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Abstention and Populist Voting: Evidence From the Italian 2018 Election

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Abstract

The 2018 election in Italy produced a highly fragmented outcome with a "tripolar" structure: mainstream forces were sharply weakened, while the Five Star Movement (left-wing) and The League (right-wing), two populist parties with different political agendas but similar anti-establishment postures, captured unprecedented levels of support. This configuration highlights a theoretical tension regarding disaffection towards the voting mechanism: similar underlying grievances can lead to either abstention or support for right- and left-wing populist parties. In 2018, in Italy, these three responses were available simultaneously, a unique case. This article examines the determinants of abstention and populist voting in Italy's 2018 general election. Using provincial (NUTS 3) data from 2008, 2013, and 2018, we employ a combination of factor and regression analysis to describe the underlying causes of populist voting and abstention. Our results show that abstention was higher in provinces characterized by crime, insecurity, and weak governance, while populist parties thrived in economically fragile areas. This contrasts with the stronger performance of mainstream parties in more prosperous regions. Overall, our findings suggest that both abstention and populist voting reflect enduring socio-territorial inequalities and institutional fragility. This implies that reducing regional disparities and strengthening state capacity are key conditions for addressing persistent patterns of electoral disengagement.

Keywords

abstention; Italy; political disaffection; populism; populist voting; territorial inequalities; voter turnout

1. Introduction

Across advanced democracies, the rise of populist parties has reshaped political competition. Dissatisfaction with mainstream politics, institutional strains, and widening social divides have weakened established party systems and opened space for movements claiming to represent "the people" against "corrupt elites." Italy offers a particularly relevant case of this transformation, as the Italian party system has undergone major changes over the past three decades, culminating in the results of the 2018 general election. Traditional center-left and center-right parties declined sharply, while two populist forces gained unprecedented support: the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), a left-wing anti-establishment movement, and the Lega (The League), a right-wing nationalist and anti-immigration party rooted in northern Italy. Both are widely recognized as populist (Corbetta et al., 2018) and strongly critical of European integration (Dijkstra et al., 2020).

The 2018 election produced an unprecedented tripolar configuration. According to post-election analyses (Itanes, 2018), 26.7% of voters changed their preferences compared with 2013. The Democratic Party (PD) and Forza Italia (FI) lost 2.76 and 2.81 million votes, respectively, while The League and M5S gained 4.19 and 1.55 million votes. Unlike many European contexts, Italian populist parties obtained a parliamentary majority and formed a coalition government that lasted until September 2019. Scholars have linked the rise of populism to economic and cultural transformations associated with globalization (Colantone & Stanig, 2018a, 2018c, 2019; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Morgan, 2018a, 2018b; Mutz, 2018a, 2018b). In Italy, these dynamics were reinforced by a prolonged economic downturn following the 2007 financial crisis. By 2018, real GDP per capita remained below its 1998 level, and declared incomes had not fully recovered (Maraffi, 2018).

Building on this literature, this article argues that abstention and populist voting represent distinct electoral responses associated with structural conditions consistent with lower confidence in representative institutions. When citizens perceive democratic institutions as unresponsive, they may either withdraw from participation (abstention) or support parties that challenge the status quo (populist voting). Empirically, we analyze provincial-level data for the 2008–2018 elections, combining descriptive analysis, factor analysis, panel regressions, and dynamic panel models. This framework allows us to examine how persistent territorial inequalities relate to abstention and populist voting across Italian provinces.

This article contributes to the literature by providing a unified interpretation of abstention and populist voting as interconnected electoral outcomes linked to structural conditions affecting democratic representation, and developing an empirical framework combining factor analysis with panel and dynamic regressions to examine how territorial inequalities shape electoral behavior. This study is structured as follows: The next section (Section 2) reviews the literature on populism and confidence in voting mechanisms. Section 3 describes the evolution of the Italian party system and the 2018 election. Section 4 presents the data and variables. Section 5 outlines the analytical framework and empirical results, and Section 6 concludes.

2. Electoral Confidence and Political Disaffection: A Structural Perspective

2.1. Confidence in Voting Mechanisms

Although scholars (e.g., Cook & Gronke, 2005) caution against treating trust and confidence as interchangeable concepts, the literature on populism often discusses institutional legitimacy and political dissatisfaction in

broadly overlapping terms (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). These debates have frequently been used to interpret patterns of abstention and anti-establishment voting in contemporary democracies.

Theoretical contributions emphasize how weaknesses in representative institutions can reduce the perceived instrumental and normative incentives for electoral participation (Birch, 2010). Empirical research also documents a significant association between support for populist parties—as defined by Inglehart and Norris (2016)—and broader forms of political dissatisfaction and disengagement from representative institutions (Algan et al., 2017). These patterns are embedded in a longer-term decline in electoral participation driven by cumulative institutional and contextual factors (Blais, 2000; Franklin, 2004).

Comparative studies further show that institutional arrangements and electoral system characteristics influence participation and disengagement by shaping perceptions of responsiveness and inclusiveness in democratic representation (Blais & Aarts, 2006; Jackman, 1987; Powell, 1986). In addition, contextual and election-specific factors—such as issue salience, electoral competition, and the broader political environment—can reinforce these dynamics by interacting with structural institutional conditions (Blais & Rubenson, 2013; Franklin & Hobolt, 2011). In this perspective, citizens who perceive political representation as ineffective may either withdraw from electoral participation or support populist parties. Applied to Italy in 2018, this suggests that abstainers and populist voters share similar structural conditions while diverging in their electoral responses.

These considerations motivate a joint analysis of abstention and populist voting. In this article, we do not attempt to measure voters' confidence directly; rather, we examine whether persistent socio-territorial characteristics—such as economic fragility, demographic decline, and institutional weakness—are systematically associated with both forms of political disengagement. In this sense, abstention and populist voting are treated as parallel aggregate responses consistent with weaker institutional performance and legitimacy, while remaining analytically distinct behavioral outcomes shaped by territorial context.

2.2. Populism

Populism is among the most debated and multifaceted concepts in political science, and no single universally accepted definition exists, with competing approaches—ideational, discursive, and strategic—capturing different aspects of the phenomenon. The ideational approach, now dominant, defines populism as a thin-centered ideology that divides society into two antagonistic camps: the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite." Populist actors claim to represent the general will of the people against distant or unaccountable elites (Mudde, 2004). Because it lacks a comprehensive ideological system, populism can combine with different host ideologies, including both left- and right-wing variants (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The discursive approach focuses on language and political rhetoric. In this view, populism is expressed through a discourse that constructs "the people" as a moral subject opposed to corrupt elites (Laclau, 2005; Stavrakakis et al., 2018). The strategic approach instead emphasizes modes of political mobilization, defining populism as a strategy through which leaders appeal directly to the masses while bypassing traditional intermediary institutions (Barr, 2009). Despite their differences, these perspectives converge on the idea that populism tends to emerge in contexts characterized by perceived exclusion and institutional irresponsiveness. Depending on the ideological context in which it develops, populism may assume different forms. Left-wing populism is commonly associated with economic grievances and opposition to neoliberal policies, whereas

right-wing populism is often linked to cultural conflicts related to immigration, national sovereignty, and supranational integration (Pappas, 2019). At the same time, recent research highlights the growing prevalence of hybrid forms that combine economic and cultural appeals and adapt political narratives to evolving socio-economic conditions (Kriesi & Pappas, 2016).

