A sinking boat?
The refugee crisis and attitudes towards the European Union in Italy, 1993-2018

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Abstract

The refugee crisis has been difficult for Mediterranean countries, including Italy. Due to the structural defects of EU regulation on security and a lack of coordination between member states, management of the crisis has developed as a continuous confrontation with the EU. This article evaluates the effect of the refugee crisis on whether citizens think Italy's membership in the EU has been positive and beneficial and whether they are satisfied with democracy in Europe. Applying hierarchical models to survey data between 1993 and 2018, findings indicate that positive attitudes towards EU dropped substantially over the period, and that refugee inflow might have been a source of such a change. The results also point to a polarisation of EU attitudes among social groups, with the poorly-educated and not employed/unemployed becoming more critical compared to their better educated and employed counterparts. These differences seem to widen as the inflows of migrants increase.

1. Introduction

The 2019 European elections represented a landmark in the politics of the area. Italy contributed to the European Parliament by electing a large number of MEPs from parties that are Eurosceptic. The *Lega* (the League) and the *MoVimento 5 Stelle* (Five Star Movement), after succeeding at the 2018 parliamentary elections, in fact, won 51.4% of the votes (34.3% and 17.1%, respectively). They reinforced their stances through slogans against the EU campaign 'to stop bureaucrats, bankers, good-doers, ships', 'to stop the "invasion', 'to give representatives more powers, and fewer to bureaucrats', 'to stop austerity' and, in general, 'to stand up in Europe'.[1] At least until Matteo Salvini's threat to pull the League out of Conte's government and the prime minister's resignation in August (2019), Italy was the only Western country with a government formed by anti-European Union parties.[2]

Given the electoral success of these two parties, and the relatively weak results of openly pro-European parties such as the *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party), and the failure of others, such as *+Europa* (More Europe), a question that arises is how a

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[1] For political platforms and slogans of the Five Star Movements and of the League see: https://continuarexcambiare.it/programma/ and https://legaonline.it/t_galleria.asp?l2=1965.
[2] See Basile and Borri (2018) and Giannetti et al. (2018) on the positions of this government and its voters.

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country that was known for its positive attitudes towards Europe ended up becoming one of the least pro-European (Di Mauro, 2014). The Italians' positive attitudes towards Europe have often been considered the result of the weak performance of national institutions and widespread dissatisfaction with domestic politics and actors (Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000; Martini and Quaranta 2015). Yet the results of the last European elections seem to confirm that something has changed among Italians also with respect to European Union agencies. Existing research focusing on the Italian context has often pointed to economic reasons to explain rising popular Euroscepticism, in particular in recent years. These contributions have suggested that Italian citizens evaluate the EU primarily in relation to the perceived costs and benefits of European governance to the interests of their own polity, with utilitarianism emerging as a key explanation for the decline. Indeed, EU utility seems to have decreased due to the effects of the economic recession (Quaglia 2011; Di Mauro 2014; Conti and Memoli 2015; Lucarelli 2015).

This article seeks to contribute to this literature, evaluating one factor that has attracted much attention among pundits and scholars, but whose effect has not been thoroughly investigated: the unfolding of the refugee crisis and the mass influx of migrants. Since 2010 this has escalated in addition to the crisis of the Euro, which has also contributed to citizens' increasing detachment from the EU (Börzel and Risse 2018; Caporaso 2018). Amid this gloomy scenario, the refugee crisis may have reinforced an already widespread sense of insecurity and cultural threat and the perceived economic threat resulting from enduring economic strain. Moreover, it has given the opportunity to political actors to attack the EU for its inability to seek coordination and agreement between member states on how to stop or limit the inflow of migrants from north Africa and the Middle East, as well as on how to relocate quotas across the member states (see Attinà, 2017; Bauböck, 2018). In brief, the magnitude of the crisis, with the arrival of hundreds of thousands of migrants on the Italian coast, the increasing number of asylum seekers, and the opposition of various European countries to sharing the burden in a context of prolonged economic turbulence has revealed 'the contradictory nature of Europeanization' (Castelli Gattinara, 2017: 322).

This article, then, proposes to further explore the link between immigration and attitudes towards the European Union by looking at the differences between social winners and losers (Kriesi et al. 2008). There are two pieces of evidence that might be relevant in this respect. First, more disadvantaged social groups tend to have negative attitudes towards Europe and support anti-EU political forces (e.g. Hakhverdian et al., 2013; Foster and Frieden, 2017). Second, anti-immigration sentiments and a perceived threat from immigrants seem to be more widespread among such groups (e.g. Lubbers and Scheepers, 2007). Therefore, citizens with more disadvantaged positions in society might be more subject to changes in immigration inflows and, in turn, blame Europe more intensely for its inability to solve such problems, weakening their support for it.

Last, in spite of its value, available research on the Italian case is often the result of a historical-institutional examination of events or data analyses based on limited periods. Relying on a Eurobarometer series from 1993 to 2018, this article provides an overview of the trends in attitudes towards the EU among the overall Italian sample of respondents and among groups of citizens distinguished by education and employment status during the whole post-Maastricht period. It then provides a preliminary

test of whether immigration can explain such trends. Findings indicate that positive attitudes towards Europe dropped substantially over the period analysed, and that immigration might be considered a potential source of such a change. The results also point to the polarisation of EU attitudes among groups of respondents, with the poorly-educated and not employed/unemployed becoming even more critical with respect to their better educated and employed counterparts. The differences between groups seem to widen, in particular, as the inflows of migrants increases.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Immigration (in-)flows, the refugee crisis, and support for the European Union

Research has pointed to the strong link that exists between immigration and attitudes towards the European Union (henceforth EU). The argument originates from the idea that, when relating to the EU, citizens use as point of reference the nation-state, which defines their group loyalties and provides a context for strong territorial identities. This identification with the national polity may, as a consequence, constrain preferences towards EU integration, which is supposed to remove borders and bring diversities together following the 1985 Schengen agreement (e.g. Taggart, 1998). In line with this rationale, attitudes towards the EU may depend on the way people relate to other cultures and their level of hostility (McLaren, 2002).

