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Party and Leadership Effects on Referendum Voting: The Italian 2020 Constitutional Referendum

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ABSTRACT

Unlike other ballots, referendums do not provide voters a list of parties or candidates to choose from. Here we argue that referendum voting behaviour, however, can be understood through the lends of partisanship and the socio-economic context during the voting period. The personalisation of contemporary politics would also suggest an important role of political leadership in swaying voting decisions. The article applies this theory in analysis of the vote YES of the 2020 Italian Constitutional Referendum. We attribute the success of the 2020 referendum to the role of partisanship, leader favorability, systemic and elite discontent, and the role that interest played in voting decision. Exploring the role that party leaders may have in the voting behaviour on referenda is an area for future research, especially in an era of the presidentialized political parties.

Introduction

While many studies assessing the impact of retrospective and performance-based voting behaviour focus on national executive and legislative elections (Healy & Malhotra, 2013), voter motivations in referendum voting are less well understood. In national or local elections, parties and candidate name appear on the ballot, and as such, evaluations of parties, policies, and personalities make sense. On the ballot paper of referenda, there is no such clear identification with these political actors or other reliable voting cues (Leduc, 2002). That said, referenda voting behaviour need not be apolitical. Below, we argue and demonstrate empirically that voting choice outcomes in the 2020 Italian Constitutional Referendum can be analysed and understood in terms quite similar to those of general elections.

In 2020, Italy went to the polls to vote on a constitutional change to its system of electoral representation. Voters were asked whether to reduce the size of both the Senate and Chamber of Deputies. Four years prior, Italians rejected a constitutional referendum that included a similar proposal. While reducing the size of the parliament was one of the

more popular measures contained in the 2016 constitutional referendum[1], voters were more swayed by their concerns over the incumbent government than by the contents of the referendum, and they rejected the reform (Bergman & Passarelli, 2021; Ceccarini & Bordignon, 2017). In 2020, however voters overwhelmingly supported the reform.

The article assesses individual-level partisan and contextual opinions on predicting voting decisions, drawing from and contributing to the literature on referendum and voting behaviour. In the twenty-first century context of dealigned voters, the long-term effect of partisan attachment might be outweighed by short-term effects of party leaders (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002), whose effects can be both conditional and independent (Barisione, 2009; Mughan, 2015). Using the ITANES post-election survey on over 2000 respondents, we analyse whether partisanship, interest in the referendum, protest attitudes, party leaders, or populist leanings impact the choice of a respondent to approve of this referendum through a logistic regression. Each is found to have a significant impact on the choice of voting in support of the referendum though the magnitude of these effects differ.

2020 Referendum in Context: Parties, Personalities, and Politics

In 2019 the Democratic Party (PD) and the populist Five Star Movement (M5S) made an alliance to form a new government after the M5S and the far-right Lega party dissolved their own coalition formed the year prior. The reduction of the size of the parliament was among the proposals of the 2016 referendum backed by the PD, but the voters rejected these proposals, with evidence indicating a protest vote against their incumbency (Bergman & Passarelli, 2021; Ceccarini & Bordignon, 2017). The anti-establishment M5S had pledged to reduce the size of parliament during the previous electoral campaign and, in 2019, introduced the reform to reduce the size of the legislature in parliament. It was relatively easy enough for the two governing parties (PD and M5S) to converge on the 'Yes' to approval the constitutional reform. At the same time, the largest parties of the right (Lega, Forza Italia, Brothers of Italy), with populist elements of their own, felt it difficult to oppose the proposal that in voters' eyes would reduce the privileges of the ruling class (in the House 553 MPs voted yes to the law and 14 abstained).[2]

The 2016 referendum proposal that included the reduction of the number of legislators was advanced by then Prime Minister Matteo Renzi of the centre-left Democratic party saw a joint reaction of all other parties against its proponent. The 2020 referendum was a different case, unique in the historical place of constitutional and electoral reform in Italy. Previous reforms approved in Italy that were advocated in a more popular, bottom-up, less party-driven initiative, such as the 1991 and 1993 referenda that reduced the number of preferential votes allowed and abolished the proportional part of the Senate electoral law of the time (Passarelli, 2019, 2020). On the other hand, the 2020 reform had been promoted by the political parties.

At stake in 2020 was not only the outcome of the referendum, but also the unity of the new coalition ruling the country. The two parties made the alliance on the bases of political agreements that also included mutual support to the referendum. The 2020 referendum encapsulated Italian anti-party attitudes (Bergman et al., 2020) as a protest against the ruling class as the reform would quantitatively reduce the influence of

those legislators, disallowing many incumbents from continuing in their roles in a smaller parliament. The reform was largely supported by voters (70%) so that the new Parliament starting from the 2022 elections has 400 deputies and 200 senators instead of 630 and 315 respectively.

Motivations for Vote Choice in a Referendum

A vote on a referendum could be viewed as a vote of popularity of the incumbent government (Franklin et al., 1995). Here, referenda elections are viewed as second-order, with voters having little interest or knowledge and using other heuristics to aid their voting decision such as relying on the evaluations of the incumbent government (Norris, 1999). Opposition to a government-supported referendum might then be inspired by a 'voting against logic' (Camatarri, 2020, p. 612) towards the performance of the government. Such a 'protest' vote need not be ideologically or strategically driven (van Der Brug et al., 2000), but simply an expression of disenchantment. Voters might be convinced that the government's policies have been having an adverse impact on their lives, and as such would vote against further advancement of the government's priorities (Bowler & Lanoue, 1992).

The economic vote is an even simpler heuristic than those that rely on approval or disapproval of a government policy programme. A voter may simply ask herself if she (and her family) is better off economically than the previous election (Key, 1966) and attribute this to the government. One's subjective assessments of the economy might also affect one's confidence in the government (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000) and its future policies, as well as supporting the government in future elections (van der Brug et al., 2007).

The Vote in the Italian Case

Despite the past when most of voters' behaviour was mainly driven by ideology, the sense of belonging to a defined political field, or party (Parisi & Pasquino, 1979), this trend has gradually but dramatically changed since the 1980th. Instead voting in Italy has been characterised by holding the government accountable for subjective economic perceptions (Bellucci, 2012) and evidence suggests that the 2016 referendum rejection might have been influenced by Italian's negative assessments of the economy (Leininger, 2019).

Broadly this vote against the establishment has been assigned the term 'elite discontent' (Bergh, 2004), closely related to a voting choice based off 'valence' characteristics (Green, 2007). In the Italian context, elite discontent has been identified as one of the drivers of the electoral success of the M5S since 2013 (Passarelli & Tuorto, 2018) and the failure of the 2016 referendum (Bergman & Passarelli, 2021), especially among the more politically interested (Bergman, 2019). Expressing elite discontent through a referendum vote is one-way voters can sanction a government. On the other hand, approval of the government program might lead voters to have greater support for government-advocated referenda (Bergman, 2020). As the M5S specifically supported the content of the referendum in its coalition agreement with the PD, who had advocated for the previous constitutional referendum, it would be difficult to not associate the referendum with the governing parties.

