

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From criticism to pragmatism? The impact of NGEU funding on party-based Euroscepticism in Italy[‡]

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[‡]This article has been updated since original publication. A notice detailing the change has been published.

(Received 18 March 2025; revised 18 August 2025; accepted 17 September 2025; first published online 14 November 2025)

Abstract

How do Euroskeptical parties adjust their rhetoric when the European Union expands its fiscal and redistributive role? We address this question by examining the impact of the next-generation EU (NGEU) program on parliamentary debates in Italy, the largest beneficiary of EU recovery funds. Drawing on an original dataset of over 700 hand-coded parliamentary statements covering 30 debates in the Italian Chamber of Deputies (2018–2024), we show that the launch of NGEU coincided with a measurable increase in supportive rhetoric toward the EU, especially among parties with Euroskeptical profiles, a shift that is not solely attributable to changes in government status. Our findings suggest that EU-level redistributive policies can contribute to altering, at least temporarily, domestic party discourse in parliament, pointing to the domestic political relevance of fiscal integration

Keywords: discourse analysis Euroscepticism; national recovery and resilience plan; next-generation EU; parliament; political parties

Introduction

In an interview with *El País* on 19 December 2024, Marine Le Pen, leader of the French Rassemblement National, remarked, “I understand that Italy is in a different situation to France, and I am not judging Giorgia [Meloni]. The Recovery Plan that she received, essential for her financial stability, has nothing to do with that of France: €194 billion, against €40 billion. Italy needs to rely on the EU. We are not in that situation; we are free to criticize Von der Leyen’s Commission, the quintessence of everything we fight against” (Verdú, 2024). Le Pen’s statement underscores a relevant but unexplored dynamic in contemporary European politics: the extent to which financial dependence on EU funding can temper Euroskeptical rhetoric.

Italy, as the largest beneficiary of the next-generation EU (NGEU) funding program, provides a compelling case study for assessing how European economic incentives contribute to shaping party discourse on European integration. Traditionally Euroskeptical parties, such as Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d’Italia*, FdI) and Matteo Salvini’s League (*Lega*), now face a strategic dilemma – how to reconcile their nationalist, anti-Brussels messaging with the reality of unprecedented EU financial support. This article examines whether and how Italy’s receipt of substantial

EU funds through the recovery and resilience facility (RRF) has influenced the rhetoric of political parties in parliamentary debates. Has the EU's innovative "carrot-and-stick" approach – linking financial assistance to national reform commitments (Vanhercke and Verdun, 2022) – led to a rhetorical softening among historically Euroskeptic parties? Or do these parties maintain their critical stance despite the economic benefits? By analyzing parliamentary debates from the past two Italian legislatures, this study investigates shifts in oppositional behavior toward the EU, contributing to broader discussions on the interplay between supranational governance and domestic political dynamics.

This topic is both academically and policy-relevant. Academically, there has been a longstanding debate on what drives support for or opposition to the EU at the level of political parties (e.g. Hooghe, 2007; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2013; Braun *et al.*, 2019; Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2024). This debate has gained momentum over the last decades due to the discussion on whether EU integration has entered a phase of "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe and Marks, 2009; see also Capati and Christiansen, 2025). This shift is evidenced by the rising Euroscepticism among political elites and in public opinion (e.g. Hobolt and Tilley, 2014; Hutter *et al.*, 2016; De Vries, 2018), which has been fueled by a series of successive crises (Zeitlin *et al.*, 2019). A growing body of literature has examined how the RRF and NRRPs not only contributed to reshaping the economic governance of the EU but also significantly affected the domestic politics of its member states (Capati, 2023; Corti and Vesan, 2023; Guidi *et al.*, 2023; Bokhorst and Corti, 2024; Borghetto *et al.*, 2024; Miró *et al.*, 2024; Zeitlin *et al.*, 2025). While some works have investigated the influence of party politics in the formulation of NRPPs (Munta *et al.*, 2023; Oellerich and Simons, 2023; Miró *et al.*, 2024), we know relatively little about the impact that this unprecedented set of measures had on the attitudes of political parties toward the EU.

The response to this question certainly has implications for EU policy as well. Many voices – including EU officials, scholars, and media commentators – underscored that the RRF was not only an economic tool, but a political one (Armingeon *et al.*, 2022). It was explicitly designed to show European citizens that the Union can protect and assist them in a crisis, thereby avoiding the errors that fueled mistrust and Euroscepticism in the 2010s. This article serves as the first evaluation of whether this display of solidarity – the substantial financial assistance provided to member states through common borrowing – and new forms of conditionality attached to national plans have influenced political parties' EU discourse in the domestic arena. In light of what has just been said, we expect that, first, following the adoption of the NGEU, Italian political parties, *ceteris paribus*, increased their support for and reduced their oppositional behavior toward the EU. Second, we expect this shift to be particularly marked for Euroskeptic parties. Our focus is on Italy, a "most likely case" since it received a large amount of EU funding in absolute and relative terms for its NRRP, and thus can be considered a plausibility probe of our test. Moreover, Italy is an ideal case because different government coalitions have been in power during the negotiation and implementation of the NRRP: a coalition between the center-left Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, PD) and the Five Star Movement (*Movimento Cinque Stelle*, M5S) under Conte II; then a broad technocratic government that included major parties across the political spectrum with Draghi; and finally a right-wing government led by FdI in coalition with the League and Forward Italy (*Forza Italia*, FI), under Meloni. This variation allows us to control for the impact of being in government, an important alternative explanation for the moderation of party-based Euroscepticism.