People's tendency to categorize themselves and others is important to understand why immigration can be related to attitudes towards the EU (De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005). Such categorization means that people attribute more importance to the members and characteristics of the in-group, negatively valuing the out-group (Lubbers and Scheepers, 2007). The process of integrating nation-states, with the consequent opening of internal borders and the circulation of citizens, represents a peril to national identity (Luedtke 2005), as this may have an impact both on distribution of resources as well as on cultural traditions. Thus, although internal migration within the EU is necessary for the successful functioning of its economic and political integration, the increasing circulation of people may have had negative effects on support for European integration in the host societies (Toshkov and Kortenska 2015). In other words, the increasing presence of migrants resulting from integration may represent a threat to national identity, favouring a negative bias against foreign people, and, in turn, the critical evaluations of the EU project. However, what has been the impact of immigration from outside the Union?

Generally speaking, there is 'a lack of scholarly interest in the impact of the number of asylum seekers and refugees on support for European integration' (Kentmen-Cin and Erisen, 2017: 19). Various expectations can be drawn regarding the link between asylum seekers and attitudes towards the EU. The first is that the arrival of large numbers of asylum applicants in EU countries would amplify in-group attachments because of the cultural and material threats these bring to the host countries. The relocation and resettlement of asylum seekers have material costs, and they represent a burden for the local communities in which these are located on arrival. In addition, the inflow of asylum seekers to Europe is composed mainly of citizens of Muslim heritage (e.g. Syria, but also Iraq and Afghanistan) (Eurostat 2019), which may explain the hostility towards them. A

strand of literature has, in fact, argued that hostility towards Muslim communities has been somewhat exacerbated by recent terrorist attacks and that negative orientation towards them is also linked to anti-EU attitudes in general and to specific EU policies (Azrout and Wojcieszak 2017; Hobolt et al., 2011). In short, an increase in the inflow of asylum seekers may have brought about ethnic conflict and social tensions which have affected citizens' evaluations of the EU (see Berry et al., 2016).

Alongside this psychological mechanism there is also the institutional defects of EU regulation on security, and the lack of coordination among member states which may have reinforced people's hostility towards the EU. While policy responsibilities are shared between the EU and its member states, policy failures tend to be attributed to the EU alone (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014). In this regard, the refugee crisis that has exploded since 2010 has been seen as an important failure of the EU (see Niemann and Zaun 2018). Because of geographical location, existing migrant networks, immigration policies and the Dublin Regulation,[3] according to which countries of arrival are responsible for the processing of asylum applications, the distribution of asylum seekers and its costs has been unequal (Thielemann 2018). In sum, the EU has been heavily criticized for its failure to find cooperation since: 'member states had to choose between a cooperative solution that would have preserved open borders and distributed the refugee admission burden and a non-cooperative one where each country would retake control over its national borders. [...] Defection by a few states was enough to create a domino effect that tipped the balance towards non-cooperation' (Bauböck 2018: 148).

2.2. Social winners and losers, immigration and the EU

In this article we assume the link between citizens' attitudes towards the EU and immigration to be heterogeneous across social groups of the population. This expectation is justified by much literature arguing that support for the EU is connected to citizens' socio-economic status (e.g. Anderson and Reichert 1995; Gabel and Palmer 1995, Gabel 1998; Hooghe and Marks 2005).

Literature based on 'cognitive mobilization theory' (Inglehart 1970) has emphasized that education and cognitive skills increase political awareness, making individuals adhere to the norms and core values of democracy with a 'norm-inducing' function (Mayne and Hakhverdian, 2017) as well as to cosmopolitan worldviews and tolerance towards diversities (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2006). Thus, more educated people would look more favourably on the development of super-national institutions aiming at overcoming the nation-state.

Moreover, according to a 'utilitarian approach', in modern global capitalism, trade liberalization has gradually favoured the displacement of the production of goods which require low skills from more developed countries to less developed ones, where the cost of

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[3] Originally signed in 1990, the Dublin Regulation was emended in 2003 (Dublin II) and 2013 (Dublin III) without substantial changes to this basic regulatory principle. See: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32013R0604. We need also to acknowledge two decisions made by the Council (2015/1523 and 2015/1601) establishing provisional measures for the relocation of immigrants across countries of the area for the benefit of Italy and of Greece. However, the decisions left the final word to receiving countries whether or not to reject requests of relocation. See: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1568048254135&uri=CELEX:32015D1523 and https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1568048276875&uri=CELEX:32015D1601.

labour is reduced. Conversely, highly skilled jobs, especially in the tertiary sector, have grown where the levels of education and technology are high. Thus, in developed democracies, 'social winners', or people with higher educational attainment and better skills, may be more able to benefit from opportunities available through the new economy. Instead, 'social losers', that is, citizens with lower human capital, tend to be penalized when competing for jobs (Kriesi et al. 2008).

Thus, attitudes towards the process of integration may depend on objective individual conditions such as education and employment status, which can be used as proxies of labour skills. The goal of the European Union, in fact, has been, first and foremost, to remove barriers to economic exchange in order to create an integrated economic market with a unique currency. As Anderson and Reichert (1995: 233) argue: 'EU membership is not necessarily a positive sum game where everyone wins; instead it frequently involves both winners and losers'. Over the years, such expectations have been gradually sustained by empirical research which has shown that more highly educated and employed citizens tend to express greater support for the integration process than less educated and unemployed ones, or those out of the labour market (see Di Mauro and Memoli 2016; Di Mauro 2014; Foster and Frieden 2017; Hakhverdian et al. 2013).

