The Italian Centre-Right Coalition and the Transnational Cleavage

Alessio Scopelliti

Working Paper No. 03-22

Copyright © 2022 by Alessio Scopelliti. Working papers are in draft form. This working paper is distributed for purposes of comment and discussion only. It may not be reproduced without permission of the copyright holders.

Alessio Scopelliti is a PhD Candidate in the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies at the University of Bristol. His main research interests are Right-Wing Party Competition, Western European Politics and Global Populism. He is also a Doctoral Fellow at the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR). He can be contacted at alessio.scopelliti@bristol.ac.uk or alessio.scopelliti91@gmail.com.
Chapter 7

The Italian Centre-Right Coalition and the Transnational Cleavage

This chapter is part of a book entitled *The Right Coalition in Italy: moving from Centre-Right to Radical-Right (2018-2020)*, (co-editor) with Valerio A. Bruno (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan) and James F. Downes (The Hong Kong Metropolitan University). Contract signed with Transcript ibidem-Verlag/ Columbia University Press, (9 chapters commissioned, final draft approximately 200 pages to be submitted in September 2022).

European party systems have been shaped by the formation of a new cleavage structure that is between those political forces that sustain the European integration project (or pro-EU) and those that reclaim national sovereignty (or anti-EU): the new transnational cleavage structure. In this chapter, we will explore the implications of this new ideological conflict within the Italian party system. To accomplish this, this chapter firstly reconceptualise the transnational cleavage as a complex issue that is structured from multiple dimensions that can generate their own ideological pull (institutional, economic, and cultural). It, secondly, explores how the new transnational cleavage has developed within both party and individual levels from the start of the Second Republic in 1994 to the 2018 general election. Finally, it will deepen the analysis on the centre-right coalition exploring forms of alignments and dealignments among the League, Brothers of Italy and Forward Italy with regards to the new transnational cleavage. The central finding of this chapter is that the institutional dimension of the transnational cleavage is the conflict that mostly contribute the polarisation process of this new ideological conflict between pro-EU vs. anti-EU within the Italian party system. Moreover, from 2013 to 2018, the right-wing coalition has been ‘radicalised’ from one election to another, moving from a utilitarian Europeanism towards a pure Euroscepticism, by the oldest parties constituting this alliance: the League and Forward Italy. By contrast, Brothers of Italy kept its Eurosceptic stance from one election to another.

KEYWORDS: (1) Transnational cleavage; (2) Public opinion; (3) Party competition; (4) Alignments and dealignments; (5) Euroscepticism.

7.1 Introduction

The political and economic consequences of the World War II have risen in the minds of the Italian political elites the urgent need to demand for a stronger alliance of the European countries at the transnational level in order to avoid any further military conflict within the old continent. Accordingly, Italy has always been at the forefront of the European integration process by several reasons. Firstly, Italy wants to be considered as equal with the other (victorious) European countries of World War II; secondly, the Italian government wants to increase its diplomatic ties with the US (which invested massively in European reconstruction against the Soviet threat); and, thirdly, the Italian people are still reeling from the totalitarian fascist experience and the European integration process offers an opportunity for Italy to initiate a new democratic process (Varsori, 2010). Therefore, the Italian governments of the 1950s played a leading role in the building of a new transnational community. Ultimately, driven by a strong desire of reconstruction and friendship among

---

1 We should not forget that Italy is a country weakened by the war militarily, politically, and economically. Furthermore, although a substantial part of the Italian people joined the resistance movement, the Italian electorate of the 1950s has not yet accepted democratic values. Indeed, looking at the Italian political landscape of the time, there are parties, both on the left (the Italian Communist Party) and on the right (the National Monarchist Party and the Italian Social Movement), that openly declare themselves as revolutionary and/or anti-system movements, reaching a total of 30%-35% of support in the Italian electorate. For this reason, the pro-European choice of the Italian governments (largely controlled by the Christian Democratic party) is primarily driven by the goal of improving the country's economy and embracing the values of democratic regimes tying with a double knot Italy with the other European democratic powers (Varsori, 2010).
European people, Belgium, France, Italy, the Federal Republic of Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands jointly signed the Treaty of Paris in 1951 (establishing the European Coal and Steel Community – ECSC) and the Treaties of Rome in 1957 (establishing the European Economic Community – EEC), which will be the first bricks that will compose the foundations of the European Union (EU).

Subsequently, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Italian political elite turned to be polarized with regards to the European integration process. On the one hand, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) forcefully opposed subsequent steps of the European integration process because of their scepticism towards the Common Market as adverse for the Italian economic system and a threat for the European continent to achieve peace since the European integration process was perceived as a ‘provocation’ to the Soviet Union (Mueller, 2010). On the other hand, the Italian Christian Democracy (DC) sustained the EEC as a chance for Italy to play a leading role at the international level and, again, to consolidate the Italian alliance with the US. Nevertheless, over the years, left-wing parties, including PCI, gradually changed their position towards the EEC, resulting in a reduced polarization of the Italian party system with regards to the European integration process (Conti and Verzichelli, 2005).

Afterward, from the early 1980s to the early 1990s, the Italian political elite was able to sustain policies in pursuit of more economic and political unification of the EEC countries, without suffering from political blame in implementing significant institutional reforms and delegating national authority to transnational institutions, such as the signing of the Single European Act (SEA) aiming for the completion of the Single Market and the enlargement to the Southern Europe including Greece, Spain and Portugal. The literature on European politics defines this period of time as the “permissive consensus” (Daniels, 1998: 107) where Italy was “long regarded as the most pro-European of the continent” both at the country and party levels (Serricchio, 2012: 115).

