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# **Leaders as cognitive shortcuts: on the representation of political competition at the European elections of 2014 in Italy**

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## **Abstract**

The huge success of the Democratic Party at the last European Parliament election in Italy has been widely interpreted as due to the unusual ability of its new leader Matteo Renzi to mobilise support for his party in an era of candidate-oriented and valence politics in which political leaders' personal characteristics are crucial for vote choices and party performances. Framing the last EP elections as a sign of the overwhelming importance of personalised politics and personalised voting, however, does not tell us everything there is to know about the role of leaders in voters' decisions. According to the literature, in fact, leaders are not only a collection of personal traits and characteristics exerting short-term effects on voting behaviour, but also cognitive shortcuts that help decision-making by simplifying the complexity of the political environment. Within this framework, we investigate whether leader evaluations, in the form of confidence ratings, provide information about how Italian voters perceived the structure of political debate at the 2014 EP elections. Our results confirm that judgments of leaders imply specific representations of political competition, of which we try to outline some general features.

## **Keywords**

2014 EP elections, leaders, political competition, cognitive shortcuts, leader evaluation, majority/opposition scheme

## **Introduction**

The results of the last European Parliament (EP) election in Italy can be considered an anomaly in light of the expectation that government parties should perform worse than opposition and small parties at such 'second order' elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980). This is due to the huge success of the currently incumbent party, i.e. the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD), whose performance (with 40.8% of the vote) has been interpreted by many as directly linked to the recent rise of Matteo Renzi. According to some, the new PD

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<sup>1</sup> Mariano Cavataio wrote the Introduction. Stefano Camatarri wrote the following three sections. The Conclusion was written jointly by the two authors.

and government leader played a key role in his party's success by exploiting his considerable popularity among wide-ranging segments of the electorate and public opinion (e.g. Campi 2014; Diamanti 2014). According to others, the PD's success was facilitated by the ability of its leader to recapture the support of centre-left voters who had turned their backs on the party at the general election of 2013 (e.g. Colloca and Vignati 2014; D'Alimonte 2014; Gualmini 2014a, 2014b). A key indicator relied on by both these accounts is the high level of popular confidence enjoyed by Renzi before and after the last European elections. As is apparent from Figure 1, these levels, although slightly decreasing after the second half of 2014, otherwise remained stable over the course of that year. In addition, they appear considerably higher than those for other political figures (except for Giorgio Napolitano), which clearly indicates the existence of a honeymoon effect (Poletti, Segatti and Vezzoni 2015).

[Figure 1 about here]<sup>2</sup>

Although the above two hypotheses about the PD's success contrast with one another, they both imply the centrality of leadership – and in particular of leader evaluation – in explaining vote choice at the 2014 EP election in Italy. This is in line with the general expectation that elections are increasingly characterised by candidate-oriented voting in which partisan loyalties are replaced by a more a-partisan mobilisation and more direct linkages between voters and candidates (Manin 1997; Dalton, McAllister and Wattenberg 2000; Poguntke and Webb 2005; Blondel *et al.* 2010; Calise 2010; Aarts, Blais and Schmitt 2011; Dalton, Farrell and McAllister 2011; Dalton 2013). After all, we live in an era of candidate-oriented (Wattenberg 1991) and valence politics (Stokes 1992) in which political leaders' personal characteristics are crucial for vote choices and party performances (e.g. Barisione 2006, 2009). According to this literature, cognitive mobilisation has changed the calculus of political decision-making for several voters over the past few decades, so that many cognitively mobilised citizens tend always to give more weight to candidate evaluations as part of their calculus of voting, at the expense of traditional party loyalties (e.g. Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1984; Popkin 1995; Dalton 2013).

Despite the fact that this conclusion is neither completely confirmed by the literature (e.g. Aardal and Binder 2011) nor universally shared within the scientific community (e.g. Katz

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<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 was constructed using survey data accessible through the Dipartimento per l'informazione e l'editoria – Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri website. We chose to present the findings of the surveys carried out by the Ixé Institute because they are the most extensive time series of Italian public opinion in relation to the period of interest. Moreover, they rely on a uniform sampling design and the same system of data collection.

