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Davide Vittori ⓘD, Sebastien Rojon, Jean-Benoit Pilet and Emilien Paulis

ABSTRACT

While citizens' preferences for governing actors have attracted growing interest, little is known about how these preferences relate to partisan support. Using original survey data from 5,000 Italian respondents, we show that preferences for who should govern in Italy largely align with broader European patterns. However, we also uncover distinctive associations between governing preferences and propensity to vote for the main Italian parties: preferences for experts in government are positively linked to voting for left-wing parties but not for right-wing ones. Contrary to our expectations, support for a more active role of citizens in government is only weak related to the propensity to vote for populist parties. These findings highlight the importance of contextual factors in shaping these associations.

Introduction

In recent years, citizens' preferences for how government should run and especially for who should govern, have attracted a lot of scholarly interest. In particular, the literature has focussed on preferences for models aimed at providing a greater role to specific actors in government, for example representative democracy empowering elected officials, participatory democracy empowering ordinary citizens, and technocracy empowering independent experts (Ferrín & Kriesi 2016; Bowler et al. 2017; Chiru & Enyedi 2022). Most often, these processes have been analysed in isolation or in trade-off scenarios where citizens are asked to pick one way of making a decision from a list with two or more options (König, Siewert & Ackermann 2022). Along with the overall support for these different models, the literature has insisted on the drivers that lead citizens to support them, e.g. citizens' socio-demographic characteristics, ideologies, and political attitudes (Bengtsson & Mattila 2009; Pilet et al. 2022; Rose & Weßels 2020). Comparatively less attention has been given to the correlation between those preferences and voting behaviour, i.e. whether holding specific preferences for who should govern is associated with preferences for specific political parties. The

only exception is the link to voting for populist parties whose voters have been shown to be, in some countries, more in favour of decision-making processes empowering ordinary citizens, such as referenda (Rooduijn 2018, for counter results see Bowler et al. 2017). In the same vein, we can also cite the work of Hernández (2018) who observed different normative democratic preferences among voters of mainstream and challenger parties in Western European democracies.

Still, we lack a systematic analysis of whether preferences for how government should be organised are distinct across party electorates. The aim of this article is to fill this gap by using Italy as a case study. We start by investigating what are the actors that citizens would prefer to be given a prominent role in governing their country. And we then investigate whether these preferences are associated with citizens' party preferences. While there is an extensive literature on the relationship between voting behaviour and issue positions of political parties, there is very little on whether voting behaviour is connected to one's preferences for governing actors (e.g. Ziller & Schübel 2015).

We use Italy as a case study. Italy has stood as a frontrunner compared to other European countries due to its diverse range of actors responsible for decision-making. The current parliamentary system in Italy showcases a blend of representative democracy, frequently employed referendums, and the presence of several technocratic governments over the past two decades. Consequently, citizens have been exposed to various decision-making methodologies and, therefore, have experienced them directly. This makes Italy an ideal case study for research on citizens' preferences for governing actors, as Italian citizens should be able to assess the merits of various decision-making processes. Italy is also an interesting case study due to the diversity of political parties represented in government. The Italian party system is currently marked by the presence of two significant (populist) radical right parties, two mainstream parties, and a left-leaning populist party. Such a party system configuration is rather uncommon in Europe. The ideologically diverse political landscape provides an exclusive opportunity to examine whether preferences for governing actors influence voting behaviour and if distinct electorates manifest divergent preferences.

Our findings are threefold. First, we show that, overall, although Italy stands out for its distinctive decision-making structures, Italian citizens do not differ substantially from their European counterparts in how they conceptualise their preferences for governing actors.

Second, our main contribution is that these preferences are significantly associated with voting preferences across all major Italian political parties. In other words, voters of different political parties hold different views regarding how the Italian political system should be organised and which actors (citizens, elected politicians, scientific experts, less traditional actors like businessmen, military generals or religious leaders, etc.) ought to be given a more central role

in power. Cross-party differences in governing preferences are not limited to the distinction between mainstream and challenger parties.

Finally, when looking at patterns of process preferences across party electorates, we find some elements on which Italian citizens appear to differ from what had been found in earlier studies. Notably, the link between support for citizen involvement in decision-making and voting for populist parties is less straightforward than previously suggested. Similarly, support for expert-led governments appears to be far less associated with voting for (traditional) right-wing parties than expected. We interpret the latter finding in light of Italy's specific political context, where left-wing parties have traditionally been more supportive of technocratic governments, and the former in relation to the longstanding reluctance of Italian right-wing parties to engage with referenda.

Preferences for who should govern and how at glance

Preferences for who should govern have been extensively analysed in the literature. Primarily, they were linked to the analysis of trust in representative institutions, where decisions are taken by elected officials (Van der Meer 2017). However, recent empirical research has shifted the focus to other actors who might be empowered to take decisions (e.g. the people via direct democracy or deliberative mini-publics or experts via technocratic appointments or experts committees) (König, Siewert & Ackermann 2022). Recently, building on the work of Hibbing et al. in the US (2023), Pilet et al. study (2023) in 9 European countries found that citizens' preferences for the actors they are willing to delegate power to can be structured into 5 different dimensions: a) traditional forms of representation, such as preferences for politicians in government; b) citizen-oriented processes; c) non-political experts; d) non-traditional actors; and e) compromising and conciliatory politicians, i.e. politicians who are positively inclined towards deliberation, compromise, and ideological flexibility. These dimensions represented the most in-depth attempt to analyse traditional and non-traditional processes; excluding these recent works, so far, the literature had focussed mainly on a handful of processes or, oftentimes, on a single process (König, Siewert & Ackermann 2022).

When the literature examined attitudes towards non-traditional actors, it did so by mainly analysing citizen-oriented and expert-oriented processes (Gherghina & Geissel 2017). The most notable and frequently employed citizen-oriented process is direct democracy. The use of referenda is increasing globally, making it one of the most popular decision-making procedures among citizens (Rojon & Rijken 2020). On the contrary, expert-oriented processes emphasise the role of unelected experts as decision-makers or consultants in the decision-making process. While less favoured than direct democracy and exhibiting more country-to-country variation at the European level, the involvement of experts in decision-making is generally positively assessed by citizens (Bertsou & Pastorella 2017; Chiru & Enyedi 2022; Lavezzolo, Ramiro & Fernández-Vazquez 2021).