However, since the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the ideological conflict between pro-EU vs. anti-EU has played a significant role in all the European member states’ party systems, including the Italian one (Hooghe and Marks, 2018). For that reason, we aim to explore to what extent the transnational cleavage developed within the Italian party system since the beginning of the ‘Second Republic’, which coincided with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, and, then, focus to what extent the parties constituting the Italian centre-right coalition address this new ideological conflict in the most recent years.

With this goal in mind, since the early 2000s, as “a true cottage industry” (Mudde, 2012: 193), a great number of scholars has increased in describing the phenomenon of Euroscepticism relying on different theoretical approaches. In this chapter, we mostly rely from studies produced by the ‘North Carolina school’ which analyses how party politics address the conflict between pro-EU vs. anti-EU identifying it as a new ideological conflict (or cleavage structure) that impacts current European party systems and political debates, including Italy. To this end, this chapter will, firstly, review the more recent literature that attempt to conceptualise the notion of Euroscepticism and we will also re-examine the new transnational cleavage conceptualised by Hooghe and Marks (2018) proposing an innovative multidimensional approach about this this new ideological
conflict. Secondly, relying on data from the Eurobarometer (EB) and the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP), we will show how we operationalise in practice the new transnational cleavage in order to depict both factors of the demand side and supply side of political parties. In the third part, we will present results to, firstly, verify whether (and to what extent) Italy is polarised both at the country (demand side) and party level (supply side) since the beginning of the Second Republic (from 1994 to 2018) and, secondly, we deepen our analysis of the new transnational cleavage focusing on the centre-right wing coalition (League, Brothers of Italy and Forward Italy).

7.2 The new transnational cleavage: an ideological conflict more complex than we thought

The conceptualisation of Euroscepticism is not an easy task. This notion is widely debated among scholars of European politics and, notwithstanding they have produced a great amount of literature on this topic, there are few agreements and many disagreements on the aspects that constitute this notion (Kopecky and Mudde, 2002; Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008). On the one hand, there is agreement among scholars with regards to the origin of Euroscepticism. In fact, although most of the academic work (before Maastricht) used to deal Euroscepticism as an extension of nationalism (when studying far-right parties/electorate), the post-Maastricht debate often identifies the whole European integration process as the historical juncture that produces this new ideological conflict (Crespy and Verschueren, 2009). More specifically, when drawing on Soifer’s (2012) theoretical framework on historical junctures, the European integration process can be ‘unpacked’ in two elements which “combination is necessary and sufficient for [creating] divergence” within society: the permission conditions and the productive conditions. Soifer (2012: 1574-1575) defines the permission conditions “as those factors or conditions that change the underlying context to increase the causal power of agency or contingency and thus the prospects for divergence”; while the productive conditions are those “aspects of a [historical] juncture that shape the initial outcomes that diverge across cases”. Accordingly, combining both literature on European politics and Soifer’s framework, we consider the period of time, from the early 1950s to the early 1990s, when the European political elites pushed for a stronger European integration process (Hooghe and Marks, 2009) as the permission condition. While we consider the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 as the productive condition since the change from European Economic Community to European Union has inevitably driven to “the moment when divisions between European and domestic policy within the member states began to become blurred” (FitzGibbon et al., 2016: 1).

On the other hand, the meaning of Euroscepticism, more specifically its suffix -scepticism, has been debated among scholars, mostly because of its ambiguous nature. As Leruth et al. (2018) explain, the logic behind the sceptical nature towards Europe is not clear, firstly, because of its terminological origin. In fact, the notion of Euroscepticism was not conceptualised in academia, but it was coined by British journalists to identify Conservative MPs who were concerned about the consequences of the Single European Act for the United Kingdom (Spiering, 2004). Despite the unclear definition of Euroscepticism, this term was internalised by the academic literature, without a proper conceptualisation, and it was, therefore, employed by academics to define
any form of antagonization towards the EU. Subsequently, the first (successful) attempt to provide theoretical clarity is provided by Szczerbiak and Taggart's (2008) two-volume analysis of Euroscepticism across eighteen countries. In their very accessible style, the authors have been able to provide two degrees of Euroscepticism in order to distinguish different forms of antagonization towards the EU: the so-called soft-Euroscepticism and hard-Euroscepticism. Soft-Euroscepticism is defined as “the expression of qualified opposition to the EU” (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2008: 7) in relation to one (or more than one) European policy; whilst, hard-Euroscepticism is understood as “a principled opposition to the EU and European integration”, which might lead towards a withdrawal from EU membership – as it was the Brexit referendum in 2016 and it was also demanded by the National Rally during the 2017 Presidential Elections (Frexit). Nevertheless, some criticism has been made regarding these definitions. For instance, some authors (Kopecky and Mudde, 2002; Hooghe et al., 2004) consider these definitions too broad (the soft one) or too narrow (the hard one) in order to conceptualise Euroscepticism but, most importantly, we believe that these definitions lack of ideological pull that Euroscepticism can express.

