



# The Italian political elites and Europe: Big move, small change?

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## Abstract

This article examines the attitudes of national political elites towards the EU and the recent politicisation of Europe in the Italian party system. Italian political elites have experienced some important transformations in the recent past as a consequence of the emergence of new parties, the re-alignment of other established parties and some structural transformations in their socio-demographic traits. This article shows that positive feelings towards the EU have survived the acute change to the composition of the political elites, and that support for Europe is still widespread. Variations are mainly differences in degree of support. Although opposition to the EU has emerged, this has not occurred in a linear way and remains dispersed, while a Eurosceptic camp able to challenge the mainstream pro-European conduct of the Italian elites is far from being in place.

## Keywords

Elites, EU, Euroscepticism, crisis, survey

## Introduction

Traditionally, Italy has been one of the most pro-European member states of the EU. The wide support for European integration was the result of a consensus between the elites and the masses, but in recent times more critical views have emerged. Over the past decade, the fall in public support for the EU has been impressive: a large electoral market available for a Eurosceptical platform has materialised and parties have started to look at this market with greater interest. The economic crisis adds to this critical scenario, as EU-led austerity measures have been perceived as responsible for the economic stagnation and worsening of the life standards of Italians. The crisis has also been accompanied by a peak in the protest vote and the emergence of radical parties that oppose the EU as part of their uncompromising opposition to the system and its main socio-economic paradigms.

Given the circumstances, Italy represents an interesting case, where elite attitudes towards the EU can be analysed in a quasi-experimental situation. Some of the main factors determining those

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attitudes (such as party stance, elite composition and popular attitudes) have varied substantially in the past few years. Have the emergence of new parties and the repositioning of established parties affected the traditional pro-EU attitudes of the Italian political elites? For a long time, these elites have been rather unified on Europe and this has secured the loyalty of the national government to the EU. But how unified are Italian elites on Europe after the outbreak of the economic crisis and the important changes that have occurred in their composition?

This article addresses these questions through analysis of the views of political elites on different aspects of the European integration process at this critical juncture. This is done through original data, obtained by a standardised survey questionnaire that was part of a larger comparative project. The article shows that, during the crisis, consensus has indeed disappeared from the Italian political scene. However, despite a public discourse that has become more critical and very much oriented towards inter-party demarcation, the attitudes of the elites are not as polarised as one might expect. Positive feelings towards the EU have survived the crisis era, and the acute changes both to the party system and to the composition of the political elite. Although opposition to the EU really has emerged in this country, this has not occurred in a linear way but remains generally confined and rather dispersed, while a Eurosceptic camp able to challenge the underlying pro-Europeanism of the Italian elites has not yet emerged.

This article is structured as follows. The next section carries out a historical reconstruction of the pattern of attitudes towards the EU and discusses the most recent developments. The following sections present the results of the empirical analysis: first, the attitudes of the Italian political elites are described with respect to the most substantial dimensions of the EU process; second, these attitudes are explained through the use of causal models that test the explanatory power of different theoretical perspectives. Finally, the conclusion summarises the main results of the article and discusses their theoretical relevance for the broader literature on elites, Europe and Euroscepticism.

## **Background: Elite attitudes towards the EU in the Italian context**

After the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the re-alignment of the Italian left to pro-West and Atlanticist positions, there ceased to be any serious opponents among the Italian political elites to the integration of Europe or the Common Market. By the early 1990s, membership of the EU was consensually considered a necessity, in order to introduce the national economy into the stronger Eurozone and to drive the system to solve the long-standing problems – such as distributive laxity and abuse in the public spending of the domestic government – that were often caused by political clientelism and corruption at home (Dyson and Featherstone, 1996; Ferrera and Gualmini, 2004). Italian public opinion shared the pro-European views of the domestic elites, and for a long time Italian citizens proved to be among the most ardent Europhiles in the continent (Bellucci and Serricchio, 2012).

But with the deepening of the EU process, the pro-European orientation of the Italians started to come into question, and a change in popular attitude became visible (Conti and Memoli, 2015; Di Mauro, 2014; Serricchio, 2012). This can be explained by the fact that the costs of integration started to be perceived as excessive and even to outweigh the benefits, particularly after the entry into force of the Euro and the enlargement to include new central and eastern European member states (Bellucci and Serricchio, 2012). These two processes put unprecedented competitive pressure on Italy, imposing tight constraints on its public finances, transforming the country from a net recipient to a net contributor to the EU budget, and making its goods less economically competitive in the international markets. At that point, party propaganda started to echo the popular unhappiness with the undesired outcomes of integration.

However, beyond propaganda, even during the most critical phases, the members of Italian parties holding public office have always proved loyal to the EU. This phenomenon shows how difficult it is for parties in public office (even when they are not particularly harmonised with the EU trajectory, see Quaglia and Radaelli, 2007) to change the pro-European orientation of national institutions, especially when this is so deeply rooted and the national government has embraced a strategy of loyalty towards the EU (Cotta, 1992; Quaglia, 2005a). Even those parties that in the past were more active in voicing criticisms through their discourse proved on many occasions to be loyal when EU-sensitive decisions had to be taken within parliament or government. To summarise, the recent trend in Italy has been one of firm support for the EU by the political elites who hold public office, accompanied by ambivalence in the parties' central offices (whose position rests between the views of the elites and the attitudes of the majority) on one side, and declining support for the EU by citizens on the other side.