H1 (Elite Discontent): Voters that are supportive of the current state of the economy and government policies would be more likely to support the referendum

Elite Discontent is a focused antipathy towards the specific governing elites. Another dimension of protest is more systemic in nature. Systemic discontent refers to feelings towards the functioning of democracy, institutions, and the parties more broadly (Bergh, 2004). Voters may be motivated by anti-system attitudes (Poguntke & Scarrow, 1996; Sartori, 1976) and vote against 'politicians as a class and political institutions more generally' (Birch & Dennison, 2019, p. 112). Systemic discontent could be actualised as a politics of resentment (Betz, 2002) driven by distrust, alienation, and political malaise.

The 2020 Italian referendum served as a perfect way to express dissatisfaction toward the representational system (Camatarri, 2020). Voters could in a sense punish the political elite by literally removing the seats of their power. As opposed to a focus on substantive or instrumental goals, a vote motivated by systematic factors would be devoid of ideological and/or strategic context, driven purely by a motivation of punishing political elites (van Der Brug et al., 2000). In examining the 2016 referendum, Bergman and Passarelli (2021) identified that systemic discontent and elite discontent were indeed independent dimensions in the minds of Italian voters. Systemic discontent led voters to support the referendum then and as such should support the referendum again.

Populist sentiments tap these feelings of systemic resentment and exploit them politically (Betz, 2002, p. 198). They are devoid of wider ideational concepts and lack a programmatic centre (Freeden, 1998; Stanley, 2008). Instead, populist forces are united by the idea of an antagonist relationship between people and the elite and the notion of popular sovereignty (Mudde, 2004). Politicians interfere with this notion of sovereignty and their removal, as the 2020 referendum would impose, can only serve to strengthen the political system of the nation.

H2 (Systemic Populist Discontent): Voters that express greater populist feelings are more likely to support the referendum

Evidence has demonstrated that most citizens lack the political knowledge and interest to participate directly in political decisions (Zaller, 1992). While the more political attentive can be expected to pay greater attention to referendum content (van der Brug et al., 2018), citizens are still able to vote in a manner as if they were informed through the use of voting heuristics such a partisanship (Sciarini & Tresch, 2011). Informed voters can detract more from a party's preferred position should they be exposed to increased information (Boudreau & MacKenzie, 2014). Politically interested voters thus might process information in a more systematic way (Kam, 2005) and follow their interest as opposed to relying upon partisan cues or motivations of discontent (Arceneaux, 2008). The more politically aware are driven more by partisan aspects than substantive frames (Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). The strength of the effects of political variables is contingent on one's political awareness. While contrary theoretical effects have been argued, in the 2016 referendum, those with greater interest in the referendum were more strongly, not weakly, influenced by their evaluation of the incumbent government policies (Bergman, 2019). The expectations would likely hold in the 2020 referendum vote.

H3 (Political Interest): Voters that expressed greater interest in the referendum campaign will be more motivated by their discontent in their voting decision: The impact of discontent is predicted to affect those with greater interest more strongly than those without

Party loyalty 'matters a great deal' when it comes to voting in referenda (Marsh et al., 2017). When a referendum is prompted by a government[3], the referendum usually is to enact the governing parties' preferred policies. Relatedly, parties not affiliated with the government would likely campaign against the referendum. There might even be circumstances in which a party is internally divided and chooses not to take a position. Voters supporting a party in government should be the most likely to support a referendum put forth by that party. In Irish referenda on European Union treaty changes[4], when Fianna Fail leads the government, its supporters were more likely to support such referenda and vice versa during the 2012 referendum when Fine Gael was leading the government (Marsh, 2015).

Looking at a broader range of cases across Europe, the percentages of voters that tend to support their party's position on referenda exceed sixty percent (Hug & Sciarini, 2000).[5] Swiss voters have also been found to align their policy preferences in referenda to those of the parties they support (Colombo & Kriesi, 2017). Absent political knowledge or interest, party sponsorship can help citizens form political opinions (Jacobs, 2018; Kam, 2005). With greater motivation, party cues compel citizens to support the position of their party (Petersen et al., 2013), as individual opinions about policy proposals have been shown to change when they are provided information about party positions (Kam, 2005).

Research on the previous Italian 2016 referendum have found that individuals (Bergman, 2020; Bergman & Passarelli, 2021; Draege & Dennison, 2018) who supported the government party were more likely to support the referendum. We have the same expectation here.

H4 (Partisanship): Voters of parties that support the referendum would be more likely to support the referendum.

If citizens are uninformed of referendum-specific factors, they might conform to policy views of party elites (Bullock, 2011). The role of political leaders on electoral behaviour has been questioned in numerous comparative studies that hypothesise and measure the influence of party leaders on voting decisions. While someone's partisanship might serve as one simple heuristic, partisan identification is a complex process. Identifying with a party does not capture all of the relevant party attachments (Mughan, 2015). It is not parties that campaign on television (Poguntke & Webb, 2005) or the internet, but their leaders. While partisanship is a long-term force in voting behaviour, the appeal of party leaders is a short-term factor that has become increasingly dominant in the contemporary era of partisan dealignment (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002). Along with the rise of issue-oriented voting and economic voting, short-term factors such as the character of the current party leader might form the basis of a voting decision. It might require less effort and fewer cognitive resources (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) to simply follow the directives of a political leader.[6] 'By delegating their decisions to 'like-minded experts', citizens reduce the costs of collecting information on, for example, the technical details of the policy and of analysing its effects' (Petersen et al., 2013, p. 832).

The impact of political leaders has been detected as a persistent element of the contemporary politics. The growing emphasis on centralisation of electoral campaigns, party organisation, and government resources in the hands of party leaders have been labelled as the 'personalisation' of political competition (Garzia, 2014; Lobo & Curtice, 2014; Poguntke & Webb, 2005) or the 'presidentialization' of parliamentary systems, whereby actors in these regimes mimic the dynamics associated with the prominent of role of presidents as party leaders in those institutional frameworks (Elgie & Passarelli, 2019; Passarelli, 2015; Samuels, 2002; Samuels & Shugart, 2010). In particular, popular direct presidential elections confer more and more importance to the leaders, and the political and electoral dynamics associated with such elections have been have been measured in several countries without them (Passarelli, 2015, 2019). Although the intensity and the significance of the role of personal leadership can vary even greatly from one country to another and the impact of party leaders is mediated by context, party, electoral system (Carey and Shugart, 1995) and voter characteristics, there has been a general increase of its impact on the electoral behaviour overtime. The role of the politicians assumed more and more importance in voters' choice. In Western countries in particular this trend has been detected, though others have found it in Latin America, post-soviet countries, and in the Balkans (Passarelli, 2015, 2019). The Italian context, especially after 1994, has appeared as one prominent in this panorama. Voters seem to consider more and more the features of the head of parties and coalitions in their voting choice.

