

RESEARCH ARTICLE

What's new under the sun? A corpus linguistic analysis of the 2022 Italian election campaign themes in party manifestos

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Abstract

In this article, we introduce an innovative approach to examining campaign themes in Italy, by performing an original corpus linguistic analysis of the party manifestos related to the crucial 2022 election. Through its systematicity and flexibility, our approach allows us to gauge theory-driven propositions using a large amount of so far unexplored textual data. As anticipated, the 2022 Italian party manifestos are characterised by a somewhat balanced configuration of emphasis across a variety of themes, of which some are more controversial and others more widely shared among voters and parties. Further, we also corroborate that parties primarily focus on those themes that historically fit them best, ideologically and in terms of perceived competence. Lastly, salient ‘issues of the day’ are differently emphasised by Italian parties, which particularly avoid devoting considerable attention to the highly sensitive Russian-Ukrainian war.

Keywords: Italy; 2022 Italian election; party manifestos; corpus linguistic analysis; electoral campaign; themes

Introduction

We present an original analysis of the thematic keywords that shaped the campaign for the fundamental 2022 general election in Italy, which saw the unprecedented victory of a radical-right party (RRP), Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi), and the subsequent appointment of Italy's first ever female prime minister, Giorgia Meloni. We adopt an innovative strategy for the investigation of the thematic characterisation of electoral campaigns in Italy by exploring the 2022 Italian party manifestos using corpus linguistic analysis, further comparing their key features with those of the 2018 platforms. This approach allows us to systematically and flexibly assess theory-driven propositions derived from the specialised literature on the historical evolution of campaign themes in Italy by using large amounts of so far unexplored textual data. Our empirical analysis leads to interesting results: in line with what was to be theoretically expected, in their 2022 manifestos, Italian parties strike a balance between an emphasis on uncontroversial themes – such as the need for

administrative reform and bureaucratic simplification – and more controversial topics related to the economy and socio-cultural issues. Further, while doing so, parties still primarily focus on those issues on which they are more credible historically and ideologically. Finally, although the three identified issues of the day (the environment, energy, and the Russian–Ukrainian war) do not seem to be featured prominently in the 2022 Italian party manifestos at first sight, further investigation shows how, of these three, it is only the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine that is not emphasised explicitly.

The article is structured as follows: following this introduction, the second section sets the scene by illustrating the historical background and circumstances underpinning the 2022 Italian election. The third section critically assesses the existing literature on the themes of Italian election campaigns and their historical evolution, building theory-driven propositions that inform the empirical analysis. The fourth section introduces the research design of the article, with a specific focus on party manifestos as sources of data for corpus linguistic analysis. The fifth section discusses the results of the empirical analysis. Finally, we draw conclusions and look at the contributions we provide to the literature on Italian campaign themes.

Historical background: the 2022 Italian election

The 2022 Italian general election was a pivotal event not just in Italian politics but also from a broader international perspective. The success of the centre-right coalition led by an RRP in FdI and the subsequent election of Italy's first ever female prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, occurred in extraordinary circumstances.¹ This was the country's first election to take place in the autumn – following the equally new experience of a short electoral campaign under the summer sun – and the number of MPs was reduced from 945 to 600.

Further, it saw as its backdrop some of the most meaningful global events in postwar times. On the one hand, the country had only just left behind the most pressing health concerns related to the Covid-19 pandemic, which struck the *Belpaese* earlier than anybody else in the Western world. Moreover, Italy was still in the midst of a highly delicate macro-economic situation, needing to ensure that the criteria set out by European institutions for economic assistance in the form of the Recovery Fund would be met: the key goal for which was an agreement concerning Mario Draghi's grand coalition government, which was initially reached in February 2021. On the other hand, Draghi's tenure as prime minister only got more complicated with the outbreak, in late February 2022, of the Russian–Ukrainian war and the ensuing crisis in terms of the cost of living and energy prices, which were particularly impactful in Italy.

This international situation not only had profound repercussions in the country but also intersected with an especially unstable internal political climate, even by Italian standards. Indeed, the turbulent eighteenth legislature, which preceded the 2022 election, originated from another peculiar electoral contest in 2018. This contest was characterised by very high electoral volatility (Emanuele and Chiaramonte 2020),² marking a profound reconfiguration of the Italian party system with the striking rise of the 'populist' (see, e.g., Rooduijn et al. 2019) Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) (with almost 33 per cent of the vote share) and the radical-right Lega (almost 18 per cent), and the collapse of mainstream actors such as the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD) (almost 19 per cent) and centre-right Forza Italia (FI) (14 per cent).

The scene was set for a peculiar legislature in the executive arena as well, with two vastly different M5S-led governments preceding the final, grand coalition Draghi cabinet. Both governments were headed by Giuseppe Conte, now the political leader of the M5S.

The Conte I government, also known as the ‘*governo del cambiamento*’ (‘government of change’), was a minimum winning coalition (e.g. Koehler 1975) with Lega, based on a shared post-electoral programme and with a right-wing approach to issues of immigration and security. After Lega withdrew from government, the M5S then headed a much more left-wing surplus coalition government, Conte II, with parties from the left and centre, chiefly the PD.

Against these political developments, the centre-right capitalised on finally being poised to win a general election in 2022, with FdI emerging as the largest party by far.³ What would a sensational political event such as the victory of an RRP mean for a G7 Western power and European Union (EU) founding member state such as Italy? This question – which is relevant to politics and geopolitical equilibria not only in Italy but also in the EU, the West and the world at large, especially amid the continuing and perilous conflict in Ukraine – makes a discussion of the themes that characterised the campaign preceding this significant election particularly important.

Propositions from the literature: which themes characterise Italian campaigns?

Over time, a varied body of research has been interested in investigating which themes characterise electoral campaigns in Italy, relying on data such as party manifestos (Sani and Segatti 1997), television airtime (Legnante and Sani 2008; Legnante 2010) and social media output on platforms such as Twitter (Emanuele, Maggini and Paparo 2020).

The general backdrop to this literature is constituted by the peculiar environment in which Italian parties have been embedded in recent decades, which shapes their ultimate goals in communicating positions during a campaign. Indeed, in the country’s ‘mediatised politics’ (Campus 2010) and particularly in its hybrid media system (Marchetti and Ceccobelli 2016), with strict regulation of airtime on television, the primary objective of Italian parties is pushing their spin. This is ideological in nature and serves the purpose of reinforcing parties’ identity; it is hence to the detriment of actual policy proposals that would be enacted if the party got elected (e.g. Legnante 2010), which is the ultimate goal of electoral campaigns. Thus, these elements make it particularly interesting to investigate which positions are strategically chosen by Italian parties in terms of their attention and emphasis during electoral campaigns.

Keeping this in mind, the specialised literature highlights several interesting findings and trends in the thematic characterisation and evolution of Italian campaigns, not least since the beginning of the period known as the Second Republic (*Seconda Repubblica*). For a start, in the run-up to a general election, Italian parties usually compete over the most pressing issues defining that specific period, as well as over the ‘background noise’ made up of topics concerning the electoral contest itself (such as candidates, other parties and the campaign) (Biorcio 2006; Legnante 2006, 2007, 2010; Legnante and Sani 2008). Examples of this are the construction of the TAV high-speed rail network in northern Italy in 2006 (Legnante 2007), the ‘Alitalia case’ in 2008 (Legnante 2010), and the debate over taxation surrounding the ‘flat tax’ versus tax progressivity in 2018 (Emanuele, Maggini and Paparo 2020).