Other studies have explored support for non-traditional actors in government. These actors exist outside the democratic chain of delegation and could potentially put democratic norms and principles under strain. For instance, within the framework of stealth democracy (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2002), recent works have confirmed the existence of a segment within US and European societies that supports businesspeople in government (Hibbing et al. 2023; Lavezzolo & Ramiro 2018; Rojon et al. 2023). Another example in this regard is the support for military rule or religious leaders. The former has been investigated in Europe and the US (Foa & Munk 2016; Malka et al. 2022). While the role of religious leaders in society has been thoroughly analysed, especially in the US (Pew Research Center 2019a, 2019b), their role as decision-makers has received less attention in other contexts (Servín-González & Torres-Reyna 1999). In the realm of non-traditional actors, experimental literature has focused on the significance of political 'outsiderness' and its importance in determining preference for candidates among citizens (Lavezzolo, Ramiro & Fernández-Vazquez 2021; Berz & Jankowski 2022). With the election of Donald Trump this issue became particularly relevant, but previously it was also politicised in other European contexts, such as Italy. For example, Silvio Berlusconi, a political outsider claiming to be a self-made entrepreneur with real-world knowledge, became Prime Minister. Also illustrating the appeal of political outsiderness in Italy, the political party Five-Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) required that all of its candidates to the 2013 national elections come from outside politics, successfully managing to elect hundreds of MPs.

As for preferences for politicians with a more flexible and conciliatory approach, and in particular the preference for compromise and deliberation among elected officials, several scholars (Hibbing et al. 2023; Lavezzolo & Ramiro 2018), drawing from a seminal study on 'stealth democracy' by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), argued that some citizens prefer a government that operates efficiently and effectively without the need for political conflict and constant bickering between elected representatives. In this regard, a recent survey experiment conducted in Austria highlighted that citizens prefer political compromise over steadfast principles (Hjermitslev 2025), thus supporting the idea that ideological flexibility is a trait that citizens appreciate among politicians. In summary, the literature has examined a wide range of actors to whom citizens might delegate decision-making. Specifically, it has focused on preferences for actors closely associated with (a) representative democracy and politicians' capability, (b) direct democracy and citizens' capability, (c) technocracy and the role of experts in government, (d) support for various political outsiders, and (e) support for representative actors and their governing styles.

However, despite a few notable exceptions (Bowler et al. 2017; Hernández 2018; Hooghe & Dassonneville 2016), we still lack a comprehensive understanding of how these preferences are associated with voting preferences. In this

regard, we follow the conceptual frameworks which are based on the correlates between vote choice and preferences for decision-making processes (Hernández 2018; Grotz & Lewandowsky 2019). This framework leverages on the theory of the issue voting (Green Pedersen 2019) which posits that citizens know where parties stand on specific policies and reward them accordingly while parties provide issue-related cues to attract citizens with similar policy preferences. However, the direction of causality, i.e. whether issue preferences lead to voting preferences or vice-versa, is still debated in the literature (Vliegenthart & Lefevere 2018). Issue proximity literature argues that citizens reward political parties with matching policy positions by voting for them. Yet, parties still play a role in shaping those positions (Slothuus & Bisgaard 2021) and this holds true also in the case of democratic preferences (Font & Rico Motos 2023; Paulis & Rangoni 2023) and political discontent (Rooduijn, Van der Brug & De Lange 2016). Therefore, to avoid the issue of reverse causality, we do not assume that preferences for governing actors influence vote choice. Instead, we examine the association between vote choice and preferences for governing actors, leaving it to future research to determine whether these preferences are 'latent' or actively shaped by political entrepreneurs.

This study represents a first step in assessing whether ideas about the structure and composition of government play a role in shaping political competition in the same way that policy issues such as immigration, foreign affairs, or the economy do. This is due to the fact that, while for more salient issues it is relatively easier to identify parties' positions and thus to estimate the issue proximity between parties and voters, for preferences for governing actors this can only be theorised, as parties do not often talk about processes and preferences for actors who should govern, as they are the main actors in government. Even challenger parties do not often talk about the possibility of using different decision-making mechanisms. A recent study by Gherghina and Pilet (2021) analysed how much populist parties talk about direct democracy, a decision-making solution in line with the people-centred nature of populism. Their conclusion was that these parties do not talk much about referenda and direct democracy in general, even if in some cases they promote specific direct democracy initiatives (Angelucci, Rojon & Vittori 2024). When programmatic positions are more difficult to find, what citizens can do is use cues from the actual behaviour of political parties. When parties promote referenda, citizens' initiatives, or democratic innovations such as deliberative mini-publics, they provide cues that citizens can use to reward or punish them for using alternative decision-making processes. This is why it is challenging to determine the direction of causality and therefore preferable to focus on associations. This is particularly true of our case-study, Italy: a country where citizens can more easily extract information from parties' behaviours, given the extensive use of different decision-making processes. An example might be the position of political parties on support for past technocratic governments, which is likely

to influence voters' preferences for non-elected experts. Thus, without implying a causal relationship – and acknowledging that, with few exceptions, parties provide fewer cues on these matters than on traditional policy issues – we argue that preferences for governing actors may be meaningfully correlated with the propensity to vote (PTV) for different political parties (Geurkink et al. 2020; Hernández 2018; Zaslove & Meijers 2023).

Italy as a frontrunner for alternative decision-making processes

Italy serves as a case due to the versatility of its decision-making processes and the different actors involved in decision-making. For several decades, and prior to the Clean-Hands scandal, a nationwide judicial investigation during the early 1990s that uncovered widespread political corruption, Italy was known as the realm of 'partitocrazia', a system in which parties held significant influence in the decision-making process and government formation. Parties within parliament have had a prominent role in the decision-making process, as parties and party leaders were the king-makers in the government formation (Pasquino 1997). While deliberative processes are less common in Italy compared to other countries (Paulis et al. 2020), the country possesses more experience with other methods, namely direct democracy and technocracy. As for the former, with the sole exception of Switzerland and partly Ireland, Italy leads Europe in the number of national-level referendums held. Therefore, Italy can be considered a frontrunner in the implementation of direct democracy at the national level (Angelucci, Rojon & Vittori 2024). Italy has also encountered technocracy extensively, with three technocratic governments emerging since the advent of the so-called Second Republic in 1994 (Dini Government, Monti Government, and Draghi Government). Moreover, Italy is one of the European countries where technocrats are more frequently appointed as ministers (Vittori, Pilet et al. 2023).

Furthermore, Italy stands out as one of Western Europe's frontrunners regarding the presence of outsiders with a business background (former Prime Minister [PM], Silvio Berlusconi) or with no attachment to party politics (former M5S leader Beppe Grillo, and M5S leader and former PM Giuseppe Conte) as party leaders or PM. Furthermore, the appointment of non-partisan academics (such as former PM Mario Monti), businesspersons (Silvio Berlusconi) and outsiders (Giuseppe Conte) to leading government positions is more common in Italy than in most Western European countries (Vittori, Pilet et al. 2023). Again, this exception has been normalised in the European scenario: political outsiders accessing governmental positions have become more common than ever before. Notable examples in this regard are former PM Andrej Babiš in Czech Republic, Stefan Yanev and Galeb Donev in Bulgaria, French president Emmanuel Macron, and

party leaders such as Stefanos Kasselakīs in Greece and Matthias Strolz in Austria.

