

## **Citizens' Policy Mood, Policies and Election Outcomes in Italy**

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## **Abstract**

This article investigates the relationship between changes in Italians' policy preferences and parties' and governments' responsiveness. It analyses whether there is a congruence between citizens' policy preferences, on one side, and parties' and governments' ideological positions on the other. The study represents the first attempt to estimate the Italian 'policy mood' adopting a methodology already used for other political systems. We infer public preferences from more than 200 survey questions administered more than 550 times between 1981 and 2015 that ask respondents to 'take a side' on several controversial domestic policy issues. Empirical results sustains the idea of a public opinion acting as a thermostat to balance the governments' policy goals and, at the same time, provide somewhat stronger evidence to the argument that governments adapt their preferences according to the changes in public opinion. Finally, it is shown a relationship between citizens' preferences and their voting choices.

**Keywords:** Electoral behaviour; Ideology; Italy; Policy mood

## **Introduction**

Representative democracies base their legitimacy on both procedural norms to freely select representative institutions and on the expectation of substantive responsiveness of institutions to people's preferences. Specifically, democratic theories claim that, in democracies, people's preferences are translated in policy decisions. A correct functioning of the chain of responsiveness then imply that the preferences of the decision-makers converge to some extent towards the preferences of the people on most controversial policy issues (Powell 2000).

In a cycle of representation, people's policy preferences are supposed to be exogenous to the political system, depending on socio-economic circumstances and other contextual factors. At the same time, government policies do impact upon citizens and contribute to mould popular preferences. Furthermore, citizens' lack of knowledge and interests (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1989) means that they take also cues on many issues from parties and leaders in forming preferences. Representation is therefore a circular process where preferences originate from the interaction of public opinion and political representatives. The topic of (policy) representation has however mainly seen scholars in turn focusing either on the leadership role played by elected representatives and parties – whom people would follow – or on the primacy of popular preferences which parties would accommodate under the threat of electoral defeat. In a principal-agent perspective, then, the two roles would appear to alternate in answering the questions: who is leading? who is following?

Research assigning the principal role to institutions (parties, governments, legislatures) focused on policy feedbacks, that is the consequences of policies on their recipients, i.e., citizens. Enacted policies alter behaviour and attitudes of the public, by creating new constituencies, different pattern of political mobilisation, new priorities which in turn affect overall mass political behaviour and their preferences (see, for a review, Campbell, 2012).

On the other hand, research focusing on the people's primacy highlight how parties shift their policy position in response – among other factors – to voters' changing policy preferences in a process of dynamic representation (for a review, see Stimson et al. 1995; Burstein, 2003, and Adams, 2012).

This literature recognises, however, the methodological thorny issues about inference and causality - leaving aside for the moment the issue of how to measure people's preferences and parties' policies – and the demanding research design and time series data availability to ascertain patterns of causal variation (Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2005). Although representation is seen as an iterative process in which policy positions result from the interplay of people's preferences and parties' priorities, the actual working of this interplay is a matter of theoretical and empirical debate, where the adaptive public perspective has gained some prominence: research by Wlezien (1995; 2004) and Soroka and Wlezien (2005) frames public opinion as a 'thermostat', reacting adaptively to the status quo. That is people demand less of a policy when its supply is high and vice versa. So public opinion and government's policy would move in tandem with an inverse direction of preferences.

In this paper we confront with two tasks: the first is to provide for the Italian case a summary measure of public opinion's policy preferences and track it overtime, from 1981 to 2015. To infer citizens' policy preferences we do not rely on their reported positions on the left-right scale, but we estimate them from more than 200 survey questions - administered more than 550 times between 1981 and 2015 - that ask respondents to 'take a side' on several controversial domestic policy issues. This is a first attempt to assess the Italian domestic 'policy mood', a macro-level estimation of public opinion's policy preferences, adopting a methodology already tested in the US (Stimson 1999), Great Britain (Bartle, Dellepiane-Avellaneda 2010), France (Stimson, Thiébaud and Tiberj 2012) and Spain (Bartle, Bosch and Orriols 2014). The second task we pursue is to assess some of the interactions between public

opinion and parties. We do so by exploring: a) whether public opinion reacts to parties' and governments' policy preferences; b) whether government's policy are responsive to changing popular preferences; c) whether, finally, people's policy preferences have an electoral impact. The paper is then organized as it follows: in the next section we discuss the measure of public opinion's policy preference – the policy mood – and track its trend; in the following section we test two leading hypotheses in the literature: public opinion reaction to government policies and the responsiveness of political actors to people's preferences; in the fourth section we assess the electoral impact of the policy mood, while the conclusion sums up the findings.

### **The Structure of Policy Preferences: The Italian Policy Mood**

The relationship between political parties (and governments) on the one hand, and the electorate on the other is a cornerstone of representative democracy. In the last twenty years many efforts have been made to estimate, through different methodologies – from content analysis of party manifestoes to evaluations by policy experts - the position of parties on several policy issues and in particular on the general left-right continuum (see among others, Laver and Hunt 1992; Budge et al. 2001; Benoit and Laver 2006; Klingemann 2006). By contrast, to track the movement over time of the electorate's preferences scholars have usually relied on citizens' self-placement on the left-right spectrum. This represents the most obvious way to infer the electorate's preferences. However, this method presents several shortcomings, at the individual level at least. The first and foremost concern is that the question simply asks voters to locate themselves on a general left-right scale and it does not express clear preferences over policy outcomes. Such question refers to the labels 'left' and 'right' to which people may attach themselves. Secondly, as several studies argued, while the small group of politically sophisticated voters may use these labels correctly, the great majority of citizens may be subjectively uncertain on the meaning of these labels, inferring

their left-right position from the location of their preferred party (Scarborough 1984; Box-Steffensmeier and De Boef 2001; Baldassarri 2007). Finally, the meaning of the ‘left’ and ‘right’ labels varies across countries and over time (Stimson 2004; Corbetta, Cavazza and Roccato, 2009).

Another feasible strategy is to estimate the citizens’ preferences over a series of specific ‘policy issues’. Policy issues are debates around valued alternatives, about ‘what ought to be done’ and the proper role of the government in managing public issues (Stimson 1999). They involve disagreement about the desirability of goals, such as state’s intervention in the economy versus free market or abortion rights versus protection of the unborn child. Taking a position implies that citizens express a preference, that they ‘take a side’. The key concept of ‘policy mood’ in this literature is precisely a macro-level estimation of the citizens’ opinion on several policy issues. It represents the shared feelings over policy preferences by individuals which moves over time and circumstances (Stimson 1999; 2004). Whereas individual preferences may not be consistent and stable, the aggregate public opinion, if correctly measured, show stability and predictability, allowing us to take marginal changes seriously. Thus, the policy mood concept rests on the idea that the aggregation of variables, obtained by responses to questions in specific domains, cuts out inessential details and allows scholars to examine the relationship between preferences and policies and vice versa (Bartle, Dellepiane-Avellaneda and Stimson 2010).

In this paper to estimate the macro-level annual policy preferences we adopt the same method already applied in the US (Stimson 1999), Great Britain (Bartle, Dellepiane-Avellaneda and Stimson 2010), France (Stimson, Thiébaud and Tiberj 2012) and Spain (Bartle, Bosch and Orriols 2014). We started compiling a dataset composed by frequency distributions of responses to survey questions related to policy issues taken from nationally representative polls between 1981 and 2015.<sup>1</sup> These questions simply record the proportion of

respondents who take side on controversial policy issues ‘supporting’ or ‘opposing’ specific proposals and the role government should play in managing them, and on ‘agreeing’ or ‘disagreeing’ with social, economic and political statements. Given that the statistical method adopted uses longitudinal evidence of change in marginal responses to estimate the policy mood, we included in the dataset only those questions that were asked in exactly the same wording in at least two separate years. We treated any difference in question wording, order, filter and response categories as different items. We excluded all those questions that refer to specific leaders, parties and governments, because from these questions is not possible to disentangle citizens’ opinion on government activity and their judgements on either politicians, parties or cabinets.