Moreover, another type of issue traditionally playing a central role in Italian campaigns and the political message of parties during such periods is administrative simplification: that is, making the Italian public sector, bureaucracy, institutions and politics more efficient (e.g. Sani and Segatti 1997; Legnante 2010; Emanuele, Maggini and Paparo 2020). These goals, in the terminology of Donald Stokes (1963), constitute ‘valence’ issues: they are widely shared among voters and parties, hence they are not controversial, and what matters is who is seen by the electorate as most competent and credible to address them.

Alongside these issues, the configuration of Italian electoral campaigns is also traditionally shaped by another prominent set of topics, which are socio-economic in nature (e.g. Sani and Segatti 1997; Legnante and Sani 2008; Legnante 2010; Emanuele, Maggini and Paparo 2020). Indeed, these chiefly pertain to the traditional left–right conflict over the economy, work and welfare. Parties from across the left–right ideological spectrum take different positions and have different priorities concerning these matters, which is why they are often defined as ‘positional’ (e.g. Downs 1957).

These are the types of themes that have been most emphasised by Italian parties during electoral campaigns in recent decades, with other policy questions receiving only relatively residual attention. However, it must be highlighted how, especially during the 2010s, socio-cultural issues, and particularly questions of immigration and security, have become increasingly prominent (e.g. Emanuele, Maggini and Paparo 2020).

Further, the themes of electoral campaigns are also impacted by the configuration of party competition and its dynamics. Indeed, when Italian parties were organised in two alternative electoral coalitions headed by a clear dominant partner (for instance in the mid- to late 1990s and the 2000s), they all tended to campaign on and talk about the same themes. This is because of a simple mechanism: whoever has a legitimate or realistic expectation of being in government will have to address the same topics once in power (e.g. Sani and Segatti 1997).

However, when these conditions are not present anymore, parties tend instead to ‘talk over each other’ about entirely different themes, and more specifically those that traditionally suit them best in terms of ideology and credibility, hence reinforcing the patterns of what has been defined in the literature as ‘issue ownership’ (e.g. Budge, Robertson and Hearl 1987; Petrocik 1996). For instance, this was the case in 2018 (Emanuele, Maggini and Paparo 2020), when a third competitive actor – the M5S – also competed, and the intra-coalitional balance of power within the centre-right appeared more precarious than in previous years dominated by FI.

In sum, considering this brief excursus on the literature on the themes characterising recent Italian campaigns, we are able to derive some informal propositions that can inform our original empirical analysis of the campaign themes in the 2022 electoral contest.

First, in this brief review, we show how Italian elections traditionally revolve around a broad range of themes, from more widely shared to more controversial ones, and this should be reflected particularly in party manifestos. Indeed, these documents are often produced as the result of a collective process involving multiple participating actors, veto points and intra-party conflict, and they need to both provide parties’ official views on a broad range of issues and to cater to diverse constituencies (e.g. Däubler 2012; De Sio, De Angelis and Emanuele 2018). Hence, in light of both the traditional configuration of themes in Italian electoral campaigns and the nature of party manifestos, in Proposition 1 we anticipate a mixture of shared issues (i.e. valence issues) and more controversial or ideological (i.e. positional) topics in Italian party manifestos for the 2022 general election, with parties’ emphases being distributed in a somewhat balanced fashion across current issues and administrative-bureaucratic, socio-economic and socio-cultural ones.

Second, in Proposition 2 we anticipate that, specifically, the most topical issues of the day have a relevant role in the party manifestos of the 2022 Italian general election. Again, recall the broad variety of topics that were prominent in past Italian electoral campaigns due to their relevance in contemporary public debates (Legnante 2007, 2010; Emanuele, Maggini and Paparo 2020). The underlying mechanism here is intuitive and has been shown to be at work generally in party manifestos, even beyond Italy (e.g. Lehmann and Zobel 2018): if something is being talked about in broader public debates,

parties are likely to address it when campaigning and hence include it in their official documents. Therefore, on this basis, we anticipate that the prominent themes of the three most pressing ongoing crises – i.e. the longstanding and escalating environment crisis, as well as the more recent Russian–Ukrainian war and the ensuing energy question – feature prominently in the official campaign documents of Italian parties.

Third and finally, keeping in mind the balance between the different emphasised themes posited by Proposition 1 and Proposition 2, in Proposition 3 we anticipate that individual formations still primarily focus on their flagship topics: that is, the themes on which they are most credible and with which they are most ideologically comfortable. This is in line with both the non-bipolar configuration of party competition in 2022 and the related dynamics of issue ownership that should apply in such an environment, as per our theoretical discussion. Indeed, some argue that not only policy-seeking but also vote-seeking dynamics should lead campaigning parties to primarily emphasise the issues that are important to their core electorate, as this increases their chance to remobilise such voters and retain their electoral support (Baumann, Debus and Gross 2021). Naturally, such incentives differ depending on the nature of each specific party. For instance, as the historical mobilisers of the workers' end of the class cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), parties of the left, including social democratic and socialist formations, are expected to focus particularly on traditionally leftist socio-economic issues such as redistribution, inequality and the welfare state (e.g. Emanuele 2021). This is different, however, for right-of-centre parties that may be either more focused on the 'traditional-authoritarian-nationalist' (e.g. Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2002) socio-cultural issues of immigration, identity and security, as in the case of RRP (Mudde 2007; Donà 2022), or more oriented towards neoliberal, free-market economic stances, in the case of mainstream centre-right formations (e.g. Paolucci 2008). In short, each party has its defining issues, which we hence anticipate being reflected among the primary foci of emphasis in the 2022 Italian party manifestos.

Research design and methods

The data source: Italian party manifestos

In terms of research design, to pursue our analytical goal, the first decision to be justified is the choice of party manifestos for analysing party positions and, hence, campaign themes. Indeed, these documents are only one of many sources employed in the literature for this purpose, including mass and elite surveys (e.g. Benoit and Laver 2006; Bakker et al. 2015), roll-call data (e.g. Poole and Rosenthal 1985; Hix 2002), social media outputs (e.g. Capati, Improta and Trastulli 2022), and political texts more generally analysed through techniques such as Wordscores and Wordfish (e.g. Laver, Benoit and Garry 2003; Slapin and Proksch 2008).

Moreover, party manifestos cannot be conceived separately from the broader system of political communication in which they are immersed and of which they are only a part. This is especially true within a context of mediatised politics (Campus 2010) in a country with a hybrid media system such as contemporary Italy (Marchetti and Ceccobelli 2016), in which electoral campaigns are played across multiple platforms and arenas, including social media (Ceccobelli 2018), and where electoral propaganda spreads through new media (Novelli 2019).

Keeping this in mind, in our view, using party manifestos to analyse party positions and programmatic outlooks in terms of emphasised themes is the most suitable choice for a number of reasons. First, most theoretical models of representative democracy such as party government (Katz 1987) stress the responsibility of parties in competing

for political power against each other based on clearly distinct and identifiable programmatic platforms. This essential mechanism allows citizens to allocate responsibility for governmental action and thus act accordingly the next time they are called upon through voting in elections. Hence, party manifestos become essential in keeping parties accountable once they move from the electoral arena to the governmental one.

