institute that collects the public opinion of citizens. Data has been provided by the University of Milan by virtue of a grant by the Fondazione Cariplo. The authors are grateful to prof. Paolo Natale for his continuous support.

⁴ The value refers to the total number of cases having no missing values in any of the relevant variables. The monthly sample size varies between a minimum of 927 in October 2011 to a maximum of 4,237 in January 2013. Three months are missing from the time series: August 2011, January 2012 and August 2012.

⁵ «Vote intention» forces respondents to compare a list of party options and pick the one that is most preferred. Ptv's instead allow us to have a measure for the propensity to vote for a specific party for all the (more or less desired) options in the list. Ptv's are therefore richer in information than vote intention because they measure the desirability of all parties, rather than identifying only which one is the most desirable. Given that in our analyses we want to measure whether there has been an increase in the electorate's *availability* (e.g. voters' *openness* to the appeals coming from the opposite ideological side), using Ptv's instead of «vote intention» is an obvious choice. Moreover, over the period covered by our study, in every survey the percentage of respondents who claim to be undecided or reticent about their voting intentions is very high.

opinion research is to assess how characteristics of the external political context may influence the opinions that eventually shape individual behaviour. In this respect, Ptv's are to be regarded as measures of *potential* behaviour, as they capture the foundations of the choice by observing for each individual which parties are excluded from the short-list (the ones that the respondent says he/she would never vote for) and which parties are the real competing candidates running for the final choice (the parties that receive a high propensity to vote).

Given this property, to observe a voter's set of Ptv's is equivalent to measuring his/her degree of electoral *availability*, that is, the extent to which he/she is open to modify his/her electoral choice (Bartolini 1999). If voters express a positive propensity to vote for one party only, and no propensity to vote for all the others, it is likely that their choice is already made, no matter what further strategies parties will adopt. Conversely, if voters give the same Ptv to all the parties, their choice is open to influence by a potentially large number of events and last-minute considerations. In the first case, the probability that any voter will switch between parties is essentially null, and thus party allegiances are going to be *frozen*. In the second case the potential for switching party is virtually unlimited, and voting will resemble something approaching a random choice.

However, in the real world most people's consideration sets tends to lie in between these two extremes. For instance, voters can be similarly attracted by *two* parties, and completely disinterested in all the others. In this situation, it is reasonable to assert that the two parties are *competing* with each other for their votes. Thus, on aggregate, this is equivalent to saying that patterns of covariation between Ptv's provide a picture of *who competes with whom* in the electoral arena at any given moment. If the Ptv's of two parties covary in opposite directions, it means that a positive evaluation of one party corresponds to a negative evaluation of the other, and *vice versa*. In this situation, the two parties are not competing for the same voters, as being attracted by one corresponds in the voters' mind to being repelled by the other. In other words, the (potential) electorate of one party is *unavailable* to the other. On the other hand, when the Ptv's of two parties covary positively, a higher likelihood to vote for one corresponds to a higher likelihood to vote for the other, and therefore their electorates are reciprocally available. In this case, the two parties must compete with each other to win over the same voters.

The Italian election of 2013 has been characterised by the largest amount of vote switching in republican history (Itanes 2013). This could be due to the fact that the effects of the left-right cleavage which con-

tributed a great deal in maintaining the voters' choice sets, mostly «frozen» into relatively stable ideological blocks during the Second Republic, have eventually weakened. Although it has been shown that voters' movements between the Pd and the Pdl have decreased from 2008 to 2013 (De Sio and Schadee 2013), we expect that a weakening of the left-right cleavage should be reflected, among other things, by a pattern of increasing *reciprocal availability* between the electorates of the two most important parties of the two blocks, the Pd and the Pdl, at least as a temporary effect of the joint support by the two parties for the Monti government.

