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Ideological Ambiguity, Issue Blurring & Party Dissent:

The Electoral Decline of the Populist Italian Five Star Movement

James F. Downes and Nicola Palma argue that Italian Five Star Movement's (M5S) future as a governing party is uncertain. Drawing on data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (2014, 2017 and 2019 waves), they argue that M5S's recent [electoral decline](#) post-2018 can be explained by a combination of factors, namely: (a) M5S's 'ideologically ambiguous' nature, (b) M5S's issue blurring on key issues, (c) M5S's increasing internal party factions (dissent) over ideological issues and (d) the 'clear' (clarity) stances adopted by their right-wing electoral competitors, in the form of Lega and Fratelli d'Italia.

M5S's Founding & Ideology

Founded in 2009 by the comedian and blogger Beppe Grillo alongside the web strategist Gianroberto Casaleggio, the Italian Five Star Movement (or *Movimento 5 Stelle*) rose to prominence in Italian politics, winning the most votes out of all the parties in the 2013 General Election. The Party continued to perform well electorally after that, with the party gaining its first seats in the European Parliament, in 2014.

At the 2018 Italian General Election, M5S continued its electoral 'rise' and entered the government for the first time having abandoned its previous political strategy of total closure to any type of alliance with other political parties. In fact, despite having increased its votes by over 1.5 million in 2018 compared to the previous political elections in 2013, the Five Star Movement did not obtain the required majority to form a government. M5S negotiated a coalition arrangement with the populist radical right *Lega* (League) under their Party Leader Matteo Salvini (under the "Conte I Cabinet").

This [governing coalition](#) between M5S & *Lega* did not last long though and the coalition government with *Lega* ended after only one year in 2019, with a second [coalition government being formed](#) with the 'mainstream' centre left party, The Democratic Party (PD) (under the "Conte II Cabinet").

Electoral Decline (2018–2020)

M5S saw a reduction of its overall vote share in the 2019 European Parliament Elections, with the party also losing out considerably, in a number of recent regional elections, such as in Abruzzo and Umbria in 2019. Most significantly, "[b]etween the March 2018 General Election and the May 2019 European contest, M5S slumped from 32 to 17 percent support."

More recently, M5S has also continued to perform poorly in the polls in 2020. Comparing the 2020 regional elections results in Emilia Romagna and Calabria with those obtained in the last 2018 General Election, a drastic electoral decline of Five Star Movement can be seen. The Party went from 27.5 percent to 4.7 percent support in Emilia Romagna and from 43.4 percent to nearly 6.3 percent in Calabria.

Neither Left nor Right: A Post-Ideological Party?

M5S is often considered by some [political commentators](#) as resembling both a (a) populist radical right and (b) a populist radical left party family. We argue that M5S's ideology resembles that of a 'broad church', with its focus on anti-establishment policies, direct

democracy, popular sovereignty (or ‘power for the people’), environmentalism and economic redistribution policies towards key issues, such as income inequality. M5S can be seen as a ‘big tent’ party, with its broad ideological focus.

We build on existing [literature](#) which argues that M5S should be defined as neither ‘left’ nor ‘right’. Instead, we suggest that M5S can be seen as part of a broader, ‘ideologically ambiguous’ party family that has an unclear ideology and party strategies. In contemporary European politics, these parties are often few and far between, aside from the case of the ‘incumbent’ [ANO Party](#) in the Czech Republic.

Internal Party Factions

There are arguably two features that bind together M5S as a party ideologically. M5S focuses on an (a) anti-establishment/anti-elites and (b) anti-corruption platform. However, there are significant ideological differences within M5S, pertaining to the ‘Left-Wing’ among whose supporters is the current president of the Chamber of Deputies, Roberto Fico, and the ‘Right-Wing’ to which the leader, Luigi di Maio, belongs.

The co-existence of the two different factions and their ideological ambiguity can be considered as one of the potential factors that allowed the Five Star Movement to enter into two different ideological government alliances in just over a year: first, with the radical right League (Conte I Cabinet), secondly with the mainstream centre-left party PD (Conte II Cabinet). These two ideological factions of the party often have disputes over ideology, especially among the members of the movement, particularly regarding policy differences between the two recent coalitions.