Our empirical investigation relies on a unique dataset of hand-coded plenary debates concerning the "Communications of the Prime Minister" on upcoming European Council meetings in the Italian Chamber of Deputies from 2018 to 2024, spanning two legislative terms. Our in-depth assessment of support and opposition to the EU in over 700 statements made by members of parliament (MPs) reveals a shift in party discourse toward the EU following the adoption of NGEU. In particular, we find that parties, especially those with Euroskeptic views, moderated their criticism and adopted

more supportive language after the program's launch, a change that incumbency status cannot solely explain.

The article is structured as follows. It first outlines our theoretically derived hypotheses. Next, it outlines our research design, methodology, and data. Finally, we present our analysis and discuss the main results.

State of the art

Previous research has shown that multiple crises over the past decades, along with the EU's responses to them, have fueled political dissensus within the European Union (Hutter *et al.*, 2016; Zeitlin *et al.*, 2019). This was particularly evident during the sovereign debt crisis, when the EU-driven enforcement of fiscal austerity exacerbated public and party-based Euroscepticism, especially in the most affected countries (Brack and Startin, 2015; Braun *et al.*, 2019; De Vries, 2018; Foster and Frieden, 2021; Hobolt and Tilley, 2018; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2015; Conti *et al.*, 2020, specifically on Italy).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the EU adopted a markedly different strategy. To prevent the repetition of past mistakes, rather than fiscal restraint, the EU prioritized economic solidarity and risk-sharing mechanisms (Buti and Fabbrini, 2022; Capati, 2023; Fabbrini, 2024; Schramm and Terranova, 2024). This learning was driven not only by economic rationale, but also by a recognition of the political costs of failing to support member states in times of crisis. As Armingeon *et al.* (2022: 160) observe, the new approach was designed as a "reaction to political vulnerabilities that inevitably follow from economic vulnerabilities" (see also Ladi and Wolff, 2021; Schelkle, 2021; Nicoli and Zeitlin, 2024). Notably, they provide evidence that countries with strong anti-EU sentiment were allocated particularly high per capita grants from the NGEU fund. In contrast, the distribution of NGEU grants did not appear to be linked to the severity of the health crisis during the first half of 2020. In other words, by offering grants and demonstrating solidarity, the aim was to deprive populists of the ammunition needed to provoke a political backlash against the EU. Moreover, the RRF marked a departure from the negative conditionality that characterized previous interventions. Instead, it took a carrot-and-stick approach (Vanhercke and Verdun, 2022) combining financial incentives ("carrots") with requests for reform ("sticks") to encourage member states' compliance while fostering national ownership of policy plans (Munta *et al.*, 2023; Miró *et al.*, 2024; Zeitlin *et al.*, 2025).

With that being said, our understanding of how EU financial assistance affects domestic political debates remains limited. While existing research indicates that EU funding – especially in the form of structural and cohesion funds – can foster support for European integration at both individual and regional levels (Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Chalmers and Dellmuth, 2015; Radojičić, 2024), and may reduce backing for Eurosceptic parties (Henceroth and Oganessian, 2019; Rodríguez-Pose and Dijkstra, 2020; Vergioglou, 2023), these findings are nuanced and context-dependent. This trend aligns with cost-benefit analyses suggesting that economic incentives shape attitudes toward European integration (Foster and Frieden, 2021). According to a rationalist institutionalist framework (Hix, 2007), attitudes toward the EU are not fixed, but responsive to evolving incentives and perceived interests, implying that today's critics could become tomorrow's supporters if their circumstances improve.

Drawing on this literature, our first hypothesis investigates whether the NGEU achieved its intended objective: reducing the Euroscepticism that had been exacerbated by the EU's austerity-driven, conditionality-based approach to the sovereign debt crisis. We therefore propose:

H1: Following the adoption of the NGEU, political parties increased their support for and/or reduced their criticism of the EU.

Our second hypothesis suggests that the new phase initiated by NGEU will have a more pronounced impact on the rhetoric of Eurosceptic parties, while its effect on pro-EU parties will be minimal. This expectation is grounded in existing literature that explores the reasons behind

parties' shifts toward or away from Euroscepticism. One dominant explanation for party-based Euroscepticism is rooted in party family traditions and ideological cleavages: mainstream parties (social democrats, liberals) generally support integration, while radical left and radical right parties are more skeptical (Marks and Wilson, 2000; Hooghe *et al.*, 2002; Halikiopoulou *et al.*, 2012; Vasilopoulou, 2018).

A related perspective highlights the mainstream-radical divide, suggesting that mainstream parties tend to support European integration, while radical parties – both left and right – are more prone to Euroscepticism (Hooghe *et al.*, 2002; De Vries and Edwards, 2009; Conti and Memoli, 2012), and so are antiestablishment and populist parties (Pirro and Taggart, 2018; Braun *et al.*, 2019; Taggart and Pirro, 2021; Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2024). These parties often deploy Euroscepticism as a tool to differentiate themselves from the political mainstream, capitalizing on public discontent with EU institutions. A similar logic applies to challenger parties – those with no prior experience in government – who may use Euroscepticism to gain visibility and contrast themselves with incumbent elites (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). Importantly, this literature also suggests that Euroscepticism among these parties is often strategic rather than purely ideological, meaning that they may adjust their rhetoric in response to changing incentives, including participation in government and funding provided by the EU. From this perspective, rhetorical positions are not fixed but contingent on context and opportunity structures.