The data was collected from eight survey programmes: Eurobarometer (EB), European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS), European Social Survey (ESS), European Values Study (EVS), International Social Survey Program (ISSP), Italian National Elections Studies (ITANES), Pew Research Centre (PEW) and World Values Surveys (WVS). Table A1 in the Appendix displays the number and proportion of single questions and administrations of these questions for all the eight survey programmes used as data sources. The full dataset includes a total of 251 single questions and 966 administrations. There are questions that specifically refer to domestic policy issues in different domains, such as public versus private ownership, inflation and unemployment, moral and social attitudes, ethnic relations and immigrations. In general, this type of questions clearly invite respondents to endorse controversial goals and take a side selecting a ‘left’ or ‘right’ option. Thus it was quite a simple task to decide the directional thrust of the responses and attribute them to a latent left-right scale. Considering that party politics is structured in left-right terms, survey designers take note of this aspect and frame survey items accordingly, mostly concerning the standard positions of parties. However, in case of mistakes the estimation technology would observe a bad coding as a

negative sign when a positive one was expected and automatically correct it (see Stimson 1999; Bartle, Dellepiane-Avellaneda and Stimson 2010; Stimson, Thiébaud and Tiberj 2012).

The full dataset also includes questions on citizens' attitudes toward European Union and EU institutions, mainly taken from Eurobarometer series, and questions on international affairs, mainly gathered from Pew Research Centre. US studies on policy mood includes only questions on domestic policy issues arguing that international affairs are unrelated to them (Stimson 1999; Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002). However, we need to recognize that international issues, especially during the so called First Republic (1946-1993), historically divided the major parties and in some sense conditioned their domestic strategies. Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI), the major communist party in Western Europe, was overtly pro-Soviet Union, whereas the Christian Democratic Party (Democrazia Cristiana, DC), which permanently was in government from 1946 to 1994, was pro-US. Although this argument is seemingly plausible and the inclusion of the international affairs questions does not significantly affect the estimation of the policy mood, we preferred to exclude them from the dataset.

We faced more severe problems with questions dealing with the EU issue. Undoubtedly, with the outbreak of the sovereign debt crisis in 2009, EU institutions and governance have become extremely controversial issues, especially for the constraints they impose on the member states' economy. Nevertheless, it was particularly difficult to locate citizens' responses to questions on EU issues on the left-right spectrum. Italian citizens' and parties' attitudes toward EU changed over time (Bellucci and Conti, 2012). Among those that more strongly oppose the UE model of governance and Euro currency we can find citizens and parties located both at the left and at the right side of the continuum, as well as citizens and parties that cannot be easily located along this one (see for instance the Movimento 5 Stelle and their voters). Therefore, in this preliminary research effort we preferred to exclude



also the questions on EU issues from our analysis. This choice was also motivated by an empirical concern. In the full dataset questions on EU issues are among the ones administered almost every year. Given their longer series, these questions assume a highly relevant predicting power in inferring the policy mood. Including them in the analysis would imply that the estimated policy mood would be strongly affected by citizens' responses to questions on EU issues. Finally, for the reason explained at the beginning of this section we decided to exclude also questions on citizens' left-right self-placement, and to use the series generated from these items only to validate our extracted estimation of the domestic policy mood.

The final dataset used for the analysis of the domestic policy mood includes a total of 202 questions for 554 administrations over the 1981-2015 period (see the last two columns of Table A1 in the Appendix). The ISSP survey programme contributes to the dataset with almost one third of the questions and administrations, while other two programmes – ITANES and EVS – contribute with almost one fifth of the administrations. The peak of survey administrations is in 2006 (N=84), followed by 1990 (N=66), 2013 (N=63), 1999 (N=47) and 2012 (N=47). Once we coded respondents' marginals as either 'left' or 'right' and 'neutral', then, we have computed an 'Index of Preferences' measuring the proportion of 'leftist' preferences over the total respondents' preferences, excluding neutral ones.<sup>2</sup> The formula is the following:

$$Index\ of\ Preferences = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^N (Left\ Preferences)}{\sum_{i=1}^N (Left + Right\ Preferences)}$$

Preferences vary across individuals and over time. The index of preferences allows us to aggregate individual preferences for each single item. We cannot, however, simply average preferences for different years. Items included in the dataset belong to different policy issues that might contribute to define different dimensions. Some items and issues are better indicators of left-right positions than others. Moreover, the same issues are often measured

with several items that present different wording and response categories. Principal components analysis could be the solution to analyse change in preferences over time, but it is not workable given the structure of the public opinion data. The reason is that what we have is survey items repeated a few times over the long period we want to investigate. Therefore, most of the possible cases, i.e. the answers to a survey question in year  $t$ , is missing. Missing cases considerably outnumber observed cases and imputing values for all those missing cases would create a dangerous dependency on the assumption underlying the imputation (Stimson 1999; Bartle, Dellepiane-Avellaneda and Stimson 2010). This is the reason why we adopted the ‘dyad ratio algorithm’, an estimation technique that is modelled on the same assumptions of the principal component analysis but allows us to aggregate preference data across individuals, first, and then across different items, coping with the problem of missing data (Stimson 1999; Bartle, Dellepiane-Avellaneda and Stimson 2010; Bartle, Bosch and Orriols 2014). The solution to this problem is to express preferences as ratios of responses to the same question asked at different times. The extraction algorithm calculates these ratios recursively for every possible dyad until information at all time points has been exhausted (Stimson 1999). These ratios, finally can be averaged for each year to provide an indicator of average preferences.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1 plots our estimate of the Italian domestic policy mood. The measure presents the same metric of the input data, i.e. the index of preferences. The policy mood basically measures the proportion of citizens that have ‘left’ preferences. It ranges from 0, i.e. the entire surveyed Italian public opinion has ‘right’ preferences, to 100, i.e. the entire surveyed Italian public opinion has ‘left’ preferences. In order to shed more light on the evolution of the mood we marked with a vertical line the election years.

Figure 1 about here

Italians' policy preferences show a relative dynamic over time. This trend, rather than being characterized by random abrupt shifts in the policy mood - large enough as to be ascribed to external shocks that modify Italian public opinion as an aggregate – shows that changes in public opinion are essentially 'changes at the margin' (Stimson, 1999). The Italian domestic policy mood confirms therefore a pattern of small but cumulative changes already found in previous studies in other democratic systems (Stimson 1999; Bartle, Dellepiane-Avellaneda and Stimson 2010; Bartle, Bosch and Orriols 2014).

Looking at Figure 1 we can identify three phases characterized by different directions: Italians' preferences moved to right from 1981 through 1997; to the left between 1998 and 2008, and sharply back to the right since 2009. These trend changes correspond to clearly identifiable periods of the recent Italian political history. The first period – showing movements towards the right – coincides with the long sunset of the so called First Republic (1981-1992) and the following political transition (1992-1996). These years were marked by significant international and domestic changes: the end of the Soviet Union and the Cold War, the corruption scandals and the consequent inquiries that brought to the collapse of the traditional Italian party system, and the enactment of a new electoral law, all of which have likely disoriented Italian citizens. The movement toward right of Italian public opinion matched with the transformation of the PCI in a social democratic party (Partito Democratico della Sinistra, PDS) and the birth a new centre-right party (Forza Italia, FI) led by the tycoon Silvio Berlusconi. The second period – showing movement towards the left – nearly covers the two longest legislatures of the so called Second Republic (1996-2008): the first (1996-2001) characterized by four different and heterogeneous centre-left coalition governments, and the second one (2001-2006) dominated by the centre-right Berlusconi's cabinets. After the initial stability of the Italians' preferences the graph shows a marked movement to the left

in correspondence with the end of the Berlusconi's second government experience. Finally, the last period – marked by a sharp movement to the right of the domestic policy mood – started in 2009 when the sovereign debt crisis that invested South European member states burst off and ignited electoral gains for right-wing parties (Lindvall, 2014).