In sum, we can expect party leaders have an independent effect on referendum voting. The Italian case might be an ideal case for such an affect given that partisan volatility is high and previous work has identified an independent effect of opinions of party leaders on voting in Italy (Barisione, 2009; Bellucci et al., 2015; Bergman, 2020; Garzia, 2017; Garzia & Viotti, 2012)

> H5 (Party Leaders): Voters with high opinions of party leaders that support the referendum would be more likely to support the referendum.

Data and Methods

To investigate whether partisanship, elite protest, or populist protest motived the approval of the 2020 Italian Constitutional referendum, survey data was acquired from the Italian National Election Survey (ITANES). ITANES contracted with SWG to carry out 3,355 interviews before and after the 2020 referendum. Sampling was based on stratified quotas using a computerised procedure for randomisation. For the analysis below, we use only the post-referendum sample. We did not want to introduce errors that might be associated with respondents shifting their vote choice after the survey or perhaps abstaining after indicating that they would vote in favour.

The dependent variable, *voteYes*, is a dichotomous measure with = 1 assigned to respondents who answered that they voted in favour of the referendum and = 0 for all other responses (voting No, abstaining, blank ballot). To test the P*artisanship hypothesis (H4)* a party is assigned to each respondent. If a respondent indicated they felt close to a major political party or a movement, they were assigned the corresponding variable[7]:

LEU (Liberi e Uguali), *PD* (Partito Democratico), *M5S* (Movimento 5 Stelle), *FI* (Forza Italia), *Lega* (Lega), *FdI* (Fratelli d'Italia), *IV* (Italia Viva).

ITANES asked respondents to rate on a scale from 0 'completely negative' – 10 'completely positive' their judgement of political leaders.[8] Figure 1 displays the correlations between these. Looking own the first column, we see the correlations between favourable judgement of party leaders and the reform overall. There is a positive association between favourable judgement of Di Maio (leader of M5s) and the judgement of the contents of the referendum (r = .48). There is also a slightly moderate correlation between judgement of Conte and the contents of the referendum (r = .32). Of note is that the correlation between any of the other party leaders and the reform overall is not evident: the correlation coefficients for each is less than 0.1. Thus, if there is any effect of political leaders on voting decision, it does not necessarily work through altering opinions towards the reform.

In examining correlations between political leaders, two groups stand out. The correlation between judgement of Meloni and Salvini is 0.84, and both correlate with Berlusconi at .59. Di Maio and Conte correlate at 0.63.[9] For purposes of empirical analysis, and concerns of multicollinearity, we have respectively collapsed[10] these variables into OppositionFav[11] and GovernmentFav.[12] These will be used to test the *Party Leader hypothesis (H5)*. As we must be concerned with multicollinearity between partisanship and leader favorability, these variables will be included in separate models. Appendix Figure A1 demonstrates that indeed some partisan identification and leader favorability correlate strongly: Democratic and Lega identification with favorability towards Salvini and
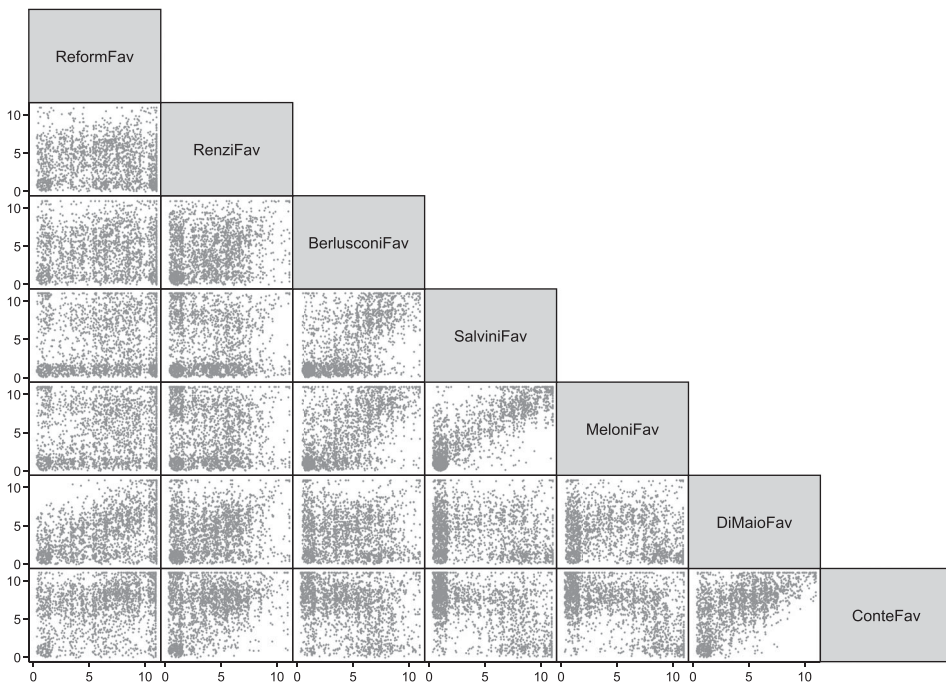

Figure 1. Correlations between opinions of political leaders and reducing the number of parliamentarians in Italy. Source: Authors' Elaboration from ITANES (2020).

Meloni – though correlated in opposite directions; M5S identification and Di Maio favorability; and FdI identification and Meloni Favorability.

To test the *Elite Discontent hypothesis (H2)*, respondents were asked about their feelings towards the economic state of the country and how Conte's government policies have been affecting them. Economically, respondents were asked their retrospective, prospective, and familial situations on a 5-point scale ranging from 'much worse' to 'much better'. They were also asked rate the Conte government in five policy areas on a 10-point scale ranging from 'completely negative results' to 'completely positive results': local economic conditions, economic response to COVID-19, immigration, the handling of lockdowns, and tax reductions. An *EliteDiscontent* scale is created by regression scoring after a principal factor analysis and inverted such that greater values indicate greater discontent with the incumbent government.

To test the *Systemic Populist Discontent hypothesis (H3)*, respondents were asked a now well-standardized and validated populism battery (Akkerman et al., 2014).[13] On a scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree', A *Populist* scale is created by regression scoring after a principal factor analysis and inverted such that greater values indicate greater levels of discontent with the political system.