Figure 1 shows something interesting in this regard, illustrating the monthly variation of the polychoric correlation between the Ptv's of the two parties from March 2011 to February 2013⁶. The pattern shown in the figure is consistent with our expectation. Up to November/December 2012, the correlation between the Ptv's of the Pd and the Pdl is negative and significant. Substantively this means that, in the months within our time window preceding the technocratic government, to have a higher propensity to vote for the Pd (vs. Pdl) corresponded with having a lower propensity to vote for the Pdl (vs. Pd). This does not come as a surprise for those who experienced the political mood of the Second Republic, characterised by constant reciprocal accusations between party spokesmen on Tv talk-shows and repeated appeals to ideological labels as group flags. However, from December 2012, immediately after the resignation of Silvio Berlusconi as Prime minister and the handover to Mario Monti, the correlation becomes increasingly weaker, reaching a level in Spring/Summer 2012 where it looks not significantly different from zero. Normally, a zero correlation is interpreted as «independence», that is, knowing a person's position on one variable does not provide any support for inferring his/her position on the other variable. In our case, this zero could be interpreted literally, by claiming that from April to September 2012 the Pdl and the Pd were evaluated independently from each other⁷, or we could simply note that the predomi-

⁶ The polychoric correlation assumes two continuous, normally-distributed latent variables that are observed on ordinal scales, and therefore it is the most appropriate technique in estimating the correlation between variables such as the Ptv's. Polychoric correlations are interpreted in the same way as the Pearson's r , and like their better-known counterpart they range between -1, indicating perfect negative correlation, and +1, indicating perfect positive correlation. The coefficients are computed via maximum likelihood estimation.

⁷ In the month of July 2012 the correlation seems to become slightly stronger, before dropping again in September. We believe that this effect is mainly due to an anomaly in the sampling for the month of July, probably due to the fact

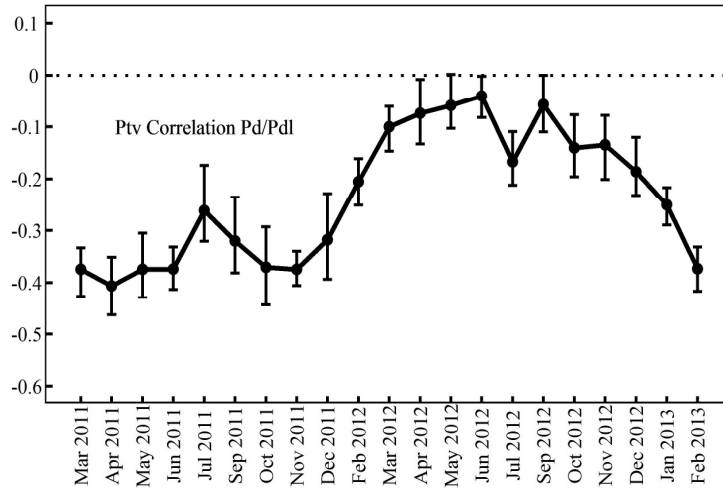


FIG. 1. Correlation between propensity to vote for the Pd and the Pdl over time (bootstrapped 95% c.i.).

Source: own elaboration of Ipsos data.

nance of opposing feelings towards the two parties among the public has disappeared. This implies that the electorates of the two main parties on the left and the right were, for a few months at least, «open» to the possibility of voting for the main opponent, although without necessarily providing a positive evaluation of it.

Figure 1 also shows that, from October 2012, the negative correlation between the Ptv of the two parties gains new strength, reaching at the moment of the election in February 2013 the same level observed *before* the beginning of the technocratic government. This steady but persistent return to a polarised situation, where the propensities to vote for the two parties are essentially mutually exclusive, reflects a growing tendency by the Pd and the Pdl to «close ranks» among their supporters. The turning point here is the beginning of the primary campaign for the election of the candidate for Prime minister by the left-wing coalition. The primary elections which were announced earlier in the summer had, for the first few weeks, only one candidate supported by the Pd coalition leader, namely Pierluigi Bersani, the secretary of the party. However, in mid-September Matteo Renzi, the mayor of Florence, presented himself

that many potential respondents are on vacation. This suspicion is somewhat strengthened by the presence of a similarly outlying observation in July 2011.

as an alternative candidate, pushing for an agenda heavily based on the renewal of the leading class of the Pd. At around the same time, two other members of the coalition presented their candidacy, effectively starting the primary campaign. The primary elections, won by Bersani on the second ballot, marked the beginning of the actual electoral campaign. On December 6th, only a few days after the official designation of Bersani as the left-wing coalition's candidate for prime minister, the former Pm and leader of the Pdl Silvio Berlusconi announced that he would be the candidate of the right-wing coalition. On the same day, the Pdl withdrew its support from the Monti government, ending the temporary compromise with the Pd. From this point, the electoral campaign carried on with the same hostile tones that the voters were used to before the Pd and the Pdl jointly supported the Monti government (a period during which reciprocal accusations among the two parties were still present, but the tones were somewhat softened).