Populism frequently overlaps with nationalism, nativism, and authoritarian tendencies, which complicates empirical identification. In this study, we adopt the ideational approach as a baseline framework, interpreting populism as a worldview that portrays politics as a conflict between virtuous citizens and corrupt elites. Within this perspective, both M5S and The League can be classified as populist despite their ideological differences. M5S emerged as an anti-establishment movement emphasizing transparency and political renewal, whereas The League evolved under Matteo Salvini into a nationalist, anti-immigration, and Eurosceptic force.

Our analysis focuses on how economic stagnation, demographic decline, and perceived insecurity shape the geography of populist support and abstention. This perspective aligns with recent research emphasizing the spatial dimensions of populism (Colantone & Stanig, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Di Matteo et al., 2022; Dustmann et al., 2017; Guiso et al., 2017, 2025; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Italy's 2018 election provides a revealing case in which both left- and right-wing populist parties achieved strong electoral success in contexts marked by socio-economic fragility and institutional weakness.

3. Institutional Situation in Italy and Electoral Results

3.1. The Italian Second Republic

Between 1992 and 1994, Italian politics underwent a profound transformation often described as the transition from the First to the Second Republic. The Tangentopoli corruption scandals dismantled the governing parties that had dominated the postwar era and precipitated the collapse of the proportional electoral system. The 1993 reform introduced a mixed electoral system (Mattarella Law), encouraging pre-electoral alliances and consolidating bipolar competition between center-left and center-right coalitions.

From 1994 to 2013, these two blocs alternated in power, largely structured around Silvio Berlusconi's center-right leadership and the center-left coalition anchored in PD. Geographic cleavages reinforced this pattern: FI and Lega Nord—later The League—were particularly strong in Northern regions, while center-left parties maintained stronger support in the center and parts of the South. During the same period, Italy also experienced frequent electoral reforms.

Four main systems were adopted after World War II: proportional representation (1948–1992), the mixed-member system introduced by the Mattarella Law (Law 276/1993), a proportional system with majority bonus under the Calderoli Law (Law 270/2005), and the mixed system introduced by the Rosato Law (Law 165/2017). The current Rosato system allocates roughly 61% of seats proportionally and 37% through plurality single-member districts, maintaining a hybrid structure that has contributed to fragmentation and electoral volatility.

3.2. Overview of the 2008, 2013, and 2018 Electoral Results

3.2.1. 2008 General Election

The general election of 13–14 April 2008 was held under the electoral rules introduced in 2005 by the center-right coalition (the Calderoli Law). The vote followed the collapse of the center-left government elected in 2006, representing a further step in the transformation of the Italian party system from the bipolar competition of the Second Republic toward a more fragmented configuration (Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2017).

The center-right coalition won a clear parliamentary majority. For the first time, only five parties entered parliament—two within each major coalition and the centrist Unione di Centro. Voter turnout declined to 80.5%, the lowest level recorded in Italy's postwar parliamentary elections and 3.1 percentage points below the 2006 election. The League achieved its best result up to that point, with support strongly concentrated in Northern regions, reflecting its longstanding territorial and regionalist political positioning. Figure 1 illustrates the spatial distribution of abstention and populist voting across Italian provinces in the 2008 election.

3.2.2. 2013 General Election

The 2013 general election took place in the aftermath of the eurozone crisis and the technocratic government led by Mario Monti, whose austerity policies generated widespread dissatisfaction. Voter disaffection was reflected in declining turnout and increasing volatility affecting mainstream parties.

The PD obtained a relative majority and formed a center-left government, but the most significant outcome was the emergence of the M5S as the most voted-for single party. Founded in 2009, M5S capitalized on anti-elite and anti-corruption sentiments and presented itself as an alternative to the political establishment (Angelucci et al., 2020).

Turnout declined to 75.2%, continuing the downward trend observed in previous elections. The results consolidated a tripolar party system composed of the center-left coalition, a fragmented center-right, and M5S. By contrast, The League—still largely perceived as a regional party—obtained only 4% of the vote, a weak performance that preceded the leadership transition from Umberto Bossi to Matteo Salvini. Figure 2 illustrates the spatial distribution of abstention and populist voting across Italian provinces in the 2013 election.

3.2.3. 2018 General Election

The 2018 general election marked a major turning point in the Italian party system. Traditional parties such as the PD and FI experienced sharp electoral losses, while M5S and The League recorded significant gains. M5S obtained 32.4% of the vote and became the dominant political force in Southern Italy, where its message of economic justice and political renewal resonated strongly in areas characterized by long-term socio-economic fragility. At the same time, Matteo Salvini repositioned The League as a nationalist and anti-immigration party with a broader national appeal, allowing it to expand beyond its traditional Northern base and overtake FI within the center-right coalition (Albertazzi et al., 2018; Orsina, 2019).