At the same time, the literature is divided on whether and why political parties alter their positions on issues related to European integration. Building on reputational theory and cleavage theory, some scholars argue that mainstream parties would incur “credibility” and internal “cohesion” costs from changing their (generally longstanding) attitudes in favor of European integration (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2015). As a result, these parties tend to remain rhetorically consistent, even amid rising public Euroscepticism or the electoral gains of Euroskeptical competitors (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2015, p. 141). By contrast, challenger parties – particularly those already skeptical of the EU – may be unlikely to revise their attitude because it is a way to differentiate themselves from mainstream parties (Taggart, 1998) and attract disenchanted voters (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020).

Other works, building on the spatial theory of voting, stress the dynamics of competitive party politics and thus examine the strategies adopted by (generally pro-European) mainstream political parties to compete with Euroskeptical challenger parties (Meijers, 2017, p. 413). Since public opinion has become more Euroskeptical, mainstream parties have an incentive to adopt less pro-European, or even Euroskeptical, rhetoric in order to attract anti-EU voters. The greater the electoral success of Euroskeptical actors, the more likely mainstream parties are to shift their discourse to retain or recapture voters. Yet from this vantage point, rhetorical shifts may also respond to material incentives, not just electoral ones.

We hypothesize that Euroskeptical parties are particularly susceptible to external financial incentives, such as those introduced through NGEU funds, because their opposition to the EU is often contingent on political or economic grievances. If the EU is seen as providing tangible economic benefits, the rationale for maintaining a Euroskeptical stance weakens. This aligns with research suggesting that parties may shift their EU position when faced with material gains or changing public sentiment (Foster and Frieden, 2021; Taggart and Pirro, 2021). Accordingly, we expect that the financial assistance and stabilizing effects of the NGEU, combined with the possibility of framing national ownership of recovery plans, will exert a moderating influence on the rhetoric of Euroskeptical parties.

H2: Following the adoption of the NGEU, traditionally Euroskeptical parties will increase their level of EU support and decrease their oppositional attitude toward Europe more than mainstream parties.

While we emphasize the strategic adaptation of party rhetoric in response to the NGEU, it is important to acknowledge that such rhetorical shifts may emerge through multiple mechanisms. For governing parties, moderation may reflect a direct material interest in managing and implementing EU recovery funds, which creates incentives to project alignment with EU priorities. For opposition

parties, however, rhetorical moderation may be driven more by reputational concerns or anticipatory incentives – such as the desire to appear credible governing alternatives, to respond to changing public opinion, or to position themselves for future coalition opportunities. These distinct pathways highlight that rhetorical change is not exclusively a function of incumbency or ideology, but also of the strategic and reputational logic that parties face within a dynamic political and economic context. Our hypotheses reflect this multidimensional understanding, expecting that parties – especially those with Euroskeptical profiles – will moderate their rhetoric following the launch of the NGEU, regardless of their immediate position in government or opposition.

Research design and methodology

This study examines patterns of Euroscepticism in the Italian Chamber of Deputies (the lower chamber) from February 2018 to December 2024, a period spanning two legislative periods, four cabinets, and marked by the launch of the NGEU program in 2020. The analysis relies on a newly collected dataset of 30 plenary debates concerning the “Communications of the Prime Minister” about upcoming European Council meetings (for more information, see section 2 in the Appendix).

Examining Euroscepticism in the context of plenary debates offers several methodological advantages. These meetings are reasonably transparent, as deliberations with the Prime Minister are broadcast, and stenographic minutes from the meetings are made available to the public. This provides us with sufficiently fine-grained data to identify shifts in tone and content in party positions toward the EU. Furthermore, compared to other institutional settings, most notably standing committees, plenary debates are arguably more visible to the public, providing parties with greater incentives to engage in signaling behavior to their constituents (Williams and Spoon, 2015) and issue competition strategies. As a result, we argue that plenary debates are an ideal setting for advancing our understanding of the forces driving Euroscepticism at the national level.

The units of analysis in our study are the oral contributions made by individual MPs in response to the Prime Minister’s briefings. Overall, our dataset consists of 725 statements hand-coded independently by two researchers. Inter-coder reliability was high (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.89$), and disagreements were reconciled through team discussion. We decided to exclude 138 statements made by MPs from the mixed group, as it is a composition of smaller parties with sometimes different ideological leanings, making it challenging to attribute a coherent rhetorical strategy on European affairs to it. For each of the remaining 587 statements, we assessed the presence of support and/or opposition to the EU. Political science literature offers no univocal definitions of these concepts. One possible operationalization concerns the object of (dis)agreement, namely, whether it is directed at the policy, at conduct in politics, or toward the political system (Persson *et al.*, 2024). This categorization somewhat resonates with the widely recognized distinction between “hard” and “soft” Euroscepticism (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008). Hard Euroscepticism refers to a principled rejection of the European integration project and opposition to the transfer of national sovereignty to supranational institutions, such as the EU. In contrast, soft Euroscepticism encompasses criticism of the EU’s current or future direction, particularly regarding the expansion of its competencies. While acknowledging the theoretical relevance of these approaches, this piece focuses on the overall dynamics of party-based Euroscepticism. We, therefore, consider all forms of opposition and support as significant insofar as they are directed toward the EU.