Figure 1 succeeds in showing one important pattern: the joint support by the two parties for the Monti cabinet seems to have *de facto depolarised* the attitudes of the voters towards the two parties. In other words, for a few months in 2012, the electorates of each of the two parties were more *available* to the appeals of the other. Thus, our data seems to confirm that the left-right cleavage temporarily weakened during this period. This could have happened regardless of whether voters might still have perceived the two parties as quite far apart from each other. Nevertheless, the combination of signs of behavioural convergence between the two parties on the one hand, and of quarrelling divergence on the other, may also have generated a wave of disengagement from electoral politics

4. *Greater Electoral Availability or More Disengagement from Politics?*

The pattern observed so far, i.e. the simple correlation between the Ptv's of the Pd and the Pdl, can reflect two qualitatively different phenomena. The most obvious one, following the rationale discussed earlier, is the variation of the competition between the two parties by means of an increased reciprocal availability of their respective electorates. This part of the story refers to the propensities to vote for the Pd and the Pdl becoming less (or more) mutually exclusive, and thus the two parties becoming more (or less) appealing to the same electorate.

However, a second phenomenon that can be captured by the varying correlation between the two Ptv's is the variation over time of the proportion of respondents who state their unwillingness to vote for *any* party in the system, and therefore give the lowest value to all the Ptv questions. In fact, the contribution that these respondents give to the correlation between the Ptv's of the Pd and the Pdl is always positive: for them, the correlation will always be +1. Thus, for instance, if in the months between March 2011 and February 2013 the proportion of citizens responding in this way increased, the negative correlation between the two Ptv's would inevitably look weaker. Nonetheless, this would not be due to a growing reciprocal availability of the two electorates, but rather to a growing tendency among the population to refuse being available at all.

These respondents are those who do not feel attracted by any of the relevant options, and thus refuse to even consider voting for them. These individuals are by all means *unavailable* to any party, and thus completely *out* of party competition, given that no matter how parties change their appeals, they will simply ignore them. We define such citizens as *disengaged*, or *detached*, from the traditional political parties, and we categorise them using a dummy that has value of one if they give the lowest to all the main parties, and zero otherwise. In the calculation of this variable, we consider the Ptv of eight parties: Pd, Pdl, Lega Nord, Italia dei Valori (and its pre-electoral merge with other left-wing parties, Rivoluzione Civile), Udc, Fli, Sel and Monti's Scelta Civica party. We exclude from the calculation the Ptv for the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5s). This is due both to a theoretical and a practical reason. First, our variable measures the refusal to vote for the *traditional parties*, i.e. the parties who describe themselves as *insiders* of the political system, of which the Pd and the Pdl are the two main poles, while the M5s presents itself as an *alternative* to the political system. This difference is not trivial, as it implies that the *space of competition* (see Sani and Sartori 1983) where the M5s seeks votes is essentially different from the one where the other parties act. In fact, since its first days as a grassroots movement in the mid-2000s, the M5s built an image aimed at expressively capturing and channelling citizens' negative sentiments towards parties, obtaining an *anti-political* movement label in the media. Thus, including the Ptv of the M5s in our calculation would have excluded those respondents who give a higher Ptv only to M5s, i.e. the voters who are already out of the space of competition, in which the Pd and the Pdl contend their votes. A second and more pragmatic reason to exclude the Ptv of M5s is that, due to the relatively sudden growth of the party, the variable is only present in our data from June 2012 on-

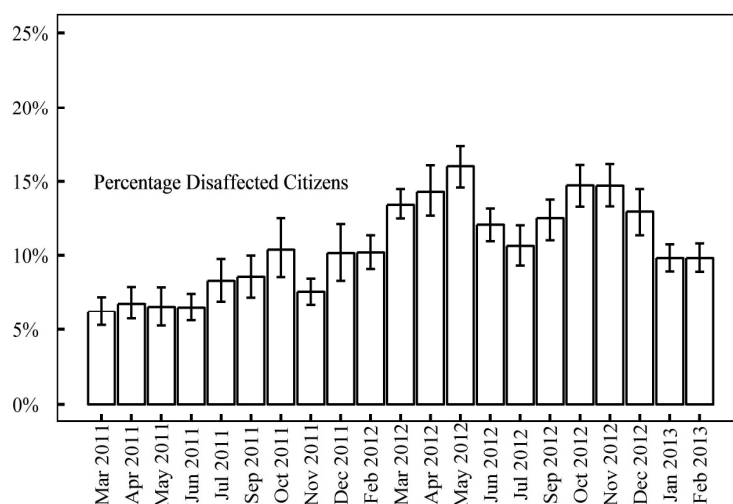


FIG. 2. Disengagement from the traditional political parties over time.