Building on these theoretical approaches and the evidence of gaps in support for the EU among social groups, it is also reasonable to expect citizens with varying socio-economic status to react differently to contextual conditions related to immigration. Competition between natives and immigrants increases feelings of insecurity over resources, availability of jobs, and services provided by the state, thus making the former more hostile towards the latter (see Polavieja 2016), as the result of intensified ingroup/out-group discrimination.[4] However, following the arguments sketched above, those with a lower social status should be those who are more sensitive, feeling more threatened in economic and cultural terms by immigrants (Lubbers and Scheepers 2007). Indeed, poor socio-economic conditions seem to predict nationalistic or exclusionary attitudes, favouring more restrictive immigration policies and opposing a harmonization of the rules among member States. This eventually would result in a preference towards the nation-state over European integration, responsible for the inflow of newcomers (Luedtke 2005).

2.3. The refugee crisis in Italy: context and hypotheses

The refugee crisis has been particularly difficult for Mediterranean countries. Since 2010, in fact, a large share of migrants have reached Europe by sea as a result of the civil war in Syria and the dramatic events relating to the Arab Spring in northern Africa (European Parliament 2017). The crisis has been even harsher in Italy, given its favourable geographical location on the Libyan route to the European continent. Thus, due to the structural defects of EU regulation on security and the coordination problems sketched above, the crisis has opened a new line of demarcation between southern and northern member states (Caporaso 2018).

In Italy the management of the influx of refugees soon developed into a continuous confrontation with the EU. Governmental policy to tackle the problem has gradually

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[4] For an alternative view on the 'labour market competition hypothesis' – i.e. opposition to immigration is higher among those who are employed in similar job positions to those of immigrants – see Valentino et al. (2017).

changed from the ordinary management of irregular immigration based on the Schengen scheme during Berlusconi's (2008-2010) and Monti's (2010-2013) cabinets to the *Mare Nostrum* operation of Letta's government (2013-2014) motivated by humanitarian principles of saving lives at sea; from the promotion of a common approach through the *Triton* mission coordinated by Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, a position held by Renzi during his mandate (2014-2016), to a new turn interpreted by Gentiloni during his years (2016-2018) in which migrants were stopped at 'hotspots' and returned to their countries of origin (e.g. Attinà 2017).

Meanwhile, with the increasing inflows of migrants, anti-migration rhetoric and mobilization against relocations of migrants have become common (Castelli-Gattinara 2017). The relocation and resettlement operations have been seen as a 'business': migrants should be 'helped at home', an 'invasion' is occurring and in times of economic crises politics should put 'Italians first'[5]. Although the connection between prejudice and politics is nothing new in Italian politics (Sniderman et al., 2000), in a few years immigration has become one of the most important problems facing the country and migrants have become increasingly perceived as a threat to public security. The number of asylum seekers, for instance, has grown exponentially over the last 25 years in Italy (Ministero dell'Interno 2019), and this might have contributed to the increase in intolerance and detachment from the EU. For instance, between 1993 and 1997, there were, on average, about 1900 applications; between 2003 and 2007 there were about 12,000, while between 2013 and 2018 applications became, on average, more than 80,000, reaching a high of more than 130,000 in 2017. The rhetoric about immigration has mainly been used by emerging populist and right-wing parties which gained considerable electoral support during the last general (2018) and European (2019) elections amid widespread anti-immigration resentment (Garzia 2018; Guidi and Martini 2019). These actors emphasized the economic consequences of migration and the necessity of taking back control over national security in opposition to EU agencies. Thus, the refugee crisis might have added to a long period of economic distress starting in 2008, which in Italy, as in many other peripheral countries of Europe, has been very intense and characterized by growth contraction and rising public debt with negative consequences for system support at the domestic level (Martini and Quaranta 2015) as well as towards the European Union (Di Mauro 2014; Conti and Memoli 2015; Dotti Sani and Magistro 2016).

The process of more exclusory policy eventually culminated during the first Conte government and Salvini's doctrine[6] of strengthening the sanctions on non-governmental boats that take migrants rescued in the Mediterranean sea to Italy (June 2018-August 2019).[7] In brief, given the failures of the EU in addressing the complexities of the refugee crisis, the fact that Italy has been one of the main countries of arrival, and the increased politicization of the migration issue, it is likely that immigration inflow connected to the refugee crisis has had an effect in shaping attitudes towards the EU in the country. Thus:

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[5] ''Italians first': how the populist right became Italy's dominant force', The Guardian, December 1 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/01/italians-first-matteo-salvini-the-league-rise-rightwing-populism.

[6] The Conte government I passed two more restrictive decrees on security and migration.

[7] 'Italy targets migrant rescue boats with new law', Financial Times, July 23 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/2320c93e-ad53-11e9-8030-530adfa879c2.