In line with previous studies on parliamentary behavior, we distinguish between two types of opposition: the expression of criticism and the presentation of alternatives (see, for instance, Karlsson and Persson, 2022; Persson *et al.*, 2024). Although both involve some extent of disagreement, the distinction between the two is crucial since they usually serve two different purposes. On the one hand, explicit criticism is mostly voiced by actors expressing opposition toward general issues, such as EU governance, treaties, and institutions (Senninger, 2017). On the other hand, actors presenting alternatives address specific policies promoted and implemented by the EU (Garritzmann, 2017). Thus, we

Table 1. Type of parliamentary statements by party

Party	Statements	Support	Criticism	Alternative
Brothers of Italy	82	29 (35.4%)	48 (58.5%)	39 (47.6%)
Five Star Movement	82	46 (56.1%)	29 (35.4%)	43 (52.4%)
Democratic Party	78	66 (84.6%)	6 (7.7%)	34 (43.6%)
Go Italy	71	52 (73.2%)	11 (15.5%)	39 (54.9%)
League	70	15 (21.4%)	53 (75.7%)	45 (64.3%)
Left	61	35 (57.4%)	17 (27.9%)	40 (65.6%)
Italy Alive	42	40 (95.2%)	1 (2.4%)	16 (38.1%)
More Europe	28	19 (67.9%)	3 (10.7%)	4 (14.3%)
Us moderates	28	23 (82.1%)	5 (17.9%)	13 (46.4%)
Action	26	20 (76.9%)	2 (7.7%)	8 (30.8%)
Südtiroler Volkspartei	19	17 (89.5%)	1 (5.3%)	0 (0%)

Note: Own data.

regard the latter as a more moderate form of opposition. Based on these distinctions, we coded each statement into one or more of the following categories: (1) support, (2) criticism, and (3) alternative (see Appendix, sections 3 and 4).

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of parliamentary statements across the three categories for each political party, providing both absolute values and percentages relative to their total number of statements. First of all, we observe that the distribution of statements varies extensively across parties. These results, in part, stem from the fact that some are not present for the entire study period: Action (*Azione*, Az), Italy Alive (*Italia Viva*, IV), and Us Moderates (*Noi Moderati*, NM) were absent during the Conte I cabinet. In part, it has to do with the fact that some have a small delegation in parliament and are given less speaking time (+*Europa* and *Südtiroler Volkspartei*). In consideration of these disparities, the descriptive section will show data on all parties, whereas the multivariate analysis will only focus on the six biggest parties with a continuous presence in parliament during the study period.

In substantive terms, the data reveal distinct party strategies in their engagement with EU affairs and their attitudes toward the EU. Italy Alive (95.2% of statements falling within the “support” category), PD (84.6%), and US Moderates (82.1%) exhibit a strong tendency to support EU policies, projecting an image of broadly pro-European parties. Conversely, the League (75.7% of statements falling within the “criticism” category) and FdI (58.5%) are the most critical parties, which is in line with their historically Euroskeptic positioning (e.g. Caiani and Conti, 2014; Conti *et al.*, 2020). Further evidence of this critical stance is that, in 19 out of 53 critical statements by the League, the attack is directed against the European polity itself, not just its policies (for FdI, this figure drops to 9 out of 48).

Meanwhile, the M5S and the Left (*Sinistra Italiana*, SI) display a more balanced approach, distributing their engagement across support, critical, and alternative proposals. Notably, the Italian Left (65.6%) and, once again, the League (64.3%) register the highest share of “alternative” statements, suggesting an active role in shaping policy debates, not merely reacting to existing measures. All in all, the high share of alternative proposals among both ideological camps challenges the conventional Euroskeptic vs. pro-European dichotomy, highlighting that EU policy debates in parliament are more complex than a binary opposition. It suggests that political contestation over EU affairs frequently manifests as argumentative engagement rather than outright rejection.

For our multivariate analysis, we created three models, where the dependent variable is a dummy variable, taking the value of one if a party uses any of the three categories of statements. To test our first hypothesis about the impact of NGEU (H1), we created a time categorical variable taking one if the debate takes place after July 2020, namely, after the European Council meeting when NGEU was adopted.

Whereas party categories are considered a control variable in the first three models, they are included in interaction with NGEU to test our second hypothesis. In line with our reading of the

relevant literature, we expect the impact of *NGEU* to be stronger for traditionally Euroskeptical parties, increasing their level of EU support and decreasing their oppositional attitude toward Europe to a greater extent than for mainstream parties (H2). To classify a party as Euroskeptical, we cross-checked two expert survey sources: populist (Rooduijn *et al.*, 2023) and Chapel Hill Expert (CHES) surveys conducted in 2019 and 2024 (Jolly *et al.*, 2022, Rovny *et al.*, 2025). According to these surveys, three parties can be classified as such in the two legislative terms under study: FdI, the League, and the M5S. With that being said, their stances toward European integration varied over our study period. According to CHES data, the League maintained consistent and strong opposition. In contrast, M5S and FdI showed notable moderation in their EU positions, suggesting a shift away from hard Euroscepticism (see Table A1 in the Appendix). Including this ideological shift helps contextualize our subsequent analysis and reinforces our understanding of how evolving parties' EU positions relate to changes observed in parliamentary rhetoric. If Hypothesis 2 is correct, then as Italy becomes one of the greatest beneficiaries of *NGEU* funding, these parties should moderate their Euroskeptical tone.

