

eupinions brief | February 2018

Dissatisfied and Disenchanted: How Italians View European and National Politics?

The outcome of the Italian elections remains uncertain. It seems to be a fight between three major political forces, Forza Italia, Lega Nord and the Five Star Movement, all of which score high on populist and Eurosceptic rhetoric. For many years, Italian public opinion was characterized by strong support for and belief in European integration. Today, many actors on the Italian political scene are vocalising their doubts and disappointments about the EU. Yet, the question remains if the Italian public is equally sceptical of the European project.

Isabell Hoffmann, Senior Expert, Bertelsmann Stiftung

Catherine E. de Vries, Professor of Politics, University of Essex

This eupinions policy brief delves deeper into the contours of Italian public opinion. We report five main findings.

1. Italians today are quite sceptical of their country's membership in the EU: only 56 per cent of the Italian public would vote for their country to remain in the EU if a referendum on EU membership were to be held.
2. Notwithstanding this scepticism, a majority of Italians, 66 per cent, wish to see more political and economic integration in the future. That said, while in the EU as a whole support for more political and economic integration seems to be rising somewhat, in Italy it is not. Between July 2015 and July 2017, support for further integration has dropped by about 10 percentage points in Italy.
3. Left-right ideology seems to be important for shaping people's views about Europe: scepticism of both membership and further integration is the most pronounced among the political right compared to centrists or those on the left.
4. While some parts of the Italian public are Eurosceptic, they are even more dissatisfied with national politics. The vast majority of Italians, regardless of their

political leaning, think that their country is moving in the wrong direction.

5. Dissatisfaction with European and national politics among the Italian public seems to coincide with a high level of pessimism about one's own personal economic situation. Except for the centre-left, a majority of Italians feel that their personal economic situation has worsened over the last two years.

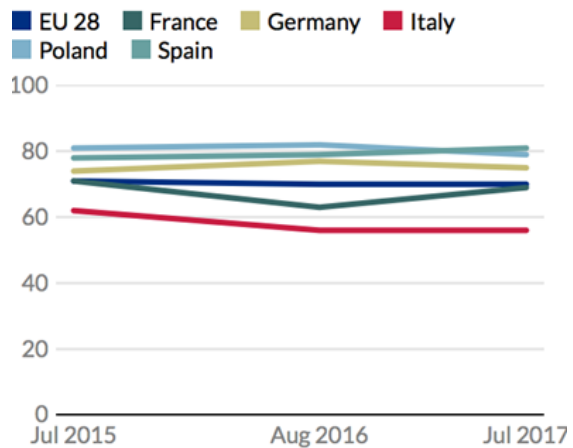
In a first step, we examine Italian public opinion towards EU membership in a comparative perspective. Italians used to be particularly supportive of their country's membership in the EU. Yet, this was before the Eurozone and refugee crisis. Today, a quite different picture emerges.

Figure 1 displays the share of people between August 2015 and July 2017 who would vote to remain in the EU if a referendum would be held today. In July 2017, only 56 per cent of Italians would have voted for their country to remain in the EU. This is rather low compared to the vote intentions of those within the EU as a whole. Within the EU28, 70 per cent of people would vote to remain.

In comparison to public opinion in France, Germany, Poland and Spain, support for membership is the lowest among the Italian public. In France, 69 per cent would support EU membership, while 75 per cent in Germany, 79 per cent in Poland and 81 per cent in Spain.

Figure 1: Support for country's EU membership

Vote to remain. Figures in percent.



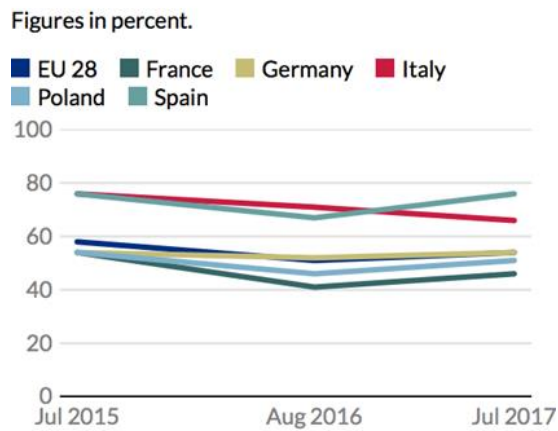
July 2015 - July 2017

[Get the data](#)

eupinions | what do you think?