Source: own elaboration of Ipsos data.

wards. Given this constraint, including the M5s in our calculation would make the cases classified as disengaged before and after that month not equivalent, biasing the reliability of our operationalisation.

According to our measurements, the disengaged citizens represent approximately 10% of our sample, and vary considerably across months, ranging from a minimum of roughly 6% (March 2011) to a maximum of 16% (May 2012). The trend shown in fig. 2 resembles the one in fig. 1, with some important differences. First of all, while fig. 1 clearly showed the beginning of the decline of the correlation in December 2011, here the bump starts in March 2012. Second, fig. 2 shows a sudden drop of these respondents in the months of June, July and September 2012. We attribute this drop at least in part to the quality of the sampling used to collect our data. Despite this, the figure shows a pattern of increase and subsequent decrease that follows the political events that occurred in those months that we discussed earlier. Thus, the period of the technocratic government saw a significant increase in citizens' detachment from the traditional parties. Moreover, the Pdl's withdrawal from the majority, coincident to the beginning of the electoral campaign, seems to be related to an inversion of this tendency. However, one thing worth noticing is that, at the end of our time series, the overall level of disengagement is significantly higher than at the beginning. This marks

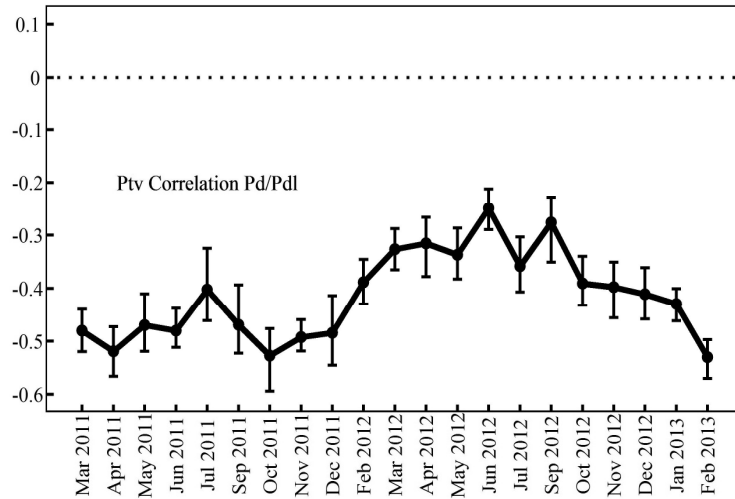


FIG. 3. Correlation between propensity to vote for the Pd and the Pdl over time, for the voters who are open to party competition (bootstrapped 95% c.i.).

Source: own elaboration of Ipsos data.

an important difference from the trend in fig. 1: while there the level of correlation in February 2013 was back on the same level it had before the beginning of the technocratic government, here the level of disengagement increased by almost five percentage points.

Once the correlation is clean from the spurious association with the variable measuring feelings of detachment, the pattern looks different. Figure 3 shows the same correlations computed for fig. 1, but applied only to the sub-sample of respondents who are *open to party competition*, i.e. those who gave a positive Ptv to at least one party. The picture makes three main points. First, the entire series is shifted downwards, increasing in negative strength of 0.1 points (on a scale from -1 to 1), and is always significantly different from zero. This means that, once a very specific group representing about 10% of the population is excluded from our observation, the correlation between the Ptv of Pd and Pdl is always and inevitably negative. Second, the range of the monthly variation reduces considerably, going from 0.4 points of fig. 1 to 0.25 points. In other words, for this population, parliamentary support of the technocratic government by the Pd and the Pdl has had a relatively smaller impact. Finally, at the moment of the elections in February 2013, the negative correlation between the two Ptv has once again

reached the levels it had before November 2011. Hence, the ability of the grand coalition to depolarise the electorate, and thus increase the reciprocal availability of the electorates of the two main parties of the left and the right blocks, has been limited to the period in which the grand coalition lasted. Once the electoral campaign started, the reciprocal availability between the electorates of the Pd and the Pdl went back to the (low) levels that it used to have.

