INTER
DISCIPLINARY
POLITICAL
STUDIES

INDEX

SPECIAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION

People Have the Power? Reframing the debate on Contemporary Populism(s)

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The term 'populism' has been used, at least in the last fifteen years, with great frequency both in scientific political literature and in the language of the mainstream media. The fortune of the category, far from its initial use – which was somewhat specialised and linked to political phenomena determined in time and space – has amplified beyond all reason the semantic scope of the conceptual category linked to it. Many scholars have adapted the category of populism to any phenomenon with certain basic characteristics, i.e. political leader's attitude, direct link with a 'people', reference context characterised by oligarchic drift and others.

Starting from this fact, the exertion of this issue of the journal has not been to proceed to a unidirectional clarification of the content of the term, but, on the contrary, to account for its polysemy, which is its structural characteristic.

The four contributions that IdPS presents on the theme of populism and its variety therefore examine different aspects of the populist phenomenon, investigating its historical-political roots, highlighting its contradictions, and questioning

the aporias and contradictions of the main theoretical approaches to the phenomenon.

Alfredo Ferrara's contribution proposes a threefold typification of the populisms that emerged within Western liberal democracies in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis: (a) productive populism, which combines a pro-market competition approach with an anti-authoritarian sensibility, and contrasts the productive people with party elites, indicated as incapable of seizing the opportunities of globalisation; (b) nationalist populism, which adopts an authoritarian approach in the governance of society, aggressive in the governance of international relations without questioning the axiological priority of the market; it counterposes a native population with globalist elites; (c) citizenship populism, the only one that questions the centrality of the market and proposes a demanding idea of democracy; it counterposes subordinate and marginal citizens against post-democratic and neo-liberal elites. Finally, the author points out that, unlike what has happened outside the enclosure of Western liberal democracies, no forms of populism combining an authoritarian approach with a critique of capitalism have emerged in the context examined.

Damiano Palano's contribution examines some of the theoretical nodes of the discussion on populism developed in the last two decades, initially reviewing the multiple approaches to the debate and then focusing on the perspective outlined by Ernesto Laclau, analysing a specific problematic feature: the dual nature of Laclausian populism, which is both a universal logic of political discourse and a particular political proposal. First, the author highlights how this aspect makes the use of the Argentine philosopher's populist theory as a tool for interpreting contemporary populism problematic. Later, he identifies in the distinction between the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference – which is central to The Populist Reason but already present in the first works on populism by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal

Mouffe in the 1980s – a key to overcoming the impasse in which the dual nature of Laclausian theory risks to lead those scholars intending to operationalise its concepts and use them in order to interpret the present.

Alessandro Simoncini's contribution analyses the political context that emerged in the aftermath of the 2007-08 economic crisis, linking the ordoliberal government of the crisis – in continuity with the neoliberal governmentality imposed in the 1970s and 1980s – with sovereignist populism. The author highlights how these two perspectives, which compete on the post-2008 political scene, although in conflict and in alternative to each other, are in fact two faces of the same capitalist realism, sharing the intent to create a new system of neoliberal accumulation, in which competitive elements are exacerbated and mixed with racist, securitarian and coercive devices. According to Simoncini, both ordoliberalism and sovereign populism promote – albeit in different forms – an alliance between the local middle and lower classes, thus revealing a colonial subconscious that is reinforced against a racialised external enemy and consolidates neoliberal domination of society.

Gianpasquale Preite analyses the emergence of populist movements as an attempt to provide answers to the problems that have emerged from the global spread of financial capitalism and neo-liberal practices, which have produced a communicative overlap between the economic system and the political system, generating new forms of exclusion and placing economic value at the top of social values. According to Preite, the explosion of populist movements is describable as the result of the stabilisation of the processes of corruption of functional codes: these organisations act as networks of inclusion that promise the obtaining of what is no longer obtainable through politics by virtue of the processes of marginalisation and exclusion that politics itself has produced. In the hypothesis outlined by Preite, fol-

lowing the track of these expectations disappointed by politics and embodied by populism allows an understanding of how the peripheries are generated and stabilised, urgently re-proposing the need to think of the relationship between the state and the market in new forms.
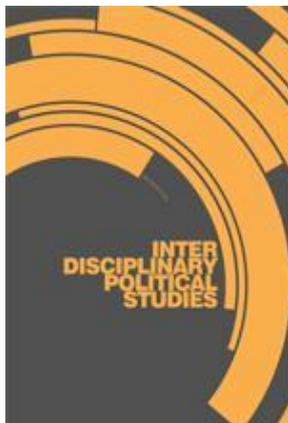
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Typologies of Populism: a Hypothesis Based on _Hyperpolitics_ Methodology

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ABSTRACT

The article proposes an ideological typification of the populisms emerged in North America and Western Europe since 2008, articulating the relationship between populism and ideology through a combination of the Ideational approach and the Discursive-Performative approach. Using the analytic tool of the matrix in the version elaborated by Hyperpolitics, this typification is constructed through a work on some political concepts and the connection between them. The cross-tabulation is useful in order to highlight the presence of three main typologies of populisms: the productive populism, the nationalist populism, and the citizen populism; the paper also highlights how the ideological mix between authoritarianism and regulation can be seen as a possible evolution of Western populisms.

KEYWORDS: Populism; Ideology; Hyperpolitics; Democracy; Capitalism

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Populism is a research topic which has progressively attracted the interest in political studies during the last two decades. These studies have gradually contributed to make the concept of populism no longer related only to past historical experiences, turning it into an analytical tool useful to understand present politics (and in some cases to act within it). As well as for other concepts having a wide diffusion, the concept of populism has been exposed to the phenomenon of concept stretching (Sartori 1970), thus, becoming vulnerable to the risk of losing denotative power.

In order to avoid this danger, scholars who study populism pursue two complementary paths. The first one consists in dealing directly with the definitional question. Benjamin Moffit has identified three leading approaches to this question (Moffitt 2020): the Ideational approach, which defines populism as an ideology having some distinctive characteristics, such as the importance attributed to the opposition between people and elites; the Strategic approach, which is based on an idea of populism as a political practice in which charismatic leaderships have an important role; the Discursive-Performative Approach, which conceives populism as a discursive practice aimed to fix meanings and identities in political struggle.

The second path pursued by scholars is to investigate the varieties of populism: it involves the study of similarities and differences between different case studies classifiable under the label of populism, and therefore in creating and naming different typologies. This article aims to be part of these studies and suggests an ideological typification of populisms arisen after the 2008 crisis in North America and Western Europe. The process of typological construction is realized through a work concerning the relation between political concepts, guided by the *Hyperpolitics* methodology.

1. Hyperpolitics and its methodology

The methodology used in this article is adopted from *Hyperpolitics* (Calise & Lowy 2010). Before explaining its guidelines, it is necessary to illustrate what *Hyperpolitics* is. As its subtitle indicates, it is an 'Interactive Dictionary of Political Science Concepts' edited in 2010 by Mauro Calise and Theodore J. Lowi; it is also an

online platform (www.hyperpolitics.net) that allows political science scholars to use its methodology. *Hyperpolitics* was followed in 2016 by *'Concetti chiave. Capire la Scienza Politica'* ('Key Concept. Understanding Political Science') edited by Mauro Calise, Theodore J. Lowi and Fortunato Musella (Calise et al. 2016). Adopting the same methodology, *Concetti chiave* proposes a study on a different group of concepts in addition to those analysed in *Hyperpolitics*. Differently from the traditional Political Science dictionaries, which propose an in-depth study of each single concept, *Hyperpolitics* and *Concetti chiave* have a different aim, that is to clarify the meanings and implications of political concepts by relating them through a methodology based on the use of the matrix – an analytic tool widely used in social sciences to which *Hyperpolitics* adds some specific features – and of a common vocabulary.

The *Hyperpolitics* matrix logic is based on some syntactic rules and its main purpose is to 'create comparability through categorization by cross-tabulating two variables' and thus 'produce four interrelated property spaces'. Through a graphical interface the use of this methodology is represented by a concept placed at the centre of the matrix (the concept at the core of the inquiry) and by two axes at the ends of which are placed two other concepts; the axes identify the two variables and represent the analytical dimensions which the central concept is related to. Thus, the four property spaces created by this cross-tabulation represent four sub-types of the central concept and are represented by two further concepts, one placed at the centre of each quadrant and one at its periphery (in the outer corner). Matrices have often been used in the social sciences as tools for quantitative research, but *Hyperpolitics* presents a qualitative approach to their use, because it develops 'property spaces containing not data but concepts that contribute to the definition of the selected concept' (Calise & Lowi 2010, p. 14).

Hyperpolitics uses a common vocabulary, including about one hundred keywords to promote a cumulative and systematic knowledge based on political concepts. This vocabulary is the result of a selection made by the scholars who

developed the *Hyperpolitics* project on the most frequent entries present in ten North American and European Political Science dictionaries[1].

    Hyperpolitics and its methodology are based on the idea that political concepts are open universes, constantly liable to new interpretations. Hence, it is possible to develop different matrices of the same concept by crossing different variables, responding to different research questions, and creating different subtypes. For instance, Annalisa Criscitiello created a matrix of populism which, compared to the present matrix, proposes a different reference context (not circumscribed to the years following the 2008 crisis and to North America and Western Europe) and considers different variables: one related to the phase of populism - of propaganda or government – and another related to its approach - individualist or communitarian - to polity (Criscitiello 2016).

    An article adopting the *Hyperpolitics* methodology has a simple structure: it is opened by the graphical interface in which the concepts are organized into the matrix logical space; this interface is followed by (2.1) an introduction in which the minimum definition of the central concept adopted is proposed, (2.2) a paragraph dedicated to the axes explaining which variables they represent, (2.3–2.6) four paragraphs each dedicated to a quadrant and, finally, (3) a brief conclusion.

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[1] For the comprehensive list of analysed dictionaries, keywords selected, and selection criteria see Calise & Lowi, 2010, pp. 20-24.

2. The matrix
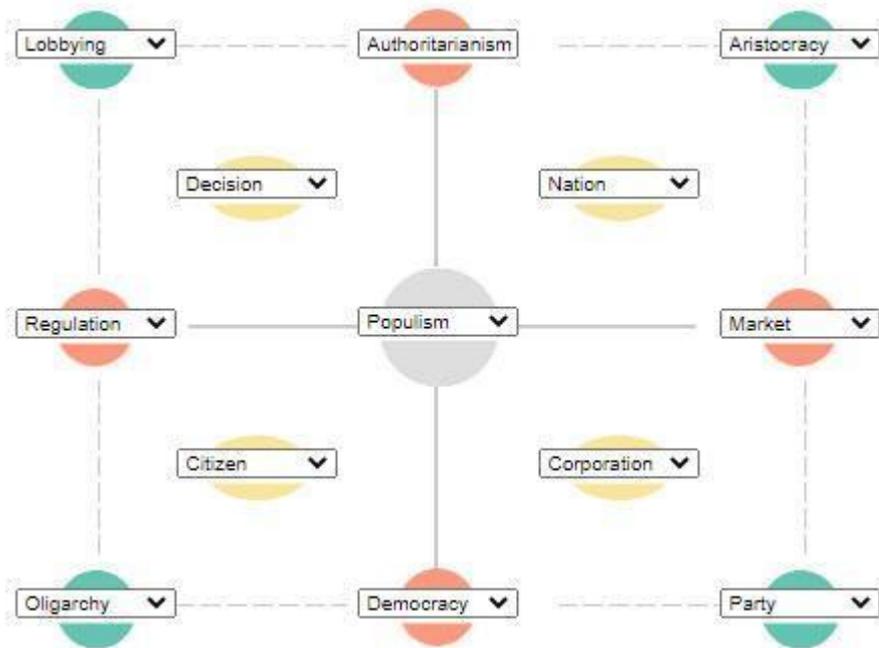
Source: the graphical interface is generated through Hyperpolitics online platform (www.hyperpolitics.net).

2.1. Introduction

The publication in 2005 of 'On Populist Reason' by the Argentine philosopher Ernesto Laclau - who since the Seventies had already begun to elaborate a populist theory together with Chantal Mouffe – is undoubtedly a watershed in the debate about populism. Laclau defines populism as a 'political logic' related to the 'institution of the social' (Laclau 2005, p. 117), i.e. a way of constructing the unity and the identity of a political community. This logic is characterized by the presence of 'three structural dimensions' (Laclau 2005, p. 77): a) the unification through an equivalential chain of a plurality of unsatisfied demands that arose within society, having as a common feature the denial of satisfaction by political power; b) the formation of an antagonistic frontier dividing society into two fields, on the one hand power and on the other hand the people (the way this articulation of unsatisfied demands proclaims itself); c) the consolidation of this chain which – from a vague

feeling of solidarity – becomes popular identity. This consolidation is characterized by its being more than the sum of the links that compose it and by the hegemonic role played by a single link within it. In this third structural moment a 'symbolic framework' is constructed, acquiring autonomy with respect to the demands from which it emerged. Laclau states that 'whenever we have this combination of structural moments, whatever the ideological or social contents of the political movement in question, we have populism of one sort or another' (Laclau 2005, pp. 117–8); the populist political logic is therefore, according to Laclau, unrelated to a specific ideological content, but it is producer of extremely varied ideologies.

The relation between populism and ideology is the focus of the *Ideational approach*, according to which some positive contents of a movement's ideology qualify it as populist. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser propose the following definition: 'we define populism as a thin-centered ideology, that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic fields, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, pp. 5–6). This thin-centered character makes populist ideologies opposed to 'thick-centered' or 'full' ideologies (such as socialism, liberalism, fascism, etc..): while the latter are characterized by an extended morphology that makes them complex worldviews, thin-centered ideologies such as populism have a narrower morphology (summarized in the short Kaltwasser and Mudde's quote). In order to acquire a wider morphology, thin ideologies like populism need to aggregate ideological contents originating from different ideological traditions.

The combination of these two approaches in defining populism and its relationship with ideology allows us to set some coordinates. Starting from there, is possible to build different typifications. The Ideational approach, by highlighting the inclination of populism to build complex ideological profiles from a few ideological contents, provides an important basis for the ideological comparative analysis of populisms. The Discursive-Performative approach allows to question the historical genesis of populist movements and to provide the context for the matrix; Chantal

Mouffe has defined 'populist moment' as a kind of conjuncture which occurs when, 'under the pressure of political or socioeconomic transformations, the dominant hegemony is being destabilized by the multiplication of unsatisfied demands', identifying in the crisis of 2008 the beginning of a populist moment that 'signals the crisis of the neoliberal hegemonic formation' (Mouffe 2018). Therefore, this matrix will examine the ideological typologies of populism originating in the temporal frame of the populist moment in North America and Western Europe, a geopolitical area in which - because of social, economic, and political similarities - neoliberal hegemony and its crisis developed similar forms and meanings.

2.2. The Axes

The vertical axis represents a political variable through a classic political dichotomy: democracy and authoritarianism. The concept of democracy has ancient origins, but here it is preliminarily used referring to the liberal democracies that arose in Modern times within the framework of Nation-States. The rise of a democratic regime is not an irreversible process: as Charles Tilly points out, 'democratization is a dynamic process that always remains incomplete and perpetually runs the risk of reversal' (Tilly 2005, p. XI). Starting from a notion of democracy that is not limited to the importance of electoral participation but precisely enhances this dynamic aspect of it, Colin Crouch highlights that it 'thrives when there are major opportunities for the mass of ordinary people actively to participate', or rather to define the priorities of public life also 'through discussion and autonomous organizations' (Crouch 2004, p. 2). It is because of this broad and demanding conception that Crouch argues that democracies are in a state of crisis that began in the 1970s due to the progressive concentration of power in small economic elites. He named this condition post-democracy, which is marked by formal continuity and by the substantial weakening of democracies. In the aftermath of the 2008 crisis – which called on politics to make important decisions – the choice between the defence (or reinforcement) of weakened democratic systems and the adoption of authoritarian styles or solutions has become a fundamental ground of ideological conflict.

Authoritarianism - which also has ancient origins - after the 2008 crisis took on a peculiar form in some Western political factions and actors that, as Luciano Gallino has pointed out, promised 'law and order, i.e. job security, combating foreigners because they are considered culturally different and competing in the workplace', as well as 'stimulating the economy by means of rapid implementation of decrees and exceptional laws, rather than relying on the slow and complicated mechanisms of democracy' (Gallino 2011, p. 310[2]).

The horizontal axis expresses instead an economic variable and is summarized by the concepts of market and regulation. The market and its competitive logic conquered an axiological primacy in the economic policies of Western countries with the rise of neoliberalism; in the two decades following 1989, only a few and marginal political actors proposed a critique of capitalism, which has indeed become an ideological taboo. The crisis of 2008, showing in a very impressive way the contradictions and risks of contemporary capitalism, has broken this taboo conferring again public legitimacy to the critique of capitalism (Piketty 2020, p. 34). The concepts of market and regulation thus represent in this matrix two stances adopted by political actors in this renewed debate. In order to clarify the use, we propose, and to avoid misunderstandings, a brief digression is necessary. The absence of regulation – which through the doctrine of *laissez-faire* was a central aspect of classical liberalism – gradually became anti-historical during the twentieth century as a consequence of the enlargement of the market and the developing of more complex production processes (Mirowski 2009). Neoliberalism, for example, stems precisely from the awareness that the market order is not spontaneous and that it needs the active role of the State to be protected, not the absence of regulation but a pro-market and pro-economic actors' regulation. The market-regulation dichotomy in this matrix is therefore not understood as a synonym for the absence or presence of regulation, but as two different models of regulation: the first (market) which – while combining with other instances – reaffirms the axiological primacy of the market and capitalism, and the second (regulation) which instead - according to a more classical meaning of

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[2] Translated by the author.

the concept itself - denies and openly criticises this primacy, proposing an idea of society not dominated by the logic of the market and capitalism (where not directly an overcoming of the latter). If we accept the idea that the stance about capitalism is still today decisive in qualifying left and right, this dichotomy is partially superimposable on the left-right dichotomy. However, as will emerge from the matrix, especially from the lower right quadrant, in post-1989 Western politics the similarities between these two dichotomies, although not overcome, are very problematic.

2.3. Lower right quadrant

At the heart of this typology of populism, emerging from the intersection of the concepts of democracy and market, there is the idea that the most recent transformations in capitalism - its global dimension, the importance of technological changes, etc. - are an opportunity for Western societies. This populism does not question the axiological priority of market and competition; even if it criticizes capitalism, this criticism is limited to the excesses of financialization. It is the populism of productive people: entrepreneurs, traders, social innovators, non-unionized workers worried about the future of the company where they work, young people wishing to actively insert themselves in the labour market (the reference to the concept of corporation is to be understood in this sense). Its enemy are the political elites produced by the party system who, failing in modernization of economic systems and political institutions, have wasted many opportunities for their countries. By promoting the open society model, this typology of populism treats diversity - cultural, ethnic, gender, religious, etc. - as a factor useful to the modernization and development of society.

The two most important cases of productive populism are the ones of Emmanuel Macron and his *La République En Marche* party and Matteo Renzi's political experience prior to his defeat, following the 2017-constitutional referendum he promoted. In the first case, the polemic against the party system took on a technocratic character, with the experts presenting themselves as the only

representatives of the productive people (Diamanti & Lazar 2018 p. 105; Perottino & Guasti, 2020). In the second case, instead, there was a mix between this character and the generational one, identifying the younger generation as a group excluded from a gerontocratic system and as the most in harmony with the modernization processes (Bickerton & Invernizzi Accetti 2014, pp. 26–7; Castaldo & Verzichelli 2020, p. 490). Both leaders have emblematically evoked Silicon Valley as a social and productive model to aim for. Although in the Western world productive populism had a genesis in the conservative area alongside Berlusconi (Castaldo & Verzichelli 2020), whilst in Eastern Europe it continues to be in that political field (Buštíková & Guasti 2019), in the Western populist moment it is placed within or beside the progressive area, taking on the character of a populist variant of Blair's Third Way. Indeed, Renzi's and Macron's economic policies exhibit similarities to those adopted by the the former Labour leader's governments (Bordignon 2014, p. 8; Rathgeb & Wolkenstein 2017).

Productive populism - especially in its technocratic component - is marked by some claims conflicting with liberal-democratic principles: mistrust of party democracy and political pluralism, strong decision-making attitude (Caramani 2017, pp. 60–1). Nevertheless, productive populism declares itself extraneous to authoritarian impulses and the only possible bulwark against them: it rejects the label of populist and attributes it to extremist parties and movements (Bordignon 2014). The productive people are not interested in political earthquakes: they only demand to be allowed to peacefully employ their productivity in economic life.

2.4. Upper right quadrant

In this quadrant is placed the most studied form of populism in Western populist moment. Sometimes the same label of populism – by way of «a reified association» (Stravrakakis et al. 2017, p. 421) and without further clarifications - is used as a synonym of this specific typology. Definitions starting from a higher awareness of this specificity can be different: right-wing (Pelinka 2013), radical right-wing (Mudde 2019), authoritarian (Norris & Inglehart 2019) or nationalist (Eatwell & Goowin 2018) populism. In this matrix, however, we prefer the last definition

because it allows us to thematize this typology of populism in relation to both axes and to qualify it without the need to place it in the multifaceted right-wing political family. Nationalist populism is widespread in Western world: almost in every country there is at least one party that can be ascribed to this family. Main cases are Donald Trump leadership, Brexit Referendum and following transformations of the Conservative Party, Marine Le Pen's *Front National* and Matteo Salvini's *Lega.*

As highlighted by De Cleen (2017), populism and nationalism are based on two different ideas of antagonism. The former is based on a down/top antagonism between the people as underdog and the elites. The latter, instead, is based on an in/out antagonism between the people as nation and its outsiders. Nationalist populism proposes an idea where the people is intended as *down* and *in* and the enemy as *out* and *top*. The people, composed of the natives of a nation, is opposed both to the outsiders (the immigrants) as to foreign and national elites, such as the liberal-democratic or progressive ones, described as cultural aristocracy that 'in the name' of cosmopolitan values pursue anti-national interests. These two enemies are not disconnected among themselves: according to the narrative of nationalist populists (which often takes on conspiratorial connotations, see Eatwell & Goodwin 2018), elites promote pro-immigration policies in order to transform Western societies in a multicultural sense and to increase the availability of low-paid workers, who are in competition with native workers on employment and welfare grounds.

Central to this frame is the denunciation of 'national decline and destruction' that can be overturned by prioritizing 'the culture and interests of the nation' (Eatwell & Goodwin 2018). In contrast to productive populism, at the core of nationalist populism's ideology there is the idea that globalization is a threat for wealth of Western societies: amongst the people to whom it appeals, the presence of unskilled or low-skilled native workers is central. These groups perceive their social condition threatened by offshoring, processes of automation and growth of international competition, whereby the new economic powers (firstly China) are advantaged (Bornschier 2017). Nevertheless, this polemical approach to economic globalization is entirely alien to a form of capitalism critique. As Öniş and Kutlay suggest,

nationalist populists are both 'selective anti-globalists' and 'selective globalists' (Öniş & Kutlay 2020, p. 11): they are not autarchic and opposed to globalization *tout-court*, but supporter of an idea of globalization in which the Nation-state is protector and promoter of national capitalism, adopting an aggressive approach in international relations and foreign trade. Here is where its sovereigntist claim lies. The nationalist populism combines in fact an economic policy made of strengthening financial capitalism, anti-progressive fiscal policies, opposition to trade unions. Each of these factors is linked to a delegitimization of supranational organizations, agreements to reduce polluting emissions and to the adoption of protectionist policies (Öniş & Kutlay 2020, p. 4); where it does not propose a downsizing of welfare, it declines it in a nativist and exclusivist form (De Cleen 2017).

The authoritarian element of nationalist populism resides in what Mudde defined 'the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements on authority are to be punished severely' and 'all 'problems' [...] can only be countered by a tough punitive approach and prevented by reintroducing 'moral' or 'traditional' education in schools' (Mudde 2019). Norris and Inglehart identify three core components of this authoritarian character in the emphasis on (a) security and order, (b) preservation of cultural group conformity, and (c) loyalty to strong leadership tasked with protecting the community (see Norris & Inglehart 2019, p. 7). These missions legitimize the use of strong governance which, for the sake of restoring order and imposing the national interest in an unfriendly world, can conflict with democratic norms and practices.

2.5. Lower Left Quadrant

Differently from the types of populisms represented in the other quadrants - where the defining label is often attributed with denigrating intent by political opponents - the one represented in this quadrant is often inspired by populist theory in its Discursive-Performative approach (LaTuerka 2015; Mélenchon 2016). Chantal Mouffe in 2019 published 'For a left populism' (Mouffe 2019), a pamphlet which provides us a privileged way to qualify this typology of populism, although we must

be aware this is a manifesto and not only an analytical work, so it is necessary to place it alongside other studies.

Left populism confers a strong relevance to the present crisis of democracy, and indeed, post-democracy represents the main polemical reference point alongside neoliberalism. According to the narrative of left populists, the weakening of liberal-democratic political regimes and the growth of inequalities that Western countries have experienced in the last forty years have contributed to the establishment of an economic and political oligarchy. This oligarchy is composed of the exponents of financialized capitalism and of political class (conservative and progressive) that adopted, with various degrees, a neoliberal-inspired agenda. On the other hand, those who experienced a worsening of their social condition and were deprived of political representation live a condition that cannot be interpreted only as an intensification of capitalist exploitation because it concerns a broader horizon; this condition can be qualified as subordination (Mouffe 2019), subalternity (Damiani 2020) and marginality (Augustín 2020). In the construction of its people, left populism is symbolically inclusionary (Font et al., 2019): it includes all those who suffer forms of subordination, subalternity or marginality without determining ethnic or cultural boundaries and conceiving antagonism only in a top-down manner (Judis 2016, p. 15).

The response of Left-Wing Populism to the crisis of democracy is not a rupture with liberal democracy but a radicalization of democratic values betrayed by the postdemocratic and neoliberal oligarchy. Therefore, Chantal Mouffe identifies in the democratic idea of citizenship a 'locus of construction of a 'people'': for this reason, it is possible to define the left-wing populism a citizen populism. This project, as Mouffe highlights, 'necessarily includes an anti-capitalist dimension' (Mouffe, 2018) as many conditions of subordination, subalternity and marginality are the result of the neoliberal capitalist system and the axiological primacy assigned to the market competition.