To check that our extracted measure is indeed capturing left-right preferences of the Italian citizens we have displayed in the Table A2 in the Appendix the highest factor loadings for those items that more contribute in the estimation of the policy mood. As it can be seen, among these items we find typical controversial 'economic' issues easily interpretable in left-right terms but also extremely controversial 'cultural' issues. Among the former we find issues such as the governments' responsibility to provide job, protect lower classes and reduce income differences. Among the latter instead we find issues related to abortion rights, immigration and religion. Overall, the estimated domestic policy mood explains more than 62 per cent of the variation in the assorted series included in the dataset.<sup>4</sup>

As a further check of the validity of our extracted measure in Figure 2 we compared the estimated domestic policy mood with a measure of reported left-right positions of Italian citizens, estimated through the dyad ratio algorithm (see the dashed line). Even though the reported positions take higher values than policy preferences, the domestic policy mood series and left-right self-placement series track each other quite well, at least until 2006.<sup>5</sup> The product moment correlation for the two series over the 1981-2015 period is 0.50 (N=35,  $p < 0.01$ ). If we restrict the analysis to the 1981-2006 period the index of correlation between the two series reaches the impressive value of 0.79 (N=26,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Figure 2 about here

On the contrary, starting with the 2006 election Italians' policy preferences and their reported left-right position show movements in opposite directions. While the domestic policy mood trend moves to the left in 2005-08 and then to the right afterwards, the left-right self-placement one moves to right between 2005 and 2010, turning back to left since. This finding is puzzling, since it shows a novel divergence between Italians' policy preferences and their self-representation expressed by their location on the ideological left-right continuum. A divergence not observed in the previous 25 years. While we have to wait for new longitudinal data to assess the plausibility of such dis-anchorage – which would highlight the importance of social representation rather than of policy content of the left-right continuum; see Corbetta, Cavazza and Roccato (2009) – we can briefly speculate on its origin. Potential reasons of this divergence between Italians' reported left-right positions and their policy preferences can be found in the historical conjuncture. 2008 is considered as the outbreak year of an international financial crisis that affected several European member states, initially moving towards the right European electorates (Lindvall, 2014). In 2011 the worsening of the sovereign debt crisis made the centre-right Berlusconi's government resign, leaving the floor to a technocratic executive led by the former EU commissioner Mario Monti with the precise aim to adopt austerity measures (Bellucci, 2014). While the crisis affected the Italians' preferences over a set of policy issues, the left-right positions of Italian citizens did not move in the same direction. The share of citizens who locate themselves on the left side of the spectrum increased after the experiences of the Berlusconi and Monti governments, and reached a new peak in 2013, even though the centre-left coalition failed to secure a sound majority of votes in the legislative election. The divergence between the two movements might signal that when citizens face strong economic threats – such as an increasing unemployment and a decreasing purchasing power of their salaries – the economic content of their ideological self-location become more salient and may discount other policy issues they consider temporarily less

relevant, such as family, environment, abortion, or change their opinion on other issues such as immigration. As a reaction to the consequences of the crisis, the austerity policies imposed by the EU and the increase of the immigration flows, Italian citizens' attitudes have become more populist, anti-establishment and Euro-sceptic.<sup>6</sup> Of course, we recognise that at this stage the previous discussion is inevitably *ad hoc*, and that an empirical test of the source of the divergent trend of policy preferences and people' reported left-right self-location must await novel time series data. What we have established is a measure of the Italian policy mood whose validity rests on a unidimensional solution of factor loadings and on a fairly strong correlation ( $r=.50$ ) with an external variable, i.e., people's reported left-right aggregate position. We move then, in the next section, to an analysis of the consequences of policy mood, focusing on the responsiveness of political actors to people's policy preferences.

### **Policy Mood, Party Positions and Government Ideology**

Democratic theories claim that in representative democracies, the wishes or interests of the people should, to some degree, prevail in the decisions made by the government. In this section we investigate whether the ideological goals of governments and of the parties' proposals are related to the citizens' policy preferences. The main questions we address are: Does public opinion react to shifting policy preferences of parties and governments? Do parties accommodate people's policy preferences in their electoral platforms? Do governments respond to changing popular preferences?

Existing studies argue that party competition in European political systems is usually limited to one or two policy dimensions (among others, Kitschelt 1994; Marks et al. 2006). Italy does not represent an exception (Curini and Zucchini 2010). Although politics, theoretically, can be conceived as contestation in an infinite-issue space, there are many reasons that induce voters and parties to reduce this space to one or two dimensions. Given the complexity of politics and their difficulty in processing multiple pieces of information,

voters use ideology to reduce the multidimensionality of politics. Reducing the space of party competition to a very low number of dimensions help parties to solve collective actions problems in mobilizing the electorate. Most models of party competition take into consideration only one dimension that summarizes different policy issues. This one-dimensional space is represented by the traditional left-right dimension (Downs 1957; Kitschelt 1994; Marks et al. 2006).<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, politics can be explained as a continuous competition between those that ask for a more active role of the government in the economy (left-wing side), as well as in other policy domains, and those that ask for less (right-wing side). Citizens with extreme left or extreme right policy preferences will never be satisfied by the decisions taken by governments. By contrast, all those citizens somewhere in between these extreme positions have a motive to change preferences over time, and parties that alternate in government are induced to pay attention to them. According to such literature we can then advance two alternative conjectures about the relationship between policy mood and parties' and governments' ideology: the first is 'the balancing public', while the second is 'the responsive government'.

The first conjecture about the relationship between citizens', parties' and governments' preferences thus postulates that public opinion would adjust its preferences demanding 'more' or 'less' policy activity in response to the different governments' policy outputs. Following Wlezien (1995)'s argumentation, citizens behave like a 'thermostat' demanding less of the direction of policy that are receiving. After several years in which a government has implemented 'left' policies voters react demanding a less active role of government, and vice versa after a right-wing executive (Wlezien 1995; Soroka and Wlezien 2005).

An alternative expectation can be formulated on the basis of the Downs' model of two-party competition in one-dimensional space (Downs 1957). To obtain the control of the government a political force should converge to the position of the median voter. Thus, shifts in public preferences over time necessarily imply that parties and then governments move their preferences in the same direction (Pellegata 2016). Only shifts in a party's policy preferences large enough to include the median voter's preferences should allow it to govern. Therefore, the second conjecture assumes that governments react to movements of citizens' policy preferences shifting their ideological preferences in the same direction.

In a process of continuous mutual adjustment between the citizens' and governments' policy preferences, to systematically determine whether the public changes their preferences in reaction of governments' shifts or vice versa is not an easy task. Likewise, although in both these expectations preferences shifts are entirely endogenous to the relationship between voters and governments, an appropriate empirical test should also take into account exogenous factors, such as the conditions of the macro-economy, government popularity, corruption scandals, etc. We leave these empirical controls to a subsequent study, and discuss here some exploratory analyses that describe the links between citizens', parties' and governments' preferences.

Parties' policy positions are computed from the Comparative Manifesto Project data (CMP, Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006). The position of the left-wing parties or coalition is measured through the average left-right position of all parties weighted by their seat share obtained in the Chamber of Deputies. We have rescaled the original CMP metric – in which -100 represents extreme left and +100 represents extreme right – on the policy mood scale where 0 represents the extreme right value and +100 represents the extreme left one. In order to measure governments' policy position we rely on a different data source.