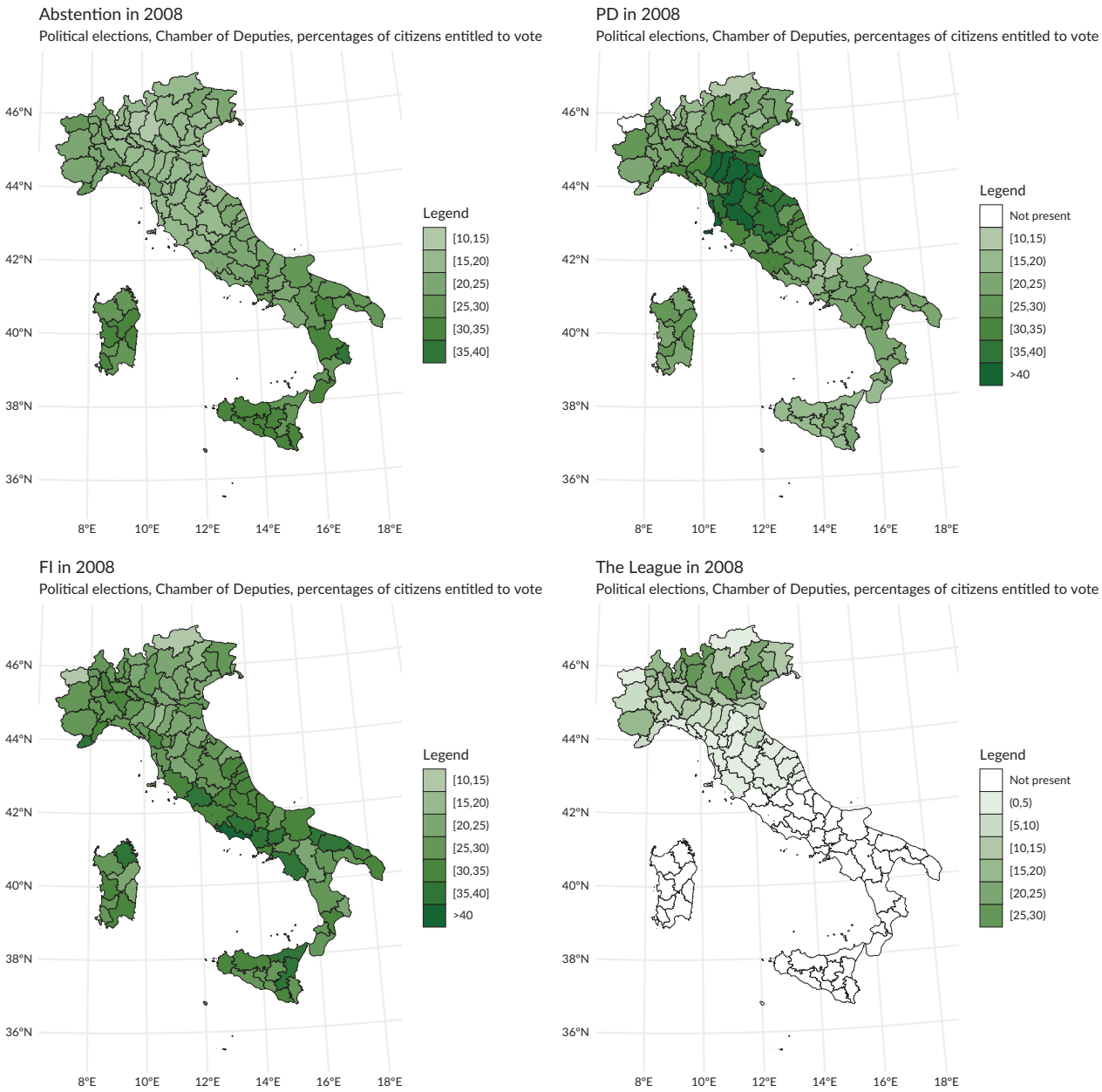

Figure 1. Italian political elections 2008: Results for abstention, PD, FI, and The League. Notes: The total number of voters who abstained or did not cast a valid vote (abstention) and the total number of valid votes obtained by each party or political area are expressed in percentage points as a share of citizens entitled to vote.

The election also confirmed the continuing decline in electoral participation. Turnout fell to 72.9%, and abstention rates were highest in economically and institutionally marginalized provinces. Although the coalition between M5S and The League proved short-lived, the election reflected a profound transformation of Italian politics around new issue dimensions related to sovereignty and social protection. Figure 3 illustrates the spatial distribution of abstention and populist voting across Italian provinces in the 2018 election.

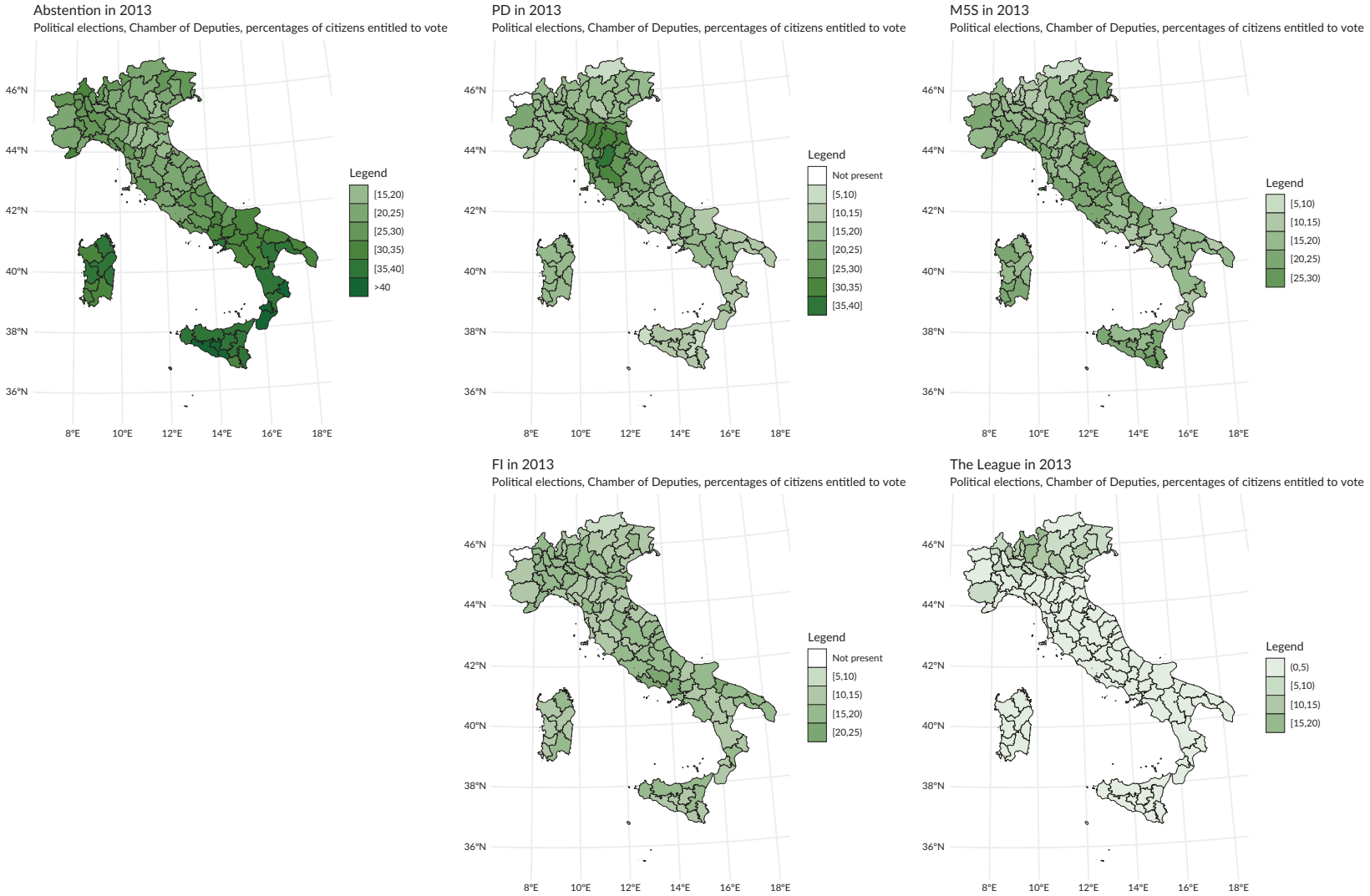

Figure 2. Italian political elections 2013: Results for abstention, PD, M5S, FI, and The League. Notes: The total number of voters who abstained or did not cast a valid vote (abstention) and the total number of valid votes obtained by each party or political area are expressed in percentage points as a share of citizens entitled to vote.