Italy offers a particularly valuable case study for examining the relationship between political preferences and voting behaviour. At the time of the survey (August 2021), five main political parties dominated the landscape. Two belonged to mainstream party families: *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party, PD) and *Forza Italia* (Go Italy, FI). Two were part of the populist radical right: *Lega* (League) and *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy, FdI). Finally, the M5S is a left-leaning 'valence' populist party (Zulianello & Larsen 2024). This diverse configuration provides an ideal setting for testing our hypotheses about the link between preferences for governing actors and voting propensity across a wide ideological spectrum. Table 1 summarises the ideological classification of these parties.

Since Italy represents a frontrunner in the experience of alternative decision-making process, our test is of particular relevance, since Italian citizens have been directly or indirectly exposed to several decision-makers. Following Rohschneider (1999), a consistent institutional learning process might be at work in Italy: Italian citizens have direct experience of different processes and know what they look like in the real world. In the same way that West Germans were more pluralistic than East Germans in the 1990s because they were exposed to and practised these principles in their daily lives (Rohschneider 1999), Italians should know better than other European citizens what all these processes look like because they are frequently exposed to them. This process of institutional learning operates independently of a party's ideology. For instance, Rohrschneider demonstrated significant differences in democratic ideals between West German and East German MPs belonging to the same party. If Italy diverges from the patterns observed in other European countries regarding how preferences for governing actors are structured, this would suggest that direct experience with specific decision-making processes shapes how citizens form those preferences. Conversely, if the Italian case aligns with broader European trends, it would indicate that such preferences are not primarily driven by direct institutional experience, but instead reflect more general attitudes about who should hold power and how political decisions should be made.

Table 1. Main political parties at the time of the survey fielding.

Party	Mainstream vs. Populist	Ideology
League	Populist	Radical-right
Brothers of Italy	Populist	Radical-right
Go Italy	Mainstream	Conservative, right-wing
Democratic Party	Mainstream	Liberal, Left-wing
Five-Star Movement	Populist	Left-wing

Linking vote choice and preferences for actors in government

The literature generally supports the notion that in Europe mainstream left and mainstream right voters exhibit higher levels of trust in traditional representative institutions, namely, politicians, parties, and parliament (Hernández 2018), whereas radical left and radical right parties tend to foster consensus around distrust in institutions (Rojon & Rijken 2020; Rooduijn 2018). Mainstream voters have benefitted from representative democracy which granted power to elected representatives sharing their preferences, values, and beliefs. These voters are therefore sceptical of any alternative decision-making processes, which may challenge the hegemony of their preferred representatives (Hernández 2018).

In Europe, the most vocal opponents of representative democracy are populist parties (Wegscheider, Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert 2023). Populist parties are generally less inclined towards compromise (Louwerse & Otjes 2019) and more intolerant towards different viewpoints (Bos, Wichgers & van Spanje 2023). In Italy, M5S, League and FdI were ostensibly critical of Italian 'partitocrazia' at different points in time, while advocating a people-centric view of politics (Angelucci & Vittori 2021; Puleo & Piccolino 2022).

Moreover, European populist parties tend to adopt a more confrontational approach to opposition compared to their mainstream counterparts (Louwerse & Otjes 2019). This uncompromising stance often intensifies when populist parties, regardless of their core ideologies, are in opposition, but it is also present when they are in government (Schwörer 2021). While the literature hasn't explicitly examined whether this pattern holds true for the most recent populist-led government, it's plausible to assume that, in general, voters of populist parties would be inclined towards preferring politicians with a more confrontational style of governance. Based on these premises, we hypothesise the following:

(H1.1) *Preferences for a) politicians in general and b) flexible and conciliatory politicians are positively associated with the propensity to vote for Italian mainstream left and right parties, and*
(H1.2) *negatively associated with the propensity to vote for both radical right and valence populist parties.*

The literature has highlighted that European populist left-wing and right-wing voters are usually much more oriented towards direct democracy, than they are towards representative institutions (Mohrenberg, Huber & Freyburg 2019; Hooghe & Dassonneville 2016; Rojon & Rijken 2020). These instruments allow those parties and their voters to circumvent traditional channels of representation, from which they have typically been excluded, by providing direct links between government and the people. Among populist parties in Italy, M5S

voters prove to be leaning towards empowering the people via referenda (Vittori 2020). The literature has also shown that M5S is highly people-centric and in favour of direct democracy (Vittori 2020). While comparative research confirmed the relationship between radical right voters and direct democracy, there are no specific studies on Italian radical right parties' voters. The only descriptive analysis in this regard, however, shows that League and FdI voters are very much sympathetic to direct democracy (Vittori et al. 2024). On the other hand, there appears to be a much weaker relationship between mainstream voters and support for direct democracy (Hernández 2018; Rojon & Rijken 2021).

Given these findings, we anticipate the following:

(H2. 1) The *preference for citizens-as-governing-actors is positively associated with the propensity to vote populist parties, and (H2.2) is negatively associated with the propensity to vote for mainstream parties.*

When it comes to support for experts, the literature shows that technocratic attitudes in Europe are quite widespread across various segments of the population (Bertsou & Pastorella 2017), and Italy aligns with this trend (Vittori, Paulis et al. 2023). However, the endorsement of technocracy, and of scientific experts, isn't evenly distributed: right-wing voters tend to view this decision-making process more favourably than their left-wing counter-parts (Bertsou & Pastorella 2017; Chiru & Enyedi 2022). The reason for why this is the case is that technocracy is associated with an output-oriented and market-friendly conception of democracy which is better paired with neoliberalism than progressive ideologies (Barrenechea & Dargent 2020). Therefore, technocrats are not perceived by citizens as non-political governing actors, as their support is skewed towards the right-wing political spectrum. In Italy, however, this trend hardly applies. Italy is a country that recently experienced two different technocratic governments (the 2011–2013 Monti Government and the 2021–2022 Draghi government) that were supported by mainstream left and, less enthusiastically, by mainstream right parties. Radical right parties are the sole main parties in Italy that did not participate in the last two technocratic governments – the League did not participate in the Monti Government and FdI did not participate in the Draghi Government. In both instances, these parties were markedly critical of the technocratic shift in Italian politics. M5S has displayed an ambivalent stance towards technocracy: during the Monti government, the party's leader at the time, Beppe Grillo, criticised the grand coalition supporting it. However, during its time in government with the League (2018–2019), M5S appointed several technocratic ministers and, albeit reluctantly, entered the grand coalition supporting PM Mario Draghi (2021–2023). On the other hand, FI and PD have shown less scepticism towards technocratic governance. Particularly in the case of Draghi's government, both parties supported the

grand coalition. Therefore, it's reasonable to expect that recent events, might influence the support for being governed by experts. For the following hypotheses, we have decided not to specify any contextual factors that might affect our results, but we discuss the importance of them when commenting the results. This way our hypotheses fit with the comparative literature, while being less attached to the peculiarity of the case-study.