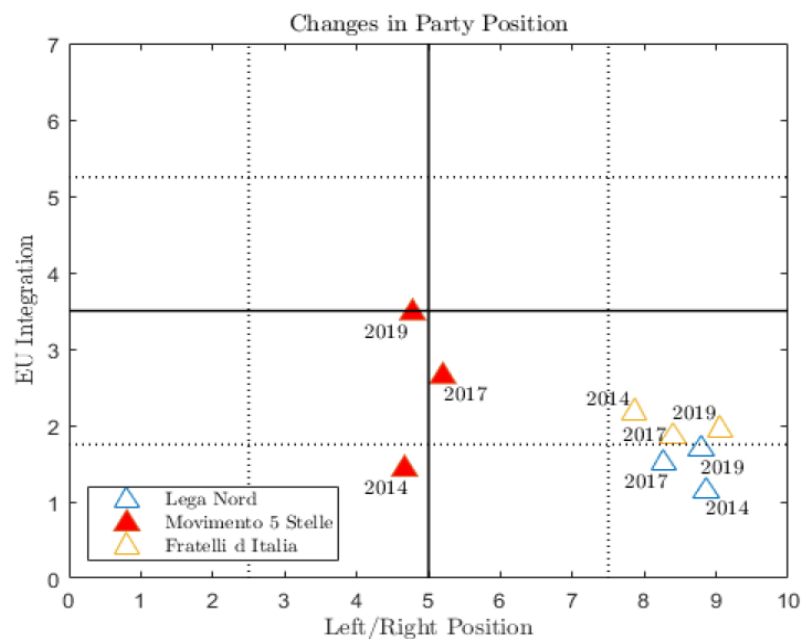
Ambiguity & Blurring (M5S) v. Clarity (*Lega* & *Fratelli d’Italia*) Party Positions

Drawing on the internationally renowned Chapel Hill Expert Survey Data (CHES) from the 2014, 2017 and 2019 waves, we make four important observations regarding the party positions and stances of the ideologically ‘ambiguous’ M5S, alongside the populist radical right *Lega* and its electoral competitor, *Fratelli d’Italia* (Brothers of Italy). We argue that the ambiguity of the Five Star Movement is one of the main causes of its recent electoral decline.

(1) EU Integration:

Figure 1 below depicts party positions on EU Integration on a 1–7 scale in 2014, 2017 and 2019. A score of 7 implies positive EU attitudes, whereas a score of 1 indicates a strong opposition to EU Integration and the wider EU project. Figure 1 shows how the Populist Italian Five Star Movement (M5S) has shifted from being anti-EU, towards a more 'neutral' and ideologically ambiguous position on EU Integration. The populist radical right Lega and *Fratelli d'Italia* both resemble adopt clear anti-EU stances on this dimension.

Figure 1: Changes in Party Positions on EU Integration

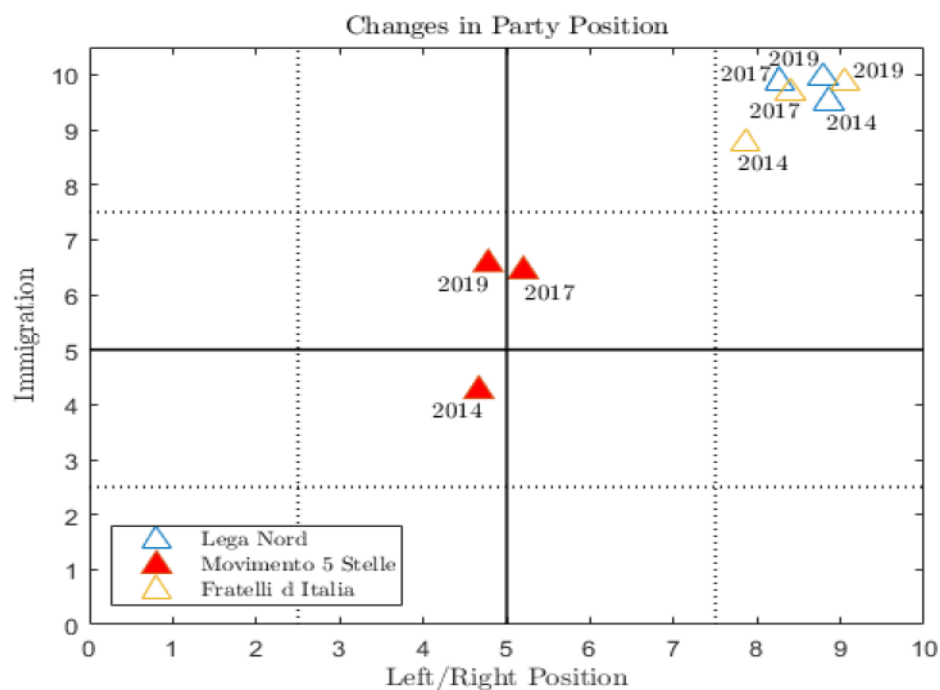


(2) Immigration:

Figure 2 below depicts party positions on Immigration on a 0–10 scale in 2014, 2017 and 2019. A score of 10 indicates more restrictionist and anti-immigration attitudes, whereas a score of 0 implies much more positive attitudes towards immigration. Figure 2 below outlines how M5S has also become more right-wing on the Immigration issue (particularly from 2014). However, the Populist Radical Right *Lega* is much more anti-immigrant and its positions on Immigration has largely remained 'static'.

The PRR League's nearest electoral competitor *Fratelli d'Italia* has adopted a near 'identical' anti-immigrant stance, an increase from (a) 2014 to (b) 2017 and (c) 2019. Though not presented in the first two charts, the 'mainstream' centre left Democratic Party (PD) and centre right Forza Italia (FI) parties in Italy are much pro-EU Integration, in comparison to the three 'main' populist parties in Italy. Interestingly, for each of the three time points (i.e. 2014, 2017 and 2019) *Forza Italia* (FI) maintained a more anti-immigrant position than the Five Star Movement did during this period.

Figure 2: Changes in Party Positions on Immigration



(3) Economics:

Figure 3 measures party positions on redistribution via a 0–10 scale in 2014 and 2019. A score of 0 implies that a political party favours redistribution, whereas a score of 10 implies a party strongly opposes redistribution. Figure 3 outlines how party positioning on "Redistribution" is particularly noteworthy. It seems to confirm M5S's attempt to set the political agenda on different issues from the ones at the centre of the League's political campaign, such as Immigration and Internal Security. According to the CHES 2019 latest wave, the issue salience attributed by the League to immigration policy in 2019 was around its maximum value (i.e. 9.9 out of 10) against the 6.5 points attributed by the M5S. In contrast, the Five Star Movement's salience on redistribution was nearly 8, in comparison to the League's score of 5 on the same issue.

Figure 4 also provides an additional measure that includes improving public services versus reducing taxes and demonstrates how M5S has become more left wing (from 2014) in 2019 and favours improving public services.

During the recent Coalition Government (2018–2019) between M5S and LN, the Five Star Movement launched the [Citizenship Income](#) which is a redistribution of wealth measure. The positioning of the government allies in 2019 are almost opposite on this issue. It is important to note that Figures 3 and 4 show that M5S's positions on socio-economic issues corresponds more to the left-wing dimension, rather than a clear story about 'ambiguity.'