In a next step, we asked people's preferences for further political and economic integration in Europe. Interestingly, a quite different picture emerges. Comparatively speaking, Italians are amongst those who display the highest support for further political and economic integration in the EU. Figure 2 shows that in July 2017, 66 per cent of Italians were in favour of more political and economic integration in Europe. Only Spaniards were more positive with 76 per cent wanting more political and economic integration. German and French citizens are more cautious with 54 per cent supporting more integration in Germany and 46 per cent in France respectively in July 2017. Within the EU as a whole, only a slight majority of 54 per cent is in favour for more political and economic integration in Europe. That said, in the EU28 as well as in France, Germany, Poland and Spain, support for further integration is somewhat increasing, while in Italy it is not. From July 2015 and 2017, support for further integration has dropped by about 10 percentage points among Italians.

Figure 2:
Preference for more political and economic integration



July 2015 - July 2017
[Get the data](#) **eupinions** | what do you think?

In a third step, we examine if support for membership and integration varies with people's left-right political identification. We first inspect how Italians position themselves on a scale from extreme right to extreme left, and secondly assess whether this positioning matters for their attitudes towards the European Union. In a final step, we inspect how those who self-identify as left or right think about national politics and their personal economic situation.

Figure 3 shows that two thirds of Italians position themselves in the centre of the political spectrum. 33 per cent label themselves centre-right, 30 per cent label themselves centre-left. 21 per cent label themselves as right-wing, either right (14 per cent) or extreme right (7 per cent). 6 per cent label themselves left-wing, either left (12 per cent) or extreme left (4 per cent).

Figure 3:
Italy: Personal political views on a left-right scale

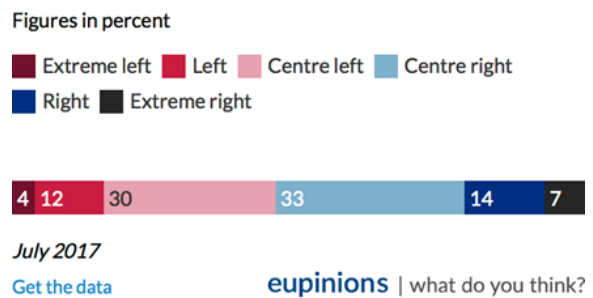
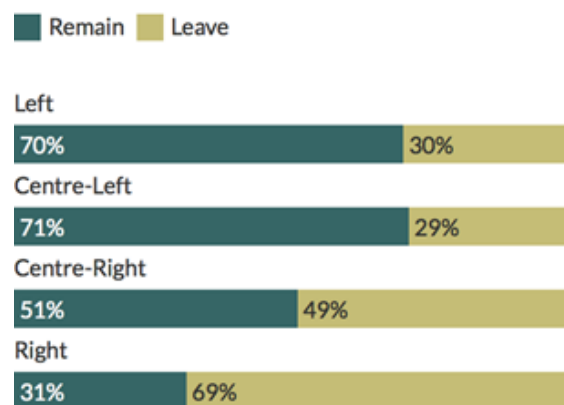


Figure 3 overall shows that the share of respondents who view themselves as extreme, either on the left or right is rather small. In order to overcome problems associated with relying on a limited number of observations, we group respondents that view themselves as extreme left or left together as well as those that describe themselves as extreme right and right. Consequently, in the remaining analyses, we discuss four groups, those on the left, centre-left, centre-right and right.

Figure 4:
Italy: Support for country's EU membership on a left-right scale



July 2017
[Get the data](#) **eupinions** | what do you think?

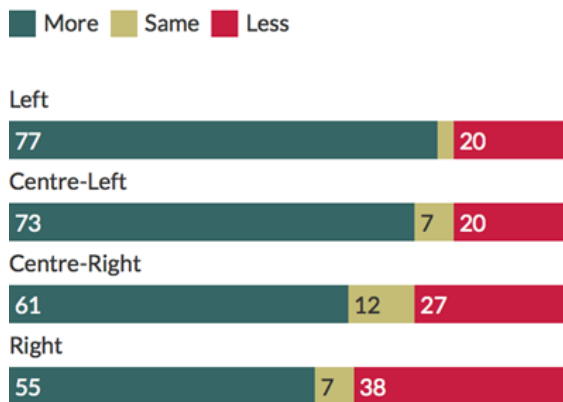
Similar to our previous study on France (Is Right the new Left? Right-wing voters in France and in the EU and how they differ. May 2017), those who view themselves as right-wing differ

massively from those on the left when it comes to support of their country's membership in the European Union.

Figure 4 shows that those who view themselves as centre-left or left are largely supportive of Italy's membership in the EU. Yet, those who identify as centre-right are split: 51 per cent would vote to remain in the EU if asked in a referendum, while 49 per cent would vote to leave. Those who identify themselves right-wing are very strongly negatively predisposed to their country's membership: 69 per cent would vote for their country to leave the EU, while only 31 per cent would vote for their country to remain.