However, in more recent times the emergence of new radical parties, notably the Five Star Movement, has reinforced the opposition camp (Di Virgilio et al., 2014), while some of the established parties have openly attempted to capitalise on citizens' dissatisfaction with the EU. The general elections of 2013 marked a turning point, with the unexpected success of the Five Star Movement which, in its first nationwide electoral campaign, became the first party in the country (with over 25% of the votes). One year later, on the occasion of the European elections of 2014, the same party campaigned against the Euro and in favour of Italy's exit from the Eurozone, the rejection of the major EU financial constraints such as the Fiscal Compact, and even the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean community as an alternative to the EU. On the same occasion, other fringe parties (the Northern League, the Brothers of Italy) aligned themselves with the Five Star Movement on many European issues. Furthermore, *Forza Italia*, the main centre right party, led by former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, started to represent the EU as an enemy, with a campaign that made use of slogans such as 'less Europe in Italy' and stories of EU conspiracy against Italian interests.

It is evident that some parties have made an effort to separate themselves from the mainstream, to politicise the EU issue and to acknowledge the emerging split that more and more divides advocates and opponents of the EU within Italian society. In the end, if one considers the political discourse during the electoral campaign of 2014, party attitudes towards the EU appear to have changed substantially: most of the relevant parties (those that gained seats in the European Parliament) campaigned on a Eurosceptic platform, and about one-third of the votes actually went to parties with a hard Eurosceptic stance.

In this changing context, the following sections map the attitudes towards the EU of the Italian political elites in the period between the general election of 2013 and the European elections of 2014. In this period, these elites have undergone some important transformations, with the emergence of new sizeable parties, the re-positioning of other established parties and a broad generational change accompanied by better gender representation. All these factors have contributed to a modification of the overall structure of political representation at the national level. The aim of the article is to analyse the attitudes of these novel elites towards the EU and to produce a picture that is informed by the most recent developments.

Other studies show that in countries such as Greece, the Eurozone crisis and a massive change to national elite composition has brought about greater inter-party demarcation on the EU and Euroscepticism has become a more ordinary posture (Verney, 2015). Other works document how claims about the undemocratic nature of the EU have become increasingly common among mainstream media and parties, to a point that can be termed the mainstreaming of Euroscepticism (Brack and Startin, 2015). However, none of these works has systematically analysed the attitudes of national elites, despite the very nature of European integration being one of a top-down process

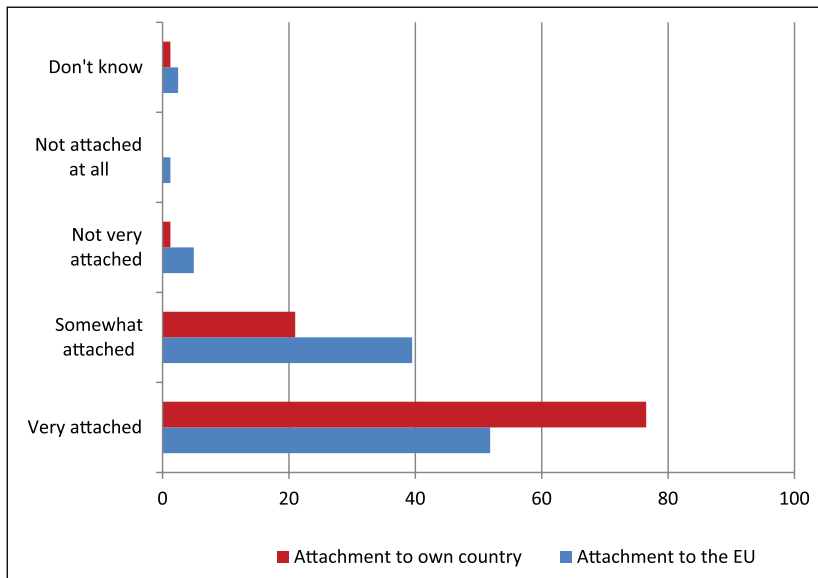
initiated and coordinated by elites and subsequently submitted to the wider public. From this perspective, the analysis of the Italian case will report on the most recent patterns of change in this country, expand our knowledge about the phenomenon of the politicisation of Europe during the crisis and reflect on elite theory about European integration.