To this end, we argue that Hooghe and Marks (2018) best represent the definition of Euroscepticism when introducing this notion to the theoretical premises of the cleavage theory (Lipset and Rokkna, 1967). In fact, Hooghe and Marks do not explore Euroscepticism as a ‘standalone’ phenomenon unrelated to the electoral dynamics among political parties, but they rather conceptualise it as a political thought which is antithetical to Europeanism (another political thought). Jointly together, Europeanism and Euroscepticism constitute a new ideological conflict (or cleavage structure) that is shaping the current European party competition in a conflict between pro-EU (any favourable mentions of EU) vs. anti-EU (any negative references to the EU). Moreover, thanks to this conceptualisation, Hooghe and Marks empirically demonstrate the causes behind the electoral success of radical right parties across the European member states. In fact, “just as the religious cleavage and the class cleavage were raised by Catholic and socialist parties on one side of the divide” (Hooghe and Marks, 2018: 111), the new transnational cleavage, which has risen in terms of political salience in the European societies (see also Kriesi and Grande, 2015), is mostly mobilised by the radical right parties because they are issue owners of Euroscepticism, while the mainstream parties (both form the left and the right wing) traditionally proposed a political agenda to depoliticise the European integration process, implying an inevitable alignment towards Europeanism (Marks et al., 2002).

Nevertheless, although Hooghe and Marks successfully provide a new theoretical framework that clarify the nature of Euroscepticism (which is antithetical, per nature, to Europeanism), they fail to detect all the different nuances that both Europeanism and Euroscepticism can employ because they consider the transnational cleavage, in a classical fashion, as a unidimensional conflict that parties and citizens can only approve or oppose. Alternatively, we argue that the transnational cleavage can be conceptualised as a complex ideological conflict that is structured from multiple dimensions that can generate their own ideological pull. The identification of these multiple dimensions eases the understanding to what extent political parties (or people) support or oppose the EU. In support of this argumentation, we mostly rely on the idea of multidimensionality
of complex political issues proposed by Baumgartner and Jones (2002) and Gattinara (2016). Gattinara (2016), for instance, argues that immigration is a complex issue that branches out over three dimensions: economic, cultural, and law and order. Similarly, as Euroscepticism has been explored in multiple ways, we accordingly argue that the transnational cleavage is essentially a multidimensional conflict. More specifically, we identify three dimensions of conflict within the transnational cleavage: an institutional dimension (Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970; Feld and Wildgen, 1976; Handley, 1981; Eichenberg and Dalton 2007), an economic dimension (Tsebelis and Garrett, 2000; Leupold, 2015) and a cultural dimension (Taggart, 1998; McLaren, 2002). Moreover, each dimension is composed by antithetical positions respectively as: ‘Federalism vs. Souverainisme’, ‘Marketism vs. Welfare Chauvinism’, and ‘Multiculturalism vs. Nativism’. Table 7.1, below, represents our reconceptualization of the transnational cleavage with the well-known Bartolini and Mair’s (2007) definition of cleavage structures composed by three aspects that are equally important and necessary to define a conflict as a cleavage: empirical aspect, normative aspect and organisational aspect.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Origin of the conflict</th>
<th>Empirical aspect</th>
<th>Normative aspect</th>
<th>Organizational aspect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The European integration process and the signing of the Maastricht treaty in 1992</td>
<td>Level of education</td>
<td>Institutional Federalism vs. Souverainisme</td>
<td>Radical right parties vs. Mainstream (both left-wing and right-wing) parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Economic Marketism vs. Welfare Chauvinism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Multiculturalism vs. Nativism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s elaboration.

This reconceptualization of the transnational cleavage is still in line with the ‘North Carolina school’ idea of the EU being so socially rooted within current European societies that it reinforces a new dimension of conflict that challenges pre-existing classical cleavages such as Left vs. Right. Additionally, it provides the advantage to explore whether individuals and political parties can adopt stances that allows them to employ elements from both Euroscepticism and Europeanism. Drawing from this new reconceptualization, in the following section, we will explain how to operationalise in practice in order to depict the new transnational cleavage at both the individual level (demand side) and party level (supply side).

7.3 Operationalizing the new transnational cleavage structure

The main data source to explore the transnational cleavage, at the individual level, is the standard version of the EB, which has been published twice a year (spring and autumn) since 1973. We selected this data source because it is particularly well suited to analyse trends of public opinion with variables that can represent each dimension of the transnational cleavage. As follows, we describe which EB’s questions best represent the

---

2 We recommend reviewing Von Schoultz (2017) who clearly explain Bartolini and Mair’s three parts definition of a cleavage structure.

3 In order to explore data from the early 1990s to the late 2010s, we integrated the following EBs: EB42, EB43.1, EB44.1, EB46, EB47.1, EB49, EB50, EB52, EB53, EB54.1, EB56.2, EB57.1, EB58.1, EB59.1, EB60.1, EB61, EB62, EB64.2, EB73.4, EB91.5.
dimensions of the transnational cleavage and, then, we will show how we constructed the variable that represent the transnational cleavage as a whole at the individual level.

Starting with the institutional dimension, we will employ the ‘Membership good/bad’ question. This variable has already been used to explore support/opposition to the European integration project, from an institutional perspective (Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970; Feld and Wildgen, 1976; Handley, 1981). In fact, this trend question is widely used in studies of Euroscepticism since the “membership in the European Union represents the existential fact of the integration process – endorsing membership is therefore endorsing the process of integration itself” (Eichenberg and Dalton, 2007: 133). Moving to the economic dimension, we selected the “Membership country benefit” question to capture respondents’ attitudes with regards to the economic calculations between costs and benefits of being part of the EU (McLaren, 2002: 522). Indeed, this variable has already been used to measure the utilitarian aspect of Euroscepticism within public opinion (Gabel and Palmer, 1995; Anderson and Reichert, 1996; Gabel, 1998). With regards to the last dimension of the transnational cleavage, the cultural dimension is represented with the ‘National vs. European identity’ question. This variable was already employed to explore the extent to which European integration might be hindered not only for institutional or economic reasons, but also because of peoples’ concerns about the dissolution of their national identity (McLaren, 2002: 554). Finally, moving to the transnational cleavage (as a whole), this ideological conflict was constructed by combining the three variables that we just described above. To accomplish this, we used the ‘count values’ command in SPSS in order to count how many times occur the value corresponding to dimensions that antagonise the EU such as ‘souverainisme’, ‘welfare chauvinism’ and ‘nativism’. In this way, we could measure how many times an individual had a negative attitude towards the European integration process across the three dimensions. Subsequently, we would have an ordinal variable with four categories: (0) ‘0 times’, (1) ‘one time’, (2) ‘two times’ and (3) ‘three times’. Ultimately, these new categories were recoded as a dummy variable from 0 to 1 as pro-EU (0) and from 2 to 3 as anti-EU (1). The threshold to define as pro-EU and anti-EU is drawn from the work of Emanuele et al. (2020: 320) when defying the threshold of parties’ position on the integration/demarcation cleavage (Kriesi et al., 2008). Accordingly, an individual will be defined as anti-EU when it holds at least two negative stands out