Together, figures 2 and 3 effectively decompose the phenomenon observed in fig. 1, namely the significant reduction of the negative correlation between the propensities to vote for Pd and the Pdl, and thus the apparent increase of the competition between the two main parties of the left and the right blocks. Our data shows that there has indeed been a moment where the evaluations of Pd were less negatively associated with the ones of the Pdl, which lasted for most of 2012. Nonetheless, the extent of this phenomenon has been rather limited, and its occurrence was only contingent to the presence of the grand coalition. At the same time, another much less desirable phenomenon affected the electorate to a similar extent. In addition to making the electorate less shy to cross the border between left and right, the behaviour of the elites also contributed to an increase in the amount of citizens who were disengaged from the traditional parties, a tendency that persisted for a portion of citizens even after the end of the grand coalition.

5. *Correlates of Disengagement and Availability at the Individual Level*

What are the factors associated with the two phenomena that we have just discussed? It is interesting to understand which characteristics link voters to the disengagement from the political parties on the one hand, and make them regard the Pd and the Pdl more or less equally appealing on the other. Moreover, by controlling for individual characteristics, we can clean our picture from correlations given by the sample composition of each month, and ensure that during the months of the Pd/Pdl coalition the voters have been significantly different in their probability to be disengaged by the parties and in their joint evaluations of the Pd and the Pdl. Thus, to perform a last investigation, we model these two phenomena at the individual level using multilevel regression analysis.

The two dependent variables are straightforward. First, the detachment from the traditional parties is observed at an individual level by

means of the dummy variable discussed before. As a reminder, our Dv here measures one when the respondents give the lowest Ptv to each and every party (excluding the M5s) and zero otherwise. Second, we observe the difference in judgement between the Pd and the Pdl (and therefore their mutual exclusiveness) by taking the absolute difference between their Ptv's. This measure, which we call *Ptv certainty*, has a higher value when the Pd and the Pdl are given two very different Ptv's, and a lower value when they are evaluated similarly. The range, then, runs from zero ($Ptv\ Pd = Ptv\ Pdl$) to nine (one Ptv is 1 and the other Ptv is 10). The term «certainty» is justified by the fact that the greater the absolute difference between the two Ptv's, the more a voter's choice is predetermined, and thus the smaller the chance that he/she will be convinced by the other party. Given that for those who give the lowest value to all Ptv's the difference between the Ptv of the Pd and that of the Pdl will always be zero, the second model will be estimated on the sub-sample of respondents who are open to party competition, i.e. the same observed in fig. 3.

The social-structural predictors that we include in the model are the respondent's age (measured in years, centred around the sample mean), gender (a dummy where 1 = female; 0 = male), level of education (an ordinal variable with five ascending categories going from low to high education, centred around the median), degree of attendance to religious services (an ordinal variable with four ascending categories going from «never» to «weekly attendance», centred around the median), and the geo-political area of residence. The latter is divided into five categories: the North-West (used here as a reference category, including the regions of Piemonte, Valle d'Aosta, Lombardia, and Liguria), the North-East (the so called «white area», including Trentino-Alto Adige/Sud Tirolo, Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia), the Centre-North (the so called «red belt area», including Emilia-Romagna, Toscana, Umbria and the Marche), the Centre-South (Lazio, Abruzzo, Molise and Sardegna), and the South (Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria, Sicilia). These variables help us generate a socio-demographic «profile» of the disengaged citizens, and of those who are more or less open to competition between the Pd and the Pdl.

Another three individual-level variables that are included in the model are three dummies indicating the ideological orientation, or self-definition, of the respondents: one for left-wing voters, one for right-wing voters, and one for the voters who refuse to position themselves on

the left-right *spectrum*⁸. These variables are useful to see whether and how disengagement and availability to switch between blocks have been associated in different ways with people from different ideological identities (including those who refuse to have such an identity at all). Finally, the model predicting the Ptv difference between Pd and Pdl requires one additional control variable, namely one that captures the level of the highest Ptv between the two considered⁹.