Governments' position on the left-right scale have been estimated through the Italian Legislative Speech Dataset (ILSD, Curini and Martelli 2009). Governments' preferences are inferred from a content analysis of the investiture speeches taken by the prime ministers in Parliament. These estimations are based on the same methodology and the same policy categories adopted by the CMP project. Also the original ILSD scale, that goes from -100 at the extreme left and +100 at the extreme right, was transformed in order to have the same metric of policy mood, from 0 (extreme right) to 100 (extreme left). We preferred ILSD data to CMP ones to estimate the position of governments for two main reasons. The first is that ILSD dataset gives us a more real estimation of the position of different governments, while CMP data only provide an estimation of the position of different parties obtained from their electoral manifestos. Starting from these estimations scholars should compute the governments' preferences. ILSD data instead infer both parties' and governments' preferences. The latter are directly estimated from the Prime Ministers' investiture speeches that are the result of the post-electoral bargaining among coalition partners. The second reason is that CMP data captures parties' preferences only before the elections. This strategy does not allow scholars to estimate the position of those government born between elections, that are particularly frequent in Italy. ILSD data instead directly estimate the preferences of all different governments succeeded in the Italian Republic.

Let us inspect first some descriptive data, to move then to structured explanatory models. To what extent do parties' ideological positions reflect citizens' policy preferences? Or rather do voters react as a thermostat? Figure 3 reports a bar graph that, for each pair of elections over the 1983-2013 period, plots changes in domestic policy mood (white bars) and changes in the left-right position of left-wing parties (hard grey bars)<sup>8</sup>. In six out of eight pairs of elections analysed we detect a systematic congruence between the movement of citizens' policy preferences and the movement of left-wing parties or coalitions proposals, based on

their electoral manifestoes. So parties and electorates show a slight tendency to move in tandem. In 1987, 2001 and 2006 both policy mood and left-wing parties' ideological position moved to left compared to previous elections, while in 1992, 1994 and 1996 the two measures moved to right. Finally, only in the last two elections – 2008 and 2013 – changes in policy mood do not track the changes in the ideological position of the centre-left coalition. Overall, the evidence so far analysed would support the parties' responsiveness hypothesis rather than the balancing public one.

Figure 3 about here

To further probe the balancing hypothesis, we can investigate whether it is detectable a change in Italian policy mood occurred between the beginning and the end of tenure of different coloured governments. Figure 4 reports changes in the domestic policy mood under different governments. As before, positive values indicate movement to left, while negative values indicate movement to right. More precisely, all the executives with the same partisan composition and/or the same ideology 'label' are considered as a single government. For instance, between 1983 and 1991 six different governments succeeded, but they are all characterized by the same partisan composition named 'Pentapartito'.<sup>9</sup> In the same way, between 1996 and 2001 four governments and three Prime Ministers succeeded. These governments presented partially different partisan compositions but they are all identified under the 'centre-left' ideological label.

Figure 4 displays little evidence in support of the thermostat idea. Only in 2006, at the end of the second and third Berlusconi's centre-right governments initiated in 2001 we detect a significant movement to left of the public policy preferences. At the end of the other clearly ideologically characterized executives of the Second Republic (centre-right in 1994-1995 and

2008-2011 and centre-left in 1996-2001 and 2006-2008) we do not identify a change in the policy mood opposite to the governments' ideological position. It is of course more difficult to test the thermostat hypothesis in the remaining governments given their uncertain ideological positions. At the end of the two technocratic governments (Dini 1995-1996 and Monti 2011-2013) we detect a movement to right of citizens' policy preferences, while we should have expected a movement to left considering the financial austerity measures implemented by them. Similarly, it would have been more plausible to detect a movement to left, instead than to right, after the two most recent governments. Letta government (2013-2014) was a 'grand coalition' composed by the largest centre-left party (Partito Democratico, PD), the largest centre-right movement (Popolo della Libertà, now renamed Forza Italia) and several small political forces located in the ideological centre. The current Renzi government is led by PD but in coalition with several centre and centre-right small parties.

Figure 4 about here

What happens if we shift the focus from parties' preferences – expressed by the party programmes before the elections – to governments' ones, based on the Prime Ministers' speeches, which represent the actual policy commitments of governments installed after the elections? Figure 5 plots a bar graph that reports the change in domestic policy mood (light grey bars) and the change in left-right position of governments with respect to the previous government with a different partisan composition and/or a different ideological label (hard grey bars). We observe a congruence between policy mood and governments' left-right preferences in five out of ten pairs of governments analysed. This ideological congruence is present in the last government of the so called First Republic (Andreotti VII in 1991), together with the Berlusconi II government (2001) and the Prodi II cabinet (2006) and the two more

recent executives (Letta in 2013 and Renzi in 2014). In the other five pairs of governments analysed, policy mood and governments' preferences move in opposite directions. However, it is not correct to infer that such instances show public opinion reacting in a thermostatic manner since a movement to the right of a new government – such as in the Berlusconi I *versus* the previous Ciampi in 2004 or in the Berlusconi IV *versus* Prodi II in 2008 – corresponds to a synchronous shift of public opinion to the left. According to the thermostatic model we should have observed an opposite shift after the change in government. At best, then, these cases are instances of faltering responsiveness.

Figure 5 about here

Before reaching such conclusion we must however acknowledge that the evidence so far shown, albeit illustrative, is not able to accurately provide a conclusive answer to the public opinion-parties nexus. We can improve over such static contrasts – that is the paired comparisons between outgoing governments during an electoral term that we have so far considered – by introducing a dynamic component in the analysis. We do so via a more refined modelling of the political leaning of executives and of their duration in office. Moreover, we enlarge the sample size of our observations by including also the governments that alternate in office within the same political composition, thus taking into account the short term duration of governments which characterises the Italian political system. Such frequent government crises – resulting from disagreement among the coalition partners – entailed differences in policy pledges which could reflect not only the need to accommodate different parties' interest but also, in hypothesis, a changing public opinion mood. Such inclusion enlarges the sample size to 20 governments for an overall of 35 observations.

We measure the political leaning and duration of governments with a variable (Incumbency) assuming the value of 1 for the first year of a centre-left government, positively increasing with yearly tenure (2, 3, 4, etc.); and assuming the value of -1 for the first year of a centre-right government and negatively increasing afterwards (-2, -3, -4, etc.) while non-partisan governments are coded 0.

Let us start with the ‘balancing public’ conjecture. Table 1 reports findings of a regression of mood on incumbency, both for the shorter time series limited to election years (Model 1, column 1) and for the extended one covering all governments (model 2, column 2). Model 1 provides an estimate of data graphed in Figure 4 but improves over the measurement of government tenure, as previously described. The coefficient of mood, although not statistically significant at conventional levels due to the small N, is negative ( $b = -0.36$ ). This means that the longer a Centre-Left government rules the more public opinion mood moves to the right. Model 2 – considering all government policy pledges – confirms such result. The Incumbency coefficient ( $b = -0.45$ ; statistically significant) shows that each year of tenure of a leftist/rightist government moves popular mood to the right/left by half a percentage point. These estimates convey some support to the balancing public conjecture, although they show just a tendency rather than a strong causal impact, as the variance explained by the models is modest (respectively 15% and 23%).

Table 1 about here

Having ascertained that Italian public opinion adjust to an extent their policy preferences according to the policy supply, we confront ourselves with the second conjecture, that of policy responsiveness to public opinion. Table 2 reports estimates of a model which regresses (change in) policy positions of pre-electoral parties’ manifestoes and governments’ policy on

(change in) public opinion policy mood, controlling for previous (lagged) parties positions. Model 1 shows that (Centre Left) parties' policy positions do respond to public opinion mood. On average, a one percentage change of mood towards the left elicits an almost equal movement ( $b = 0.93$ ) of parties' position to left. Although the coefficient only border statistical significance ( $t = 1.63$ ;  $p = 0.154$ ), such great elasticity in the responsiveness of parties to public opinion appears confirmed when moving to the longer government time series (Model 2): the regression coefficient, statistically significant ( $t = 1.71$ ;  $p = 0.09$ ), shows that a unit change of popular mood to the left/right is mirrored by a 0.88 movement of government policy in the same direction. The model fit has improved (respectively 54% and 40%) and signals that responsiveness of both parties and specially government to public opinion's preferences is – with some surprise from the Authors' side – a feature of Italian democracy, not distant from what comparable research has uncovered.