An important moderating factor we should control for is whether the speaker is affiliated with a party in government (1) or opposition (0) at the moment of intervening in the debate. Building on the responsibility-responsiveness dilemma (Mair, 2014), the hypothesized effect is that parties in government moderate their Euroskeptical positions, while parties in opposition have less incentive to do so. Governing parties are expected to act responsibly, abiding by EU commitments, operating within the supranational constraints set by the EU, and collaborating with EU institutions. By contrast, opposition parties can be more responsive to their electorate and the prevailing public opinion (Spoon and Klüver, 2014; Spoon and Williams, 2017). As a result, these parties have more leeway to criticize the EU and the EU-level compromise made by the government (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). This also chimes well with the literature on oppositional behavior to the EU in parliament. Of particular interest are works that investigate it by ascribing considerable explanatory power to party characteristics, such as the degree of Euroscepticism (which relates to our H2) or whether parties are in government or opposition (Hoerner, 2017; Senninger, 2017; Tuttnauer, 2018; Karlsson and Persson, 2022).

Empirical analysis

Table 2 shows the estimates of six regression models testing H1 (models 1–3) and H2 (models 4–6). We calculate standard errors clustered for each European Council object of the Prime Minister's communication to account for external events and political dynamics that dominated the European summit on that occasion, and that might have affected all parties' positions (for instance, summits focused on the Russian attack against Ukraine in February 2022). In the following, we report both average predicted effects (APE) and average marginal effects (AME) to provide a comprehensive picture of how party discourse has evolved. APEs illustrate overall trends in party rhetoric before and after *NGEU* adoption (Figures 1–4), while AMEs isolate the specific impact of our explanatory factors on party rhetoric. This allows us to distinguish between broad temporal shifts and the magnitude of the effect.

The empirical results indicate that transitioning from the pre-*NGEU* to the post-*NGEU* period is associated with an increased probability of parties expressing supportive statements toward the EU, along with a reduced likelihood of critical and alternative proposals. Figure 1 illustrates these effects using APEs. Although these results align with our theoretical expectations, only the increase in supportive statements approaches conventional levels of statistical significance. Specifically, AMEs reveal that the adoption of the *NGEU* correlates with approximately a 10 percentage-point increase in supportive rhetoric. At the same time, the estimated reductions for critical and alternative statements are smaller and statistically indistinguishable from zero. Thus, our first hypothesis receives partial support: the adoption of the *NGEU* is primarily associated with increased pro-EU rhetoric, but evidence for a corresponding decline in critical discourse remains inconclusive.

Table 2. Logistic regression results

	Support	Criticism	Alternative	Support (with interaction)	Criticism (with interaction)	Alternative (with interaction)
NGEU	0.58 (0.27)*	-0.38 (0.33)	-0.23 (0.30)	-0.52 (0.68)	0.08 (0.64)	-0.44 (0.54)
In government	1.69 (0.33)***	-1.25 (0.31)***	0.46 (0.20)*	1.50 (0.34)***	-1.12 (0.35)**	0.30 (0.22)
PD	1.67 (0.44)***	-1.66 (0.41)***	-0.90 (0.37)*	1.37 (0.62)*	-1.67 (0.54)**	-1.37 (0.47)**
M5S	-0.37 (0.56)	0.62 (0.41)	-0.61 (0.32) +	-0.91 (0.89)	0.52 (0.81)	0.00 (0.61)
FI	0.99 (0.45)*	-0.90 (0.48) +	-0.46 (0.30)	0.15 (0.53)	-0.84 (0.75)	-0.86 (0.45) +
Fdi	-0.87 (0.48) +	1.27 (0.39)**	-0.68 (0.26)*	-17.48 (0.65)***	2.45 (0.63)***	-0.79 (0.54)
League	-2.16 (0.64)***	2.51 (0.49)***	-0.17 (0.40)	-3.49 (1.15)**	3.35 (1.08)**	-0.52 (0.71)
PD × NGEU				0.36 (0.83)	0.06 (0.77)	0.72 (0.69)
M5S × NGEU				0.89 (1.10)	0.03 (0.94)	-0.79 (0.74)
FI × NGEU				1.33 (0.91)	0.12 (0.98)	0.65 (0.62)
Fdi × NGEU				17.31 (0.79)***	-1.60 (0.79)*	0.15 (0.63)
League × NGEU				2.00 (1.30)	-1.30 (1.07)	0.64 (0.83)
Num. Obs.	444	444	444	444	444	444
Log. Lik.	-230.908	-220.002	-298.021	-223.158	-216.412	-295.072

Note: Coefficients from logistic regression models predicting the likelihood of different types of political statements (Support, Criticism, and Alternative), with and without interaction effects. Standard errors are clustered around the European Council to which the debate is dedicated and are reported in parentheses. Statistically significant coefficients are indicated with $p < 0.10$ (+), $p < 0.05$ (*), $p < 0.01$ (**), and $p < 0.001$ (***).