Finally, we add to the model two macro predictors observed at the month level: a dummy indicating the months where the Pdl and the Pd were part of the parliamentary grand coalition jointly supporting the technocratic government¹⁰, and the passage of time, assessed by a progressive number associated to each month, going from 1 in March 2011 to 21 in February 2013. Both variables are rather important for our argument, as we contend that the parliamentary coalition between the two parties is the main motive for the loosening of the psychological boundary between ideological blocks. However, while the first indicator is meant to capture the extent to which our dependent variables vary during the grand coalition period, the second will tell us whether their variation *lasted* even after the end of the agreement. Thus, to observe a significant coefficient for these two variables while controlling for individual characteristics would essentially prove that the coalition was associated with the public's evaluations.

⁸ The reference category in this case consists of the voters who position themselves at the centre of the left-right scale.

⁹ This control is necessary as our dependent variable is a compound measure. In fact, the difference between the two Ptv's has a theoretical maximum that inevitably depends on the level of the highest one. Let's take as an example a supporter of the Pdl who gives it a Ptv of nine. In the case of this respondent, the difference between the two Ptv's can range from zero, in the case that he/she gives a Ptv of nine to the Pd as well, to eight, in the case that he/she gives the Pd a Ptv of one. However, if another respondent, also a supporter of the Pdl, gives it a Ptv of four, then the difference can be at the most three points, because it is not possible to give the Pd a Ptv smaller than one. Not considering the level of the highest Ptv creates artificial heterogeneity in the measurement, which needs to be compensated for by adding among the predictors the value of the largest Ptv (among the two considered here). The correlation of this variable with our dependent variable is expected to be always positive and highly significant, although this result is purely *mechanical*, and thus not interesting from a substantive point of view. Note that omitting this variable from the model leads to very similar coefficients for the other variables of interest (in some cases even with a larger magnitude) but also to a substantial drop in the model fit.

¹⁰ The dummy has value one for the months from November 2011 to November 2012 included, and zero for the months before and after this period.

Given the hierarchical structure of our data, with individuals nested within months, we model our dependent variables in a multilevel setting. Multilevel modelling allows us to set the effect of some variables as *fixed*, i.e. constant among the time points of our series, and of other variables as *random*, i.e. free to vary across months. In our case, we specify a simple *random intercept* model, hence controlling for each month's specific sample the effect on our dependent variables, without having this effect absorbed by other predictors, while at the same time accounting for the non-independence between observations belonging to the same month. Because disengagement is operationalised as a dummy variable, we model it assuming a binomial distribution with a logit link function. For the Ptv difference between Pd and Pdl we rely on a more common linear modelling. The models are estimated via restricted maximum likelihood, using the package *Lme4* for R.

Table 1 shows the results of the two models. The magnitudes of the two sets of coefficients are not comparable to each other, as they represent in one case variations of the linear predictor (for the logit model of disengagement) and in the other variations of the actual distribution of the dependent variable (for the linear model of Ptv difference). However, we can analyse the direction and the statistical significance of the effects in each model, in order to assess what characterises disengaged citizens and what determines people's availability among the Pd and the Pdl.

Focusing on the first model, we note that more educated people, and people who more frequently attend religious services, are significantly less likely to feel disengaged from the traditional political parties. This makes sense if we consider that disengaged citizens are expected to be generally more socially marginalised than people who are positively engaged, and both education and church attendance are indicators of positive social integration. Moreover, all our indicators related to ideological self-labelling are significantly associated to the refusal to express a party preference for all parties. First of all, both being positioned on the left and on the right is associated with a lower probability to be disengaged, with a stronger effect for left-wing voters than for right-wing voters. In other words, citizens who state their own ideological identity to be either left-wing or right-wing are more likely than those at the centre to be attracted by at least one among the (relevant) competing parties. This finding suggests a certain degree of detachment of «centre» voters from the political supply, which nicely confirms what Itanes scholars (2013) have found on the basis of a different dataset. This is also implicitly a confirmation of the bipolar nature of Italian political divisions as well as

TAB. 1. *Multilevel regression models for disengagement (dummy) and Ptv certainty between Pd and Pdl (0 = minimum certainty; 9 = maximum certainty). The table reports the point estimates (β) and Standard errors*