2011), we believe that analysing the PD's success through the lens of 'personalised voting' (Baldini and Legnante 2000) and the 'personal vote' (Calise 2010) fails to capture all aspects of the role of leaders in voters' decision-making at that election. In particular, it does not tell us anything about the importance of individuals' evaluations of leaders for how they perceived and interpreted the political debate (e.g. Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit and Rich 2001), which is precisely the issue we intend to deal with in this article. Citizens' assessments of the main competing leaders in a survey context will take a central role from this point of view. Assuming in fact that leaders provide voters with cognitive shortcuts allowing them to make judgments and political decisions (e.g. Barisione 2007), our goal, taking the 2014 EP election in Italy as a case study, will be to test whether leaders' confidence ratings behave as a summary measure of specific representations of the political competition. The reason why we rely on this kind of indicator is quite straightforward. Indeed, it seems quite rational to believe that, as compared to the detailed promises made by a party at election time, the overall trustworthiness and competence of party leaders nowadays have a more central role in voters' reasoning and decision-making (e.g. Page 1978; Kinder 1986).

The remainder of this contribution is structured as follows. In the following section we will sketch the theoretical and methodological framework on which we rely. In the section after that we will move to the presentation and discussion of our analyses. Finally, the article reports some concluding thoughts on the findings, and some suggestions for further research.

### **Theoretical intuitions and methodological aspects**

In what sense were leader evaluations important at the 2014 European elections in Italy? Are we dealing with individual assessments of specific and independent leader-objects, or with networks and combinations of ratings that can be summarised in a sort of collective map of political objects? It is one thing, in fact, to say that degrees of affection for leaders are due to idiosyncratic and subjective factors; it is another thing to say that they are driven by ideological factors and/or political predispositions that play an active role in structuring individual-level attitudes (Baldassarri and Schadee 2004). Clearly, selecting one or the other option can lead to very different outcomes in the related analysis. What we intend to do here is to follow the second path. As a matter of fact, we are interested in testing whether voters at the 2014 EP election were characterised by a systematic arrangement of ratings towards leaders as opposed to detached (and probably incoherent) evaluations of them. Our primary goal, in this sense, is to discover to what extent leaders, apart from their possible effects on voting behaviour, worked as summary coordinates of voters' perceptions of the structure of

political debate at the last European elections. Taking this analytic perspective should allow us, we expect, to verify the existence of consistent patterns of judgment towards competing political actors. Furthermore, such judgments should result in a coherent representation of political competition among voters.

Crucial, from this point of view, is the theoretical notion of political space. Usually this concept refers to specific cognitive artefacts functional for a correct mapping and sorting of the political environment. A typical example of these is the left-right ideological dimension (e.g. Barnes *et al.* 1979; Hix 1999a; Hix and Lord 1997; MacDonald, Listhaug, and Rabinowitz 1991; Van der Eijk and Niemoller 1983). Although there have been disputes about the real dimensionality of the political space in the past (Converse 2006; Duckitt 2001; Eagly and Chaiken 1998; Feldman 2003; Kerlinger 1984), what we here assume is the existence of a one-dimensional structure of competition, which is a fairly standard assumption in the literature (e.g. Poole and Rosenthal 1997, 2007). More specifically, we conceptualise such structure in terms of a unified bipolar concept, extended between the two extremes of a one-dimensional continuum. As anticipated above, its internal components will not consist here of political parties to be located along the derived space. Rather, they will rely on voters' assessments of competing leaders and personalities. Indeed, as normally happens when placing parties along the left-right axis, even for political personalities (leaders, candidates and representatives) it is possible to elaborate a systematic organisation of evaluations within a cognitive space (e.g. Bafumi and Herron 2010). Moreover, this strategy will allow us to deal effectively with the issue we are interested in: did leaders work as cognitive crutches, assisting voters to interpret and map political competition at the last EP elections in Italy?