One may argue that party manifestos are just ‘lip service’: parties are not actually bound to do what they have said in their programmatic platforms once they get into power, nor do they do so in practice. While, in principle, this point may not only hold true but also extend to other forms of political campaigning (such as communication on social media and at public events), empirical evidence shows that parties’ official stances in manifestos often impact actual policy output once in government (e.g. Brouard et al. 2018). Furthermore, this has been found to be especially true in Italy, where a comparatively high ‘mandate effect’ – the translation of programmatic commitments into policy – has been shown both to exist, especially compared with other countries with post-electoral governmental coalitions (Moury 2011), and to have become increasingly relevant during the Second Republic (Borghetto, Carammia and Zucchini 2014; Carammia, Borghetto and Bevan 2018).

Indeed, party manifestos are relevant precisely because they fulfil essential roles such as setting the programmatic agenda and policy commitments of political formations during electoral campaigns (e.g. Eder, Jenny and Müller 2017), streamlining the efforts of parties and providing them with campaign material. In this light, over time these documents have become a standard means for the analysis of party positions and campaign themes, which is why we turn to them as our source of data for the 2022 Italian election.

Methodological approach

Methodologically, we rely on corpus linguistic analysis – i.e. an approach that uses computer-assisted methods to study language and its building blocks. Corpus linguistic analysis operates through a defining set of tools, such as word frequencies, collocations and Key Word In Context (KWIC), which provide important quantitative information about the analysed text corpus. Depending on the underlying research question and objectives, such information then can be interpreted by the researcher in light of their knowledge of both the analysed documents and the reference literature (e.g. Partington, Duguid and Taylor 2013; Gries 2016).

We identify corpus linguistic analysis as the most suitable method for our empirical analysis because of two fundamental reasons. The first is systematicity: corpus linguistic analysis allows us to investigate a large amount of as yet unexplored textual data – i.e. the party manifestos we analyse – in a systematic fashion, which means providing key quantitative information on a series of important characteristics of these documents that are necessary to gauge our theory-driven propositions and could not otherwise be retrieved qualitatively (i.e. through discourse, frame or thematic analysis).

The second is flexibility: for a start, at the time of writing, the latest version (2023a) of the Manifesto Project (MARPOR) dataset (Volkens et al. 2020) does not include the 2022 Italian party manifestos. Yet, even if it did, MARPOR’s older, unchanged and thematically limited codebook (e.g. Trastulli 2022) would not allow for the necessary original and fine-grained exploration of our data, especially on the newer ‘issues of the day’ (for instance, the Russian–Ukrainian war), whereas corpus linguistic analysis is well placed to do so.

Therefore, corpus linguistic analysis provides us with both powerful tools for data analysis and a structured framework of interpretation. On this basis, we employ the information retrieved from our corpus regarding keywords of substantive interest, which we interpret by associating them with specific campaign themes. Thus, we will henceforth talk about ‘thematic keywords’.

We now move to illustrate the steps we followed to execute our empirical analysis, for which we used *R* (Gries 2016), specifically employing the *quanteda* family of packages for the quantitative analysis of textual data on this software (Benoit et al. 2018). We first collected 14 party manifestos for the 2022 Italian election, belonging to the following formations: Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra (AVS), Alternativa per l'Italia, FI, FdI, Impegno Civico, Italexit, Italia Sovrana e Popolare, Lega, M5S, Noi Moderati, PD, +Europa, Terzo Polo (Azione – Italia Viva) and Unione Popolare. These are the parties that were usually included in pre-electoral surveys in the build-up to the election and they represent 97.7 per cent of list votes in the 2022 contest. Even though all manifestos were available in PDF format, not all of them were searchable PDFs, which is the desirable form for corpus linguistic analysis. Therefore, we applied a technique called optical character recognition, which allows machine-readable text to be obtained by recognising characters in an image.⁴ Subsequently, we were able to create an analysable corpus – i.e. a collection of documents – formed by our selected 14 party manifestos (Gries and Newman 2014).

Table 1 presents descriptive information concerning the manifestos included in the corpus. As is evident, manifestos vary in length. Here, while the 'Types' column tells us the number of unique words in a manifesto – that is, each different word that appears in the document, without counting the number of times it is repeated – the 'Tokens' column is the total number of words overall.⁵ We can see that the M5S and Lega presented the longest manifestos, while Alternativa per l'Italia and Italia Sovrana e Popolare drafted the shortest documents in the 2022 Italian election, formed respectively by 14 and 38 sentences.

Before being able to proceed with our corpus linguistic analysis, the corpus needed to undergo tokenisation. This is the process of breaking down each document into individual units to be analysed – namely tokens, which are usually words or phrases. Because we are interested specifically in thematic keywords that characterise manifestos, we opted for

Table 1. Descriptive information on the 2022 Italian party manifestos included in the corpus

| | Party | Sentences | Types | Tokens |
|----|-----------------------------------|-----------|--------|--------|
| 1 | +Europa | 202 | 3,960 | 16,370 |
| 2 | Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra | 621 | 5,625 | 26,875 |
| 3 | Alternativa per l'Italia | 14 | 153 | 237 |
| 4 | Forza Italia | 270 | 2,028 | 5,947 |
| 5 | Fratelli d'Italia | 509 | 3,051 | 11,466 |
| 6 | Impegno Civico | 98 | 1,001 | 2,628 |
| 7 | Italexit | 262 | 2,611 | 8,254 |
| 8 | Italia Sovrana e Popolare | 38 | 435 | 767 |
| 9 | Lega | 1,785 | 12,096 | 87,596 |
| 10 | Movimento 5 Stelle | 2,194 | 10,588 | 82,722 |
| 11 | Noi Moderati | 248 | 2,078 | 7,129 |
| 12 | Partito Democratico | 443 | 4,300 | 20,003 |
| 13 | Terzo Polo (Azione – Italia Viva) | 857 | 5,283 | 27,539 |
| 14 | Unione Popolare | 359 | 1,772 | 5,650 |

words as our tokens. We also cleaned our corpus of all entities that were not particularly informative from a substantive viewpoint, such as punctuation, conjunctions and articles. Moreover, we excluded words that have little or no semantic meaning on their own; these are referred to as stop words in the natural language processing subfield.

These steps were executed with the spacyr package,⁶ as this is able, while dividing manifestos into single tokens, to also perform two additional and essential functions for our analysis. First, spacyr establishes the lemma of words: i.e. their base form, which is often the dictionary form or the infinitive form of a verb. For example, the lemma of the word *'economica'* is *'economico'*, and the lemma of the word *'vogliamo'* is *'volere'*. Using lemmas instead of simple tokenised words has the analytical advantage of simplifying the huge variation in words – a feature of the Italian language – to common base forms.⁷ Second, spacyr applies part-of-speech tagging: this is a technique that assigns each token to its proper grammatical function – e.g. noun, verb, adjective and so on – based on its context and definition. This further helped us in the process of removing stop words and retaining only a truly substantively meaningful body of text for our corpus linguistic analysis, without the need to have a prior list of stop words.⁸

At this point, to further ensure that we analysed the most semantically meaningful corpus possible, we also identified those words that appear together often and that only together have a specific meaning, to unite such multiword expressions into a single token. For instance, while the words *'reddito'* and *'cittadinanza'* have their separate meanings when appearing alone, the specific multiword expression *'reddito [di] cittadinanza'* has its own meaning, which refers to the flagship policy proposal of the M5S.⁹ At this stage, we were finally ready to obtain the data matrix to be used in our corpus linguistic analysis – i.e. a 'document-feature matrix' (DFM), where each row represents a party manifesto, each column represents a token, and the value in each cell represents the frequency with which a token appears in a manifesto.

