**Populist electoral competition in Italy:**

**The impact of sub-national contextual factors**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article investigates the impact of sub-national contextual variations on the performance of populist actors in a country in which several electorally relevant populist parties exist: Italy. By employing a multi-model Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) of the 2018 Italian general election, it explores the extent to which factors such as the distribution of ‘economic losers’ and the impact of migration, political discontent and societal malaise have influenced the performance of the Lega(League) and the Movimento Cinque Stelle(Five-star Movement, M5s). The study shows that, while the League has thrived especially in areas characterised by ‘cultural backlash’, but also in contexts characterized by Euroscepticism and societal malaise, the success of the M5s cannot be explained without reference to poor economic and institutional performances. Moreover, by stressing the advantages of assessing sub-national variations, the study encourages us to move away from one-size-fits-all grand narratives that see some factors (or combination of factors) as necessarily impacting populist performance throughout national territories in a consistent manner.

**Keywords**: Italian politics; League; M5s; populist competition; populist parties; QCA; sub-national politics.

# Introduction

While the literature has mainly focused on how ‘mainstream’ parties deal with populist challengers (e.g. Akkerman *et al.*, 2016; Wolinetz and Zaslove, 2018), more attention needs to be paid to *intra-populist* electoral competition, that is the competition *between* populists (Albertazzi and Vampa eds, forthcoming). This is due both to the increasing number of party systems in which more than one ‘relevant’ (in Sartorian terms – Sartori, 1976) party of this kind exists, and to these parties’ increasing importance as government partners (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015: 1-13; Zulianello, 2020: 337-339).

Responding to calls to achieve a better understanding of the fertile breeding grounds behind populist performance at the polls (see Mudde 2007: 230), this article tests four different models to assess the impact of sub-national contextual variations in economic, cultural, social and political factors on intra-populist electoral competition. We do this by focusing on a country in which two very different populist parties considerably increased their support at the last general election (2018), as opposed to the previous one (2013): the Lega (League), which grew by 13.3 percentage points, and the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement, M5s), which grew by 7.1 percentage points (combined growth in comparison with 2013: +20.4 percentage points; aggregate support in 2018: 50.1 percent).[[1]](#footnote-1) Discussing the Italian case provides an excellent opportunity not only to test the explanatory power of different models focusing on populist success, which we do by employing Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), but also to shed light on the increasingly common phenomenon of competition between populist parties in the same context across the Old Continent.

Our research shows that the M5s owed its recent impressive electoral result to its ability to attract economic ‘losers’ in regional contexts characterized by poor institutional performance. Meanwhile, its main populist competitor, the League, mainly benefited from the effects of cultural backlash, but also flourished in contexts characterized by Euroscepticism and diffuse societal malaise.

In order to advance our argument, the discussion will now proceed as follows. In the next section we review some of the most relevant literature on our chosen topic and state our research question (Section 2), to then introduce the two parties at the centre of our analysis (Section 3). This will be followed by an explanation of our methodology and research design (Section 4), a presentation and discussion of our findings (Section 5), and finally a concluding section (Section 6).

# 2. Existing approaches to populist success

As already mentioned, the new century has clearly been kind to populists, both in electoral terms and by providing them with increasing opportunities to access power. To explain this success, proponents of the *losers of globalisation* theory (e.g. Grande and Kriesi, 2012; Kriesi *et al.*, 2006, 2008; Mughan *et al.*, 2003; Swank and Betz, 2003) have emphasised the impact of processes of globalisation and post-industrialisation and the shrinking of welfare states. This approach argues that as many people see their jobs (if they have any), prospects and ultimately the social contract they have entered into with the state being put at risk by global processes, they become particularly susceptible to protectionist offerings, such as the ones they find in populist electoral platforms. Hence some voters, and specifically the low skilled who are not well placed to adapt to the rapidly changing requirements of the job market (Scheve and Slaughter, 2004), are said to have abandoned mainstream parties and chosen left- and right-wing populists, as they have come to believe, not without reason, that they have been ‘left behind’ (Ford and Goodwin, 2014) by the political elites. The sense of ‘relative deprivation’ these voters experience (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018: 179–222) hence translates into increasing fear for the future, bringing with it a tendency to support parties that promise to be ‘responsive’ (Mair, 2009) to voters’ needs.

It is common to object to the ‘losers of globalisation’ theory by pointing to the many *rich* countries in which populists have done remarkably well, for instance in northern Europe, or else by stressing how, within countries, better-off middle-class voters have hardly been immune to populist appeals. In recent years, these kinds of objections have led even the proponents of this theory to warn against focusing exclusively on these factors, at the expense of cultural and political factors. Edgar Grande and Hanspeter Kriesi, for instance, have concluded that ‘the political actors who mobilize the globalization losers mainly do so in cultural and political, and not in economic, terms’ (Grande and Kriesi, 2012: 15), by ‘appealing to the cultural and political anxieties of these losers’ (Ibid.: 16). Similarly, the *cultural backlash* theory advanced by Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Norris and Inglehart, 2019) has emphasised the importance of *identity* issues for an understanding of what they call ‘authoritarian populism’, at the expense of economic concerns. The aim of this research is to account for the same outcome (populist support) among voters who are characterised by different economic interests. Older generations of white, less educated voters, often living in rural communities, are thus said to be particularly susceptible to the populist message, whatever their actual income. According to this narrative, these voters long for the preservation of traditional communities which are allegedly threatened by secularisation, the spread of progressive values, large-scale immigration, multiculturalism and the erosion of what is perceived as a ‘traditional’ way of life. In this context, anti-immigration attitudes are usually identified as being very relevant (Arzheimer, 2018; van der Brug *et al.*, 2005; Rooduijn, 2018; Stockemer, 2016), a proxy for people’s willingness to ‘defend’ their culture and way of life (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007). To say it with the words of the proponents of this theory, ‘cultural threats associated with immigration are found to be more closely linked with authoritarian and populist values than instrumental concerns about protecting economic interests’ (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 455). Hence ‘authoritarian culture’ can be understood as ‘a rational response to perceived tribal threats’ (Ibid. 445), particularly those brought about by the ‘silent revolution in cultural values’ (Ibid., 446) mentioned above.

Alongside cultural factors, scholars have also focused on political ones. In particular, the issue of political integration is shown to have been instrumental to the success of populist parties (Grande and Kriesi, 2012: 12), insofar as it has transferred ‘political authority to institutions beyond the nation state’ (Ibid.: 15), hence giving the impression that national political institutions are no longer in charge. If national governments have lost the power to make a real difference within the territories they are supposed to control, they will address neither the grievances of the ‘left behind’ (since their ‘budgets’ are affected by decisions taken elsewhere, and/or international treaties or institutions) nor the concerns of the ‘nostalgic’ (since they may lack the power to favour ‘their own people’, again due to international treaties/membership of the EU, etc.). This is said to lead to further disillusionment with the political class as a whole (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018: 83–127; Grande and Kriesi, 2012: 4; Mair, 2009), ultimately further fuelling the populist ‘revolt’ (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018).

Last but not least, the issue of ‘societal malaise’ is also usually brought up in discussions of the growth of populism. When social distance is small ‘there is a feeling of common identity, closeness, and shared experiences’ (Putnam, 2007: 159), while the decline in social capital leads to fear of societal decline and a decrease in social trust. In this respect, the literature identifies three social factors as being conducive to populist appeals: levels of pessimism about the future (Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Steenvoorden and Harteveld, 2018), declining levels of particularised trust and declining levels of generalised trust (Algan *et al.*, 2018; Bakker *et al.*, 2016; Berning and Ziller, 2017). Ultimately, it could be argued that economic, cultural, political and social factors have *all* contributed to the creation of a ‘multifaceted perception of crisis’ (Aschauer, 2017: 304) now widely associated with support for populism – albeit possibly in different doses, depending on the context.

To advance this discussion, our exploratory research aims to uncover how different populist parties successfully compete with each other by mobilising voters on the basis of cultural, political, social and/or economic issues – if not a combination of (some of) them – without *a priori* assuming that certain factors must be more consequential (Kriesi and Grande, 2012: 15) than others. The Italian case is truly emblematic: the country has been defined as a ‘populist paradise’ (Zanatta, 2002) due to the strength of populism in the country, with different populist parties having consolidated their support here for decades. Hence Italy provides an ideal case study in which to test the different appeal of various populist actors.

Below we provide a detailed analysis of the impact of sub-national factors on populist competition in Italy, once the two populist parties that will be the focus of our research – the League and the M5s – have been introduced to the reader.

# 3. The Five-star Movement and the League at the 2018 elections

The most widely used definition of populism in recent years has come from Cas Mudde (2004: 544), who understands it as ‘an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’. Having adopted this definition, this article falls in line with the rich literature conceiving both the League and the M5s as populist parties (e.g. Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008, 2015; Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013; Font *et al.* 2019; Tarchi, 2015; Tronconi, 2015), although certainly different varieties of the populist phenomenon (Zulianello, 2020).

The M5s is still relatively recent, having been founded by the well-known political activist and actor Beppe Grillo in 2009. By gaining 25.6 percent of the vote at the 2013 Italian general election, the party became the most successful new party in the history of Western Europe, and inserted itself as a third pole in-between the opposing left and right electoral alliances. At the 2018 general elections, the M5s confirmed its status as the largest party in the country, this time with 32.7 percent (+7.1 percentage points) of the vote.

Much has been written about the peculiar nature of the M5s’s populism. The difficulties originate from the fact that its ideological profile and policy proposals defy easy classification, both in terms of the distinction between ‘left’ and ‘right’ and that between ‘inclusionary’ and ‘exclusionary’ varieties of populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Caiani and Graziano, 2019; Font et al. 2019; Manucci and Hamsler, 2018; Tarchi, 2015). While flexibility and the ability to adapt to a changing political environment may be typical of all populists (Taggart, 2000), the peculiarity of the M5s is that its ideological core is constituted by *populism itself* rather than any interactions between populism and other ideologies, such as socialism or nationalism (Zulianello, 2020: 332). Hence we define the M5s as a case of ‘valence populism’ (Ibid.), alongside parties such as ANO 2011 in the Czech Republic or Živi zid (Human Shield) in Croatia.