H1: *Attitudes towards the EU in Italy worsen as the inflow of asylum seekers/refugees increases.*

Moreover, in a country also troubled by fiscal constraints, the costs of the refugee crisis have been central in public debate and in the press, with the claim that the resources devoted to the relocation and resettlement of migrants should instead be used to assist natives in difficulty (see Berry et al. 2016). Finally, Eurosceptics have attempted to cue the opinion of more disadvantaged groups, influencing their attitudes towards the EU. Briefly, in Italy, the migration crisis might have exacerbated existing grievances among those with more disadvantaged positions in society, distancing them further from Europe. Therefore, it could be expected that:

H2: *The increase in the inflow of asylum seekers/refugees affects more negatively the attitudes towards the EU of those who have a low level of education or who are not employed/unemployed.*

3. Research design

To study the trends in public attitudes towards the European union in Italy we rely on the Eurobarometer series (EB), from 1993 to 2018, covering the last 25 years over the whole post-Maastricht period.[8] Overall, we rely on a sample of 72,256 respondents aged between 18 and 85 years old, before the list-wise deletion of missing values on the selected variables.[9]

3.1. Dependent variables

Regarding the dependent variables, we consider three indicators which can provide a general overview of citizens' support for the EU: an indicator measuring whether the respondent considers her country's membership in the EU a good thing or not;[10] one capturing whether membership in the EU is considered beneficial or not;[11] and one eliciting the respondent's satisfaction with how democracy works in the EU.[12] The three indicators have been recoded as dichotomous variables gauging positive vs. negative attitudes (good thing vs. bad/neither; yes vs. no; very or fairly satisfied vs. not very or not at all satisfied).

In line with most of the literature on public opinion about the EU, we argue that these three indicators should capture support for European integration, although there is an ongoing debate about what dimension of the concept these actually measure (see Anderson and Hecht 2018). Research has relied on the classic conceptualization of Easton (1975), who distinguished between 'diffuse' support, which refers to what the system represents and not what it does in practice, and 'specific' support, which refers to the attitudes towards the outputs of the system. Hobolt and De Vries (2016) argue that in

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[8] The analysis is based on 72 surveys.

[9] Dependent variables are not available in all surveys.

[10] 'Generally speaking, do you think that (OUR COUNTRY)'s membership of the EU is…?': 1) Good thing, 2) Bad thing, 3) Neither good nor bad.

[11] 'Taking everything into account, would you say that (OUR COUNTRY) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the EU?' 1) Yes; 2) No.

[12] '…How about the way democracy works in the European Union? Would you say you are very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied?)': 1) Very satisfied, 2) Fairly satisfied, 3) Not very satisfied, 4) Not at all satisfied.

the context of the EU, it is also useful to distinguish between 'regime' and 'policy' support, which is a distinction mirroring the one illustrated before (for a different position see Boomgaarden et al. 2011 or Di Mauro and Memoli 2016). Regime support can be assessed by looking at attitudes towards membership in the EU, as it provides an indication of the legitimacy citizens posit towards the Union. In fact, this indicator has also been used to capture support for EU integration (see Eichenberg and Dalton 2007), or, when reversed, it has been used to capture 'public opposition to the EU as a regime' (see Serricchio et al. 2013) or Euroscepticism.

When it comes to the policy aspect, this mainly regards a calculation of costs and benefits. Therefore, it can be argued that the indicator measuring the benefits/costs of EU integration can be considered an evaluative judgement of the output of the EU. Finally, the indicator measuring political satisfaction should also lean towards the assessment of the 'functioning of democracy in a specific system, rather than support for democratic norms as such' (Hobolt 2012: 91). The indicator is similar to that largely used to measures satisfaction with national democracies. While, also in this case, there is considerable debate on 'what' this indicator actually captures (see Canache et al. 2001; Martini and Quaranta 2019), most research uses it as an indicator of citizens' perception of the outputs and the performance of a political system, in this case the EU.

3.2. Explanatory factors

The time-varying contextual variable of interest is the logarithm of the total number of asylum applicants (Ministero dell'Interno 2019).[13] This indicator allows us to measure the extent of the migration crisis in Italy and it provides an indication of how the inflow of persons seeking international protection has changed over time (see Harteveld et al. 2018). Given that, in the period analysed, another important change has occurred in Italy, i.e. the economic crisis, we use as control the Consumer Confidence Indicator (CCI) drawn from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2019). This indicator uses opinions about the past and future personal and national economic situations, and therefore provides a clear indication of the citizens' mood about the economy.[14]

We then use two main individual characteristics that have been argued to be important predictors of attitudes towards the EU, given their consequences for the position individuals have within society. We use age at completed education and employment status. Although in the context of the study of public opinion towards the EU, the first one has been criticised due to problems of comparability (see Hakhverdian et al. 2013), in the Italian context this should not present drawbacks, since the educational cycle follows age patterns in the country. We therefore distinguish between those who did not complete their education after the mandatory age (up to and including 15 years old, 34.2%) and those who completed it afterwards (65.8%). This dichotomy allows us to clearly distinguish respondents with better and worse opportunities in the labour market and who are in turn less at risk of suffering the consequences of societal changes.[15] With regard to the

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[13] The logarithm transformation is used to assess potential non-linear associations.

[14] Both variables are included as one-year lag.

[15] To determine the educational levels of respondents still in education we used their age (see Hakhverdian et al. 2013).

employment status, we similarly distinguish between three categories: those who are employed (49.1%) and those who are unemployed or not employed (39.8%). In doing so, we can distinguish between citizens who are still part of the labour market, no matter their position, and those who are out, because they are looking for work, or because of life cycle, or other roles, and as a consequence occupy more disadvantaged roles in societies and are more vulnerable. Additionally, we add a category capturing whether the respondents are students (11%). Finally, we consider gender (men = 45.28%, women = 54.2%), age (M = 46.35, SD = 16.73) and its squared term.

3.3. Model

The empirical analysis will take two steps. First, we assess descriptively the trends in the three indicators over time in the whole sample, and among the groups of interest, namely low vs. highly educated and unemployed/not employed vs. employed. This step will provide a general overview of the temporal patterns of Italians' attitudes towards the EU. Second, we use logistic hierarchical models (see Gelman and Hill 2006) to formally test whether time-varying factors are associated with the trends in attitudes towards the EU, and with the differences in trends among respondents with different education and employment status. Given the structure of the data, respondents are nested in surveys (i.e. time points), and we are interested in testing cross-level interactions. Therefore, we will use models with random-intercepts which allow us to test whether the deviations from the overall levels in the dependent variables follow the time-varying variables. We then let the coefficients of the individual-level variables of interest vary across time points and we test whether these variations are captured by the time-varying variables.