Our analysis has investigated the two sides of the representation cycle: findings show an adaptive public responding to the policy supply, adjusting their policy preferences overtime and moving in the opposite direction *vis a vis* the status quo. At the same time, parties and governments appear to respond to such popular preferences. Data limitation do not allow a simultaneous estimation of these two flows, as to gauge in greater details their interplay. Such limited analysis has therefore been constrained to assess each path independently. Results available so far seem to suggest that – although both conjectures have not been rejected – the balancing public appear weaker than policy responsiveness. This leaves open to further research the origin of public opinion's policy preferences and its evolution overtime, in response to exogenous factors, such as the conditions of the macro-economy, government popularity, corruption scandals and above all policy implementation. Finally, a not irrelevant finding of this research concerns the need to fine tuning the analysis. As our descriptive examination above has shown, comparing government policy positions and

public opinion preferences between electoral cycles hide many nuances that meticulous yearly and cabinet by cabinet data can uncover.

Table 2 about here

### **So What? Policy Mood and Electoral Outcomes**

It is a plausible hypothesis that public policy preferences influence voters' political choice at election, although in the past research seldom has been able to confirm it. Actually, political behaviour research has recently moved away from reliance on social cleavages and partisanship as key explanatory factors, towards choice models of voting behaviour (Clarke et. al., 2001), focusing on medium-term factors like the citizens' evaluation of the economy, of leaders and their policy preferences (Lewis-Beck 1988; Bellucci 2002; 2007). Nevertheless, scholars are not unanimous regarding the resilience of partisanship, the reasons of its decline and its (supposed lower) influence on citizens' voting choices (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002; Bartle and Bellucci 2009). Our contribution to the debate in this paper is a first attempt to investigate, relying on aggregate data, the impact of policy mood on Italians' voting choice. The key questions we try to answer is: changes in domestic policy mood are reflected in people's voting choices? As a caveat we need to recognize our inability, at this stage of analysis, to ascertain the causal path between voting and policy mood – i.e. whether voting choice is the source (as commonly assumed) or the consequence (as choice theory proposes) of policy preferences – and admit that endogeneity might affect our findings.

Figure 6 offers a first, albeit not conclusive, answer to the previous questions. It plots a bar graph displaying, for the eight pairs of elections occurred between 1983 and 2013, changes in domestic policy mood (white bars) and changes in the vote share left-wing parties obtained in the Chamber of Deputies (dark grey bars). Positive values indicate a left shift in

policy mood and in the vote share obtained by left-wing parties, all measured as first difference from previous elections.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 6 about here

In four out of eight pairs of elections included in Figure 6 we detect a perfect correspondence between the direction of the change in the domestic policy mood and of the vote share obtained by these parties. In 1992 and in 2013, Italians' policy preferences went right and the vote share obtained by left-wing parties decreased. In 2001 and 2006 findings are again congruent: the mood went left and the vote share obtained by left-wing parties increased. In the remaining elections (1987, 1994, 1996, 2008) vote changes show no correlation with policy mood movements.<sup>11</sup>

These findings are puzzling, since lend support to contradictory hypotheses on the causal relationship between mood and voting. What could account for such differences? Many interpretations are obviously possible, but here we focus on one institutional explanation. These elections differs as to the duration of legislatures. Only those elections held at the completion of the institutional term (5 years: 1992, 2001, 2006, 2013) display a systematic association between a movement to left (right) in the Italian domestic policy mood (compared to the level at the beginning of the legislature) and an increase (decrease) in left-wing parties' vote share. When legislatures spanned over their natural duration and were characterized by the presence of governments of quite the same ideological position, voters seemed more inclined to base their voting choices on short and medium-term factors, such as policy preferences. On the contrary, in shorter and fragmented legislatures – among which the two legislatures of the transition to the Second Republic (1992-1994 and 1994-1996) – the



electorate may have been bewildered and might have chosen to rely on the partisanship shortcut to express their voting choice.

We test the previous supposition with a regression model where change in Left parties' (and Centre-left ones after 1992) share of votes is regressed on change in popular Policy Mood, controlling for previous vote share. Model 1 in Table 3 show a positive relationship (the Mood coefficient  $b = 0.86$ ), where a one percentage movement to the left of Mood brings about a positive change of 0.86 of a percentage point in vote share. This impact is short of statistical significance, due both to the short time series and to the likely impact of early call elections. The introduction of an interaction of Mood with a variable tapping full legislative term sensibly alters findings (Model 2). The coefficient of Mood (which refers now to early called elections) is negative signed and statistically insignificant, as to show great uncertainty on its impact on the vote, while its interaction (which refers to completed legislative terms) is positive signed and statistically significant. It shows a great impact of policy mood on voting choice: a point percentage change in mood brings about over 2 points percentage gains for the leftist vote. Albeit only preliminary, these findings suggest to pursue research further.

Table 3 about here

## **Conclusions**

This study has investigated the relationship among policy preferences of citizens, parties and governments, and electoral behaviour in Italy between 1981 and 2015, a period that encompasses the end of the so called First Republic, the legislatures of the so called Second Republic and the recent post-crisis years. We have proposed a measure of policy mood, i.e. public policy preferences estimated from responses to survey questions on controversial domestic policy issues through the dyad ratio algorithm, that allows us to compare over time

changes in public opinion preferences. Its trend shows incremental changes. We have detected three different phases: a movement to the right in the policy mood in correspondence with the end of the First Republic and the transition toward the Second Republic (1981-1997); a movement to the left during the main legislatures of the Second Republic, between 2005 and 2008; and finally a sharp turn to the right after the outbreak of the Great Recession in 2008-09.

When linking policy mood to the political system, our expectations were rather bleak, but findings positively surprised us. There are several caveats on the correct functioning of Italy's democratic institutions. The never-ending reform of the electoral system, the competition structured around two broad, heterogeneous and volatile coalitions, the high levels of party switching, the recursion to technocratic non-partisan executives and the recent electoral success of an anti-establishment and populist party (5 Stars Movement) represent all strong challenges to democratic accountability and responsiveness between governments' policies and citizens' preferences.

Nevertheless, our results shed a rather positive light on the representation-responsiveness process in Italy. The main findings show that in the Second Republic, especially in those legislatures that spanned over their natural term, there is a quite systematic correspondence between public preferences' shifts and election results. Moreover, with the exception of the last two legislatures, we have detected a congruence between shifts in policy mood and shifts in left-wing parties' ideology. And we uncovered an important congruence between citizens' and governments' preferences.

These results allow preliminary but quite relevant conclusions. First of all, in almost all the period covered by the analysis there is a systematic congruence between (left-wing) parties' ideological positions and policy preferences. Also governments' positions tend to converge towards citizens' preferences. Second, there is a strong association between citizens'

voting choices and their policy preferences. Medium and short-run factors play thus a significant role in driving citizens' electoral behaviour. The majoritarian reforms and the bipolar competition of recent years have prompted voters to take into consideration their policy preferences in making their voting choices.

The analysis sustains to an extent the idea of a public opinion acting as a thermostat to balance the governments' policy goals and, likewise, it provides somewhat stronger evidence to the argument that parties and governments adapt their preferences according to the changes in public opinion.