Turning to non-traditional actors, it's anticipated that the roles of these actors – specifically the military, religious, and business leaders – will align with the left-right political spectrum, mirroring the pattern observed in the US, where business, religious, and military leaders are more favourably viewed by Republicans than Democrats (Pew Research Center 2019a, 2019b). This is unsurprising, as right-wing voters are traditionally more religious (Elff & Roßteutscher 2017), value the respect of traditions more (De Koster & van der Waal 2007) and tend to hold more authoritarian attitudes (Jylhä, Rydgren & Strimling 2022) compared to left-wing voters. Religious and military figures have traditionally played a niche role in Italian politics, yet they have exerted notable influence. Regarding the latter, General Francesco Paolo Figliuolo was appointed as Extraordinary Commissioner for the COVID-19 Emergency in 2021, while former general Roberto Vannacci, running as an independent with League, emerged as the party's most popular candidate in the recent European elections (2024). As for the former, beyond historical religious figures engaged in politics – such as Don Luigi Sturzo – the Episcopal Conference of Italy has played a central role for years, directly intervening in sensitive political debates on issues like same-sex marriage and euthanasia (Melloni 2009). Additionally, the political culture of bishops and their interactions with the public have shaped citizens' voting behaviour (Lanzara et al. 2024). Therefore, while religious and army leaders may not be at the forefront of contemporary political debates, their influence on citizens' political behaviour remains significant. In Italy, right-wing parties have historically been closely associated with the Church. Additionally, when it comes to support for business leaders, it is worth noting that business entrepreneur Silvio Berlusconi was leader of both the mainstream right party and the centre-right coalition until 2018.

(H3.1) *Preferences for a) non-traditional actors and b) (scientific) experts are positively associated with the propensity to vote for right-wing parties and (H3.2) are negatively associated with the propensity to vote for left-wing parties*

Data and methods

When examining the association between preferences for actors in government and voting behaviour it is prudent to first identify how these preferences are structured in the Italian electorate before investigating their impact on voting

behaviour. To accomplish this, we propose a two-step analysis involving exploratory factor analysis and regression models, which are based on the same original survey.

For our study, we employed a novel computer-assisted web-interviewing survey administered to 5,007 Italian respondents during August 2021. The survey was conducted by the survey company Demetra on a profiled online panel. The survey questionnaire was created by the authors and distributed by the survey company. Online panels usually overrepresent politically engaged or interested citizens. In our case, the mean political interest in our sample (2.63) is in line with (and actually slightly lower) than the mean political interest of Italian citizens in the European Social Survey (ESS) (2.93), which is the point of reference for surveys on political attitudes in our field. Our sample is representative of the Italian population in terms of age, gender, and region of residence, while the sample slightly over-represents highly educated respondents. Therefore, to adjust for the mismatches in the stratification criteria, we applied weights to achieve a better representation of the Italian population (see Appendix, Independent variables – Discussion on Controls, Descriptive Statistics and Wording).[1]

To gauge preferences for actors in government, we employed a battery of questions developed by Hibbing et al. (2023) in the US and subsequently replicated by Pilet et al. (2023) in nine European countries, excluding Italy. The battery consisted of 21 statements, grouped into seven dimensions (three questions per dimension), examining whether citizens *should* (1) or *could* (2) govern, and whether governing should be carried out by (3) politicians, (4) scientific experts, (5) religious, military, and business leaders, (6) non-traditional figures with experience outside politics, or (7) politicians with a conciliatory or flexible approach.

Our factor analysis was conducted on 21 statements, with the complete list available in the Appendix ('Battery of questions: wording and descriptive statistics'). We opted for reversing the scale of the questions of the third factor (politicians in government) to match the direction of all other questions. We performed the factor analysis with varimax rotation using the *fa* function in R. We reported maximum likelihood scores. When replicating the factor analysis across nine European countries, Pilet et al. (2023) found that Europeans from nine countries structure their preferences for how government should run into five stable dimensions: (a) politicians' capability, (b) citizens' capability, (c) power to religious, military & business leaders, (d) power to (scientific) experts, and e) preferences for politicians with a conciliatory or flexible approach. In our exploratory analysis, we anticipate finding these five dimensions (Table 2). As one of the five dimensions – consensual politicians – is not purely related to the

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Table 2. Preferences for actors in government identified by three different studies.

Preferences for actors in government	Hibbing et al. (2023)	Pilet et al. (2023)	Current study
(1) citizens' capabilities	√	√	√
(2) politicians' capabilities	√	√	√
(3) power to the people	√	X	X
(4) power to scientific actors	√	√	√
(5) power to non-traditional actors	√	√	√
(6) power to non-traditional profiles with experience outside politics	√	X	X
(7) support compromising politicians	√	√	√

actors in government, but is mainly aimed at identifying how political actors, and namely politicians, should behave once in government, we run the same factor analysis without the three items. With 18 items in total the results of the factor analysis remain the same (Appendix, Figures 2A and 3A, Table 10A).

After identifying the dimensions using our 21-item battery – measured on a Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' = 0 to 'strongly agree' = 5 – we extract the factor loadings for each dimension, and we assign to respondents their factor loading for each dimension. These five factor loadings, which indicate the preferences for different actors in government, serve as the main independent variables in our regression analysis (Table 3). Our main dependent variable is the PTV score for the main political parties in Italy – namely FdI, League, FI, PD, and M5S. Since our survey does not include questions related to prospective vote choice and since vote recall is not a reliable way of measuring party identification, particularly in a multiparty system (Van Der Eijk & Niemöller 2008), our choice is to use PTV scores as a proxy for actual vote choice. Although the literature has primarily focussed on the distinction between populist and mainstream party voters, we refrain from grouping parties into families given the ideological diversity within mainstream and populist party families in Italy. This approach enables us to capture the distinct associations between party support and attitudes towards government actors, preserving the nuance that would be lost by grouping parties into generic 'populist' or 'mainstream' labels, particularly given the shifting coalition governments Italy was experiencing when we fielded the survey (see above). Descriptive statistics for each dependent variable and the main independent variables in the models, along with their wording, are provided in the Appendix. We also add several controls

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the factor analysis presented in Figure 1.