Valence populist parties generally focus on non-positional issues (e.g. corruption, transparency and institutional performance). When it comes to positional issues, they tend to be flexible and inconsistent across policy domains, because of the absence of strong ideological constraints. For instance, the M5s focused its 2018 campaign on socio-economic issues, and made the pledge to introduce a universal *reddito di cittadinanza* (basic income) – which became the defining proposal of its campaign. However, this emphasis on one inclusionary policy during this campaign is not sufficient to turn the M5s into an inclusionary populist party. As Nuria Font *et al.* (2019: 16) underline, the M5s ‘seems to have a limited number of inclusionary traits’. As these authors explain (Ibid.), the party’s emphasis on direct democracy and expansionary forms of welfare ‘are strongly associated with “the people” who share the language – Italian – and who are therefore seen as citizens. No direct mention is made of immigrants or marginalized people in inclusionary terms’. In other words, classifying the M5s in terms of ‘right vs. left’ or ‘exclusionary vs. inclusionary’ populism is not possible, insofar as the only feature unmistakably present in the party’s DNA is in fact populism itself – and nothing else (Zulianello, 2019: ch.4; 2020). This was confirmed in September 2019, when, after governing with the right-wing League for over a year, the M5s performed an ideological U-turn and formed a government with the centre-left Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD), hence defeating an attempt by the League to force new elections.

Besides the M5s, the League was the other undisputed winner of the 2018 election. The oldest party in the Italian parliament – and one that had already been in government at national and local levels many times since the 1990s – the League was originally a regionalist populist party advocating more autonomy for northern Italian regions. However, under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, the party became a populist radical right party that put nativism and authoritarianism at the centre of its discourse (Albertazzi *et al.*, 2018). As such, the party fought the 2018 campaign mainly on issues having to do with migration and law and order, while its leader avoided being seen to privilege the problems of northern Italy so that his party could expand to the South. While in 2013, under the leadership of Roberto Maroni, the motto had been ‘the North First!’, in 2018 this became ‘Italians first’, as candidates were fielded throughout the whole country. Beyond its focus on nativism, the party called for a ‘common sense revolution’ (Lega - Salvini Premier 2018) during the electoral campaign, hence refusing to let the M5s assert exclusive rights to populist slogans.

The 2018 Italian general election has now been the object of extensive discussion (see Itanes, 2018). Interestingly, the analysis of the vote at the sub-national level reveals important differences in the geography of the cited parties’ electoral growth.[[2]](#footnote-2) Despite attracting a considerable number of votes across the whole of Italy, the M5s was particularly successful in the South, where its support increased, on average, by 17.6 percentage points. In the North the increase was only 1.0 percentage points, while in the centre it was 2.4 percentage points. As for its total vote share, the M5s obtained a very impressive 44.8 percent of the vote in the South, as opposed to 30.3 percent in the centre and 24.8 in the North.

Interestingly, the geography of the League’s vote tells a completely different story. Although the party expanded its vote share by 17.1 percentage points in its strongholds of the North, its new strategy of nationalisation led to a 16.5 percentage points growth in central regions, too, and allowed the party to establish a foothold in the south, where it experienced a healthy increase of 7.4 percentage points. As for its total vote share, the League received a (by historical standards) remarkable 23.2 percent in the North, 17.1 percent in the centre and 7.7 percent in the South – where it was virtually non-existent before. Overall, the League has grown by 13.3 percentage points since 2013, overtaking Berlusconi’s Forza Italia to become the largest party on the right.

Successful as both these parties certainly were in 2018, their growth was, however, uneven, both within macro-regions, and at the lower regional level. Disparities between macro-regions are clearly shown in Figures 1 and 2; as for differences between regions, the League’s expansion in the North (vs. 2013) ranged from +14.2 percentage points in the Valle d’Aosta to +21.7 in the Veneto region; in the centre, it grew by +13.2 percentage points in the Lazio region, but by as much as +19.6 in Umbria; and in the South, it went up by 4.0 percentage points in Campania, but +13.6 in Abruzzo. The M5s’s electoral performance was characterised by similar variations. Hence, within the North, the party suffered a 2.6 percentage points loss in Friuli Venezia-Giulia, but grew by 5.6 percentage points in the Valle d’Aosta; in the centre, it grew by only 0.3 percentage points in the Umbria region, but by 5.1 in Lazio; finally, in the South, it gained 10.0 percentage points in Abruzzo, but almost three times as much (i.e. 27.3 percent) in Campania.

[Figures 1 and 2 about here]

Below we aim to account for these parties’ performances in different areas of Italy via a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). First, however, we need to present our research design and justify our methodology.

# 4. Research design and methodology

This study assesses the impact of sub-national contextual variations on intra-populist electoral competition by focusing on the regional level. This represents the lowest territorial level of analysis at which an assessment of the competing theories outlined above (Section 2) can be carried out, since systematic data at the municipality or district levels only exists for some of the key factors listed below, but not others (for instance, not for the key factor of ‘Euroscepticism’). The article employs QCA, as this allows us to make case-based comparisons, by linking configurations of causal conditions to the outcome of interest. Whereas quantitative methods are generally used to perform contextual analysis, we agree with Thomas Denk and Sarah Lehtinen (2014: 3485) that ‘the use of QCA-methods provides opportunities to formulate contextual hypotheses in alternative ways’. In fact, QCA is increasingly used not only to assess topics such as party system institutionalization (e.g. Casal Bértoa, 2017a; 2017b), and the electoral fate of political parties (by combining supply and demand factors) (e.g. Beyens *et al.,* 2016; van Kessel, 2015; Zulianello, 2019), but also to explore the impact of broad contextual factors on electoral performance (e.g. Fernández-García and Luengo, 2018; Hanley and Sikk, 2016; Zulianello, 2018).

In this study, we chose to adopt the fuzzy-set (fsQCA) version of QCA, by coding all twenty Italian regions according to degrees of set membership in the causal conditions and outcomes. These were expressed as values ranging from 1.0 (full membership) to 0.0 (full non-membership) – with 0.5 representing the point of maximum ambiguity in qualitative terms (see Ragin, 2008; Schneider and Wagemann, 2012). Details on the calibration strategy of the causal conditions are provided below.

Before discussing the outcome sets and conditions tested in our analysis, it is important to explain how we theorize the impact of the contextual factors mentioned below (stocks, in most cases) on populist competition, ultimately to explain the variation in the two parties’ performances between 2013 and 2018 (van Kessel, 2015). Through the deployment of QCA, we test four different models that focus on contextual variations in factors having to do with cultural backlash, economic conditions, political discontent, and societal malaise.

Our decision to focus on electoral variation by looking at the performance of the two parties at regional level (rather than their aggregate electoral performance) is due to the fact that the relationship between these populist competitors changed fundamentally when the ideological profile of the League was revolutionised by its new leader, Matteo Salvini. The League’s transformation into a nationalist party appealing to the whole country, rather than just a ‘macro-region’ (cf. Massetti, 2009) within it, immediately impacted on the electoral potential of its major populist competitor, the M5s. Given that southern Italy ‘is traditionally the most competitive area of the country from an electoral viewpoint’ (Chiaramonte *et al.*, 2018: 490), this development produced a major change in the structure of populist competition. Hence, a focus on intra-election variations in populist support provides a more appropriate account of intra-populist competition than focusing on their aggregate vote share at a specific point in time (i.e. 2018).

Second, changes in the supply-side of politics are expected to impact on parties’ abilities to mobilise voters according to the different distribution of demand-side factors, even when the latter may not have changed substantially in comparison with the previous election. In fact, and despite some exceptions – such as, for instance, conditions *decline of generalised trust* (DEGEN) and *decline of personalised trust* (DEPERS), which are affected by substantial short-term fluctuations – intra-election variations in most contextual factors remain less significant than the ‘stocks’ characterizing the election. Hence focusing on GDP variation rather than GDP pro-capita levels would have provided a distorted economic picture. The average GDP growth of Basilicata between 2011 and 2017 was +1.7%, and that of Friuli-Venezia Giulia –0.1% (Istat, 2018b), yet what matters to a study like ours (as we assess the impact of economic performance on voting behaviour, and with the M5s having promised a basic income for all) is the fact that Friuli-Venezia Giulia is still among the wealthiest regions in the country, and Basilicata among the poorest. A focus on intra-electoral variations (rather than ‘stock’ values) would have overlooked the importance of long-standing economic disparities between the North and the South of the peninsula (Bagnasco, 1977), as well as their actual exacerbation in recent years (Lagravinese, 2015). Similar considerations can be made for the other conditions, most notably *poor* *quality of regional government* (PQOG). Between 2013 and 2017 the quality of regional government substantially declined in Trentino-Alto Adige and improved in Campania, and yet the former remains the only region whose European Quality of Government Index (EQI) scores are comparable to the European Union’s (EU) average over the year, while the latter remains among the worst performers within the EU (Agerberg, 2017; Charron and Lapuente, 2018). Due to these reasons, and given the above-mentioned changes in the supply-side of populist politics, we have decided to focus on sub-national ‘stocks’ rather than intra-election variations.

## The outcome sets: populist electoral breakthrough(s)

The correlation analysis of the electoral variation in support for the League and the M5s over the last two elections returns a Pearson’s coefficient of −0.959,[[3]](#footnote-3) showing a strong inverse relationship between the substantial vote gains of the two parties at the regional level. Figure 3 shows that the expansion of the M5s between 2013 and 2018 was most noticeable precisely where the League performed relatively poorly – and vice versa. In order to shed light on this interesting pattern of intra-populist electoral competition, the analysis focuses on two outcome sets: the League’s electoral growth (LEAGUEBKT) and that of the M5s (M5SBKT) between 2013 and 2018.