A logistic regression with errors clustered by region is used for multivariate analysis. All variables are scaled such that positive coefficients would indicate that greater levels of discontent would be more likely to produce an affirmative referendum vote. Standard controls are also used in the subsequent analysis including *AgeGroup, female, education*, which is a dichotomous variable for those that have greater than secondary education, and *LeftRight*, which asks respondents to place themselves on a 0–10 left-right scale. The *Political Interest hypothesis (H4)* is conditional in nature. As such, interaction terms will be included in related regression models. Respondents were asked how much they followed the referendum campaign. *RefInterest*[14] is scored from (0) 'not at all' through (3) 'a lot'. All models cluster standard errors at the regional level to account for unobserved heterogeneity in the campaign and party systems of each region. Sub-national context has been recently noted as influencing populist-motivated voting (Albertazzi & Zulianello, 2021). As such, the geographic zone of Italy is also controlled for.

Descriptive Results

Figure 2 indicates that M5s voters were by far the most in favour of the reform (80%). The other major parties had about half that rate of approval. LeU opposed the referendum for ideological reasons and Italia Viva – a party formed by Renzi – did not support the referendum as this was not Renzi's proposal. It is clear from Figure 2 is that these smaller parties were the least likely to vote to approve the referendum.[15]

While this provides preliminary support for the *Partisanship hypothesis*, there are several other co-variates to test this explanation against. The variables used for creation of the *EliteDiscontent* and *Populist* constructs are presented in Table 1. The left column lists the survey items that were used to create each measure. The eight items for *EliteDiscontent* load onto a single dimension with an eigenvalue of 4.08. The next factor had an eigenvalue of 0.42[16], which is below the eigenvalue threshold of 1 that typically used for dimensional reduction techniques. The six items for *Populist* load onto a single

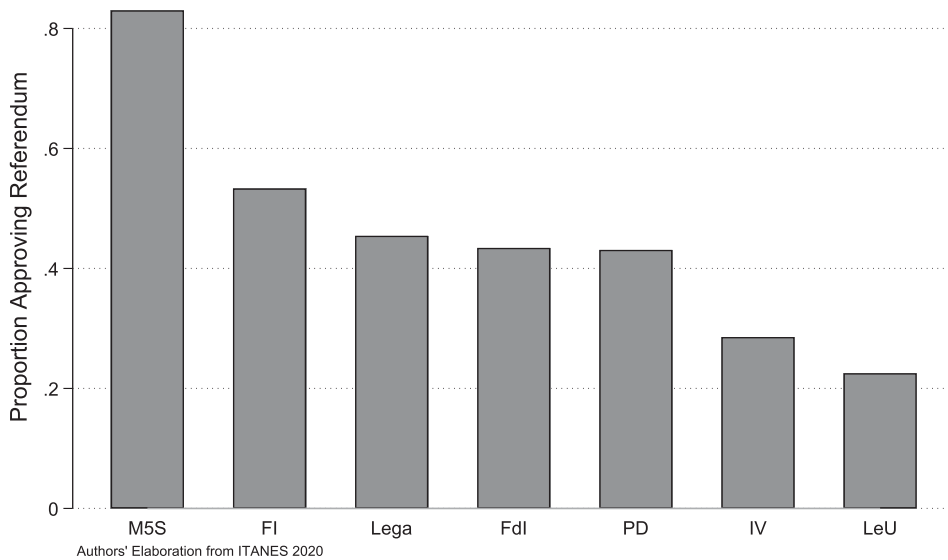## Proportion of Partisans Voting in Favor of Referendum

Figure 2. Proportion of partisans voting in favour of referendum in Italy (2020).

dimension with an eigenvalue of 2.08. The next factor had an eigenvalue of 0.14. Chronbach's Alpha scale reliability coefficient is also listed and suggests that these scales are reliable in their underlying construct. Analysing all fourteen items at once indicated that two factors had an eigenvalue above 1, with the eight *EliteDiscontent* items averaging a .65 rotated factor loading on the first and a .08 on the second while the six *Populist* items averaged a .16 rotated factor loading on the first and a .54 on the second. Thus, as in the 2016 referendum (Bergman & Passarelli, 2021), the discontent expressed by Italian voters had both a focused elite component and a broader systemic component.

Table 1. Principal factor analysis – generating key independent variables.

Elite discontent (Eigenvalue 4.08; Chronbach's Alpha 0.88)	Scoring coefficients	Factor loadings
Local Economic Conditions	0.151	0.801
Economic Response to COVID	0.285	0.882
Immigration	0.163	0.806
Lockdowns	0.211	0.832
Tax Reduction	0.174	0.812
Retrospective Economic Condition	0.064	0.416
Family Economic Condition	0.061	0.361
Prospective Economic Condition	0.08	0.565
Populist (Eigenvalue 2.09; Chronbach's Alpha 0.77)	Scoring Coefficients	Factor Loadings
Politicians ought to follow will of the people	0.198	0.576
People (not politicians) should make most important decisions	0.268	0.661
Large differences between people and politicians	0.202	0.579
Preference for citizen representation (rather than professional politician)	0.224	0.615
Politicians talk too much	0.181	0.533
Political Compromise is selling out	0.188	0.565

Source: Authors' elaboration from ITANES (2020).
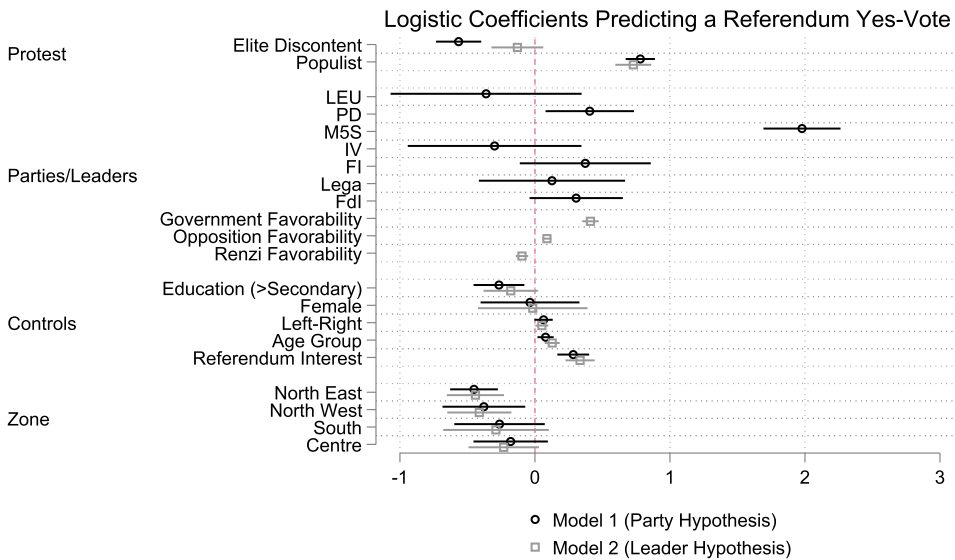
Figure 3. Predicting a referendum yes-vote in Italy.