4. Findings

We start with a descriptive assessment of the trends in public attitudes towards the EU. Figure 1 shows the proportion of respondents who think that Italy's membership in the EU is a positive thing, that Italy has benefitted from being a member of the EU, and that are satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU over 25 years. Starting from the first panel we can see that in 1993 the proportion of those supporting Italy's membership in the EU was about 0.75, which dropped in 2000 and then improved in 2002. Afterwards, the decline is steady until 2008, when the proportion is about 0.42. In the following two years there is a slight improvement, but then the proportions drop again, reaching a minimum of about 0.39 in 2016-2017.

With regard to opinions about whether Italy has benefitted from being a member of the EU, we can see that trends are quite similar to the previous one, although it seems that levels were higher between 1993 and 2002, and in more recent years these seem to improve. In contrast, satisfaction with the way democracy works in the EU seems to follow different patterns. In fact, satisfaction increased between 1993 and 2006, from 0.40 to about 0.68. It remained more or less stable up to 2009, and dropped drastically after that. The minimum was reached in 2014 (0.37). In the following years, satisfaction seemed to take a more positive, yet weak turn.

**Figure 1.** Trends in attitudes towards the EU in Italy, 1993-2018.
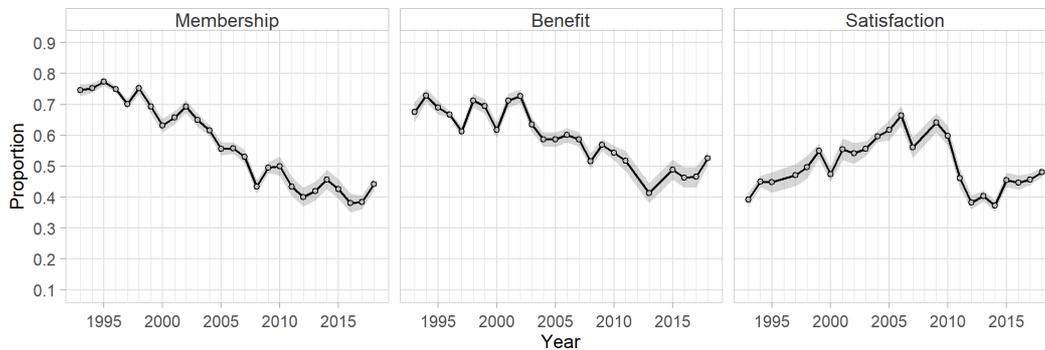
Note: proportions with 95% confidence intervals.

To understand the trends in public opinion it is also important to investigate group-level heterogeneities (see Martini and Quaranta 2019). This allows us to understand whether decreasing trends are due to one or another group of citizens, and also to understand if there are temporal patterns in the attitudinal differences between members of groups. We show public opinion on the EU by educational levels and employment status in Figure 2. The top panels of this figure show trends by education. The first thing to notice is that throughout the period and for all the dependent variables there were considerable differences in terms of attitudes towards the EU between those who completed mandatory schooling and those who did not. We can see that the trends were negative for both groups and that they do not follow different patterns compared to those seen in Figure 1. Nevertheless, we can notice that over time, differences seem to become larger. As regards the indicator measuring the benefits of the EU and satisfaction with its democratic functioning, we can see that the education gaps seem to get larger over time too. The education gap regarding the benefits of the EU is about 0.05 in 1993, then it becomes about 0.14 in 2000, 0.18 in 2010 and 0.20 in 2018. Similarly, the gap in satisfaction widens by about 0.10, from a gap of about 0.08 in 1993 to a gap of 0.17 in 2018.

The bottom panels in Figure 2 show the same trends by employment status. We can see that the differences between employed and unemployed or not employed are quite important too. The gaps in attitudes towards the EU seem to be downward over time. The largest differences in opinion about Italy's membership in the EU can be found in the last period observed, in particular after 2016, and this can be attributed to the more visible decrease in positive attitudes among the unemployed or not employed compared to the other group. The scenario is similar for the attitudes about EU benefits, although between 2011 and 2016 the differences remained quite constant. With regard to satisfaction, we can see that larger gaps were in 2007, and as before in the most recent period.

Figure 2. Trends in attitudes towards the EU in Italy by levels of education and employment status, 1993-2018.
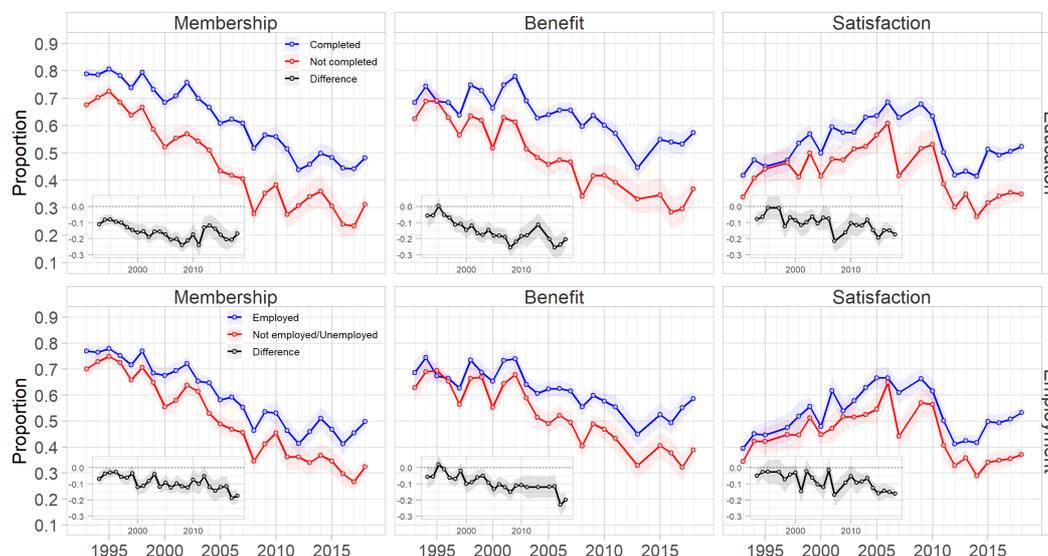