[Figure 3 about here]

In line with the objectives of our study, Table 1 provides data on the electoral performances of these parties at regional level. The threshold for full membership (1.0) in both outcome sets is set at a level of ‘very substantial’ electoral growth: +20.0 percentage points (cf. van Kessel, 2015: 77–78). The 0.5 cross-over point is set at 7.0 percentage points, which can be considered as a remarkable electoral breakthrough (Hanley and Sikk, 2016; Pauwels, 2014; Zulianello, 2019). Finally, when there is no electoral growth – either because there is no variation in comparison with 2013 or the party has suffered electoral losses (i.e. negative electoral returns) – the instance is considered as being fully out of the outcome sets. [[4]](#footnote-4)

[Table 1 about here]

## The causal conditions and criteria for calibration

We adopted an *exploratory* research design, thereby testing a number of different explanatory models without restricting ourselves to a pre-selected set of conditions. Four models were tested by drawing upon the theoretical approaches considered in Section 3: (a)the *economic losers* model; (b) the *cultural backlash* model; (c) the *political discontent* model; and (d) the *societal malaise* model.

The thresholds for the attribution of the three ‘qualitative anchors’ – full membership (1.0), cross-over point (0.5), and full non-membership (0.0) – (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012: 28) are outlined in Table 2. Given the exploratory research design of our QCA focusing on the sub-national level, in establishing the three qualitative anchors we cannot rely on given ‘thresholds’, because the substantive meaning of the various concepts, and hence its translation into sets, is dependent on the specific research context (Ragin, 2008: 72ff; Schneider and Wagemann, 2012: 34). Therefore, and in line with relevant standards of good practice, we combine case knowledge and empirical evidence for the calibration of each condition. More specifically, we complement knowledge external to the data at hand with the assessment of prominent or noticeable gaps in case distribution of our raw data (this is in line with previous QCA studies, such as Emmenegger, 2011 and Hanley and Sikk, 2016). This strategy allows us to identify the regions, and the corresponding raw data value, that can be considered as best or worst instance(s) (fuzzy-set scores of 1.0 and 0.0) of each condition (or factor) within the context of the 2018 Italian general election, as well as to set the crossover point of the various sets (the 0.5 qualitative threshold).

Firstly, drawing on our contextual knowledge, we establish a key qualitative threshold (i.e. the 0.5 crossover point) within the regions and see whether ‘prominent gaps’ in data distribution exist. This is preferable to resorting to problematic measures, such as the average or the median (see Schneider and Wagemann, 2012: 35), for reasons that have been explained above. In order to ensure maximum transparency in the process of calibration, we set the cross-over point for each causal condition halfway through a meaningful, qualitative, gap. For instance, the 0.5 cross-over point in condition *poor* *quality of regional government* (PQOG) is set at –1.016, the exact halfway point between Molise (–1.183) and Tuscany (–0.849), regions that are characterized by qualitatively different levels of institutional performance (see Putnam, 1994). The same strategy was used to establish the cross-over points of the vast majority of conditions tested for different models (see table 2) – with the exception of the previously mentioned conditions DEGEN and DEPERS. Hence the 0.5 threshold corresponds to the halfway point of a prominent, or at least, noticeable gap that also reflects a qualitative difference between the cases, as suggested by knowledge external to the data at hand.

Second, once the key qualitative difference is established (i.e. between the cases above or below the 0.5 threshold), we distinguish between full-membership (1.0) and partial membership, on the one hand, and full non-membership (0.0) and partial non-membership, on the other. Here, given our focus on the specific context of the 2018 Italian general election, we look for the regions that can be considered as the best or worst instance(s) of a condition (or explanatory factor). Indeed, in any QCA analysis the establishment of set-membership values ‘directly depend on the definition of a concept, which in turn is closely linked to the research context’ (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012: 34). Hence the precise location of the anchors for calibration and their substantive meaning must be shaped by the temporal and geographical scope of our research (i.e. regional differences).

For example, in the case of the condition *low regional levels of annual per capita GDP at current prices* (LOWGDP), the raw data suggests a noticeable gap that can be used to distinguish between full members and partial members. Apulia, Calabria, Campania and Sicily constitute a cluster of regions characterised by the lowest levels of regional per capita GDP (Apulia: €18,000; Calabria: €17,100; Campania: €18,200; and Sicily: €17,400). Here a noticeable gap between the ‘richest’ among them, that is Campania, and the next region outside this cluster (Molise: €19,500; + €1,300) can be identified. Accordingly, the value characterising Campania (€18,200) is used as the threshold for full membership in condition LOWGDP. This allows us to consider all the regions with a value ≤€18,200 as full members (i.e. all regions in this cluster, as shown in table 2). Molise can be considered as a very good instance of condition LOWGDP (being above the 0.5 cross-over point), however not a perfect one (fuzzy-set membership score = 0.92, rounded). The same logic applies when distinguishing between full non-members and partial non-members.

Full details on the qualitative anchors for calibration of each causal condition, as well as the indication of the regions matching the thresholds for full membership and full non-membership, are provided in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

Below we present the four models through which we have assessed which factors (or combinations of factors) explain populist success in different Italian regions. Our illustration of the four models will proceed in the same order in which they have been introduced above, starting with the ‘*economic losers’* model.

## Economic losers

The first model relies on contextual data at regional level showing how many people can be defined as ‘economic losers’, according to both ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ indicators (in line with recent research, such as Burgoon *et al.*, 2019; Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Rico and Anduiza, 2019). The economic losers model focuses on the following conditions.[[5]](#footnote-5)

(a) *noticeable levels of economic deprivation* (DEPR), is assessed via data provided by the Istituto Italiano di Statistica (Italian National Institute of Statistics – Istat) on the basis of the percentage of respondents who, in 2017, had reported not having been able to afford at least four of the following: (i) unbudgeted one-off expenses of €800 or more; (ii) a one-week holiday away from home; (iii) not falling behind with bills or interest payments; (iv) eating a nutritious meal (i.e. including proteins) at least once every two days; (v) being able adequately to heat their residence, or being able to afford: (vi) a washing machine; (vii) a colour television set; (viii) a phone, or (ix) a car (Istat, 2018c);

(b) *low regional levels of annual GDP per capita at current prices* (LOWGDP) (Istat, 2018b);

(c) *diffuse perceptions of worsening economic condition* (WECO), which captures the number of households that thought their economic situation had ‘somewhat’ or ‘considerably’ worsened between 2016 and 2017 (Istat, 2018a).

## Cultural backlash

Our second model investigates whether the success of Italian populists in the 2018 elections might have been due to *cultural backlash*. On the basis of previous research, we rely on the distribution of asylum seekers (e.g. Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Swank and Betz, 2003; van der Brug *et al.*, 2005), the proportion of resident immigrants of the Islamic religion (e.g. Betz, 2017; Schmuck and Matthes, 2019; Yilmaz, 2012); and long-term immigration growth (e.g. Bonikowski, 2016; Harteveld *et al.*, 2018; Inglehart and Norris, 2016). The cultural backlash model focuses on the following conditions:

1. *high regional concentration of asylum seekers* (ASYLUM), using official data for 2017 (Camera dei Deputati, 2017), by assessing the proportion of the total number of Italy’s asylum seekers hosted by a given region;
2. *high long-term immigration growth* (IMMGRO), using official data (Istat, 2018d), to identify the contexts that experienced the most significant socio-demographic changes over the ten years preceding the election (2008–2018);
3. noticeable concentration of Muslim resident immigrants (MUSLIM), by accounting for the percentage of Muslim immigrants present in the region, thanks to data for 2017 provided by the “Initiatives and Studies on Multi-ethnicity Foundation” (ISMU, 2018). Islam is arguably often seen as a ‘threat’ to Western (and/or Christian) values. This is particularly significant in this context, given the importance of Catholicism in Italian public life (see Garelli, 2007). Hence, rather than considering the overall number of foreign residents (contra Arzheimer and Carter, 2006; Givens, 2005) we choose to consider Muslim residents instead.

## Political discontent

Our third model investigates the extent to which political discontent may have influenced populist success. We consider the following as relevant to our purposes: (a) how widespread Eurosceptic attitudes were at regional levels (e.g. Hobolt and de Vries, 2016; Krouwel and Abts, 2007); (b) levels of institutional and political trust (e.g. Rooduijn, 2018; Ziller and Schübel, 2015); and (c) the performance of regional political institutions, including corruption levels (e.g. Agerberg, 2017). Accordingly, we focus on the following conditions:

1. The *considerable* *availability of Eurosceptic voters* (EUROSC), by using data from the Flash Eurobarometer 427 (European Commission, 2018) relating to 2018.
2. *High* *levels of political and institutional distrust* (POLDIS), by relying on the most recent data available (from 2015) on levels of trust in institutions such as Parliament, the regional government, the municipal government, the political parties, the legal system and the police (Fazio *et al.*, 2018).
3. *Poor* *quality of regional government* (PQOG), by relying on the latest round of the European Quality of Government (EQI) survey conducted in 2017 (Charron and Lapuente, 2018).

## Societal malaise

Our fourth model has to do with societal malaise and the perception that society is not ‘in good health’ (Aschauer, 2017: 303). As already mentioned, the literature identifies three factors as being conducive to populist appeals: (a) levels of pessimism about the future (Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Steenvoorden and Harteveld, 2018), (b) declining levels of particularised trust and (c) declining levels of generalised trust (Algan *et al.*, 2018; Bakker *et al.*, 2016; Berning and Ziller, 2017). Accordingly, we focus on the following conditions:

1. *A pessimist contextual inclination* (PESS), using data from Istat (2018c). This allows us to ascertain levels of pessimism about the future, by showing how many respondents within each region expected to be worse off five years after participating in the relevant survey;
2. Declining levels of social trust are assessed by focusing on two factors, by using data from Istat (2018c), and by considering variations occurring between 2013 and 2017 (i.e. the nearest period to the 2018 general election for which we have data). *Decline of personalised trust* (DEPERS) is assessed by considering the percentage of respondents who say they can rely on people in their vicinities, such as relatives or friends; moreover, *decline of generalised trust* (DEGEN) captures the extent to which respondents trust people more generally.