	Dependent Variable			
	Disengagement – <i>Logit</i>		Ptv Certainty Pd/Pdl – <i>Ols</i>	
	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Max Ptv (Pd and Pdl)			0.881	(0.004)
Age	-0.001	(0.001)	0.009	(0.001)
Gender (female)	0.023	(0.033)	-0.021	(0.017)
Education	-0.047	(0.013)	0.121	(0.007)
Church attendance	-0.054	(0.014)	-0.153	(0.008)
North-East	-0.048	(0.056)	0.009	(0.030)
Center-North	-0.050	(0.050)	0.057	(0.026)
Center-South	0.086	(0.045)	-0.047	(0.025)
South	0.047	(0.044)	-0.062	(0.025)
Left	-0.783	(0.057)	1.160	(0.029)
Right	-0.262	(0.058)	0.315	(0.030)
Not positioned on l-r	1.587	(0.053)	0.155	(0.036)
Joint support government	0.330	(0.077)	-0.106	(0.050)
Time	0.033	(0.006)	0.007	(0.004)
Intercept	-2.906	(0.098)	2.912	(0.058)
Var (intercept)	0.0216		0.0098	
Observations	49,901		43,694	
Groups	21		21	
Log likelihood	-14,378		-87,416	

of the weakening of the left-right ideological constraints on the «centrist» voters. Second, people who refuse to admit any ideological affiliation by not positioning themselves on the left-right axis are more likely to have the same attitude as the «centrist» voters. This is again a confirmation that among «centrist» voters there are many whose attitudes are similar to those of the respondents who do not place themselves on the left-right *continuum*. Such a tendency reflects the one observed for left-wing and right-wing voters, namely that ideological self-identifications in Italy are (still) strongly associated to party evaluations, and thus refusing to be associated with such labels in all probability is united with the tendency not to be attracted by any of the relevant party options. On these grounds, we could define «centrist» voters and those who do not place themselves on the left-right continuum as voters who are or became politically marginalised from the bipolar competition peculiar of the Second Republic.

Our macro-level predictors, i.e. the presence of the grand coalition and the passage of time, have both a strong positive and significant effect. This implies, first, that in the months where the Pd and the Pdl

joined a parliamentary coalition, citizens' disengagement, on average, increased; and second, that this tendency remained also in the following three months, during the electoral campaign before the elections. This confirms what was observed in fig. 2, and holds even after taking into account the «usual suspect» variables at an individual level. Thus, we conclude that both the joint support by the two main parties and the two-faced pattern of competition were linked prior to the elections to an increasing citizens' disengagement from the traditional political parties.

Moving on to the second model, some effects change substantively, while others maintain a similar profile. First of all, we note that older citizens are more «certain» about their choice between the Pd and the Pdl, that is to say, they are less likely to switch between them. This finding is rather intuitive, as older citizens are more likely to have developed a voting *habit*, and thus to be relatively harder to be influenced by different party appeals. We also find that education has the same effect as age in making up voters' minds about their party preference, while the coefficient of church attendance goes in the opposite direction. In other words, our data shows that more religious people are more open to switching between the Pd and the Pdl, when holding everything else constant, while more educated people are more likely to take a side. Finally, we find a significant tendency to be more certain among the Pd and the Pdl in the Centre-North, and to be less certain in the South. Both these findings make sense if we keep in mind that the red regions of the Centre-North are possibly the last territories that are clearly identified with a partisan affiliation (for the Pd, or in general for left-wing parties), while the South has recently given several signals of a generalized refusal of the two main parties (see for instance the Sicilian regional elections of October 2012). The coefficients of the three categories of ideological self-identification are all positive and significant, suggesting that both left-wing and right-wing citizens, and those who do not identify themselves using ideological categories, evaluate the Pd and the Pdl differently than voters at the centre. Here, again, the coefficient associated with left-wing voters is much stronger than the other two groups, indicating that people who place themselves on the left are more certain about their party preference (presumably for the Pd). Interestingly, those who refuse to place themselves on the left-right range tend to be more certain about their evaluations among the Pd and the Pdl. This is somewhat counter-intuitive, as one would expect that people who refuse ideological labels are also more likely to regard the two parties in a similar way.