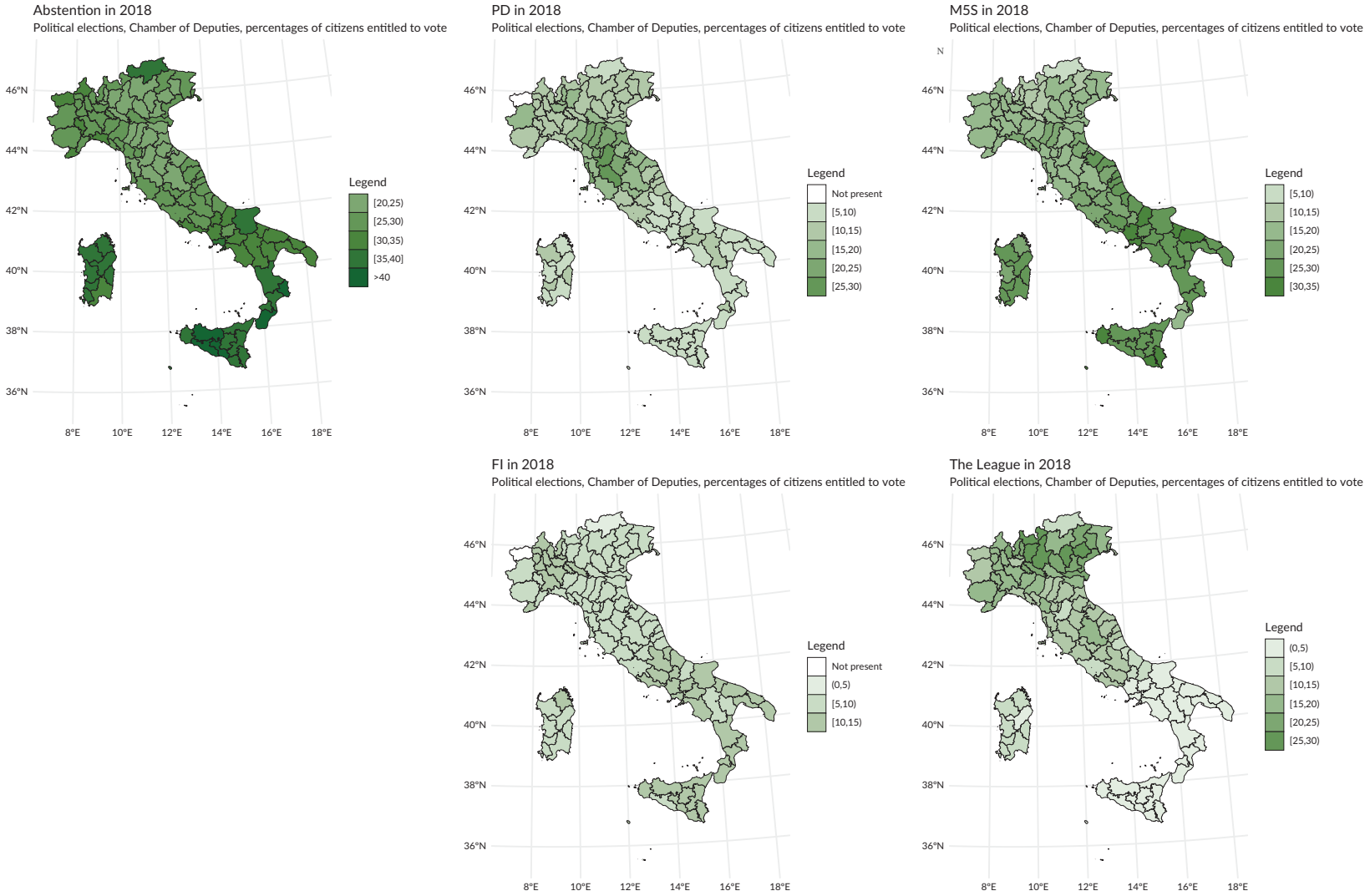

Figure 3. Italian political elections 2018: Results for abstention, PD, M5S, FI, and The League. Notes: The total number of voters who abstained or did not cast a valid vote (abstention) and the total number of valid votes obtained by each party or political area are expressed in percentage points as a share of citizens entitled to vote.

4. Data

To analyze the drivers of abstention and voting for populist parties, we have built a dataset that contains both electoral data from the general elections in 2008, 2013, and 2018, and a wide set of geographical, demographic, and socio-economic indicators.

4.1. Elections

The unit of observation is the province (NUTS-3 level). The dataset includes the 110 Italian provinces existing between 2012 and 2018, allowing us to capture territorial disparities that recent studies identify as central to the geography of political discontent (Di Matteo et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Electoral results and turnout rates were retrieved from the Italian Ministry of the Interior (Archivio Storico delle Elezioni). Socio-economic, demographic, and security indicators were obtained from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT—Territorial Database) and the Bank of Italy. These variables are consistent with those used in recent studies on the territorial determinants of populism and political disaffection (Colantone & Stanig, 2018a, 2018b; Di Matteo et al., 2022; Guiso et al., 2017; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Table 1 reports the electoral outcomes for the Chamber of Deputies elections in 2008, 2013, and 2018.

4.2. Demographic and Socio-Economic Variables

The study distinguishes two main electoral outcomes—abstention and populist voting—both interpreted as aggregate electoral responses associated with structural conditions affecting the functioning of representative institutions. Populist voting refers to ballots cast for the M5S and The League, which, despite ideological differences, share an anti-elite narrative and a strong appeal to "ordinary citizens." All other parties are classified as mainstream.

To explore territorial variation, we group the structural determinants into three broad domains—economic performance, demographic dynamics, and crime and security conditions—each measured through a set of standardized indicators:

- *Economic performance*: GDP per capita, unemployment, income inequality (Gini index), participation in the labor market, sectoral composition of value added, and non-performing loans.
- *Demography*: fertility and population growth rates, age structure, density, internal and international migration, and educational attainment.
- *Crime and security*: rates of theft, robbery, extortion, arson, and homicide, complemented by indicators of micro-criminality and organized crime presence.

These dimensions capture both the material and institutional context shaping patterns of political participation and disengagement. Following Rodríguez-Pose (2018), Colantone and Stanig (2018a, 2018b), and Di Matteo et al. (2022), we interpret persistent socio-economic disadvantage and insecurity as a fertile ground for populist mobilization and voter withdrawal alike. Variable description, data sources, summary statistics, and correlation matrices are reported in Appendix 2 in the Supplemental File.

Table 1. General elections results for 2008, 2013, and 2018 (Chamber of Deputies).

Political election	2008			2013			2018		
	Number	% of citizens	% of valid votes	Number	% of citizens	% of valid votes	Number	% of citizens	% of valid votes
Abstention and turnout									
Citizens entitled to vote	47,142,436	100%		47,005,432	100%		46,604,896	100%	
Abstention	10,617,017	22.5%		12,932,157	27.5%		14,955,989	32.1%	
Turnout	36,525,420	77.5%	100%	34,073,272	72.5%	100%	31,648,908	67.9%	100%
Parties									
M5S				8,702,987	18.5%	25.5%	10,252,280	22.0%	32.4%
The League	3,026,844	6.4%	8.3%	1,392,537	3.0%	4.1%	5,587,146	12.0%	17.7%
PD	12,092,998	25.7%	33.1%	8,644,542	18.4%	25.4%	5,887,357	12.6%	18.6%
FI	13,642,745	28.9%	37.4%	7,332,829	15.6%	21.5%	4,471,741	9.6%	14.1%
Fratelli d'Italia				668,886	1.4%	2.0%	1,398,109	3.0%	4.4%
Political areas and alignments									
Extreme left	378,116	0.8%	1.0%	95,150	0.2%	0.3%	480,285	1.0%	1.5%
Center-left	15,343,652	32.5%	42.0%	10,852,847	23.1%	31.9%	7,085,809	15.2%	22.4%
Center-liberals	103,760	0.2%	0.3%	3,364,715	7.2%	9.9%	971,815	2.1%	3.1%
Center-right	19,130,396	40.6%	52.4%	10,180,386	21.7%	29.9%	11,905,528	25.5%	37.6%
Extreme right	1,026,485	2.2%	2.8%	421,367	0.9%	1.2%	502,238	1.1%	1.6%
M5S				8,702,987	18.5%	25.5%	10,252,280	22.0%	32.4%

Notes: In 2008, FI and Alleanza Nazionale (which later became Fratelli d'Italia) stood in the elections together with a list called Il Popolo delle Libertà (The People of Freedom). Source: Italian Ministry of the Interior (2019).

5. Analytical Framework

5.1. Methodology

The empirical strategy combines exploratory, dimensional reduction, and inferential techniques to examine the territorial determinants of abstention and populist voting in Italy's 2018 general election. The objective is to identify the structural foundations of these outcomes and assess whether they reflect persistent territorial disparities affecting democratic representation.