As we will see in the next section, our analysis reveals interesting patterns of variation, from party to party and in different regions. It identifies a combination of different factors as providing the breeding ground for the success of the League, while pointing to economic and political factors as the main culprits of the M5s’ success.

# 5. Analysis and discussion

We used the ‘SetMethods’ R package (Oana *et al.*, 2020) to conduct the empirical analysis and investigate our outcomes of interest – the League’s electoral breakthrough (LEAGUEBKT) and that of the M5s (M5SBKT). The discussion that follows will cover the League first, then move on to the M5s.

## The League’s electoral breakthrough (LEAGUEBKT)

Following the standards of good QCA practice, we performed the analysis of necessity first (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012) and found no condition reaching the minimum consistency value of 0.9 required by the analysis. Next came the analysis of sufficiency (shown in Table 3), which tested the extent to which different clusters of factors *taken in isolation* could produce the outcome LEAGUEBKT (i.e. explain the party’s stunning growth). Attention was paid to the conservative solutions returned by each model, produced exclusively on the basis of the available empirical information – that is, by considering only the rows presenting empirical cases. No assumptions about logical remainders were made and no directional expectations were set. In Table 3, ‘Cut-off point’ indicates the threshold for logical minimisation, ‘Coverage’ the extent to which the outcome of interest is explained, and ‘Consistency’ ‘to what degree the empirical data are in line with a postulated subset relation’ (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012: 324–325).

The models focusing on the *economic losers* (Model 1, consistency: 0.973; coverage: 0.771) and *political discontent* (Model 3, consistency: 0.964; coverage: 0.655) left noticeable instances of the outcome LEAGUEBKT uncovered. These are all important cases, i.e. the regions of Abruzzo, Molise and Sardinia in the case of Model 1, and Lazio, Molise, Sardinia and Umbria in the case of Model 3, which are all located outside the traditional northern strongholds of the League. Taken in isolation, factors related to *societal malaise* (Model 4, consistency: 0.973; coverage: 0.656; 6 unexplained cases) performed badly, too.

[Table 3 about here]

Although, as shown in Table 3, our *cultural backlash* model (Model 2) includes three conditions (i.e. ASYLUM, IMMGRO and MUSLIM), condition MUSLIM emerged as a sufficient condition *on its own*, with a remarkable consistency of 0.972 and a high coverage of 0.821. However, the statement of sufficiency MUSLIM → LEAGUEBKT left the League’s electoral rise in two regions still unexplained. These deviant cases are the Molise region, where the party grew from 0.2 percent in 2013 to 8.7 percent in 2018, and Sardinia, where in the same period it went from 0.1 percent to 10.8 percent. Hence we assessed whether a mixed model combining condition MUSLIM with others could provide an explanation for the rise of the League *even* in contexts characterised by small Muslim communities. Having tested various combinations of condition MUSLIM and the other factors mentioned above, a solution was reached by adding conditions that had to do with societal malaise: DEGEN, and PESS, alongside the political factor, EUROSC. This choice allowed us to reach theoretical soundness and left no deviant cases. In order to reach an intermediate solution, we refrained from making directional expectations on conditions related to cultural backlash, on the basis that existing research on the impact of the number of migrants on populist radical right performance yields mixed results (see for instance Arzheimer and Carter, 2006; Norris, 2005; van der Brug *et al.*, 2005). However, in light of the increasing importance of EU-related issues for the League (see Section 3), we set a single directional expectation, namely that the presence of a considerable pool of Eurosceptic voters (EUROSC) constituted a good counterfactual for the outcome LEAGUEBKT to occur. Using 0.91 as our cut-off point for logical minimisation (see the online appendix, Table A.10), we identified an intermediate solution consisting of three paths, characterised by an extremely high consistency of 0.956 and the remarkable coverage of 0.939 (See Table 4). In addition to this, this solution left no deviant cases (see Figure 4).

[Table 4 and Figure 4 about here]

In Table 4, Path 1 covers the thirteen regions hosting high numbers of Muslim migrants (MUSLIM), eight of which are located in the North (i.e. the Valle d’Aosta, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli Venezia-Giulia, Liguria, Lombardy, Piedmont, Trentino Alto-Adige, Veneto), four in the centre (i.e. Marche, Lazio, Tuscany and Umbria) and one in the South (Abruzzo). The typical case for this path is the Umbria region, where the party went from 0.6 percent of the vote in 2013 to 20.2 percent in 2018 and which is characterised by one of the highest concentrations of Muslim migrants in the peninsula: 2.9 percent of the general population. However, the solution provided by the mixed model shows that the League can thrive in different contexts too, as long as the area under analysis is characterised by a large pool of Eurosceptic voters and by societal malaise, either in the form of a pessimistic contextual inclination among the population or declining levels of generalised trust. Hence Path 2 (Table 4) uniquely covers one of the regions presenting low levels of Muslim migrants: Molise. Configuration ~DEGEN\*EUROSC\*PESS, characterising Path 2, is particularly interesting from a theoretical point of view: despite the absence of declining levels of generalised trust (+2.5 percentage points in comparison with 2012), here the League was boosted by the existence of a large pool of Eurosceptic respondents (i.e. 39.0 percent), and by the presence of one of the most pronounced pessimistic contextual inclinations in the peninsula (17.7 percent).

Finally, Path 3 uniquely covers the other region where the League experienced a remarkable breakthrough *even* in the absence of noticeable levels of Muslim immigration, i.e. Sardinia. In addition, it also covers the case of Lazio, which had already been covered by Path 1. Configuration DEGEN\*EUROSC\*~PESS, like Path 2, covers contexts characterised by a considerable availability of Eurosceptic voters; however, here the specific triggering factor related to societal malaise is represented by declining levels of generalised trust, rather than pessimism. Indeed, Sardinia presented one of the highest levels of Euroscepticism across the country (40.0 percent) and, despite the relatively low levels of pessimism (13.9 percent), was characterised by a negative trend in terms of generalised trust (−0.7 percentage points). The different interactions between conditions DEGEN and PESS in Paths 2 and 3 highlight a phenomenon similar to the gap between ‘individual’ and ‘societal’ pessimism often emerging in the literature, since ‘while people tend to be optimistic about their own future, they can at the same time be deeply pessimistic about the future of their nation or the world’ (Roser and Nagdy, n.d.). The findings emerging from Paths 2 and 3, therefore, suggest that, alongside mass-level Euroscepticism, the electoral breakthrough of the League was fostered by factors revealing a rather bleak vision of the future in some areas: either a pessimistic contextual inclination or declining levels of generalised trust.

To summarise our findings in this section, we can say that the League’s breakthrough in 2018 was due *either* to a cultural backlash caused by Muslim immigration (in many regions) *or* to the considerable availability of Eurosceptic voters, matched by a feeling of societal malaise (in others). In other words, it is our contention that there is not one single explanation for the recent success of the League that works across the whole country (see Table 4), and scholars would do well to pay more attention to the variety of reasons behind support for this party at sub-national level.

Our next task is to offer the same analysis with reference to the M5s. As we show below, here it was in fact the presence of large numbers of economic losers and poor institutional performance that ignited the flames of the party’s success.

## The M5s’ electoral breakthrough (M5SBKT)

Our analysis shows that no condition can be considered as necessary for the outcome M5SBKT (M5s’ electoral breakthrough) to occur.[[6]](#footnote-6) As for the analysis of sufficiency, Table 5 shows the impact of different factors in isolation: as was the case previously, the focus was initially placed on the conservative solutions of each distinct model. The analysis of sufficiency focusing on Model 2 (including, as we have seen, conditions ASYLUM, IMMGRO and MUSLIM) indicates that, unlike the case of the League, cultural backlash (Model 2) was *not* responsible for the M5s’ electoral rise, since the two configurations obtained via the QCA were characterised by the *absence* of key conditions ~ASYLUM\*~MUSLIM + ~IMMGRO\*~MUSLIM (consistency: 0.931; coverage: 0.727; one unexplained case). Moreover, *societal malaise* (Model 4) appeared to be the model with the lowest explanatory power of all (consistency: 0.768; coverage: 0.337; seven unexplained cases), while the model focusing on *political discontent* (Model 3) performed better, but could not account for three deviant cases (consistency: 0.849; coverage: 0.686; two unexplained cases, and one true logical contradiction). Finally, in the case of the M5s, the *economic losers* model (Model 1) outperformed all others (consistency: 0.832; coverage: 0.709), but still left one case unexplained (Basilicata).

[Table 5 about here]

Hence, also in the case of the M5s, we assessed if a mixed model can reach theoretical soundness and leave no deviant cases. Therefore, we combined conditions DEPR, LOWGDP and PQOG. By using a 0.86 cut-off point for logical minimisation (see the online appendix, table A.19) we set a single directional expectation, namely that the presence of noticeable levels of economic deprivation (DEPR) constituted a good counterfactual for the outcome M5SBKT to occur. This is due to the key importance of the universal basic incomein the election campaign. The analysis returned the sufficient configuration DEPR\*LOWGDP\*PQOG → M5SBKT, with a consistency of 0.860 and a coverage of 0.801 (see table 6). Importantly, no deviant cases for consistency or coverage were returned (figure 5).

[Table 6 and figure 5 about here]

Unlike the case of the League explored above, where factors leading to the party’s success appeared to vary across the country, the decisive role played by economic factors and poor institutional performance in explaining the M5s’ electoral breakthrough emerges from the data across the board. This outcome is unsurprising given the previously mentioned emphasis of the M5s on the so-called universal basic incomein the 2018 general elections, as well as its profile as a valence populist party focusing on non-positional issues such as transparency, institutional performance and anti-corruption motives. Indeed, *all* the regions in which the M5s experienced its most consistent electoral growth (i.e. > +7.0 percentage points, as compared to 2013) were characterised by a combination of ‘Noticeable levels of economic deprivation’ (DEPR), ‘Low levels of regional per capita GDP’ (LOWGDP), *and* ‘Poor quality of regional governments’ (PQOG). The regions of Campania and Apulia are characterised by levels of per capita GDP that are well below the national average (with values of €18,200 and €18,000, respectively, as opposed to €28,500 for Italy as a whole), as well as higher levels of economic deprivation (18.6 percent in Campania and 15.1 percent in Apulia; national average: 10.0 percent), and low institutional performance (–1.877 in Campania and –1.545 in Apulia; national average: –1.193). While no one denies that the M5s’ success in Campania must have been further boosted by the fact that the party’s candidate for PM, Luigi Di Maio, is originally from this area, the centrality of economic factors and poor institutional performance in providing the ideal breeding ground for the M5s to grow is nowhere shown more clearly than in the case of these regions, which are the best typical cases in our QCA. Here the M5s’ success was stunning, as it enjoyed growth of 27.3 and 19.4 percentage points, respectively.