	Politicians' capability	Citizens' capability	Power to scientific experts	Power to non-traditional actors	Compromising politicians
SS loadings	3.13	2.31	2.15	2.01	1.21
Proportion Var	0.15	0.11	0.10	0.10	0.06
Cumulative Var	0.15	0.26	0.36	0.46	0.51
Proportion Explained	0.29	0.21	0.20	0.19	0.11
Cumulative Proportion	0.29	0.50	0.70	0.89	1.00

(gender, age, education, political efficacy, political interest, religiosity, and ideological self-placement) to strengthen the robustness of our results, including fixed effects for the area of residence of the respondents (North-East regions, North-West regions, Centre regions and South and Islands regions), as the support for at least three parties (PD, M5S and League) is heavily skewed towards specific areas. Furthermore, we also opt for including a different specification of respondents' ideological orientation: we include one economic left-right question about income inequality and one cultural left-right question about immigration (Table 7A in the Appendix). These models include fixed effects as in the main text. The results are robust. To facilitate the interpretation of the results, we opt for including five figures, one for each factor under analysis, where we plot the predicted values of the PTV for each party. In the Appendix we grouped the five factors by party to make the comparison even more meaningful (Figures 4A, 5A, 6A, 7A, 8A).

Results

Similarly to Pilet et al. (2023), who found five main dimensions in the nine European countries under analysis, we have found five dimensions that structure Italian citizens' preferences regarding what actors must be given a prominent role in governing the country (Figure 1): the fit of the factor analysis is sufficient (RMSEA = 0.02). Regarding the meaning of those five dimensions, four focus on empowering different actors – citizens, politicians, experts, and non-traditional actors (i.e. business, religious, and military leaders). The fifth factor also relates to representative actors (politicians) but emphasises their consensual stance. In our robustness test, we have also identified a sixth dimension: support to non-professionalised politicians. However, the eigenvalue for this dimension is below the conventional threshold of 1 (0.9) and the dimension explains less than 5 per cent of share variance among items (see Appendix – Tables 1A and 2A).

While the fit of the model is slightly better, the added value of the sixth dimension is rather limited. Therefore, we decided to exclude it from the analysis. This finding shows that the structure of citizens' governing preferences are in line with those of citizens from other European countries, since Pilet et al. (2023) have identified the same dimensions in the nine other European countries they surveyed.

Given these results, in our second step of the analysis, we retained only five factors. Another important indication of the consistency of our results comes from the mean scores of the factor loadings on each of the five dimensions: the score is negative for all dimensions, but for citizens capability.[2] Table 4

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[2]Politicians' capabilities (−0.003), Citizens' capability (0.007), Power to (scientific) experts (−0.001), Power to non-traditional actors (−0.005), Nature of governing (−0.005).

Question	Politicians' capability	Citizens' capability	Power to (scientific) experts	Power to non-traditional actors	Compromising politicians
I trust ordinary people to make important political decisions.	0.25	0.69	0.06	0.05	0.09
Ordinary people are informed enough to make important political decisions.	0.13	0.72	0.01	0.24	0.07
Ordinary people have the necessary skills to make important political decisions	0.22	0.80	0.02	0.13	0.05
Politicians are too corrupt and selfish to make important political decisions.	-0.79	-0.06	-0.04	0.04	-0.06
Politicians would ruin society if people didn't stop them.	-0.79	-0.19	-0.01	-0.08	-0.07
Politicians have the wrong motives.	-0.76	-0.06	-0.04	0.04	-0.08
Ordinary people should be given as much power as possible.	0.52	0.50	0.05	0.18	0.06
Politicians should be stripped of as much power as possible.	0.63	0.31	0.00	0.16	0.02
We should have more ballot referenda where people vote on issues directly.	0.49	0.27	0.08	0.08	0.10
The political power of unelected experts should be increased.	-0.02	0.07	0.52	0.25	0.14
The political power of scientists should be increased.	0.03	0.01	0.89	0.14	0.13
The political power of medical doctors should be increased.	0.05	0.02	0.80	0.28	0.08
The political power of business people should be increased.	0.09	0.08	0.38	0.61	0.09
The political power of military generals should be increased.	0.11	0.12	0.25	0.76	0.07
The political power of religious leaders should be increased.	-0.03	0.18	0.09	0.71	0.04
The political power of people who have experienced real-world problems should be increased.	0.35	0.14	0.30	0.07	0.13
The political power of politicians who can't benefit themselves should be increased.	0.18	-0.04	0.24	-0.05	0.19
The political power of people with no previous governmental experience should be increased	0.11	0.33	0.07	0.40	0.10
Government would run better if elected officials deliberated more.	0.12	0.08	0.08	-0.02	0.46
Government would run better if elected officials compromised more.	-0.02	0.07	0.10	0.24	0.62
Government would run better if elected officials were more ideologically flexible.	0.08	0.05	0.14	0.06	0.65

Figure 1. Result of the factor analysis.

Table 4. Comparisons of the direction of the mean scores of the 5 factors extracted in our and Pilet et al. study. '–': negative score; '+': positive score.

Country	Politicians' capabilities	Citizens' capabilities	Power to scientific actors	Power to non-traditional actors	Compromising politicians
Italy	–	+	–	–	–
Austria	–	–	+	–	+
Belgium (Wallonia)	–	–	+	+	–
Belgium (Flanders)	–	+	+	+	+
Bulgaria	–	–	+	–	+
Czech Republic	+	–	–	–	–
Denmark	+	+	–	+	–
Finland	+	–	+	+	+
Greece	–	–	–	+	–
Ireland	+	+	+	+	+
Netherlands	+	–	–	–	–

summarises the direction of the score of each factor in the countries included in Pilet et al. study: overall, the picture is variegated, but Italy does not stand out as an exception to the trends. This overall picture is corroborated also when looking at the mean score for each of the 21 questions in the battery: we compared the scores we obtained in Italy with the scores obtained in the other countries (Appendix, Tables 8A and 9A).

We discuss the findings more in details in the Appendix, but only on three items do Italians prove to be deviant from other European citizens: a) the power of unelected experts, b) the influence of people with no prior governmental experience, and c) the issue of political compromise. Italians are slightly less inclined towards all three aspects: on average, they are less favourable towards unelected experts, people with no political experience, and political compromise. In the Appendix, we tentatively explain these results due to the Italian political context during the fielding of the survey.

While Italy has been a frontrunner in empowering different actors in government, our findings suggest that Italian citizens are divided along the same dimensions as their European counterparts. The number of dimensions align with those observed in other European countries and the direction of factor loading does not show a clear-cut differentiated pattern vis-à-vis other European countries.

In Figure 2, we present the outcomes of our models, which examine the association between the 5 preferences for actors in government and the predicted PTV for the radical right parties *FdI* and *League*, the mainstream right party *FI*, the mainstream left party *PD* and the left-leaning valence populist party *M5S*. The full model specifications, including control variables, can be found in the Appendix, Table 6A.