---

4 The question is formulated as follows: “Generally speaking, do you think that (your country’s) membership of the European Community (common market) is ...? (1) A good thing, (2) neither good nor bad, (3) a bad thing” (excluding the DK and NA categories). By merging the last two categories, we can observe, on the one hand, all those respondents that are clearly in support of the EU membership, and on the other hand, those that are not totally convinced of the EU integration project. I, therefore, relabelled these categories as 0 for ‘federalism’ and as 1 for ‘souverainisme’.

5 The question is “Taking everything into consideration, would you say that (your country) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European community (common Market)? (1) Benefited, (2) Not Benefited” (excluding the DK and NA categories). Eventually, we respectively relabelled these categories as 0 for ‘marketism’ and as 1 for ‘welfare chauvinism’.

6 The question is structured as follows: “In the near future do you see yourself as? (1) <nationality> only, (2) <nationality> and European, (3) European and <nationality> and (4) European only” (excluding the DK and NA categories). Therefore, in order to represent the dichotomist nature of this dimension I have recoded the variables as follows: 0 for ‘<nationality> and European’, ‘European and <nationality>’ and ‘European only’ and as 1 for ‘<nationality> only’. In this way, I relabelled these two categories as 0 for ‘multiculturalism’ and as 1 for ‘nativism’.
of three towards the EU; and it will be defined as pro-EU when it holds at least two positive stands out of three towards the EU. Table 7.2, below, recaps which variables have been employed from the EB questionnaire.

Table 7.2 Overview of EBs questions to construct the transnational cleavage at the individual level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideological conflicts</th>
<th>Questions from the EBs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional dimension</td>
<td>&quot;Generally speaking, do you think that (your country's) membership of the European Community (common market) is ...?&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic dimension</td>
<td>&quot;Taking everything into consideration, would you say that (your country) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European Community (common Market)?&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural dimension</td>
<td>&quot;In the near future do you see yourself as &quot;&lt;nationality&gt; only&quot;, &quot;&lt;nationality&gt; and European&quot;, &quot;European and &lt;nationality&gt;&quot; or &quot;European only&quot;.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s elaboration from the Eurobarometer questionnaire.

Moving to the operationalization of the transnational cleavage at the party level, the main data source is the CMP dataset (Werner et al., 2011). This data source is one of the most used in comparative politics in order to explore the supply side of political parties. In fact, the CMP team provides an invaluable amount of data manually coding electoral manifestos of political parties from over 50 countries since the end of the World Warr II onwards. The electoral manifestos are coded in units of analysis named as quasi-sentence. Each unit represents only one message (thus only one category). In order to explore the development of the transnational cleavage at the party level in Italy, we employ these data because CMP also provides categories that best represent all dimensions of the transnational cleavage.

Starting with the institutional dimension, this is associated with the categories (108) European Community/Integration: Positive and (110) European Community/Integration: Negative. These categories respectively coincide to the dichotomy ‘Federalism’ and the dichotomy ‘Souverainisme’. The economic dimension is constructed, on the one hand, by the CMP categories (401) Free Market Economy and (407) Protectionism: Negative. Both categories favourably mention the free movement of goods and capital, defending processes at the basis of the liberal economic market. They, thus, jointly represent the dichotomy ‘Marketism’. On the other hand, the CMP categories such as (403) Market Regulation, (406) Protectionism: Positive, (409) Keynesian Demand Management and (413) Nationalisation, favourably mention stances on government ownership of industries, economic stimulus by the government in periods of economic crisis (against austerity) and the extension of protectionist measure to disincentive the movement of capital and goods across countries. These categorise constitute the dichotomy ‘Welfare chauvinism’. The cultural dimension is associated with CMP categories (602) National Way of Life: Negative and (607) Multiculturalism: Positive, which represent favourable mentions towards cultural diversity, to immigration and opposition to nationalism. Instead, CMP categories (601) National Way of Life: Positive and (608) Multiculturalism: Negative are stances appealing to nationalism, patriotism and antagonization with cultural diversity or immigration. The first pair of categories coincide with the dichotomy ‘Multiculturalism’ and the second pair of categories coincide to the dichotomy ‘Nativism’. To conclude, the transnational cleavage is constituted by all CMP categories presented above. Accordingly, the dichotomy ‘Pro-EU’ is measured through all categories linked to the dichotomies ‘Federalism’, ‘Marketism’ and ‘Multiculturalism’; while the
dichotomy ‘Anti-EU’ is measured with all categories linked to the dichotomies ‘Souverainisme’, ‘Welfare chauvinism’ and ‘Nativism’. Table 7.3 below shows the CMP categories associated with the transnational cleavage and its dimensions.