The framework just outlined has important technical and methodological implications. Indeed, a one-dimensional ideological structure needs specific statistical techniques in order to be properly assessed. We are not referring here to analytical tools of data reduction such as factor analysis. Such a solution, in fact, tends improperly to split the structure into two different monopolar concepts (e.g. Van Schuur and Kiers 1994).<sup>3</sup> This is especially true in the case of ordered-categorical survey items like so-called Likert scales (Van der Eijk and Rose 2015). For this reason we prefer here to focus on instruments such as one-multidimensional scaling techniques. Indeed, as they are based on the assumption that both subjects (e.g. voters) and stimuli (e.g. judgments towards political objects) can be placed on the same latent

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<sup>3</sup> In several analyses, for example, some applications of factor analysis have counter-intuitively suggested that 'liberalism' and 'conservatism' constitute two separate and independent factors, rather than a single bipolar factor (Conover and Feldman 1981; Krosnick and Weisberg 1988; Weisberg 1980).

dimension, they seem to be very suitable for testing the existence of bipolar ideological structures (e.g. Van Schuur 1984; Giampaglia 1990).<sup>4</sup> Clearly, such a choice does not necessarily imply the use of descriptive techniques only. As a matter of fact, inference analysis remains an achievable goal under such analytical conditions, although it will not be pursued here.

Let us finally say something about the data employed. First, they are drawn from a representative sample of the Italian population assembled some weeks before the election.<sup>5</sup> This entails various constraints and implications. With regard to the temporal dimension of the survey, for example, dealing with pre-election data clearly prevents us from analysing the actual behaviour of voters. Indeed, strictly speaking, these data regard individual voting intentions, which are by definition still open to change over subsequent periods of the election campaign, at least within specific groups of voters (e.g. Barisione, Catellani and De Sio 2011). Moreover, they are affected by a variety of the distortions that often afflict surveys (Natale 2009). Nevertheless, the aim of our analysis is not to explain actual voting behaviour at the 2014 EP election, but rather to understand how Italian voters perceived political competition among leaders while the campaign was still ongoing. This makes pre-election data adequate for our purposes. It will therefore be on the basis of this scientific tool that we will try to address our research questions, so as to shed light on the cognitive dynamics governing the use of leaders as instruments through which voters orient themselves in a political environment (Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991).

### **Analysis and results: the structure of voters' judgments of leaders**

In the previous section we said we were interested in finding out whether judgments of the main competing leaders at the 2014 EP election in Italy followed a more or less systematic pattern, somehow underlying a sufficiently structured and coherent organisation of political beliefs and attitudes (Van Dijk 1998). In operational terms, a first step in this direction is to observe the levels of confidence in each leader by voting intention for the main parties according to their political area (Table 1).<sup>6</sup> The first row presents the average levels of

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<sup>4</sup> For further analyses focusing on the Italian case using this approach, see for example: Baldassarri and Schadee (2004); Baldassarri (2005); De Sio and Schadee (2013).

<sup>5</sup> The survey was carried out by the Tecnè Institute in April 2014. The sample size was 1,000 and interviews were conducted using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI).

<sup>6</sup> Confidence in leaders has been derived from responses to the following question: *"I am going to read out the names of some Italian political leaders. How much do you trust each of them: a great deal, quite a lot, a little or not at all?"* Unfortunately, due to data limitations, the number of leaders included, as well as the number

confidence in each leader among respondents generally, assessed on a four point rating scale rescaled from 1 to 10. The remaining parts of the table instead show the variations from these values within each group of voters. To facilitate understanding, we report in bold the average ratings that exceed the sample mean. What immediately stands out is that respondents tend to trust leaders associated with their own political area more than they do other leaders. This is a rather common finding in the study of leader effects (e.g. Garzia and Viotti 2011). Nevertheless, what we wish to stress here is that the division between positive and negative judgments in 2014 does not seem completely to overlap with the traditional left-right scheme, but rather marks a contrast between the two incumbent leaders (Renzi and Alfano) and their two main opponents (Berlusconi and Grillo, respectively).