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, data before 1981 are very thin. We found questions on European Union in Eurobarometer surveys since 1973 and questions on citizens' left-right self-placement since 1968. However, questions on more specific domestic policy issues are very scarce in most important available data sources. Therefore, we decided to discount all questions administered before 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Following Stimson (1999), Bartle, Dellepiane-Avellaneda and Stimson (2010) and Bartle, Bosch and Orriols (2014), we have computed the proportion of 'leftist' preferences over the total preferences, but we could not have calculated the proportion of 'rightist' preferences over the total.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed explanation of the dyad ratio algorithm see Stimson (1999): 133-137.

<sup>4</sup> We have also estimated a second policy dimension given the structure of our data. However, the second extracted dimension accounts only for 5.7 per cent of the total variance. This result clearly indicates the presence of only one underlying policy dimension given the preferences of the Italians.

<sup>5</sup> Bartle et al. (2011) found a similar positive relationship comparing the policy mood in post-war United Kingdom with citizens' reported left-right preferences.

<sup>6</sup> The movement toward right of the policy preferences of Italian citizens has been also observed by Baldassarri (2013) who conducted an analysis on ITANES post 2013 national election survey.

<sup>7</sup> Kitschelt (1994) refers to this dimension with the term left-libertarian/right-authoritarian that summarizes the first and foremost economic left-right dimension and a second, more context-specific, dimension that captures several noneconomic issues such as the environment, lifestyle, and community, which scholars usually label GAL/TAN.

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<sup>8</sup> During the First Republic (1983, 1987 and 1992 elections) we considered as left-wing parties the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) and Democrazia Proletaria (DP). These parties were chosen because they clearly represented left-wing alternatives to the major government party, Democrazia Cristiana (DC). Other left-wing parties, such as Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI) and Partito Socialista Democratico Italiano (PSDI) are not included as Left because during 1970s and, above all 1980s, they participated in several coalition governments with DC. Starting with 1994 we identified as left-wing parties all those parties that formed the centre-left coalitions that contested different elections. We repeated the same analysis taking into account right-wing parties. Results obtained were the same as the ones presented so we do not reproduce them in the paper. They can be requested to the Authors.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Pentapartito’ was a government alliance between five parties (Democrazia Cristiana, Partito Socialista Italiano, Partito Repubblicano Italiano, Partito Socialista Democratico Italiano and Partito Liberale Italiano). Among the six executives succeeded between 1983 and 1991 Fanfani VI was a single-party government composed by DC. However, given that it is a so-called ‘governo balneare’ that lasted only the three months before 1987 national elections we considered it together with the other executives characterized by the ‘Pentapartito’ formula.

<sup>10</sup> See Footnote 8 for the classification of left-wing parties. We repeated the same analysis taking into account the electoral performance of right-wing parties with similar results. They are available by the Authors.

<sup>11</sup> This result is in line with Erikson et al. (2002) who, even if relying on an abundance of data, did not find any significant relationship between policy mood and macropartisanship in the US.

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Table 1. The Impact of Incumbency (Election Years and Government Pledges) on Public Opinion’s Mood (OLS - Standard Error in parenthesis)

Variable	Model 1 Election Years	Model 2 Government Pledges
Intercept	58.7 (1.13)***	57.6 (.58)***
Incumbency	-0.36 (.23)	-0.45 (.13)***
N	9	35
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.15	0.23

\*\*\* p < 0.01 (two tailed test)

Note: Dependent variable is the Policy Mood; Incumbency: Centre-Left government tenure = 1, 2, 3 ...N; Centre Right government tenure = -1, -2, -3, -N; non-partisan government =0

Table 2. Responsiveness of Pre-Electoral Centre Left Parties' Manifestoes and Government Pledges to Public Opinion's Policy Mood (OLS - Standard Error in parenthesis)

Variable	Model 1 Pre-Electoral Government Parties Manifestoes	Model 2 Government Pledges
Intercept	58.7 (1.13)***	34.6 (7.39)***
Delta Mood	0.93 (.57)+	0.88 (.52)*
Lagged Centre Left Parties/Government Position	-1.11 (.33)***	-0.79 (.17)***
N	9	34
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.54	0.40

\*\*\* p < 0.01; \* p < 0.10; + p = 0.15 (two-tailed test)

Note: Dependent variable is the change (first differences) in the policy positions of Centre Left Parties' Manifestoes since previous election (Col. 1), and change in Government Pledges since previous government (Col.2); Delta Mood is the change (first differences) in Public Opinion Mood since previous election year (Col. 1)/previous government (Col. 2)

Table 3. The Electoral Consequences of Public Opinion Mood for Centre-Left Parties

Variable	Model 1 (Centre) Left parties' vote share	Model 2 (Centre) Left parties' vote share
Constant	23.44 (12.77)**	1.16 (2.80)
Delta Mood	0.86 (.75)	-0.85 (1.12)
Lagged Centre Left Vote (%)	-0.65 (.35)**	
Full Legislative Term		0.55 (.56)
Full Legislative Term * Delta Mood		2.42 (1.47)*
N	9	9
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.19	0.13

\*\* p < 0.05: \* p < 0.10 (one-tailed test)

Note: Dependent variable is the change of the Centre Left Parties' vote share (first differences) since previous election; Delta Mood is the change (first differences) in Public Opinion Mood since previous election; Full Legislative Term is a dummy variable indexing completed Legislation; Full Legislative Term \* Delta Mood interacts Delta Mood with election years of completed legislature

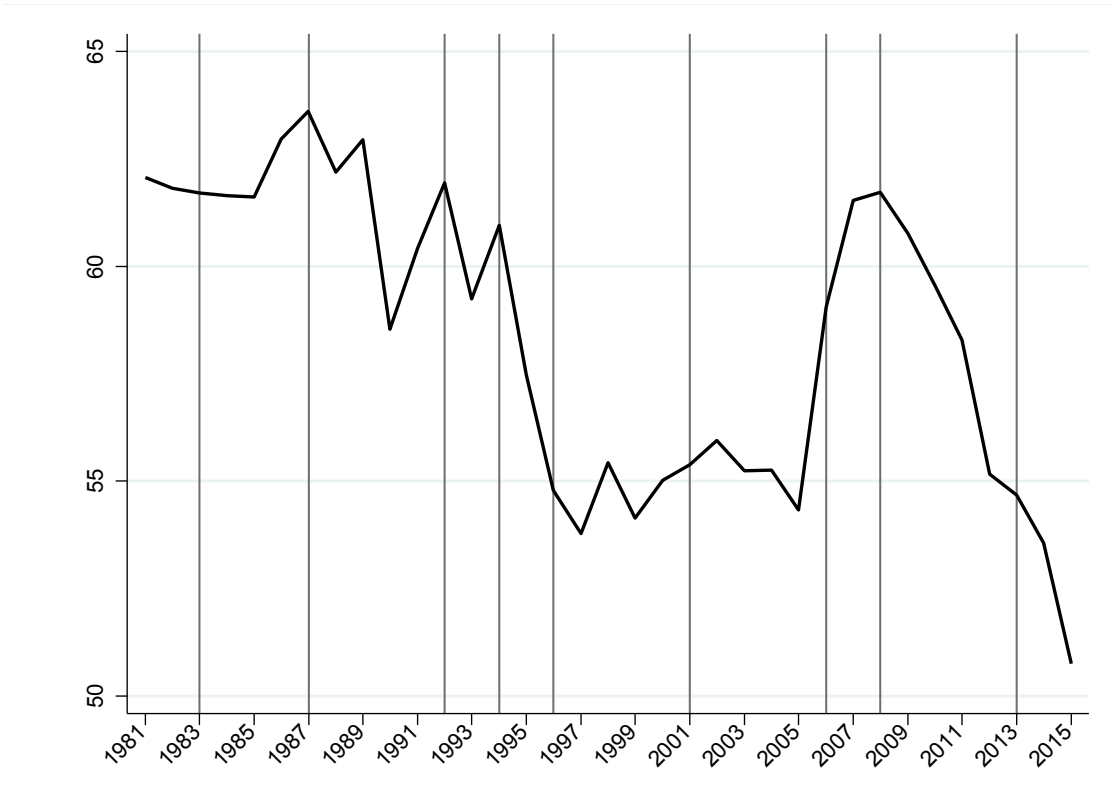


Figure 1. The Italian domestic policy mood (1981-2015) with election years highlighted.