Note: proportions and differences with 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 3 reports the predicted probabilities, based on the hierarchical models, of citizens responding that Italy's membership in the EU is a positive thing, that Italy has benefitted from being a member of the EU, and of those being satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU, by number of asylum applicants (in thousands, on the original scale) and the Consumer Confidence Indicator.[16] Economic conditions have been regarded as very powerful predictors of over-time change in support for Europe (see Serricchio et al. 2013; Dotti Sani and Magistro 2016), therefore the inclusion of the CCI in the models should provide a robust test of the role of immigration in EU attitudes. We can see that there are strong associations between the time-varying variable of interest and two attitudes. As the number of asylum applicants increases over time, the probability of being supportive of the EU drops significantly. When asylum applicants are few, the probabilities of positive attitudes are between 0.80 and 0.70, while when these become more numerous, as in recent times, the probabilities drop to about 0.40 to 0.50. In contrast, we can notice that there is no association between the number of asylum applicants and the levels of satisfaction with democracy in the EU. The bottom panels report the association between the CCI, which we use as control, and the three dependent variables. Here, we can also see that there is a strong link between citizens' perceptions of the economy and attitudes. Over the range of the CCI, the differences in probability of responding that membership in the EU is positive and that the country has benefitted from EU membership are about 0.22 points. Finally, there is also an association with satisfaction with the way democracy works in the EU, although it appears slightly weaker. Therefore, these results seem to confirm that the changes in the contextual economic conditions are linked to the weakening of attitudes towards the EU among Italians, as research has already shown (see Dotti Sani and Magistro 2016; Di Mauro 2014; Conti and

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[16] The models are reported in the Appendix.

Memoli 2015), yet they also indicate that the larger burden of immigration has played a not irrelevant role.

Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of positive EU attitudes in Italy, 1993-2018, by number of asylum applicants (in thousands) and Consumer Confidence Indicator, with 95% confidence intervals.
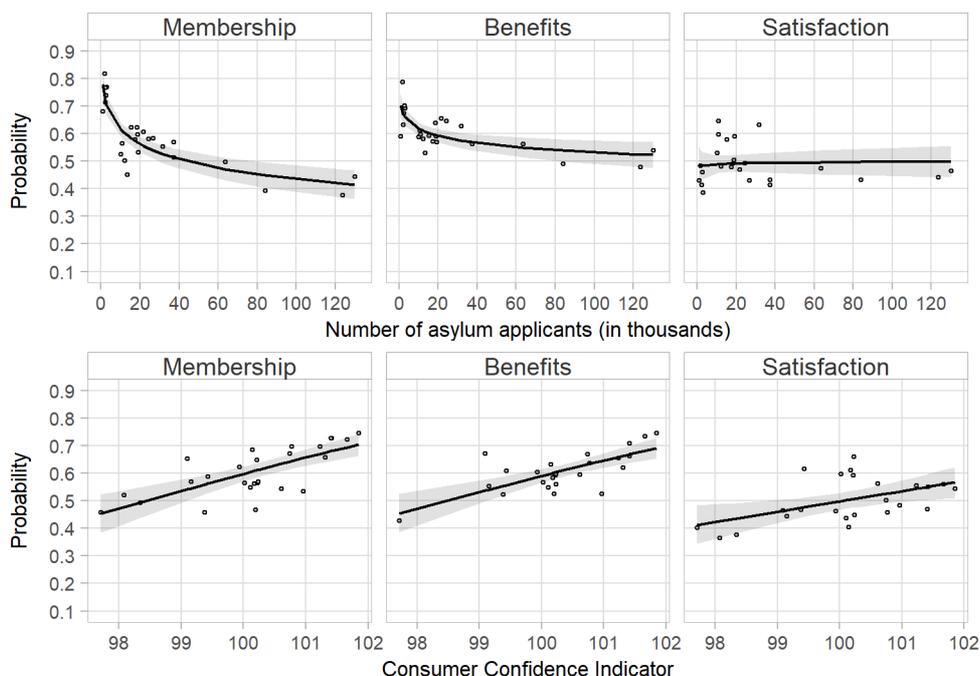
While we have found that immigration may be important with regard to attitudes towards the EU, we have yet to understand whether this factor matters differently for the attitudes of members of social groups. The figures shown previously clearly indicate that there are substantial and significant gaps in attitudes between respondents with different levels of education and employment status. Nevertheless, does immigration have heterogeneous effects on EU attitudes among respondents with different levels of education or employment status? Does this factor contribute to widen the gaps due to education and employment status in EU attitudes? We can address these questions by looking at Figure 4, which shows the probabilities of positive attitudes by levels of education and employment status and the differences between respondents, along the number of asylum applicants. We can see that an increase in the number of asylum applicants is associated with a decrease in the probability of positive attitudes towards EU benefits and membership among both educational groups (top panels), although it seems that the effects are slightly more negative for the group of respondents who did not complete mandatory education. In contrast, we can see that the number of asylum applicants has quite a different role for satisfaction between both groups.