As for the case of first model, the macro-level indicators confirm what can be observed in the figures. First, the Pd/Pdl coalition in support of the Monti government is negatively associated with Ptv certainty, indicating that during the months of the grand coalition there has in fact been a slight depolarization among the two electorates. Second, the effect of time is not distinguishable from zero, i.e. there is no trend of growing reciprocal availability between the supporters of the Pd and the Pdl. In other words, following the end of the grand coalition and the beginning of the electoral campaign, the degree of mutual-exclusiveness between the evaluations of the two parties returned to the levels that it had before the events of 2011 forced the formation of the technocratic cabinet.

These results add an interesting detail to the overall picture of how voters' perceptions of the political space might have been affected by the experience of the parliamentary coalition in support of the technocratic government. Essentially, our data shows that the legacy of the joint, *but contentious*, support for the Monti Government did not open a «breach» between left and right blocks, hence reducing the polarization of the electorate along the ideological cleavage. Quite the contrary, the most enduring reaction was an increased feeling of disengagement from all political parties. In other words, our data shows the makings of the subsequent electoral earthquake, which made the emergence of a third block possible¹¹.

¹¹ Our findings do not exclude that other factors might have contributed to both the reciprocal availability of the Pd and Pdl's electorates and disengagement. In particular, two important candidates are the voters' perceptions of the economic situation, which might have fueled people's political frustration, and the evaluation of the government's work. Unfortunately, such individual-level indicators are not available in our data for all the months included in the observation. However, to make sure that such explanations do not overrule our own, we replicated our analyses including those variables, to test whether their inclusion in the model would decrease the significance of our findings. While both retrospective and prospective economic evaluations, and evaluations of the government's performance, have a significant effect on both our dependent variables, their inclusion in the model does not alter the substantive results reported here. When choosing to report the models based on the largest amount of data available, as we did here, we recognise that additional factors played a role in the phenomena observed. Yet we note that those factors are indeed additional, not alternative, to our explanation.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This article argues that the choice of a grand coalition government might have been the right thing to do to reassure the financial markets during the sovereign debt crisis in autumn 2011, but it had (unintended) discouraging consequences among the voters.

By observing monthly changes of party evaluations in a sample of the public opinion we find that, first, there has been a slight increase in the *reciprocal availability* between the electorates of the Pd and the Pdl, although this effect vanished as soon as the Pdl withdrew its support from the technocratic government and started the electoral campaign. Secondly, we show that the months of the technocratic government also led to a high degree of *disengagement* from the traditional parties among the public. Nevertheless, in this case the growing trend continued even after the beginning of the electoral campaign. In other words, while an increased tendency by the voters to consider the main left-wing and right-wing parties as similarly attractive lasted only for the frame of the parties' temporary armistice, the tendency to feel disengaged from the traditional parties remained to a certain extent even beyond that period, lasting at least until the election in February 2013.

A lack of data and space limits impede us from analysing the reported electoral behaviour at the February 2013 elections of the respondents who have been refusing to express any positive party preference over the period we considered. Nonetheless, the theoretical rationale of our analysis is that the «political earthquake» of the election of 2013 may have been produced by the choices of the parties themselves, i.e. their inability to cope with the brand-new experience of a grand coalition brought about by necessity in a moment of economic emergency.

Hard times can call for political responsibility. If a government of technocrats led by a respected and internationally-recognised character such as Mario Monti succeeded in calming the attacks of the financial markets, the same attempt was not perceived by the voters as a final loosening of the long-lasting conflict between the Pd and the Pdl. On the contrary, the two-faced behaviour that the two parties adopted during those months was perceived by many citizens as an attempt to *fool* the electorate. It does not come as a surprise that the slogan «sono tutti uguali» (all parties are the same), largely promoted by the leader of the M5s Beppe Grillo, became very popular among so many citizens.

An Italian reader might comment that the Italian party system is completely different from the German one, both in terms of type of competition and the centrality of particular actors (we refer here to the

twenty-year protagonism of the Pdl leader, Silvio Berlusconi). We agree: Italy is not Germany. Nonetheless, what we argue here is that Italian voters, as citizens and individuals, are not different from German ones. They both make up their mind when they have to vote on the basis of similar types of calculations. We have already pointed out that the electoral consequences of German grand coalitions looked similar to the ones of the 2013 Italian election (i.e. negative for the coalition partners), apart from the remarkably large magnitude of the latter. We claim that this might be a reaction to the two-faced behaviour of the two main Italian parties. Thus, at the end, the decision made by Pdl and Pd to form *only* a parliamentary coalition in November 2011 seems to have backfired among their voters.

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