Analysis of Referendum Approval in Italy

Figure 3 presents the base models for investigating which variables have an impact on support for the referendum.[17] While there was no difference in the gender of the respondents, all else equal, older respondents were more supportive of the referendum than younger ones while those with greater education were less supportive than those with a secondary diploma or less. There was also a geographical component to the vote with those in the North being less supportive than the Islands. When not examined in a conditional model, greater interest would seem to predict a greater likelihood of supporting the referendum.

We find that the descriptive differences between partisans (as compared to those who do not affiliate with the major parties) are supported in multivariate regression analyses. Model 1 presents the analysis with the parties included, while Model 2 substitutes leadership evaluations for partisan identification. M5S supporters were 39%-points more likely vote yes in the referendum and PD voters were 8%-points more likely to vote in favour of the referendum. No other parties had a statistically significant relationship with voting decisions. This provides strong support for H4 in that the two parties of the government that supported the referendum also had their voters more likely to support the vote in favour of the referendum. In examining the leadership hypothesis, we observe a similar finding. Holding constant feelings towards other political leaders, those who look more favourably toward governing parties are the most supportive of the reform. There is also evidence that those viewing the opposition parties more favourably also were more likely to vote for the referendum. Those however, favourable towards former PM Renzi were the least favourable. These results are all significant. The coefficient on Renzi's party (IV) is also in the negative direction, though lacks significance:

perhaps as a result of the low number with this identification as compared to the larger parties (see Appendix Figure A3 for total number of observations per party). In comparing the models, the leadership opinion variables offer greater explanatory power on the grounds of pseudo- r-square (by 2.5%) and pseudo log-likelihood.

Data also supports the other hypotheses. In the model including partisan variables, those holding the mean-level of *EliteDiscontent* have a 46% likelihood of voting Yes to the referendum. This increases to 74% for those most supportive of the Conte government and drops to 25% for those least supportive of the Conte government. While a similar pattern can be observed in the leadership model, this variable does not reach standard levels of statistical significance, perhaps due to the high correlation between government approval and favorability of government leaders. Similarly, while the mean-level *Populist* voter had a 46% likelihood of voting Yes to the referendum, the increases to 73% for the most populist and drops to 13% for the least populist.[18] Similar to the 2016 referendum then (Bergman & Passarelli, 2021), Italians wishing to express their protest faced cross-pressures: those opposed to the government would vote to reject the referendum while those most opposed to the political system would vote to support the referendum. This variable is significant no matter how partisanship is measured.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that those more interested in the referendum would be more motivated by their elite and systemic-populist discontent. Figure 4 plots the coefficients from the regression models that include the interaction.[19] We can notice that the effects of protest attitudes vary with one's level of interest in the referendum. The statistical significance of this interaction is greater in the partisan ship model, although the model with leadership evaluations again has 2%-points greater pseudo R-squared. Figure 5 graphs these interactions; note the necessity to graph marginal effect plots to determine whether an interaction is significant (as opposed to relying upon the significance of
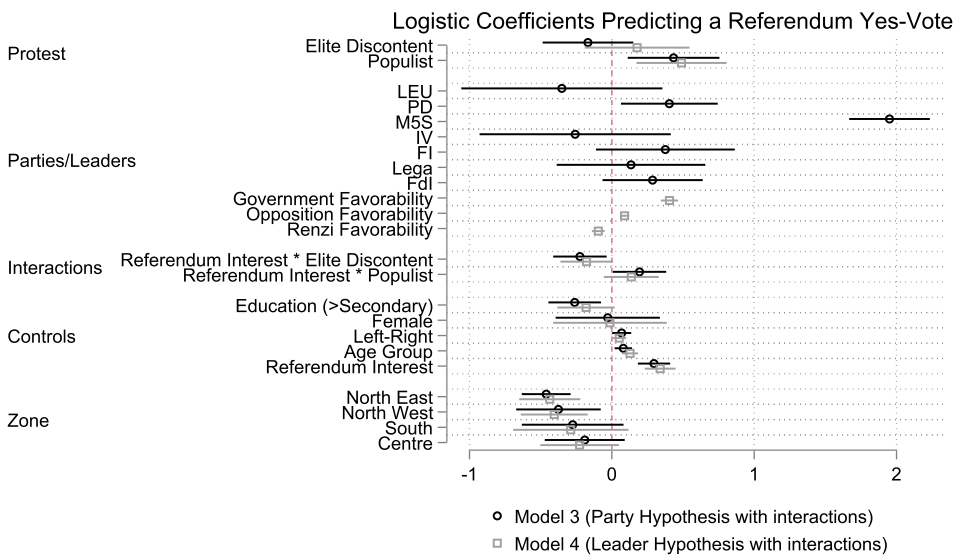
Source: Author's Elaboration from ITANES (2020)
Standard errors clustered by region; Islands as base zone

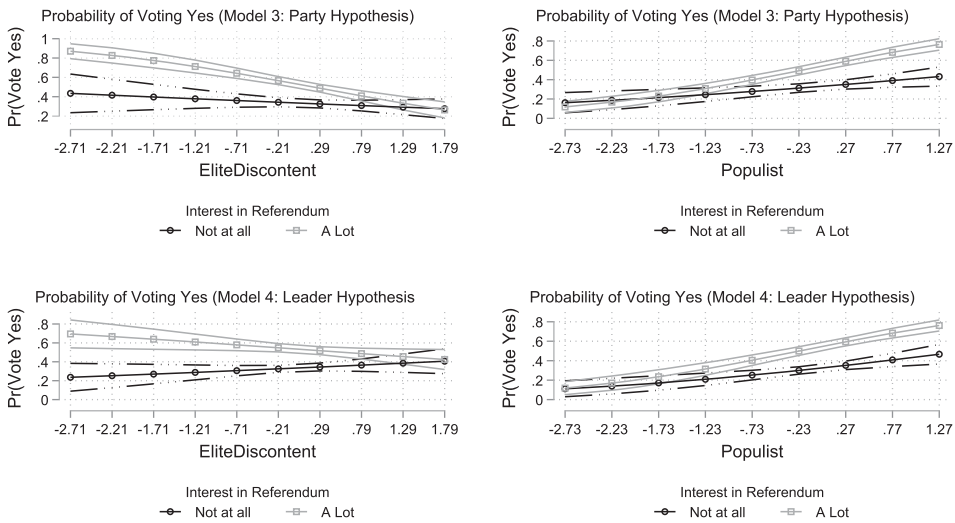**Figure 4.** Predicting a referendum yes-vote with interactions in Italy.

Figure 5. Conditional effects of interest in the referendum on elite discontent and populism in Italy.

the interaction coefficient) (Brambor et al., 2006). Note also how the predictions from two models largely conform with one another. There is no statistical effect of *EliteDiscontent* for those who 'not at all' followed the referendum (left graphs on Figure 5). The overall negative effect discussed above, however, can be explained by the detail that only 4.6% of respondents responded in this manner.[20] These voters had between and 30% and 40% probability of supporting the referendum.