## Retrospective and prospective views on the EU

The EU process involves different dimensions of change, and elites display variable combinations of attitudes on matters that concern the nature of the EU polity, its institutional configuration and policy goals, its past and its future. For an accurate analysis of attitudes towards the EU, it is therefore important to analyse preferences across different facets of the EU process. This article covers several of these dimensions, and is based on the analysis of original data from a recent survey of Italian MPs.<sup>1</sup> Elite surveys are rare compared to mass surveys, which have been systematically analysed to gauge public opinion. Certainly, the complexity of conducting a survey of political elites should not be underestimated,<sup>2</sup> and possibly for this reason they are not implemented at regular intervals like mass surveys. This has caused an important flaw in the literature, because a fundamental component of party organisation and democratic representation – the party elites in public office, who have been particularly crucial for the process of European integration since its origins (Hooghe and Marks, 2008; Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970) – is often missing in the empirical research. Exceptions are quite infrequent; a few can be mentioned with respect to the Italian case and the problem of elite attitudes towards the EU (Bellucci, 2005; De Giorgi and Verzichelli, 2012; Roux and Verzichelli, 2010) but these papers are rarely available in English and they certainly need to be updated with the most recent developments. In this article, I will refer to those past studies so that I can insert the analysis of the Italian case into a longer time perspective and can use them as a benchmark against which the new data can be compared. In particular, I will refer to a two-wave survey that was conducted in 2007 and 2009<sup>3</sup> and then mirrored in 2014 by the ENEC project. With the help of these three waves, we can contrast the present attitudes of the Italian elites with those that have emerged in the past (under a centre left and a centre right majority in 2007 and 2009, respectively).

European integration is a multi-dimensional process that has impacts on feelings of attachment and identification with a polity, on mechanisms of political representation and democratic control over political authorities, and on policy scope (Bartolini, 2005: 211; Best et al., 2012). The European menu is rich, and different parties choose different mixes in line with their own agenda and policy priorities, but also in conformity with their short-term strategies on the domestic scene (Neumayer, 2008; Sitter, 2001). Domestic elites develop a mix of responses to the EU in these dimensions; only the extreme positions (hard Euroscepticism and Eurofederalism) are simple, and these are usually taken by a minority, while the mainstream develops a variety of positions that are often less geometrically coherent (Russo and Cotta, 2013). This article will address these problems through the analysis of the multi-dimensional nature of the attitudes of elites, and the direction and overall linearity of these attitudes.

Starting the analysis with the emotive component and making reference to the identity dimension, it is useful to refer first to De Giorgi and Verzichelli (2012), who found that attachment to Europe has been very high among Italian MPs in the past, although it declined from 92.7% in 2007 to 86.5% in 2009 (while attachment to the MPs' own country remained stable in the two waves, at about 94%). In 2014, the same question was put to a sample of Italian MPs by the ENEC project. In this new wave, 91.4% of the respondents declared that they were (very or somewhat) attached to Europe, and 97.5% that they were attached to their own country (Figure 1). Although, the latter shows a stronger feeling of attachment, the connection with the EU is certainly impressive,



**Figure 1.** Attachment of Italian MPs to their own country and to Europe in 2014.

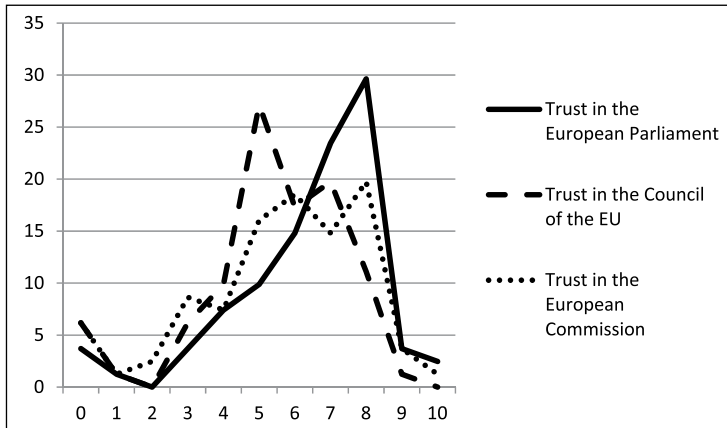
Note: Question: People feel different degrees of attachment to their own country and to Europe. What about you? Are you very attached, somewhat attached, not very attached or not at all attached?

N=81.

particularly when one considers the difficult times during which the survey was conducted, with the economic crisis hitting the country severely and the EU imposing heavy constraints on the national government, something that one might anticipate would have provoked more negative attitudes from the domestic elites.

This result suggests that any sense of malaise concerning the EU and its policies does not have a nationalistic cultural drive among the Italian political elites and has not affected their overall attachment to Europe. On the contrary, in Italy (as in most other countries, see Cotta and Russo, 2012: 19) the long-term trend in attitudes shows an overlap between attachment to one's own nation and attachment to Europe, with the two communities not seen as alternatives, nor as conflicting with each other, but rather as complementary. Only a limited minority of respondents declared that they did not feel very (or at all) attached to Europe. Under these circumstances, the decline of attachment to Europe found in 2009 appears erratic and unlikely to persist in the long term; in fact, attitudes towards the EU proved more positive in 2014 than in 2009 even given the larger number of radical parties in the sample.

When the analysis considers a different face of integration, such as delegation of sovereignty to the EU and the creation of a supranational layer of governance, attention moves to those institutions that represent the different actors that can be found within the EU: the European *demos* (European Parliament), the national governments (Council of Ministers) and the supranational technocratic expertise (Commission). These are the main actors in the institutional framework of the EU and are those most responsible for European decision-making (aside from the European Council that drives the medium/long-term trajectory of the EU and that also represents the national governments). What are the feelings of the Italian political elite towards the most relevant institutions in the processes of political representation in Europe?