# 6. Conclusion

This article provides an empirical analysis of intra-populist electoral competition at sub-national level. We have tested four different models focusing on contextual variations in terms of cultural backlash, economic deprivation, political discontent, and societal malaise. Having accounted for the impact of sub-national contextual variations, we show how the chosen parties, i.e. the League and the M5s, experienced their most considerable electoral growth for very different reasons in 2018 (vs. 2013). In particular, the analysis shows that the varying success of League and M5s has in fact been due to the interaction between very different factors across the various sub-national contexts, allowing both parties to experience remarkable electoral growth in the same election, despite their programmatic and ideological differences.

In the case of the League, our QCA shows that ‘cultural backlash’ (cf. Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Norris and Inglehart, 2019) played a fundamental role in boosting the party’s success, as its appeal proved especially strong in regions characterised by a noticeable presence of foreign residents of the Islamic religion. This confirms the importance of cultural factors in the Italian context – i.e. issues having to do mainly with identity and immigration. However, our study also revealed that culture could only provide a *partial* explanation for the League’s success. Hence the party was shown to have flourished in other contexts, too (albeit admittedly fewer), i.e. those in which Euroscepticism was strong, and where it was matched by societal malaise (evidenced either by pessimism about the future, or by declining levels of trust towards people in general). As for the M5s, our research shows that it was precisely in the regions characterised by poor institutional performance and high concentrations of ‘economic losers’ that the M5s’ pledge to introduce a universal basic income (Zulianello, 2019: 156), and ‘abolish poverty’ (*la Repubblica*, 2018) proved particularly appealing. In the Italian case, where different kinds of populist parties were competing for votes, economic factors were obviously not secondary across the board, as shown by the case of the M5s. Therefore, in line with recent research conducted in other European countries (e.g. Fetzer, 2018; Becker *et al.*, 2017; Perrineau, 2017; Shields, 2017; Eiermann, 2017; Burgoon *et al*., 2018), we find that the dismissal of ‘economic forces as less important than cultural experiences to shaping the palpable resentments at play in radical-populist politics’ (Burgoon *et al*., 2018: 31) is premature. While emphasising that economic factors can retain their centrality, however, we do not wish to downplay the importance of the *interconnection* between different factors and the way changes in the economy, culture, society and political or party systems can all help trigger a ‘populist revolt’. Economic changes do have an impact in cultural terms, too; after all, they may themselves be the product of cultural shifts. To say it with Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2016: 3): ‘Interactive processes may possibly link these factors [i.e. economic and cultural], if structural changes in the workforce and social trends in globalised markets heighten economic insecurity, and if this, in turn, stimulates a negative backlash among traditionalists towards cultural shifts’. This interaction may trigger a political reaction, too, in the form of disillusionment and detachment from traditional parties and hence availability to try more radical solutions (Grande and Kriesi, 2012).

Finally, the work presented here encourages us to move away from one-size-fits-all grand narratives that see factors (or combinations of different factors) as necessarily impacting on populist performance throughout national territories in a consistent manner. Whatever the reality under investigation – i.e. either populists performing much better in some areas rather than others, or else putting in equally strong performances in very different regions – the sub-national level clearly deserves much more attention than has been paid to it so far, particularly as more and more countries now host competing populist parties targeting different constituencies of voters.

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Table 1 – Subnational variation in electoral support for the M5s and League (2013-2018) and calibrated set membership in the outcomes.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Region | Abbreviation | League Δ  2018-2013 | M5s Δ 2018-2013 | Set membership  in LEAGUEBKT | Set membership in M5SBKT |
| Abruzzo | AB | 13.6 | 10.0 | 0.82 | 0.66 |
| Basilicata | BA | 6.2 | 20.1 | 0.42 | 0.95 |
| Calabria | CL | 5.3 | 18.6 | 0.33 | 0.93 |
| Campania | CM | 4.0 | 27.3 | 0.22 | 0.99 |
| Emilia-Romagna | EM | 16.6 | 2.9 | 0.90 | 0.15 |
| Friuli Venezia-Giulia | FvG | 19.1 | -2.6 | 0.94 | 0.02 |
| Liguria | LI | 17.6 | -2.0 | 0.92 | 0.02 |
| Lombardia (Lombardy) | LO | 15.1 | 1.8 | 0.86 | 0.10 |
| Lazio | LZ | 13.2 | 5.1 | 0.80 | 0.31 |
| Marche | MA | 16.6 | 3.5 | 0.90 | 0.19 |
| Molise | MO | 8.5 | 17.1 | 0.58 | 0.91 |
| Piemonte (Piedmont) | PI | 17.8 | -1.0 | 0.92 | 0.03 |
| Puglia (Apulia) | PU | 6.1 | 19.4 | 0.41 | 0.94 |
| Sardegna (Sardinia) | SA | 10.7 | 12.8 | 0.70 | 0.79 |
| Sicilia (Sicily) | SI | 5.0 | 15.3 | 0.30 | 0.87 |
| Toscana (Tuscany) | TO | 16.7 | 0.7 | 0.90 | 0.07 |
| Trentino Alto-Adige | TR | 15.0 | 4.9 | 0.86 | 0.29 |
| Umbria | UM | 19.6 | 0.3 | 0.95 | 0.06 |
| Valle d'Aosta | VdA | 14.2 | 5.6 | 0.84 | 0.36 |
| Veneto | VE | 21.7 | -1.9 | 0.97 | 0.02 |

Table 2 – Anchors for the calibration of the conditions tested in the empirical analysis

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Model | Condition | Full membership, fs-score 1.0  (regions matching the threshold are indicated in brackets) | Crossover point, fs-score 0.5 | Full non-membership, fs-score 0.0  (regions matching the threshold are indicated in brackets) |
| 1. Economic losers | Noticeable levels of economic deprivation (DEPR) | 15.1%  (SI, CM, AB, PU) | 7.7% | 4.2%  (TR, VE) |
|  | Low levels of regional GDP per capita (LOWGDP) | 18.200 €  (CM, PU, SI, CL) | 25.500 € | 38.200 €  (LO, TR) |
|  | Diffuse perceptions of worsening economic condition (WECO) | 39.0%  (SI, SA, CL) | 30.7% | 16.4%  (TR) |
| 1. Cultural backlash | High regional concentration of asylum-seekers (ASYLUM) | 8.9%  (LO, CM, LZ) | 5.4% | 0.2%  (VdA) |
|  | High long-term immigration growth (IMMGRO) | +6.0%  (LZ) | +2.9% | +1.1%  (VdA) |
|  | Noticeable concentration of Muslim resident immigrants (MUSLIM) | 3.1%  (EM, LO, TR) | 1.6% | 0.9%  (BA, PU, SA) |
| 1. Political discontent | Considerable availability of Eurosceptic voters (EUROSC) | 44.0%  (CM) | 37.5% | 26.0%  (VdA, TR) |
| High levels of political and institutional distrust (POLDIS) | 0.550  (CL, SA, BA) | 0.599 | 0.653  (EM, LI, VdA, TR) |
| Poor quality of regional government (PQOG) | -1.530  (CL, AB, CM, BA, PU, SI, LZ) | -1.016 | -0.364  (TR) |
| 1. Societal malaise | Pessimist contextual inclination (PESS) | 18.3%  (SI, MA, UM) | 14.5% | 11.3%  (TR) |
|  | Decline of personalized trust (DEPERS) | -6.6%  (PU) | 0.0% | +7.1%  (MO) |
|  | Decline of generalized trust (DEGEN) | -4.6%  (CL, LI) | 0.0% | +5.3%  (CM, BA, TR) |

Table 3 - Empirical analysis of the different models in isolation - League (conservative solutions)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Model | Cut-off  point | Solution | Consistency | Coverage | Deviant cases |
| 1. Economic losers | 0.98 | ~LOWGDP +  ~DEPR\*WECO | 0.973 | 0.771 | AB, MO, SA (coverage) |
| 2. Cultural backlash | 1.00 | MUSLIM | 0.972 | 0.821 | MO, SA (coverage) |
| 3. Political discontent | 0.96 | ~EUROSC\* ~POLDIS +  ~POLDIS\*PQOG +  EUROSC\*POLDIS\*~PQOG | 0.964 | 0.655 | LZ, MO, SA , UM (coverage) |
| 4. Societal malaise | 0.96 | DEGEN\*~DEPERS +  DEGEN\*~PESS +  ~DEGEN\*DEPERS\*PESS | 0.973 | 0.656 | AB, FVG, MO, TO, TR, UM (coverage) |

Note: ~ negates the condition; \* indicates the conjunction of the properties; + indicates the equifinal configurations for outcome LEAGUEBKT.