In line with H1.1a, we find a positive association between having politicians as governing actors and the PTV for mainstream parties. The significance of this dimension is prominent for FI and PD and its explanatory power is particularly relevant for PD voters (Figure 2.1). In our models presented in the Appendix, politicians' capability exhibits the highest explanatory power for the PTV for the PD. The same positive association among PD voters can be also found for consensual politicians (H1.1b) in Figure 2.5, which has the fourth largest effect in the model (Table 6A). Compared to PD voters, the effect of politicians as governing actors and consensual politicians are weaker for FI voters, but they are still two of largest effects observed in the mode. Our findings are not surprising, as comparative analyses have shown that mainstream voters are the most satisfied with representative democracy (Hernández 2018; Hooghe & Dassonneville 2016) and more inclined towards preferring ideological flexibility. We cannot corroborate H1.2a and H1.2b: contrary to our expectations, a negative evaluation of politicians (H2a) is not significantly associated with FdI. In the League model, the coefficient is negative, which means that positive evaluations of politicians are related with a higher PTV for the League (yet, the
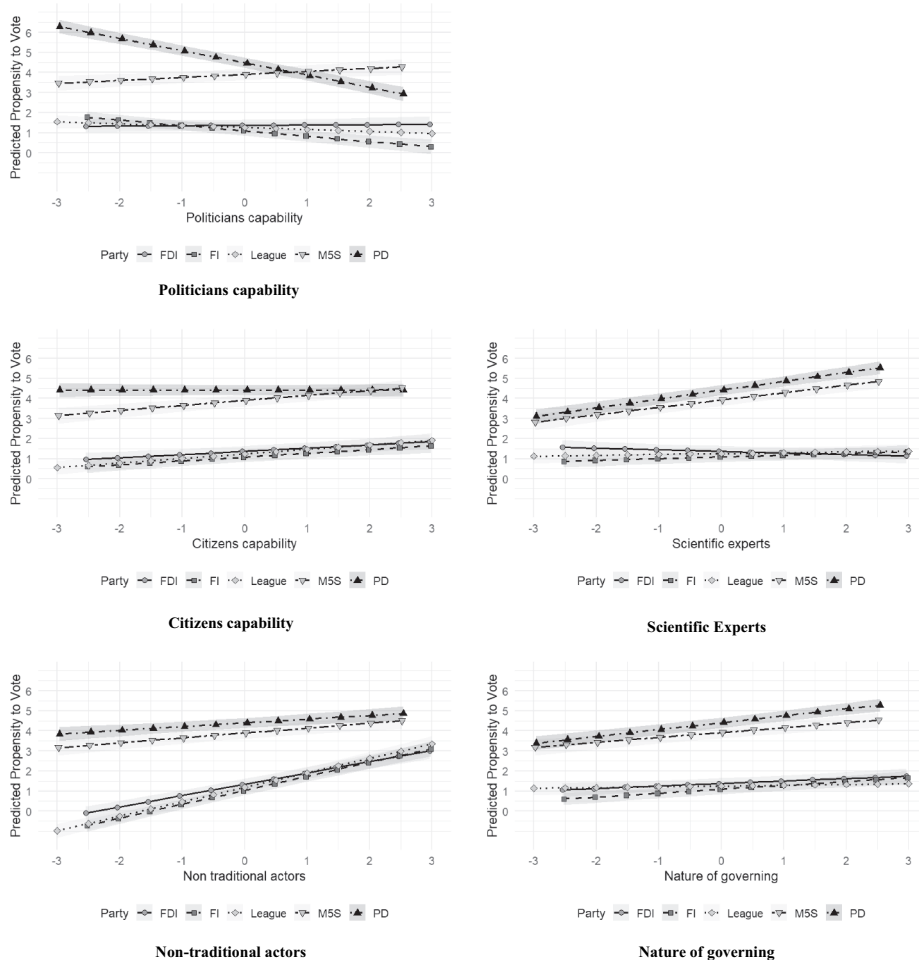
Figure 2. Preferences for actors in government and propensity to vote for the main five Italian parties: predicted values. Full model specification available in Table 2A. In order to show the different predicted values, in the non-traditional actors figure, we forced the values to be negative, even though this is not technically possible.

coefficient is significant only at $p < 0.1$) (Table 5). The coefficient goes in the expected direction in the case of M5S, but its significance disappears in the robustness tests (Table 7A). By looking at Figure 2.1, for FdI and the League the predicted values of the PTV for those parties is basically flat, thus suggesting a low explanatory power. We therefore find little evidence for our claim that preferences for politicians as governing actors are negatively related to the PTV for populist and valence challenger parties.

As for H1.2b, we have found that the preference for consensual politicians is positively associated with all populist parties (Figure 2.5), except League, for which the coefficient while positive is not significant. These results are noteworthy for several reasons. We tentatively interpret the positive association

Table 5. Preferences for actors in government and propensity to vote (full model specification available in the Appendix, Table 6A).

	FDI (rad. Right)	League (rad. Right)	FI (main. Right)	PD (main. Left)	M5S (valence)
Politicians' capability	0.02	−0.10*	−0.27***	−0.61***	0.15**
	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)
Citizens' capability	0.16***	0.23***	0.19***	0.00	0.25***
	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)
Power to scientific experts	−0.08	0.04	0.09*	0.44***	0.37***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)
Power to non-traditional actors	0.56***	0.72***	0.70***	0.19***	0.24***
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Compromising politicians	0.12**	0.04	0.19***	0.34***	0.25***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)
R^2	0.38	0.37	0.33	0.27	0.16
Adj. R^2	0.37	0.37	0.33	0.26	0.16
Num. obs.	4208	4208	4208	4208	4208

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

between the PTV for M5S – a party whose voter base has traditionally been highly sceptical of politicians (Angelucci & Vittori 2021) – and the preference for politicians with a flexible and consensual approach as a consequence of M5S's transition into a governing party. This shift may have made M5S voters more receptive to deliberation and compromise, marking a departure from the party's original protest-oriented stance. It also reflects their broader aversion to traditional left – right political divisions. Recent studies show that M5S voters are significantly more likely than other voters to refrain from placing themselves on the left – right spectrum (Angelucci & Vittori 2021; Vittori, Rojon et al. 2023).

Furthermore, this finding goes against a consolidated strain of literature that identifies challenger parties as the main recipient of dissatisfied voters (Rooduijn 2018) and which shows that radical right voters in Europe are much more distrusting of politicians, specifically, than the voters of other party families (Rojon & Rijken 2020). We explain this discrepancy in two ways. Firstly, League and FdI, while populist, can no longer be considered as challengers, since they have a rather extensive history as governing parties and their inclusion in governing coalitions might have impacted the way their voters conceive politicians and their preference for ideological flexibility in an uncertain political environment, such as the Italian political system.[3] Secondly, dissatisfaction has been measured with trust-related items, while here it is conceptualised with support for politicians as decision-making actors. More research is nonetheless needed in this regard.