Left populism considers transnational organizations (in the European case especially the European Union and its integration process) as neoliberal and

postdemocratic fortresses. The controversial relationship with sovereignty arises on this ground, regarding which differing positions coexist within Left Populism. A part which has become most prevailing with the intensification of the crisis has also adopted the perspective of the 'democratic sovereigntism' (Ferry 2006) which rejects the nationalistic component of sovereigntism and intends it, according to Damiani, as a necessary tool aimed to the 'pursuit of social inclusion for all members of the same political community within the existing democratic system' (Damiani 2020, p. 53); the presence of internationalism in the ideological horizon of all left-wing political forces, however, potentially collides with the democratic sovereigntism perspective and, together with the nationalist populism's monopolization of sovereigntist instances, generates distrust or critical approaches towards it.

The cases concerning Left populisms have passed through different trajectories. The most relevant cases are represented by *Syriza* and *La France Insoumise*, which became populist parties originated from classical radical left parties, *Podemos*, that is a native experience of the populist moment, while Jeremy Corbyn's former Labour leadership and Bernie Sanders' two Democratic primary campaigns brought out populist approaches and assertions within the traditional progressive parties of their countries.

2.6. Upper Left Quadrant

In the Western populist moment, no populist movements arose combining authoritarianism and critique of capitalism. Outside the geopolitical area considered in this matrix, there is no lack of experiences that may be ascribed to this quadrant: Norris and Inglehart place, for example, the experience of Chavez and Maduro (clearly anti-capitalist) among authoritarian populisms (Norris & Inglehart 2019, p. 245), but this matter is beyond the scope of this essay. This empirical empty space, however, is not devoid of useful suggestions about a possible evolution of populism in Western countries. Despite several factors suggest that such an evolution is hardly achievable, some uncertainties associated with economic and political issues of post-pandemic transition contribute to create a terrain in which political identities can

further transform themselves: this context could, in fact, foster the rising up of a people claiming a stronger decision-making approach to governments against the inertia of democracy and economic system, weakened by pandemic crisis and hostages of corporatist elites.

In the present and immediate future, the decisions, that governments will take to overcome the socio-economic crisis, caused by the spread of the pandemic, could sanction a new social contract that overcomes not only the problems that emerged with the Covid crisis but also those that emerged with the 2008 crisis and caused the populist moment to explode. The expectations that this occasion generates in public opinions that have been stressed by almost two years of pandemic are very high, and if they are disappointed, they could trigger a new and unprecedented populist wave. Unlike the other three quadrants, the scenario represented in the quadrant is only a hypothesis, and it is premature to claim how realistic it is.

3. Conclusion

The matrix shows that the ideological typification of populisms is a useful tool in order to analyse many of the changes emerged in Western political systems after the 2008 crisis. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that this kind of typification is not suitable for all populisms: the Italian *Movimento Cinque Stelle* - which Pirro defined 'polyvalent populism' (Pirro 2018) – is characterized by a multitude of instances and ideological orientations (especially regarding market and capitalism) and has experienced such different phases in its short history that it is not possible to classify it within a single quadrant.

Most of the above-mentioned populist experiences have known political defeats: above all, Donald Trump's defeat in the 2020 elections has created a nationalist populism lacking of a strategic reference point. The exceptional condition imposed by the post-pandemic transition also provides Western governments unprecedented possibilities for action, which could enable them to respond to the demands whose overload had triggered the populist moment's explosion. The

revitalization of the populist moment or its ultimate end depend today on the effectiveness of such responses.

Moreover, as time progresses, populist experiences are no longer a novelty within political systems. Above all, for populist movements and parties ruling their countries – and which need to shape and support their decisions on a public level - it is evident that the varied ideological elements they have used to extend the morphology of the populist thin ideology become increasingly relevant for their identities. However, considering populism as a mere temporary phase, at the end of which the previous situation will be restored, is a reductionist hypothesis: once again populisms have introduced in Western politics some antagonistic contents which had long been absent. In this perspective, for traditional progressive and conservative parties, it represents a call for ideological renewal, although the latter have demonstrated so far only in few cases their will and capacity to take advantage of this opportunity.

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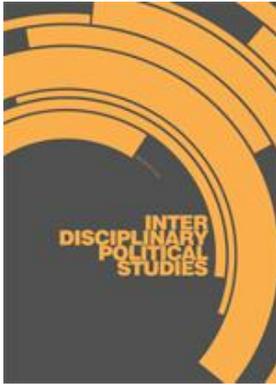
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Shape of the People. Rethinking Populism Beyond Laclau

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ABSTRACT

In the theoretical discussion of populism, two main options can be identified: a perspective conceives the populism as a thin-centered ideology; a second perspective believes that populism is a set of rhetorical, stylistic and organizational tools, which can be used by any political force. With respect to these two perspectives, Ernesto Laclau's proposal outlines a further strategy. This article examines the merits and limitations of Laclau's proposal. This paper highlights two problematic aspects: for Laclau, populism is not only a logic of political discourse, but also a political proposal; furthermore, 'populism', in his perspective, is not a specific phenomenon, because it is the mechanism by which every political identity is produced. The paper suggests that a solution consists in recovering the distinction between the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference, which was advanced by Laclau and Mouffe during the 1980s.

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1. Introduction

In the different versions of Maoism we can recognize rhetorical elements that are usually associated with "populism". Many of these elements were present in the language of the Western far left of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and especially in the leaflets and documents of the small Italian, French and German Maoist groups, which had grown up in the myth of the Cultural Revolution. In the songs that were written in the early seventies by the 'National Songbook of the Red Wind' ('Canzoniere Nazionale del Vento Rosso 1974'), a cultural organization linked to a small Italian Maoist party (UCI), we can find a striking example of populist rhetoric. In one song especially, the protagonist is an Italian worker, who was forced to emigrate abroad 'by a frightening government'. In the song, he also remembers the times when, still 'young and happy', he went fishing with friends, or when he listened to the advice of 'old and wise' farmers. Furthermore, he says that, when the village factory closed, the workers were duped 'by corrupt delegates', 'trapped by false and empty speeches and by those people who had been bought'. Finally, the song ends with a grim vision of the struggle between people and power: 'the struggle against the boss / is a struggle between love and selfishness / is a struggle between the rich / who love only money / and the people who want altruism' (Canzoniere Nazionale del Vento Rosso, 1974).

In the romantic image of the people celebrated in this Maoist song, we can probably recognize the core of 'populism', or at least the heart of that rhetoric that in recent decades we have called 'populist'. Although there are no definitions of 'populism' that are accepted by all social scientists, in fact, many definitions underline the moralistic components of populism and the idea of a 'united' people, clearly opposed to the elites. Jan-Werner Müller, for example, defines populism as 'a particular *moralistic vision of politics*, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified – but [...] ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior' (Müller 2016, pp. 19–20). Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser write that populism is a *thin-centered ideology*: an ideology that *'considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of*

the volonté générale (*general will) of the people*' (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, p. 6). According to these definitions, the song of the Italian Maoist group should be considered an authentic paradigm of the thin-centred populist ideology, or as an example of the 'moralistic vision of politics' that characterizes this phenomenon. However, this definition can be contested from various points of view, and in particular, the idea that the romantic image of a 'good people' is the distinctive element of populism may be unsatisfactory. We can thus ask ourselves a series of questions. For example, should we consider Maoist rhetoric as wholly 'populist' or even as 'Marxist'? Is this naïve representation of the 'good people' and the 'bad elite' an exclusive feature of populism, or is it an element present in many ideologies? Can we recognize in that song an ideology, or just a 'moralistic vision', or simply a rhetoric?

These questions are well known by scholars of populism, who have been wondering for more than half a century what the 'essence' of populism is (and whether there is anything like an 'essence' of populism). The word 'populism' has indeed known a rather singular story, especially from the moment in which, between the eighties and nineties of the last century, it began to be adopted by the language of journalism and the lexicon of political debate to identify radical positions. Since then, the term has become almost ubiquitous, following an 'inflationary spiral' that accelerated with Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election, for many observers a sign of the triumph of 'global populism' (de La Torre 2014, 2018; Moffit 2016). Of course, the frequent use of the term has not reduced the polysemy of the concept. If today we ask ourselves 'who' the populists are, the answer seems obvious, for the simple reason that newspapers, TV and political debate contribute almost daily to crowding the gallery of 'populist' leaders and movements. On the other hand, if we ask ourselves 'what' populism is, the answer turns out to be much more difficult, particularly because the heterogeneity of the phenomena usually attributed to this category.

The difficulty of grasping the 'essence' of populism has become a real commonplace for scholars over the past 50 years. In the famous conference organized by 'Government and Opposition' at the London School of Economics and Political

Science in 1967, Isaiah Berlin noted that the debate on populism was a victim of the 'Cinderella complex' (Berlin 1968). In essence, Berlin observed that the scholars were destined to endlessly search for a paradigmatic case: a sort of Cinderella capable of perfectly fitting the 'slipper' of a theoretical definition. In half a century of discussions, the situation has not substantially improved. The field of populism studies has become increasingly crowded in the last ten years by political scientists, sociologists, communication scholars and economists, but neither the political fortune of populism nor the growth of research dedicated to this phenomenon has provided a decisive contribution to solving the 'puzzle' of the theoretical definition. And the discussion on 'what' populism is continues, without shared solutions (Ionescu & Gellner 1969; Canovan 1981; Tarchi 2004; Panizza 2005; Deiwiks 2009; Terragoni 2013; Chiapponi 2014; Bonaiuti 2015; Tarchi 2015; Tarizzo 2015; Anselmi 2017; De Cleen 2017; De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017; Freeden 2017; Palano 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017; De Cleen et al. 2018; Moffitt 2020).

According to some scholars, the absence of a shared definition is a valid reason to get rid of the term: given that the theoretical category is so broad, flexible and poorly defined, we should give up using it. Although this position must be taken seriously, it is perhaps possible to try to think of the concept starting from its vagueness. In one of his first writings, Ernesto Laclau highlighted how many social scientists conceived the concept of 'populism' in an ambiguous way and how they used it to refer to movements with extremely heterogeneous characteristics. 'Populism,' wrote Laclau, 'is a concept both elusive and recurrent' and 'few terms have been so widely used in contemporary political analysis, although few have been defined with less precision' (Laclau 1979, p. 143). Surprisingly enough, this ambiguity was not meant to push to get rid of the concept, but it was meant to push to investigate the deeper causes of the phenomenon. In fact, the reason for the imprecision for Laclau was not accidental, because it was linked to the ambiguity of the concept of 'people': as he wrote, '*the people* is a concept without a defined theoretical status' and 'despite the frequency with which it is used in political discourse, its conceptual precision goes no further than the purely allusive metaphorical level' (Laclau 1979, p. 165). In many

ways, Laclau continued to question the peculiar nature of 'people' and 'populism' throughout his career, proposing different solutions. In general, ideology was conceived in terms close to those of Althusser in his early writings. Later, in his 'post-Marxist" season, Laclau clearly distinguished the level of (ideological) representations from that of the economic 'structure' and, to a large extent, conceived populism as a process of formation of political identities. Although the contribution of the Argentine theorist is not without some limits, I think that some aspects of his proposal are valuable.

In particular, I think that Laclau's theory offers important suggestions for rethinking the idea of populism as an ideology (or as an ideology sui generis), proceeding in a different direction than that followed by many contemporary scholars. In the field of studies on populism, three ways of conceiving the phenomenon can generally be distinguished (Moffit 2020): a) the Ideational Approach, which considers populism as an ideology, or as a worldview (Mudde 2004; Abts & Rummens 2007; Albertazzi & McDonnel 2008; Stanley 2008; Rooduijn 2014; Müller 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017); b) the Strategic Approach, which interprets populism not as a 'thing' or an 'object' to be studied, but as 'a mode of political practice' (Jansen 2011, p. 75); c) the Discursive-Performative Approach, which is characterized, in general, by a 'primary focus on populism as a particular type of language that has significant effects on how politics (and political identity) is structrured and operates' (Moffit 2020, p .22). Although Laclau's theory represents one of the main pillars of the Discursive-Performative Approach, I think it can also be very useful for rethinking the relationship between populism and ideology from a non-positivist perspective. Many of the scholars of the Ideational Approach in fact share, in a more or less explicit way, the methodological principles of neo-positivism: therefore, they try to define populism as an ideology similar, or in any case comparable, to other structured ideologies. Laclau's proposal, on the other hand, indicates an alternative way to conceive both populism and ideology: the central point of his theory is in fact the idea that populism is a strategy for 'building' the people and that the elements of ideology are therefore the elements that are used to give a 'shape' to the people. In this

perspective, of course, ideologies become something very different from how they are conceived by the Ideational Approach: as a result of a sort of 'Copernican revolution', ideology is no longer the 'engine' that explains conflicts and collective identities; on the contrary, conflicts can explain the specific characteristics that ideology assumes, that is, the 'shape' in which the people present themselves.

In this article, I therefore propose to use some of his suggestions to redefine populism, or rather to clarify how populism can be conceived as an ideology. First, I will focus on the limitations of some of the main definitions of populism as an ideology (or as a *sui generis* ideology). In particular, I will examine two aspects that greatly complicate the discussion of populism as an ideology: the 'neo-positivist' strategy, which prompts scholars to construct generally exhaustive classifications, in which classes (and concepts) are mutually exclusive, and the idea that populism can be conceived as an ideology similar to other modern ideologies, such as liberalism, socialism, communism, fascism, etc. Secondly, I will focus on some of Laclau's ideas that allow us to conceive populism as an ideology, or at least to identify a possible link between the logic of production of collective identities and the analysis of ideologies. In this regard, I will take up Laclau's idea that the main function of an ideology is the production of a collective identity, that is, the formation of a 'we'. For this reason, ideology must be conceived as a changing assemblage of central and peripheral concepts, but it must also be conceived as a 'relational' assembly, since the production of a 'we' always requires the establishment of a symbolic boundary between 'us' and 'them'. Laclau's theory of populism offers important elements precisely for this rethinking. But, since his proposal also appears ambiguous under various profiles, he will indicate some possible strategies for developing the idea of populism as a strategy for the construction of political identities.

2. Two strategies for studying populism

In general, social scientists, since the times of the old *Methodenstreit* of the late nineteenth century, have been able to adopt two different strategies to study a phenomenon: the first path, which today we can call 'constructivist', consists in

understanding (*Verstehen*) and interpreting reasons for social and political actions; the second strategy, on the other hand, has the objective of explanation (*Erklären*) and seeks to identify causal connections between independent and dependent variables. Although these strategies are not necessarily incompatible with each other, each of them implies different rules for constructing concepts. In the 'constructivist' perspective – whose origins can be found in the sociology of Max Weber – the concepts offer a guide to understanding socio-political phenomena and the great historical transformations. The goal, therefore, is not to place socio-political phenomena within taxonomies similar to those of the natural sciences, which are aimed at classifying, for example, living species. The intent, rather, is to understand what the logic is that moves the actors. An emblematic example is offered by the Weberian ideal types, whose purpose is not to place real phenomena within taxonomies (whose classes have mutually exclusive characteristics), but rather to exaggerate aspects of reality to grasp the logic that guides the phenomena (Weber 1904). For example, an ideal type of 'feudalism' or 'capitalism' can help in understanding whether, at a given historical moment, a specific society is closest to one or the other of the 'ideal-typical' configurations. And also, for this reason, Weber invited us to recognize how, in the political reality, the three different logics of legitimation of power, which he had identified thanks to his famous ideal types, were often intertwined (Weber 1926). From a 'Weberian' perspective, therefore, a definition of populism is aimed at grasping the 'essence' of the phenomenon; that is, it must clarify what the characterizing elements are. However, the objective of this strategy is not to 'add' the new box of 'populism' to a (more or less articulated) taxonomy. The intent is in fact to establish whether a particular movement approaches the ideal type of populism, or possibly whether the trend towards 'populism' is more evident in one given historical period than in others.

The 'neo-positivist' strategy, however, points in a very different direction. The concepts are used in this case to construct exhaustive classifications, in which each class is mutually exclusive with respect to the others. In other words, the classification must make it possible to locate a certain phenomenon – for example, a leader, a party, a political regime, etc. – exclusively within a specific class. On the other hand,

the possibility that a single case may be placed in two different classes at the same time must be avoided. Since a classification is not a simple enumeration, it must in fact be composed only of classes that are 'exhaustive' and 'mutually exclusive' (Sartori 1970). In the first condition, one can be tolerant, but the second is mandatory: 'Classes are required to be mutually exclusive, i.e., class concepts represent characteristics that the object under consideration must have or lack.' Therefore, 'two items being compared must belong first to the same class, and either have or not have an attribute', and 'only if they have it can the two items be matched in terms of which has it *more* or *less*' (Sartori 1970, p. 1038). Within the neo-positivist strategy, it is therefore necessary to identify a balance point between *intension* (connotation) and *extension* (denotation) of the concept. Furthermore, it is essential to find a balance point between the historical anchoring of a term and the 'operational' definition; that is, the definition that must make it possible to classify phenomena. Both of these tasks are far from easy, but they are particularly complicated in the case of populism.

Some contemporary scholars of populism, in particular within the Discursive-performative approach, adopt a 'constructivist' strategy and, for example, ask themselves to what extent parties have the distinctive characteristics of 'populism' (Wodak & Meyer 2001; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014; Moffitt 2015; Wodak 2015; Aslanidis 2016; Bonikowski & Gidron 2016; Moffitt 2017). The overwhelming majority of researchers, however, take the 'neo-positivist' path (Mudde 2004; Abts & Rummens 2007; Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008; Stanley 2008; Müller 2016) and thus run into rather robust obstacles. I limit myself to pointing out two problems, the first relating to the relationship between intension and extension of the concept, the second relating to the historical anchoring of the term. First, the 'neo-positivist' scholars must in fact decide where on the 'ladder of abstraction' to place the concept of populism. Basically, a high level of extension can be maintained: in this case, all the historical cases of populism and neo-populism are considered, with the consequence of an impoverishment of the concept on the side of intension; on the contrary, it is possible to privilege the side of the intension, focusing only on the most recent cases and therefore enriching the concept with elements of contemporary populist

movements (for example, the request for direct democracy, the protest against migratory flows, etc.). The risk, in this case, is to sever any link between contemporary 'neo-populism' and the movements that in the past were defined as 'populists' (for example, the People's Party should not be considered a 'populist' party, even if the term was invented precisely to identify this political organization). Secondly, a specific problem concerns the historical anchoring of the concept of 'populism'. In general, the language of the social sciences requires that concepts be 'cleaned up', eliminating the margins of ambiguity and vagueness that exist in everyday language. At the same time, it is impossible to totally forget the historical anchoring of the terms, since the concepts (and especially the political concepts) are the result of long processes of cultural elaboration. In other words, it is not possible to completely overlook the meaning that a term has in everyday language.

Populism, however, has a very peculiar historical anchoring. First of all, very frequently (or almost always) this formula is used in an explicitly derogatory meaning, with the aim of disqualifying a political opponent. In other words, in common parlance the term has a strong negative connotation, while something similar is not found, for example, in concepts such as 'democracy', 'freedom' and 'socialism'; although these concepts have also received powerful criticism and frequent disputes, they have also found strong supporters. The concept of 'populism', on the other hand, has hardly any supporters. Furthermore, the social sciences have by no means contributed to 'cleansing' the concept of value 'encrustations'. On the contrary, scholars have 'reinvented' the concept, assembling in the idea of 'populism' characteristics of many movements, very different from each other. The term 'populism' was most likely coined in the United States in 1891 to refer to the militants and political positions of the People's Party (Hicks 1931; Gennaro Lerda 1984; Houwen 2011). Only later, starting from the mid-fifties of the twentieth century, was it associated with a broader meaning, which went beyond the historical experience of the People's Party. From that moment on, the formula 'populism' in fact began to be 'dilated' in two directions: it was historically expanded, to indicate the psycho-political dynamics that had marked the United States during 'McCarthyism' (Allcock 1971; Formisano 2004);

moreover, it was expanded geographically, to indicate some Latin American regimes with authoritarian tendencies, in Brazil, Mexico and especially Argentina. In the reinvention of the concept, the word 'populism' was considered an attenuated variant of 'fascism' or 'authoritarianism', and it was used to refer to irrational, fanatical, intolerant, illiberal political tendencies, but marked by the support of the popular classes (Houwen 2011, pp. 17–21). In this way, the outline of populism was built 'by theoretically assembling' elements of very different political movements, which were not conceived at all as belonging to a common ideological family (Jäger 2017; Stavrakakis 2017; Palano 2019). In other words, the 'reinvention' of the concept found the unifying element of 'populism' in the fact that movements defined as 'populists' represented a threat to liberal democracy.

As a result of these two problems, the 'neo-positivist' scholars of populism often arrive at fruitless, or questionable, results. The 'slipper' of the concept of 'populism' becomes so large that it can be 'worn' by (almost) any political movement, and the 'Cinderella complex' risks becoming truly a problem with no solution. In any case, these problems are even more evident in the research of those scholars who consider populism as an ideology.

3. A 'populist' ideology?

A striking example of the (probably insoluble) difficulties of the 'neo-positivist' strategy of studying populism is represented by the studies that focus on 'populist ideology'. In this case, the need to build taxonomies (with mutually exclusive classes) clashes both with the problems relating to historical anchoring and with the problems associated with the considerable extension of the concept. The 'neo-positivists' must in fact necessarily respect first of all the rules of construction of taxonomies; that is, they cannot forget that the classes of a taxonomy must be (hopefully) exhaustive and, above all, that they must be mutually exclusive. In other words, populist ideology must represent a specific class of a taxonomy aimed at classifying all existing ideologies; that is, populism is a new class, which is placed alongside the more consolidated ideologies, which are, for example, considered in the classifications of

'party families'. As we have seen, if a taxonomy may not be absolutely exhaustive, it is not possible to compromise on the requirement of mutual exclusivity of the classes. In this regard, however, we come across some intricate knots. When trying to identify the elements of an ideology, one must inevitably consider its historical anchoring, its intellectual matrices, its theoretical references, the concrete declinations of ideology. However, such an operation is very problematic in the case of populism, because evidently it cannot be placed side by side with liberalism, conservatism, socialism, communism, fascism, etc. Looking at the vast array of movements that scholars refer to as 'populist', it is clear that no one (or almost no one) has called themselves a 'populist', or has raised the banner of 'populism'.

Even scholars who have tried to define populism as an ideology are well aware of the peculiar character of the phenomenon. Edward Shils recognized, for example, its qualifying element in assigning to the will of the people a value higher than any traditional norm and any institutional constraint; but in reality he observed that, rather than an autonomous ideology, it was a phenomenon recognizable in many ideologies (in agrarian radicalism, in German National Socialism, in Soviet Communist ideology) (Shils 1956). For Donald MacRae, despite his theoretical inconsistency, ambiguity and malleability, the elements of populist ideology were instead some rather simple traits: 1) faith in a virtuous community; 2) an egalitarianism hostile to any kind of elite; 3) the idea of a mythicized past, to be opposed to the threat represented by foreign conspiracy; 4) the belief in an 'imminent and instant apocalypse mediated by the charisma of heroic leaders and legislators' (MacRae 1969). According to Paul Taggart, some key themes recur in populist movements: 1) hostility towards representative politics; 2) identification with a mythologized image of the 'homeland' (heartland), from which 'alien' elements are excluded, a threat to the health of the people; 3) the absence of a solid anchorage to well-defined values (such as equality, freedom, social justice); 4) the belief that we are facing a process of extreme crisis; 5) the tendency towards simplification; 6) a chameleonic attitude (Taggart 2000). Loris Zanatta instead identifies the 'core' of the populist 'weak ideology' in some traits: 1) the reference to an idea of community; 2) an apolitical or even anti-

political vocation; 3) an aspiration to regeneration, which aims to restore sovereignty to the people; 4) the ambition to restore the values of a mythologized past and to regain lost social harmony; 5) the conviction of addressing the majority of the people; 6) the tendency to emerge in societies undergoing modernization or transformation processes (Zanatta 2002, 2013). Cas Mudde, in some very influential contributions, finally defines populism as a thin-centred ideology (Mudde 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). If Freeden (1999) proposed the notion of thin-centred ideology to identify nationalism, feminism and environmentalism (Freeden 1999, 2017), Mudde suggests identifying populism with a simple conceptual core, composed only of two components: on the one hand, the idea of a society divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups; on the other hand, the idea that power, monopolized by the 'corrupt elite', should be handed back to the 'pure people' and that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde 2004). For this reason, the antagonists of populism are mainly elitism and pluralism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). In more articulate terms, Ben Stanley also proposes the thesis that populism is a thin-centred ideology. More specifically, he specifies that his conceptual heart is made up of four elements: 1) the presence of two homogeneous units of analysis, namely 'the people' and the 'elite'; 2) the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite; 3) the idea of popular sovereignty; and 4) the positive appreciation of the 'people' and the denigration of the 'elite' (Stanley 2008, p. 102).