Table 3.1 Classical and new cleavage structures associated to CMP categories for the Chapter 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideological conflict</th>
<th>Dichotomy 1 (CMP categories)</th>
<th>Dichotomy 2 (CMP categories)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional dimension (Federalism vs. Souverainisme)</td>
<td>108 European Community/Union: Positive</td>
<td>110 European Community/Union: Negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s elaboration of CMP’s categories (Werner et al., 2011: 15-23).

The CMP team suggests three main techniques in order to conceptually depict the supply side of political parties (Laver and Budge, 1992): strategy, emphasis and position. Political parties’ strategy includes both dimensions of emphasis and position. In fact, parties’ strategy is measured as the sum of all categories representing one dichotomy minus the sum of all categories representing the second dichotomy. Therefore, the resulting score ranges from −100 to +100 (strategy = dichotomy1 − dichotomy2). Political parties’ emphasis is measured by the sum of categories that compose both dichotomies where the resulting score ranges from 0 to 100 (emphasis = dichotomy1 + dichotomy2). Finally, political parties’ position is measured as the sum of all categories representing one dichotomy minus the sum of all categories representing the second dichotomy and, then, divide it with the sum of categories that compose both dichotomies. The resulting score ranges from −1 to +1 (position = (dichotomy1 − dichotomy2)/(dichotomy1 + dichotomy2)). Parties’ strategy will be employed to depict whether and to what extent centre-left and centre-right propose themselves as political alternatives on the new transnational cleavage. Parties’ emphasis and position will be used to deepen the analysis of the parties constituting the centre-right wing coalition.

7.4 The development of the new transnational cleavage structure in Italy

Following the widely acknowledged literature in section 7.2, we will now explore how the transnational cleavage has changed in Italy. This section is divided in two parts. In the first one, drawing from previous scholars’ recommendations (Rydgren 2007; Mudde 2007), we will explore how the transnational cleavage has become a polarising conflict at both individual level (demand side) and party level (supply side). In the second
part, we shall focus exclusively on the parties composing the centre-right coalition in order to reveal similarities and differences among them with regards to the new transnational cleavage.

7.4.1 The metamorphosis of the Italian party system in the Second Republic

As stated above, this section depicts how individuals and political parties align with regards to the new transnational cleavage in Italy from 1994 to 2018. Starting the analysis at the individual level, figure 7.1 shows how the new transnational cleavage has developed since the beginning of the Second Republic (until 2019). These results confirm that the Italian public opinion is experiencing new processes of realignments that increase the level of polarisation with regards to the new transnational cleavage. Overall, figure 7.1 shows three main stages of change within the Italian public opinion. From 1994 to 2002, most of Italians hold pro-EU attitudes with regards to the transnational cleavage in a range between 78% and 84%. Then, from 2002 to 2005, there is a first decrease of pro-EU consent from 78% to 61%. Finally, the new transnational cleavage has deepened so much within the Italian society since 2005 that, for the very first time, Italians are perfectly polarised (50%-50%) on this new ideological conflict in 2019.

The reasons behind this new realignment within the Italian public opinion can be observed in figure 7.1 when focusing on each dimension composing the new transnational cleavage. In fact, we can observe that from 1994 to 2002, all dimensions show that the majority of Italians hold positive attitudes towards the EU (federalism, marketism and multiculturalism). Moreover, it should be noted that among the three dimensions, the economic dimension is the one that is more polarised in 1994, but the marketism attitude tends to increase in the following
years until 2001 reaching its peak at 65%. Therefore, these results demonstrate that the public opinion did not react against the EU in following years after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty. By contrast, most Italians hold positive attitudes towards the EU at this first stage (institutional and cultural dimensions) and even the number of people who believe in the economic beneficial effects of the European membership has increased.

However, although the Maastricht Treaty was not greeted by Italians with scepticism, subsequent events linked to the European integration process made the EU more visible in the eyes of Italian citizens, who started to recognize the extent to which the European institutions can impact their daily lifestyles and, eventually, increased the level of scepticism towards the EU. For instance, in the period from 2002 to 2005, we can observe the first substantial decrease of Italians that favour the EU in all three dimensions of the new transnational cleavage. The spur of dissent against EU is often explained by the literature as a consequence of the European enlargement process towards Eastern European countries in 2004. In fact, this enlargement was perceived by the Italian public opinion as a threat both from an economic and a cultural point of view. Economically speaking, the enlargement towards poorer regions of Eastern Europe meant an impact on structural redistribution of the EU budget which, since then, was mostly favouring the Mediterranean regions (including regions from the Southern Italy) (Serricchio, 2012). Culturally speaking, from the heritage of Cold War conflict between East vs. West, Western populations (including Italians) did not consider the people from Eastern Europe as truly Europeans, deepening a cultural clash between ‘old’ vs. ‘new’ European people (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002).

Finally, from 2005 to 2019, figure 7.1 shows that the Italian public opinion is perfectly polarised with regards to the new transnational cleavage (as a whole). Nevertheless, when focusing on the dimensions of this new conflict, we can observe that the institutional dimension is the one that is playing a significant role in decreasing the number of people in favour of the EU. The reason behind this phenomenon is because of two major crises that have worsened the Italians’ view on the usefulness of the EU to handle transnational issues: the Eurozone crisis in 2010 and the migration crisis in 2015 (Scipioni, 2018; Anderson, 2021). With regards to the Eurozone crisis, according to Bellucci (2014: 248), most of Italians criticised the EU austerity plan, which was delivered, at the time, through the prime minister Mario Monti (a former European commissioner). While, linked to the migration crisis, the normative consequences of the Dublin Treaty, which dropped the responsibility to the peripheral countries to host refugees, have driven Italians to mostly blame EU for abandoning Italy in the management of the migration crisis (Barbulescu and Beaudonnet, 2014; Conti et al., 2020).