[Table 1 about here]

Against this background, we should also stress that confidence levels in a particular leader seem to influence (at least in aggregate) the ratings attributed to all the others. One clear example of this is certainly the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five-star Movement, M5S). Among its voters evaluations of the party leader Beppe Grillo appear significantly more positive than the sample mean (+2.9), while his three opponents fall below this level. The same applies to centre-right voters in relation to Silvio Berlusconi, while the cases of Matteo Renzi and Angelino Alfano are slightly more complex. Undoubtedly, the two governmental leaders at the time of the election are the only ones to attract confidence ratings higher than the means among voters of the incumbent parties (+1.2 and +0.5 respectively). Nevertheless, they also appear to benefit from significant levels of support among the electorate generally, as is attested to by their above-average confidence ratings among those who are undecided about their future voting choices. Therefore, it seems appropriate to argue that identification with the party voted for does not simply lead to a positive evaluation of the reference leader, but implies a systematic network of evaluations involving all the leaders who are part of a competition.

An analysis of the organisation of judgments carried out through traditional descriptive techniques (factor, cluster and scaling analysis) confirms the plausibility of a placement of leaders into two opposing groups. As mentioned above, we report below the outcome of the

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of response categories, is quite limited. It remains to be seen, therefore, whether research using more or better indicators would ~~come~~ allow us to come to the same conclusions.

one-dimensional scaling. ~~The technique is known as ‘unfolding’ (Coombs 1964), while t~~The programme version we used is the ALSCAL package (Alternating Least Squares)<sup>7</sup> provided as part of SPSS. The logic underlying its algorithm is the creation of a spatial arrangement of the selected items on the basis of their reciprocal distances, inferred from voters’ judgments towards each leader within the data matrix. Such a process is regulated by a ‘stress’ algorithm, which compares the Euclidean distances between the selected items within the output space with those present in the original matrix (Kruskal and Wish 1978; Young 1970). According to the demanding Kruskal parameters, a spatial solution becomes acceptable only when its stress function is included between 0 and 0.15. Our one-dimensional solution has a stress value of 0.01. Moreover, the stress and squared correlation (RSQ), which explains the proportion of variance of the scaled data (for each respondent and then averaged) on an interval ranging from 0 to 1 is above .99. Therefore, the fit of the model is generally acceptable.

[Figure 2 about here]

Leaving aside any further technical details, let us now describe the substantive aspects of this analysis. First of all, it should be noted that one-dimensional models like the one presented above appear closely related to the Downsian notion of voter utility framed in terms of spatial proximity (Downs 1957). Within this framework, voters tend to prefer parties which are closer to their ideal point along the left-right ideological dimension. However, our results look pretty inconsistent with such a criterion of proximity. Such observation is suggested both by the apparent contrast between the items ‘Renzi’ and ‘Grillo’ (these are the real opposing stimuli, or rather the interpretative key able to explain the scale obtained), and by the proximity between ‘Renzi’ and ‘Alfano’, as well as between ‘Grillo’ and ‘Berlusconi’.

All these elements lead us to assume the existence of an alternative standard of judgment, not proximity-based but rather following the line of conflict between who actually is on the majority and who is on the opposition side. We will define it as a ‘majority/opposition’ scheme. In accordance with previous research on voters’ representations of political competition in Italy (e.g. Baldassarri and Schadee 2004, 2006; Baldassarri 2005),

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<sup>7</sup> For a general overview of ALSCAL and the family of techniques to which it belongs (multi-dimensional scaling) see for example: Schiffman, [Reynolds](#) and [Young](#) (1981); cf Coxon (1982); Cox and Cox (1994). For a substantive application of ALSCAL to Italian public-opinion data, see instead: Schadee, Segatti and Vezzoni (2011).



we assume this latter to imply a simple decision-making mechanism, whereby voters evaluate leaders according to the following reasoning algorithm:

- If the leader belongs to the side (whether the Government or the Opposition) with which I identify → **positive judgment**
- If the leader belongs to the side (whether the Government or the Opposition), with which I do not identify → **negative judgment**.<sup>8</sup>