Each of these proposals naturally captures significant aspects. Nevertheless, definitions of this type run quite significant risks, which I try to summarize. In the first place, a problem arises from the absence of a homogeneity between the phenomena that are traced back to the common populist ideology. In other words, populist ideology does not seem to be characterized by authors, doctrines or books that represent a common reference to all leaders and movements defined as 'populists'. This element therefore distinguishes the (alleged) populist ideology from the main ideologies of the last two centuries (Tarchi 2015, p. 40). Second, the label of 'populism' is not recognized as an identifying flag by the movements and leaders who are placed in this category. After the distant cases of the late nineteenth century, the

formula was used by scholars, opponents and journalists, but it was never claimed (in a lasting and not episodic way) by the protagonists. Indeed, many leaders disdainfully reject this label, which in their view represents only the accusation of resorting to easy demagogy. All this clearly distinguishes the behaviour of the 'populists' from that of the main ideological family protagonists of the last two centuries of the history of the Old Continent. Thirdly, traits that have been identified by scholars as distinctive of populist ideology actually seem very generic: they do not seem able to define a class whose characteristics are 'mutually exclusive' with respect to those of the classes included in an exhaustive taxonomy of ideological families or contemporary ideologies. The elements that have been highlighted are in fact shared by other ideologies as well. More generally, the elements that, according to many definitional proposals, characterize populism (i.e. the appeal to the people, the celebration of the virtues of the people, the conviction that the 'unity' of the people must be defended by the elites or by external enemies) are in fact central elements of the modern conception of politics. For example, the appeal to the people, as the source of the legitimacy of power, can be recognized as a recurring element in all the many variations of the doctrine of popular sovereignty and of the very modern conception of democracy; in many ways, there are therefore traces of appeal to the people in the rhetorical and ideological repertoire of socialist, nationalist, Christian Democrat, ethno-regionalist or liberal parties. Furthermore, even the 'anti-pluralist' trend, which is often attributed to populism, as a consequence of an organicist conception of the community, can be recognized in an extremely wide spectrum of positions. The same distrust towards institutional procedures seems only an element that recurs in various ideologies, or at least an element that occurs at certain stages in the history of political movements. Finally, a similar discourse also concerns the 'reactive' character, which cannot be conceived as exclusive to 'populism'. At the base of every collective identity, a more or less explicit opposition with an adversary (or an enemy) is always recognizable: the opposition towards an antagonist pole marks every political movement, for the simple reason that every collective identity must be defined by difference with respect to a subject considered at least potentially hostile. As Stein Rokkan has shown, the European

parties, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in fact drew their lifeblood from cultural and social cleavages, which divided the population of a state into clearly opposed fields and, therefore, they drew a boundary between us and them (Rokkan 1999).

All these criticalities make the path of a neo-positivist definition of populist ideology very problematic (Aslanidis 2016; Moffitt 2016; Freeden 2017; De Cleen et al. 2018; Stavrakakis & Jäger 2018). Therefore, Margaret Canovan's old statement, according to which 'attempts to define populism in terms of any such ideology fail, because in another context the anti-elitist mobilization concerned may be reacting to a different ideological environment' (Canovan 1999, p. 4), is still valid. Or at least, it remains valid if the goal of a definition is to build a concept that can be placed in some basically exhaustive taxonomy of ideological families, in which each class has mutually exclusive characteristics. In other words, the risk of these definitional proposals is that of placing, in the populist family, parties that can be hosted, at the same time, in the socialist, communist, liberal or radical-right family. In other words, the definitions of populism as an ideology risk being of little use for the purposes of empirical investigation: in essence, they do not allow us to establish whether a political formation is populist or not, that is, whether it can be placed in the class of parties with populist ideology or should be inserted elsewhere. Almost invariably, more or less all the protagonists of the contemporary political scene appear to us to be a bit populist, because they present some of the characteristic elements of this class, while no political force appears completely populist, because some traits make it extraneous to the class, or because its political choices are in contrast with the definition.

By virtue of the reasons briefly considered above, the mortgage weighing on the word 'populism' seems really too heavy. For some scholars, the word should in fact be set aside (Mastropaolo 2005; Colliot-Thélène 2016, 2018). Others believe instead that the survey should limit itself to asking 'how' populist movements act, and what their communication, organizational and strictly political strategies are (Anselmi 2017). According to others, the solution consists instead in recognizing a clear break between the 'old' populism and the 'neo-populism': in this way, one can get rid of the

cumbersome legacy of the past and understand the characteristics of a phenomenon substantially unpublished (Graziano 2018). If it certainly indicates a promising direction, even also this solution must consider the historical anchoring of the concept and be aware of the problematic aspects. Also, for this reason, it is probably more useful to abandon a neo-positivist definitional strategy and adopt a 'constructivist' or 'Weberian' strategy, which seeks to construct an ideal type of populism. The construction of an ideal type of populism can indeed allow the closeness (or remoteness) of specific political formations to the 'pure' type of populism to be measured, including empirically. On the other hand, many proposals move in this direction, and among these a particular place is occupied by the researches of Canovan, which invite us to shift our gaze from ideology to 'structural considerations', that is, to conceive populism as 'an appeal to 'the people' against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society' (Canovan 1999, p. 3). This means that the structure of populism is characterized by some recurring elements, such as a 'characteristic legitimating framework, political style and mood' (Canovan 1999, p. 3). In any case, populism is not associated with any specific content: the objectives of its protest take on completely different characters according to the historical and social context. In other words, despite the appeal to the people, no recurring 'ideological' content can be discerned.

Canovan's proposal still provides an effective indication, in the direction of an ideal-typical definition of populism, that in explicit terms abandons the path of a neo-positivist strategy. However, these suggestions must be taken from different points of view, and it is in this sense that Ernesto Laclau's theory can offer a useful contribution. If Canovan's 'phenomenological' perspective indicates an alternative to the neo-positivist strategy, Laclau's proposal instead suggests an important rethinking of the concept of 'ideology'. More specifically, the Argentine theorist argues in fact that ideologies are flexible tools, which constantly change to respond to the needs of action and conflict. And these insights can also be useful for rereading his theory of populism.

4. Laclau and the people

In the late 1970s, Laclau began building his own theory of populism, when he still shared the Marxist perspective. The starting point for his reflection was Perón's Argentine experience and in particular the role the leader had played in building a broad political alliance. Laclau had already begun to redefine the role of ideology and the idea of the link between ideology and the economic base. While in the Marxist tradition ideology is conceived as a 'false conscience', Laclau in fact proposed conceiving ideology as a tool capable of constructing collective identities. More specifically, he took from Louis Althusser the concept of 'interpellation' to indicate the process that attributes coherence to an ideological system and with which, at the same time, a subject is constituted as such. As regards the dynamics of populism, Laclau recognized that the 'superstructural' level on which discursive articulations operate is (at least relatively) autonomous from the level of production relations. More specifically, he proposed a sort of 'Copernican revolution' in the way of conceiving the relationship between ideology and subjects, because he suggested considering the 'interpellated' subject as the unifying element of ideology. First, 'the basic function of all ideology is to constitute individuals as subjects'; secondly, 'through interpellation individuals live their conditions of existence as if they were the autonomous principle of the latter'; furthermore, 'the unity of the distinct aspect of an ideological system is given by a specific interpellation that forms the axis and organizing principle of all ideology' (Laclau 1979, p. 101). Based on these premises, for Laclau, therefore, *'what constitutes the unifying principle of an ideological discourse is the 'subject' interpellated and thus constituted through the discourse'* (Laclau 1979, p. 101).

Although Laclau used Althusser's theory, he actually proposed a different vision of ideology, which still offers very useful elements to address a problem related to the temporal continuity of ideological families. In this case, the difficulty does not specifically concern populism, but, more generally, the concept of 'ideology' itself. As David McLellan pointed out, the concept of 'ideology' remains in fact 'the most elusive concept in the whole social sciences' (McLellan 1995). The concept weighs primarily on the negative meaning that, starting from the nineteenth century, conceived

ideology as a distorted representation of reality, as a 'false consciousness'. By abandoning this vision, one can conceive of ideology as a representation of reality: an inevitably partial representation of reality, but at the same time indispensable for politically mobilizing individuals. In this sense, ideology is a tool that political parties and actors cannot do without. In this perspective, Andrew Heywood, for example, defines ideology as 'a more or less coherent set of ideas that provides the basis for organized political action, whether this is intended to preserve, modify or overthrow the existing system of power' (Heywood 2007, p. 11). Furthermore, he identifies three main characteristics in ideologies: 'a) they offer an account of the existing order, usually in the form of a 'world view'; b) they advance a model of a desired future, a vision of the 'good society'; c) they explain how political change can and should be brought about' (Heywood 2007, pp. 11−12). This is obviously a truly 'minimalist' definition, because it does not require an ideology to have a strong structure. It undoubtedly has many advantages, but it still does not allow the continuity over time of a given ideological party family to be explained: for example, this conception of ideology (like others that are used in the social sciences) is unable to explain why a party retains an organizational identity over time, although it changes its vision of the existing order, its model of reference society and its conception of political change. The socialist parties offer the emblematic example of this process: they have a long history, they have kept their name and their symbols for more than a century, they thus have a lasting identity, but they have modified several times, and even in a radical way, their ideology (i.e., the image of the existing order, the model of a desired future, the idea of how to bring about political change). How can we explain this continuity? Can we really speak of a continuity in the ideology of these parties? And can we therefore speak of an 'ideological family', even if the ideology changes so radically over time?

There are of course many alternative conceptions of ideology, which can contribute to the study of political phenomena and also of populism. In any case, I think Laclau's 'Copernican revolution' can offer an answer to these questions, because it invites us to shift our attention from the representations of reality to the function that representation performs: if the main function of the ideological

discourse is the constitution of the subject (the construction of 'we'), continuity must be sought in the representation of the subject, not in the conceptual elements that are used in ideological discourse. An effective example is offered in this regard by the analysis of populism that Laclau carried out in the seventies. Then Laclau tried to clarify the relationship between populism and class struggle, and in this context he tried to explain 'the relative continuity of popular traditions, in contrast to the historical discontinuities that characterize class structures' (Laclau 1979, p. 166). These traditions, Laclau wrote, 'are crystallized in symbols or values in which the subjects interpellated by them find a principle of identity' (Laclau 1979, p. 166). However, they must not be conceived as purely rhetorical elements or as tools used with opportunistic objectives by the working class. In contrast, "popular traditions' constitute the complex of interpellations that express the 'people'/power bloc contradiction and distinct form of class contradiction' (Laclau 1979. p. 167). In Laclau's analysis, therefore, this led to two conclusions: a) 'in so far as 'popular traditions' represent the ideological crystallization of resistance to oppression in general, that is, to every form of the state they will be longer-lasting than class ideologies and will constitute a structural frame of reference of greater stability'; b) 'popular traditions do not constitute consistent and organized discourses but merely elements that can only exist in articulation with class discourses', and 'this explains why the most divergent political movements appeal to the same ideological symbols' (Laclau 1979, p. 167).

Almost 30 years after that first attempt, Laclau completed his theory in *On Populist Reason*. Compared to the numerous contributions to the discussion, Laclau's reflection is characterized by various aspects, which are not exclusively related to the intent to give a positive evaluation of populism. His investigation of populism is aimed above all at the goal of bringing to light the dynamics of the formation of political identities. The qualifying point of his proposal, however, starts from dissatisfaction with the way in which the discussion on populism took place. If it is impossible to recognize a constant ideological core at the heart of the different populist movements, however, for Laclau the solution that ends up reducing populism to pure rhetoric is theoretically weak. In his eyes, rhetoric must in fact be conceived as a tool

through which identity and social structure are 'materially' constructed. Even according to the Argentine theorist, it is useless to seek a universal ideological content of populism; in other words, it is useless to find the 'essence' of the phenomenon in a precise value reference. Laclau's real goal, on the other hand, is to clarify the specific 'dimension' that qualifies populism. He thus conceives populism as a performative act and 'a constant dimension of political action that necessarily arises (in different degrees) in all political discourse' (Laclau 2005, p. 18). Therefore, 'rhetoric is not epiphenomenal vis-à-vis a self-contained conceptual structure, for no conceptual structure finds its internal cohesion without appealing to rhetorical devices' (Laclau 2005, p. 67).

The premises of *On Populist Reason* can of course be found in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, a book written by Laclau in collaboration with Chantal Mouffe in the mid-1980s (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). In the first place, according to Laclau, the terrain of constitution of objectivity is always defined by discourse, that is, by 'any complex of elements in which *relations* play the constitutive role' (Laclau, 2005 p. 68). Secondly, a hegemonic identity is 'something of the order of an *empty* signifier, its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness': 'it should be clear that the category of totality cannot be eradicated but that, as a failed totality, it is a horizon and not a ground' (Laclau 2005, p. 71). Finally, metaphors and rhetorical devices are part of the way in which the 'social' is constituted. In this sense, the rhetorical tool of 'catachresis' (a distortion of meaning that meets 'the need to express something that the literal term would simply not transmit') plays a fundamental role. Hegemonic totalization – and therefore also the construction of a 'people' – can in fact be conceived as a 'catachresic' operation: the naming of something that is 'essentially unnameable'. The 'people' produced by populism therefore does not have 'the nature of an ideological expression', but rather appears as 'a real relationship between social agents' and as 'a way of constituting the unity of the group' (Laclau 2005, p. 73).

Laclau also illustrates the specificity of the populist articulatory practice with which a unification is achieved starting from smaller units. The starting point is in fact constituted by a series of isolated questions, which can initiate a process of

articulation. The formulation of the questions represents the first step of a possible articulatory practice. However, for Laclau, the possible connection, within an 'equivalential chain', of unsatisfied questions is above all important. The question that remains isolated is therefore for Laclau a 'democratic question', while the popular question coincides with a plurality of questions that, through an equivalential articulation, constitutes a broader social subjectivity. Thus, the unsatisfied demands that combine in a chain of equivalences constitute the basic units of the 'people'. For Laclau, the populist configuration requires three elements: 1) 'the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the 'people' from power'; 2) 'an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the 'people' possible'; 3) 'the unification of these various questions – whose equivalence, up to that point, had not gone beyond a feeling of solidarity – in a stable system of signification' (Laclau 2005, p. 74). Summarizing this view, Mouffe writes that Laclau defines populism ad a discursive strategy of constructing a political frontier dividing society in two camps and calling for the mobilization of the 'underdog' against power' (Mouffe 2018, pp. 10–11). Furthermore, she points out that populism 'is not an ideology and cannot be attributed a specific programmatic content' and it is 'a way doing politics that can take various ideological forms according to both time and place, and is compatible with a variety of institutional frameworks*'* (Mouffe 2018, p. 11).

In general terms, I believe that this conception of populism can help to define more adequately the ideal-typical structure that Canovan had suggested. If Canovan had in fact invited us to conceive populism as 'an appeal to 'the people' against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society', Laclau's framework allows us to specify the 'morphological' elements of this 'appeal to the people'. In some way, we can recognize in the Argentine theorist's reflection a sort of 'morphological theory' of populism: a theory in which the focus is mainly on the 'shape' of political identities, while the 'contents' of these identities (concepts, ideas, values) are conceived 'only' as tools to give a 'shape' to a collective subject. Although apparently this view seems similar to Freeden's 'morphological' theory of ideologies, there is an important difference: while Freeden focuses on the

relationship between concepts, Laclau's theory invites us to consider above all the relationship between 'we' and 'them', which qualifies the construction of collective identities; therefore, it conceives the concepts and ideological elements as tools that are used in the strategy of constructing a frontier dividing society in two camps.

Laclau's theory has been criticized in recent years in terms of many aspects (Critchley & Marchart 2004; Marchart 2007; Baldassari & Melegari 2012; Chignola & Mezzadra 2012; Cacciatore 2019; Mazzolini 2020). A first problematic aspect is linked to the objectives of his theory of populism: his theory in fact provides an explanation of the dynamics of populism, but, at the same time, it presents itself as a political strategy to renew the left. For Laclau, populism is not only a logic of political discourse but also a political proposal; in other words, it is a strategy that, in his opinion, popular forces should adopt. A second aspect concerns Laclau's disinterest in the economic roots of the conflicts. And another aspect is related to the way in which unsatisfied questions are connected: Laclau seems to believe that questions can always 'add up' to other questions and that therefore they can always aggregate in an equivalential chain; however, he underestimates the specificity of the single questions and, moreover, the specificity of the institutional level in which the questions can aggregate. All these problems are absolutely relevant and the criticisms that have emerged in the last few years indicate weaknesses in Laclau's proposal. In the concluding section of this article, however, I intend to focus on a specific objective, which concerns the usefulness and limits of Laclau's contribution for a 'constructivist' study of populism.

5. Beyond Laclau

As we have seen in the previous pages, the 'neo-positivist' strategies of defining populist ideology lead to rather disappointing results. The drawbacks of these proposals can be avoided thanks to a 'constructivist' and 'Weberian' strategy, which is able to identify the elements of a populist ideal type. One solution is represented, for example, by the 'minimalist' conception that considers populism as a set of rhetorical tools. As we have seen, Canovan believes that populism consists of a repertoire

of rhetorical instruments, based on the appeal to the people. However, this solution may be 'too' minimalist, and in turn may appear disappointing for students of populism. Laclau's theory can probably offer useful elements to enrich Canovan's ideal-typical definition of populism.

As we have seen, for Canovan, populism is not an ideology, but a set of tools and above all a framework of legitimation. In this definition, however, a piece seems to be missing, at least in part: the objective for which the rhetorical tools of populism are mobilized. For Canovan, these tools are mainly used to organize a protest 'against' power, and the scholar emphasizes that this protest can take, from time to time, very different political colors. Following Laclau, we can argue that the goal of mobilization is the 'construction' of the people. In other words, the rhetorical tools that characterize populism are mobilized with the aim of building a new political identity, that is, of a 'people' that previously did not exist (or that were not 'represented'). In more ambitious terms, we can also say that populist logic has the objective of a sort of 'original accumulation' of 'political capital': in essence, it creates the symbolic capital that a political movement can draw on to mobilize its militants and own followers. Basically, 'building a people' means, according to Laclau, building a (fictitious) collective subject, to which the individual militant feels linked, through a relationship of emotional and symbolic identification. When the leader of a party mobilizes their followers, they draw on that symbolic and political capital that consists in the emotional bond that unites the individual to the collective subject (the class, the homeland, the nation, etc.).

On the basis of this general idea, we can identify the condition of the emergence of populist logic in the weakening of the relationship between citizens and the political class, or rather in the weakening of the previous identification mechanisms that linked individual citizens to leaders, symbols and organizations. In other words, populist logic can assert itself politically when it can occupy the space left free by previous political identities. Only when the identity bond between citizens and the political class weakens, that is, a space opens up for populist logic, can populist logic, appealing to the people and their sovereign authority, propose a representation of the

political space that is completely alternative to the previous one, i.e., a different representation of the fracture lines present in society. In this sense, populist logic, as Laclau foresees, can establish 'an antagonistic internal frontier that separates the 'people' from power', elaborating 'an equivalential articulation of the questions that finally makes the emergence of the 'people' possible', and finally proceed to the unification of the various questions 'in a stable system of signification'. When it emerges, this logic tries to propose a new cleavage (between the 'people' and its adversaries), but it is by no means certain that the new fracture line will be consolidated in the future.

If Laclau's theory provides many useful elements for rethinking populism, it is by no means devoid of problematic elements. The main problem, at least from my perspective, is represented by the relationship between populism and the 'political'. For Laclau, 'populism' is not olny a specific phenomenon: in essence, 'populism' is the mechanism by which every political identity is produced. In *On Populist Reason*, he writes that 'populism is, quite simply, a way of constructing the political' (Laclau 2005 p. 9), but, in a more radical way, he seems to conceive populism as a synonym for the 'political'. In Laclau's scheme, it is clear that the distinction between 'political' and 'economic' struggles has no relevance: every conflict, since it expresses an antagonistic dimension, is 'political'. Furthermore, the distinction between 'political' and populism tends to disappear, because the logic of populism coincides with the logic of the formation of political identities; every political project, therefore, has a populist element in it. In essence, Laclau seems to have a 'totalizing' vision of populism; therefore, populism must be considered as a tool that can (and must) use any political force that tries to represent its demands as 'general' interests. This represented for Laclau a precious element of his theory, but undoubtedly it can represent a weak point for a reflection on the specificity of populism. If all political movements are, to some extent, 'populist', perhaps it becomes useless to try to grasp the specificity of the phenomenon, which could instead be identified by other more general terms.

This problem, however, is linked to a further ambiguity, which concerns the relationship between conflicts and the space in which these conflicts take place. In schematic terms, the formation of a collective identity coincides, in fact, in Laclau's

theory, with the construction of a conflictual cleavage: following the proposal of the Argentine theorist, we can in fact believe that, when an antagonistic border is established between 'us' and 'they', at the same time a certain conflictual level also takes shape, within which the conflict takes place. Furthermore, since social identities do not have roots in the 'objective' structure of society, we must also believe that there is a multiplicity of possible conflictual cleavages, each of which is concretely activated when questions begin to be formulated and when an equivalential chain is formed. In essence, we should thus imagine a plurality of possible collective identities and a plurality of conflicting cleavages. Actually, in *On Populist Reason* Laclau seems to presuppose the existence of a single conflictual space. Although he often claims that the terrain is shaped by the conflict itself, the logical presuppositions of his whole discourse and the historical examples he uses tend to proceed in a different direction. It seems that the Argentine thinker believes that there is an instance capable of answering social demands and that the existence of such an instance does not depend on political conflict. In other words, he seems to hypothesize that there is a specific 'political' space in which all demands can be effectively aggregated. Although Laclau is obviously very far from admitting this point, many clues tend to confirm that he conceives the space in which the conflict takes place coincides with the national space. In the first place, all the examples he uses in *On Populist Reason* (the struggle against Russian tsarism, Peronism, Mao's 'Long March', the Italian Communist Party during the leadership of Palmiro Togliatti) refer to movements that have as their objective the conquest of the state and that, to achieve this result, are able to aggregate extremely heterogeneous social demands. Secondly, the discussion on 'heterogeneous' questions only makes sense if one assumes the existence of a space that coincides with the space of the national state, because the only way to consider them 'homogeneous' is to conceive a given conflictual space as prevalent with respect to other potential areas of conflict. Laclau's theory therefore tends to think that the conflict between collective identities takes place on the terrain of state institutions: in the first place, therefore, he assumes that the conflict takes place within the perimeter of the national state; moreover, at least implicitly, he assumes that state institutions are

endowed with the necessary resources to act in society (Palano 2012; 2016; Filippini 2019).

These problems make it difficult to use Laclau's proposal to interpret contemporary populism (and to distinguish the different examples of populisms). One solution, however, consists in recovering a distinction that Laclau himself formulated in the 1980s, precisely with regard to the relationship between the birth of collective identities and the structure of the political space. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, with Chantal Mouffe, he distinguished between the *logic of equivalence* and *the logic of difference*. 'The logic of equivalence,' they wrote, 'is a logic of the simplification of political space, while the logic of difference is a logic of its expansion and increasing complexity' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, p. 130). For Laclau and Mouffe, the *logic of difference* is a logic that multiplies the spaces of conflict: for example, in postmodern society, there are many conflicts (economic, social, cultural, gender) that are independent of each other. In this sense, the logic of difference is used by those subjects who intend to propose a new conflictual cleavage, rejecting the existence of a unity: for example, the workers' movement, feminism, etc., which affirm an interest different from the interest of the 'nation', of the 'people', of the 'homeland'. The *logic of equivalence* is instead a logic that tends to divide the political space between two opposing fields (absorbing the other potential cleavages) : 'in the countries of the Third World, imperialist exploitation and the predominance of brutal and centralized forms of domination tend from the beginning to endow the popular struggle with a center, with a single and clearly defined enemy. Here the division of the political space into two fields is present from the outset, but the diversity of democratic struggles is more reduced' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, p. 131).

This distinction, 'correcting' the all-encompassing vision of *On Populist Reason*, makes it clear that not all political identities are 'populist'; that is, not all political identities have the objective of aggregating different positions in this common popular front. For example, movements that aim to claim a partiality that cannot be recomposed cannot be considered (even tendentially) as 'populist', because they aim to assert a 'partial' identity and do not try to be spokespersons for the people. Following

this proposal, we can consider populism as a specific variant of the logic of equivalence: it is not important what the ideological elements are that are used to justify the unity of the people, but the point is that the populist logic aims to propose a vision of the political space, in which it is divided into two opposing fields. The stages are therefore those identified by Laclau himself: 1) fixing 'an antagonistic internal frontier separating the 'people' from power'; 2) elaborating 'an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the 'people' possible'; and finally 3) unifying the various questions 'in a stable system of signification'.

This way of conceiving populism clearly allows us to establish what populism is 'not', but it also allows us to identify other logics that are similar to populism. In fact, nationalism is another variant of the logic of equivalence: in all these cases, the political space is divided into two opposing fields and the individual claims are 'merged' into the unity of the 'people' or the 'nation'. Examples of 'non-populist' logics are movements that 'complicate' the political space, because they propose new lines of division: a youth movement, a women's movement, a religious minority, etc. In all these cases, the movement proposes a new division line that does not aspire to reabsorb all the other lines: simply, these movements aim to affirm a difference, establishing a conflictual line (young/old, men/women, etc.) that previously did not exist. In essence, both the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference propose a division of the political space. The logic of equivalence, however, aims to reabsorb all the differences existing in only two opposing fields. And for this reason, populist logic can represent the political space as a division between the people and the establishment.

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe always seem to presuppose two conditions, which in reality can also be considered problematic. Indeed, the two scholars seem to believe that conflicts take place within a political space that has certain characteristics: first, the boundaries of the political space always seem to be those of the state, that is, of the political space that is identified by existing political institutions; secondly, Laclau and Mouffe think of a 'democratic' political space, within which antagonism can therefore always express itself. These assumptions were

linked to the particular goal that the book pursued. Using today, for another purpose, the distinction between the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference, it is probably necessary to 'complicate' the discourse, adding two further logics. In view of a further development of Laclau and Mouffe's theory, we can in fact identify two further logics for the formation of collective identities: first, the logic of *totality*, which not only tries to oppose a rival, but which aims to eliminate antagonism by expelling enemies; secondly, the logic of *secession*, which aims to leave the political space to give shape to a new space: in others words, it does not simply seek to 'complicate' the structure of the political space, but pursues the objective of a radical separation from the political space, through the construction of a totally alternative political space.

Through this reformulation of Laclau's theory, we can therefore identify four different logics for the formation of collective identities: a) the logic of equivalence (populist); b) the logic of difference; c) the logic of *totality*, d) the logic of *secession*. Evidently, all these logics describe a process of unification and construction of an identity; moreover, all can appeal to the sovereignty of the people. Furthermore, these four logics represent ideal-types, that is 'pure' theoretical types, which can often occur in an overlapping way. However, what distinguishes them are other aspects that concern politically crucial questions, such as: On what ground are the people built? Who is the enemy/rival? How is the unity of the people defended? But the different ways in which these questions can be answered confirm, once again, that the faces of the people are multiple and, in many ways, even infinite.