To reduce multicollinearity and dimensionality, we apply factor analysis. This procedure summarizes a large set of correlated provincial indicators into a smaller number of structural dimensions capturing territorial inequalities, including economic conditions, demographic dynamics, and different forms of insecurity and crime. Using factor scores as regressors avoids estimating models with many highly correlated variables while preserving interpretability in the subsequent regressions. We then estimate regressions linking electoral outcomes in 2018 to lagged factor scores. Lagging the explanatory variables reduces simultaneity concerns and supports a more credible interpretation of the associations (Angrist & Pischke, 2009). It also helps avoid "bad controls," since contemporaneous variables may themselves reflect outcomes of the political process. The baseline specification includes election-wave effects and fixed effects to control for nationwide shocks and time-invariant territorial characteristics. Electoral persistence is captured by including lagged electoral outcomes. To further assess robustness, we estimate a dynamic panel specification based on the Arellano–Bond framework (Arellano & Bond, 1991). This estimator accounts for unobserved heterogeneity through first differencing and uses internally generated instruments based on lagged values of the dependent variable, helping to mitigate endogeneity related to persistence and simultaneity.

The empirical framework therefore proceeds in two stages: first, the extraction of latent territorial dimensions through factor analysis; and second, the estimation of static and dynamic regressions to evaluate the structural determinants and persistence of abstention and populist voting. The analytical framework is summarized in Figure 4.

5.2. Factor Analysis

To synthesize the large number of correlated indicators identified in the descriptive analyses, we perform a factor analysis on the full set of socio-economic, demographic, and security-related variables. This dimensionality reduction technique extracts a limited number of latent structural components that summarize broader territorial patterns, thereby reducing multicollinearity and facilitating a more interpretable regression analysis.

The factor solution reported in Table 2 yields nine latent factors that capture distinct structural dimensions of the Italian provincial landscape, differentiating provinces by economic conditions, demographic vitality, and several forms of insecurity and social vulnerability. More specifically, Factor 1 captures overall economic performance and material well-being, loading strongly on value added per capita, wages, exports, wealth, and labor market participation, and negatively on unemployment. Therefore, higher values of this factor identify economically dynamic and prosperous provinces. Factor 2 reflects demographic structure and vitality, distinguishing younger, growing territories from aging, demographically stagnant ones through

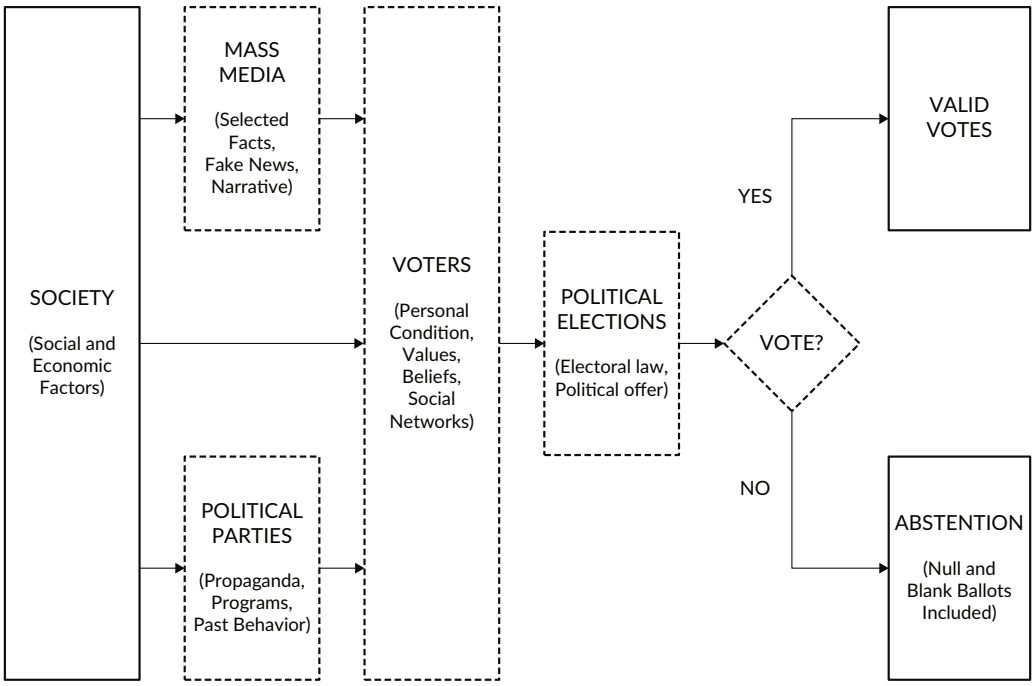

Figure 4. Analytical framework.

loadings on fertility, population growth, and age composition. Factor 3 captures labor market structure and sectoral specialization, particularly the relative weight of manufacturing and public sector value added, differentiating more industrialized provinces from those more dependent on public employment. Factors 4 and 5 group crime-related indicators. Factor 4 loads primarily on indicators of conventional crime—such as robberies, burglaries, and other forms of reported criminal activity—while Factor 5 is more closely associated with severe or organized crime, including homicides and mafia-related offenses. Together, they distinguish provinces according to different dimensions of insecurity and exposure to criminal networks. Factor 6 reflects educational attainment and human capital, loading on the share of the population with at least secondary education and related skill indicators. Factor 7 is associated with migration-related variables, including foreign residents and migrant reception structures. It captures the territorial intensity of migration-related presence and pressures, without implying any normative assessment regarding the governance or control of migration flows. Factor 8 reflects internal and external mobility dynamics, particularly emigration across regions and abroad, identifying provinces characterized by stronger outward migration patterns. Finally, Factor 9 captures aspects of the informational environment, proxied by newspaper circulation and related indicators of media exposure. Factor labels in Table 2 are intended as heuristic summaries of the dominant loadings and should not be interpreted as direct measures of specific phenomena.

Their spatial distribution (see Appendix 3 in the Supplemental File) aligns with well-documented territorial divides in Italy: long-term economic disparities between North and South, contrasting demographic dynamics between metropolitan and inland areas, and persistent differences in exposure to criminal networks and local security challenges. These patterns are consistent with evidence that contemporary political behavior is shaped by historically rooted territorial inequalities and uneven development trajectories (Colantone & Stanig, 2018b, 2019; Morgan, 2018b; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Table 2. Varimax rotated factor loadings and characterization of factors.

Variable	Factor 1 Economic well-being	Factor 2 Crime in densely populated areas	Factor 3 Demographic growth	Factor 4 Crime in less industrialize areas	Factor 5 Organized crime violence	Factor 6 Arsons and extortions in areas with high emmigration	Factor 7 Government management of uncontrolled immigration	Factor 8 Crimes against women	Factor 9 House robberies	Communality	Uniqueness
1. Arsons	–0.384					0.682				0.709	0.291
2. Attempted homicides	–0.380			0.328	0.593					0.680	0.320
3. Bag theft		0.917								0.868	0.132
4. Home burglaries	0.517	0.339	–0.314						0.428	0.767	0.233
5. Drug-related crimes		0.344		0.682						0.644	0.356
6. Extortions		0.311			0.319	0.379			0.329	0.564	0.436
7. House robberies		0.482							0.671	0.750	0.250
8. Intentional homicides					0.804					0.778	0.222
9. Mafia homicides		0.345			0.606					0.734	0.266
10. Micro criminality	0.403	0.796								0.904	0.096
11. Prostitution-related crimes								0.757		0.697	0.303
12. Sexual violence	0.369			0.474			0.340	0.471		0.773	0.227
13. Robbery		0.901								0.890	0.110
14. Robbery homicides				0.384	0.474	–0.323		0.398		0.692	0.308
15. Fertility rate	0.481		0.418				0.529			0.809	0.191
16. Total growth rate of population	0.781		0.456							0.893	0.107

Table 2. (Cont.) Varimax rotated factor loadings and characterization of factors.