While voters who were very interested in the referendum and held high levels of *EliteDiscontent* are statistically indistinguishable from those with little interest, a large difference exists for those that did not hold this discontent. Interested individuals who supported the Conte government, and its policies were nearly 90% likely to support the referendum. In other words, for those who followed the referendum campaign, their opinion of the Conte government could sway the likelihood of their support by 60%.

Hypothesis 3 is also supported when we examine the predicted effects of the interaction between interest in the referendum and the populist construct of systemic discontent. Voters supportive of the current political system broadly had a less than 20% likelihood of voting yes on the referendum (right graphs on Figure 5). For voters who were not following the referendum, but indeed had strong feelings of systemic discontent through their expressed populist beliefs, this shifted their propensity to support the referendum by just over 20%. Those with greater interest in the referendum holding these strong populist beliefs shifting in their propensity to support the referendum by nearly 70%.

All political leader assessments remain statistically significant in Model 4, perhaps an explanation for why this model has a greater explanatory power through pseudo R-squared and pseudo log-likelihood. Those with the highest approval of Renzi were only 33% likely to support the referendum, while those with the lowest favorability of

Renzi were 51% likely to support the referendum. Approval of the opposition leaders had the opposite effect, ranging from only 39% probability of approving the referendum for those with minimal approval and 56% probability of approval of the referendum for those with maximal approval. Approval of the government ministers had the strongest effect. Those with the strongest negative assessments of the government leaders were only 16% likely to approve the referendum, while those holding the greatest favorability were 85% likely to approve it. In short, the *Party Leader* hypothesis continues to find strong support.

Discussion

While it is uncontroversial to suggest that party leaders influence legislative or executive voting behavior, the evidence presented above suggests that leadership evaluations influence political behaviours independent of policy outcomes. Italians have voted four times in the first two decades of the twenty-first century on constitutional reforms, passing the first in 2001 and the most recent in 2020. While in the twentieth century, 'political parties have been cautious about promoting referendum initiatives' (Uleri, 2002, p. 871), the Italian experience in recent decades suggests an alternative dynamic is at work. Another broad change affecting political behaviour in recent decades has been the 'presidentialization' (Passarelli, 2015; Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Samuels & Shugart, 2010) of politics and the personalised focus on political leaders. As opposed to partisan linkages or socio-demographic backgrounds, the valence impact of politicians has an independent role in the behaviours of voters and politicians alike. The Italian experience in their 2020 referendum vote combines these two processes.

We started by examining the 2020 referendum vote using insights gained from the 2016 referendum. The 2016 campaign had been personalised to such an extent that Prime Minister Renzi had said he would resign if it failed. The vote, thus became a referendum on Renzi himself (Ceccarini & Bordignon, 2017). Partisanship, assessments of Renzi's political and economic performance, and broader feelings of anti-system protest each could explain part of the choices that voters made (Bergman & Passarelli, 2021; Draege & Dennison, 2018; Leininger, 2019). Our analysis here indicated that voters of the governing PD and M5S parties again were more likely to vote in favour of the referendum and that those with greater interest in the referendum were more strongly affected by strong anti-system and anti-elite protest attitudes (Bergman, 2019).

Moving beyond the unique circumstances of the 2016 referendum and placing the 2020 referendum in a broader context, we then hypothesised an independent effect of the role of party leaders. Just as campaign, public opinion, and elite behaviour has now entered an age of 'presidentialization', our results are suggestive that referenda voting can also now be associated with a voter's personal favorability of political leaders. In particular, we found unique evidence of a government-opposition dynamic. Both those looking favourably on government leaders and opposition leaders were more likely to support the referendum. This stands in contrast to the 2016 referendum, where the government supported the referendum, but the opposition generally opposed it. While previous research has attributed this to partisan identification or assessment of incumbent policy directives, these had little role in our final analysis, instead favorability

towards political leaders, statistically dominated the other explanations and provided greater explanatory power than simply partisanship measured via party identification. The referendum campaign fell in the middle of a parliamentary term, so perhaps voters were less motivated by partisan identification or specific critiques of the elites.[21] In particular, we believe that research on future referenda should be motivated by understanding the role and influence that presidentialised politics has on voting outcomes.

Notes

1. Other measures included altering the nature of federalism, bicameralism, and corporatism (Ceccarini & Bordignon, 2017).
2. The only party opposing the reform was a small component of the Democratic party who claimed that the reform linked to the reduction of the parliament size would have been effective only if included in a vaster project of constitutional, and electoral reforms.
3. While in the 2016 referendum, Prime Minister Renzi explicitly supported the reform, in 2020, the referendum was technically called by Senators from smaller parties. As such, it was the parties, not the government specifically, that were involved in the referendum campaign.
4. 1973, 1987, 1992, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2008, 2009, and 2012.
5. This investigation focused on referenda related to the European Union.
6. These will of course vary on the basis of the institutional context and the electoral system under which the elections are held (Carey & Shugart, 1995; Renwick & Pilet, 2016).
7. If a respondent indicated that they felt close to no party or they preferred not to respond, they were not assigned any major party; this category serves as a base in the regression analysis that follows.
8. Six leaders were recognized: Matteo Renzi (leader of the small Italia Viva party), former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (of the center-right Forza Italia), Georgia Meloni (leader of the conservative Fratelli d'Italia), Matteo Salvini (leader of the nationalist Lega), Luigi Da Maio (former leader of the Movimento 5 Stelle serving as foreign minister at the time of the referendum), and Giuseppe Conte (the non-partisan Prime Minister at the time of the referendum). Respondents were also asked to rate on the same judgement scale, their overall approval of the reform to reduce the number of Senators.
9. In the appendix we have included a heatmap with all pairwise correlations indicated.
10. Analysis without using collapsed variables did not change the substantive conclusions of any variables under consideration.
11. A scale was created through use of additive average to maintain 0–10 scaling. These variables had a Chronbach's alpha of .86.
12. A scale was created through use of additive average to maintain 0–10 scaling. These variables had a Chronbach's alpha of .77.
13. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the ideas that politicians in parliament need to follow the will of the people, the people (not politicians) should make most important decisions, the differences between politicians and the people are larger than differences among the people, they would rather be represented by a citizen rather than a professional politician, politicians talk too much, and political compromise is equivalent to selling out one's principles.
14. PolInterest is used in the appendix table 1a as a measure of overall political interest, instead of just focusing on interest in the referendum. On standard measures of model fit (log-pseudolikelihood, pseudo R-square, % correctly predicted cases), using referendum interest outperforms general pollical interest. The two variables correlate greater than $r>0.40$ with statistical significance $p<0.001$, and as such both are not included in the models presented in the paper due to concerns of multicollinearity. For both, the modal response is 'somewhat' interested though more report being 'a lot' interested in the politics, while more

report being 'not at all' or 'a little' interested in the referendum. That said, when comparing coefficient estimates of Political Interest and Referendum Interest, few differences can be detected. In the paper we present the Referendum Interest variable as it was measured as the same time as the other variables after the vote.