That is to say, over the decades, these data demonstrate that Italians do not approve or oppose the EU outright, but they rather differently support and oppose some dimensions constituting the new transnational cleavage. In fact, the picture that we can draw from figure 7.1 is that Italians used to completely endorse the European integration process in the 1980s. While, in the most recent years (2019), most of Italians still consider the European membership as a benefit for their national economy and they also tend to consider themselves more Europeans than Italians. Yet, results from figure 7.1 also demonstrate that Italians are mostly sceptical against
the EU with regards to the institutional dimension, which undermines the ideological basis of the EU foundation to raise the European countries at the world stage as key player.

Now, shifting the focus at the party level, we will explore how the Italian coalitions (centre-left and centre-right) have addressed the new transnational cleavage in the last seven political campaigns during Italian general elections (from 1994 to 2018). First of all, we can see from figure 7.2 that the new transnational cleavage does not occupy a significant space in political parties’ manifestos. Indeed, we can notice that both coalitions never dedicate more than 5% of their manifestos to this topic (except for the centre-right coalition in 2008). However, in terms of dealignment between coalitions, we can observe two main periods of time that demonstrate that the new transnational cleavage became, from election to election, a more polarising topic at the party level. For instance, from 1994 to 2006, the centre-right and the centre-left coalitions do not experience considerable level of dealignment on the new transnational cleavage. They do not attempt to present themselves to the Italian electorate as two alternative political offers, but they are rather similar in both terms of emphasis (low) and position (pro-EU). However, from 2008 to 2018, the two coalitions start to differently address the new transnational cleavage. On the one hand, the centre-left coalition steadily shift from a neutral to a pro-EU strategy (most notably in 2018). On the other hand, the centre-right coalition fluctuates more than the centre-left coalition as it moves from a strong opposition against the EU in 2008, to a moderately negative strategy in 2013, and finally it returns to an anti-EU strategy in 2018. These results confirm our expectations that, similar to the individual level, there is not dealignment between the two coalitions in the subsequent years after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, but they eventually started to offer two political alternatives to their electorates on the European issue from the late 2010s onwards.

Figure 7.2 Alignments of the new transnational cleavage at the party level from 1994 to 2018

Source: CMP data. Author’s elaboration.
We shall focus now on each dimension in order to explore which of them mostly impacted this new dealignment process at the party level on the European issue. In fact, at first sight, we can observe that the centre-left and the centre-right coalitions differently experienced each dimension of the new transnational cleavage over the years. Starting with the institutional dimension, the centre-left coalition shows to have always supported the EU. It usually holds a neutral strategy, but it also demonstrated to institutionally support the European integration process, especially in the years of the great left-wing coalitions (composed by both left-wing and radical left-wing parties) in 2001 and 2006 and more recently in 2018. This increase of Europeanism at the institutional dimension within the centre-left coalition coincided with the presidency at the European Commission of Romano Prodi from 1999 to 2004. Romano Prodi is one of the founders of the left-wing coalition and his presidency at the European Commission were characterised by some of most important events that advanced the European integration process (e.g. the introduction of the Euro currency and the EU enlargement to the East). By contrast, the centre-right coalition gradually changed its strategy on this dimension shifting from a federalist strategy in the 1990s to a neutral strategy in the 2000s, and finally standing for the dichotomy ‘souverainism’ in the 2010s. Kertzer (2015), for instance, considers the Romani Prodi’s European Commission presidency at the really root of this antagonization against the EU from the centre-right coalition, because Prodi is one of the founding leaders of the Italian left-wing and a long-time opponent of Silvio Berlusconi (leader of the centre-right coalition).

However, it is within the economic dimension that the centre-right coalition demonstrated most of its antagonization against the EU. In fact, the centre-right coalition moved from a neutral strategy (from 1994 to 2006) into standing the dichotomy ‘welfare chauvinism’ since 2008. This shift of the centre-right coalition is described by Quaglia (2008: 64) as the attempt to identify in the EU and, most importantly the “lefts in Europe to be blamed for the poor economic performance” in Italy. In fact, throughout the 2001-2006 Berlusconi government, the centre-right coalition developed a new narrative against the EU that overlapped with the more traditional conflict against the Italian centre-left coalition. In this period, “numerous attacks on the EU and the Euro were made often by the Berlusconi allies” in blaming “Prodi and Brussels for placing Italy in this situation and for agreeing on Italy’s entrance into the Eurozone at too high an exchange rate” (Brunazzo and Mascitelli, 2020). By contrast, except for one year (2006), the centre-left coalition never exposed itself on the economic dimension, but it rather preferred keeping a neutral strategy all over the period observed.

Finally, within the cultural dimension, we can observe that both coalitions did not considerably change in the last seven general elections. They both hold a neutral strategy with regards to the cultural dimension, although the centre-right coalition slightly distinguished itself from the centre-left coalition standing towards the dichotomy ‘nativism’, especially, in 2018. To that end, during the 2018 general election, the centre-right coalition strongly focused its electoral campaign to defend Italy by the uncontrolled migratory flows from Northern Africa and the Middle East (Geddes and Pettrachin, 2020).
Similar to the previous analysis, the multidimensional investigation of the new transnational cleavage offers the opportunity to reveal in which dimensions political forces alternatively propose themselves to the Italian electorate. Thus, figure 7.2 reveals that, since 2008, the centre-left coalition has been neutral in all three dimensions, except for the institutional dimension in 2018. This result demonstrates that the Italian centre-left coalition is not sceptical with regards to the EU, but not even Euro-enthusiast, except for its institutional dimension showing that the centre-left coalition is keen to encourage a further political integration process at the transnational level. By contrast, in the same period, the centre-right coalition has also been neutral towards the EU, except for the economic dimension. Eventually, in 2018, the centre-right coalition drastically shifts its strategy against the EU in all its dimensions, revealing as the Italian centre-right coalition has completely internalised the dichotomy ‘anti-EU’ in all its logics of conflict (dimensions).