Note: Vertical line marks election years.

Source: See Table A1 in the Appendix.

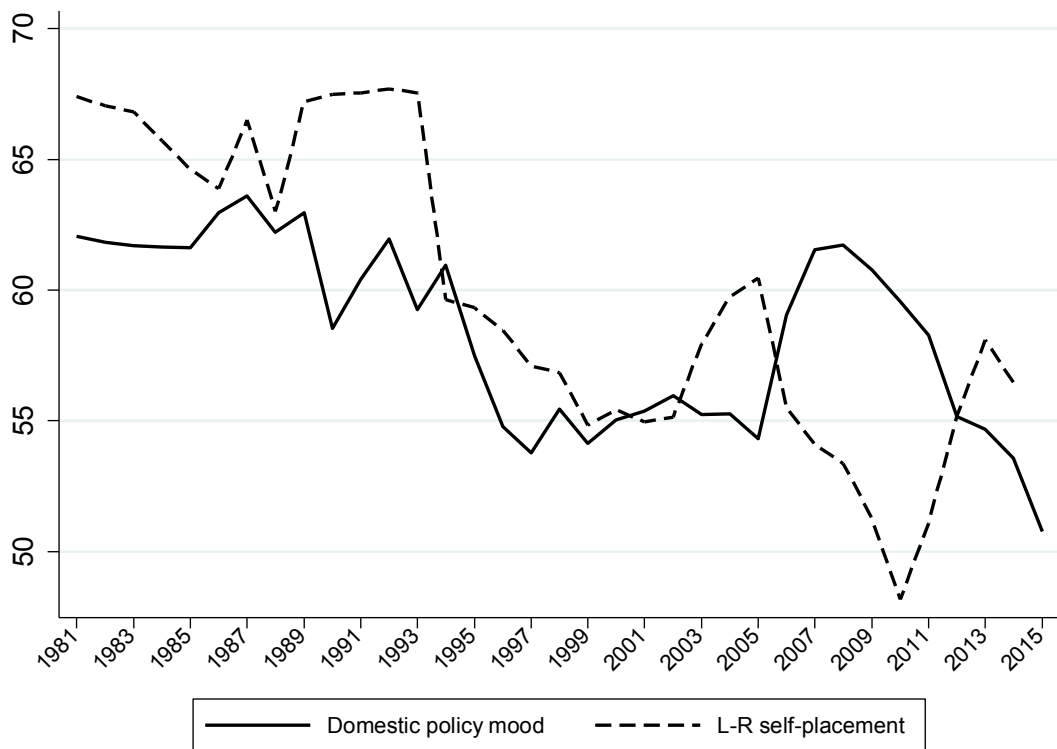


Figure 2. The Italian domestic policy mood.

Source: See Table A1 in the Appendix.

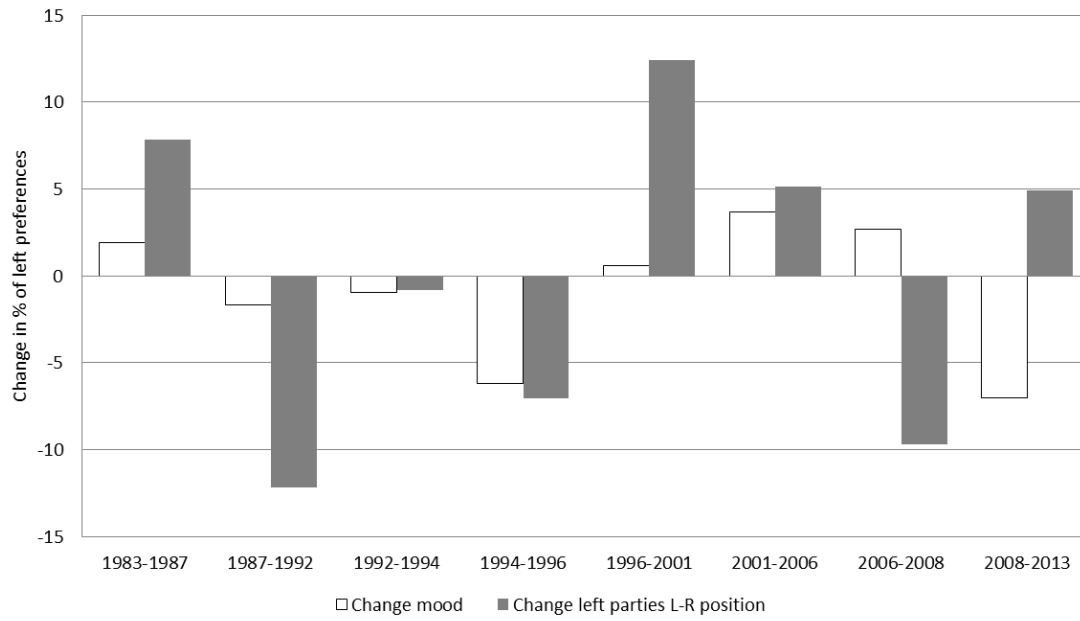


Figure 3. Relationship between mood and left-wing parties' position on left-right space for pairs of elections (1983-2015).

Source: Italian policy mood dataset; Comparative Manifesto Project dataset (<https://manifestoproject.wzb.eu/>)

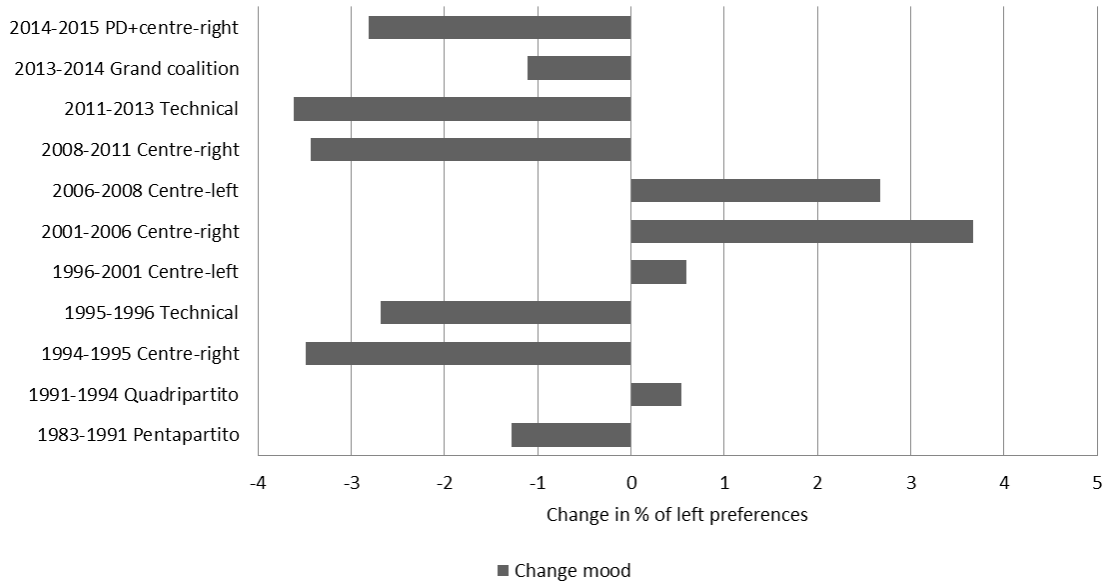


Figure 4. Change in the domestic policy mood between the beginning and the end of each government (1983-2015).

Source: Italian policy mood dataset.