Figure 3: Changes in Party Positions on Redistribution of Wealth

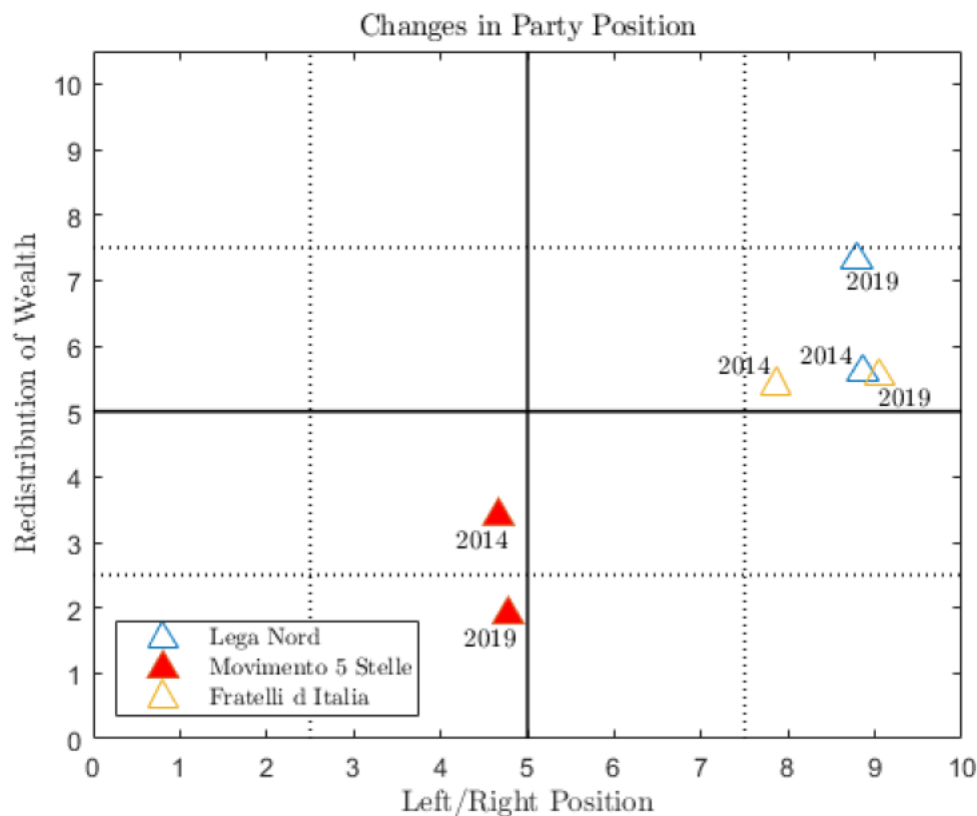
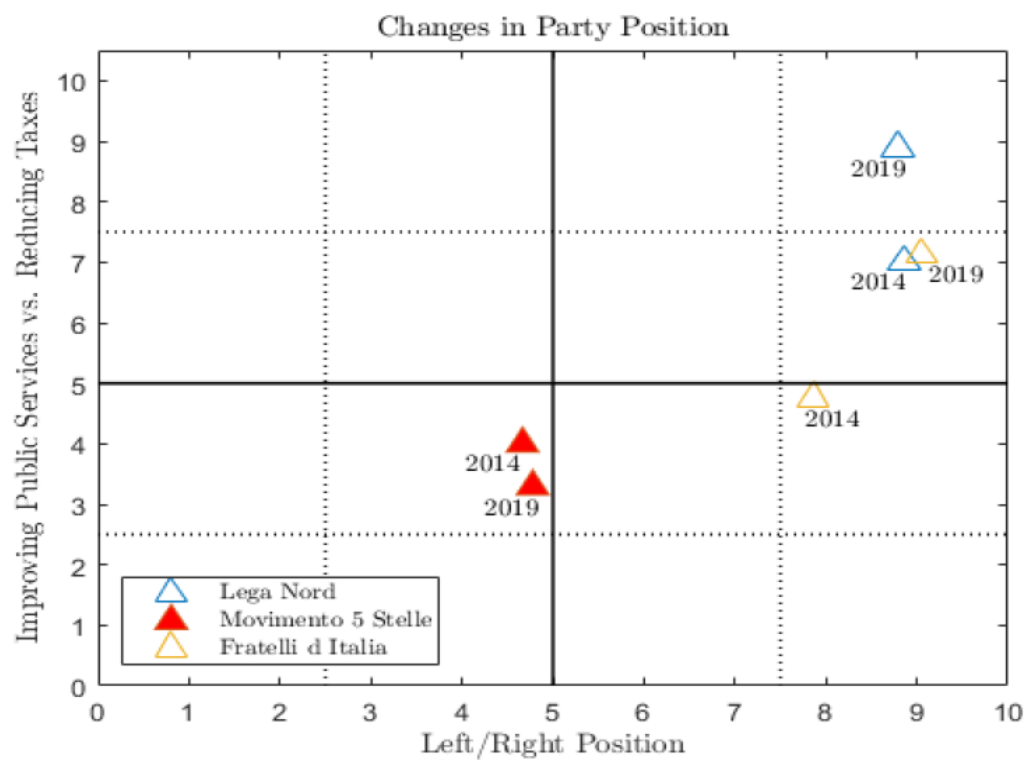


Figure 4: Changes in Improving public services versus reducing taxes



(4) M5S Issue Blurring & Internal Party Dissent

Table 1: Main Political Parties in Italy & Issue Blurring (CHES, 2019)

Political Party	Party Family	EU Integration: Blurry (2019)	GALTAN: Blurry (2019)	Left-Right Economic Position: Blurry (2019)
Five Star Movement (M5S)	Ambiguous	6.3	4.9	6.1
Lega (LN)	Radical Right	3.1	0.8	3.6
Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)	Radical Right	1.5	0.5	4.4
Democratic Party (PD)	Centre Left	1.9	3.1	3.2
Forza Italia (FI)	Centre Right	5	4	2.3
	CHES AVERAGE (2019)	3.4	2.9	3.6

Source: CHES (2019)

Note: Figures rounded up or down to 1 decimal place.