To clarify the effectiveness of this statement we will now ask ourselves about the spread and the degree of specificity of such bipolar organisation of judgments. How many (and especially which) respondents adopt that pattern of evaluations? Unfortunately, due to the poor fit of Alfano within the assumed scheme (only 9% of our sample evaluated him in accord with the algorithm above), we decided to restrict the scope of this analysis to the main three leaders of the competition: one (Matteo Renzi) belonging to the Government side and the other two (Grillo and Berlusconi) belonging to the Opposition side. Overall, about 40% of our respondents adapted to the standard of judgment under analysis. This means that about one-and-a-half in four of them systematically structured their ratings toward the three main leaders according to a majority/opposition scheme. This is a considerable proportion of our sample, especially if compared with previous results in this field (cf Baldassarri and Schadee 2004, Baldassarri 2005). Still, the remaining 60% of voters must have relied on an alternative criterion, although not one that was necessarily systematic or inter-subjectively shared, for sorting these leaders.

Such expectation leads us to deal with two different issues: first, the existence of possible violations of the majority/opposition scheme; secondly, the characteristics which are associated with that phenomenon. In relation to the latter point, a useful piece of evidence is the one presented in Figure 3. It shows that the majority/opposition scheme is relatively more widespread on the left, and particularly among centre-left respondents, accounting for 69.5% of them.

[Figure 3 about here]

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<sup>8</sup> In order to assess the reasoning algorithm described above, we recoded the original Likert scales measuring confidence in leaders deriving a new dichotomous variable contrasting those respondents who expressed a great deal or quite a lot of trust in Renzi and Alfano with those who expressed little or no confidence in Berlusconi and Grillo, and *vice versa*.

Clearly, this does not mean that the ideological orientation of the voter is the main element affecting the adoption of one form of representation or another. Such a statement could be validated only through more in-depth analyses. It remains the case, however, that those who place themselves on the left part of the ideological spectrum – which coincides with the part occupied by the main governing party – are significantly more likely to adopt this logic of representation.

The next step should then be to understand why, in the other ideological regions, this is not so. In this regard, we recall here how many commentators pointed out, both before and after the EP election, that Matteo Renzi's popularity in 2014 seemed (and effectively was) far from being confined within the boundaries of his own party (e.g. D'Alimonte 2014). If that is true, we should find at least discrete levels of confidence in Matteo Renzi not only among those who intended to vote for the PD at the 2014 EP election, but also among those who intended to vote for other parties or were undecided. More specifically, we discovered that, among centre-right parties' supporters, positive evaluations of Silvio Berlusconi were much more associated with positive evaluations of Matteo Renzi than was the case among those who voted for leftist parties. Similarly, it might be that, among M5S voters, having a high level of confidence in Beppe Grillo is less likely to imply low levels of confidence in Matteo Renzi than happens among the supporters of other parties. So, even if in aggregate the majority/opposition scheme appears to be the prominent mode of interpreting political competition in 2014, it could be that widespread support for Matteo Renzi at the last EP election led to it being partially disregarded among specific groups of voters.

The empirical strategy we followed in order to test this assumption was to calculate the co-occurrence of positive judgments of Renzi, on the one hand, and of Berlusconi and Grillo respectively, on the other. Afterwards, we calculated the differences in percentage points between the share of these co-occurrent judgements within different political areas (those shown in Table 1) and their percentages in the sample. This helped us to develop an initial and very approximate idea of how judgments inconsistent with the majority/opposition scheme we originally assumed were distributed among different sectors of the electorate. The results are presented in Figure 4 and are rather in line with our expectations. As is noticeable, the highest level of co-occurrent positive evaluations of Berlusconi and Renzi is found among those who intended to vote for centre-right parties (+16.5 percentage points above the sample mean). A similar result, although less evident, applies to M5S voters. In this case too, in fact, high levels of trust in the reference leader (Beppe Grillo) are relatively more likely to be

associated with a positive assessment of Matteo Renzi than among other party supporters. Specifically, they are about four percentage points above the sample mean.

[Figure 4 about here]

At first sight, these findings may look somewhat surprising. Indeed, the occurrence of joint positive assessments of the current Prime Minister and one of his main opponents might seem counterintuitive. Yet the simple fact that we would have expected a different result does not allow us to conclude that some voters had mistaken (or worse, irrational) representations of the political debate. Rather, violating a pre-arranged sequence of judgments would necessarily imply the existence of one or more alternative ways of reasoning about politics and representing political competition (e.g. Baldassarri 2005).