Upon obtaining our DFM, it was possible to perform the corpus linguistic analysis. The main methodological tools we employed to empirically gauge our propositions were relative frequency analysis, at the level of both the party system and individual parties, collocation and KWIC analysis. The specific steps followed for the analysis related to each proposition are detailed below in the illustration of our results.

The themes of the 2022 electoral campaign in Italy

Proposition 1: a mixture of shared and controversial themes

We now turn to the results of our corpus linguistic analysis concerning the 2022 Italian party manifestos and the themes of the electoral campaign. We start by assessing Proposition 1, focusing on all 14 analysed documents.

Figure 1 shows the top 50 words with the highest relative emphasis at the level of the party system, meaning across all of the 2022 party manifestos we analysed. That is, we take, for each manifesto, the proportion of the document devoted to such words and, subsequently, calculate the average of all these proportions. We do this to account for the difference in length and, hence, the number of words in the documents.¹⁰

We now proceed to interpret the thematic keywords that emerge from this relative frequency analysis at the party system level. Among these keywords, it is evident how socio-economic issues seem prominent, with the most relatively salient words after 'Italy' being 'business' and 'work'. Other relevant keywords in this list include economic development and support, as well as investments, economic resources, the industrial sector, and explicit mentions of (more or less detailed) expenditures conveyed by how recurrent the word 'euro' is. Social policies, in general and on specific issues such as healthcare, are also

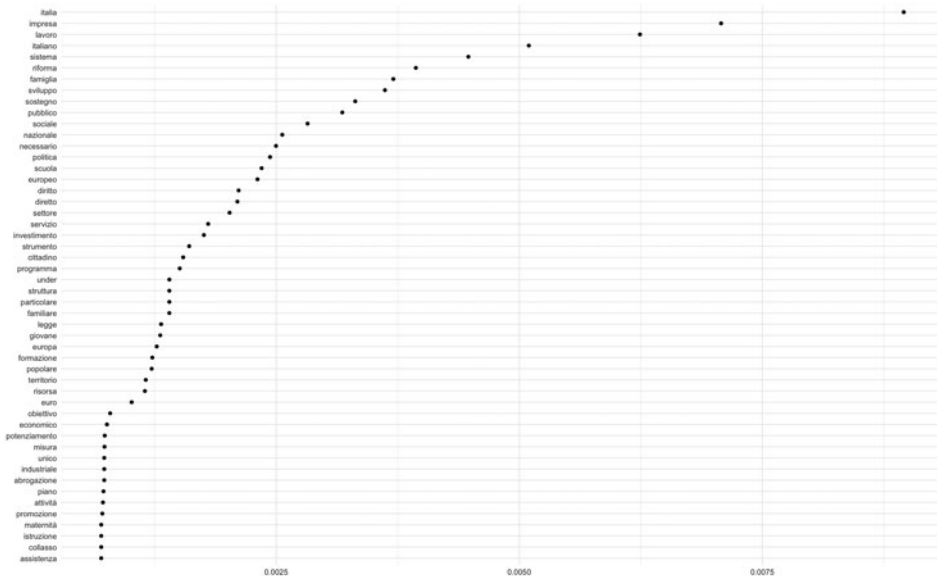


Figure 1. Top 50 words with the highest relative emphasis at the level of the party system in the 2022 Italian election

rather important in current manifestos, perhaps in light of the recent acute crises recorded in Italy, for instance with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Yet, other non-socio-economic issues are also prominent in this list: chiefly, the need for ‘reforms’ is highlighted. As seen, ‘valence’ electoral contestation on shared issues of administrative efficiency is typical of Italy, and topics such as reforms – in several different areas of policy, public administration and bureaucracy – and legislation – including through greater autonomy for individual ‘territories’ – are also recurring features of individual party manifestos.

Furthermore, the systemic focus also seems to target specific socio-demographic groups. These include, first and foremost, ‘families’, around which the salient debate on rights concerning ‘traditional’ versus same-sex families revolves. Moreover, young people are especially topical and recur as a target group in parties’ electoral campaigns, for reasons such as the widespread impression of often being ‘left behind’ in the political debate and facing issues such as high unemployment, lack of opportunities, and a hardly sustainable system of welfare provision. With 18–24-year-olds eventually allowed to also vote for the Senate in 2022, it was in parties’ evident interest to try to attract votes from young people, especially due to the usually high abstention rates among them.

Further, rights play a prominent role in the official programmatic commitments of Italian parties in 2022. This is perfectly compatible with the politicisation of, on the one hand, the Italian citizenship law and debates around its reform, by allowing children who were born in Italy to non-Italian parents (*ius soli*) or non-Italian children who have attended school in Italy for a substantial time (*ius scholae*) to become Italian citizens; and, on the other hand, euthanasia. However, questions of rights emerge not only in general terms but also regarding specific issues. This is exemplified by maternity, which is broadly dealt with by parties from a wide variety of viewpoints: for instance, with regard to maternity leave and gender equality vis-à-vis such provisions, surrogate motherhood, and conflict over family and gender roles (e.g. traditional versus rainbow families).

Finally, a lot of focus also seems to be put on two recurring topics: education and the related system, especially relating to ‘school’ and ‘formation’; and Europe.

Hence, the first excerpt of our empirical analysis highlights a mixture of more shared, ‘valence’ topics and more controversial, ‘positional’ issues, mostly economic or socio-cultural in nature, among the most emphasised themes in the 2022 campaign, corroborating Proposition 1. In contrast, thematic keywords related to the identified issues of the day do not seem to feature prominently among the 50 most emphasised terms at the party system level. On the one hand, this raises the question as to whether issues of the day are really not relevant in the 2022 Italian party manifestos, which we will delve deeper into in the next section. On the other hand, given that the 2022 election originated from the aforementioned set of extraordinary circumstances, a comparison with the overall programmatic outlook of the Italian party system in 2018 might be informative. We provide this comparison by replicating our relative frequency analysis on the corpus of all 2018 Italian party manifestos (11 in total) available in the MARPOR dataset.¹¹

As per Figure B1 in online Appendix B, it is evident how, in general, the anticipated overall balance between positional and valence issues is also present in the 2018 election. However, in 2018, the top 50 most relatively emphasised words at the systemic level also include thematic keywords clearly related to much more contentious positional themes compared with 2022. This applies both to economic issues, such as taxation, and also to socio-culturally authoritarian issues of security and defence. Further, unlike in 2022, this list of the most relatively emphasised words also includes issues of the day at the time of the 2018 contest. These include, for example, the aforementioned focus on taxes, with Lega extensively priming the flat tax proposal during the campaign; more restrictive socio-cultural attitudes, as this election came at the end of the electoral cycle during which the 2015–16 European migrant crisis unfolded; and even the environment, missing altogether from 2022.

Proposition 2: the differentiated relevance of issues of the day

To empirically assess Proposition 2 and go beyond the picture emerging from the relative frequency analysis of the top 50 words at the party system level for the 2022 Italian party manifestos, we perform a collocation analysis. This methodological tool allows us to identify expressions made up of multiple words (usually two) that only together have a precise substantive connotation – i.e. collocations. More specifically, to identify such expressions, collocation analysis relies on three different measures: their absolute frequency within the analysed corpus; *lambda*, a measure indicating the probability that the words making up an expression will follow each other rather than following any other word within the corpus; and *z*, a standardised version of *lambda* (Puschmann and Haim 2019). To allow for a meaningful application of collocation analysis, we have hence run it on the version of our corpus immediately before the stage of compounding meaningful multiword expressions into single tokens, so that the analysis itself can identify them through its embedded measures.