6. Conclusions

In recent years, the reflections of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on populism, and on the structure of collective identities, have offered a series of important stimuli to radical theory. The discussion on their proposals will probably also continue in the next few years, and in particular, scholars interested in studying the structure of the 'political' will have to deal with their hypotheses. Instead, in this article I have focused only on one aspect of Laclau's theory and tried to show its usefulness for contemporary debate. In particular, Laclau's proposal offers some valuable

elements to elaborate an ideal-typical definition of populism. As we have seen, the 'neo-positivist' strategy of defining populism leads to very disappointing results, especially when it tries to identify the elements of a 'populist ideology'. Laclau's contribution, on the other hand, suggests not only conceiving populism differently but also conceiving ideology in very different terms from traditional ones.

As we have seen, in Laclau's 'morphological' theory, the 'people' is not the result of a specific ideology or traditional conceptions: the people is the result of a rhetorical construction, which can use elements of different ideologies and political traditions. More precisely, the structure of the populist configuration requires three elements: 1) an internal antagonistic frontier separating the 'people' from power; 2) an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the 'people' possible; 3) the unification of these questions in a stable system of signification. This configuration can be considered as a parsimonious definition of the ideal-typical structure of the appeal to the people that characterizes populism. Even if some 'pieces' of ideologies can be used to appeal to the people, what characterizes populism is not the ideology, but the set of these three elements, which allow to give a specific shape to the people.

As it turns out, the small 'Copernican revolution' proposed by Laclau is not without some ambiguity. In particular, in *On Populist Reason* it is not clear whether Laclau conceives populism as the only logic of formation of political identities, or if he instead conceives populism as one of the possible ways in which political identities can be formed. Furthermore, the Argentine theorist seems implicitly to believe that the space of conflict, in which political identities are formed and in which they collide, coincides with the space of the nation-state. To overcome both of these ambiguities, in the final part of this article I tried to 'correct' through an idea developed by Laclau himself and by Mouffe in the 1980s, relating to the distinction between a logic of (populist) equivalence and a logic of difference (which is a kind of logic of autonomy). And in this regard, in my opinion, a space opens up for further developing the hypotheses of the two scholars on the formation of collective identities and on the forms of political conflict.

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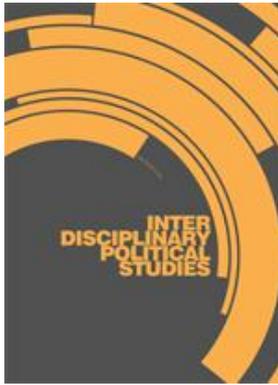
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Populism and Neoliberalism. Notes on the Morphology of a 'Perverse Alliance'

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the commonalities of contemporary right-wing populism and neoliberalism. It thereby focuses on how neoliberalism has undone the ontological basis of the modern sovereign people and how this process has generated the conditions for the possibility of neo-populism, which thus appears as the obscene reverse of neoliberalism. Populism and neoliberalism form a 'perverse alliance' that leads them to fight the same battle, albeit in different forms, against material equality. Populism fights this battle with two privileged instruments: a 'war of values' that deflects interest from the conflict against socio-economic inequality and a 'war on migrants' that amplifies xeno-populism while nevertheless sharing with neoliberalism the processes of the hierarchisation of citizenship and social order.

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1. Undoing the Demos: on the genesis of neo-populism

With the 2008 crisis, as well as the 2011 sovereign debt crisis in Europe, a post-democratic interregnum has opened which has not yet come to an end (Balibar 2016; Simoncini 2018). Since then, the neoliberal governance of the crisis has amplified the 'democratic recession' that had already been underway since the 1970s (Palano 2012; 2019). In this context, neoliberal governmentality has continued to 'undo the demos', understood as the subject of representative democracy. Revisiting and criticising Foucault's lesson, Wendy Brown has well described this process of undoing of the people and has shown how, in recent decades, neoliberal devices have acted by progressively transforming citizens into entrepreneurs of themselves, civil society into the arena of continuous inter-individual competition, and the State into a company competing with others (Foucault 2005; Brown 2015, pp. 17-45). This is how, for Brown, neoliberalism has undone the ontological basis of the modern sovereign people: the *homo politicus*, that is, the subject imagined by the modern *fabula* of the contract. The *homo politicus* is the autonomous individual capable of voluntarily subjecting himself to the sovereign power of which he is the author and to the legal norms that arise from that power. In other words, he is the subject who, in a democracy, authorises (through elections) his representatives to act politically in his name and in the name of the sovereign people – a people made up of *homines politici* who delegate the power to govern to a representative parliament. For Brown, the people under neoliberalism do not follow this logic. In fact, it is constructed as a disaggregated set of *homines oeconomici* who remove the political dimension and – as Ida Dominijanni has observed – internalise the system's imperatives by identifying 'their own life *performance* with that prescribed by capitalism' (Dominijanni 2017, p. 88). The neoliberal people thus coincide with a multitude of individuals self-subjected to the 'performance-enjoyment device' (Dardot & Laval 2009, pp. 433-437): a performative device that continuously exalts the 'freedom to invest and bet on oneself as on *futures* in the stock exchange' (Dominijanni 2017, p. 88).

However, the aim of the neoliberal programme was not in itself to undo the demos; its aim was not, in other words, to ensure that 'the world economy had

no people' or to achieve 'a world without a people' (Slobodian 2018, p. 276). Neoliberalism rather aimed at *sequestering* the people 'and leashing it, penning it into prescribed areas' (ibid.): areas in which the freedom and political mobility of its individual components would be harnessed within the mesh of the capitalist order. A multitude of de-politicised individuals competing with each other for individual affirmation, in fact, can hardly recreate 'the conditions of possibility for collective action based on the discourse of equality' (Ricciardi 2020, p. 286). The first objective of neoliberal programmatic rationality is therefore not the resetting of popular sovereignty as such, but rather the disciplining of collective action. What is most important to it is to neutralise everything that can 'modify the order of the system': its concern is to defend capitalism as 'social order and way of life' (ibid.). In order to achieve this, it is not necessary to abolish representative democracy. It is enough to preserve a weakened form of it and to superimpose itself while guaranteeing formal rights. In this way, differences and inequalities through which neoliberal capitalism enhances itself are reproduced: 'the poor and informal nature of work, classification according to skin colour, patriarchal constraints' (ibid.). Thus, social inequality is naturalised by acquiring a normative character.

However, when inequality widens too much and the middle classes together with the subaltern classes become drastically impoverished, the crisis generates the conditions for the possibility of a new age of mass resentment (Revelli 2019, pp. 5-84). Thus, from 2008 onwards, 'in the ruins of neoliberalism', sovereign populism has strongly re-emerged (Brown 2019). And 'from the neoliberal undoing of the sovereign people', from its 'defeat', the people of populism was born (Dominijanni 2020a, p. 23).[1] In different ways according to space and time, this was characterised

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[1] Brown summarises it as follows in a recent interview: 'what has broken down is the post-war social contract that promised security and a degree of social mobility to the white working and middle classes'. So 'inequality has grown both in wealth and in access to what had been the commons'. In the absence of the left, 'the right has brilliantly transformed this frustration into a racist and sexist rage' (Capuccilli 2020). Throughout the text, I speak of a populism of the right, and also adopt the term 'sovereigntist populism' in order to mean (as we will see) a neo-populism that does not limit itself to evoking a sovereign people distinguished from its insidious enemies by means of a strict line of separation, but also leverages the idea of a virtuous and productive people capable of making the nation competitive within the arena of global capitalism: a people of honest workers who accept the neoliberal norm of inter-individual competition without the qualms of unions.

as a people made up of frightened, resentful and revanchist individuals demanding 'protection, borders, security, confirmation of identity, primacy of race and gender, sovereignty' (Dominijanni 2020b, p. 32). Having gone through the joyous season of triumphant neoliberalism 'armed with the self-entrepreneurial ethic and the principle of performance' – sanctified also by the left-wing parties of social-democratic and communist filiation (parties which, satisfied the rise of capitalist globalisation and the logic of the European Treaties, ending up forgetting the working classes and the importance of public services) – these individuals were overwhelmed by the crisis (ibid.). The market's promises of happiness have been reversed into austerity. The incitement to enjoy, which had become a categorical imperative along with the axiomatic of competition, left the door wide open for the 'ethics of debt and guilt, resentment and self-defence' (Dominijanni 2020a, p. 24). The crisis generated fear of falling and resentment. Neo-populism leveraged on these, finding the impoverished subjects ready 'to defend what *they had* with guns under the pillow' and what *they were* 'with walls on the borders' (ibid.). These subjects, however, remained shaped 'in their behaviour and subconscious by the subjectivation devices of neoliberal ethics»' (ibid.). The populist subject, in short, was no different from the neoliberal subject. It was the same subject that, fearing to become a 'marginal *forgotten*' of globalisation, showed its obscene face in full: the ordinarily *off-stage* face of racism, supremacism, and neo-patriarchy (Dominijanni 2020b, p. 32).

More generally, Slavoj Žižek has shown how neo-populisms constitute the obscene reverse of neoliberalism (Žižek 2009).[2] Indeed, they materialise the 'unspeakable invitation to enjoyment' in the identification with the leader and in the hunt for the enemy of the people, allegedly responsible for the crisis (Visentin 2014, p. 203). In this way they balance out, 'obviously only on the level of the imaginary,

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[2] The present text moves in a similar theoretical direction, i.e., one that is different from hypotheses which interpret neo-populisms only as a form of opposition to neoliberalism and the technocratic drifts of liberal democracy (Mounk 2018), or as an 'illiberal democratic response to a non-democratic liberalism' (Mudde 2015). And despite considering them very useful and provocative, the perspective adopted here also considers the theoretical hypotheses which read neo-populisms as a 'senile disease of democracy' (Revelli 2009, p. 8) or as its 'permanent shadow' (Müller 2017, p. 101) to be insufficient.

the suffering and material sacrifices imposed by the end of Welfare and the social democratic compromise' (ibid.). By advancing the claim of restoring the sovereign power of the national people, populist sovereignties promised impoverished subjects that they would defend them from what threatened their 'honest' work, their property, their 'almighty freedom' (Dominijanni 2020a, p. 24). To the representation of an undone people and the people's defeat, they were able to counterpose the dream image of a people made up of sovereign and free individuals (of an unrelated, private and proprietary freedom). Thanks to the exhausting rhetorical and media repetition of an 'empty signifier' that gave contingent unity to different popular demands, individuals were stimulated to a strong identification with the leader. In this way the construction of the people took shape (Laclau 2005, pp. 122-148).

However, Laura Bazzicalupo has emphasised that the identification processes of contemporary populism are very different from those activated by the totalitarian movements of the 20th century. For these movements, in the words of Freud (1989), the strong libidinal and ideological investment in the figure of the charismatic leader triggered a mechanism of idealising sublimation that compensated for the 'impotence of fragmented and atomistic masses' (Bazzicalupo 2014, p. 28). In contemporary populism, on the other hand, multitudes composed of individuals whose form of life is shaped by the competitive-consumeristic untying of the market (understood as the now naturalised principle of social normativity) tend to aesthetically and temporarily identify with leaders who are less and less traceable to the figure of the Freudian superego and more and more similar to 'despotic fetishes' (Gatto 2021). Through continuous imitative processes, individuals who 'maintain their own narcissism, their own imaginary of self-fulfilment and self-management', aggregate into a public rather than a people unified by representative logics. They stop sublimating their libido and agglomerate, swarming around provisional leaders who seem 'available to everyone': leaders to be 'consumed' in forms of postmodern collective rituality that provisionally gives meaning to the identity of individual followers; leader-influencers who gain credibility precisely because they know how to support 'the standardised images of the public' – images that emerge

from the web, from polls, from the bubbles of social networks[3] – and for the (equally decisive) fact of knowing how to exhibit 'the desires and resentments of all in a striking way' (Bazzicalupo 2014, p. 33). In a sort of superficial mimetic game entirely within the logic of the spectacle, the multitudes imitate the leader and the leader imitates the multitudes 'as in a mirror' (ibid., p. 25). Everyone imitates everyone.

What remains central to contemporary populism – as has been said – is instead the recourse to dream images provided with a reassuring, fusional power: images able to confer a temporary mythical-imaginary unity on the people-public. This makes populism the latest scenario of the society of the spectacle. As Mario Pezzella has observed, populism is a 'newly minted spectacular representation that replaces the phantasmal dispute of the old parties'; by proposing a merely imaginary emancipation that never touches 'the real domination of capital', populism completes the transformation of 'democracy into spectacle' (Pezzella 2016, pp. 187-192).[4]

2. Neoliberalism and populism: three links in a 'perverse alliance'

Sovereigntist populisms have manifested themselves, and continue to manifest themselves, essentially as 'an attempt at the reactionary stabilisation of the crisis' which recalls the ghost of the homogeneous and sovereign people – with its recomposed hierarchies of race, gender and class – 'at the service of neoliberalism itself' (Amendola 2020, p. 257).[5] In this way they were, and are, 'global phenomena of ideological – rather than practical – neutralisation of the social distances that neoliberalism constantly reproduces' (Ricciardi 2020, p. 285). And just as they were presenting themselves almost everywhere as the main adversaries of neoliberalism,

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[3] On the centrality of 'bubbles' for the metamorphosis of contemporary democracy, see Palano (2020).

[4] On the spectacular logic of Trump's 'image politics', see the interesting proposal in Bolt Rasmussen (2019, pp. 53-67).

[5] For sovereigntist populism, anyone who challenges this homogeneity and hierarchy is an enemy. These include, for example, social movements that politically subjectivate popular differences along the lines of colour, gender and class. Neo-populism opposes movements such as *Black Lives Matter*, *Ni Una Menos* and the *Gillet Jaunes* with its 'at once supremacist, securitarian, heteropatriarchal and libertarian frames', behind which stands the image of a people recomposed around the hegemony of the white, Western, property-owning male subject (Dominijanni 2020a, p. 25).

neo-populisms were forging a 'paradoxical and perverse alliance': perverse because it was founded on the 'omnipotence of politics in relation to society and its substantial impotence in relation to the market'; paradoxical because it contradicted the wordy criticism directed at the only really existing cosmopolitanism, namely the 'halved cosmopolitanism' of capitalist globalisation (Ferrajoli 2019).

Luigi Ferrajoli has recently underlined three fundamental links of this peculiar alliance. The first is the functionality of neoliberalism to sovereigntist populism. By demolishing labour law and guarantees, multiplying, fragmenting, and making its forms more precarious – putting workers in constant competition with each other and, at the same time, breaking up 'forms of collective subjectivity based on equality, solidarity and common struggles for common rights' – neoliberal policies have created the social basis for populism. Social insecurity has in fact created the fertile ground on which xenophobic and racist security campaigns have been grafted, re-founding 'collective subjectivities on a common hostility to those who are different – migrants – identified as aliens, enemies, dangerous and potentially criminals' (ibid.).

The second link in this perverse alliance is of an inverse nature. It consists in the functionality of sovereigntist populism with neoliberalism, i.e., in the fact that the former is objectively sympathetic to the interests of the great economic and financial powers. The anti-globalism and anti-Europeanism of sovereigntist populism is in fact opposed to the construction of a transnational public sphere. And only on this scale could the mechanisms of collective subjectivation take shape which are able to operate at the level of the 'new absolute, invisible and irresponsible sovereigns into which the markets have transformed themselves', true 'savage powers' (ibid.; Ferrajoli 2011). The growing sovereignty of economic and financial powers, which is in fact exercised on a global scale, thus ends up being facilitated precisely by neo-populisms that claim an 'illusory sovereignty' for nation states (Ferrajoli 2019).

The third link between neoliberalism and sovereigntist populism consists in the fact that neither tolerate constitutional constraints, undermining them at their

roots. In fact, neoliberals see the market as a sovereign space whose freedom cannot be controlled and corrected by public authorities; the latter must rather support the market and set up an efficient legal-institutional device capable of guaranteeing that everyone adapt to the logic of competition. On the other hand, sovereigntists conceive 'the popular will embodied by the majority as the only source of political legitimacy' (ibid.). But since in practice the sovereignty of the markets prevails over popular sovereignty, the combined action of these two logics produces, on the one hand, the 'disempowerment of politics towards the markets» and, on the other hand, its 'renewed omnipotence towards individuals and their rights' (ibid.). All of this leads to the 'de-constitutionalising of our political systems' and generates a situation in which 'the political and democratic governance of the economy' leaves more and more room for the economic and 'non-democratic governance of politics' (ibid.).

For Ferrajoli, the cases of Trump, Bolsonaro, Erdogan, Salvini and Orban show 'the populist deceit' which consists in the fact that sovereigntism validates itself as an anti-system force precisely when its culture and policies prove to be maximally 'functional to the strengthening of the existing system, its inequalities and discriminations' (ibid.). Just as neo-populism denies the sovereignty of fundamental rights over state sovereignty, neoliberalism subordinates it to the sovereignty of the markets. In doing so, both make instrumental use of the concept of popular sovereignty: sovereign populism identifies it with the omnipotence of electoral majorities and neoliberalism uses it as a source of legitimisation for a capitalism that now tends to become 'absolute' (ibid.; Balibar 2020, pp. 272-278). Both political families thus attest to their equal anti-constitutional valence, since for post-war European constitutions – starting with the Italian one – 'sovereignty belongs to the people, who exercise it in the forms and within the limits of the Constitution'.

For the constitutional dictate, however, 'people' should not be understood in the neoliberal sense, as a multitude of self-entrepreneurs dedicated to enhancing their human capital in order to prevail in market competition. Nor should it be understood in a populist sense, 'as a homogeneous and undifferentiated whole' (Ferra-

joli 2019). For the Constitution – Ferrajoli continues – the 'people' is by no means an abstract 'macro-subject', but 'the totality of citizens in flesh and blood' (ibid.). The fact that the people is the constitutional holder of sovereignty means two things: first, sovereignty can *only* belong to the citizens that make up the people and no one else (no constituted power can usurp it); second, sovereignty is equivalent to 'the sum of everyone's powers and counter-powers, which are constitutionally established rights' (ibid.). Contrary to the neoliberal and populist people, then, the democratic people coincide with the set of citizens who concretely enjoy fundamental rights, i.e., those civil, political and social rights which are constitutionally superior to any constituted power and must be institutionally guaranteed in the framework of a social democracy that Ferrajoli hopes is 'cosmopolitan' (Ferrajoli 2015, pp. 95-122; Ferrajoli 2021, pp. 369-450).

If they were conceived in their abstract legal determination, however, these rights would remain only the formal mirror of the existing relations of force. They must therefore be understood as the instruments that materially contest those very relations of force (Ferrajoli 2019). For this reason, Ferrajoli equates popular sovereignty with 'the sum of those fragments of sovereignty that are the powers and counter-powers in which consist the fundamental rights held by each and all' (ibid.). In other words, it is these rights that give 'form and content to the *will of the people*'. (ibid.). To trample on them, as neoliberalism and populism do, is to violate the people who hold them and, simultaneously, popular sovereignty itself. The 'sovereignty of fundamental rights' of which Ferrajoli speaks thus seems to maintain a continuous relationship with the social conflict from which it in fact moves (ibid.). In other words, rights are not a rosary of guarantees, but rather the instruments of a social critique that rises from the participation of the governed and challenges the presumed naturalness of law, which is instead a political stake. In this sense, rights are the 'counter-powers' that defend subjects from the savage powers of the state and the market, reaffirming the *kratos* constitutionally held by the *demos*.[6] This is the true

[6] Beyond the important theoretical differences, it may be useful to compare Ferrajoli's 'counter-powers' to the 'counter-rights' (*Gegenrechte*) of which the Frankfurt philosopher Christoph Menke spoke. If the 'counter-powers' of the former call to mind the conflicting subjectivation from which

'democratic substance' of popular sovereignty, which neoliberalism and populism constitutively oppose because – albeit in different ways – both violate the principle of equality (ibid.).[7]

3. Populism as 'new neoliberalism'

The elective affinities between sovereigntist populism and neoliberalism do not end there. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval have recently argued that their perverse alliance is structural in nature. For them, neo-populism cannot be interpreted simply as an authoritarian reaction to neoliberalism. It is not a revolt against liberal democracy, nor is it the result of a 'Polanyi moment' in which the demand for the protection of populations would find an answer in a state that opposes neoliberal globalisation. Much less it is a 'fascist moment' of neoliberalism that would give rise to a 'neoliberal fascism' (Fassin 2018). Dardot and Laval observe how between neo-populisms and neoliberalism there is no antithesis at all. For them, the former represents a specific articulation of neoliberal governmentality, i.e., a 'new neoliberalism' (Dardot & Laval 2019). Indeed, while adopting different styles and rhetoric, none of the populist forces that emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis has really opposed the axioms of neoliberalism understood as a global political rationality 'which consists for governments in imposing the logic of capital within the economy, as well as within society and the State itself, to the point of making it the form of subjectivities and the norm of existence' (ibid., p. 5). Dardot and Laval's hypothesis is that neoliberalism is multiple in itself and that its plasticity has allowed it to survive crises, or rather to define itself as a system that 'governs through crisis' (ibid., p. 6). Since the 1970s – they argue – neoliberalism has 'fed and radicalised itself through its own crises', perpetuating the logic that produced them (ibid.). Neo-populism is only the latest metamorphosis of this way of governing, one in which

they arise and constitutively oppose the new forms of domination, the 'counter-rights' of the latter contrast the depoliticisation produced by the absolutisation of subjective rights. In fact, they arise from the realisation of the impotence of the subalterns and are defined by enhancing the praxis that combats it. Like Ferrajoli's 'counter-powers', Menke's 'counter-rights' aim to re-politicise the juridical. At the same time, they propose to modify the arrangements of the social order, marking the very 'political process they make possible' (Menke 2015, p. 388).

[7] On the principle of equality see Ferrajoli (2018, pp. IX-XIII, 3-35, 113-137, 196-220).

neoliberalism – earlier associated with progress and individual freedoms – 'takes the form of the closure of borders, the erection of new «walls», the cult of nationhood and sovereignty, and the explicit offensive against human rights, seen as a danger to security' (ibid.).

In this sense, Trump's election 'unquestionably marks a date in the history of global neoliberalism: Trump is the name of a mutation that goes well beyond the United States and involves 'all governments that express nationalist, authoritarian, xenophobic tendencies' (ibid. p. 7). Similarly, we can observe the government that was in power in Italy from 2018 to 2019, considered one of the most interesting laboratories of the 'new neoliberalism' because it is characterised by a mixture of nationalism and neoliberalism perfectly embodied by Matteo Salvini's Lega. While verbally lashing out against the European Union and the Euro, the governing League has in fact remained firmly within the limits of the neoliberal programme. It has opposed 'any logic of redistribution through taxation and public spending', in particular by raising the flag of the *flat tax;* it has supported small and medium-sized enterprises by elevating them to the rank of champions of productivity and 'national heroes'; it has tried to promote the so-called 'differentiated autonomy', that is, that real 'secession of the rich' which – in the name of free competition between regions of the same country – undermines the equality of citizens 'with respect to fundamental public services' (ibid.; Viesti 2019).

The 5-Star Movement has also mixed nationalism with neoliberalism – as evidenced by its full support for the immigration policies of the Ministry of the Interior – which also includes the so-called 'citizenship income'. This social measure, flaunted from the balcony of Palazzo Chigi as the abolition of poverty, is a good example of paternalistic neoliberalism and is in fact a 'dangerous workfare system' (Ciccarelli & Nicoli 2019; Ciccarelli 2020);[8] in fact, it is a subsidy strongly condi-

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[8] Ciccarelli recalls that the 'citizenship income' envisages on paper 'up to 16 hours of free work per week provided to local authorities, compulsory mobility throughout the country in search of a job, funds to companies that hire. Those who do not respect these rules are penalised and punished up to the loss of the subsidy'. This neoliberal workfare logic has, moreover, run aground on the rocks of the failure of the 'digital platform that was supposed to bring supply and demand together' and that

tioned and marked by the colour line – all non-EU citizens who have resided in Italy for less than 10 years are excluded. It was not conceived as a measure capable of freeing up time to dedicate to 'active participation in citizenship' but as a 'tool for moralising the poor and disciplining the workforce to the benefit of businesses' (Dardot & Laval 2019, p. 7).

For Dardot and Laval, the Italian example shows that the governments of the new neoliberalism do not in any way represent 'a questioning of neoliberalism as a form of power' (ibid., p. 8). Rather, despite their great difference, governments such as those of Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, Johnson, and Orban innovate the forms of neoliberal power by experimenting with an authoritarianism that reinforces its governmental grip on society and transforms it into 'national-neoliberalism'. As Pierre Sauvêtre has argued, this national-neoliberalism proclaims the recovery of national sovereignty against 'globalism' but does not oppose capitalist globalisation (Sauvêtre 2020). On the contrary, Trump, Johnson, Bolsonaro and Salvini present themselves as champions of entrepreneurial *ratio* and do not question generalised competition as the new reason of the world. On the contrary, they redefine the nation as an entrepreneurial community engaged in international economic warfare. A war whose logic their economic nationalism fully accepts, further pursuing 'the neoliberal work of the general dismantling of society' in the name of affirming the nation-state and national capital (ibid). Hence the support for lower taxes for the rich, the reduction of subsidies (which are only conceivable if they are strongly conditional on work) and the simplification of the various forms of market deregulation,

For Dardot and Laval, neo-populisms are thus produced within neoliberal governmentality as 'an original political form that mixes anti-democratic authoritarianism, economic nationalism and extended capitalist rationality' (Dardot & Laval 2019, p. 9). Arising out of the crisis of neoliberalism that, with its programme of transforming society into an order of competition, blew up the foundations of social and political life by generating anger, neo-populisms channel and exploit popu-

'has never come into operation'. Thus 'in fact, today, the 'citizenship income' is a basic income of 500 euros on average' (Ciccarelli 2020).

lar anger. Legitimising their actions with that same anger, they adopt a policy that overwhelmingly favours the market (ibid., p. 10). They use 'the crisis of liberal-social democracy', without ceasing to aggravate it, in order to better impose the 'logic of capital on society' (ibid.). Neo-populism is thus an integral part of neoliberalism. It is the form that politics takes in the crisis of neoliberalism and representative democracy. It is a tactical articulation with which neoliberalism addresses these crises by deploying more radical and explicit forms of its basic choice: the 'choice of civil war' (Dardot et al. 2021). In a recent book, written together with other members of the *Groupe d'études sur le néolibéralisme et les alternatives*, Dardot and Laval argued that the unifying feature of neoliberalism is that it wants to impose the market order through a policy of civil war. In all its forms, whether progressive, conservative, or populist, the strong State of neoliberalism fights a no-holds-barred battle for the constitutionalising of capitalist axioms: for a 'market constitutionalism', that is – as the governmental architecture of the European Union shows – the one able to shield the levers of political decision-making from democratic processes (ibid., pp. 97-118; Dardot & Laval 2009, pp. 196-199; Malatesta 2020). The political is thus reconfigured 'as a fundamental decision in favour of the economic' (Ricciardi 2016; 2017, pp. 11 ff; Zanini 2019).