Variable	Factor 1 Economic well-being	Factor 2 Crime in densely populated areas	Factor 3 Demographic growth	Factor 4 Crime in less industrialize areas	Factor 5 Organized crime violence	Factor 6 Arsons and extortions in areas with high emmigration	Factor 7 Government management of uncontrolled immigration	Factor 8 Crimes against women	Factor 9 House robberies	Communality	Uniqueness
17. Population between 15 and 64 years	−0.505		0.790							0.908	0.092
18. Population over 64 years	0.319		−0.875							0.933	0.067
19. Population density		0.655							−0.335	0.738	0.262
20. Total immigration	0.869									0.887	0.113
21. Isolation (highways, airports, and ports)		−0.491		0.421				−0.329		0.645	0.355
22. Participation in the labor market	0.882									0.911	0.089
23. Participation in the labor market: difference between men and women	−0.804		0.325							0.812	0.188
24. Exports per capita	0.668			−0.482						0.751	0.249
25. Income inequality	−0.656		0.391							0.697	0.303
26. Non-performing entry rate of loans to households	−0.648									0.646	0.354
27. Unemployment: job seekers aged 15 and over	−0.805									0.717	0.283
28. Value added: Manufacturing	0.601			−0.668						0.881	0.119
29. Value added: public sector	−0.761			0.426						0.878	0.122
30. Value added: per capita	0.907									0.895	0.105

Table 2. (Cont.) Varimax rotated factor loadings and characterization of factors.

Variable	Factor 1 Economic well-being	Factor 2 Crime in densely populated areas	Factor 3 Demographic growth	Factor 4 Crime in less industrialize areas	Factor 5 Organized crime violence	Factor 6 Arsons and extortions in areas with high emmigration	Factor 7 Government management of uncontrolled immigration	Factor 8 Crimes against women	Factor 9 House robberies	Communality	Uniqueness
31. Median gross hourly wage of employees born abroad	0.639					–0.364	0.352			0.747	0.253
32. Median gross hourly wage of employees born in Italy	0.869									0.893	0.107
33. Mean wage of employees	0.833									0.874	0.126
34. Mean wealth per capita	0.870									0.868	0.132
35. Population having at least a secondary degree	0.699				–0.323					0.762	0.238
36. Immigration of graduates between 25 and 39 years	0.848									0.844	0.156
37. Foreign residents	0.763									0.768	0.232
38. Emigration to other Italian regions	–0.335					0.765				0.745	0.255
39. Emigration abroad	0.413						0.579			0.656	0.344
40. Beds in emergency residences for migrants							0.671			0.557	0.443
41. Newspaper circulation	0.708									0.747	0.253

Note: Factor loadings below 0.3 are omitted.

5.3. Regression Analysis on Factor Scores

Rather than examining a large number of individual indicators separately, the factor structure allows us to model structural conditions more parsimoniously and evaluate how these broader dimensions relate to abstention and party support. The factors derived from this analysis serve as the main explanatory variables in the regressions estimated in the next sections. Full extended descriptions of factor composition, loadings, spatial distributions, and macro-territorial averages are reported in Appendix 3 in the Supplementary File.

To assess how the underlying territorial structures identified through factor analysis relate to electoral outcomes, we estimate a set of linear regression models where the dependent variables are the provincial shares of abstention and the vote shares of M5S, The League, PD, and FI in the 2018 election. The explanatory variables are the factor scores, which summarize broader socio-economic, demographic, and security-related conditions across provinces. This specification allows us to evaluate the relationship between territorial inequalities and electoral behavior while reducing multicollinearity and improving interpretability. The baseline linear panel model is specified as follows:

$$y_{i,2018} = \alpha_1 + \beta_1' F_{i,2017} + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Where $y_{i,2018}$ is the share, expressed in percentage points, of citizens entitled to vote who abstained or voted for a given party (i.e., M5S, The League, PD, FI) in province i in 2018, and $F_{i,2017}$ are the factor scores for province i in 2017. Factor scores are lagged at time $t - 1$, i.e., 2017, to limit problems of reverse causality. The outcomes of the baseline regression analysis linking electoral behavior to the latent structural factors are presented in Table 3. The results show that territorial disparities remain powerful predictors of both abstention and populist support.

The estimated coefficients should be interpreted as associations between territorial characteristics and electoral outcomes. The analysis does not identify causal effects but documents systematic patterns linking socio-territorial conditions to abstention and populist voting.

Starting with abstention (Column 1), the estimates suggest that it rose in provinces marked by structural disadvantages, particularly those characterized by crime in less industrialized areas (F4) and organized crime violence (F5), and declined in those with higher levels of economic well-being (F1). These findings reinforce the interpretation of abstention as a reaction to socio-economic marginalization and institutional neglect, in line with evidence that long-term territorial inequalities and weak governance contribute to democratic disengagement (Di Matteo et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). The government management of the uncontrolled immigration factor (F7) is also positively and significantly associated with abstention. In this sense, abstention functions as a form of protest or "exit" behavior—a withdrawal from political participation associated with the weakening of representative institutions and their capacity to channel political demands.

Moving to party-specific patterns, economic well-being (F1) emerges as the most consistent differentiating factor across political forces. M5S (Column 2) achieves higher support in economically fragile and institutionally weak territories, consistent with its stronger presence in areas characterized by socio-economic vulnerability and political disaffection. By contrast, The League (Column 3) performs better in economically dynamic provinces, particularly in Northern Italy, where demographic stagnation and long-standing territorial characteristics contribute to shaping its electoral geography (Albertazzi et al., 2018).

Table 3. Baseline regression analysis on factor scores.

	(1) Abstention	(2) M5S	(3) The League	(4) PD	(5) Forza Italia
F1 Economic well-being	−3.973***	−4.531***	5.106***	2.962***	−1.311***
	(0.266)	(0.266)	(0.437)	(0.258)	(0.156)
F2 Crime in densely populated areas	−0.438*	0.697***	−0.862**	0.796***	0.252
	(0.237)	(0.199)	(0.341)	(0.236)	(0.193)
F3 Demographic growth	1.146***	0.901***	−1.170***	−1.286***	0.472***
	(0.239)	(0.222)	(0.427)	(0.280)	(0.163)
F4 Crime in less industrialized areas	2.028***	0.600**	−2.496***	−0.446*	−0.400**
	(0.233)	(0.262)	(0.450)	(0.227)	(0.162)
F5 Organized crime violence	1.667***	−0.175	−0.911***	−0.734***	0.217
	(0.282)	(0.385)	(0.185)	(0.226)	(0.172)
F6 Arsons and extortions in areas with high emigration	0.446*	0.313	−1.327***	−0.091	0.419**
	(0.238)	(0.253)	(0.270)	(0.204)	(0.175)
F7 Government management of uncontrolled immigration	1.185***	−1.116***	0.356	−0.837***	−0.174
	(0.253)	(0.222)	(0.584)	(0.285)	(0.164)
F8 Crimes against women	−0.001	0.435*	−0.311	−0.373*	0.061
	(0.255)	(0.227)	(0.282)	(0.214)	(0.115)
F9 House robberies	−0.268	0.351	−0.310	0.747***	0.093
	(0.252)	(0.255)	(0.330)	(0.254)	(0.153)
Constant	29.684***	21.819***	12.278***	12.531***	9.507***
	(0.247)	(0.284)	(0.364)	(0.272)	(0.152)
No. of observations	110	110	110	109	109
R-squared	.808	.746	.736	.645	.514
F test	51.6***	57.3***	59.9***	20.1***	11.3***

Notes: The economic variables are expressed in thousands of euros, robust standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

For mainstream parties, the estimated coefficients are generally weaker and less stable across specifications, suggesting looser and less systematic associations with the structural factors considered. In line with this pattern, FI (Column 5) displays weaker and more dispersed territorial associations, consistent with its declining organizational capacity and the erosion of a coherent social base.