Based on this possibility, we should then reflect on the reasons why some voters, notwithstanding their intention to vote for an opposition party, ultimately had a good opinion of the current incumbent: the Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. In the first case, contingent issues such as decline, fragmentation, and polarisation in the centre-right camp may have played a role (Poletti, Segatti and Vezzoni 2015). Indeed, the low-key election campaign of Silvio Berlusconi, built around the idea of the beginning of a period of political reform in collaboration with the PD might have led some centre-right voters to perceive Renzi as politically close to their reference leader. In the case of Grillo, instead, an alternative way of representing public debate could have been the triggering factor. Specifically, a perceived dichotomy between the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ political establishment (with Renzi and Grillo respectively on the first side and Berlusconi on the other), may have led some M5S voters to express positive assessments of both their reference leader and Matteo Renzi. Clearly, further research will be needed in order to test these assumptions. For now, as Figure 2 clearly shows, we can confirm that overall the majority/opposition scheme emerges as the main way in which the political debate was represented at the 2014 EP election in Italy. Within this framework, minor pathways of perceiving the proximity between leaders seem to be equally plausible as well as worthy of further investigation.

## **Conclusion**

As stated at the beginning of this contribution, the outcome of the 2014 EP election in Italy represented a great opportunity for scholars to assess the centrality of political leaders in voters’ decision-making. As a matter of fact, the surprising percentage won by the PD –

40.8% of the total vote, a result equalled only by the Christian Democrats at the 1958 general election – was clearly fostered by the recent rise of the new Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, who helped to change the political climate of the election by claiming to be an outsider with regard to the political status quo. A similar case was the EP election of 1994. At that time, it was the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi who gained resounding electoral success, having presented himself as an outsider with respect to the political class ([see also Poletti, Segatti and Vezzoni 2015](#)). Keeping this parallelism in mind, it is easy to see how the recent debate on the leadership factor at the 2014 EP election in Italy coincides with an already solid and fertile research tradition, dealing with the issue of political personalisation and personalised (or personal) voting in Italy (e.g. Venturino 2000, 2005; Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009; Calise 2010).

Notwithstanding this, it is rather well known that the general argument stressing the importance of leader evaluations in voters' decision-making should not be loaded with excessive explanatory claims. Indeed, the importance of party leaders in how people decide to vote could to some extent be conditional on country-specific factors, such as the institutional arrangements of a political system (e.g. McAllister 1996) or the particular circumstances in which an election is fought (e.g. King 2002).<sup>9</sup> In addition, the impact of political leaders may hinge upon the overall strength of partisan loyalties, so that the weaker these loyalties are, the greater is the expected effect of leaders (Blais 2011). But there is also a further matter, on which we focused most of our attention: if in recent decades leaders have become the most prominent and powerful feature of election campaigns (Scarrow, Webb and Farrell 2000), then perhaps they have come increasingly to fashion their parties in their own image, so as to become the prism through which the messages of their parties are communicated (Curtice and Holmberg 2005).

If this is true, then it would be reasonable to argue that the overall trustworthiness and competence of party leaders are the main elements on which voters rely when thinking about politics and taking political decisions. Recent studies have already investigated how this expectation is more or less reflected in direct effects of leader evaluation on vote choice in Italy, both as a case study and in comparative perspective (e.g. Garzia 2012; Garzia and De Angelis 2014). Less attention, however, seems in general to be dedicated to the role of leadership evaluation in understanding how the political debate is perceived and interpreted

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<sup>9</sup> For example, leader effects appear to be stronger in systems and elections where party policies differ little (McAllister 2007; Holmberg and Oscarsson 2011).

by the public. In this contribution we deliberately followed this second path of analysis, until now partially overlooked at least in relation to the debate on the 2014 EP election in Italy.