Table 4 – Intermediate solution of the mixed model for outcome LEAGUEBKT

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Path | Consistency | PRI | Coverage | Unique Coverage | Cases |
| 1 | MUSLIM | 0.972 | 0.965 | 0.821 | 0.549 | TR; FvG,MA, PI, UM; LO, VdA; EM,LIG; TO; *LZ;* AB, VE |
| 2 | ~DEGEN\*EUROSC\*PESS | 0.940 | 0.833 | 0.299 | 0.050 | MO |
| 3 | DEGEN\*EUROSC\*~PESS | 1.000 | 1.000 | 0.257 | 0.022 | SA; *LZ* |

Cut-off point = 0.91; Solution Consistency: 0.956; Solution Coverage 0.939 (Multiple covered cases in italics)

Table 5 – Empirical analysis of the different models in isolation - Five-star Movement (M5s)

(conservative solutions)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Model | Cut-off  point | Solution | Consistency | Coverage | Deviant cases |
| 1. Economic losers | 0.83 | DEPR\*LOWGDP\*WECO | 0.832 | 0.709 | BA (coverage) |
| 2. Cultural backlash | 0.86 | ~ASYLUM\*~MUSLIM + ~IMMGRO\*~MUSLIM | 0.931 | 0.727 | AB (coverage) |
| 3. Political discontent | 0.84 | EUROSC\*POLDIS\*PQOG | 0.849 | 0.686 | AB, BA (coverage), LZ (consistency) |
| 4. Societal malaise | 0.76 | ~DEGEN\*DEPERS\*~PESS | 0.768 | 0.337 | AB, CL, CM, MO, PU, SA, SI (coverage) |

Note: ~ negates the condition; \* indicates the conjunction of the properties; + indicates the equifinal configurations for outcome M5SBKT.

Table 6 – Intermediate solution of the mixed model for outcome M5SBKT

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Path | Consistency | PRI | Coverage | Unique Coverage | Cases |
| 1 | DEPR\*LOWGDP\*PQOG | 0.860 | 0.820 | 0.801 | - | AB, BA, CL, CM, MO, PU, SA, SI |

Cut-off point = 0.86; Solution Consistency: 0.860; Solution Coverage 0.801

Figure 1 – Sub-national variation in the electoral growth of the League



Figure 2 – Sub-national variation in the electoral growth of the M5s



Figure 3 – The inverse relationship between the electoral growth of the League and the M5s over the last two general elections



Figure 4– XY plot of the mixed model for outcome LEAGUEBKT



Figure 5 – XY plot of the mixed model for outcome M5SBKT



**ONLINE APPENDIX**

*Abbreviations:* Abruzzo (AB), Basilicata (BA), Calabria (CL), Campania (CM), Emilia-Romagna (EM), Friuli Venezia-Giulia (FvG), Liguria (LI), Lombardia/Lombardy (LO), Lazio (LZ), Marche (MA), Molise (MO), Piemonte/Piedmont (PI), Puglia/Apulia (PU), Sardegna/Sardinia (SA), Sicilia/Sicily (SI), Toscana/Tuscany (TO), Trentino Alto-Adige (TR), Umbria (UM), Valle d’Aosta/Aost Valley (VdA), Veneto (VE)

Table A.1 – Causal conditions (calibrated)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| REGION | ASYLUM | IMMGRO | MUSLIM | DEPR | LOWGDP | WECO | EUROSC | POLDIS | PQOG | DEGEN | DEPERS | PESS |
| AB | 0.1546332 | 0.3797193 | 0.59690648 | 0.95864738 | 0.6091362 | 0.6857779 | 0.75629564 | 0.37971930 | 0.99597340 | 0.8491894 | 0.5111513 | 0.8357843 |
| BA | 0.0940674 | 0.3420167 | 0.05000000 | 0.56918531 | 0.8694080 | 0.2712395 | 0.28984569 | 0.95000000 | 0.97668277 | 0.0500000 | 0.5882902 | 0.2161590 |
| CL | 0.3238554 | 0.5707583 | 0.30126774 | 0.92179306 | 0.9673312 | 0.9500000 | 0.88477613 | 0.96659497 | 0.99875222 | 0.9928163 | 0.8389816 | 0.7617465 |
| CM | 0.9538481 | 0.4189318 | 0.07420613 | 0.98709408 | 0.9500000 | 0.8160718 | 0.95000000 | 0.90232701 | 0.99284115 | 0.0500000 | 0.1713774 | 0.1866055 |
| EM | 0.8540422 | 0.7907987 | 0.99108533 | 0.18030493 | 0.0934613 | 0.3409878 | 0.19651655 | 0.05000000 | 0.07416182 | 0.7599074 | 0.2384516 | 0.9169829 |
| FvG | 0.1781630 | 0.2413926 | 0.82783599 | 0.19307437 | 0.2183768 | 0.7082457 | 0.15919256 | 0.34201675 | 0.08436589 | 0.2179291 | 0.3977834 | 0.8559634 |
| LIG | 0.2334199 | 0.7576398 | 0.87685286 | 0.58858222 | 0.1848524 | 0.7155216 | 0.19651655 | 0.05000000 | 0.79350652 | 0.9500000 | 0.1388681 | 0.7617465 |
| LO | 0.9994402 | 0.7210788 | 0.98065750 | 0.25093182 | 0.0500000 | 0.3984783 | 0.34522497 | 0.44568848 | 0.08195578 | 0.5478602 | 0.3878923 | 0.2321558 |
| LZ | 0.9500000 | 0.9500000 | 0.68679625 | 0.52980690 | 0.1524314 | 0.4487049 | 0.75629564 | 0.89690151 | 0.95000000 | 0.7713908 | 0.8719539 | 0.1866055 |
| MA | 0.1781630 | 0.1630374 | 0.92769751 | 0.78802486 | 0.4365858 | 0.6132934 | 0.12782964 | 0.31791438 | 0.89113160 | 0.3392439 | 0.6097180 | 0.9568684 |
| MO | 0.1095758 | 0.3420167 | 0.22064658 | 0.63577109 | 0.9183463 | 0.6132934 | 0.66362395 | 0.72341192 | 0.72245183 | 0.1995856 | 0.0500000 | 0.9226941 |
| PI | 0.8432401 | 0.5473487 | 0.89653048 | 0.62650832 | 0.2473383 | 0.7082457 | 0.40514871 | 0.29474968 | 0.73042021 | 0.4039850 | 0.8668897 | 0.9108905 |
| PU | 0.7490682 | 0.1866055 | 0.05000000 | 0.95000000 | 0.9536956 | 0.5791479 | 0.75629564 | 0.64586354 | 0.95392727 | 0.5159969 | 0.9500000 | 0.5956630 |
| SA | 0.1866055 | 0.3797193 | 0.05000000 | 0.62650832 | 0.8906511 | 0.9500000 | 0.75629564 | 0.96025830 | 0.77709358 | 0.6101795 | 0.8133945 | 0.3653814 |
| SI | 0.8432401 | 0.2413926 | 0.22064658 | 0.99339633 | 0.9632834 | 0.9898119 | 0.75629564 | 0.57455324 | 0.95367485 | 0.5793359 | 0.5111513 | 0.9724635 |
| TO | 0.7645476 | 0.7746514 | 0.91337445 | 0.31926721 | 0.2388076 | 0.4284282 | 0.28984569 | 0.16303745 | 0.31991253 | 0.5159969 | 0.7093551 | 0.8357843 |
| TR | 0.1152239 | 0.2127146 | 0.95000000 | 0.05000000 | 0.0400680 | 0.0500000 | 0.01854945 | 0.02394377 | 0.05000000 | 0.0326447 | 0.4279312 | 0.0500000 |
| UM | 0.1095758 | 0.5473487 | 0.92769751 | 0.20652030 | 0.6186961 | 0.8830964 | 0.15919256 | 0.82669107 | 0.94426873 | 0.4722508 | 0.1246476 | 0.9500000 |
| VdA | 0.0500000 | 0.0500000 | 0.82783599 | 0.41665814 | 0.0954442 | 0.4284282 | 0.05000000 | 0.03468572 | 0.17785800 | 0.8034835 | 0.1655682 | 0.1370188 |
| VE | 0.8317960 | 0.1866055 | 0.89653048 | 0.04615192 | 0.1465367 | 0.6299792 | 0.66362395 | 0.73527247 | 0.07478437 | 0.7480355 | 0.4689368 | 0.8248711 |