In Table 2, we present the top 50 collocations within our analysed corpus as per the employed *R* package’s output ranked by *z* value, again indicating the substantive meaningfulness of such collocations within the corpus. Here, unlike the systemic relative frequency analysis employed to gauge Proposition 1, several multiword expressions that refer to two out of the three identified issues of the day – specifically, the environmental and energy crises – are present in this list of the top 50 most substantively meaningful collocations in our corpus. Indeed, multiple collocations emerge regarding the topic of the environment, such as ‘climate change’ (*cambiamento climatico*), ‘ecological transition’ (*transizione ecologico*), ‘sustainable mobility’ (*mobilità sostenibile*) and ‘soil consumption’ (*consumo suolo*). Further, the role of the energy question seems even more prominent,

Table 2. Top 50 collocations within the analysed corpus of 2022 Italian party manifestos

| | Collocation | Count | Lambda | z |
|----|--------------------------|-------|--------|-------|
| 1 | unione europea | 92 | 8.13 | 35.26 |
| 2 | miliardo euro | 66 | 6.21 | 33.75 |
| 3 | cambiamento climatico | 58 | 8.25 | 32.08 |
| 4 | persona disabilità | 63 | 6.13 | 31.90 |
| 5 | credito imposta | 51 | 6.57 | 31.84 |
| 6 | transizione ecologico | 73 | 7.71 | 31.50 |
| 7 | pubblico privato | 78 | 4.42 | 30.89 |
| 8 | particolare attenzione | 48 | 6.21 | 28.80 |
| 9 | fonte rinnovabile | 36 | 6.36 | 27.99 |
| 10 | pubblico amministrazione | 61 | 4.93 | 27.90 |
| 11 | salario minimo | 34 | 6.88 | 27.67 |
| 12 | articolo costituzione | 34 | 6.44 | 27.34 |
| 13 | energia elettrico | 41 | 5.65 | 27.32 |
| 14 | territorio nazionale | 64 | 3.84 | 26.48 |
| 15 | reddito cittadinanza | 35 | 6.00 | 26.36 |
| 16 | milione euro | 38 | 5.29 | 26.05 |
| 17 | protezione civile | 30 | 6.11 | 25.77 |
| 18 | piano nazionale | 60 | 3.76 | 25.37 |
| 19 | mercato lavoro | 61 | 3.79 | 25.15 |
| 20 | piccolo medio | 28 | 5.93 | 24.75 |
| 21 | diritto umano | 39 | 4.86 | 24.16 |
| 22 | energia rinnovabile | 33 | 5.10 | 24.14 |
| 23 | legge bilancio | 31 | 5.23 | 22.92 |
| 24 | produzione energia | 33 | 4.52 | 22.61 |
| 25 | mobilità sostenibile | 24 | 5.80 | 22.55 |
| 26 | consumo suolo | 21 | 7.26 | 22.12 |
| 27 | efficienza energetico | 27 | 5.15 | 21.57 |
| 28 | innovazione tecnologico | 21 | 5.70 | 21.55 |
| 29 | enti locale | 24 | 6.47 | 21.49 |
| 30 | patrimonio culturale | 25 | 4.96 | 21.36 |
| 31 | impianto sportivo | 20 | 5.71 | 21.28 |
| 32 | corte costituzionale | 18 | 7.79 | 21.25 |
| 33 | offerta turistico | 20 | 5.61 | 21.07 |
| 34 | domanda offerta | 18 | 5.90 | 20.66 |

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued.)

| | Collocation | Count | Lambda | z |
|----|----------------------------|-------|--------|-------|
| 35 | previdenza complementare | 16 | 8.72 | 20.38 |
| 36 | corso laurea | 17 | 6.29 | 20.26 |
| 37 | economia circolare | 30 | 7.69 | 20.25 |
| 38 | asilo nido | 14 | 7.68 | 20.23 |
| 39 | contratto collettivo | 17 | 6.06 | 20.11 |
| 40 | ente locale | 22 | 4.93 | 20.07 |
| 41 | fonte fossile | 16 | 6.46 | 19.94 |
| 42 | economia reale | 20 | 5.20 | 19.88 |
| 43 | governo draghi | 30 | 7.52 | 19.85 |
| 44 | commissione europea | 18 | 5.41 | 19.72 |
| 45 | tasso occupazione | 16 | 5.91 | 19.66 |
| 46 | efficientamento energetico | 23 | 6.02 | 19.56 |
| 47 | punto percentuale | 16 | 6.15 | 19.46 |
| 48 | conto corrente | 17 | 7.98 | 19.44 |
| 49 | lavoratore autonomo | 21 | 5.17 | 19.43 |
| 50 | area interno | 24 | 4.42 | 19.39 |
| 85 | guerra ucraina | 11 | 6.60 | 17.92 |

with collocations on issues such as energy sources (e.g. *'fonte rinnovabile'*, *'energia elettrica'*, *'energia rinnovabile'* and *'fonti fossili'*) as well as production and efficiency (*'produzione energia'*, *'efficienza energetica'*, *'efficientamento energetico'*) among the top 50 collocations. Conversely, the first collocation thematically linked to the Russian-Ukrainian war (*'guerra ucraina'*) – and the only one meaningfully emphasised by parties on this topic – is ranked eighty-fifth. This evidence indicates that the environmental and energy issues of the day are much more relevant in the 2022 Italian party manifestos than the Russian-Ukrainian war, which parties may want to avoid due to its highly controversial and sensitive nature. In this regard, on the rare occasions on which parties discuss this topic, they often do so by employing the 'Trojan horse' of other topics with which the war may thematically overlap – chiefly, the energy issue of the day (e.g. *'gas russo'*).

To further assess this picture, we also employed the KWIC tool to identify which party manifestos mentioned key collocations that are thematically related to our three issues of the day. To do so, we selected the highest-ranked collocations for each issue. As it emerged that the environmental and energy themes were very prominently featured among the most substantively meaningful collocations, we limited our selection to the two highest-ranked multiword expressions for each of these topics (*'cambiamento climatico'* and *'transizione ecologico'* for the environment; *'fonte rinnovabile'* and *'energia elettrico'* for energy). Instead, for the Russian-Ukrainian war we used the only available collocation (*'guerra ucraina'*).

The visualisation of our KWIC analysis, reported in [Table 3](#), fully confirms the indications emerging from the collocation analysis. Indeed, while the selected collocations of

Table 3. Key Word In Context (KWIC) analysis of selected collocations in the 2022 Italian party manifestos

| | Environment | | Energy | | War |
|--|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| | 'cambiamento climatico' | 'transizione ecologico' | 'fonte rinnovabile' | 'energia elettrico' | 'guerra ucraina' |
| Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Alternativa per l'Italia | | | | | |
| Forza Italia | | ✓ | | | |
| Fratelli d'Italia | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Impegno Civico | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Italexit | | | | | |
| Italia Sovrana e Popolare | | | | | |
| Lega | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Movimento 5 Stelle | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Noi Moderati | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Partito Democratico | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Più Europa | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Terzo Polo (Azione – Italia Viva) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Unione Popolare | | | | | |

both the environmental and energy issues of the day are mentioned by almost all parties (essentially barring smaller formations and the shorter and 'more timid' manifesto of FI), this is far from the case for the collocation related to the Russian–Ukrainian war, which is mentioned in only four manifestos. To sum up, our empirical assessment of Proposition 2 only partly corroborates it: of the issues of the day, only the environmental and energy questions seem to have a relevant role in the 2022 Italian party manifestos. In contrast, Italian parties tend to avoid placing considerable emphasis on the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, most likely due to its highly sensitive and controversial nature.