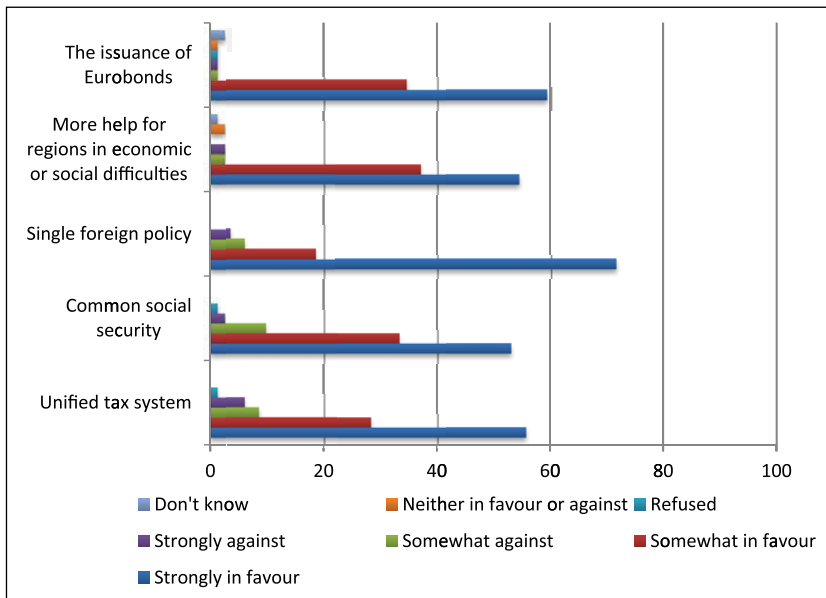


**Figure 2.** Trust of Italian MPs in different EU institutions in 2014.

Note: Question: Please tell me on a score of 0–10 how much you personally trust each of the following EU institutions to usually take the right decisions. 0 means that you do not trust at all, and 10 means you have complete trust. N=81.

Figure 2 shows that the European Parliament is the institution that is trusted most by Italian MPs (74% of the respondents located it in the higher half of a 0–10 scale of support compared to 58% in 2007), followed by the Commission (58%, it was 55% in 2007) and the Council (49%, it was 52% in 2007). Trust rates increased over time with respect to the European Parliament and the Commission, while the Council shows trust rates below those of the former two institutions. This could be a reflection of the fact that respondents have less trust in the intergovernmental method of this institution, or that they have less trust in the national government or the governments of the other member states. Certainly, this result suggests that the Italian political elites are not overtly nationalistic in attitude: if they did, the intergovernmental mode of the Council would, for them, represent a better choice than (the working method and overall philosophy of) the Commission and the Parliament, which instead they trust more. Overall, trust in the EU institutions appears relatively high among the Italian MPs, and they tend to favour those institutions that are less embedded in intergovernmental cooperation and more inclined towards supranational integration. This goes against any notion of a nationalistic identity on the part of these elites: even in the middle of a severe economic crisis and of strict austerity measures imposed by the EU, their preference goes to the supranational institutions and to a federal idea of Europe.

When the analysis moves to the role of the EU in the field of policy, it seems relevant to establish whether Italian MPs favour the communitarisation of policies that are not yet very Europeanised. In particular, we asked whether they would favour the delegation of competences to the EU in the following fields: public debt and its financing through the issuance of Eurobonds; help to regions in economic difficulties; and foreign, fiscal and social policy. The menu is indeed rich, with the different questions encompassing economic and fiscal fields, territorial cohesion, welfare and foreign affairs. Despite their differences, the percentage of respondents who support (either ‘strongly agree’ or ‘somewhat agree’ with) supranational competence in these different fields is in a range between 84% and 94%, with a peak for the issuance of Eurobonds, help for regions in economic difficulties and a single foreign policy (Figure 3). Compared to the past waves of the survey, support for widening the EU policy competence has even increased. For example, from 2007 to 2014 the trend is one of increased support for a unified tax system (+17.4%) and of stable support for a