Moving on to H2.1 and H2.2, we anticipated a positive association between citizen-oriented processes and PTV for League, FdI, and M5S (H2.1), while we expect a negative relationship with mainstream parties (H2.2). In line with H2.1 in Figure 2.2 we find that preferences for citizens as governing actors increase

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[3]In the FdI case, which was founded only in 2012, the political personnel including the party leader has a long governing history.

PTV for the three Italian populist parties, but this effect is more pronounced for M5S and the League, while for FdI (whose predicted values overlap with that of FI), the effect is less pronounced (Table 5). The findings are in line with the comparative literature in the field (e.g. Mohrenberg, Huber & Freyburg 2019, yet see; Bowler et al. 2017). Overall, H2.2 is not confirmed: we find a negative (but not statistically significant coefficient) association between citizen-oriented processes and the PTV for PD and a positive (and significant) association between citizen-oriented processes and the PTV for FI (Figure 2.2). Therefore, we find little evidence that preferences for citizens as governing actors are positively connected to the PTV for challenger parties and negatively connected to the PTV to vote for mainstream parties.

The positive association we found in FI case is less surprising than anticipated, as FI has been long classified as populist party, with its leadership consistently associated with populism (Castaldo & Verzichelli 2020). So, we explain this deviant association with the specific nature of FI. Upon examining this and the preceding finding that confidence in politicians' capabilities is most strongly related to PD voting, it appears that there is a strong association between expressing a preference for PD and holding a traditional conception of representative democracy, whereby politicians are entitled to make decisions and where political conflicts are resolved essentially within the parliament. In general, the fact that the PTV for both mainstream parties is not negatively associated with preferences for citizens as governing actors might be explained by the fact that referenda have become part of the political system and, contrary to other European countries where mainstream parties are against this process (Rojon & Rijken 2020), direct democracy might have been assimilated by the majority of voters.

Finally, for H3.1 we postulated that preferences for non-traditional actors (business, military, and religious leaders) (H3.1a) and (scientific) experts (H3.1b) would be positively associated with the PTV for right-wing parties. To the opposite, we expected that preferences for non-traditional actors (H3.2a) and (scientific) experts (H3.2b) would be negatively associated with the PTV for left-wing parties. In line with H3.1a and the comparative findings from the literature on Europe and US, we have found that support for non-traditional actors is positively associated with the PTV for all right-wing parties (Figure 2.4). For FdI, League, and FI the power attributed to religious, business, and military leaders exhibits strong, positive and significant coefficients: in the three models in Appendix, the coefficient has the second highest predicted power behind the ideological self-placement, even after accounting for respondents' religiosity levels (Table 6A in the Appendix). To the opposite, we cannot confirm H3.1b: while in Europe right-wing parties are usually keener to support technocracy than left-wing parties (Bertsou & Pastorella 2017), here we find an opposite trend, whereby the PTV for left-wing parties is positively associated with supporting experts in government, while right-wingers are lukewarm at best

Table 6. Summary of the hypotheses.

Hypothesis	Voters	Direction	Outcome
H1a	Mainstream	+ politicians	Confirmed
H1b	Mainstream	+ compromising politicians	Confirmed
H2a	Populist	– politicians	Partially Disconfirmed
H2b	Populist	– compromising politicians	Disconfirmed
H3	Populist	+ citizens	Confirmed
H4	Mainstream	– citizens	Partially Disconfirmed
H5a	Right-wing	+ non-traditional actors	Confirmed
H5b	Right-wing	+ experts	Disconfirmed
H6a	Left-wing	– non-traditional actors	Disconfirmed
H6b	Left-wing	– experts	Disconfirmed

(Figure 2.3). In this case, Italy represents an outlier compared to other European countries. This might be due to the recent technocratic government configuration; both M5S and PD, besides FI, were more supportive of the 2021–2022 Draghi Government, League was a reluctant supporter while FdI was in opposition.

In line with these findings, we cannot support H3.2b, given that support for (scientific) experts is positively associated with the PTV for left-wing parties (Figure 2.3). Furthermore, against our expectations, we cannot confirm H3.2a: somewhat unexpectedly, the PTV for PD is positively associated with the support for non-traditional actors (Figure 2.4). We tentatively attribute this to the religiosity of PD's electoral base, which contrary to other social-democratic parties has been founded in 2008 from the merger of a successors to the Christian Democratic and Social Democratic parties. The same positive association can be found for M5S. Besides the declared religiosity of the leader of the M5S (Giuseppe Conte), we can tentatively explain this result, by looking at the traditional electoral base of the party, which is anchored in the south of Italy, where religiosity levels are traditionally higher than in other parts of the countries (Deopen 2020).

We can also put forward another explanation for this result. Since the item about giving power to people with no previous government experience has a reasonable loading (0.40) on this dimension, and since M5S has traditionally campaigned for new political personnel to enter politics, the positive coefficient could be influenced by this item. Nevertheless, further research is needed in this respect. Table 6 summarises our findings showing which hypotheses are confirmed, partially confirmed or rejected.

Discussion

The goal of this article was to examine whether citizens' preferences for governing actors are linked to their voting behaviour. We approached this research question using a methodology recently developed in the US by Hibbing et al. (2023), and then in Europe by Pilet et al. (2023). Using a newly developed battery

of survey items, these authors identified that European citizens' preferences regarding which actors must play a greater role in government are structured around five main dimensions. Four of these dimensions are related to actors that must be given a prominent role, i.e. elected politicians, citizens, scientific experts, and non-traditional actors, while the fifth is linked to the choice between consensual and adversarial politics.

With this approach, the first goal of our article has been to see whether citizens' process preferences were structured similarly in Italy compared to in nine European countries studied by Pilet et al. (2023). And the conclusion is that they are very similar. Italy aligns with other European countries recently surveyed, since we have found here the same five dimensions: Politicians' capabilities, Citizens' capabilities, Power to (scientific) actors, Power to non-traditional actors and Preferences for consensual or flexible politicians. For the literature, this first finding has two important implications. First, it confirms the usefulness of the original battery proposed by Hibbing et al., and replicated by Pilet et al. (2023). Second, and perhaps more surprisingly, we have also shown that this battery performs well, even within a distinctive political context like Italy's – where citizens have directly experienced a wide range of decision-making processes, including party government, direct democracy, and technocracy, and have been governed by political outsiders such as Silvio Berlusconi (a business man) and Giuseppe Conte (a technocrat with an academic background).