The latest CHES 2019 wave includes innovative variables that measure (a) the degree to which political parties ‘blur’ issues and (b) ‘dissent’ within political parties (see Table 1). Both measures are drawn on in the Italian political context and show the issue ‘blurring’ of M5S compared to other political parties in Italy, alongside internal party dissent of M5S on EU Integration, immigration and left-right economic positions. Compared to all of the other main political parties in Italy, M5S has the highest level of issue blurring and at the same time, the highest level of party dissent.

We can also examine the mean change in party dissent on EU integration and immigration. Table 2 shows that internal party dissent within M5S has increased substantially on immigration (0.6) and European integration (+1.4). These are important findings and demonstrate the ideologically ‘ambiguous’ nature of M5S and a party that has high levels of internal party dissent in 2019.

It is also important to underline that these findings do not capture the context or the timeframe of the ongoing 2020 COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. The CHES data that we draw on does not extend to this time period and it is also important to supplement the party position data with individual level survey data, such as voters’ perceptions data of the three different populist parties. However, early indications show that M5S is continuing its [‘downward’](#) trend in 2020.

Table 2: Main Political Parties in Italy & Issue Dissent (CHES, 2019 & 2017)

Political Party	Party Family	EU Dissent (2019 & 2017)	Immigration Dissent (2019 & 2017)	Left-Right Economic Position: Dissent (2019)
Five Star Movement (M5S)	Ambiguous	2019: 5.5 2017: 4.1	2019: 5.4 2017: 4.8	6.9
Lega (LN)	Radical Right	2019: 2.8 2017: 1.2	2019: 0.2 2017: 0.1	2.9
Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)	Radical Right	2019: 0.6 2017: 0.3	2019: 0.3 2017: 0.8	2.8
Democratic Party (PD)	Centre Left	2019: 1.6 2017: 3	2019: 3.6 2017: 4.1	5.4
Forza Italia (FI)	Centre Right	2019: 4.1 2017: 4.8	2019: 3.8 2017: 3.1	4
	CHES AVERAGE (2019)	2.6	2.7	2.9

Source: CHES (2019 & 2017)

Note: Figures rounded up or down to 1 decimal place.

Implications for the Future of M5S: Volatility

Our main argument is that M5S has harmed itself electorally. In essence, M5S has self-sabotaged (i.e. internal factors) its electoral prospects, due to its (a) 'issue blurring' and (b) ideologically ambiguous positions on key issues such as EU Integration (adopting more 'neutral' positions) alongside immigration (adopting more right-wing positions) and a wider range of left-wing stances on socio-economic issues.

This has arguably made it difficult for M5S's policies to resonate clearly amongst Italian voters. In contrast, the PRR *Lega* alongside its right-wing electoral competitor, *Fratelli d'Italia* have adopted clearer positions (i.e. external factors) on a wide range of socio-cultural issues, namely on immigration and EU Integration. We also argue that M5S is neither a 'populist' left-wing or 'populist' right-wing party. It is simply an ['ideologically' ambiguous](#) Party. M5S's vote share has also collapsed in recent times.

Though M5S has been in Coalition Government and served in two successive terms, the ideological future of M5S looks increasingly uncertain, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and a [declining](#) economic situation in 2020. Italy has had an astonishing 67 [governments](#) in the post-war period (since 1945). This wider pattern of electoral volatility and party fragmentation is likely to continue in the coming future.

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Notes:

CHES Variables:

EU_BLUR = how blurry was each party's position on European integration in 2019.

0 = Not at all blurred.

10 = Extremely blurred.

GALTAN_BLUR = how blurry was each party's position on libertarian/traditional issues in 2019.

0 = Not at all blurred.

10 = Extremely blurred.

LRECON_BLUR = how blurry was each party's position on economic issues in 2019.

0 = Not at all blurred.

10 = Extremely blurred.

EU_DISSENT = degree of dissent on European integration in 2017 & 2019.

0 = Party was completely united.

10 = Party was extremely divided.

IMMIGRATE_DISSENT = degree of dissent on immigration policy in 2017 & 2019.

0 = Party was completely united.

10 = Party was extremely divided.

LRECON_DISSENT = degree of dissent on economic issues in 2019.

0 = Party was completely united.

10 = Party was extremely divided.

LRGEN = POSITION of the party in 2019 in terms of its overall ideological stance.

0 = Extreme Left.

5 = Center.

10 = Extreme Right.