4. Populism in the neoliberal 'civil war'

For Dardot and Laval, neoliberal civil war is not the *stasis* of the Greeks, the permanent threat of the dissolution of the social body. Nor is it the Hobbesian war of all against all: a figure of disorder radically opposed to politics as a praxis capable of radically suspending violence. Neoliberal civil war is a peculiar form of politics itself: it is politics understood as a 'continuation of war' (Foucault 2013, p. 45). Put another way, it is 'the product of power relations and the exercise of government' (Pelletier 2021). Exercising power, in fact, 'is in a certain way to practice civil war' and – turning Clausewitz's famous dictum on its head with Foucault – for Dardot and Laval, politics is also 'the continuation of war by other means' (ibid.; Foucault 1998, p. 22). As mentioned above, the '*heart* of the authoritarian dimension

of neoliberal politics' – the one running through both globalist and progressive ne-oliberalism as well as sovereign and reactionary neoliberalism – is the 'founding de-cision that restricts *a priori* the field of deliberation' and excludes 'economic policy from collective deliberation' (Dardot 2021).[9] This is what the two authors call 'con-stitutional decisionism' (Dardot et al. 2021, p. 296[10]). If this is the unifying feature of neoliberal civil war, the many differences of real neoliberalism are due to the changing strategies with which – in different contexts and against changing enemies – it is fought in order to establish the market order.

In order to achieve this goal, Austrian and German theorists of the 1930s immediately thought of neoliberalism as a 'political project to neutralise socialism' (ibid., p. 23). Socialist governments and parties, social movements and trade unions must not be allowed to undermine the market order. The first objective of the ne-oliberal civil war is therefore to avoid 'that the masses, forming a coalition, can – even within the legal framework of representative democracy – call into question the self-balancing functioning of the market' (ibid., p. 20). That is why a strong State is needed in order to protect the market from the threat of State regulation and the Freedom-killing collectivism of the welfare State. The State – as the champions of doctrinaire neoliberalism (Hayek, Mises, Rüstow and Röpke) agree – must index economic justice to the market order, protecting the population from class struggle understood as 'civil war in society' and effectively neutralising 'the socialist that can be born in every proletarian' (ibid., p. 302). The neoliberal State is always on the

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[9] In this sense, Dardot and Laval's theoretical proposal differs from others – such as the very stimu-lating idea of Thomas Briebricher (Briebricher 2020) – who, assimilating authoritarianism and the authoritarian regime, tend to consider as the harbinger of 'authoritarian neoliberalism' only the polit-ical options which lead to authoritarianism understood as a political regime and not also those op-tions (such as the experience of the 'Third Way' of Clinton, Blair, Schroeder, etc.) which create, in their own way, an 'irreducible authoritarian dimension of neoliberalism'. This is a dimension that, for Dardot and Laval, consists precisely in removing the decision over market order from common de-liberation (Dardot & Laval 2021, p. 297).

[10] For Dardot, the ordoliberal pioneers who paved the way for 'constitutional decisionism' in the 1930s were inspired by Carl Schmitt's concept of 'fundamental decision' (Schmitt 1984, pp. 48 ff.). Dardot recalls the example of Franz Böhm, who described the economic constitution as a 'norma-tive order of the national economy' that could only exist 'through the exercise of a conscious and felt political will, an authoritarian decision of *leadership*' (Dardot 2021). Laval pointed out that, although they dislike the concept of sovereignty, neoliberals 'are hyper-sovereigntists since they make the State the supreme guarantor of the market order' (Laval 2021, p. 189). On the Schmittian inspiration of the ordoliberals, with different positions, see also Malatesta (2019) and Mesini (2019).

warpath, but its goal can be achieved with different strategies. The neoliberal civil war is not thought of simply as a violent armed clash between two fractions of the population, even if – as has happened in practice – it can certainly resort to physical violence modulated in different degrees and forms: the coup and the physical elimination of the enemy in Pinochet's Chile, class warfare from above in Thatcher's England and Reagan's USA, the repression of the Gillet Jaunes in Macron's France, of the No Tav militants in the Italy of so many governments, the suppression of the great self-organised popular movement in Piñera's Chile.

Different from fascist violence, this violence is essentially characterised by being a 'conservative violence of the market order' (ibid., p. 21). Its 'categorical imperative' is the market and it is identified with a 'whole civilisation': the civilisation of the freedom and the individual responsibility of the 'citizen-consumer' (ibid., pp. 21-22). The neoliberal State, whether right-wing or left-wing, progressive or neo-populist, will have to defend this civilisation with all necessary means, and violence is only one of them. What is central, however, are the political, legal, social, moral, cultural and media weapons needed to construct an enemy (external and internal) that will allow popular emotions to be mobilised in order to aggregate a stable social coalition and establish a deep and lasting internal frontier between previously opposing sections of the population. Dardot and Laval give the example of the recent US elections. Although he lost them, Trump obtained the consent of 73 million voters (compared to 63 million in 2016), who – as has been observed - represent 'a rather articulated set of authoritarian impulses, supremacist behaviour, conspiracy delusions but also varied social conditions, political convictions, economic projects' – with which the United States will have to deal for a long time to come (Mometti 2021).[11] Trump has managed to 'reinvest very old racial, social and cultural divisions

[11] Franco Berardi Bifo has argued that, plagued by economic, social and anthropological crisis – and 'worried about their demographic dominance slipping away' – white Americans voting for Trump perceive that 'the privilege they enjoy is about to run out'. So for now they are desperately clinging to 'what they have left – an SUV, firearms and the right to eat a lot of meat' – but are ready to follow 'a Führer who promises to restore America's greatness'. This is why the creeping 'American civil war opposing white nationalism and liberal-democratic globalism, both expressions of American capitalist supremacism', is likely to continue for a long time 'with destructive force'. Trumpism embodies,

in order to exploit them to his own advantage', while also refreshing the sexist, racist and slave imaginary of the south (Dardot et al. 2021, p. 12; Salmon 2021). In this way he was able to make sense of popular hatred and resentment, staging a veritable war of values between freedom and equality. While equality was superimposed on the enemy – especially the 'socialist' enemy – the former president identified with a neoliberal and populist version of freedom: the 'freedom to resist anti-Covid protocols, to cut taxes for the rich, to try to destroy what remains of state regulation and the welfare state' (Brown 2020):[12] a freedom to undertake and consume what hinges on the supremacy of Western cultural values and spreads the 'passion for inequality' on a mass scale (Rancière 2021).[13]

This is a recurring strategy in sovereigntist populisms. All of these, on a global scale, today seem to want to fight a 'civil war against equality in the name of *freedom*' (Dardot et al. 2021, p. 13; Löwy 2019). A central feature of this reactionary declination of neoliberal civil war is that, while denouncing globalised *élites*, it is always driven by oligarchies: 'oligarchies coalesced to certain sectors of the population, through the active support of other sectors of the latter', especially the middle and popular classes (ibid., p. 16). This active support, however, is not already given. On the contrary, it must be built up through the instrumentalisation of the divisions already existing in the population itself. In particular, they are the more archaic divi-

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and risks continuing to embody for a long time, 'the deep soul of America' (Berardi Bifo 2020; 2021a).

[12] *The land of free'* read a banner of the US supremacist squads who, harangued by Trump, marched on Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021. For Bifo, the slogan reveals a conception of freedom as the one that the legislators of the United States of America 'wrote in their founding documents, deciding to forget millions of slaves from the very first minute'. It is a freedom that can go as far as 'legitimising and guaranteeing slavery' and which – in the universe of inequality – 'means supremacy, privilege, violence' (Berardi Bifo 2021b).

[13] The passion for inequality – Jacques Rancière points out – allows both rich and poor to 'find themselves a multitude of inferiors over whom they can maintain their superiority at all costs': superiority 'of men over women, of white women over black women, of workers over the unemployed, of those who work in the trades of the future over others, of those who have good insurance over those who depend on public solidarity, of natives over migrants, of nationals over foreigners, and of citizens of the mother-nation of democracy over the rest of humanity'. The passion of inequality is a sad passion based on the 'affection of hatred and exclusion'. For Jacques Rancière, however, it is not only found in the Trumpian people or the populist right-wingers, but also in the people of all those 'forms of community that we call democracies' (Rancière 2021).

sions along the lines of colour, nation, morality, tradition, and religion: all 'instruments of hierarchical discipline and normalisation of the population' (ibid., p. 191).

5. Dividing the people: 'war of values' and 'war on migrants'

Exploiting the great phantasmagorical narrative of the dissolution of the people and their cultural identity, in its populist and conservative version neoliberalism engages in a war of values that allows it to 'divide the people' not only by playing one side against the other, but also by effectively setting them 'against themselves' (ibid., p. 210). This 'war of values' is not a novelty coming from Trump, Bolsonaro, Orban, Kaczyński, Salvini. The 'neoliberalism/new social conservatism alliance' mentioned by Melinda Cooper was already alive when Pinochet, Thatcher and Reagan were fighting the legacy of '68 with an effective cultural counter-revolution (Cooper 2017, pp. 22 ff.). The neoliberal war of values is not just a 'superstructure', nor a mere supplement to the class struggle from above (Gallino 2012). Rather, it is a very important part of this struggle because, while it mobilises a section of the population to support *elite-friendly* policies, it deflects interest from the conflict against socio-economic inequality and provides a channel for 'venting the anger of the victims of the neoliberal system' (Dardot et al. 2021, p. 193). Victims who are invited to fight the crusade for the restoration of a traditional order in which the values of authority, 'honest' work, merit and the 'natural' family find their place but are reconfigured according to the updates proposed by neoliberal Nobel Prize winner Gary Becker (Becker 1981).

In neoliberal populism, the family is in fact conceived as a small business in which rational parents pay constant attention to accumulating 'human capital with a very high return' (Dardot et al. 2021, p. 199). This family then aims to harness women again in the gratuitousness of reproductive labour to better accommodate the neoliberal dismantling of welfare and consolidate new and more insidious forms of 'patriarchal capitalism' (Federici 2019; Chicchi et al. 2020). In sovereigntist populism, God, nation and family coexist with freedom, which remains the first source of legitimation of the neoliberal programme. But in its war of values, popu-

list neoliberalism sets up a 'new spirit of freedom', in which 'emancipation-freedom' – the set of guarantees against oppression typical of the Enlightenment and liberal tradition – gives way to 'tradition-freedom', i.e., the 'right to assert a set of self-proclaimed traditional values as equivalent to civilisation': obviously an idealised Western civilisation whose material and immaterial borders must be defended against a long list of enemies who would like to break them (technocrats, financiers, globalists, oligarchies, political castes, migrants, Muslims, terrorists, communists, feminists, LGTBQ+ activists, etc.), thus destroying the identity and freedom of the 'true people' (Dardot et al. 2021, p. 200).

It is to this right-wing variant of the neoliberal civil war that, after the 2008 crisis, a massive component of the working and popular classes ended up surrendering, after the governmental left had abandoned them in the previous decades along with the fight against inequality. Recovering the libertarian and emancipatory thrusts of the 1960s and 1970s movements to the mythologies of enterprise, technology and consumption, the governing left in the 1990s had in fact helped to forge the 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999). By embracing the deregulation of financial markets, privatisation, liberalisation, job insecurity, the dismantling of public services and the logic of *New Public Management*, the so-called Left of the Third Way had created 'progressive neoliberalism'.[14] Trying to grab the vote of large fractions of the young, educated and urbanised middle class, it ended up passively accepting the battleground of values imposed on it by the right, thus permanently closing the road to any proposal for an alternative to neoliberal society. However, if it is true that – as Žižek has argued – the explosion of sovereigntism is 'a symptom of the failure of today's liberal left', its abandonment of the working classes is not enough to explain the success of the reactionary and populist version of neoliberalism (Žižek 2016).

This, Dardot and Laval argue, is mainly due to the fact that they have been able to counteract the social damage produced by neoliberal policies with an 'imagi-

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[14] On the brief hegemony of progressive neoliberalism in the US, see Nancy Fraser (2017, pp. 46-64).

nary antidote': a true 're-enchantment of us' (Dardot et al., 2021, p. 210). Sovereigntist populism has evoked a virtuous people, without class divisions, composed of free men who respect state authority and traditional values. It invoked the idea of an indivisible nation capable of becoming competitive again in the arena of global capitalism thanks to ordinary people and honest workers, also capable of 'going for it' by accepting the norm of inter-individual competition without union complaints. Sovereigntist populism was (and is) a 'xeno-populism' that lashed out at the alleged privileges of *others*, accusing them of not taking their rightful place within the national community and of usurping what was rightfully due to 'honest working national citizens' (Alietti & Padovan 2020, p. 12). Against the backdrop of an accentuated 'productivist populism', sovereigntism forcefully remarked on the division between the virtuous national producers and the 'enemies of the people', 'immoral parasites' (Abromeit 2016, p. 236). With a threefold operation of 'imaginary re-communitisation of society', 're-idealisation of the sovereign State' and 'radicalisation of individual freedom', sovereigntist neo-populism has thus managed to divide the people and overthrow a section of the popular classes against the achievements of the labour movement, the welfare State, labour law and trade unions. The imaginary re-communitisation of society has unscrupulously mobilised xenophobia, racism and securitarianism, engaging an 'illiberal and proto-fascist drift' in style (Dardot et al. 2021, p. 211). This allowed neoliberal populism to break down any remaining unity of popular circles, undermining their 'eventual resistance to the ruling classes' (ibid.). Dardot and Laval point to the decisive role of racism in the strategy with which sovereigntist populisms fight the neoliberal civil war. They argue that this is also 'ethnic' warfare because it seeks to 'exclude foreigners from any form of citizenship, especially by increasingly restricting the right to asylum' (ibid, p. 16).

However, Dardot and Laval do not delve into the deep elective affinities that link populism and neoliberalism in the practice of the 'war on migrants', understood as a shared tactic in the common neoliberal civil war (Mellino 2016; Mezzadra 2020, pp. 101 ff). Miguel Mellino, on the other hand, does so scrupulously, arguing that the analysis of EU migration policies shows that populist sovereignty and ne-

oliberalism are 'one hydra with two heads' (Mellino 2019, p. 15). Stepping back from the different rhetoric used, in fact, both share the basic features of a mobility governance device that associates the exclusion of migrants – with the blocking and externalisation of borders, racism, the global proliferation of camps, the 'system crimes' in the Mediterranean (Ferrajoli 2021, pp. 433-438) – to their differential inclusion in the order of production and social reproduction, according to a logistical rationality pursuing the utopia of *just-in-time* and *to-the-point* migration (Mezzadra 2020, pp. 120 ff.).

When the powerful migrant and refugee movements in the summer of 2015 materially undermined European border *management*, individual states and the European Union responded in continuity with what Mellino calls the 'racist material constitution' of Maastricht and Schengen Europe (Mellino 2019, p. 10). That is, they have set up the 'hotspot approach', further tightening and externalising borders, thus decreeing 'the end of the traditional human rights regime concerning refugees and asylum seekers and its replacement by legislation geared towards their production as a differential and racialised labour force for local labour markets' (ibid., p. 38). Exploiting this context, against the backdrop of a severe economic crisis, populist sovereignties have managed to accredit themselves as the bastion erected in defence of national sovereignty and borders by proposing themselves as the actors of the 'restoration of a lost economic, patriarchal and racial order' (ibid., p. 13). In the order of the dominant discourse, then, a binary logic has been established that has insistently described neoliberalism and sovereigntism as two opposing political projects. The good conscience of European democrats has fetishised the former, seeing it as the only barrier to the spread of the latter. But, while embodying two different projects for governing the crisis, neoliberalism and sovereigntism have been (and are) an integral' part of the same 'capitalist realism» that – according to Mark Fisher's lesson – proves capable of 'dominating the political-economic unconscious' by imposing itself as the only reason able to guide our social existences (Fisher 2018, p. 148). In fact, with different modulations – as we have said – neoliberalism and sovereigntism share the intention of relaunching the 'ne-

oliberal, competitive, proprietary and securitarian way of accumulation', while also further tightening the 'racist and coercive devices, both on migrants and on the 'post-colonial' populations of the continent' (Mellino 2019, p. 10).

6. Defending the people: structural racism and the 'racial contract of citizenship'

For Mellino, the deepest link between neoliberalism and sovereigntism lies in the fact that both propose a 'new «racial contract» of citizenship', offering nationals greater control over migrants and their labour (ibid., p. 11).[15] Their 'political interpellation', however, is not only based on the socio-economic question. Neoliberalism and sovereigntism are in fact 'structures of feeling' that mobilise passions and solicit emotional involvement.[16] In different ways, they equally appeal to what Jacques-Alain Miller has called the 'hatred of the enjoyment of the other' (ibid.): the hatred against the alleged well-being of the other; against 'the way the *other* lives, dresses, eats, works, rejoices, desires'; that is, hatred against the fact 'that he can enjoy more than I do' (ibid.). What is problematic, then, is not simply the racist virulence of sovereignty, with its project of tightening up the mechanisms of hierarchisation of citizenship. Sovereigntist racism, in fact, is 'a sort of radicalisation of some tendencies already inscribed in the institutional and structural racism promoted by the European migratory regime' (ibid., p. 14). The real problem is the fact that sovereigntism and neoliberalism intimately share precisely that institutional and structural racism, even if the latter often presents itself with the face of an ethical anti-racism.

We mean by 'European institutional racism' here, following Etienne Balibar, a system of power that, by political decision, combines the political and social exclusion of migrant populations with their 'inferior inclusion in the economy and welfare networks', with the ultimate aim of 'exploiting the differential in living

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[15] Mellino takes up the concept of the 'racial contract' from Charles Mills (1986). In open polemic with John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, Mills understands the contractualist narrative as an ideological tool based on an 'epistemology of ignorance' that erases racial subordination and refuses to face reality, viewing Western society as 'a cooperative enterprise for mutual benefit' (Lim 2020).

[16] For the concept of 'structure of feeling' see Williams (1961, pp. 64 ff.).

standards and wages that is thus produced' (Balibar 2001, p. 309). 'Structural racism', on the other hand, is a concept that Mellino carves out of the Bourdieusian concept of *habitus*, in order to define a form of racism 'that crosses all the spaces we inhabit and pass through every day', material and immaterial (Mellino 2019, p. 26). Like Bourdieu's *habitus* – and like Abdemalek Sayad's 'State thought' – structural racism is 'structured structure predisposed to function as a structuring structure' (Bourdieu 2001, p. 257; Sayad 2002, pp. 367-384). As a structuring structure, it is a 'principle of division into logical classes' and 'the product of the incorporation of the division into social classes' and races (Bourdieu 2001, p. 175). As a structuring structure, it 'organises practices and their perception': that is, it shapes both the necropolitics that excludes, interns and expels migrants (to the point of causing their death), and the biopolitics that – through concrete processes of racialisation – harnesses them as concrete beings within the mesh of societal order.[17] And finally, through 'symbolic violence', it drives them to internalise domination and accept subordinate roles.[18] 'Structural racism' is the fact that society is structured on the basis of racism, which in turn reproduces and institutionalises the hierarchies of the social order. Structural racism is the obscene side of capitalist modernity which, while proclaiming equality between men in words, daily tramples on it by naturalising the material and symbolic inferiority of populations which are pushed to inter-

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[17] For the concept of 'necropolitics' the reference is of course to Mbembe (2011; 2016). That of biopolitics is clearly Foucauldian. For a concept of racialisation similar to the one used here, cfr. Omi & Winant (2015). Focusing on the centrality of the process of 'racial formation' in the United States, in this volume these authors argue that the logic of capitalism and the logic of racialisation – understood as a 'complex process of selection' and the 'fabrication of race' by way of which 'human physical characteristics («real» or imagined) become the basis for justifying or reinforcing social hierarchisation' (p. 111) – are strictly connected on the historical, material, and symbolic level. Mutatis mutandis, this is what has happened and also is happening in Europe where the recent political success is very much due to the explicit proposal to revive the weave between the hierarchies of capitalist order and processes of racialisation: this weave, however, is not disputed, except rhetorically, even by the most markedly neoliberal political forces.

[18] For Bourdieu, symbolic violence is notoriously, 'gentle, insensitive violence, invisible to the victims themselves, exercised essentially through the purely symbolic avenues of communication and knowledge or, more precisely, mis-knowledge' (Bourdieu 1998, pp. 7-8). This violence leads to the incorporation of dominant classifications by subalterns. It ensures, for example, that in Italy, despite living in a condition of intensive exploitation, Romanian construction workers can 'accept to represent themselves as «great workers» and Burkinabé labourers do not question the need to receive low wages and live in dramatic conditions during the harvesting seasons' (Perrotta 2014, p. 174).

nalise the legitimacy of the market order in which they live as excluded or included in subordination.

In different ways, neoliberalism and sovereigntism share the material substance of structural racism. Indeed, there is operative in both 'the externalisation of a racial drive rooted in Europe's historical relationship with its «colonial» others' (Mellino 2019, p. 15). What they have in common is precisely coloniality which, although removed along with its traumatic violence – after the end of the anti-colonial struggles – remains in the social unconscious as 'the Mr. Hyde who haunts Dr. Jekyll from the beginning' (Pezzella 2017, p. 113). Coloniality thus overbearingly resurfaces not only in the 'white, exclusionary and racialised conception of *people*' that operates in the sovereign promise of an 'increasingly exclusionary, selective and police-like administration of the status of modern citizenship', but also in the neoliberal programme of the EU (Mellino 2019, pp. 52 and 15). This is also why neoliberalism and populism are so similar. Their common roots lie in the colonial and imperial history of European capitalism and its States, as well as in the 'constitutive coloniality of the (political-cultural) notion of the people' that descends from that history (ibid., p. 52).[19]

Sovereigntist populism is certainly a reactionary variant of neoliberalism. But it only proposes a few more clampdowns on the 'processes of hierarchization of citizenship' that have always been 'constitutive of neoliberalism' (ibid., p. 86). With Stuart Hall, Mellino recalls that the first European neoliberalism – Thatcherism – was after all an 'authoritarian populism' (Hall 2015a). It succeeded in mobilising the masses by reinforcing the class order through the hegemonic diffusion of a new common sense that combined the values of the market – competition, personal responsibility, proprietary individualism – with the more traditional values of family, nation, duty and authority (Hall 1978; 1979, p. 17; Moini 2020, pp. 145-151). Thatcherism governed the crisis of hegemony in post-war capitalism with a 'post-colonial rearrangement of society's racial hierarchies' (Hall 1979; Mellino 2019, p. 19). 'Europe's first neoliberal *law-and-order-society*' promised the English people and

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[19] On the coloniality of modern capitalist power see at least Quijano (2000) and Grosfoguel (2017).

white proletarians – in order to divide and better discipline them[20] – a tightening of command over black populations to be understood as a kind of compensatory 'psychological wage' in the crisis: a 'wage of whiteness' which is able to defend the national people from the fear of falling (Mellino 2019, p. 21).[21] In continuity with the British imperialist and colonialist tradition, racism was thus used – for the first time after the defeat of Nazi-fascism – as a 'vehicle for political suturing' and as a 'material device for the hierarchization of citizenship' (ibid., p. 24).

After the 2008 crisis, while neoliberal governmentality was hitting large portions of the European population hard, the racist device – understood as the 'institutional technology of production of territories and populations' – again became central (Mellino 2020, p. 32). Migration governance policies and structural racism have continued to support the 'racial contract of citizenship' deputised to defend the European people from the fear of slipping into the lower rungs of the social ladder, where there are now the *others*: those migrants and refugees whose lives are reproduced as an 'increasingly precarious labour force' and tendentially 'servile' (Mellino 2019, p. 164). European capitalism and its governmental *ratio* confirm their need for '*racial* subsidies' (Mbembe 2013, p. 257). These feed on a colonial subconscious that resurfaces and, when necessary, is put to political use by neoliberals and sovereigntists alike. 'Race and racism', Achille Mbembe argues, 'are part of the fundamental processes of the unconscious' and 'refer to the blind alleys of human desire: appetites, feelings, passions, fears' (ibid., p. 57).

In the post-democratic interregnum, structural racism and the political interpellation of the new authoritarian populisms have operated as a 'driving force' able to provide 'desperate support for the structure of a failing self' (ibid.). Through the promise of defending the people from the 'ghost of the foreign body', a 'fascist mood' has thus spread: 'a subtle mood that inadvertently infects [...] the gestures and words of everyday life' of those who end up accepting and practising words and

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[20] For Hall, it is through racism that capital defeats the attempts to build 'those alternatives that could represent class as a whole, against capitalism and against racism' (Hall 2015b, p. 122).

[21] For the concepts of 'whiteness wage' and 'psychological wage' see Roediger (1991) and Du Bois (1979, pp. 700 ff.), on which Mezzadra (2013). On the 'fear of falling' during crises see Gambino (2003, p. 121).

actions that they would have 'found unthinkable and unacceptable until a short time before' (Balibar 2019; Pezzella 2019). This state of mind smoulders under the ashes of the pandemic. In order to face its re-emergence, Mellino argues, it will not be enough to throw arrows against the 'new fascism'. Instead, it will be necessary to 'decolonise anti-racism' by bringing back to the centre a political action which, even when it wants to be emancipatory and progressive, today fails to propose a different vision of society and an alternative narrative to the hegemonic neo-populist narrative. What would be needed is a political action capable of rejecting both the 'racist and «progressive neoliberalism» of the EU and the 'openly xenophobic and «regressive neoliberalism» of sovereigntist populism (Mellino 2019, p. 50; Palmi 2020).