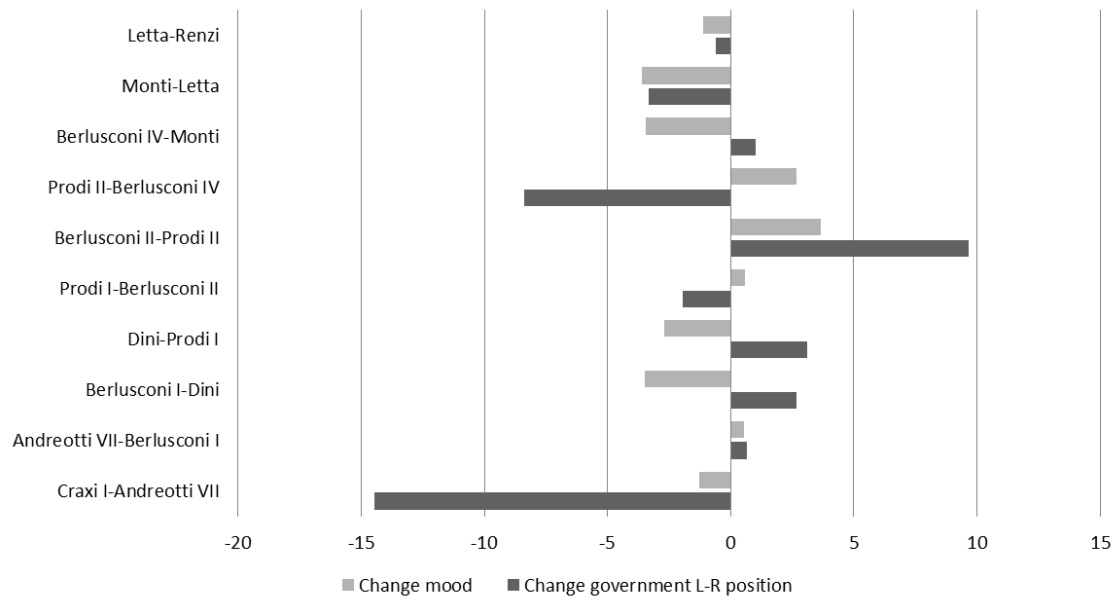


Figure 5. Change in the domestic policy mood and governments' left-right position for each pair of governments (1983-2015).

Source: Italian policy mood dataset; Italian Legislative Speeches Dataset (Curini and Martelli 2009)



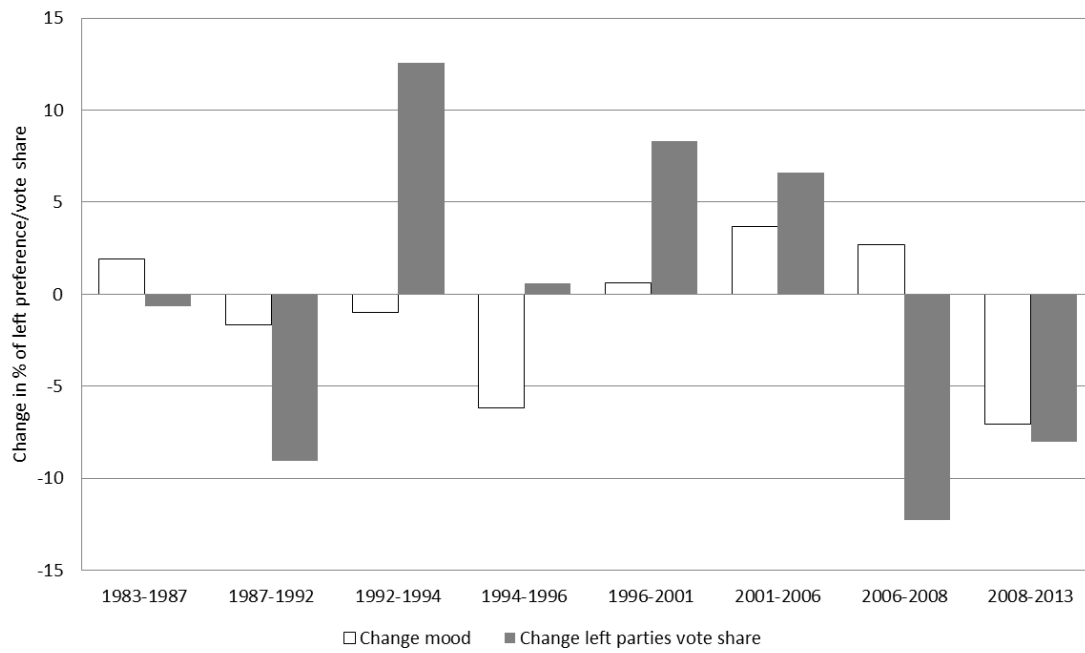


Figure 6. Relationship between mood and left-wing parties' vote share for pairs of elections (1983-2015).

Source: Italian policy mood dataset; ParlGov database.

## Appendix

Table A1. Data sources.

House	Full dataset		Domestic policy mood	
	Num. Questions (%)	Num. Admin. (%)	Num. Questions (%)	Num. Admin. (%)
Eurobarometer (EB)	31 (12.3)	346 (35.8)	5 (2.5)	22 (4.0)
European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS)	9 (3.6)	22 (2.3)	9 (4.4)	22 (4.0)
European Social Survey (ESS)	8 (3.2)	16 (1.6)	7 (3.5)	14 (2.52)
European Values studies (EVS)	46 (18.3)	132 (13.6)	45 (22.3)	128 (23.1)
International Social Survey Program (ISSP)	61 (24.3)	168 (17.4)	61 (30.2)	168 (30.3)
Italian National Elections Studies (ITANES)	36 (14.3)	156 (16.1)	32 (15.8)	134 (24.2)
Pew Research Centre (PEW)	32 (12.7)	98 (10.1)	16 (8.0)	39 (7.0)
World Values surveys (WVS)	28 (11.1)	28 (2.9)	27 (13.4)	27 (4.9)
Total	251 (100.0)	966 (100.0)	202 (100.0)	554 (100.0)

Note: To estimate the domestic policy mood we have excluded from the full dataset questions on left-right self-placement, European issues and international issues. Data on Italy in World Values Survey are present only in the wave 5 (2005). Therefore, we included in our dataset only those questions that were administered exactly with the same wording of questions included in other surveys (in particular European Social Survey).

*Source:* Eurobarometer (1981-2015); European Quality of Life Survey (2003; 2007; 2012); European Social Survey (2002; 2004; 2012); European Values Studies (1981; 1990; 1999; 2008); International Social Survey Program (1985; 1987; 1988; 1989; 1990; 1991; 1992; 1993; 1994; 1996; 1998; 2008); Italian National Election Studies (1985-2013); Pew Research Centre (2002-2015) World Values Survey (2005).

Table A2. Dimensional analysis of preference series, 1981-2015.

<b>Abbreviated Question</b>	<b>House</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Loading</b>
Government's responsibility to provide job	ISSP	6	0.953
Presence of people of another race disturbing in your daily life	EB	6	0.924
Presence of people of another nationality disturbing in your daily life	EB	5	0.905
Government's responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed	ISSP	4	0.988
Government's responsibility to reduce income differences	ISSP	5	0.876
Part of my income to prevent pollution	EVS	4	0.845
Sexual relations before marriage	ISSP	4	0.797
Presence of people of another religion disturbing in your daily life	EB	4	0.773
More emphasis on family life	EVS/WVS	4	0.756
More equal incomes VS larger income differences as incentive	EVS/WVS	4	0.671
Make the recourse to abortion more difficult	ITANES	6	0.590
Government's responsibility to reduce income differences between the rich and the poor	ISSP	5	0.553
Marriage is an outdated institution	EVS/WVS	4	0.561
Religious leaders should not try to influence how people vote in elections	ISSP	4	0.552
Abortion can always be justified	EVS	5	0.494

Note: The table includes only those items that entered into the dataset in more than three separate administrations and have a loading above 0.5.