**Figure 3.** Positions of Italian MPs on EU policy competence in 2014.

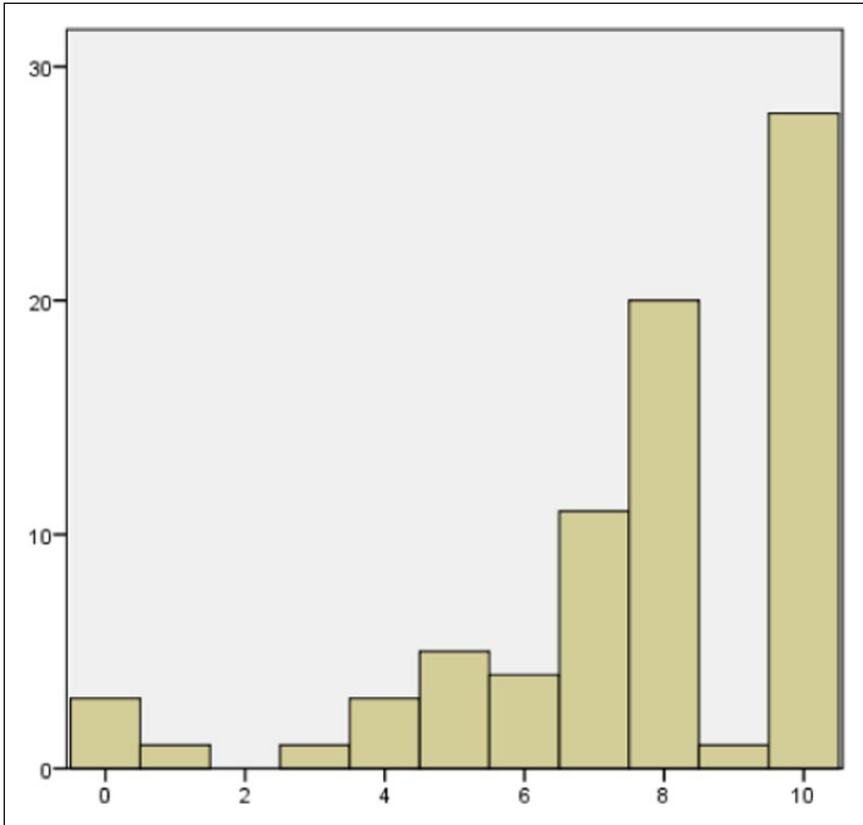
Note: Question: Thinking about the European Union over the next 10 years, can you tell me whether you are in favour or against the following.

N=81.

single foreign policy, a common social security system and for help to regions in difficulties, while the issuance of Eurobonds made its first appearance in the wave of 2014 and immediately proved most popular among the Italian MPs.

This strongly supportive stance can be explained rationally, because of the positive gains for the country that would arise from the communitarisation of these policy fields. The public debt is so high (over 132% of GDP in 2014) that the country would probably benefit from a general merger of the public debt of all EU member states and its funding through Eurobonds. Italy is a middle-ranking power with limited strategic influence, and the communitarisation of foreign policy would allow it to participate in major decisions together with bigger powers such as France, the United Kingdom, and Germany and to count (collectively) more on the international scene. With a growth of GDP per capita among the lowest of the OECD countries in the last ten years, Italy is also a country with economic troubles and social malaise that could benefit from aids to member states that are suffering from economic turbulence and long-term decline. Finally, although the schemes are generous, Italians share a widespread perception that their national security schemes are less munificent and efficient than those of other countries (such as France, Germany or the Nordic countries). From the point of view of taxation, Italy holds a comparatively negative record: in 2013, taxation rates were at 47.6% for employees and overall at 68.3% for enterprises, and a unified tax system could make taxation less heavy and more in line with the European average.

Finally, the overall levels of support for the delegation of policy competence to the EU are high, and appear to go against any expectation of a Eurosceptic turn in the Italian political scene. Only a limited number of responses in the survey were negative, while the variation in the intensity of the positive answers (between 'strongly agree' and 'somewhat agree') was more remarkable. As briefly explained, some utilitarian justifications can be found for this wide support.



**Figure 4.** Deepening integration scale: The individual positions of Italian MPs in 2014.

Note: Deepening Integration Scale: Some say European unification should be strengthened. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using a 10-point scale. On this scale, '0' means unification 'has already gone too far' and '10' means it 'should be strengthened'. What number on this scale best describes your position?

Don't know/no answer considered as missing cases.

N=77.

However, in this article I show that similar levels of support apply to other dimensions as well, where the choice for Europe is less justifiable on instrumental grounds but appears to be dictated by sentiment (attachment) and by cognition about the institutional mechanisms that organise preferences and interests at the EU level (representation). Contrary to what has been predicted and empirically proved (Real-Dato et al., 2012) in other national contexts, the tendency of Italian MPs to support the delegation of sovereignty to the EU does not only apply to policy areas associated with a long-term perspective or with a transnational scope, where the risks of failing to satisfy electoral demands are more limited, but also to those redistributive areas where elites often prefer to keep responsibility and preserve national sovereignty, such as fiscal and social policy. Moreover, it applies to areas that imply a retrospective judgement on the EU (institutional trust) as well as prospective views on its future developments (policy delegation). The congruence of the responses in support of the supranational mode of integration suggests that even today we should rank the Italian political elites among the most Europhile in the whole EU context.