**LEAGUE**

Table A.2 - Truth table: the impact of economic losers on LEAGUEBKT

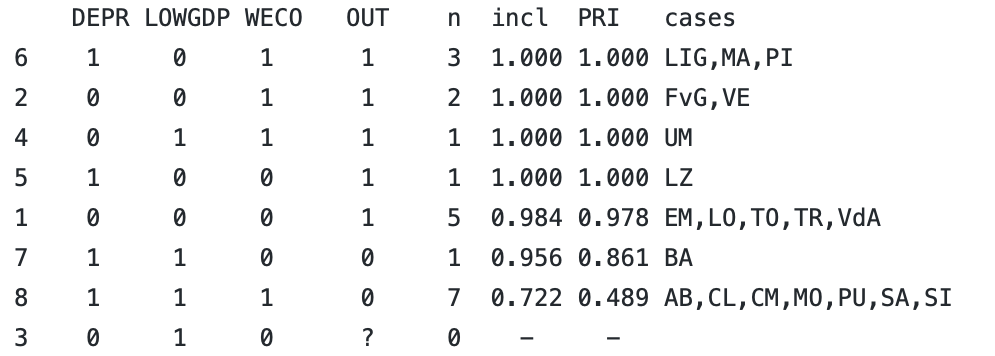


Table A.3 - Conservative solution

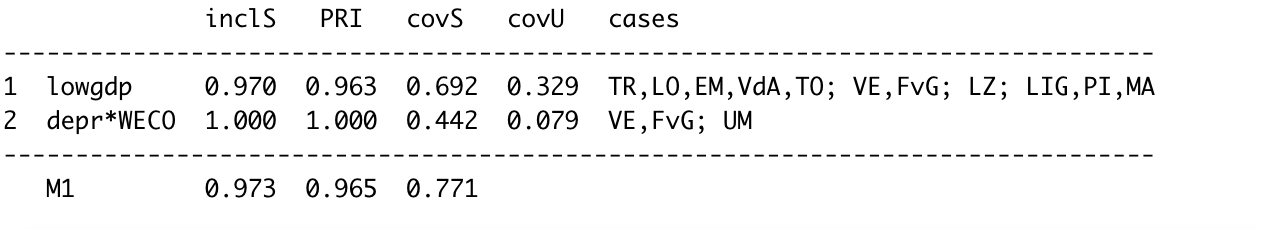


Table A.4 - Truth table: the impact of cultural backlash on LEAGUEBKT

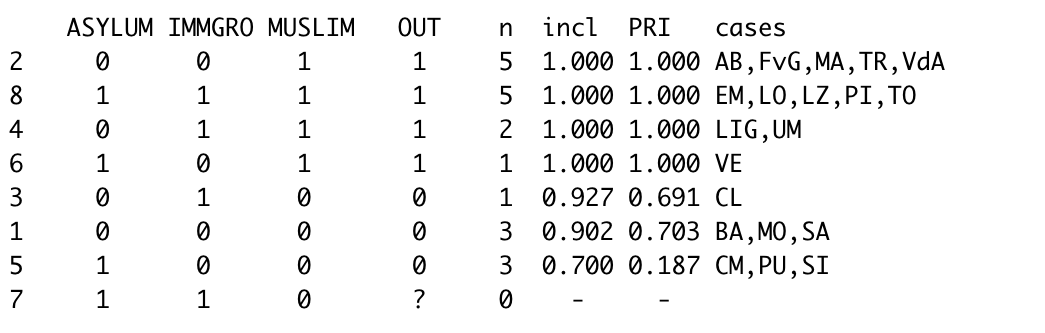


Table A.5 - Conservative solution

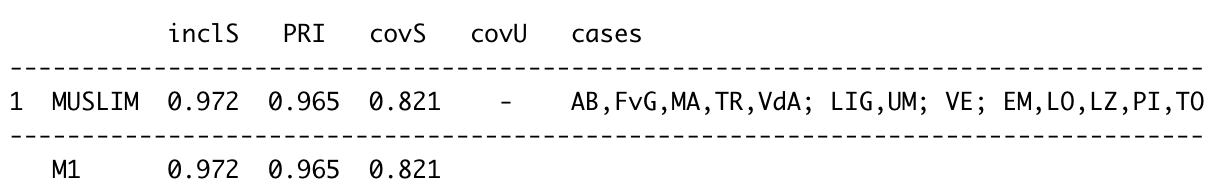


Table A.6 - Truth table: the impact of political discontent on LEAGUEBKT

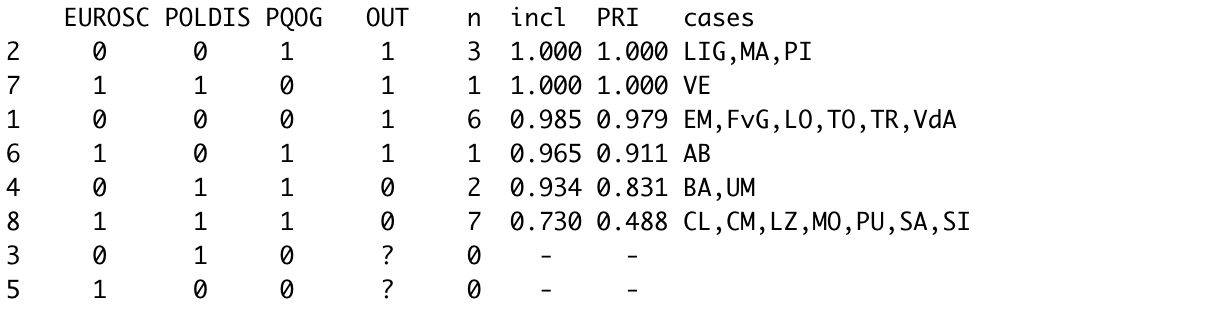


Table A.7 - Conservative solution

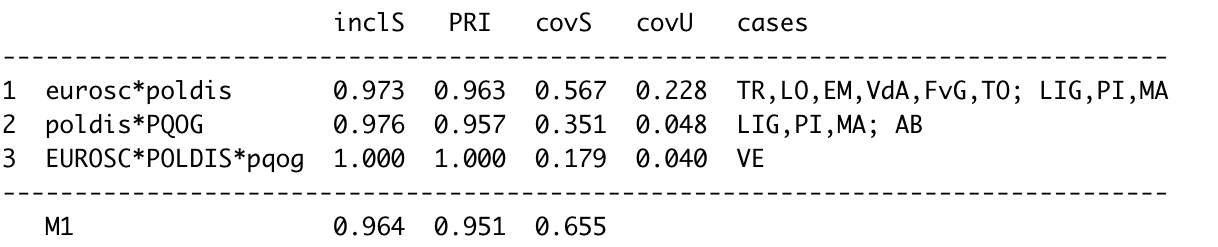


Table A.8- Truth table: the impact of societal malaise on LEAGUEBKT

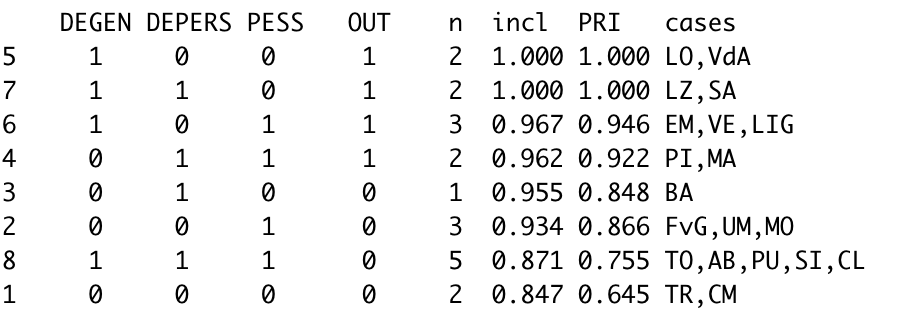


Table A.9 - Conservative solution

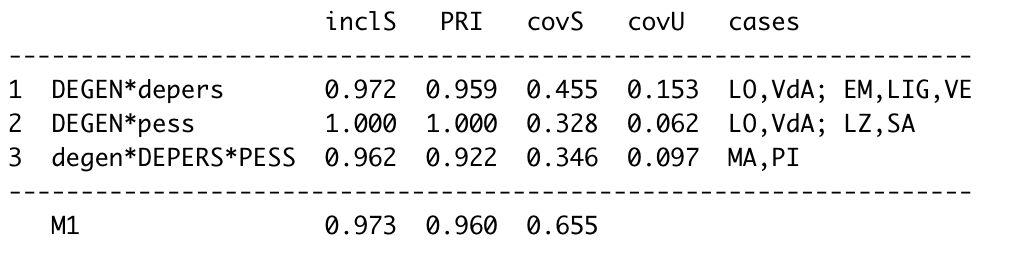
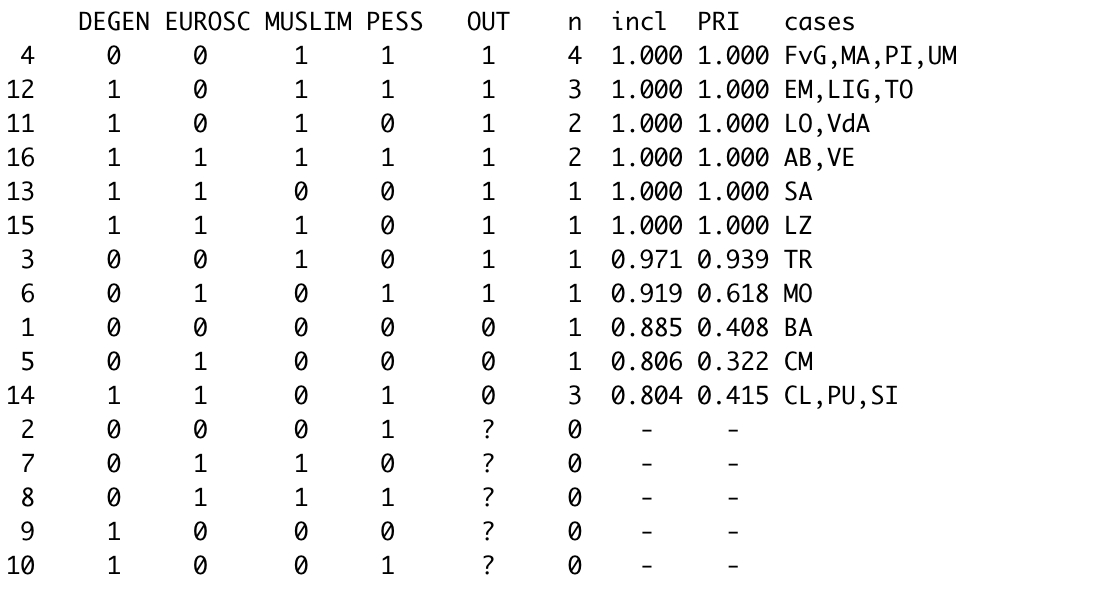