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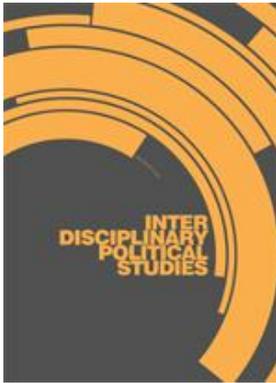
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reacting to the Politics and Economy Relation. The Reasons for Contemporary Populism

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to interpret the contemporary forms of populism, in the light of the political and economic debate about the function of the state and the market as relevant modern institutions. Considering different economic perspectives and analysing them from an historical point of view, the paper describes the evolution of contemporary society, and the changing relevance of the political and the economic systems. Against the theoretical background of Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory (1984), a critical assessment of different economic approaches is proposed: it is argued that none of them has been able to tackle the generalized increase of social, economic, and individual problems, and the growing social exclusion. In contemporary modernity, social systems are becoming more and more intransparent to one another, and apparently unable to solve the problems for which they functionally evolved. The paper proposes that populism may be intended as a reactive adaptation of the political system to its inability to solve social and economic questions and suggests the necessity of a new paradigm to understand the growing complexity and mutual intransparency of social systems.

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The current political-economic context and the paradigmatic changes of contemporary modernity generates complex relationships of interdependence that cannot be treated based on simple causal processes. These issues are various and controversial. Financial crises, economic recession, public deficit, unemployment, relativity of social rights, loss of constitutional freedoms and depoliticization are the phenomenological outcome of complex interactions that characterises the contemporary political-economic context.

The interpretative focus, therefore, relies on systemic interdependencies and not on challenging the functioning of the market institutions that have enabled - albeit in a controversial way - a unique relationship between production and consumption that, in the pure form of capitalism theorised by von Hayek, describes the market's tendency to regulate itself, to guarantee competition and to keep the economy in equilibrium (Hayek 1944).

Similarly, the interpretation of systemic interactions allows to overcome analyses focused on the failure of state institutions (welfare state), which represent the most important achievement of the twentieth century: the state intervention here is justified as it supports the adoption of programmatic action plans aimed at ensuring the existence of the basic criteria of the social order, but also of direct and indirect intervention mechanisms on the whole system of social relations within the state and between states. Keynesian economic theory is the most representative expression of utilizing forms of public intervention (particularly in periods of crisis like the current one) as a necessary solution to increase global demand even in conditions of public deficit (Keynes 1920; 1936). In such period, social space itself enters into market relations through mechanisms that, in the conceptual synthesis of welfare (health, education, work, etc.), function in terms of balancing social needs and the allocation of scarce resources. The Keynesian perspective describes a system of social expectations as a transfer of decision-making responsibility (in terms of risk) from the economy to politics. Although, the system of the economy is based/aims ensuring peace and security conditions of and politics binding decisions for the future (Luhmann 1983).

In contrast to the Keynesian perspective, liberalist thinking asserts that if something in the market does not perform (e.g. inflation rises, growth falls, etc.), the only plausible explanation is that the market is not free enough. The proposed solution consists of strengthening the principle of economic freedom and eliminate all forms of state interference in economic matters as a universally valid rule for development. Thus, the pursuit of economic freedom becomes a project based on the liberalisation and deregulation of economic transaction.

The relationship between the political system and the economic system represents the extent of the dichotomous space in which the relationship between the state and the market is situated. It is a problematic coexistence of limits and potentialities, where the categories authority-freedom, rights-security, individual-society gravitate and alternate between supporting the reduction of state control and the containment of the role of the market. Moreover, globalisation of the economic system, liberalisation of capital movement, the presence of political and monetary super-institutions create questions about the relationship between state and market where paradoxes emerge concerning the representativeness of democracy (Arrow 1951).

Stiglitz (2011) describes the first decade of the twenty-first century as characterised by an asymmetrical movement that, from many points of view, represents a major social and economic failure. In similar terms, Krugman speaks of 'damage' on the human level, caused by the 'comfortable ideological and political prejudices of the system' (Krugman 2012, p. 31), that failed to consider the lessons of history.

The systemic complexity, typical of modern society, on one hand reinforces the role of social systems such as the economy and politics, on the other one generates 'functional intrasparency' (Luhmann 2005, pp. 341–342), that is substantiated by the overlapping of codes and languages - decision/consensus, demand/supply - making it difficult to separate the economic system from the political system. This is analysed from the idea of the 'invisible hand' of Smithian liberalism to the forms of macroeconomic public intervention proposed by Keynesian models.

The area of intrasparency represents the dimension of a double contingency which is difficult to resolve. There are expectations that are fulfilled and others that are disappointed; social needs that are protected and others that are not; levels of welfare that are guaranteed and others that are deteriorated. In other words, there is a space where the conditions between inclusion and exclusion are generated. Taken that, new questions rise about the possibility that current forms of populism could offset the pressure of expectations of social inclusion values. In this perspective, the focus of the article is on the nature of the 'concentrations' of those political movements that, through unprecedented forms of populism, channel and polarise the consensus of the 'people' who distance themselves from the dichotomous effects deriving from the superimposition of the economy on politics, towards new 'networks' of social inclusion.

1. Balancing the State and Market: at the roots of a dichotomy

In Modern Age, politics and economy interact, clash, and confront each other in a new social 'arena': capital. Capitalism assumes the value of a process capable of guaranteeing economic development thanks to a series of closely interconnected factors, such as the use of production techniques, the exploitation of natural resources, the division of labour, exchange value (represented by money as a symbolically generalised medium), places for exchange (markets), and systems for the numerical measurement of value (accounting management). From the shape capitalism takes, its accelerations, setbacks, periodic crises and innumerable contradictions can be observed.

The Marxian analysis of capitalism represents a critique of the instrumental conception of capital, used as a form of power and exercise of class differentiation and not of its nature (Marx 2011). The use of capital for productive purposes became the cornerstone of economic life thanks to Smith, who opened the historical debate on the dichotomy between politics and economy (between public and private) and consequently on the role of the state in the market, a factor that conventionally marks the birth of modern political economy. The publication of An Inquiry into the Nature

and Causes of the Wealth of Nations marks a turning point (Smith 1776). He observes a social context characterised by the distinction between modern 'mercantile cities' and those still based on the model of the *Ancien régime*.

Smith asserts that in cities, where the system of economic relations is based on the exchange between capital and labour, the socio-economic dynamics, that develop around the population, produce an increase in material wealth. Workers are 'in general industrious, sober and prosperous' (Smith 1922, p. 330) and more prone to processes of emancipation. By breaking down traditional forms of subordination and through work, they learn a new way of living in freedom and become actors in their own social destiny (ivi, p. 340). Everyone, therefore, by pursuing his or her own self-interest, contributes to the collective interest (and therefore well-being). The structural asymmetries that characterise the new socio-economic system – meaning the relationship between capitalists and workers - are not ignored but take on an ethically sustainable connotation, since they produce results considered advantageous for the social organisation (ivi, pp. 67, 78).

Through Smith's words, the physiocratic orientation of Enlightenment thinking emerges. The distinctive features of the new socio-economic order are to be found in a number of fundamental elements: the active role of individuals who have now emerged from the 'state of minority' (Kant 1995, p. 162); the struggle against the cultural vision of the old social order (Condorcet 1974, p. 185; Turgot 1978); the actions to counteract a slow and inadequate policy and consequently the ineffectiveness of the political institutions inherited from the past (Rousseau 1972, p. 319). It is, however, a historical moment that highlights a jarring relationship between socio-economic evolution and political-institutional adjustments: the intolerance towards a political system that produces cumbersome and intransparent bureaucratic apparatuses. These that end up performing a repressive function, that produce generalised slowdowns of any innovative process and that support production dynamics that are now incompatible with the market economy becomes evident (Landes 1978, p. 179–180). Smith clearly states in 'Wealth' that the appropriateness of individual behaviour

cannot be separated from the rules of behaviour established and socially shared within a state. He does not consider the political system to be separated from the economic one, his new capitalist order is not a world without a state, but an order whose economic-social novelty elements cannot be traced back to the state (Gioia 2016, p. 214). In this new world, the state must exercise very precise functions - institutional duties - such as social security (internal and external), the administration of justice, the realization of public works and infrastructures, i.e. functions that cannot be carried out by an individual or a group of individuals, also because the profits obtained could never compensate - in terms of remuneration - the expenses incurred to achieve these 'institutional' objectives (Salvucci 1966, p. 39). In other words, Smith, while reflecting on the limits of the political system compared to the transformations taking place, does not observe the society of his time in the light of the general opposition between state and socio-economic organisation, but outlines a geometry of the political space, that is much more complex than the instrumentalised descriptions of many of his interpreters (Kemp 2013, p. 122). It is no coincidence that he highlights both the theme of overcoming the old state model and the need of a sovereign state 'capable of solving the problems determined by the dynamics of the market and the structural asymmetry of positions between classes and individuals' (Gioia 2016, p. 212); an industrial society needs a framework of public services if it is to function without social distress (Ashton 1948, p. 147). Smith's legacy is clearly oriented towards maintaining stable (Luhmann would say 'functionally specified') codes and language of the system to which it belongs (1984), thus, an economic system has functional codes operate based on market mechanisms: demand and supply, in symbiosis with a political system whose functional codes operate, instead, on the basis of mechanisms of (institutional) power: consensus and decision. The need to affirm an alignment between the new economic-social fabric and the political-institutional adjustments underlies a strong tendency towards ideologization of economic doctrine, aimed at preserving the characteristics of fundamentalism, through which the processes of legitimising economic liberalism are constructed. The meaning of this tendency lies in the principle that if something in the market does not work, the only possible explanation is

that the market is not free enough. This is an extreme approach resulting from a conditioning interpretation of the principles of economic freedom, which advocates the elimination of any form of state interference in the economy as a universally valid prescription for development (Preite 2017) and that although inspired by the idea of the 'invisible hand', nevertheless does not correspond to the theoretical-conceptual approach of Smithian liberalism.

From Smith onward, whose key principles of political economy are: (a) the theory of distribution based on marginal productivity, which depicts competitive capitalism as a system capable of ensuring distributive justice; (b) the theory of the 'invisible hand', which guarantees the system rationality and efficiency in the allocation of resources and, specifically, the full employment of productive factors, including labour; (c) the belief in the market's capacity for self-regulation, from which the laissez-faire policy which implies that the state must limit itself to managing order and guaranteeing only the respect of property rights, draws scientific and methodological legitimacy.

All these elements conditioned public policies until the beginning of the twentieth century (Cozzi & Zamagni 1992, p. 57). Unless Marshall, one of the most influential economists of his time, extended and refined Smith's thought, hypothesising the need for a public economic policy in the form of credit control by the monetary authorities, offering the continental economic tradition and the neoclassical paradigm an alternative perspective of economic investigation, aimed at the explanatory value of the theory rather than the logical coherence of economic analysis (Marshall 1920). In other words, he rejected the thesis of free market economists that the only way to improve the conditions of the poor is to favour and increase the interests of capitalists and the wealthy. Therefore, he is the initiator (within the neoclassical strand) of that tendency that mitigates the extreme laissez-faire with a policy of reforms. the result of an inextricable intertwining of the political (and socio-cultural) and economic dimensions, a strong connection between the facts of the material sphere and those of the moral sphere, have important consequences on the way of

conceiving interventions in the economy by the state (Cozzi & Zamagni 1992). Ultimately, Marshall, in the depth and scientific rigour of his economic analysis, never isolated the field of economics from the other domains of the social sciences.

Marshall's theoretical and methodological premises contribute to the enrichment of a process that sees the welfare state as a governmental device for balancing politics and economy, but also as a political project for the construction of a qualitatively superior form of democracy capable of realising ideals of equity and social justice, guaranteeing at the same time stability and economic growth.

2. The primacy of the State: the enhancement of welfare policies

The debate on the role of the state continued throughout the Twenty century with theories aimed at investigating the material, environmental and economic conditions that characterise processes of political centralisation. Moreover, political theory offers new impulses that aspire to the creation of a new form of state organisation through welfare interventions. The concept of state coincides with political order and, therefore, with social organisation of a given community. This restores the idea of the state as an institution and as the guarantor of a political project in which legitimacy and sovereignty must be pursued and constantly reaffirmed through legal and bureaucratic apparatuses. The state is the only institution capable of maintaining peace and public security, guaranteeing individual, collective, and social rights, while outside it, there is only anarchy and potential disorder. This 'tendency' facilitates the affirmation of opposing schools of thought and ideologies, which are also alternative political ways of organising modernised mass societies, that lead to the dissolution of political rationality, generating anti-bourgeois and anti-liberal impulses and sentiments that find fulfilment in the transition from nationalism to totalitarianism.

On the economic front, the great crisis of 1929 (and its dramatic consequences on the American and European economies) definitively revealed the limits of laissez-faire and the precariousness of the schemes of ideological cover elaborated so far, calling into question the myth of the market that regulates itself by distributing

resources in the most advantageous way for the whole of society. Mass unemployment, stagnation, the inadequacy of the traditional instruments to fight the crisis represents the turning point towards a definitive rethinking of neoclassical theories, directing the debate on the role of the state in the economy and in social policies.

After Marshall, the reality that Keynes observes, simultaneously and in an unquestionable way, overturns all the cardinal principles of the laissez-faire theorists, he affirms that: it is not deducible from the principles of economics that self-interest, however enlightened, always operates in the public interest and it is not conceivable from the experience that individuals, acting in community, are always of less acute view than when acting separately (Keynes 2004). Keynes agrees with Marx's thesis that crisis is the normal condition of the capitalist economy. For both Keynes and Marx, capitalism aims at the profit of a few people and not at the welfare of all. People think to live in an exchange economy but instead they operate in a monetary economy. Keynes' definitive attack on classical economics is represented by the reversal of 'Say's Law, or the law of market': supply creates its own demand. For Keynes, however, demand creates supply and for this reason that, if demand is too weak, efforts must be made to increase it, in order to deal with depressed situations. This is viable by increasing state expenditure, especially on public works that serve both to employ the unemployed (allowing the increase in demand of new workers, who receive an income and can therefore spend it, at least in part), and to create the convenience of companies to employ other unemployed people, who will spend more and create more job opportunities for other people. In this perspective, there is no need for the state to immediately appropriate, through new taxes, the resources necessary to increase its spending.

Under conditions of depression, the state can spend in deficit and once unemployment has been reabsorbed, public expenditure can be reduced and a rational and equitable increase in tax revenues can be envisaged, because it depends on the level of production and income. Consequently, the public deficit can be reabsorbed

in the medium term. The main task of the state is to use the mechanisms and instruments of public expenditure and revenue to avoid the occurrence of depression and widespread unemployment in the economic system (Cozzi & Zamagni 1992, p. 60).

Because of the Great Depression of 1929, the economic theses of Keynes were used in England, including the implementation of deficit spending as an input to economic growth and the extension of social security policies aimed at containing unemployment. In the United States, the Roosevelt administration experimented the new approach of public policies (New Deal), that represents the structural plan of economic and social reforms aimed at lifting the country out of the Great Depression. In 1933, the creation of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, inspired by Keynesian theories, was the first step towards a major modernisation of the US welfare and social security system.

Before the Keynesian challenge, the respect of a balanced budget was considered a real limit to political activity, not for economic reasons but for the principles of transparency and responsibility of public management (Martino 2005, p. 46). In contrast to this tradition, Keynesian theory manages to convince governments and the public of the irrelevance of 'the ancient religion of taxation', presenting the achievement of prosperity in the national economy as the primary objective of economic policy considered a modest price to pay for high employment (Buchanan & Wagner 1977). Thus, the 'budget balance' becomes an instrument of economic policy.

In short, Keynes elaborated a conceptual scheme able to explain the instability of capitalism, to provide indications to intervene on the generalized crisis, that had hit the capitalist economies to bring a renewal of the economic language for the correct interpretation of concepts and terms to make them more adherent to the discussion of practical problems and to statistically measure them (Caffè 1990, p. 136). Therefore, Keynes' theoretical interest in the functioning of the economic system translates into attention to the aggregate quantities of the economy: overall income and output, overall consumption, overall investment, and overall saving (Mazzotta 2012, p. 30). The Keynesian general theory of employment represents the basis of a new theoretical-conceptual revolution, but it is also the framework within which

the democratic welfare state develops after World War II. The free world looked confidently to the future and was about to experience a phase of great economic development, that laid the foundations for the development of welfare policies. The welfare state was born in the spirit of anti-capitalism, representing the most politically opportune attempt to introduce a certain amount of socialism, as an ethical system, according to the formula 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' (Marx 1976).

3. The primacy of the Market: the reaction of neoliberalism

Starting from the 1970s Keynesian solutions began to lose consensus due to a delicate situation caused by high levels of inflation and production stagnation with rising unemployment. The expansion rate of the welfare state, accompanied by fiscal pressure, budget deficits and public debt, became incompatible with an economic context deeply marked by the new recession (Pennacchi 2011).

The spectre of crisis and the occurrence of these particularly burdensome events legitimised the entry onto the international scene of the neo-liberal school of thought, which states that the main cause is to be found in the enormous expansion of public spending (Harvey 2005), which creates both price increases, through an increase in global demand, that is excessive compared to what the system can cope with by increasing production, and the excessive appropriation of resources by the state to the detriment of private initiative, which is no longer able to invest and promote the development of the economic system (due to a lack of means and incentives (Cozzi & Zamagni 1992, p. 61).

Within the neo-liberal movement there are two distinct schools of thought, which in many ways converge: (a) the School of Rational Expectations with Lucas, Sargent and Wallace, according to which public debt consists of the sum of the budget deficit of the current period, plus the interest that is being paid on bonds issued in previous periods in order to finance previous budget deficits; (b) Monetarism with Friedman and Phelps, according to which in the long run the economic system moves

towards the natural rate of unemployment regardless of the rate of change in wages and prices (Preite 2011, pp. 108–109). These two lines of thought agree on the failure of many of the objectives assumed as priorities by welfare policies, interpreting the public 'balanced budget' as an essential condition for an effective fight against inflation.

Friedman is not only the main exponent of monetarist economic theory, but also one of the main advocates of laissez-faire capitalism. In his work Capitalism and Freedom (1962), he argues that market forces, and certainly not state intervention, can ensure growth without inflation. Friedman's studies are scientifically aimed at refuting the Keynesian theses, through the empirical demonstration that the crisis is caused by the excessive expansion of money in circulation, most often driven by the need to finance public deficits. Mainly for this reason, Friedman advocated a strictly restrictive monetary policy, regardless of the economic situation.

This theme soon became the priority objective of US and British public policies around which, from the mid-1970s, practices such as 'privatisation' and 'deregulation' were consolidated within the government programmes of Thatcher (1979) and Reagan (1980) (Galli et al 2011, p. 226).

At the same time, Hayek published a work entitled 'Constitution of Liberty' (1960), where the cardinal principles of neo-liberalism emerged as a response to the presumed failure of Keynesian models. Hayek's philosophical-political thought is entirely based on the ideal that freedom is a condition that concerns the person as an individual. It is a notion of the individual endowed with a private sphere (around him) that is resistant to the interference of others and external coercion.

Hayek states that humanity is reduced to a state of slavery when it is forced to follow goals and objectives imposed from outside the private sphere and not from its own free intellectual exercise. In this perspective, Hayek points out that even if a man lives in comfort and prosperity, and even if he actively participates in the choices of his own government, this does not make him free (Hayek 1960). From this reflection, the concept of freedom presented by Hayek is understood as the absence of external constraint.

In the logic of Smith's 'invisible hand', he is increasingly oriented towards conceiving society as a 'free game' of personal relationships that physiologically create the conditions for their own equilibrium. The society rules itself in a market regulated by free competition and endowed with a dynamic and virtuous knowledge system, where information is exchanged and circulates among the actors involved, generating a natural and spontaneous system of general rules that are widely shared without the need for the interference of a directing and planning centre. Hence, his hostility is moved towards invasive and resource-dispersing state interventionism, especially when it implements corrective market manoeuvres in the name of a policy of social justice and equality that intervenes in the economic and social position of individuals (Preite 2011, pp. 111–112).

Hayek is more in tune with the eighteenth-century English liberal tradition with its Lockean matrix than with the continental European tradition based on Kant's system of thought. What interests Hayek most, therefore, is freedom conceived as protection by law against any form of arbitrary coercion and not as the claim of everyone's right to participate in the determination of the form of government. In this approach, the discourse on the secondary role of the state gains new relevance: the state should intervene as little as possible in the sphere of individual autonomy and guarantee, through positive law, the full unfolding of individual freedoms so as to defend the private sphere (including property) (Pancaldi, Trombino & Villani 2006, p. 231).

In the complex work 'Law, Legislation and Liberty' published during the 1970s in three volumes: 'Rules and Order' (1973), 'The Mirage of Social Justice' (1976) and 'The Political Order of a Free People' (1979), Hayek strengthens his idea of private property by equating it with the right to life and liberty. The state can legitimately intervene in the lives of its citizens only to enforce general rules, i.e., those that serve to protect the life, liberty, and property of individuals. The action of the state becomes coercive to the extent that it interferes with the freedom of individuals to pursue their own goals and realise their own expectations of life and quality of life. This would

explain why Hayek considers social policy interventions and social justice legislation as one of the most widespread forms of state interference: the anomaly of the system that leads to modify its social-economic order (Hayek 1979).

4. The response of populism within the social systems theory approach

The final phase of neo-liberal capitalism is characterised by high social complexity from which many instances (needs) emerge. In order to respond to these social instances, the systems (the political, the legal, the economic, etc.), have to differentiate themselves functionally, in the other words, they have to function autonomously, otherwise social complexity could not be managed.

In modern society, each system is to be intended as autonomous, as it works by adopting a specific code and specific systemic operations. To clarify this statement, I will start from the consideration that communication represents the specific operation at the base of social systems. Each fact, event or social phenomenon exists because it is possible to communicate. Therefore, Society exists because there is social communication. Each system, as a social construction, differs from other systems at the communicative level thanks to its own operating code, which Luhmann calls 'symbolically generalized medium' (for example: for politics, the symbolically generalized medium is power; for economics, money; for religion, faith; etc.) (Luhmann & De Giorgi 1993).

In communication, there is production of information but also production of meaning and understanding that represent the premises for a new communication. In the theory of social systems, communication is therefore an improbable event, without duration, always different and its continuous production creates new contents of meaning. In social systems theory, levels of improbability are addressed through: a) language (probability of understanding); b) means of dissemination (probability of reaching interlocutors); c) symbolic generalized means of communication (probability of acceptance) (Baraldi et al 1997, pp. 72–73).

This consideration allows to understand why systems are functionally specified, but it also means that social systems are mutually intransparent, so that one can

also speak of a 'functional intransparency' (Luhmann 2005, pp. 341–342). Topics (for example the social wellbeing or economic growth or individual rights) may be dealt with from different perspectives, for example, the political, legal, or economic perspective. However, each system may deal with issues dealt with by other systems, provided that it adopts its own specific code (Luhmann 1965), thus without 'contaminating' its specific operations.

It is difficult to perceive a clear distinction for the different treatment that each system deserves to the same topic. One could praise or blame a single system (usually the political one) as being responsible for achievements or failures that may have been produced elsewhere. The concept of double contingency may be here adapted as a possible explanation (Parsons 1951a; Longo 2005b, p. 71). Double contingency is used in the system theory as to explain the mutual intransparency of individual actions and intentions: we never know exactly what another actor is thinking, planning or aiming at, as it is impossible to probe into his/her psyche. Nonetheless, we keep on interacting, due to the fact that social systems provide us with a series of clues (normative or cognitive expectations) which gives stability to social interaction. Expectations may always be disappointed, yet they provide us with a series of hypothesis on how our fellow-people may react to our selected behaviour.

In an increasingly complex society, social systems are also contingent to each other: it is impossible to predict, from the point of view of the political system, what effects a political decision may have on the economic system, or how a legal decision may affect political decision-making. Even though social systems in modern society are not hierarchically differentiated (they have an autonomous and specific function), yet the political system is generally perceived as the structure where politically binding decisions are made. However, neo-liberalism as an economic practice has stripped the political system as much as its ability to produce effects on the economy, for instance through effective economic policies. What we have been observing is a kind of economic control of political decision-making. A paradoxical situation emerges: citizens continue to address their claims to the political system, which in a situation

of high complexity may produce an over-exemplification of issues, questions and problems, claiming to find solutions but instead producing only a populist discourse.

This situation could be traced back to the mid-1970s, with the 'Report on the Crisis of Democracy' by Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki for the Trilateral Commission. In this important report, the authors state that the excess of demand has created favourable conditions for the hierarchization of decisions, the strengthening of the executive, the establishment of a more equitable relationship between state authority and popular control, and the concentration of decision-making powers in the hands of economic and financial elites (Crozier, Huntington & Watanuki 1975). At the same time, however, there is also an extension of bureaucratic organisation. This is a development in terms of 'intrasystemic expertise' in which the major decisions of states are technical rather than political in nature (Preite 2017). The persistent use of technocratic practice to resolve political and socio-economic issues has resulted in a strengthening of bureaucratic power and in a technocratic drift in which the major decisions of a state, or several states, are of a technical and non-political nature (Longo & Magnolo 2007) that facilitates a sudden change in the evolutionary trajectory on the relationship between politics and economy.

On the political front, the context within which the social welfare model operates is undergoing complex transformations due to structural factors such as growing competition from emerging countries, the reorganisation of production processes on a global basis, the rapidity of innovation, the increasing fragmentation of employment paths, the prospective decline in the labour force and the ageing of the population (Draghi 2012). As a result, the configuration of risks also appears to be profoundly modified (globalised), compared to the Keynes era; it is ultimately a matter of a functional interdependence between social actors, economic and political events that has no precedent in history (Zolo 2004, p. 4; Mazzotta 2013, pp. 40).