Proposition 3: the persisting endurance of issue ownership

We now present empirical evidence on Proposition 3, concerning whether individual parties still primarily emphasise the themes they traditionally 'own' in terms of ideology and credibility. To do so, we move from the level of analysis concerning all documents in the corpus to individual party manifestos. While our analysis was performed on all selected parties, for reasons of substantive interest and space we focus here on presenting the results related to eight significant formations: the left wing, represented by AVS; the main centre-left party, the PD; the M5S, previously the largest party; Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right FI; Matteo Salvini's Lega, formerly the largest RRP; the new leading Italian formation and RRP, Prime Minister Meloni's FdI; and two newly created formations – the centrist Terzo Polo, which obtained a sizeable share of the vote (almost 8 per cent) in the 2022 Italian election, and Italexit, a party openly against the EU and West-led international institutions more generally that received over half a million votes (1.9 per cent of

the overall vote share). The following information is hence retrieved from relative frequency analyses performed for each of the manifestos presented.

Figure 2 breaks down the 20 most emphasised words for all 14 formations for which the related programmes were included in the analysis of the 2022 Italian party manifestos, including the eight parties discussed here. Further, for each of the presented parties, we also illustrate (in Figure B2) information captured by the term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) measure, which highlights those words that are the most frequent for a specific party and are not frequently used in the other manifestos, hence constituting the flagship programmatic content of each formation.

We start from the left wing, represented by AVS, an electoral coalition between the Italian greens of Europa Verde and the left-wing Sinistra Italiana. In its manifesto, the key issues are related to rights alongside labour questions and the world of work, a typical feature of left-wing parties. Other compatible stances are also featured, such as those on public services, social issues, school and education, support for researchers and higher education institutions, public investments in the economy, and women. Hence, the profile emerging from this platform is typically left-wing on the economy and liberal on cultural issues and rights. In line with both the presented evidence and theoretical expectations, for AVS the most defining thematic keywords captured by the TF-IDF include salient economically left-wing and culturally liberal stances, such as those on corporations' excess profits (*'extraprofiti'*) and legalising cannabis (*'canapa'*) and specific policy items on protecting the environment (e.g. *'animale'*, *'fossile'*, *'forestale'*, *'plastica'*, *'clima'* and *'coltivazione'*). Thus, all this evidence supports the expected patterns of issue ownership of AVS, as posited by Proposition 3.

Moving on to the PD, the 2022 manifesto of this centre-left party also gives considerable salience to jobs and questions of work, rights and social issues. It then presents a broader substantive range of emphasised topics, as expected from a larger and mainstream formation; these include its pro-European vocation, mixed economic positions that combine both public investment and a business-friendly approach, and more valence stances on technology and the digital world as well as schools and the education system.¹² The TF-IDF scores also highlight this generalist focus as the PD's distinguishing feature, including the electoral 'background noise' of the necessity to fight the right wing (*'destra'*), although still with expected foci such as those on environmental transition, inequalities and civil rights (LGBTQI+). Hence, overall, the picture depicted for the PD seems fully in line with both the party's historical profile and its nature as a modern, large mainstream-left formation, supporting Proposition 3.

Likely due to the extensive governmental experience gained during the eighteenth legislature, the M5S seems to have run on a rather broad and generalist platform in 2022. Indeed, the key issues emerging from our corpus linguistic analysis as the most emphasised in the 2022 manifesto are mixed economic foci on jobs and workers, economic investments and business alongside the emphasis on European questions and rights, chiefly from a social viewpoint, particularly in line with the flagship measure of the *'reddito di cittadinanza'* enacted during the M5S-led Conte I government. Hence, as to be expected, the M5S presented a more moderate and seemingly 'established-party' profile: i.e. a broad enough agenda to be realistically enactable in government without huge controversies, while maintaining some of its traditional features such as the emphasis on social questions. This profile, which is also highlighted by TF-IDF scores that illustrate a wide thematic variety of defining topics, including social ones (e.g. *'rafforzamento'* of social measures, including the *'reddito di cittadinanza'* and *'contratto collettivo'*), seems in line overall with Proposition 3.

Moving to the right of the political centre, Berlusconi's FI fully confirms its traditional profile in its 2022 manifesto, reaffirming itself as above all the party of reform,