Figure 5:
Italy: Preference for political and economic integration on a left - right scale

Should there be more or less political and economic integration in the EU? Figures in percent.

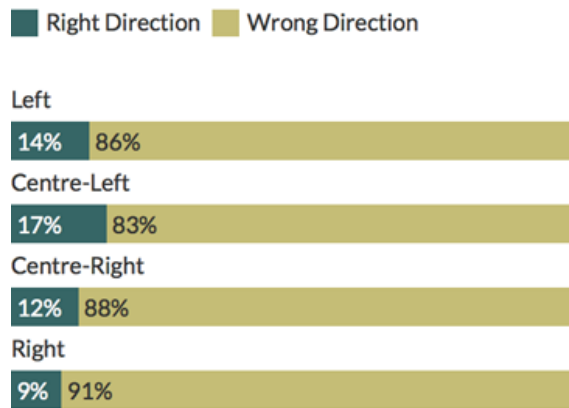


July 2017
[Get the data](#) | **eupinions** | what do you think?

Figure 5 shows that a very similar pattern emerges when people are asked about their preference for further political and economic integration in Europe. Those who self-identify as centre-left or left are very much in favour of further European integration (centre-left 73 per cent, left 77 per cent). While those who view themselves as right are less positive in comparison. 61 per cent of those on the centre-

right favour more political and economic integration, while only 55 per cent of those on the right do.

Figure 6:
Italy: Country is moving in the right direction on a left-right scale



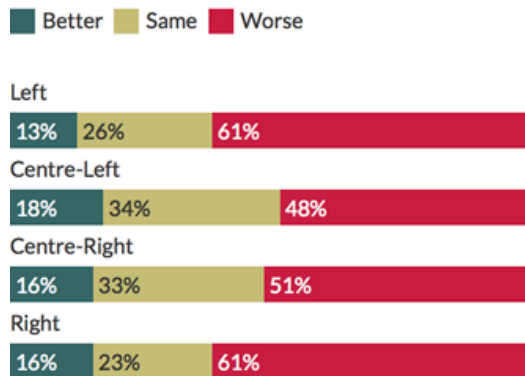
July 2017
[Get the data](#) | **eupinions** | what do you think?

When asked about their own country, Italians are even more dissatisfied. 87 per cent of Italians believe that their country is moving in the wrong direction. Figure 6 shows that there is not much variation between the different political groups. 86 per cent of those on the left view that Italy is moving in the wrong direction, while 83 per cent on the centre-left do.

Similarly, 88 per cent on the centre-right view that their country is moving in the wrong direction, while even 91 per cent on the right do. Italians are extremely sceptical of the state of their country today.

Figure 7:

Italy: Evolution of the personal economic situation by political preferences on a left - right scale



July 2017

[Get the data](#)

eupinions | what do you think?

Finally, we inspect people's views about their own personal situation. Figure 7 displays the share of people who think that their own personal economic situation has become better, worse or stayed the same over the past two years. When asked about their personal economic situation, Italians display a high level of pessimism: 54 per cent state that their situation has become worse over the past two years, 30 per cent state it has not changed, while only 16 per cent state that it has become better. Figure 7 shows that there is little variation between the different political groups: 61 per cent of those on the left and 61 per cent of those on the right state, that their personal economic situation has worsened over the past two years. 51 per cent on the centre-right view themselves as worse off than before and 48 per cent on the centre-left.

Large numbers of Italians have seen their personal economic situation deteriorate over the past years and a very large majority of Italians are very negative about their country's development. While people's views about the state of European politics has not been affected by this disenchantment for many years, with the

Euro crisis it did. Ordinary Italians are no longer sanguine about political developments in Brussels. The EU is no longer considered a lifebuoy and protector against risks for Italians who have been disenchanted with national politics for decades. Interestingly, however, while support for EU membership is at a clear low point in Italy, support for further European integration, although decreasing, is still high. While this may seem like a contradiction at first, but perhaps it is not. Italians may have become sceptical of the way the EU works today, but have not yet turned against the Union. They wish to see a different Europe in which they can find protection in light of years of political and economic uncertainty.

Data note:

The sample of n=10.755 was drawn by Dalia Research in July 2017 across all 28 EU Member States, taking into account current population distributions with regard to age (14-65 years), gender and region/country. In order to obtain census representative results, the data were weighted based upon the most recent Eurostat statistics. Calculated for a sample of this size and considering the design-effect, the margin of error would be +/-1.1 % at a confidence level of 95 %.

Imprint:

© February 2018
 Bertelsmann Stiftung
 Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256
 33311 Gütersloh
www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Responsible:

Isabell Hoffmann
 Phone: +49 5241 81 81313
isabell.hoffmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de
 @eupinions