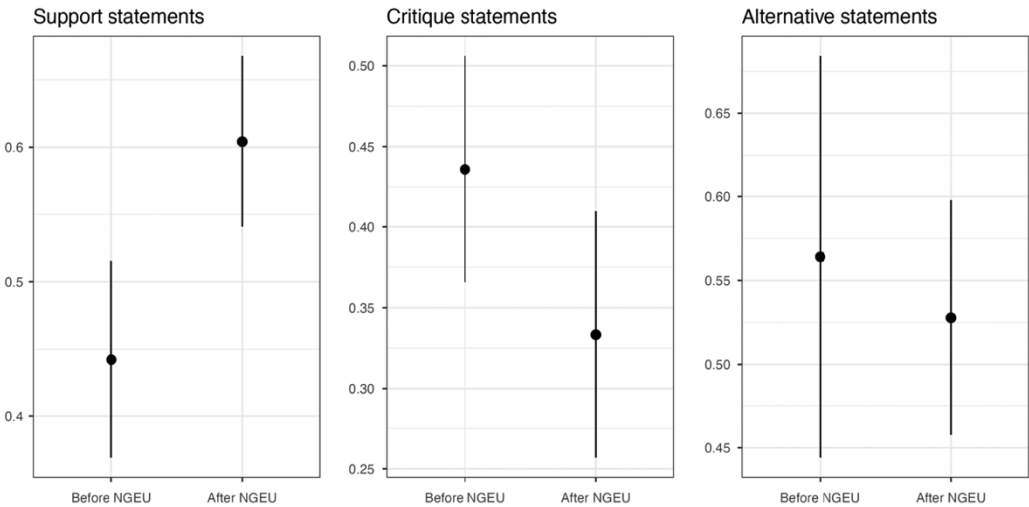


Figure 1. Average predicted probability of making a statement about the EU before and after NGEU.

Concerning our other control variable, government status emerges as a powerful explanatory factor for variations in party discourse toward the EU, significantly increasing support and alternative statements (AMEs: 33% and 11%, respectively) and substantially decreasing critical statements (AME: -22%). This finding suggests that the moderation of Euroscepticism cannot be attributed solely to the economic incentives provided by the NGEU but also reflects institutional and strategic pressures associated with government responsibilities.

But were traditionally Euroskeptical parties more affected by this shift than their mainstream counterparts? The analysis of supportive statements reveals a significant increase in the likelihood of making pro-EU statements for two of these parties: Fdi, whose APE of supportive statements rose dramatically from 0% in the pre-NGEU period to 50% post-NGEU, and the League, whose probability increased from 7% to 32% (Figure 2). In contrast, M5S showed only a slight change. When examining

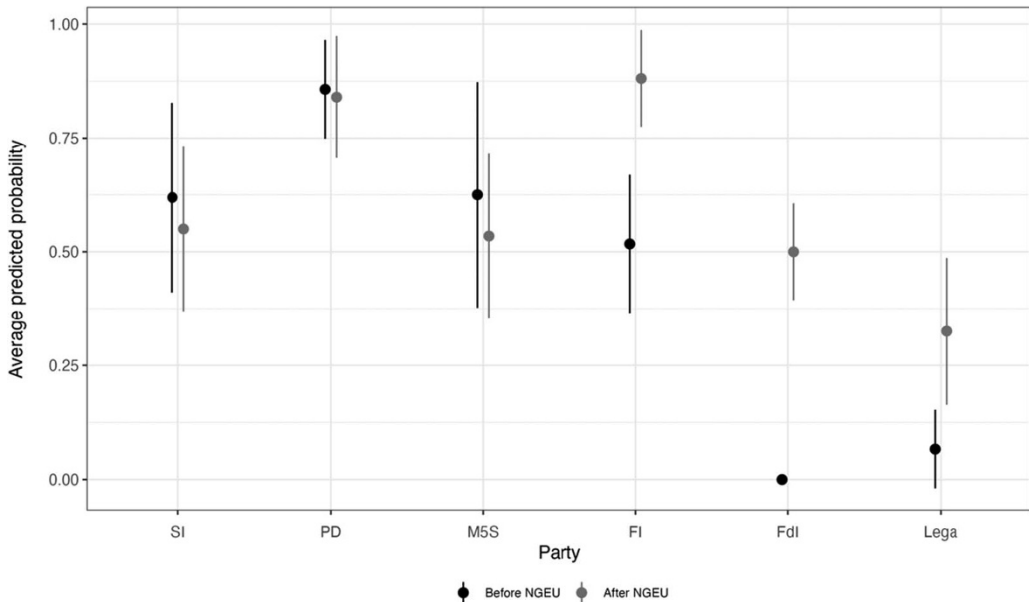


Figure 2. Average predicted probability of making a support statement about the EU before and after NGEU by party.

AMEs, the transition to the NGEU period increased the probability of supportive rhetoric by 45% for FdI and 20% for the League. Our analysis of APE for critical statements similarly highlights this moderation effect: both right-wing parties emerge as the only ones noticeably softening their critical positions (Figure 3). In substantive terms, the introduction of NGEU contributed to reducing the likelihood of FdI and the League issuing critical statements by 30% and 19%, respectively. Finally, the analysis of alternative statements reveals limited overall change in APEs (Figure 4). An important exception is M5S: moving from pre-NGEU to post-NGEU decreases their probability of making an alternative statement by 29 percentage points.

Overall, these results suggest that the post-NGEU phase is associated with a softening of hard Euroscepticism, as parties such as the League and FdI move away from outright rejection toward more pragmatic positions on EU matters. Conversely, pro-European parties show minimal variation. Collectively, these findings partly confirm our second hypothesis. They highlight how the demonstration of EU financial solidarity in response to the pandemic crisis may have contributed to fostering a political atmosphere marked by more tempered Euroscepticism. Overall, these findings suggest that while the NGEU may have helped reshape parties' critical rhetoric toward the EU, its impact on their tendency to put forward constructive criticism (i.e. alternative statements) was more limited. This highlights the need for a future examination of the strategic repositioning by specific parties, particularly the M5S, to make sense of these results.