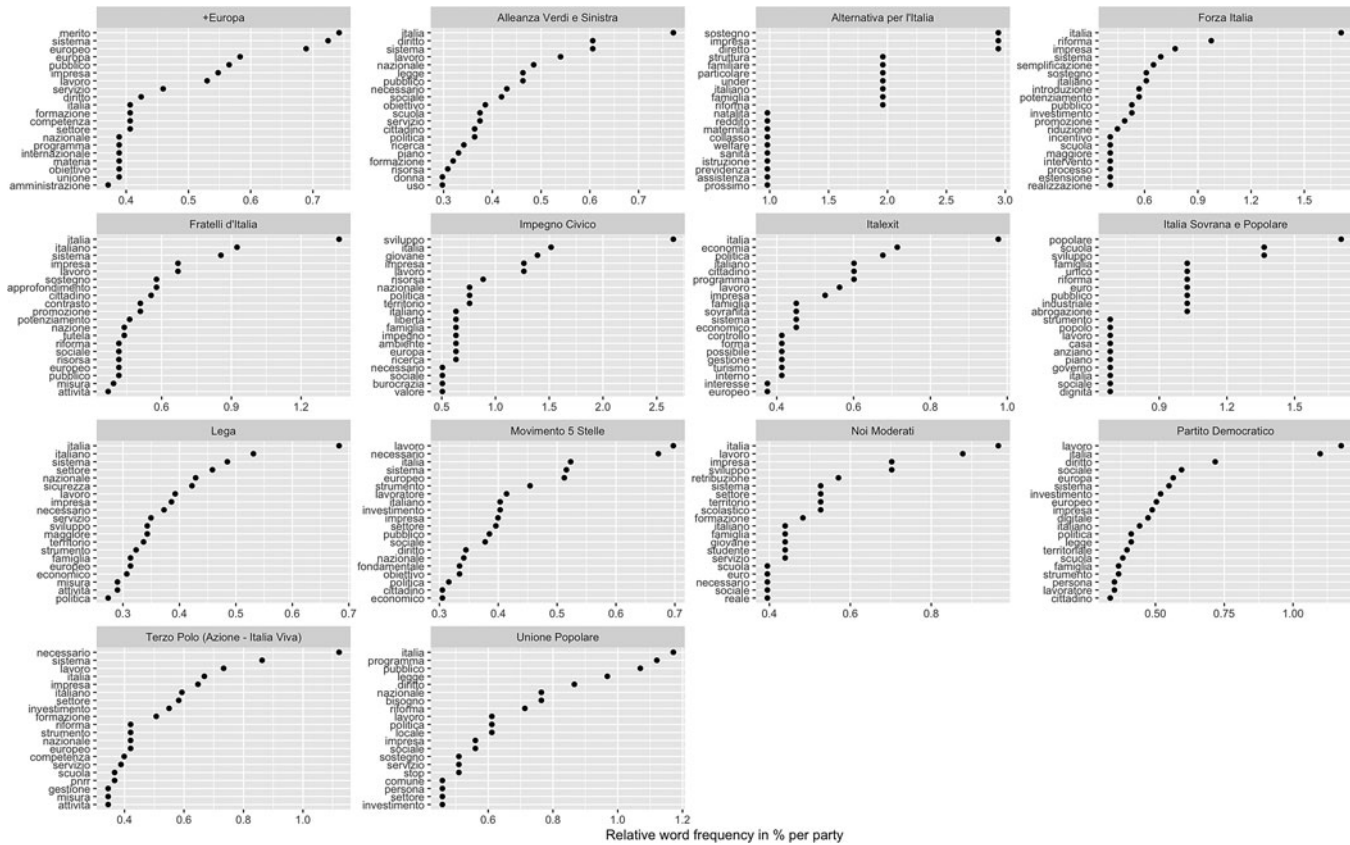


Figure 2. Top 20 most emphasised words in the 2022 Italian party manifests

bureaucratic simplification and right-wing, pro-business economics, chiefly through supply-side policies. Further, it presents some trademark foci, such as on the realisation of large public infrastructures, including the notorious bridge over the Strait of Messina frequently mentioned by Berlusconi. Other than that, it runs on a rather broad and generalist agenda, as would be expected from a mainstream-right formation, focusing on shared issues such as, to name a prominent example, school and the education system. This distinctive profile is fully confirmed by the TF-IDF scores, with administrative simplification and other flagship themes such as reforming the justice system emerging among a wider and more generalist array of emphasised issues. Hence, our corpus linguistic analysis of the 2022 FI manifesto also supports Proposition 3.

In terms of RRP, we start by looking at Salvini's Lega. As is to be expected from previous patterns of issue ownership, and hence in line with Proposition 3, the 2022 manifesto conveys the image of a party chiefly interested in issues of security as its most distinctive feature. Further, Lega also emphasises the themes of jobs, businesses, public services and investments, and European questions, alongside a few additional trademark issues concerning territorial autonomy and decentralisation, as well as families. Hence, apart from a few valence issues, the party mainly campaigns on distinctively right-wing cultural positions, accompanied by more mixed economic stances. Perhaps even more interestingly, the TF-IDF scores highlight the emphasis on some of Lega's key flagship topics, either more traditional or more contemporary ones, as its distinctive feature, in line with theoretical expectations: above all, regionalism and the energy crisis are especially prominent compared with other formations.

The second relevant RRP in the Italian party system is the winning party of the 2022 election, Meloni's FdI. Approaching this historic election with weeks' worth of polling data on its side, the manifesto of this party emphasises both the broad and shared goals necessary for the agenda of a formation with legitimate expectations of leading the executive, as well as more traditional ideological stances. On the former front, FdI focuses especially on the need to help businesses, create more jobs and provide forms of economic support, alongside an emphasis on reforms to be enacted once in government and questions regarding social issues, Europe and the public sector. On the latter front, the historical stances on the concept of 'nation' and the defence of Italy, its culture, traditions and identity are perfectly in line with the nature of this party, the heir of the Italian post-fascist 'social right' (*destra sociale*). Indeed, the concepts of 'nation' and 'fatherland' are the distinguishing features of the party according to our TF-IDF scores, alongside the electoral 'background noise' of countering left-wing parties, among other issues. Therefore, FdI, too, seems to conform to the patterns of issue ownership expected by Proposition 3, while maintaining a rather broad and balanced programmatic platform (as per Proposition 1).

It can also be very informative to spend a few words on two new competitors of substantive interest that took part in the 2022 Italian election: the new centrist Terzo Polo and Italexit, an 'anti-system' party (e.g. Zulianello 2018). The centrist Terzo Polo ran on a platform mainly focusing on the creation of jobs, helping businesses, public investments, promoting professional formation, providing people with skills, chiefly through the school system, reforms, Europe and the meritocratic idea of 'competence', which also emerges as one of its most distinguishing features from our TF-IDF scores. These results seem fully in line with the positions and character of both components of this centrist list, Carlo Calenda's Azione and Matteo Renzi's Italia Viva, and hence also go in the direction of Proposition 3.

Conversely, Italexit ran on a platform that, despite being relatively broad insofar as it primarily emphasised the need for more jobs and support for businesses, presented a focus on sovereignty as its most distinctive feature. This was exactly to be expected, as

it is the issue owned by this party, which is openly in favour of European disintegration in the form of Italy's exit from the EU. The emphasis on sovereignty – including through the key example of monetary policy – is also the key finding that emerged from our TF-IDF scores. Therefore, this case also adds to the thorough corroboration of our Proposition 3 on the prominence of owned issues in the 2022 Italian party manifestos that emerges from our corpus linguistic analysis.

Finally, as above, we also checked the programmatic continuity of individual party profiles by replicating our relative frequency analysis on individual party manifestos from 2018. From the replication visualised in Figure B3, it is evident that the key programmatic characteristics of some parties in 2022 are virtually the same as those emerging from the 2018 manifestos. This is the case with the left-wing parties (Liberi e Uguali/AVS), the PD and FI, although the latter also highlights a common trend of moderation over time by losing some culturally authoritarian foci on security and defence between 2018 and 2022.

Instead, more differences emerge in those cases where there has been extensive governmental experience, or there is a realistic prospect thereof. Indeed, on the one hand, the M5S and FdI manifestos of 2018 were less broad and generalist than in 2022, when they lost some of their more marked stances (e.g. the M5S also had a culturally authoritarian focus on security, and FdI was much more openly opposed to foreigners and banks). On the other, Lega appears to present a relatively more moderate manifesto in 2018 than in 2022, with its focus on traditional socio-cultural issues such as security and families not as prominent in 2018. Overall, though, it seems that even in individual party manifestos there was a more 'positional' approach to party programmes in 2018, rather than in the more generalist platforms of 2022.

Conclusions: what's new under the sun?

We have provided important substantive evidence on the campaign themes of the 2022 Italian election: an electoral contest of outstanding relevance and with far-reaching political implications in Italy and beyond. We did so by means of an in-depth corpus linguistic analysis – theory-driven in nature, as it was informed by the specialised literature on the historical evolution of campaign themes in Italy – on the standard source of data for measuring party positions and campaign themes: party manifestos.

In terms of real-world politics, we showed how the electoral success of the centre-right coalition, which led to the unprecedented formation of an RRP-led centre-right executive in Italy, occurred based on rather generalist programmatic platforms, yet most of all defined by markedly right-wing socio-cultural (with the themes of nationalism and defence for FdI and security for Lega) and economic (especially FI) traits. This means that Meloni's government is now called upon to act on the very programmatic bases that made the centre-right victorious at the polls and, hence, to deliver on the promises that were made during the campaign by enacting related policy.

Substantively, our empirical analysis yielded results that were mostly in line with our theory-informed propositions. Indeed, both our Proposition 1, on Italian party manifestos being characterised by a rather balanced mixture of different themes, and Proposition 3, on parties still primarily emphasising the issues they historically 'own' in terms of ideological connotation and credibility, were fully corroborated, although an overall movement towards slightly more generalist and thematically broader programmes was observed between 2018 and 2022 at both the systemic and individual levels. Further, Proposition 2 on issues of the day was mostly corroborated, meaning that, while the environmental and energy questions did have a relevant role in the 2022 manifestos, Italian parties avoided placing considerable emphasis on the Russian-Ukrainian war, perhaps due to its highly sensitive and controversial nature.