**Table 1.** The determinants of the attitudes of Italian MPs towards the EU in 2014.

	Model I Beta	Model II Beta	Model III Beta	Model IV Beta	Model V Beta
PD	.258** (.499)	.307** (.136)	.309** (.495)	.218* (.603)	.243* (.625)
Five Star Movement	-.390*** (.791)	-.283** (.206)	-.314** (.734)	-.362** (.910)	-.343** (934)
Northern League	-.262** (1.201)	-.275** (.328)	-.197* (1.200)	-.372*** (1.451)	-.123 (1.793)
Year of birth	-.239*** (.024)	-.142 (.007)	-.097 (.024)	-.033 (.029)	-.036 (.030)
Terms in parliament	-.204* (.323)	-.230* (.088)	-.212* (.323)	-.157 (.392)	-.012 (.423)
Gender	-.013 (.461)	-.014 (.126)	.102 (.458)	.056 (.556)	-.002 (.578)
University degree	.054 (.525)	.189* (.143)	.106 (.523)	.073 (.633)	-.030 (.665)
Constant	116.828	20.201	46.289	34.503	39.413
Adjusted R Square	.431	.367	.324	.346	.194
Anova (sig.)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.003
N	81	81	81	81	81

Note: For a description of the dependent variables see Endnote 4.<sup>4</sup> Entries are standardised coefficients with (in parentheses) standard errors.

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ .

## The determinants of elite attitudes

Despite the underlying support for the EU within the Italian parliament, when we consider MPs individually we find a larger spread of stances. Figure 4 shows the positions of the respondents with respect to the deepening integration scale, an indicator of broad attitude to the EU. It is interesting to note that the largest concentration of cases is located in the upper points of the scale and that half of the sample falls in the range between 8 and 10. These data are quite remarkable and confirm the broad pro-EU orientation of the Italian parliament, despite its new composition and a large presence of radical parties. However, there are some outliers in the sample that are located in the lower points of the scale. Within this overwhelmingly benevolent scenario, who are the elites who most oppose the EU? Is a Eurosceptic front forming not only in Italian society but also among its elites?

In past works, party membership has emerged as a main determinant of elite attitudes towards the EU (Hubé and Gaxie, 2012), while socio-demographic features have not been found to be strong influential factors, particularly in Italy (De Giorgi and Verzichelli, 2012). However, considering the size of the change in the parliament elected in 2013 (two out of every three members were elected for the first time), it would be interesting to examine whether something has also changed with respect to the personal characteristics of the MPs. In order to assess causality, I have built five linear regression models, with party membership, seniority in parliament, age, gender and education as predictors (Table 1). These independent variables allow us to test the main theoretical arguments on elite attitudes towards the EU, based on ideological leaning and the individual characteristics of elite members (Best, 2012). They also allow us to test the impact of factors that we know to vary between the current legislature and previous parliaments (Russo et al. 2014). The dependent variables in the models pertain to the different aspects of the EU process addressed

above. The first model refers to the underlying orientation and the broad objective of EU integration ('deepening integration scale'); the second model reflects identification with Europe ('attachment'); the third model relates to assessment of the main institutional engine of supranational integration – that is, the Commission – and to confidence in its actions ('trust'); and the fourth and the fifth models concern delegation of competence to the EU in certain important policy sectors ('policy index').

In model I, party membership is confirmed as the main determinant of MPs' attitudes. The centre left Democratic Party (PD) emerges as the main advocate of the European integration process. This party comes out as the stronghold of pro-Europeanism within the Italian party system and, because this was the same in the past, it has been fundamentally identified, together with its party predecessors, with the main principles of European integration. This image holds both in the long term and when we make use of different data (the same results are confirmed in Bellucci, 2005; De Giorgi and Verzichelli, 2012; and Roux and Verzichelli, 2010), and hence it is a firm component of the pattern of politicisation of Europe in this country. The large number of members of the PD in the Chamber of Deputies<sup>5</sup> creates an over-representation of optimistic views in the sample that may affect the descriptive analyses presented in the previous section, but control by party in the regression analysis allows the other stances to emerge as well, in all their distinctiveness.

As a matter of fact, the Five Star Movement and the Northern League appear as the two parties with the most negative views on the EU. This is also confirmed by the fact that the mean value in the deepening integration scale is 7.7 for the whole sample, but is 5.1 and 3.7 respectively for the Five Star Movement and the Northern League. If we take the MPs of these two parties out of the sample, the mean value in model I increases to 8.3, with a standard deviation of 1.7: this shows that (when the Five Star Movement and the Northern League are excluded) the overall distance between MPs belonging to the left and those belonging to the right<sup>6</sup> is not very large; we do not find the same spread in elite attitudes between the two ideological poles that was found by other comparative works (Hubé and Gaxie, 2012). This result confirms the broad convergence of the Italian political elites on EU issues and the rather uncontested nature of Europe within Italian institutions.

Differences mainly consist of variations in the degree of support for the EU process rather than of opposing positions. In actual fact, conflict and mutual demarcation on the EU have developed within the Italian party system too, but they mainly appear in the electoral phase when parties attempt to capitalise on the increased polarisation of the Italian electorate on Europe; this is, however, a pattern that only slightly involves the elected representatives, who converge instead on optimistic views about the EU process. It should also be noted that the standard deviation becomes higher in the pessimistic parties, particularly for the Five Star Movement (3.4) and the Northern League (3.5). Both party organisations are internally divided on Europe, much more so than the other party groups taken as a whole. It was not only because of the limited presence of their MPs within the sample that the opposition of these two parties had not emerged in the aggregate analyses in the previous section. When considered as separate sub-groups, the MPs of these two parties appear more pessimistic about the EU than the other parties, but they are also internally divided (about half of the respondents from the Five Star Movement show scores on the deepening integration scale above the mid-point).