On the economic front, confidence in the market's capacity for self-regulation is beginning to show its limits in terms of sharing and connecting with politics, which is in fact reduced to a system dominated by the interests of the financial-cor-

porate oligarchy. In other words, the logic of laissez-faire begins to falter as the removal of all obstacles that limit the free market is also at the basis of the formation of financial hegemonies without rules (Otte 2011; Fusaro 2018), whose harmful effects on the real economy and the social fabric are now self-evident.

The intervention of states to support the very growth of domestic demand is dangerously thwarted under the pressure of globalised finance. Even when there is room for regulatory processes, they are incentives for capital and not policies to support public spending. Some would say that the system grows, but so does the disparity of income and wealth, which translates into social inequality and drastically undermines citizens' trust in traditional institutions (Norris 1999; Pharr & Putnam 2000). If politics does not provide stability of expectations but rather helps to divert them in other directions, there is the real problem of how the resulting uncertainty can be absorbed. Today, in the Western world, there are paradoxes of democracy that do not depend on the absence of legal systems and democratic political structures, but rather on the disappointment of cognitive expectations that generate forms of selectivity (or discrimination), exclusion, but also new populist orientations (Preite 2018) that can be described as forms of political resentment. Indeed, the resentment to which every form of populism gives voice is nothing more than the product of an inability to represent the people and to give answers to social unease which, left to its own devices by 'rational' political forces, finds a hearing only in the prophets of resentment (Petrucciani 2014). A phenomenon that feeds the distance between power and society, generates exclusion and produces, therefore, social peripheries because they progressively distance themselves from the centre of power and interests (Preite 2018).

5. Conclusion

The dynamics of the relationship between inclusion and exclusion are made more complex by the disappointment of cognitive expectations. Disappointment demarcates the forms of selectivity (inside/outside) and makes possible the formation of inclusion networks (as happens, for example, in various protest movements) that

can also be identified as 'last generation' populisms. In fact, inclusion networks (of whatever form and at whatever level) structure expectations and channel them because they represent the boundaries within which code and political language are 'clear', security is guaranteed, feelings of belonging are generated, and hopes are nurtured.

The best-known story on populism over the past decade has been the rise of populism in Western democracies, including the establishment of the Alternative for Germany AfD in Germany, the Brexit in Great Britain, the Lega and the Five Stars Movement in Italy and Trump's election in the U.S. The general rise of populists can be blamed on the superimposition of the economic system on the political system. This systemic overlap has led to growing support for populist movements even outside of Western countries (Meyer 2021, p. 8). One of the best-known examples, Jair Bolsonaro, was able to introduce the new populist language in Latin America, focusing primarily on a critical assessment of the role of the economic system on political decision-making. After a partial loss of political support, he is regaining popularity, regardless of the clumsy handling of the pandemic crisis by Covid-19.

In line with this reflection, a strong component of the contemporary debate is oriented towards making the communication of economic and political discourse transparent (in terms of functional specification). In this perspective, the importance of recovering the lessons of the past and classical theories in the analysis of economic policy manoeuvres and welfare state interventions emerges. Indeed, the current crisis can represent an opportunity for social innovation (Longo, Preite, Bevilacqua Lorubbio 2020) like the one generated by the Keynesian model during the Great Depression. In other words, rethinking the relationship between politics and the economy means reviewing the terms and conditions of the relationship between the state and the market through a mix capable of reducing disappointed expectations and redesigning strategies of inclusion and participation in political and social life.

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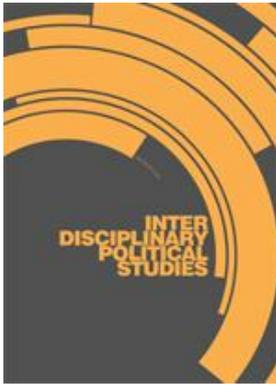
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Populism Literature on Europe: A Brief Overview and Meta-Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Populism is undoubtedly one of the most relevant concepts to the study of contemporary party politics. A massive amount of literature has been produced on this topic, especially with regard to the European continent. However, the literature still lacks a comprehensive meta-analysis of this vast body of research. In this work, we summarize the results of one hundred and ninety-four articles present on the two most authoritative bibliographic databases, Web of Science and Scopus, in the last three decades. The meta-analysis enquires into definitions of populism employed across the decades and the main characteristics of the research design. The main results show that, across time, the definition of the concept has become increasingly clear, with the interpretation holding populism to be a thin-centred ideology clearly prevailing. The focus on the empirically oriented partially confirms our expectations, although relevant differences are identified and further discussed. We conclude that more research is needed on this topic, in particular with regard to the diversity of the geographical contexts.

KEYWORDS: Populism; European Politics; Meta-analysis; Literature Review

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1. Introduction

There is a voluminous and ongoing debate about the nature and defining features of populism. This prolific literature chronicles distinct approaches to the phenomenon, some of which share relevant similarities, while others are mutually exclusive (Gidron & Bronikowski 2013). It is therefore unsurprising that the community of scholars has not been able to converge on an unanimously accepted definition (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). There is also a relatively broad literature that provides different meta-analyses focusing on both the impact of demand-side and structural factors on the radical right-wing vote share (among others Stockemer et al. 2018; Amengay & Stockemer 2019) while only recently there have been the first attempts to analyse systematically populist literature (Hunger & Paxton 2021). In this study, we aim to provide a comprehensive analysis by looking not only at how the populist phenomenon in Europe has been treated from the perspective of its determinants but also at how the conceptual solidity of the phenomenon has matured over time and which are the main definitions adopted in the available research.

In order to grasp the evolutions in the literature on populism, we examine both theoretically focussed and empirically-driven articles over time as well as the type of research design implemented. To the best of our knowledge, while there is research available dealing with the complexity of the phenomenon from a conceptual, methodological, and interpretative perspective, there is not yet a comprehensive meta-analysis of the study of the phenomenon in Europe. This represents the innovative aspect of this research, which is focussed on the perspectives of the scientific users of the concept. In this way, we provide an up-to-date review of the literature, using it as a fruitful positioning device and identifying how academic scholars relate to the concept of populism and how their analyses deal with the conceptual, methodological, and empirical challenges. In other words, from an empirical perspective, we contribute to the literature by specifying the ways in which the meanings of populism have been constructed and employed by the academic community.

This meta-analysis by no means can cover the richness of meanings attributed to populism in other disciplines or the variety of experiences labelled as populist outside Europe. Differences in the scientific focus or the geographical area would clearly have led to different results from those presented in this article, since comparative politics on Europe has evidently adopted some lines of theoretical and empirical research over others and has mainly associated this phenomenon with the right-wing. However, such a focus appears nevertheless necessary to investigate the state of the art on populism in Europe within the privileged discipline for the study of politics.

To build our corpus of scientific literature, we did an extensive search of scientific articles - research articles, editorial or introduction to special issues - published between 1990 and 2019 in relevant journals present on the two most authoritative bibliographic databases, Web of Science and Scopus (Clarivate Analytics 2021; Elsevier 2021). We will examine in detail the definitions of populism employed across decades, as well as the main characteristics of the research design of the empirically-driven articles, including whether focus is on the supply- or the demand-side, the ideological positioning of the actors, the geographical areas covered, and the number of cases.

This article proceeds as follows. First of all, we will provide an overview of the main conceptualisations of populism and the literature on its determinants, which aims to clarify the complexities faced by the literature in dealing with the populist phenomenon. This is an unavoidable step to understand the main theoretical approaches and lines of research employed by the scholars of this field that will be studied in our meta-analysis. In the second section, we move on to the research strategy, followed by the presentation of the variables of reference and expectations. The third section presents the results. We conclude by discussing the findings of such research.

2. The conceptualisation of populism

Classifying populist parties and their variants remains controversial and challenging. Note indeed that populism lacks organic *maîtres à penser* and foundational texts. It has strongly negative connotations (Urbinati 1998; Rosanvallon 2008) and, unsurprisingly, the name 'populism' is rarely invoked by those actors who are labelled as populists. There is also a widespread semantic confusion with other terms like demagoguery. In the *mare magnum* of definitions, there are four dominant conceptualisations: populism defined as a (thin-centred) ideology, a discourse, a style, and a strategy (Moffitt 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). While this plurality of definitions can be partially explained by the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon, it also reflects the specificities linked to the contexts of reference and the potential of collision between the theoretical assumptions on which the different conceptualisations are based.

The most influential - and most frequently invoked - definition in contemporary comparative politics interprets populism as a thin-centred ideology (Rovira-Kaltwasser et al. 2017). Theorised initially by Canovan (2002), it was further refined by Mudde (2004, 2007) and Stanley (2008). Building on the work of Freeden (1996), Mudde's minimal definition of populism is probably the most popular in contemporary social sciences, since its focus on minimal and essential features enabled it to travel safely across time, space, and political orientations. Mudde (2004) argues that unlike traditional interpretive frameworks - liberalism or socialism - populism is unable to provide by itself an interpretation of contemporary socio-political questions and therefore receives grafts from classic ideologies. Populism is, hence, defined as 'an ideology that considers society separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde 2004, p. 543; Italics in the text). At least two features of this definition need further specifications. First, by focusing on the realm of ideas, this definition does not postulate specific populist organizational traits or communicative features. Second, because of its 'thinness', populism can be combined with other, more

structured host ideologies, and can be located in different positions on the left/right continuum. For instance, the ideational morphology of populist radical right-wing parties relies on nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde 2007).

Within the definition of populism as a discourse, two distinct views cohabitate. While sharing the same label, they differ quite significantly with regard to the interpretation of populism they provide.

First, there is the interpretation that can be considered the main contender to the definition of populism as a thin-centred ideology. Populism as a discourse is intimately related to Laclau's (1977, 2005a) conceptualization of populism and the post-structuralist school that assumes that political identities are created through discursive practice. In this vein, Laclau rejects a definition based on fixed characteristics, considers this approach to be 'essentially flawed' and 'overwhelmed by an avalanche of exceptions' (Laclau 2005a, p. 117) and equates populism to a particular type of political logic, in the attempt to generate a new hegemonic order based on the antagonistic articulation of unfulfilled social claims that divide the society into two camps, the underdog and the power (Laclau 2005b, p. 38). In brief, 'the people' is the subject of the political and, hence, populism is the logic of the political. In this sense, at the centre of this interpretation is the claim that all politics is populism (Laclau 2005b, p. 47).

Closely related to that of Mudde (2004), Hawkins's (2009) definition of populism as a discourse has been incorporated by the same author under the umbrella term of 'ideational approach' on the ground that populist parties and movements share a way of seeing the political world (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Mudde 2017). In this vein, populism is defined as 'a Manichaean discourse that identifies Good with a unified will of the people and Evil with a conspiring elite' (Hawkins 2009, p. 1042). However, while the core of this definition of populism is located in the domain of political beliefs, it is not the result of the conscious production of a coherent worldview. Rather, it refers to 'a *latent* set of ideas or a worldview that lacks significant exposition and 'contrast' with other discourses and is usually low on policy specifics' (Hawkins 2009, p. 1045).

An alternative conceptual approach relates to populism as a political style. This is one of the oldest interpretative keys to this phenomenon. In the mid-1990s Mudde (1996, p. 231) argued that populism was 'primarily used to describe a specific political form or style instead of a specific ideology'. Various other authors referred to the rhetorical features of the phenomenon in order to grasp its specificities (Kazin 1995; Tagueiff 1995; Knight 1998; Canovan 1999). Recently, the literature has seen increased work towards conceptual refinement in this area. Jagers and Walgrave offer a 'thin' conceptualisation of populism as a 'political communication style of political actors that refers to the people' (Jagers & Walgrave 2007, p. 322; Italics in the text), which can be expanded into a 'thick' conceptualisation, based on vertical (anti-elitism) and horizontal (exclusion of minorities) dimensions. It is mainly the work of Moffitt and Tormey (2014) that has succeeded in fleshing out the conceptual elements of populism as a style. They define the political style as 'the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations' (Moffitt & Tormey 2014, p. 387; Italics in the text). Besides the rhetorical and communicative aspects, they include in the definition a relational dimension according to which populism is 'performed and enacted' (Moffitt & Tormey 2014, p. 388; Moffitt 2016, p. 38). In this way, this strand of literature acknowledges the limited interest in the content of the populist platform, its organisational features, or the political logic behind it and focuses instead on performance and the relationship between the populist leaders and their followers (Moffitt & Tormey 2014). This approach shares several commonalities with another interpretation, the so-called socio-cultural approach, which emphasises the socio-cultural relationship between populist leaders and social bases (Ostiguy 2017).

The fourth definition of populism considers populism to be a peculiar form of political mobilization. Most famously, Weyland defines populism as a 'strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, un-institutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers' (2001, p. 14). This definition does not deal with ideology, nor the type of (economic) policies enacted, but rather centres the way in which populist leaders directly relate to their constituents. While this approach has undoubtedly been

explored in the study of populism in Latin America, its application to the European context has been rather limited (Gidron & Bonikowski 2013).

3. The determinants of populism: an overview

The theoretical arguments made by this extremely diversified scholarship converge, however, into considering the socio-economic context as a fertile breeding ground for the breakthrough of populist parties across the world. Building on grievance theory (Gamson 1968), feelings of diffused economic and cultural insecurity are considered to be (major) drivers of populist voting (Kriesi et al. 2008). In direct consequence, populist parties are expected to be endorsed by the 'losers' - those individuals, and groups 'who lack the professional and/or cultural skills to function successfully in a globalizing world' (Kriesi 2007, p. 85). Recently, Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos (2020) interestingly combined arguments connected to theories of changing socio-political conflicts with those focussed on the crises of political representation to suggest that, while electoral support for radical right and radical left parties are rooted in two distinct sets of socio-structural factors, the electoral performance of these parties is in both cases connected to individual political discontent that originates in specific political dynamics. Yet, as sharply pinpointed by van Kessel (2015), this interpretative line fails to explain relevant cross-national differences in the electoral support for the different ideational varieties of populist parties or their absence in certain countries.

Both supply- and demand-side analyses present us with contradictory assessments and even conflicting suggestions, noting also that most of this literature focuses on the constellation of parties which were often described as extreme or radical right variants of populism. The literature tends to use a plethora of definitions interchangeably, including (among others) radical right, populist right, and extreme right - echoing Mudde's comment that 'we know *who* they are, even though we do not know exactly *what* they are' (1996, p. 233). More recently, left-wing (March 2011) and valence (Zulianello 2020) forms of populism received increased interest.

3.1. Populism and supply-side factors

One privileged dimension of inquiry concerns those variables directly connected to the functioning of the electoral arena. This direction of study shows moderate to limited success rates. While scholars like Abedi (2004), Carter (2005), Norris (2005), and Bustikova (2014) uncover low or no evidence related to traditional electoral variables (e.g. the disproportionality of the electoral system, requirements regarding ballot access, the turnout, etc.), various others (Jackman & Volpert 1996; Golder 2003; Veugelers & Magnan 2005) find evidence that permissive electoral systems help these parties. Recently, Amengay and Stockemer's meta-analysis (2019) further documents the relevance of permissive electoral systems in bolstering the vote share of the right-wing parties, while fine-tuning the relevance of certain assumptions (including turnout).

Other supply-side explanations focus on the impact of a federal or decentralized state structure. Scholars like Arzheimer and Carter (2006) assumed that (right-wing) populist parties might be advantaged by federal state structures with voters more willing to support them in second order elections. While the literature finds limited evidence in support of the impact of federalism on the electoral viability of (radical-right) populism (Hakhverdian & Koop 2007; Norris & Inglehart 2019), recent work documents sub-national variation in the populist phenomenon (Heinisch et al. 2020). However, rather than being a supply-side issue, this literature links this finding to the fact that populist voters are not distributed in a homogenous manner across the national territory (Vampa 2020). This bourgeoning literature further shows that some territories have more populist potential than other national counterparts (Van Hauwaert et al. 2019)

In attempting to measure the supply-side of populism, scholars increasingly focus on the winning ideology of these parties. Scholars investigate party manifestos and platforms, media, or the speeches of politicians in order to assess what the core populist ideas are and how they affect party competition (Mudde 2007; Hawkins 2009; Pauwels 2011; Rooduijn et al. 2014; Tarchi 2015). On this ground, a flourishing strand of literature focuses on these parties' impact on the agenda of the mainstream

parties (Meguid 2008). While the literature widely acknowledges the influence of populist parties on the positions assumed by other (mainstream) competitors, the direction of this influence remains a contentious topic, with cross-country and diachronic variations, as well as different effects on left and right mainstream parties, governmental and/or oppositional parties (Abou-Chadi & Krause 2020; De Vries & Hobolt 2020). A similar inconclusiveness is identified with regard to other aspects connected to the dynamics of party competition: the degree of polarization (Spies & Franzmann 2011; Mudde 2014; Enyedi 2016), issue salience and issue ownership (Meguid 2008; Bornschier 2010), or the nature of the government and its ideological position (Coffé et al. 2007). Recently, a group of scholars has inquired into the populist rhetoric among the mainstream parties, but once again with mixed results. While Rooduijn et al. (2014) have not found evidence of a linear growth of populist rhetoric, others have identified a concentration within the 2010s (Mannucci & Weber 2017).

Several studies have focussed on media as a relevant supply-side explanation (Koopmans & Statham 1999; Koopmans & Muis 2009; Vliegenthart et al. 2012). Part of this literature links the electoral performance of populist parties to the growth of polarization, the spread of misinformation and the diffusion of conspiratorial thinking (Block & Negrine 2017; Hameleers et al. 2017). Others have focussed on how the so-called discursive opportunity structure impacts the electoral viability of these parties (Koopmans & Olzak 2004). In parallel, various scholars have focussed on the agency of populist radical right parties with regard to the politicization of topics such as immigration (Van Spanje 2010; Yılmaz 2012; Helbling 2014) or EU-related issues (Hooghe & Marks 2009; Koopmans & Statham 2010; Hoeglinger 2016).

The focus on the supply-side also includes analysis of the characteristics of the leadership and internal organization of populist parties. At the beginning of the 1990s, Betz (1998) argued that strong party organization helps in achieving both party cohesion and leadership stability and, hence, provides an element of reliability to the party. Similarly, in her seminal research, Carter (2005) beautifully illustrates the key importance of party organization and leadership in explaining the varying levels of

support for extreme right parties in Europe. The most recent literature acknowledges that the organizational patterns of contemporary populist parties are a fundamental element in terms of party development and adaptation, although additional comparative studies are required (De Lange & Art 2011; De Lange 2015). Many observers also suggest the need to expand the narratives beyond high-profile cases and leaders.

All in all, despite clear individual accomplishments in advancing our understanding of populism, it is hard to draw any consistent conclusions about the effect of supply-side explanations on the parties of reference. Some of the explanations provided by the literature target the lack of consensus on which variables ought to be tested in order to explain the geographical variation of the phenomenon (Arzheimer 2009; van Kessel 2015). Various other scholars suggest the need to fine-tune the aggregate studies with a subset of geographical units and to include smallest units of subnational analysis (e.g. municipalities, communes or electoral districts) (Amengay & Stockemer 2019). Moreover, considering the variety of the phenomenon and its historical manifestations, it is reasonable to assume that changes have occurred across time, and the results we rely on have potentially altered since the research was undertaken.

3.2. *Populism and demand-side analyses*

The second main line of investigation aims to identify who supports populism and why (Arzheimer 2009; Akkerman et al. 2014; Spruyt 2014; Elchardus & Spruyt 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert 2020). The underlying assumption is that the social basis for (radical-right) populist mobilization is shaped by economic transformation and cultural diversity (Kriesi et al. 2008, p. 19) and that successful populist actors resonate with attitudes, sentiments and (political, cultural, economic) views already present among voters (Spruyt et al. 2016) as well as individuals' personalities (Bakker et al. 2016).

Until recently, the literature assumed that populist parties mobilized people who have been placed in a vulnerable cultural and economic position because of the

societal changes that have occurred since the 1960s (Betz 1990); the literature further considered that it is reasonable to expect that these parties' voters are characterized by lower educational, and cognitive resources, weaker positions in the knowledge society, more vulnerable economic positions, and Eurosceptic attitudes (Kitschelt & McGann 1995; Hooghe et al. 2002; Lubbers et al. 2002; Ivarsflaten 2005; Norris 2005; Oesch 2008; Halikiopoulou et al. 2012; Werts et al. 2013; Visser et al. 2014; Ramiro 2016). Various studies have suggested that this is indeed the case, namely that those people who vote for populist radical right and left parties tend to come from lower social classes, to be unemployed and have lower incomes (Lubbers et al. 2002; Van der Brug et al. 2003; Arzheimer & Carter 2006; Lubbers & Scheepers 2007; Arzheimer 2009; Visser et al. 2014; Ramiro 2016). Interestingly, studies have increasingly acknowledged that education and occupational status are not perfectly correlated and operate independently of each other. Moreover, various studies show that education has a positive impact on radical left voting (Visser et al. 2014; Ramiro 2016). In parallel, education has increasingly been connected with the degree of tolerance toward out-groups (Meeusen et al. 2013). In general, more recent research has fine-tuned the initial expectations, indicating that the link between personal situation (i.e. vulnerability) and political choice is not straightforward: political choices appear to be less influenced by personal life situations and more by a societal diagnosis and an evaluation of the societal consequences of the (voting) position (Elchardus & Spruyt 2016). Several scholars illustrate also that it is not (only) the economic position that explains the rise of populism, but also increased perceptions of deprivation and discrimination against 'people like us' who feel their voice no longer matters (anymore) in politics (Elchardus & Spruyt 2016; van Kessel et al. 2021) and, consequently, see the populist platform as a (desperate) politics of hope (Elchardus & Spruyt 2016, p. 126).

Several analyses inquire into gender effects and identify that men have a higher propensity to vote for (radical right) populist parties, although with relevant differences across countries (Norris 2005; Harteveld et al. 2015; Immerzeel et al. 2015). However, more recent studies indicate an overestimated difference between

male and female voters and context-dependent electoral behaviour (Spierings & Zaslove 2015; Harteveld et al. 2015; Geurkink et al. 2020). Some analyses chronicle women's increased agency in right-wing movements and parties (Erzeel & Rashkova 2017). New empirical data also show that, while both men and women tend to vote for radical right parties in line with their opposition to immigration (Immerzeel et al. 2015; Spierings & Zaslove 2015), mixed and even contradictory results are registered in terms of law-and-order attitudes, political interest, and discontent with democracy (Immerzeel et al. 2013; Harteveld et al. 2015; Spierings & Zaslove 2015).

Shifting our attention from socio-economic features, several scholars argue that people with lower levels of education, lower incomes and who are unemployed become populist voters because of their higher levels of political distrust and discontent (Elchardus and Spruyt 2016; Akkerman et al. 2017; Castanho Silva et al. 2017; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018; Geurkink et al. 2020). Populist platforms provide distrustful and discontent voters with an opportunity for reconnecting with a positive social identity. On this point, Spruyt et al. (2016, p. 336) convincingly argue that 'populism remains a politics of hope, that is, the hope that where established parties and elites have failed, ordinary folks, common sense, and the politicians who give them a voice can find solutions'.

Over recent years, the literature has increasingly analysed the role of strong and moralized attitudes about political and societal issues (Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019; van Prooijen 2021). Successful populist entrepreneurship draws on shared sentiments and views within a significant part of the population (Elchardus and Spruyt 2016; Hawkins et al 2020). With varying operationalizations (Hawkins et al. 2012; Akkerman et al. 2014; Elchardus and Spruyt 2016), scholars have investigated populist attitudes, connected them with party preferences and demonstrated that these attitudes are shared by both left-and right-wing populist voters (Akkerman et al. 2017; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018; Hawkins et al. 2020).

In their search for explanations for populist voting, scholars implicitly and explicitly refer to the literature on political psychology (Meléndez & Rovira

Kaltwasser 2021; Rovira Kaltwasser 2021). This bourgeoning strand of literature assumes that populist voters tend to simplify the dynamics of the political arena and are more susceptible to forms of conspiratorial thinking (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008; Hawkins 2009). Despite these expectations, the empirical research available shows that holding a populist view is correlated only with some sub-facets of belief in conspiracy theories. In their pioneering study, Castanho Silva et al. (2017) argue that, although conspiracy theories and populism share a simple Manichean narrative, individual support for conspiracy thinking is much higher than populist voting. They also suggest the need to inquire into which types of conspiracy beliefs attract specific (populist) constituencies, as well as the extent to which left-wing and right-wing populist citizens endorse different conspiracy-based narratives. In this vein, Vasilopoulos and Jost (2020) identify both psychological similarities and dissimilarities in left-wing and right-wing citizens who endorse populist attitudes. In parallel, Rovira Kaltwasser (2021) calls for increased attention to the link between misinformation, conspiracy thinking and populist voting. The available analysis produces mixed results. While Miller et al (2016) shown that populist voting is not necessarily driven by misinformation, van Kessel et al (2021) find evidence that misinformation relates to support for parties on the right side of populism, but not for those on the left side.

The analyses summarized above are only a tiny part of the extremely vast literature on the populist phenomenon. This literature converges in identifying that populism is more than an expression of protest with complex triggers of mobilization and a heterogeneous support base. Additional explanations concern the way different scholars operationalize the dimensions of interest, while, more recently, scholars like Stockemer et al. (2018) suggest that increased in-depth qualitative research might be needed in order to document the complexities behind the processes through which individuals becomes voters, supporters or activists for a populist party.

4. The construction of the database and the criteria of selection

If we put together the complexities behind the definitional attempts and the fertile literature on the determinants of populisms, the meeting point is the intricacy of the phenomenon. This justifies the need to further inquire into the meanings, uses and operationalization of populism in the literature. A meta-analysis dealing with a concept with such a wide range of uses, determinants and research outcomes unavoidably requires specific methodological choices. We have decided to limit the analysis to scientific articles published in English in academic journals. We are aware that the focus on scientific journals can be seen as a limitation, considering that seminal works on this topic have been published in books and/or in other languages – particularly German and French. However, we believe that this choice is in synch with the evolutions in the academic career path, since the ability to publish (peer-reviewed) articles has become a key metric of a competitive publication record. It is far beyond the aim of this article to inquire into the desirability of this evolution and we treat it exclusively as a documented fact (Kusmanoff 2019). However, almost every article included in our analysis made use of a wide variety of scientific publications, not exclusively in English. Indirectly, this bibliographical element broadens the debate on populism beyond the strict criteria described above.