Within this framework, our analyses substantially confirm the existence of a predominant pattern of leader rating within the electorate, resulting in a plausible representation of the political debate, exactly as expected. Nevertheless, in contrast with many previous empirical explorations, the ordering of the leaders does not resemble the classic opposition between left and right, but rather a dichotomy between majority and opposition. In fact, a set of governmental items, consisting of Matteo Renzi and Angelino Alfano, appears clearly contrasted by the personalities of the two main opposition leaders at the time of the EP elections: Silvio Berlusconi and Beppe Grillo. Such a configuration, which we labelled the majority/opposition scheme, could be interpreted as a possible sign of voters' abilities to adapt their collective representations to a party system constantly in flux (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002). Moreover, as it represents more than a third of our sample (39%), we can conclude that it is a sufficiently shared pattern of judgment within the electorate. Nevertheless, its distribution appeared, at least in ideological terms, rather skewed towards those who locate themselves on the left side of the political spectrum. This led us to look for the existence of alternative ways of perceiving political competition at the 2014 EP election. Specifically, we hypothesised that the supposedly widespread popularity of Matteo Renzi in the months preceding the EP elections could also have found expression in the fact that some respondents, although not intending to vote for his party, were still inclined to a positive judgment in his regard. Our analyses tell us that this is so for 14% of our cases. In addition, further forms of judgment at odds with the predominant majority/opposition scheme could reasonably exist. Therefore, we might be dealing with a not insignificant phenomenon. Future research should better focus on the variability of the ways people perceive and represent political competition at a given election, possibly also investigating their determinants. Clearly, the present contribution can only be a first step in that direction. Nevertheless, it has already provided some substantial findings on how Italian leaders at the 2014 EP election had an impact not simply as a summary of personal characteristics affecting vote choice, but also as cognitive crutches on which voters relied in order to map the salient coordinates of political competition.

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### Supplementary materials

As regards replication materials, the datasets used for the analyses in this essay are available, on request, by contacting the authors.

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## Tables

**Table 1 – Average levels of confidence in the main leaders by voting intention according to the main political areas: differences in percentage points from the sample mean (rescaled: 1 – 10)**

	Renzi	Alfano	Berlusconi	Grillo	(N)
Sample mean	6.1	4.1	3.9	4.2	(926)
<b>Government parties</b> <i>(Democratic Party - New Centre Right - Civic Choice)</i>	<b>+1.2</b>	<b>+0.5</b>	-0.6	-0.9	(328)
<b>Centre-right opposition parties</b> <i>(Forza Italia - North League - Brothers of Italy)</i>	0	-0.2	<b>+2.5</b>	-0.5	(164)
<b>Five-star Movement</b>	-1.7	-0.8	-0.6	<b>+2.9</b>	(160)
<b>Undecided voters</b>	<b>+0.3</b>	<b>+0.7</b>	-0.2	-0.5	(122)

Source: Our elaboration of survey data from the Tecnè Institute, April 2014 (N 926)

## List of Figures (captions)

- Figure 1 Confidence\* in the main Italian political leaders, January-December 2014 (%)\*\*** 2

\*\* Angelino Alfano is the current Minister of the Interior and the leader of the New Centre Right; Silvio Berlusconi is the leader of Forza Italia and has been Prime Minister four times; Beppe Grillo is the leader of the Five-star Movement; Giorgio Napolitano was the 11<sup>th</sup> President of the Republic (from 2006 to 2015); Matteo Renzi is the current Prime Minister and is leader of the Democratic Party; Matteo Salvini is the leader of the Northern League.

Source: Our elaboration of survey data from the Ixè Institute

- Figure 2 Positioning of the main political leaders in 2014 in one-dimensional space** 5

Source: Our elaboration of survey data from the Tecnè Institute, April 2014 (N 894)

- Figure 3 Respondents adopting a majority/opposition judgement scheme by ideological self-placement (%)** 6

Source: Our elaboration of survey data from the Tecnè Institute, April 2014 (N 938)

- Figure 4 Sets of respondents violating the majority/opposition scheme according to their voting intention at the 2014 EP election, differences in percentage points from the sample mean** 7

Source: Our elaboration of survey data from the Tecnè Institute, April 2014 (N 940)