In summary, a benevolent attitude towards the EU tends to prevail among Italian MPs even beyond the government-oriented parties. Some signs of Euroscepticism have emerged at the level of those radical parties that have acquired growing representation within the Italian parliament in recent times (Five Star Movement), or are currently doing well in the polls (Northern League). However, these negative attitudes remain rather isolated within parliament, as they not only have

to compete with the pro-EU attitudes of the other party groups, but also contend with opposing views within the same party group.

The younger generations of MPs tend to be more Eurosceptical. This seems important because, after a long period of stagnation, the Italian political scene is now experiencing a phase of generational change, so we might anticipate increased cautiousness on the EU by the younger cohort of elected representatives. The mean value in the deepening integration scale is 7 among the under fifties, 6.5 among the under forties but 8.8 among the over fifties. As was easy to predict, most of this difference can be attributed to the Five Star Movement, which is represented in parliament by a younger cohort of MPs. However, it should be noted that responses on the lower half of the scale (Figure 4) can also be found among those MPs who are under fifty and belong to other party groups, including the Democratic Party. Hence, age is becoming a critical factor in establishing levels of support for the integration process; this is something that had not emerged in past legislatures, but is more evident in the current parliament where MPs' ages are more diverse.

At the same time, those who have been in parliament for more than one term are also more cautious on deepening integration. When we split the sample into the two sub-groups of newcomers and non-newcomers (those who have been in parliament for more than one term), we find that, together with the Five Star Movement and the Northern League, the most negative views are held by a small group of centre right politicians belonging to *Forza Italia* and the New Centre Right party who have high seniority in parliament. In the past, politicians from this political area have been more reluctant about projects for deepening integration (Quaglia, 2005b), and this area is the main area of cautiousness within a context otherwise characterised by widespread pro-European-ism. However, it is interesting to note that within the centre right area, those MPs with the longest experience in parliament are more reluctant to deepen integration, meaning that their experience of the EU process is not completely positive. Other socio-demographic variables are not statistically significant and therefore cannot be considered predictors of MPs' attitudes towards the EU.

Moving on from broad views on the EU to more specific aspects of the integration process – those pertaining to identity (model II), representation (III) and policy (IV–V) – we find that only some of the results of model I are confirmed. The differences between the Democratic Party on the one hand and the Five Star Movement and the Northern League on the other hand are confirmed. The difference in sign in their respective coefficients is visible in all four models and it is statistically significant, with the only exception being model V (which integrates the issuance of Eurobonds), where the impact of Northern League party membership is not significant.

The other (socio-demographic) factors considered in the models confirm and reinforce the main pattern of disagreement on the EU, with the Democratic Party on one side and the Five Star Movement and the Northern League on the other. These variables also add some information on causality, but are not as influential as party membership. The impact of age is only significant in model I, while the number of terms in parliament is significant in models I–III. These two factors tell us something about the pattern of politicisation of Europe that is currently developing in Italy. The former factor needs to be tested together with the larger generational change that only future legislatures can bring about. The latter factor shows that those elites who have been exposed for a longer period of time to successive steps in the integration process also feel more cautious about the deepening of the process, another small sign of criticism within the otherwise pro-European environment of the Italian political elites.

We can conclude that, as in past analyses, in 2014 party membership is again confirmed to be the main predictor of attitudes towards the EU of Italian MPs. The broad pro-European stance of the Italian political elites is here confirmed, as well as the pronounced Europhilia of the centre left compared to other party groups. This is particularly interesting when one thinks that in Europe the vast majority of elites can be found among the weak advocates/opponents of integration (Best, 2012); the

Italian elites belong to a staunch federalist minority within the EU. It is even more striking when one thinks of the hard times during which the survey was conducted, with the economic crisis at its height and EU-driven austerity measures severely constraining the national government.

In a way that is far from linear, Euroscepticism has also emerged, particularly among the two challenger parties: the Five Star Movement and the Northern League. These two parties obtained about 30 per cent of votes in 2013 and although they are under-represented in parliament as a result of an electoral system that assigned a large seat bonus to the winning coalition<sup>7</sup> they represent an important segment of the Italian party system. The kind of Euroscepticism that has emerged within these two parties appears absolute, as it is repeated in all the aspects of the EU process that we have analysed. However, these parties are not internally cohesive on these issues; in particular, the Five Star Movement appears divided between Europhobes and EU-supporters who actually do not differ much from the mainstream parties. The issue of European integration appears divisive for these parties more than for the other parties and potentially could cause problems for their cohesiveness and overall credibility.

## Final remarks

The article has analysed the attitudes of Italian political elites towards Europe, through a new data set based on a recent survey of serving MPs in 2014. Many of the trends observed in the past are continuing now, despite the changing context that followed the economic crisis and the transformations in the personal characteristics of the elites. Nowadays, politicians' attitudes are characterised by continuity with the past to an extent that was probably unimaginable before, and this has occurred despite important changes to elite composition and to the socio-economic context in which politicians operate. Optimistic attitudes towards the EU tend to prevail among Italian MPs, particularly those within the Democratic Party, which is also the main party in government and the strongest defender of such views.