Figure 4. Predicted probabilities and differences in probabilities of positive EU attitudes in Italy, 1993-2018, by number of asylum applicants (in thousands), education and employment status, with 95% confidence intervals
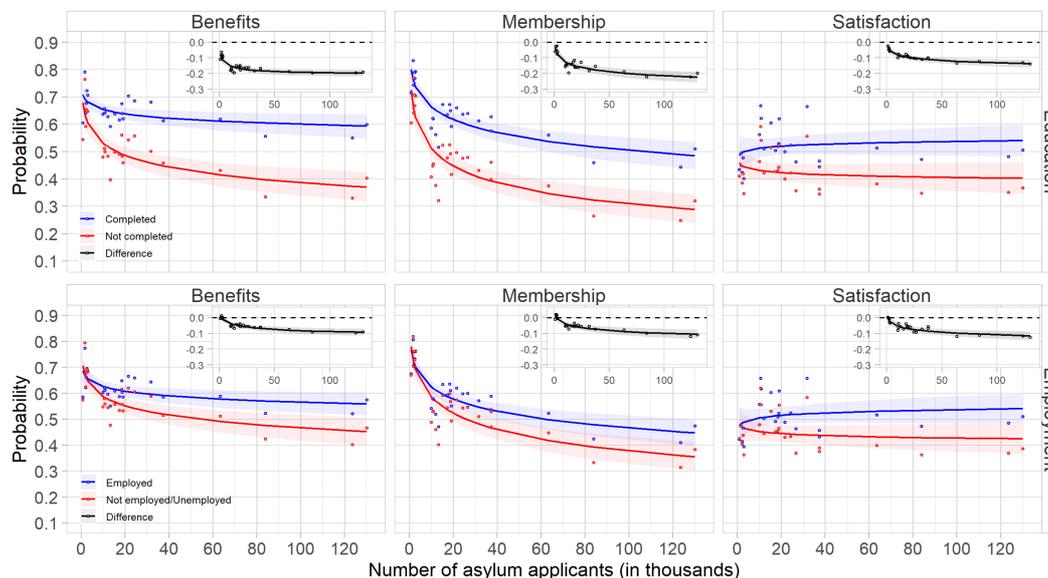
With regard to the employment status gaps (bottom panels), we can also notice they become larger as the number of asylum applicants increases, and this seems to be due to the opinions of not employed/unemployed citizens which become more negative compared to those of the employed. When asylum applicants are few there are basically no differences between not employed/unemployed and employed respondents. However, as the number increases, the differences in attitudes between the groups become significant, ranging between 0.09 and 0.12 when the number of applicants reaches the maximum. Indeed, the results for these groups indicate that the difference between groups of respondents become larger as the number of applicants increases, providing evidence that the migration crisis might have polarized attitudes towards the EU among respondents with different levels of education and employment status, and thus different positions in society. In sum, this analysis points out that respondents in more disadvantaged positions become more critical about the EU as immigration increases with respect to the counter-group.

However, similar comments cannot be made for the economy, as the interactions between the CCI and our variables identifying social winners and losers are almost always not significant (with the exception of the interaction with unemployed/not employed and whether EU membership is beneficial; see on this, Tables A2-A3 in the Appendix). In brief, immigration seems to be better suited to explain over-time changes in support between social winners and losers, exerting an additional contingent effect compared to the economy

5. Conclusion

In recent years, Italy has evolved into one of the most Eurosceptic countries in the Union. This has ultimately been testified by the increased success at the last 2019 European elections of populist and right-wing parties.

This article claims that in order to improve our understanding of this process we need to look at trends in public opinion on the EU and look for different explanations of these changes. In this respect, it has argued that one potential explanation of such trends might have been the unfolding of the refugee crisis and its overlapping with a prolonged period of economic distress which contributed to radically change the relationship between citizens and the EU project (Börzel and Risse 2018; Caporaso 2018; Castelli Gattinara, 2017). The argument is that the magnitude of the shock, with the arrival of thousands of migrants on the Italian coast, the increasing number of asylum seekers, and the structural defects of European regulation when it comes to migration and security issues, may have exposed the incapacity of the EU to respond efficiently to the imminent crisis in a country already experiencing a gradual detachment from EU institutions. This view would thus be coherent with a mechanism of activation of in-group national identities due to increased perceived threat and a problem of policy coordination. Moreover, this article has suggested that this erosion of support for the EU may not have been homogenous across social groups, since citizens with lower socio-economic status in term of education and employment position may be less supportive of an integrated European economy and feel more threatened by an incoming immigrant workforce also demanding services provided by the national state.

By applying hierarchical models to the Eurobarometer series between 1993 and 2018, we have shown that a general erosion occurred in the three indicators of support for the EU project, with Italian citizens who became more sceptical with respect to whether the country's membership in the EU is positive and beneficial and more dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy in Europe over the period analysed. This was even more pronounced for poorer educated, not employed or unemployed citizens. Additionally, aggregate changes in support for the EU can be explained according to contextual time-varying factors, such as the increasing number of asylum/refugee applications and consumer confidence over time. This complements existing research on the topic, extending the time period and providing new evidence (Conti and Memoli 2015; Di Mauro 2014). Finally, findings have also shown that the longitudinal effect of the refugee inflows in the country were stronger among more disadvantaged citizens.

Some caveats might also be specified with respect to our analysis. Studying the link between EU attitudes and immigration over time is not an easy task. There might be other factors which could act as confounders, which we could not address in this article. Trends in support for the EU had already been negative before the refugee crisis reached its climax, so this had a catalyst effect on something that had already been ongoing in the country. Nevertheless, our aim has been to provide evidence that, in addition to economic conditions, there is at least one other phenomenon, i.e. immigration, that should be accounted for when studying the changes in Italians' attitudes towards the EU. Although the role of the refugee crisis in EU attitudes has already been pointed out by some literature (see Castelli Gattinara 2017), there has been relatively little attention to its role over longer periods and, above all, to its influence among citizens with different social characteristics. This article, therefore, is an initial attempt to explore these patterns and should certainly be followed by more systematic research, accounting for multiple factors and, hopefully, multiple countries, to assess whether these results are consistent across different political contexts.