15. In the appendix we provide information on the number of observations and voting behavior by party. The number of blank ballots is limited in all parties (1.4% of analyzed sample). A visible set of respondents who did not respond to their voting decision are only visible for those without a party or those who did not respond to which party they identify with (2.9% of analyzed sample). Those who abstained from voting make up 12.5% of the analyzed sample without a clear partisanship pattern to this decision, though an analysis of the decision to abstain could be the object of future research.

16. The economic voting variables scored higher on this second factor, though no variables had a loading of above .4.

17. Full regression output is available in the appendix.

18. As these variables are generated by factor analysis and scored via regression, both *EliteDiscontent* and *Populist* have a mean of 0. The most supportive of the Conte government has an *EliteDiscontent* score of -2.72 and the least supportive has a score of 2.08. The most *Populist* voter has a score of 1.72 while the least populist has a score of -2.73.

19. Full regression output is available in the appendix.

20. 29.6% responded with 'a little', 46.3% responded with 'somewhat', and 19.4% responded with 'a lot.

21. Future research on the 2020 referendum could also analyze the role of partisanship in regions that had concurrent local elections as compared to those regions were the referendum was the only vote on the ballot.

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Disclosure Statement

Notes on Contributors

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Appendices

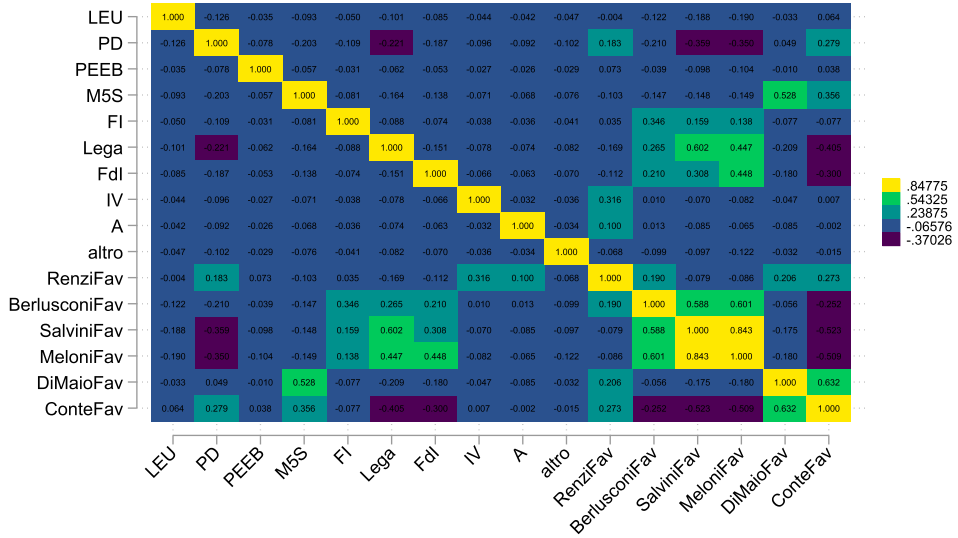Correlation Matrix of Partisanship and Leader Favorability

Figure A1.

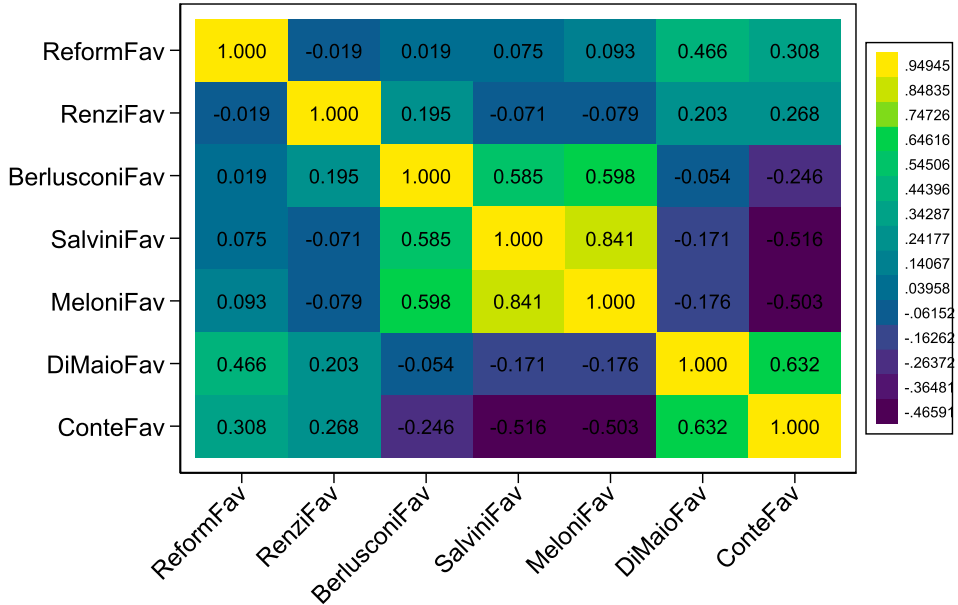Correlation Matrix of Leader and Reform Favorability

Figure A2.

Full Dataset Count of Voting Behaviour Over Party Identification
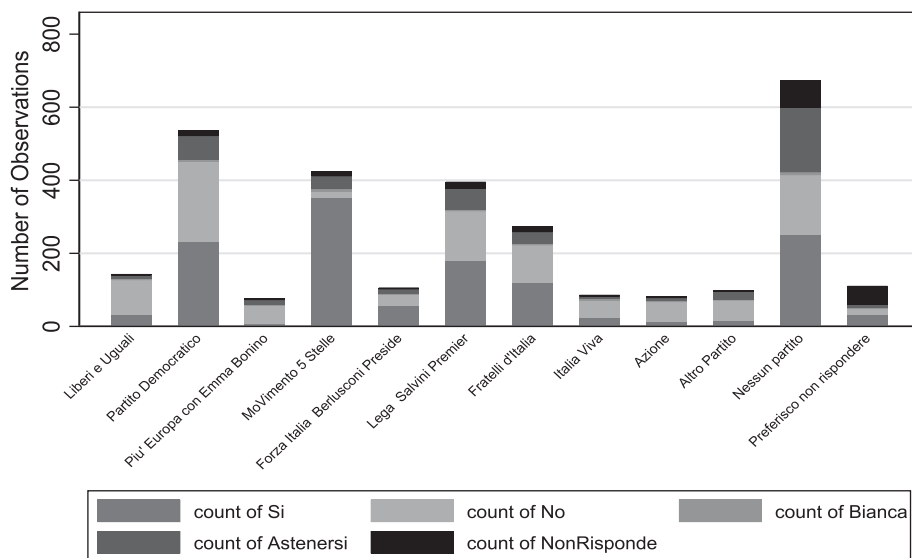
Figure A3.