Taken together, the results underscore that economic well-being (F1) and security-related dimensions (F4–F5) capture the core territorial cleavages shaping both abstention and populist support. They also indicate that abstention and populist voting represent complementary yet distinct aggregate electoral responses to persistent socio-territorial inequalities: the former taking the form of withdrawal from electoral participation, and the latter manifesting as support for alternative political options. These findings align with previous studies highlighting how spatially entrenched inequalities and institutional weaknesses contribute to divergent reactions to representative democracy across Italian provinces (Di Matteo et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Overall, the baseline model demonstrates a high degree of explanatory power across all specifications and dependent variables. The results support a multidimensional understanding of Italian electoral dynamics, in

which abstention and populist voting patterns are shaped by overlapping, but not identical, structural conditions. These findings further confirm that both the demand for populism and the retreat from electoral participation are territorially rooted responses to persistent socio-economic and institutional deficiencies.

5.4. Robustness Analysis

To assess the robustness of our findings and the methodological choices presented in the previous section, we conducted complementary robustness checks. These serve to validate both the factor-based specification adopted in our main regressions and our substantive focus on the 2018 general election as a pivotal moment in Italy's electoral realignment.

5.4.1. Baseline Regressions With Lagged Dependent Variables

To limit endogeneity, we estimated an autocorrelated model, as follows:

$$y_{i,2018} = \alpha_1 + \gamma_1 y_{i,2013} + \beta_1' F_{i,2017} + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

In which we added the lagged dependent variable(s) calculated in 2013 (i.e., the results of the previous general election) as a covariate. The results align with those obtained with the baseline model. Regression outcomes can be found in Appendix 4 in the Supplementary File.

5.4.2. Baseline Regressions on Individually Selected Variables

As a second robustness check, we estimate the baseline regressions using a reduced set of demographic and socio-economic variables instead of the latent factors. The variables are selected based on their relevance in previous empirical studies, particularly Dijkstra et al. (2020), following the conventional strategy of relating observable structural indicators directly to electoral outcomes.

Regression outcomes are reported in Appendix 4 in the Supplementary File, while Appendix 5 lists the selected variables. The results confirm the importance of distinguishing between the two main populist parties—M5S and The League—which draw support from different socio-territorial contexts.

Overall, the findings remain consistent with the baseline analysis and support the interpretation that distinct territorial conditions are associated with different patterns of populist support.

5.4.3. Panel Regressions

As a third robustness check, we estimate fixed-effects panel regressions using the same individual variables to exploit the data's temporal dimension. This approach controls for unobserved, time-invariant heterogeneity across provinces and captures within-province changes over time.

The estimated model is as follows:

$$y_{i,2018} = \alpha_1 + \beta_1' F_{i,2017} + \mu_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (3)$$

Where μ_i captures unobserved provincial effects, and all other variables have the same meaning as previously illustrated. Regression outcomes can be found in Appendix 4 in the Supplementary File.

The results confirm that the relationship between structural disadvantage and electoral outcomes evolved across elections, culminating in 2018—a turning point marked by the nationalization of The League, the consolidation of M5S in the South, and the collapse of traditional parties (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

5.4.4. Dynamic Panel Analysis

We estimate a dynamic specification using a System GMM estimator (Arellano & Bond, 1991; Blundell & Bond, 1998), which accounts for persistence, endogeneity, and unobserved heterogeneity.

Formally, the System GMM framework can be represented by two equations. The first, expressed in first differences, removes time-invariant unobserved effects and addresses the endogeneity of lagged outcomes:

$$\Delta y_{it} = \gamma_{41} \Delta y_{i,t-1} + \beta_1' \, \Delta F_{it} + \Delta \varepsilon_{it}, \tag{4}$$

The second equation, in levels, incorporates the original series and uses lagged differences as instruments to increase efficiency when variables display persistence, as follows:

$$y_{it} = \gamma_2 y_{i,t-1} + \beta_2' \, F_{it} + \mu_i + \varepsilon_{it}, \tag{5}$$

Where all variables have the same meaning as previously illustrated. To avoid instrument proliferation and the resulting overfitting of the endogenous structure in a short panel, we adopt a parsimonious specification of the estimator (Blundell & Bond, 1998; Roodman, 2009). Specifically, the second lag of the dependent variable is used as an instrument for the difference equation, and its first difference as an instrument for the level equation.

All models are estimated using two-step robust standard errors with finite-sample correction and Windmeijer-corrected standard errors. We also restricted lag depth to avoid instrument proliferation (Roodman, 2009). This procedure mitigates simultaneity and persistence biases not fully addressed in the baseline regressions.

The lagged dependent variable is positive and statistically significant across all equations, indicating strong persistence in electoral outcomes. Provinces with higher past abstention or party support tend to display similar patterns over time.

For abstention, higher rates are associated with provinces characterized by crime, social disorder, and weaker institutional capacity, while economic well-being is linked to lower disengagement. Support for M5S remains concentrated in economically fragile but demographically dynamic areas, whereas The League displays stronger persistence in wealthier Northern provinces. Mainstream parties show weaker and less stable coefficients, with FI in particular exhibiting declining persistence over time.

Overall, the dynamic estimates confirm that abstention and populist voting are cumulative processes shaped by persistent territorial inequalities and institutional fragility.

Table 4. Dynamic panel analysis on factor scores.

	(1) Abstention	(2) M5S	(3) The League	(4) PD	(5) FI
L.Abstension	1.097***				
	(0.006)				
F1 Economic well-being	0.814***	−0.575	−5.713***	1.107***	−0.291***
	(0.162)	(0.627)	(0.893)	(0.097)	(0.087)
F2 Crime in densely populated areas	0.145	−0.204	1.487**	0.131*	−0.066
	(0.119)	(0.535)	(0.573)	(0.078)	(0.081)
F3 Demographic growth	0.580***	4.097***	−4.856***	0.045	0.001
	(0.162)	(0.515)	(0.983)	(0.085)	(0.081)
F4 Crime in less industrialized areas	−0.057	0.384	3.802***	−0.546***	−0.279***
	(0.162)	(0.496)	(0.989)	(0.089)	(0.100)
F5 Organized crime violence	0.359**	1.450***	−0.212	−0.272***	−0.133
	(0.139)	(0.409)	(0.371)	(0.090)	(0.095)
F6 Arsons and extortions in areas with high emigration	0.008	1.227***	1.493***	−0.139	−0.034
	(0.146)	(0.428)	(0.539)	(0.096)	(0.086)
F7 Government management of uncontrolled immigration	−0.011	−2.164***	−1.407	−0.014	0.458***
	(0.292)	(0.692)	(1.201)	(0.133)	(0.126)
F8 Crimes against women	0.242*	2.677***	−0.524	−0.061	−0.440***
	(0.131)	(0.756)	(0.672)	(0.096)	(0.096)
F9 House robberies	0.463***	3.312***	−0.930*	0.119*	−0.269***
	(0.115)	(0.462)	(0.524)	(0.065)	(0.086)
L.M5S		1.521***			
		(0.048)			
L.League			2.505***		
			(0.205)		
L.Partito Democratico				0.689***	
				(0.005)	
L.Forza Italia					0.591***
					(0.006)
No. of observations	218	218	218	218	218
F test	6,914***	136***	17.5***	3,069***	2,281***

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Given the short panel (three electoral waves), the instrument set is deliberately restricted to avoid instrument proliferation. Therefore, the resulting model is exactly identified, and the Hansen J test is not defined. Similarly, there are not enough lags to calculate AR(.).