Additionally, another conclusion of substantive interest concerns the fact that the patterns of thematic emphasis highlighted by our analysis are well reflected in the dynamics of government formation and, in particular, in the allocation of cabinet posts. This is an important point, especially in light of the partisan nature of governments and cabinet policy built upon the thematic characterisation of parties' programmatic platforms assumed by the party government model of representative democracy (Katz 1987). Indeed, previous empirical research has shown how the attention towards certain issues allocated by parties in their electoral manifestos influences both coalition formation outcomes and which party wins control over which cabinet portfolio (e.g. Bäck, Debus and Dumont 2011). Although we cannot provide a direct empirical test here, it is nevertheless interesting to notice qualitatively that this thematic linkage between partisan issue emphasis and the control won over specific ministries seems to be confirmed by comparing our results with real-world government formation outcomes in Italy.

In 2022, for instance, all parties making up the centre-right coalition supporting Meloni's government were at the helm of cabinet portfolios corresponding to some of their key and most distinguishing thematic interests. To break this down, FI – above all the party of reform and bureaucratic simplification – was now in charge of the ministries on 'public administration' and 'institutional reforms and legislative simplification', while also controlling a cabinet post corresponding to its interest in education in the ministry of university and research. Lega saw its prominent interests in regionalism, territorial autonomy, decentralisation, economic matters, public services and investments corresponding to control over the ministries on 'regional affairs and autonomy', home affairs (through Matteo Piantedosi, an independent minister very close to Lega), economy and finance, and 'infrastructures and transport'. Finally, the winning party, FdI, most prominently concerned with the concepts of 'nation', 'fatherland' and its defence, indeed gained control over the ministries of defence, 'business and made in Italy', and 'agriculture, food sovereignty and forests'.

Even further, these last few ministries shed light on another dimension of this thematic linkage: some posts have even been renamed to match the key thematic emphasis and vision of the winning party and the coalition. Telling examples, among others, are the relabelling of the ministry of 'economic development', which became the ministry of 'business and made in Italy', and the ministry of 'agricultural, food and forest policy', which became the ministry of 'agriculture, food sovereignty and forests', in a direction that much better matches FdI's predominant focus and vision on the concepts of nation and sovereignty.

More generally, this thematic fit between partisan issue emphasis and control over corresponding cabinets seems also to be confirmed following the 2018 election, in the cabinets making up the eighteenth legislature: for example, the M5S controlled the ministry of 'work and social policies' in the Conte I and II cabinets (ministers Luigi Di Maio and Nunzia Catalfo); the PD controlled the ministries dealing with the cultural sector in the Conte II and Draghi cabinets (minister Dario Franceschini); and FI controlled the ministry of public administration (minister Renato Brunetta). Again, while a fully fledged empirical test of this thematic linkage is beyond the scope of this article, plenty of qualitative evidence seems to point to its presence at least provisionally, and future research may very well want to pursue a more systematic examination of this matter.

Our article provides important substantive contributions to the literature on Italian electoral campaigns and the themes that shape them. Further, we have introduced an innovative approach to the empirical examination of electoral campaign themes in Italy revolving around corpus linguistic analysis, which has never been used before in this literature to the best of our knowledge. This allowed us to empirically assess theoretical propositions informed by previous relevant research on a large amount of

previously unexplored textual data. Building on our work, future research could employ corpus linguistic analysis to further extend the effort of diachronically tracing change in the themes shaping Italian electoral campaigns.

Lastly, we also believe that future contributions should tackle the substantively important task of verifying whether the parties in government – potentially, in Italian fashion, governments – during the nineteenth legislature stick to their word and maintain their programmatic commitments in terms of actual policy output. Here, we have provided detailed empirical evidence that constitutes the groundwork for such an effort. More generally, we are confident that future work can further advance the literature on Italian campaign themes by moving forward – be it substantively or methodologically – from this article.

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Notes

1. The magnitude of Meloni's success was remarkable, with her party obtaining almost 26 per cent of the vote share (over 7 million votes) and the Fdi-led centre-right coalition totalling almost 44 per cent of voters' preferences (over 12 million votes). For a detailed breakdown of the 2022 Italian election, see Chiamonte et al. (2023).
2. Emanuele and Chiamonte (2020) show that the 2018 Italian election was the twelfth most volatile election in Western Europe since the end of the Second World War and the third most volatile before the 2022 Italian election, following the contests in 1994 – i.e. immediately after the collapse of the party system – and 2013, which saw the nationwide electoral debut of Movimento 5 Stelle. As per Chiamonte et al. (2023), this trend of remarkable volatility not only continued but also heightened in the 2022 Italian election.
3. See note 1.
4. Optical character recognition was performed with the ABBYY FineReader PDF 15 software.
5. For example, if a text is made up of 100 words, 50 of which are 'Italia' and the remaining 50 are 'Repubblica', it has 100 tokens and 2 types.
6. See 'spacyr: an R wrapper for spaCy', R package version 1.2.1 (2022), developed by Kenneth Benoit and Akitaka Matsuo, at <https://spacyr.quanteda.io/>.
7. Performing lemmatisation on highly inflected languages such as Italian can be problematic (Singh and Gupta 2016). However, here spacyr seemed to perform relatively well, as we manually checked the results of our lemmatisation.
8. For more information on both the spacyr package and the two functions discussed here, see <https://spacy.io/usage/linguistic-features>.
9. The list of multiword expressions that have been compounded into single tokens is available in online Appendix A.
10. Indeed, if we were to consider the top 50 most salient words across all manifestos as a unique corpus of text, strongly emphasised words in even just one longer manifesto would bias our results at the level of the party system.
11. The 2018 corpus was pre-processed by following all the steps that were illustrated for the preparation of our 2022 corpus.
12. It is interesting to note that, as per the majority of the individual parties of substantive interest illustrated here, this rather balanced configuration between more 'positional' and more 'valence' issues seems to provide further support to Proposition 1 at the level of individual formations, reinforcing the evidence presented at the level of the party system.

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Italian summary

Con questo lavoro introduciamo un approccio innovativo allo studio dei temi che caratterizzano le campagne elettorali in Italia. Facciamo ciò attraverso una *corpus linguistic analysis* originale dei manifesti elettorali relativi alle cruciali elezioni del 2022. Tramite la sua sistematicità e flessibilità, il

nostro approccio ci permette di valutare delle proposizioni deduttive impiegando un'estesa mole di dati testuali fin qui inesplorati. Come anticipato, i manifesti elettorali italiani del 2022 sono caratterizzati da una configurazione di enfasi piuttosto bilanciata tra una varietà di temi, dei quali alcuni sono più controversi mentre altri più condivisi sia tra gli elettori che tra i partiti. Inoltre, i partiti si concentrano in primo luogo su quei temi che storicamente gli appartengono di più, da un punto di vista ideologico e di competenza percepita. Infine, i principali 'temi caldi' del dibattito pubblico durante la campagna elettorale sono enfatizzati in modo differenziato dai partiti italiani, i quali in particolare evitano di concentrarsi oltremodo sul tema spinoso della guerra tra Russia e Ucraina.

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