The second goal of this study, and also the second important take-away for this field of research is related to the link between Italians' views regarding what actors must be given a greater role in governing the country and their party preferences. We are the first, to our knowledge, to systematically examine this, beyond a specific focus on the distinction between populist or challenger parties (Hernández 2018; Hooghe & Dassonneville 2016). And this approach has shown its merits. It appears that voters of the different Italian parties do hold different preferences regarding how the political system must be structured. Firstly, we expected a much neater anti-politicians' stance from supporters of populist parties, as the comparative literature had suggested, but we were able to corroborate only partially this expectation: Italy has now incorporated populist parties in government several times. Their mainstreaming made their voters more prone to a less-confrontational stance towards politicians and this is the reason why the correlation patterns do not fit our expectations. In line with literature, however, we did find that the PTV for League, FdI and M5S is associated with favourable position towards direct democracy.

Secondly, Italian citizens represent an outlier also for other aspects. In contrast with the literature on support for technocracy, we found that supporters of right-wing parties are more sceptical than left-wing parties about the inclusion of (scientific) experts in government: this might be explained by the controversial relationship that populist radical right parties have had traditionally with

recent technocratic governments and the positive evaluation of left-wing parties towards experts (PD in particular). However, the case of FI voters remains an outlier. As a mainstream party that supported the last two technocratic governments, and particularly Draghi government, one would expect a positive and significant association between support for experts in government and the PTV for FI. Yet, no such relationship emerges, suggesting that FI voters may not have been particularly enthusiastic about the party's participation in the Draghi government. Contextual factors most probably play a crucial role in shaping the relationship between preferences for governing actors and party support. Radical-right parties have consistently opposed the last two technocratic governments, and even when they joined coalition governments – such as the League's participation in the Draghi administration – they did so reluctantly. In contrast, the positive association we observe between support for technocratic government and the PD reflects that party's comparatively enthusiastic backing of recent technocratic governments.

Thirdly, right-wing and left-wing voters are divided in their support for non-traditional actors like business, military, and religious leaders, but not entirely in the way we expected. Right-wing voters do prefer non-traditional actors way more than left-wing voters. Unsurprisingly, support for non-traditional actors is also positively associated with support for left-wing parties, likely due to PD partial Christian-democratic heritage and the Five Star Movement's (M5S) electoral roots in the more religious southern regions of Italy.

Although we observe differences between the preferences for governing actors of different voter groups, we also note that support for compromising politicians is positively related to the PTV for all five parties (except League). This finding is somewhat unexpected, as one might assume that voters who support populist parties would prefer their representatives to adopt a more confrontational and uncompromising stance towards political opponents. Populist rhetoric often emphasises stark moral divisions between 'the people' and 'the elite' or 'corrupt' establishment forces, which tends to fuel polarisation and antagonism. Yet, contrary to this expectation, our results suggest that populist voters may actually favour a more conciliatory or pragmatic approach to inter-party relations.

One possible explanation for this counterintuitive result lies in the broader context of Italian political dynamics. Italy has long been characterised by chronic government instability, with frequent changes in leadership and short-lived, multi-party coalitions. In such a fragmented and unstable environment, voters – even those who gravitate towards populist parties – may come to value compromise and cooperation as necessary for ensuring basic governance and policy continuity. Rather than demanding maximalist postures, they might perceive an overly combative political style as further contributing to dysfunction and gridlock. Additionally, Five Star Movement and the League, have undergone significant ideological and

strategic shifts over time, sometimes participating in coalitions with ideologically diverse partners. These shifts may have tempered their voters' expectations and increased tolerance for more moderate or cooperative behaviour from their preferred politicians. More research is nonetheless needed in this regard.

These elements confirm the importance of further exploring, in other countries, how voting preferences may be associated to governing preferences. We are not able to say much about the direction of causality, i.e. whether party preferences shape governing processes or vice-versa, but the two are associated and party electorates are significantly different when it comes to their preferred governing actors. Adapting Rohschneider's (1999, pp. 10–11) metaphor of what influences what, e.g. values-to-institutions or institutions-to-values, we still lack clear evidence on whether the mechanism at play is preferences-to-parties or parties-to-preferences. Future research should look at how people's views on who should be in power change based on two things: how much they think politicians care about their opinions, and whether political parties focus on decision-making in ways that match what citizens want.

Finally, next to these various findings and what they bring to the literature on citizens' preferences regarding how government should be organised, we believe that the key take-away message is that the context matters. As said above, Italy is a very specific case with citizens who have directly experienced in recent years a mix of representative democracy, technocracy, and direct democracy. And with parties from different party families all participating in government. These elements may be part of the explanation for why the way citizens conceive preferences for governing actors may differ in Italy compared to in other European countries. This article marks, in this respect, an initial endeavour to explore the relationship between citizens' preferences for governing actors and voting behaviour, but it also constitutes an appeal for other researchers to take up the same questions in a greater range of countries and contexts. Further analyses are required both comparatively and in relation to the Italian case. Specifically, further research is imperative to: (a) unravel whether our key counterintuitive findings can be corroborated with other dependent variables and methodological tools, such as actual voting behaviour (which we lack in our survey) and multinomial regressions, (b) further extend the battery by including deliberative democracy-related questions and questions related to representative democracy (Pilet et al. 2023), (c) ascertain whether voters perceive different governing actors as alternatives or as complements in political decision-making, and (d) determine the direction of causality between governing preferences and PTV.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

Davide Vittori is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Valencia. He has been a postdoctoral researcher at the Université Libre de Bruxelles and at LUISS University (Rome). He works mainly on process preferences, political parties, populism and voting behaviour. His works were published by Comparative European Politics, European Journal of Political Research, West European Politics, Political Behaviour, Government & Opposition, Electoral Studies, South European Politics and Societies and others.

Sebastien Rojon is a post-doctoral researcher in political science at the Université libre de Bruxelles. His research compares political attitudes and behaviours among citizens from different regions of the world. More specifically, he is interested in how citizens try to influence politics and what kind of government they want. His work was published in journals such as European Journal of Political Research, European Political Science Review, Comparative European Politics, Political Behaviour, Party Politics and Electoral Studies.

Jean-Benoit Pilet is Professor of politcal science at Université libre de Bruxelles. He coordinates the project POLITICIZE/CureOrCurse (ERC Consolidator Grant) that looks at the impact of both deliberative democracy and technocracy on how citizens perceive the legitimacy of democracy and of policy decisions. He has co-authored several articles within this project that have been published in Party Politics, the European Political Science Review, Electoral Studies or the European Journal of Political Research. He works also on elections, electoral systems, political parties and political elites.

Emilien Paulis is associate researcher at the University of Luxembourg. He works on social media and politics, political parties, political participation and democratic innovations. He is the author or co-author of recent articles published in Acta Politica, British Journal of Political Science, Political Studies, Party Politics and the European Political Science Review.

ORCID

Davide Vittori 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0161-9679

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