5.4.5. External Validation Using Survey Evidence

While the core empirical analysis of this article relies on aggregate electoral and territorial data, our theoretical framework draws on a broad literature linking socio-territorial disadvantage to political disaffection and lower institutional confidence. To address concerns regarding the potentially attitudinal nature of this mechanism, and to assess the plausibility of our interpretation, we complement the main

analysis with an external validation exercise based on individual-level survey data from the European Social Survey.

Specifically, we use data from the European Social Survey (Round 8), which includes standardized measures of institutional trust and democratic satisfaction across European regions. We focus on three widely used indicators: trust in the country's parliament, trust in politicians, and satisfaction with the way democracy works. In addition, we construct a standardized index of institutional trust by averaging trust in parliament and trust in politicians.

To ensure comparability with our territorial analysis, we compute population-weighted regional averages of these survey measures at the NUTS-2 level. We then relate these outcomes to a territorial disadvantage index constructed using the same structural dimensions emphasized in the main analysis—namely, unemployment, income, education, and crime. This index captures persistent socio-economic and institutional conditions that characterize regional contexts.

The results reveal a consistent pattern. Regions characterized by higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage exhibit systematically lower levels of institutional trust and democratic satisfaction. Trust in parliament and trust in politicians are positively associated with income and educational attainment, and negatively associated with unemployment and crime. Moreover, the composite index of institutional trust displays a significant negative relationship with the territorial disadvantage index, as shown in Table 5. The bivariate association between institutional trust and territorial disadvantage is visually illustrated in Figure 5, which highlights the clear negative slope linking structural disadvantage to lower trust levels across regions.

Table 5. Institutional trust index vs. territorial disadvantage.

	Institutional trust
Territorial disadvantage index	−0.481*
	(0.254)
Constant	−0.000
	(0.223)
No. of observations	17
R-squared	0.193
$F(1, 15)$	3.59
Prob > F	0.0777

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.10$.

For completeness, the full correlation matrix between ESS trust measures and the underlying socio-economic indicators is reported in Appendix 6 in the Supplementary File. Although this exercise does not establish causality, it provides survey-based evidence that the structural conditions identified in our aggregate models are associated with lower institutional trust, supporting the interpretation of abstention and populist voting as territorial outcomes linked to political disaffection rather than direct measures of individual attitudes.

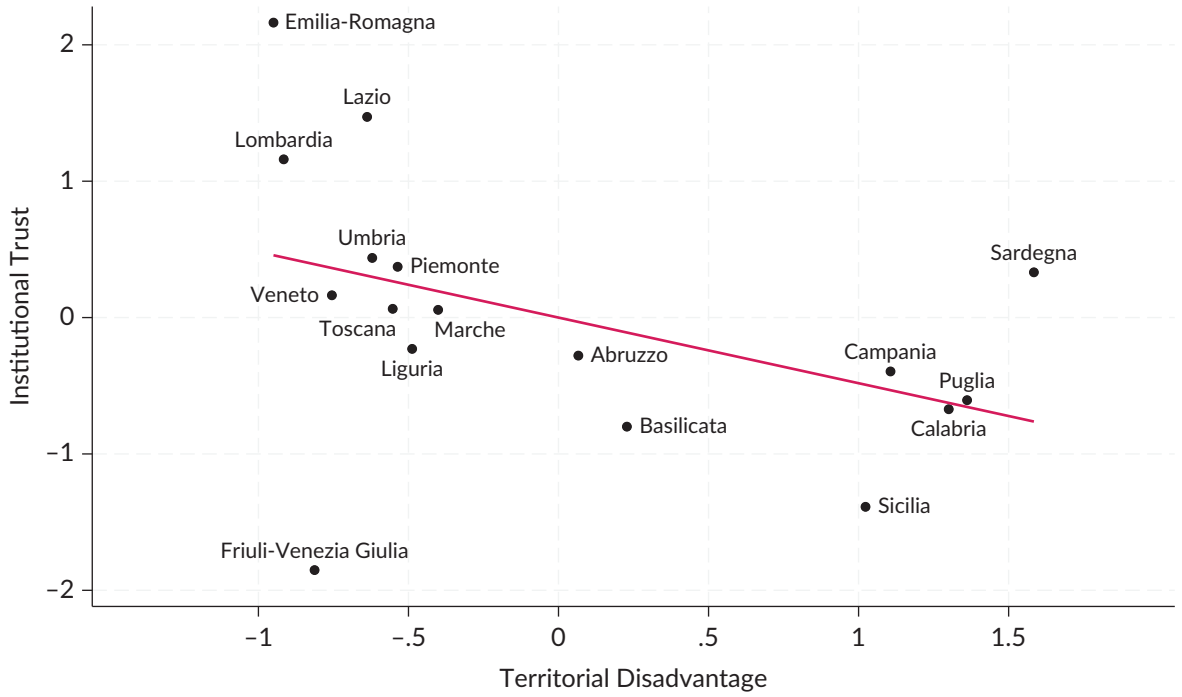

Figure 5. Trust vs. socioeconomic disadvantage.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This article examined how persistent territorial inequalities and lower confidence in electoral democracy shape both abstention and populist voting in Italy. Using provincial data for the 2008–2018 elections, we combined descriptive analysis, factor analysis, and panel regressions to identify the structural foundations of political disaffection. The results show that abstention and support for M5S and The League are stronger in provinces characterized by economic fragility, demographic decline, and insecurity—conditions that weaken social cohesion and the functioning of representative institutions. Dynamic panel estimates also reveal strong persistence in electoral behavior, indicating that patterns of abstention and partisan support tend to reinforce themselves over time.

While The League consolidated its support in Northern regions, M5S remained more strongly associated with economically and institutionally fragile Southern provinces. Mainstream parties display weaker and less systematic territorial linkages, with FI in particular experiencing a gradual erosion of its electoral base. Overall, these findings suggest that abstention and populist voting reflect long-term territorial disparities rather than short-term reactions to policy performance.

Addressing democratic disaffection, therefore, requires tackling its territorial roots by reducing regional inequalities, improving public services, and strengthening local governance. Future research could further explore the micro-level mechanisms linking territorial disadvantage, institutional trust, and electoral behavior, as well as extend the analysis to other European contexts experiencing similar political realignments.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data is available upon request.

LLMs Disclosure

The authors used a large language model (ChatGPT) solely for language editing and text compression during the revision process. The model was not used to generate scientific content, perform analyses, or interpret results. All arguments, analyses, and conclusions remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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