Table A1. Logistic regression models predicting a yes-vote.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
AgeGroup	0.079*	0.128***	0.081**	0.128***
	(0.031)	(0.028)	(0.031)	(0.029)
Female	−0.031	−0.016	−0.029	−0.013
	(0.189)	(0.207)	(0.187)	(0.203)
Education	−0.262**	−0.179	−0.261**	−0.181
	(0.095)	(0.103)	(0.094)	(0.103)
LeftRight	0.067*	0.051*	0.069*	0.052*
	(0.034)	(0.025)	(0.034)	(0.025)
RefInterest	0.288***	0.335***	0.296***	0.340***
	(0.058)	(0.055)	(0.058)	(0.055)
EliteDiscontent	−0.568***	−0.13	−0.168	0.177
	(0.083)	(0.098)	(0.163)	(0.188)
Populist	0.780***	0.729***	0.434**	0.489**
	(0.054)	(0.068)	(0.164)	(0.162)
LEU	−0.354		−0.351	
	(0.362)		(0.36)	
PD	0.412*		0.404*	
	(0.167)		(0.173)	
M5S	1.960***		1.951***	
	(0.143)		(0.144)	
FI	0.369		0.376	
	(0.247)		(0.249)	
Lega	0.123		0.135	
	(0.272)		(0.266)	
FdI	0.301		0.286	
	(0.174)		(0.179)	
IV	−0.297		−0.258	
	(0.328)		(0.343)	

(Continued)

Table A1. Continued.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
GovernmentFav		0.411***		0.405***
		(0.031)		(0.031)
OppositionFav		0.089***		0.090***
		(0.017)		(0.017)
RenziFav		−0.096***		−0.095***
		(0.023)		(0.023)
RefInterest*EliteDiscontent			−0.224*	−0.177
			(0.096)	(0.094)
RefInterest*Populist			0.195*	0.137
			(0.095)	(0.099)
NorthWest	−0.372*	−0.412***	−0.375*	−0.405***
	(0.154)	(0.121)	(0.152)	(0.12)
NorthEast	−0.457***	−0.441***	−0.461***	−0.436***
	(0.088)	(0.108)	(0.087)	(0.109)
Centre	−0.189	−0.231	−0.19	−0.226
	(0.137)	(0.133)	(0.143)	(0.141)
South	−0.266	−0.289	−0.275	−0.289
	(0.171)	(0.199)	(0.182)	(0.207)
Constant	−1.325***	−3.460***	−1.349***	−3.451***
	(0.281)	(0.295)	(0.278)	(0.29)
Observations	2066	2066	2066	2066
Pseudo R-square	0.169	0.195	0.172	0.197
Log-pseudolikelihood	−1183.34	−1146.10	−1178.28	−1143.17
Observations Correctly Predicted	69.17%	71.30%	69.51%	70.52%

Source: Authors' elaboration from ITANES (2020).
Standard Error Clustered by Region in Brackets.
$p < .05^*$; $p < 0.01^{**}$; $p < 0.001^{***}$.
Islands as base geographic zone.
LEU: Liberi e Uguali; PD: Democratic Party; M5S: Five Star Movement; FI: Forza Italia; IV: Italia Vivia; FdI: Fratelli d'Italia.

Table A2. Logistic regression models predicting a yes-vote.

	Replacing RefInterest with Political Interest			
	Model 1a	Model 2a	Model 3a	Model 4a
AgeGroup	0.0841***	0.132***	0.0882***	0.136***
	(0.0302)	(0.0278)	(0.0301)	(0.0281)
Female	−0.0467	−0.00987	−0.0463	−0.0124
	(0.187)	(0.204)	(0.186)	(0.204)
Education	−0.267***	−0.192*	−0.251***	−0.178*
	(0.0945)	(0.0991)	(0.0965)	(0.103)
LeftRight	0.0557*	0.0428	0.0550	0.0382
	(0.0329)	(0.0265)	(0.0340)	(0.0271)
PollInterest	0.0201	0.107	−0.00137	0.0773
	(0.0957)	(0.0888)	(0.100)	(0.0963)
EliteDiscontent	−0.559***	−0.133	−0.0448	0.317
	(0.0859)	(0.0992)	(0.147)	(0.200)
Populist	0.784***	0.738***	−0.0690	−0.0763
	(0.0565)	(0.0692)	(0.278)	(0.272)
LEU	−0.255		−0.215	
	(0.366)		(0.353)	
PD	0.467***		0.468***	
	(0.152)		(0.153)	
M5S	1.991***		1.984***	
	(0.142)		(0.149)	
FI	0.409*		0.403*	
	(0.232)		(0.235)	
Lega	0.203		0.196	
	(0.267)		(0.263)	
FdI	0.349**		0.375**	
	(0.177)		(0.184)	
IV	−0.266		−0.284	

(Continued)

Table A2. Continued.

	Replacing RefInterest with Political Interest			
	Model 1a	Model 2a	Model 3a	Model 4a
	(0.330)		(0.356)	
GovernmentFav		0.407***		0.403***
		(0.0320)		(0.0314)
OppositionFav		0.0877***		0.0909***
		(0.0164)		(0.0155)
RenziFav		−0.0980***		−0.0964***
		(0.0241)		(0.0236)
PolInterest*EliteDiscontent			−0.260***	−0.230**
			(0.0818)	(0.0906)
PolInterest*Populist			0.424***	0.404***
			(0.143)	(0.149)
NorthWest	−0.385**	−0.422***	−0.369**	−0.407***
	(0.158)	(0.127)	(0.158)	(0.125)
NorthEast	−0.447***	−0.437***	−0.433***	−0.426***
	(0.106)	(0.131)	(0.0944)	(0.119)
Centre	−0.183	−0.224	−0.175	−0.219
	(0.151)	(0.151)	(0.154)	(0.155)
South	−0.292*	−0.317*	−0.280*	−0.306*
	(0.161)	(0.185)	(0.158)	(0.183)
Constant	−0.837***	−3.002***	−0.814**	−2.938***
	(0.309)	(0.370)	(0.329)	(0.362)
Observations	2,061	2,061	2,061	2,061
Pseudo R-square	0.161	0.186	0.168	0.191
Log-pseudolikelihood	−1191.99	−1156.35	−1182.39	−1148.36
Observations Correctly Predicted	68.90%	70.74%	69.43%	70.79%

Source: Authors' elaboration from ITANES (2020).
Standard Error Clustered by Region in Brackets.
$p < .05^*$; $p < 0.01^{**}$; $p < 0.001^{***}$.
Islands as base geographic zone.
LEU: Liberi e Uguali; PD: Democratic Party; M5S: Five Star Movement; FI: Forza Italia; IV: Italia Vivia; Fdl: Fratelli d'Italia.