Having demonstrated that the new transnational cleavage has become a polarising topic both at the country and party levels, these results also reveal that the centre-right coalition has drastically changed its strategy from a pro-EU to an anti-EU strategy. The next section will show which right-wing party (or parties) have most influenced the political offer of the centre-right coalition.

7.4.2 Alignments and dealignments within the centre-right coalition on the new transnational cleavage

The analysis now turns to the centre-right coalition. More specifically, we are interested to explore the tripolar political alliance among the League, Brothers of Italy and Forward Italy. This coalition was originally founded in December 2012 in view of the following 2013 general elections. Subsequently, it also proposed itself at the 2018 general elections. For that reason, we will examine elements of alignment and dealignments within the centre-right on the new transnational cleavage from 2013 to 2018.

Figure 7.3, below, shows data on emphasis and position employed by the three right-wing parties on the new transnational cleavage (and its dimensions) during the electoral campaigns. To begin with, the figure shows that the transnational cleavage (as a whole) reveals both elements of alignment and dealignment among the right-wing parties. Although all three parties increase their level of emphasis on the European issue and they tend to align towards the dichotomy ‘souverainism’, which supports the idea that the transnational cleavage is particularly appealing for the right-wing and radical-right wing parties, the results are not completely homogeneous across political parties in terms of position. Indeed, one can observe that the League and Brothers of Italy are particularly polarised on the dichotomy ‘souverainism’. However, Forward Italy does not follow this pattern, but it rather stands in between a neutral position and a moderate position towards the same dichotomy. To this extent, one can notice that the centre-right coalition has changed from one election to another in within. In 2013, there would have been more similarities between the League and Forward Italy both in terms of emphasis (relatively moderate at 11%) and position (weakly pro-EU). In 2018, the League and Brothers of Italy propose an opposite pattern, dedicating much more space to this new ideological conflict (respectively 18% and 22%) in their manifestos and holding a clear position (strongly anti-EU).
Figure 7.3 Alignments and dealignments within the centre-right coalition from 2013 to 2018

Similar to the previous section, we now focus on framing strategies of the right-wing parties looking at similarities and differences can be traced among them in each dimension of the new transnational cleavage. Starting with the institutional dimension, we can observe phenomena of alignments and dealignments among...
the three right-wing parties from 2013 to 2018. On the one hand, we can observe that the parties align in terms of position standing for the dichotomy ‘souvenism’. In fact, although the League and Forward Italy used to favour a more European integration process by jointly proposing “the direct popular election of the President of the European Commission” (PDL, 2013), they now consider the EU as “a gigantic supranational body, devoid of true democratic legitimacy” (League, 2018) and for that reason they demand “revision of the European treaties” (Forward Italy, 2018) in order to restore national sovereignty. By contrast, Brothers of Italy remained more programmatically coherent from one election to another describing the EU as “a bureaucratic and oligarchic Europe that often favours interests far from the common good” (Brothers of Italy, 2013) and, for that reason, it recently demanded “supremacy clause in the [Italian] Constitution to block [European] agreements and directives harmful to Italy” (Brothers of Italy). On the other hand, we can observe that there is some extent of dealignment among these parties in terms of emphasis. The institutional dimension of the transnational cleavage became of a greater importance for the League and Forward Italy which (almost) doubled the amount of space to dedicate to this dimension from 2013 to 2018, while Brothers of Italy untouched the amount of space dedicated to this dimension.

Moving to the economic dimension, we can mostly observe dealignment phenomena among the parties in both terms of emphasis and position. In terms of emphasis, both the League and Forward Italy reduce the amount of space to dedicate to this topic, while Brothers of Italy rather prefer to dedicate more space to it. Moreover, we can observe that there is disagreement among these parties, for the first time, on how to position in the conflict marketism vs. welfare chauvinism. On the one hand, both the League and Brothers of Italy clearly stand on the dichotomy ‘welfare chauvinism’ recommending protectionist proposals in order to “enhance the quality of our know-how and our industrial excellence” (League, 2018) and the “protection of our strategic assets and our production capacity from foreign aggression” (Brothers of Italy, 2018). On the other hand, Forward Italy, in line with its laissez-faire tradition, stands in favour of the dichotomy ‘marketism’ as it still favours proposals in defence of the neo-liberal economic model.