In this article, we have documented how scepticism towards the EU project has dramatically grown in the last twenty-five years in Italy and how this has been connected to the unfolding of two crises, the economic and the refugee. Of course, the future is uncertain and recent developments in domestic and European politics might change the course of events and, perhaps, of public opinion. Indeed, citizens' support for the EU in Italy might take a different turn depending on how the new Italian government formed by the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party, together with the new elected commission, handle these two key challenges.[17]

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[17] On the new government, see Angelucci et al. (2019).

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Appendix 1

Table A1. Hierarchical logistic models predicting the probabilities of responding that Italy's membership in the EU is a positive thing, that Italy has benefitted from being a member of the EU, and of being satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU, 1993-2018.

	Membership	Benefits	Satisfaction
Intercept	0.877***	0.769***	0.220***
	(0.059)	(0.052)	(0.065)
Woman	-0.111***	-0.098***	-0.033
	(0.020)	(0.022)	(0.022)
Age	0.068***	0.018	0.061***
	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Age-sq.	-0.055***	-0.023*	-0.022
	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Education not completed	-0.619***	-0.493***	-0.376***
	(0.022)	(0.025)	(0.027)
Not employed/Unemployed	-0.158***	-0.157***	-0.283***
	(0.025)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Student	0.415***	0.411***	0.275***
	(0.051)	(0.059)	(0.055)
Asylum applicants (log)	-0.451***	-0.214***	0.020
	(0.059)	(0.050)	(0.063)
CCI	0.237***	0.206***	0.169**
	(0.048)	(0.044)	(0.063)
Random-effects (var.)			
Year	0.071	0.050	0.083
N/Year	51812/26	38542/24	35677/24

Note: estimates are log-odds, standard errors in parentheses. Sig: * = p < 0.05; ** = p < 0.01; *** = p < 0.001. Age, asylum applicants (log) and CCI are standardized.

Table A2. Hierarchical logistic models predicting the probabilities of responding that Italy's membership in the EU is a positive thing, that Italy has benefitted from being a member of the EU, and of being satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU, with interactions between education and the time-varying variables, 1993-2018.

	Membership	Benefits	Satisfaction
Intercept	0.866***	0.757***	0.217**
	(0.055)	(0.050)	(0.066)
Woman	-0.115***	-0.106***	-0.038
	(0.020)	(0.022)	(0.022)
Age	0.066***	0.015	0.061***
	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Age-sq.	-0.052***	-0.015	-0.016
	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Education not completed	-0.621***	-0.505***	-0.392***
	(0.028)	(0.038)	(0.031)
Not employed/Unemployed	-0.154***	-0.149***	-0.282***
	(0.025)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Student	0.411***	0.399***	0.270***
	(0.051)	(0.059)	(0.055)
Asylum applicants (log)	-0.407***	-0.141**	0.058

	(0.055)	(0.049)	(0.064)
CCI	0.243***	0.202***	0.159*
	(0.045)	(0.043)	(0.065)
Education not completed × Asylum applicants (log)	-0.118***	-0.215***	-0.118***
	(0.028)	(0.038)	(0.028)
Education not completed × CCI	-0.014	0.023	0.036
	(0.026)	(0.035)	(0.027)
Random-effects (var.)			
Year	0.061	0.045	0.086
Education not completed	0.006	0.016	0.004
N/Year	51812/26	38542/24	35677/24

Note: estimates are log-odds, standard errors in parentheses. Sig: * = p < 0.05; ** = p < 0.01; *** = p < 0.001. Age, asylum applicants (log) and CCI are standardized.

Table A3. Hierarchical logistic models predicting the probabilities of responding that Italy's membership in the EU is a positive thing, that Italy has benefitted from being a member of the EU, and of being satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU, with interactions between employment status and the time-varying variables, 1993-2018.

	Membership	**Benefits**	**Satisfaction**
Intercept	0.866***	0.759***	0.216**
	(0.056)	(0.049)	(0.066)
Woman	-0.117***	-0.105***	-0.041
	(0.020)	(0.022)	(0.022)
Age	0.065***	0.015	0.057***
	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Age-sq.	-0.051***	-0.018	-0.014
	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Mandatory education not completed	-0.617***	-0.489***	-0.375***
	(0.022)	(0.025)	(0.027)
Not employed/Unemployed	-0.148***	-0.153***	-0.285***
	(0.027)	(0.033)	(0.035)
Student	0.407***	0.399***	0.261***
	(0.051)	(0.059)	(0.055)
Asylum applicants (log)	-0.396***	-0.153**	0.073
	(0.056)	(0.048)	(0.064)
CCI	0.228***	0.180***	0.155*
	(0.045)	(0.042)	(0.064)
Not employed/Unemployed × Asylum applicants (log)	-0.126***	-0.145***	-0.130***
	(0.024)	(0.030)	(0.031)
Not employed/Unemployed × CCI	0.022	0.067*	0.036
	(0.022)	(0.028)	(0.030)
Random-effects (var.)			
Year	0.062	0.042	0.085
Not employed/Unemployed	0.003	0.006	0.009
N/Year	51812/26	38542/24	35677/24

Note: estimates are log-odds, standard errors in parentheses. Sig: * = p < 0.05; ** = p < 0.01; *** = p < 0.001. Age, asylum applicants (log) and CCI are standardized.