While our results illustrate significant temporal patterns, it is crucial to remember that they do not establish a direct causal relationship between NGEU and changes in party discourse. Moreover, our analysis cannot confirm whether shifts in rhetoric resulted primarily from a utilitarian logic based on parties' cost-benefit calculations or from broader perceptions of increased EU legitimacy due to its responsiveness to recent crises. Additionally, we cannot yet determine whether party rhetoric leads or follows public opinion (Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Hooghe, 2007; Williams and Spoon, 2015). To partially address this last limitation, we complemented our analysis with public opinion data from the Eurobarometer, which provides biannual measurements of citizen support for the EU (Table A9 in the Appendix). Our analysis reveals a strong correlation between shifts in public support for the

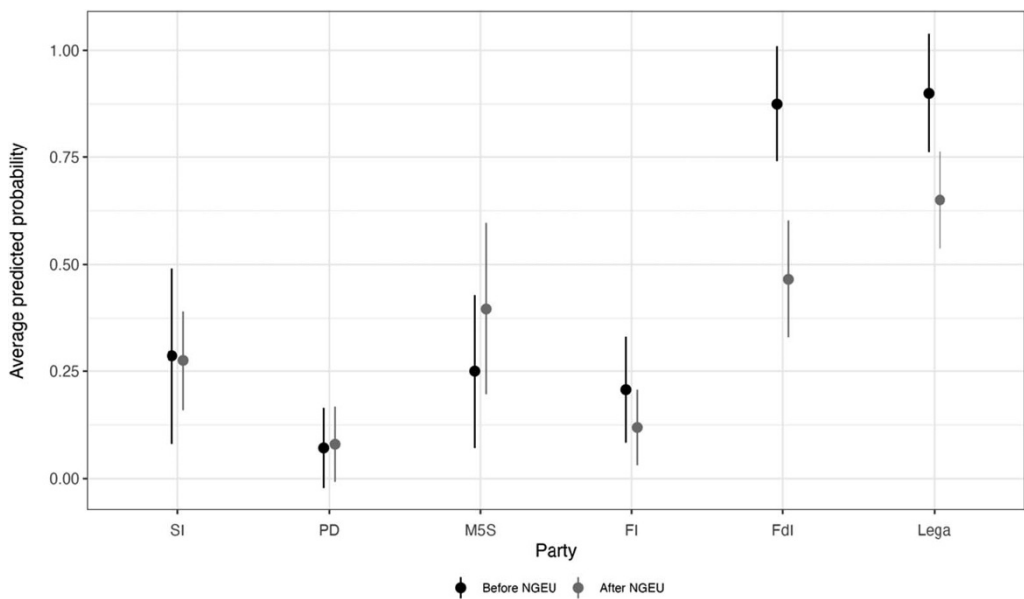


Figure 3. Average predicted probability of making a critical statement about the EU before and after NGEU by party.

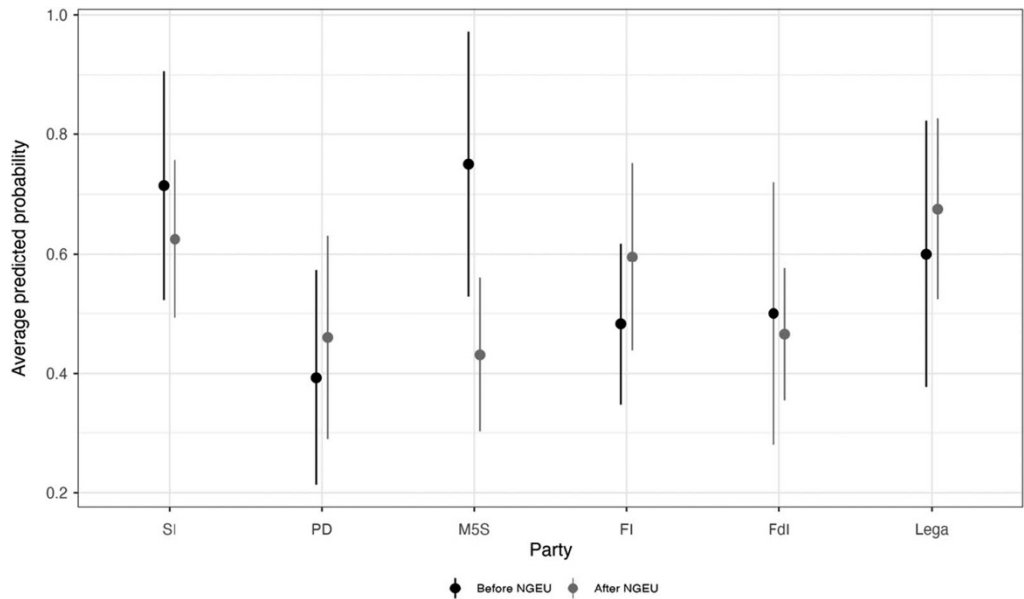


Figure 4. Average predicted probability of making an alternative statement about the EU before and after NGEU by party.

EU and our NGEU-based periodization, suggesting that the adoption of the NGEU coincided with a significant increase in EU support (on this, see also Papageorgiou and Immonen, 2023; Unger *et al.*, 2023). On average, our index rose from 56 before NGEU to 65 after, potentially reflecting a positive public response to the EU’s financial intervention and crisis management efforts. When we replace the binary NGEU variable with our continuous measure of public EU support, we find that for every 10 percentage-point increase in our index, the likelihood that parties express supportive statements rises

significantly by approximately 14%. Conversely, an increase in public support toward the EU is negatively associated with the likelihood of making critical or alternative political statements, though the strength and certainty of this relationship vary across models. Thus, while public opinion appears to be a clear driver of increased supportive rhetoric (a trend broadly aligned with the patterns observed in Table 2 for the NGEU dummy), we find limited evidence that it independently reduces critical or alternative forms of contestation toward the EU.