Parties in the member states tend to de-politicise Europe when they agree optimistically on the EU process or on its negative qualities, while parties mainly politicise those issues on which they diverge in order to appeal to voters. Has Europe emerged at all as territory for dispute in Italy? Some negative attitudes have emerged from the analysis, and opposition to the EU is voiced primarily by two challenger parties, the Five Star Movement and the Northern League. Younger politicians, as well as those with higher seniority, also tend to be relatively more cautious about the EU, arguably for reasons pertaining to a different predisposition in the former case and to critical evaluation of the outcomes of integration in the latter. However, the analysis also revealed that the number of Italian MPs holding pessimistic views on the EU is, overall, tiny, and that Euroscepticism appears to be an embryonic phenomenon, one that is finding it difficult to develop in a linear way even within the most radical parties. Despite the costs of integration having become more tangible, despite some important changes to the party system and to representation, and despite the mounting Euroscepticism and increased polarisation on the EU in Italian society, in this country the political elites hold stable views on the integration process and their loyalty to Europe remains largely unquestioned.

These findings support the idea that political elites in Italy are fairly unified on the basis of a settlement that secures their broad consensus over the EU. Consensus among the elites is always the result of a process of elite integration that provides the normative foundation of their cooperation. With only few exceptions, the impact of which can be better assessed in the long term, the article shows that elite integration on EU issues is a process that has encompassed the new MPs elected in 2013 who, in this respect, do not look so different from their predecessors. This harmonised elite structure is reflected in the operation of the national government that, under different

supporting majorities and throughout the crisis-era, has always proved loyal to the EU. Finally, the analysis of elite attitudes allows the specification of arguments about the mainstreaming of Euroscepticism in member states, a growing phenomenon at the level of voters, parties and the media, but possibly less on the rise among the elites. Considering the topical nature of the subject matter for the future of Europe, it would be important to expand the analysis of elites to other countries as well and to investigate the current direction of the elite-mass opinion gap on the EU.

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## Notes

1. The survey is part of the ‘European National Elites and the Crisis: An Empirical Research on the Impact of the Financial Crisis Upon the Attitudes Towards the EU’ Project (ENEC). We selected a representative sample of MPs and submitted a questionnaire to them. The survey started in January and ended in June 2014. The sampling was done at the beginning of the survey and reflects the particular configuration of the time of party groups, changes to group composition prior and after the sampling do not reflect in the survey and therefore are not reported here. The sampling criteria included 1) party membership, 2) gender, and 3) seniority (newcomers/seniors). The final data set consists of 70 telephone interviews and 11 self-administered questionnaires, and is representative of the lower house of the Italian parliament (Chamber of Deputies). The response rate was close to 50%.
2. The main methodological problem pertains to the limited availability of political elites to respond to surveys; for this reason, samples of national politicians tend to be smaller than samples taken to test public opinion. At the same time, however, samples should not be so small as to hamper the representativeness of the universe of reference, and for this reason elite surveys cannot tolerate the higher refusal rates of mass surveys and are therefore more challenging and costly to manage.
3. The survey was part of the INTUNE (Integrated and United. The Quest for Citizenship in an Ever Closer Europe) project.
4. Model I dependent variable: Deepening Integration Scale (‘Some say European unification should be strengthened. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using a 10-point scale. On this scale, ‘0’ means unification ‘has already gone too far’ and ‘10’ means it ‘should be strengthened’. What number on this scale best describes your position?’).  
Model II dependent variable: Attachment to Europe (‘People feel different degrees of attachment to Europe. What about you? Are you very attached, somewhat attached, not very attached or not at all attached?’).  
Model III dependent variable: Trust in EU Commission (‘Please tell me on a score of 0–10 how much you personally trust each of the following EU institutions to usually take the right decisions. 0 means that you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust’).  
Model IV dependent variable: EU policy index I (‘Thinking about the European Union over the next 10 years, can you tell me whether you are in favour or against the following: unified tax system, common social security, single foreign policy, more help for regions in economic or social difficulties’).  
Model V dependent variable: EU policy index II (‘Thinking about the European Union over the next 10 years, can you tell me whether you are in favour or against the following: unified tax system, common social security, single foreign policy, more help for regions in economic or social difficulties, issuance of eurobonds’).
5. With the elections of 2013, the overall disproportionality in the Chamber of Deputies has reached 20.1% (Gallagher index), mainly to the benefit of the PD.
6. The other party groups represented in the sample (proportionally to their size in the Chamber of Deputies) are: the Democratic Party, *Forza Italia*, Civic Choice, New Center Right, Left Ecology and Freedom, Brothers of Italy and the Mixed Group.
7. The Five Star Movement and the Northern League received 17.5% and 2.9% of seats in the Chamber of Deputies compared to their vote share of 25.6% and 4.1%, respectively.

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