Finally, in the cultural dimension, the parties still show phenomena of both alignment and dealignment. On the one hand, all three parties are strongly aligned over the dichotomy ‘nativism’. Similar to the institutional dimension, both the League and Forward Italy drastically moved from a neutral position to a strong nativist position. Albeit they did not mention this topic in 2013, they strongly opposed multiculturalism, in 2018, by making it even more difficult the naturalisation process of foreigners born in Italy or the application process for asylum. For instance, the League (2018) demanded “not only the 10-year residence, but also an examination of knowledge of the Italian language, culture and traditions, for the purpose of evaluating overall integration”. Similarly, Forward Italy (2018) proposed to abolish the asylum request describing it as an “Italian anomaly of the indiscriminate granting of self-styled humanitarian protection”. Again, Brothers of Italy demonstrates its programmatically coherence from 2013 to 2018 always standing on the dichotomy ‘nativism’ focusing on polices in order to achieve cultural homogeneity in society for a “full integration of new citizens” (Brothers of Italy, 2013) or rejecting minority groups’ rights such as the creation of a “register of Imams and the obligation
of sermons in Italian” (Brothers of Italy, 2018). Still, the parties show dealignment in terms of emphasis. In 2018, the League and Brothers of Italy dedicate a significant part of their manifestos to this topic (respectively 7% and 9%), while Forward Italy is more reluctant reaching only 2%.

These results demonstrate how much similar and different can be the right-wing parties with regards to the new transnational cleavage. Although Brothers of Italy remained fairly coherent from 2013 to 2018, one can observe that both the League and Forward Italy have a pivotal role drastically changing the nature of the centre-right coalition with regards to the transnational cleavage especially within the institutional and the cultural dimensions. In fact, the League and Forward Italy have reshaped the Italian centre-right coalition ceasing to support the European integration process (as they traditionally used to do) and also started to explicitly address the cultural dimension aligning with the radical positions of Brothers of Italy. This realignment process of the League and Forward Italy are at the basis of placing the Italian centre-right coalition in the pantheon of Eurosceptic movements in Europe. However, it should be noted that, within the economic dimension, Forward Italy does not completely align with the other two radical right parties as it still remains an entrepreneurial party and, per its nature, it is bounded by its neo-liberal economic tradition.

7.5 Conclusive remarks

Analysing the Italian party system at both the country and party levels, we have shown that the multidimensionality idea of complex issues can offer a crucial understanding on the political debate around the transnational cleavage. In fact, the threefold dimensions constituting this new ideological conflict offer an opportunity for a more detailed investigation on how it developed within the Italian public opinion, between the two Italian coalitions challenging each other and among the Italian right-wing parties that founded the centre-right coalition from 2013 to 2018. The analyses confirmed the idea that the transnational cleavage is better understood if framed on the basis of three dimensions showing that both individuals and parties do not usually stand clear crosscut strategies, but they rather can employ elements from both Euroscepticism and Europeanism. Moreover, this innovative reconceptualization of the transnational cleavage shows which dimension is more responsible for the shaping of new societal divisions within the public opinion and which new political opportunities are available for competing political parties.

Our results suggest that the institutional dimension of the transnational cleavage is the conflict that mostly contribute the polarisation process of the transnational cleavage between pro-EU vs. anti-EU within the Italian party system. In fact, at the individual level, regardless positive attitudes of both the economic and cultural dimensions tend to increase in 2019, most of Italians have lost confidence with regards to the European integration process from an institutional perspective. Italians do not see any more the European institutions as reliable to handle major crises, but they rather prefer to have “back the control” of national sovereignty. At the party level, since 2008, the two coalitions start to distinguish each other with regards to the new transnational cleavage especially within its economic dimension (since 2008). However, the European issue becomes even more polarising at the party level in the 2018 general elections thanks to the institutional dimension where the
centre-left and the centre-right coalitions diverge against each other as, respectively, ‘federalist’ and ‘souvrénist’. Moreover, from these analyses, we could show that the right-wing coalition has been ‘radicalised’ from one election to another moving from a utilitarian Europeanism towards a pure Euroscepticism. The political actors that are mostly responsible of this change are the oldest parties constituting the centre-right coalition: the League and Forward Italy. In fact, in 2013, both parties balanced the strong antagonization of Brothers of Italy\(^7\) against the EU especially within the institutional dimension when they used to stand for the dichotomy ‘federalism’. However, in the last general election (2018), both the League and Forward Italy have shifted to strongly antagonise the political European integration process embracing the dichotomy ‘souvrénism’. We believe that the reasons behind the realignment of the more moderate right-wing forces was to intercept the rising discontent of the Italian public opinion towards the European institutions considered as distant from the Italian citizens’ needs. Indeed, in line with previous research (Vasilopoulou, 2018), in times of crisis, the EU is often discredited by electors and right-wing parties (radical and mainstream) for Brussels’ unpopular political decisions when handling global issues. More specifically, the Italian people blamed Brussels for the implementation of austerity policies during the economic crisis and are still blaming the EU to abandon the Italian state from the so-called “invasions” of migrants from the Northern Africa (Conti et al., 2020).

The implications of this new political landscape can be manifold. Firstly, this new ideological conflict can be at the basis of new national alliances\(^8\) that would have been unpredicted, so far, through the lens of more classical conflicts (e.g. the alliance between the League and Five Starts Movement). Secondly, the ‘radicalisation’ of the centre-right coalition with regards to the European discourse can provoke new political ramifications that might aggravate the current political balances at the European level – just consider that the European centre-right and centre-left have always been allies in the European parliament. Thirdly, if one of the founding countries of the EU, like Italy, might undertake a strategy of obstructing international cooperation/solidarity at the European level from within or, in its worst scenario, the Italian government might incite the withdrawal of Italy from the European membership, there might be unpredictable and irreversible long-term impacts on the European integration process as a whole.

\(^7\) We must also recall that Brothers of Italy can be considered as a ‘new’ political party since it was founded around the new transnational cleavage structure theorised by Hooghe and Marks (2018).

\(^8\) For instance, the main outcome of the 2018 general elections produced the I Conte Cabinet, which was an alliance between the League and the Five Stars Movement that, for the very first time in the Italian history, created an openly populist and Eurosceptic government.
References