Another issue to discuss is the difficulty of fully disentangling the effects of NGEU and incumbency due to data limitations in our multivariate model. To address this, we conducted additional robustness checks based on subsets of the data in which party status remained constant (e.g. FdI in opposition; League and M5S in government), which are suggestive of rhetorical moderation independent of role-switching (Tables A10–A13), though the evidence is not uniform across parties or categories of statements. An analysis focused exclusively on the Conte II government, where party roles were fixed, does not show clear signs of rhetorical moderation among Euroskeptic parties following the NGEU's adoption in July 2020. We attribute this null result to the short postadoption period before the government's collapse in January 2021, which left little time for parties to adjust their rhetorical strategies.

To further assess whether the rhetorical impact of NGEU differed between government and opposition parties, we estimated two alternative model specifications. First, Table A14 reports estimates from a binary logistic regression with party fixed effects, including an interaction term between in-government status and the post-NGEU period indicator. Second, Table A15 presents results from a multilevel (mixed-effects) logistic regression with a random intercept for party–cabinet combinations, which removes the collinearity between party fixed effects and the interaction term while allowing intercepts to vary by party–cabinet unit. In both specifications, the estimated interaction term is small in magnitude and not statistically significant for any of the three dependent variables, indicating that government and opposition parties exhibited broadly similar changes in discourse following NGEU. The consistency of this result across fixed-effects and random-intercept specifications suggests that the observed moderation cannot be attributed solely to incumbency-related incentives.

Finally, we also conducted two additional robustness checks. First, we re-estimated our models excluding all statements made between May and December 2020, the period immediately following the announcement of NGEU, to assess whether this salient debate window influenced our results. As shown in Table A16 in the Appendix, the direction and magnitude of the coefficients remain substantively unchanged, though confidence intervals widen slightly due to the reduced sample size. Second, we used an alternative temporal cutoff – August 2021 – corresponding to the date Italy received €24.9 billion in prefinancing from the European Commission (13 August 2021), to test whether the receipt of the first tranche might constitute a more meaningful watershed (Table A17). Re-running our logistic regression models with this alternative periodization likewise did not substantively alter our results.

Conclusion

The empirical analysis presented in this article reveals notable shifts in Italian parliamentary discourse on the EU following the introduction of the NGEU program. Our coding of parliamentary statements documents a marked increase in supportive rhetoric and a noteworthy decline in Euroskeptic criticism, particularly among traditionally Euroskeptic parties. Both the League and Brothers of Italy significantly moderated their rhetoric toward the EU. The Five Star Movement, by contrast, displayed a more uneven trajectory, likely reflecting its lack of a coherent ideological stance on European integration. At the same time, our findings also underline the complexity of isolating the impact of EU interventions from broader political dynamics. While we observe a strong association between NGEU and rhetorical moderation, a pattern we interpret as a strategic response to material incentives and

the conditionality attached to EU funding, our ability to fully disentangle the impact of incumbency is limited by the nature of the case and dataset.

Our findings contribute to the literature in two ways. To begin with, we add to the literature on party-based Euroscepticism, providing evidence that traditionally Eurosceptic parties can strategically moderate their opposition to the EU if certain incentives are in place (in this case, substantial amounts of EU funding). At least in the medium term, strategic behavior (some refer to it as “pragmatic,” Fasola and Lucarelli, 2024) appears to outweigh ideology in shaping political parties’ attitudes toward the EU. Second, our findings shed light on the effects of the RRF on the domestic politics of member states. EU funding has not only supported national economic recovery but has also contributed to discursive shifts that temper political opposition to the EU within member-state parliaments. Yet, it remains to be seen whether these effects will be long-lasting or only temporary; in other words, what will happen once EU funding stops and the loans that Italy received from the EU must be repaid.

The generalizability of our findings must be qualified: we have examined only one country – admittedly the most likely case – and focused solely on certain instances of parliamentary debates. Most importantly, we do not consider other outlets, notably mass media and social media, where political parties also express opinions on EU matters. Future research could explore these outlets to determine whether the analysis of political parties’ statements concerning the EU reported in those channels yields results similar to ours. Furthermore, the analysis of political parties’ criticism of or support for the EU in parliamentary debates could be extended to other countries, particularly those that are “most similar” or “most different” in comparison to Italy.

Funding. This article was funded by Ministero dell’Università e della Ricerca (Project REPLANEU). Projt financed within the PRIN 2022 Call for Proposals referred to in the Directorial Decree no. 104 of 02-02-2022 REPLANEU “Explaining the formulation and implementation of Recovery and Resilience Plans in Europe: a comparative approach” within the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, Mission 4 – Component 2. From Research to Enterprise – Investment 1.1 National Research Program Fund (NRP) and Research Projects of Significant National Interest (PRIN), funded by the European Union – next-generation EU – Project Code: 2022ABWLJA – CUP: B53D23010450006.

Data. The replication dataset is available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/iprs-risp>.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2025.10077>.

Acknowledgements. We wish to thank Daniel Fernández Serrano (University of Firenze) for excellent research assistance. All errors and omissions are ours.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.

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