Table A.10 - Truth table: mixed model for LEAGUEBKT



**M5S**

Table A.11 - Truth table: the impact of economic losers on M5SBKT

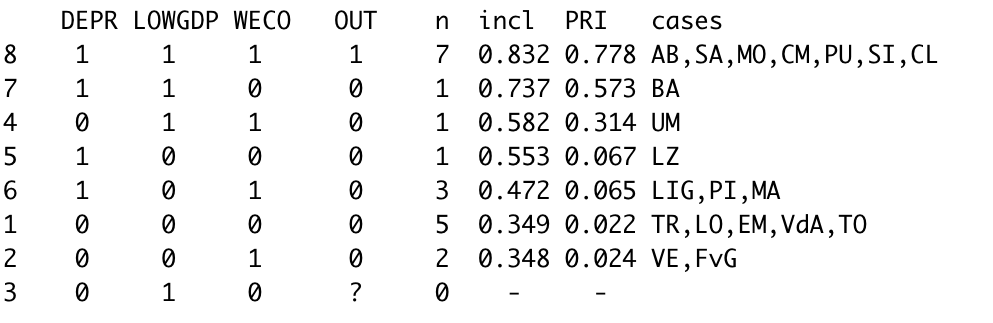


Table A.12 - Conservative solution

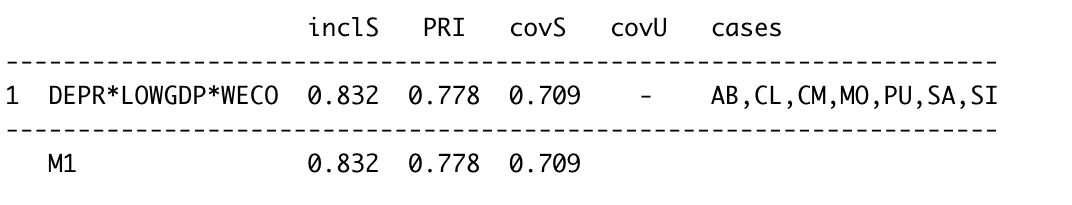


Table A.13 - Truth table: the impact of cultural backlash on M5SBKT

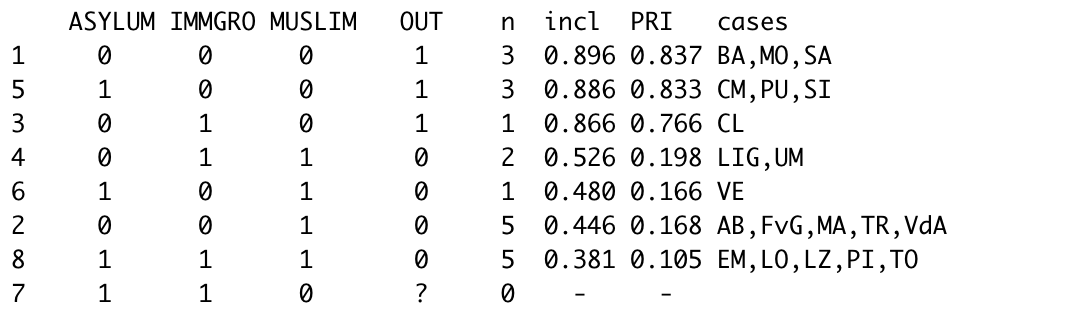


Table A.14 - Conservative solution

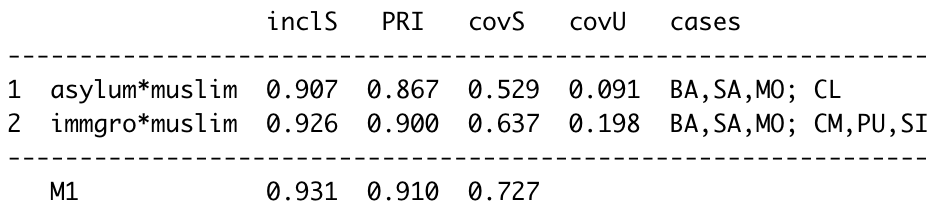


Table A.15 - Truth table: the impact of political discontent on M5SBKT

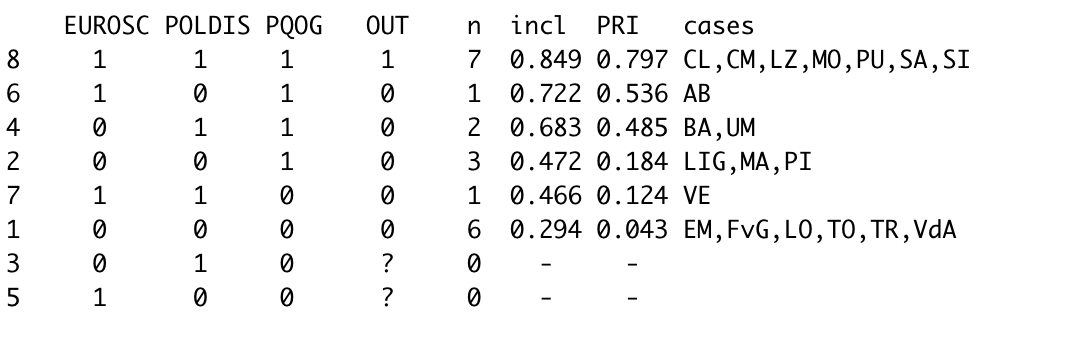


Table A.16 - Conservative solution

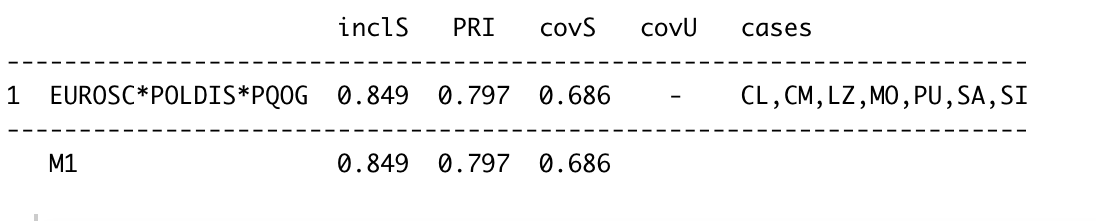


Table A. 17 - Truth table: the impact of societal malaise on M5SBKT

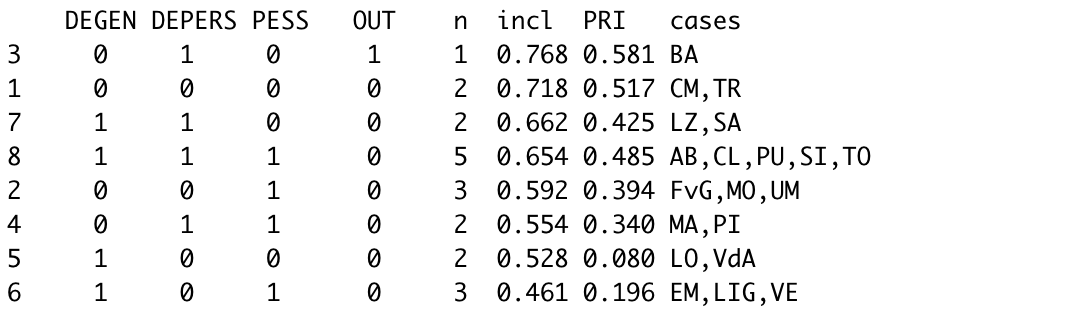


Table A.18 - Conservative solution

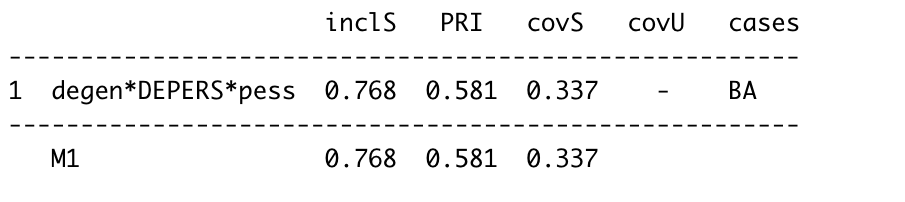
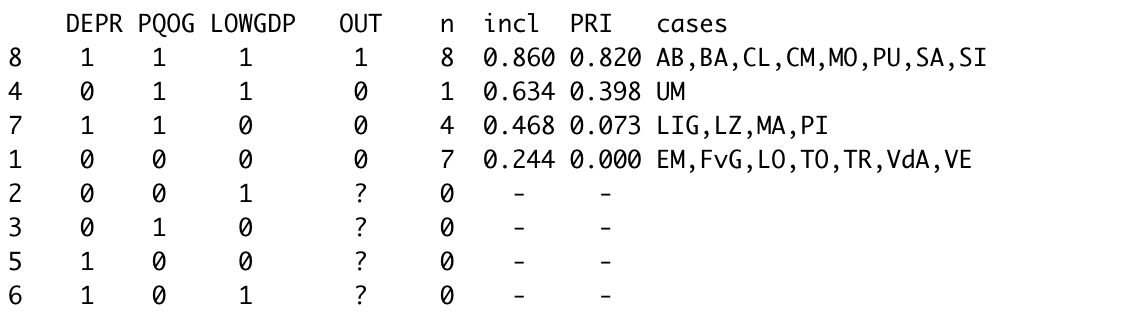


Table A.19- Truth table: mixed model for M5SBKT



1. We have decided to focus on two parties that – as discussed in section 3 – are consistently defined as ‘populist’ in the academic literature, and have both grown considerably in-between the latest Italian general elections (2013-2018). The reader will notice that Berlusconi’s Forza Italia is excluded from the present analysis. Firstly, the party has in fact shrunk in recent years. And, second, its characterisation as a ‘populist’ party is contested. While there are scholars that put it squarely into this category (e.g. Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Zulianello, 2020), others express doubts about it, due to its ‘conservative connotations’ (Tarchi, 2008: 92). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Here we group Italian regions into three macro-areas, in line with the Italian National Institute for Statistics (e.g. ISTAT 2018a). The areas are constituted by the following regions: the North (i.e. *nord-ovest* + *nord-est*): Valle d’Aosta, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Liguria, Lombardy, Piedmont, Trentino-Alto Adige and Veneto; the Centre (*centro*): Lazio, Marche, Tuscany and Umbria; the South (*sud* + *isole*): Abruzzo, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Molise, Sardinia and Sicily. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Whereas the M5s lost votes in four regions between the 2013 and 2018 elections – i.e. Friuli Venezia-Giulia (−2.6 percentage points), Liguria (−2.0), Veneto (−1.9) and Piedmont (−1.0) – the League increased its vote share in every single region. Hence no region is found to be fully out of the outcome set LEAGUEBKT in our study – a very remarkable aspect of this election. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Table 2 for a list of thresholds for calibration, as well as the list of regions that match the threshold for full membership and non-membership. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. With a consistency of 0.918, only condition PQOG achieves the 0.9 minimum suggested in the literature; however, its low RoN (relevance of necessity) value, i.e. 0.619, means that we cannot consider it necessary for the outcome M5SBKT to occur (see Schneider and Wagemann, 2012). This is hardly surprising, as the quality of regional government is low in most Italian regions (see above). In other words, there are more instances of the alleged condition than of the outcome M5SBKT. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)