Once the territory of inquiry was delineated, another crucial selection element concerned the identification of the most relevant (social sciences) disciplines for our topic. We deliberately favoured comparative politics as a privileged environment. We also included articles dealing with the European Union (EU) treated through the lens of comparative politics. In line with the literature on the influence of the context on the electoral performance of populism, there is extensive evidence that party competition over European integration (see also EU issue position, issue salience, or issue framing) interacts with the electoral performance of populism. We applied the same type of reasoning to journals of three other disciplines with porous boundaries with comparative politics: political theory, sociology, and communication. We included articles from these disciplines in our analysis insofar as they maintained strong links with comparative politics – in other words, if comparative politics

research is explicitly cited and debated in these articles or they have later been influential in the comparative politics literature.

Bearing in mind these criteria, we relied on two of the most authoritative bibliographic databases, Web of Science and Scopus (Clarivate Analytics 2021; Elsevier 2021). Given the vast number of bibliographic sources indexed in both databases, we adopted additional operational criteria in order to better grasp the relevance of the articles in the debate on European populism.

The first step involved a preliminary evaluation of the relevance of populism by running a simple search string in both databases looking for the word populism and its derivations in the title, abstract and authors' keywords (See Appendix). However, up until the 2000s or even the 2010s, it was not uncommon to find journals without abstracts, not to mention keywords. Note also that journals differ quite significantly in terms of the length of their abstracts or the number of keywords. Relying only on the words associated with populism would have created several unbalances among sources and/or different periods of time. Hence, we launched an additional search string, composed of one hundred and fifty-nine terms, such as the names of the most relevant populist parties or some concepts usually associated with them – such as 'radicalism', 'extremism', 'Euroscepticism' – and which did not have at the same time any reference to populism in their title, abstract or keywords. From these, we considered all articles which included at least ten references to populism in the body of the article or at least one reference to populism in their introductory paragraph or the conclusions[1] and additional four references anywhere in the text, excluding bibliography and footnotes from both criteria. A caveat is needed: we made an exception only for those articles which explicitly defined populism or a concept with a fundamental feature labelled as populist as their key concept.

The second step allowed us to further reduce the database and select only those articles using populism in a substantial way. For theoretically oriented articles, we included only those articles which explicitly used this concept in their analyses and

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[1] For articles without division into paragraphs, we took into account the first and the last two pages.

considered the European context[2]. With regard to empirically oriented articles, we included all articles which explicitly defined political actors, parties or movements as populist or labelled one of their specific features as such and used at least one European country as a focus. We selected empirical articles relying on descriptive analyses when they specifically employed a populist phenomenon as their main focus[3]. For articles dealing with causal relationships, we included all pieces of research which had at least one phenomenon as populist among their main *explananda*. When used among the main *explanantia*, we include only those analyses specifying or testing the causal pathways between them and the phenomena to be investigated. We also included the negative pole – those articles that used populism to openly reject its applicability to a given phenomenon, insofar as they explicitly explained the reasons for this choice and the preference for other conceptualizations.

Last but not least, we set a threshold of relevance in an attempt to obtain a list of the fifty most cited articles for every decade in each database and kept in the analysis all the articles present in at least one of the two. Since the number of citations can vary rather significantly with any update of the databases, we relaxed this criterion by using also the articles with less than two citations compared to the fiftieth most cited article per decade. In order to consolidate this list, we included two additional criteria, regardless of the threshold of fifty articles per decade. First, we eliminated all articles that received less than ten citations on Web of Science or less than twelve citations on Scopus. Second, we incorporated all articles that received at least sixty citations on Web of Science or seventy citations on Scopus. Finally, since the bibliographic search was made according to their citations on 7 May 2021, we also wanted to ensure that the articles published in the last years of the 2010s were not excessively penalized by the timing of our search. For this reason, we fine-tuned the

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[2] There are, however, theoretical articles that made only brief remarks on the European context and the specific characteristics of contemporary European populism (e.g. Canovan 1999; Aslanidis 2016). We decided to keep them in our analysis given their small number and the vast influence they have had in the theoretical debate on European populism.

[3] For instance, an article dealing with the general description of the electoral geography of the main parties in a given election, including a populist party, would not be included as there was not a specific selection of the populist party, while a similar study that focussed on how a populist party and a Green party were electorally distributed would be.

criterion for inclusion related to that decade, namely that every year must be represented in the dataset with at least three articles. This threshold was met by all years but 2019. For this reason, we ran a separate search limited to articles published during that year, selecting the three most cited articles published in 2019 in both databases. Finally, both Scopus and WoS made it possible to look for citations of articles published in journals not indexed within the database, a feature that we explicitly used in our selection[4].

Considering the above-mentioned criteria, we were able to select one hundred and ninety-four articles (Piccolino & Soare 2021). More specifically, in the 1990s we were only able to identify forty articles; in the following decade, a total number of seventy articles were gathered. In the 2010s, we were able to obtain eighty-four articles. Table 1 shows a summary of the articles in our dataset.

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[4] In the 1990s, we did not obtain fifty indexed articles corresponding to our selection criteria. We therefore included all non-indexed articles with citations equal to or higher than our minimum threshold of citations. In the 2000s and 2010s our goal was fully meet. We decided to keep non-indexed articles insofar as they matched the number of citations of the least cited article in both databases.

Table 1. Articles according to journals (per decade)

1990s	
	Number of articles
Comparative Politics	4
Parliamentary Affairs	4
Party Politics	4
West European Politics	4
European Journal of Political Research	3
Telos	3
South European Society and Politics	2
Journals with only one article in the decade	16
Total	40
2000s	
	Number of articles
European Journal of Political Research	8
West European Politics	8
Journal of Political Ideologies	7
Party Politics	5
Comparative Political Studies	4
Comparative European Politics	3
Journal of European Public Policy	3
Parliamentary Affairs	3
Patterns of Prejudice	3
Acta Politica	2
East European Politics and Societies	2
Government and Opposition	2
International Political Science Review	2
Political Studies	2
Problems of Post-Communism	2
SAIS Review of International Affairs	2
Journals with only one article in the decade	12
Total	70
2010s	
	Number of articles
European Journal of Political Research	7
Government and Opposition	7
Party Politics	6
Political Studies	6
West European Politics	6
Information Communication and Society	4
Journal of European Public Policy	4
Journal of Political Ideologies	3
British Journal of Sociology	2
Comparative Political Studies	2

Electoral Studies	2
Ethnic and Racial Studies	2
German Politics	2
Journal of Common Market Studies	2
Journals with only one article in the decade	29
Total	84

Source: Piccolino and Soare (2021), based on Clarivate Analytics and Elsevier (2021)

3.1. Coding, variables and expectations

The coding was carried out through human coding of articles by looking at the full text of them. An inter-coder reliability test was carried out on a sub-sample of articles[5]. The first distinction in our dataset was made according to the level of inquiry of the populist actors or phenomena discussed. We differentiated between articles that had populist actors or phenomena among their main *explananda*, on the one hand, and articles that used populism to label an *explanans* or an *explanandum* that was relatively secondary in the framework of the article, on the other.

A second variable involved the essential focus of the article. Even though all selected articles included some sort of theoretical elaboration and at least an elementary empirical inquiry, we made a distinction between theoretically focussed and empirically focussed articles. In the first category, we included all articles centred on the discussion, definition or improvement of concepts, while the second category includes all articles with empirical analysis as their main focus. In our definition of theoretically oriented articles, we included not only all articles of *strictu sensu* political theory, i.e. written by scholars of this discipline according to its classical approaches, but also some articles written by scholars of comparative politics. Even though this discipline may be defined in essentially empirical terms (Schedler & Mudde 2010), some of its articles are clearly focussed on debating and refining concepts rather than exploring new empirical findings. Conversely, we considered as empirically oriented articles all those pieces of research that, regardless of the originality of their theoretical framework, had a structured empirical analysis. Obviously, the empirical examination

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[5] The value of the Krippendorf's alpha on the eleven variables under coding ranged from 0.678 to 1, for an average figure of 0.844 considered reliable by the literature.

in these articles is never independent from theory, but it is nevertheless possible to identify a distinct research design.

For empirically focussed articles, we employed additional variables concerning their research design[6]: number of cases, quantitative or qualitative design[7], focus on demand- or supply-side of politics[8], geographical focus between Western and Central and Eastern Europe and between Europe and other continents, and the position of the populist actors discussed in the political spectrum.

Finally, we included two variables related to the definition of populism. The first assessed whether or not populism was explicitly defined within the article, using an admittedly large criterion. Indeed, we considered populism to be defined if an article made at least some elementary references to the main characteristics of populism. We thus considered all those articles that did not have such an (even elementary) analysis, regardless of references to a given populist 'ideology', 'ideal type', 'style', etc. as lacking an explicit definition. The mere use of populism as an adjective cannot tell us much about the interpretation of it given by an author.

In the second variable, we reported *verbatim* the label adopted by the authors to classify populism. In a rather limited number of articles, the authors employed more than one label in their definition without a clear preference for one over the others. In these cases, we counted all the labels employed within an article in our classification. In some articles, the authors did not take an explicit stand on which category should be used to classify populism, and we thus grouped all of them into a specific category. As we saw in the first paragraph, however, the same label may have different interpretations. In the case of discourse, following Poblete (2015) we will

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[6] Most of these variables would have created a high arbitrariness in the coding. We therefore decided to focus on empirically oriented articles since their research design makes the application of these variables almost free from subjectivity. Moreover, as they are articles focussed more on the operationalization of concepts rather than on their definitions, the analysis of these variables seems much more relevant.

[7] To distinguish between the two, we adopted the criterion most used in the literature, related to the use of some kind of statistical inference rather than the mere use of statistical data (Schedler & Mudde 2010, p. 419).

[8] For articles using aggregate-level data as explanandum (i.e. the vote share for populist parties), we considered them focussed on the demand-side when they employed at least one dependent variable related to the characteristics of the population (such as the unemployment rate) and focussed on the supply-side when they did not make use of such variables.

differentiate between the post-structuralist and the post-modern approaches, with the former referring to Laclau's and the latter to Hawkins' conceptualization of populism, plus another category for the generic use of this label. In the case of ideology, we differentiated between articles explicitly interpreting populism as a thin-centred ideology from those that used a different definition of ideology.

The definition of populism within articles is unavoidably the focus of our first expectations. We expect that the number of articles with a definition of populism will increase over time and the approach that interprets populism as a thin-centred ideology will gradually prevail over the others. In other words, we expect that the concept of populism will be more central and debated within the literature and that a certain consensus about its definition will be observable.

The first expectations concern both theoretically and empirically oriented articles. Our second group of expectations focuses on the empirically oriented articles only (see footnote 5). We expect that the articles with a focus on the supply-side of politics will prevail over those dealing with the demand-side in every decade, following the consideration of the literature which considers the former to have been explored less than the latter (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2018; van Hauwaert & van Kessel 2018). Then, we want to verify to what extent the expansion of the 'populist *Zeitgeist*' across countries and ideological positions has been studied by the literature. For example, we expect an increase in the cross-country studies over the case studies. In recent years, populist actors or phenomena have been observed in many countries where in the past they were thought to be absent, and therefore the literature on the subject should have taken a broader perspective on the phenomenon. For the same reason, we expect an increase in the number of studies which take into account both Western and Central and Eastern European cases, as well as an increase of articles that study left-wing populism and compare populist parties with differing ideological positioning.

5. Discussing the data

In order to verify our expectations, we focus first on the evolution over time of the definitions of populism. We considered the percentage of all articles containing an explicit definition of populism, and focussed specifically on those that had populist actors/phenomena among their main *explananda*. Intuitively, it is more likely that a definition of populism will be put forward in these articles rather than in those that use it as an *explanans* or as a subsidiary *explanandum*. Figure 1 presents us with a simple diachronic overview. The data confirm our initial expectation: in the 1990s, 37.5% of all articles used some kind of definition of populism, whereas in the 2010s the explicit definitions were present in almost two-thirds of the articles. This trend is also present among the articles that have a central focus on explaining populist phenomena, characterized by a percentage higher than the rest of the articles.

**Figure 1: Articles with explicit definitions of populism per decade (in %)[a].**
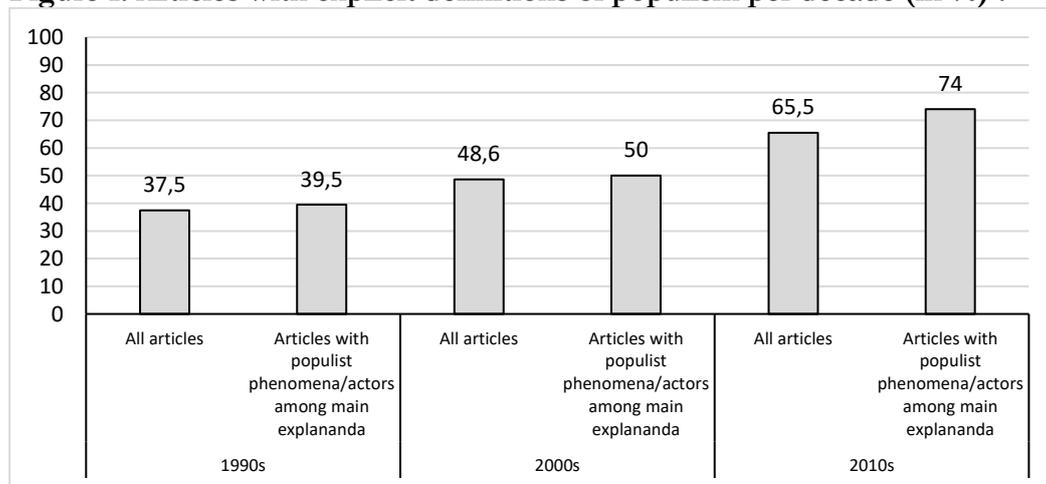
[a]Note: N 1990=40 and 38; N 2000s=70 and 66; N 2010s=84 and 73
Source: Piccolino and Soare (2021), based on Clarivate Analytics and Elsevier (2021)

In looking at the difference between theoretically oriented and empirically oriented articles, we assume that since the former are, by definition, more interested in conceptualization, a much higher share of articles with explicit definitions is to be identified. This is, indeed, confirmed by Figure 2. Again, in both categories, we can

see a confirmation of our expectations of an increase in the use of definitions of populism across decades.

Figure 2: Articles with explicit definitions of populism per decade according to theoretical/empirical focus (in %)[a].
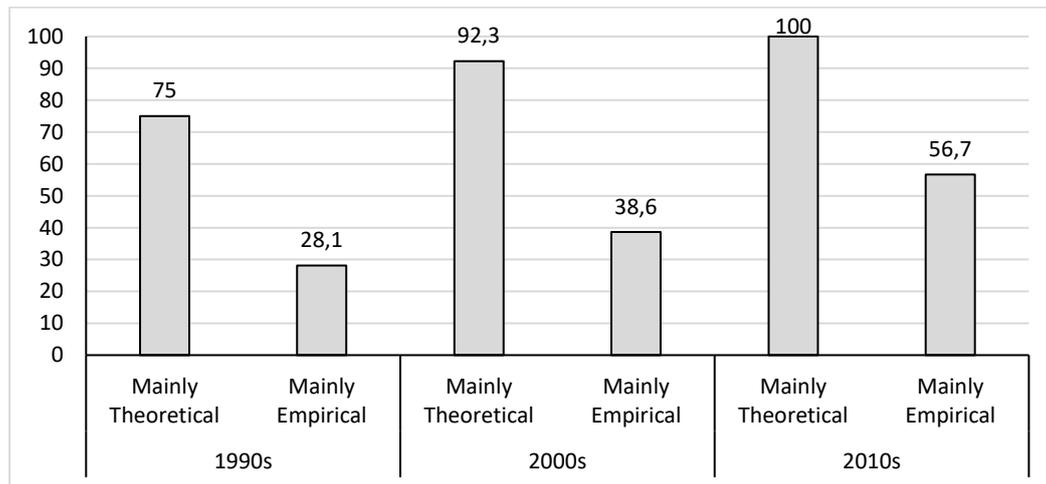
[a]Note N 1990=8 and 32; N 2000s=13 and 57; N 2010s=17 and 67
Source: Piccolino and Soare (2021), based on Clarivate Analytics and Elsevier (2021)

It seems reasonable to suggest that populism is defined more often in the literature today than it was in the 1990s. However, the presence of an explicit definition does not specify what happens in terms of conceptualization. Is this the result of an enduring "war of words" or is this connected to conceptual convergence towards the definition of populism as a thin-centred ideology? The data present in Table 2 seem to privilege the second line of argumentation, albeit with caveats. The picture varies across decades. During the 1990s, we can observe a certain fragmentation, with no category clearly prevailing over the others, a form of equilibrium between the labels that connected populism to the realm of political ideas, discursive rhetorical strategies and strategic-organizational features. The strategic-organizational interpretation is particularly popular in the Latin American context, and it is thus not surprising that this decade saw the publication of two relevant analyses that explicitly connected Central and Eastern Europe with the Latin American context: Di Tella (1997) and Weyland (1999). The most employed definitions of the 1990s associate populism with a style (20%), followed by those that

place emphasis on strategy (13.3%). Significantly, there is an important number of articles that did not include a specific preference for a categorization of the phenomenon (46.7%), which decline rather sharply in the following two decades.

In the second decade, the picture remains fragmented, with at least two differences to the 1990s. First, the most frequent definitions are those of style and thin-centred ideology, although they account for slightly less than a fifth of the categories employed. Second, during this period, the definitions that link populism to the realm of ideas become much more relevant. In the last decade, it is possible to identify a clear affirmation of the interpretation of populism as a thin-centred ideology. The frequency of the definitions associated with this strand of literature is only slightly less than an absolute majority (46.9%). Moreover, it would surpass this threshold if we took into account only the definitions with a clear categorization or added a strongly connected category, i.e. the interpretation of populism as a set of ideas (7.8%). Despite this increasingly accepted reference to a definitional framework, the overall definitional landscape remains fragmented. Apart from categories that connect the use of populism and apply it to macro-phenomena (e.g. a form of representation - Caramani 2017; democratic illiberalism - Pappas 2014), the other available definitions maintain their appeal. It is the case of the style-focussed or discourse-focussed definitions. This is relevant finding, considering that some classifications – such as those inspired to Laclau's work – are clearly more difficult to operationalise compared to the thin-centred approach.

Table 2. Categories employed in the definition of populism (per decade)[a].

1990s	N	%
Style	3	20
Strategy	2	13.3
Political Belief	1	6.7
Political Movement	1	6.7
Political Philosophy	1	6.7
Main characteristics defined without explicit categorization	5	46.7
Total	15	100

2000s	N	%
Ideology (thin-centred approach)	7	18.9
Style	7	18.9
Discourse (generic/other approaches)	4	10.8
Discourse (post-modern approach)	1	2.7
Field of the Political Spectrum	1	2.7
Form of Organisation	1	2.7
Ideology (generic/ other approaches)	1	2.7
Mass Movement	1	2.7
Mode of Representation/Participation	1	2.7
Set of Ideas	1	2.7
Strategy	1	2.7
Main characteristics defined without explicit categorization	11	29.7
Total	37	100

| 2010s	N	%
Ideology (thin-centred approach)	30	46.9
Set of ideas	5	7.8
Style	5	7.8
Discourse (post-structuralist approach)	4	6.3
Discourse (post-modern approach)	3	4.7
Strategy	3	4.7
Rhetoric	2	3.1
Democratic Illiberalism	1	1.6
Discourse (generic/other approaches)	1	1.6
Discursive frame	1	1.6
Form of Representation	1	1.6
Ideology (generic/other approaches)	1	1.6
Repertoire	1	1.6
Main characteristics defined without explicit categorization	6	9.4
Total	64	100

[a]*Note: Number of labels may be higher than the number of articles with an explicit definition of populism since some articles used more than one label to describe populism*
Source: Piccolino and Soare (2021), based on Clarivate Analytics and Elsevier (2021)

We can now move to the characteristics of the empirically oriented articles. In line with our expectations, we observe a clear prevalence of articles whose *explananda* are focussed on the supply-side compared to those focussed on the demand-side (figure 3). The percentage of the analyses focussed only on the supply-side remains high. Our analysis identifies a steady growth in the research dealing with the demand-side of the phenomenon. Interestingly, despite relevant analyses illustrating the need to recognize the interaction between demand-side and supply-side factors in the analysis of the electoral performances of (radical right-wing) populist parties (Golder 2016), our data show a decrease in the research that did not clearly privilege one of the two sides. Most probably, the explanation is connected with an increased specialization of the discipline in this time frame[9].

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[9] In each decade, qualitative articles are a clear majority of those articles. These are often general reviews of the populist phenomenon in Europe. The growth of quantitative articles over time probably plays a role in the decrease of such pieces of research.

**Figure 3. Research Design focus on Demand/Supply-side per decade (only empirical-oriented articles, %)[a].**
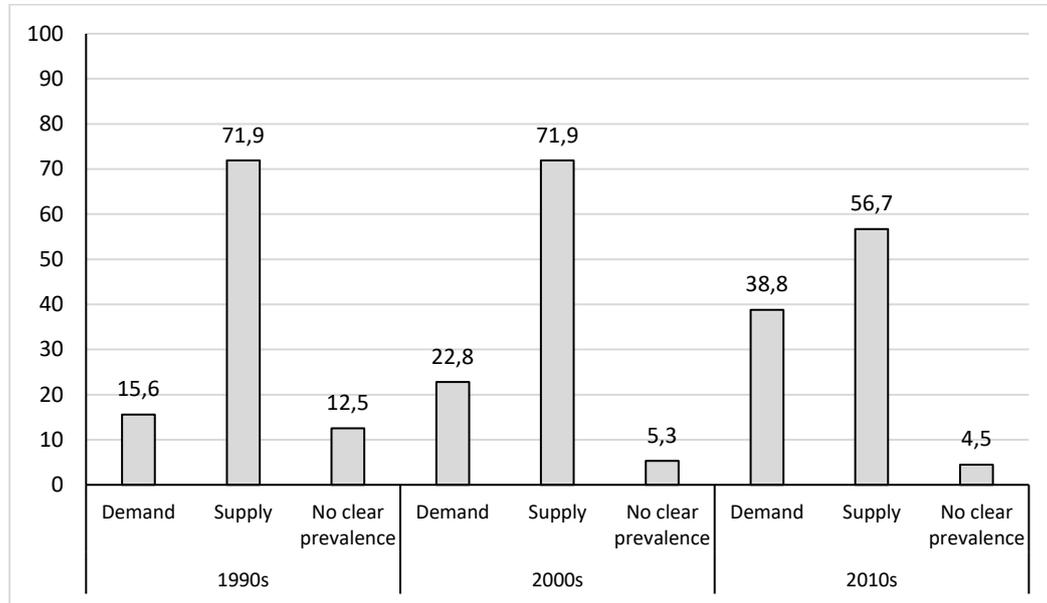
[a]Note: N 1990=32; N 2000s=57; N 2010s=67
Source: Piccolino and Soare (2021), based on Clarivate Analytics and Elsevier (2021)

Finally, with regard to cross-country studies (figure 4), our expectation regarding growth in this category is not confirmed, since in the last decade the number of cross-country studies – i.e. multiple European countries or at least one European country and one from another continent – is the lowest recorded in the series. Nevertheless, this finding is in line with the general trend of the discipline (Pepinsky, 2019).

Figure 4. Cross-country studies per decade (only empirical-oriented articles, %)[a].
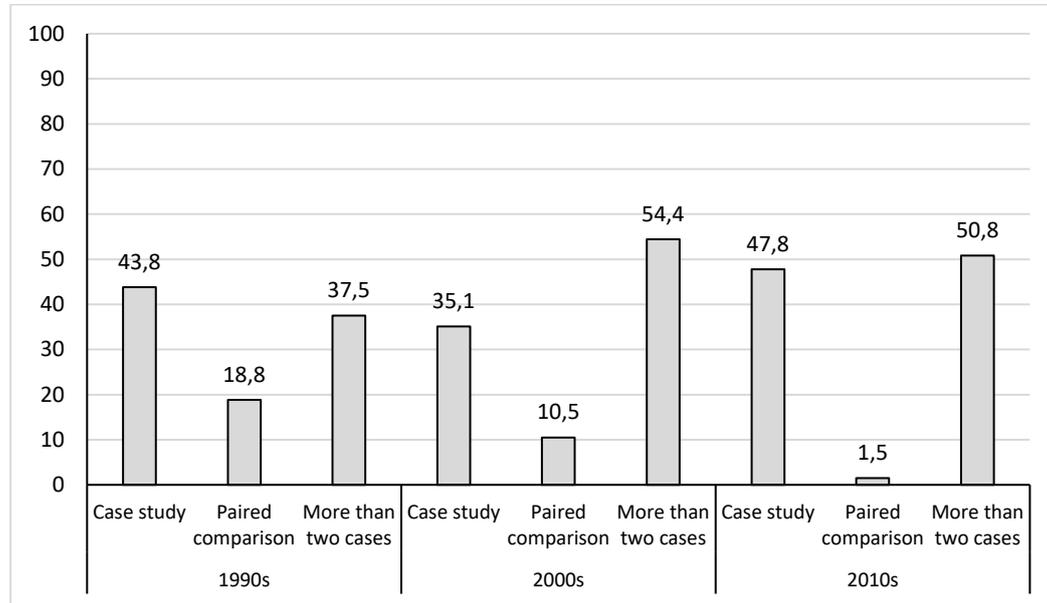
[a]Note: N 1990=32; N 2000s=57; N 2010s=67
Source: Piccolino and Soare (2021), based on Clarivate Analytics and Elsevier (2021)

To explore this surprising finding in more detail, Table 3 shows the data of the countries investigated in case study articles. In the last two decades, we can observe a strong presence of the Netherlands, which accounts for more than a quarter of the case studies in our dataset. Quite striking is the absence in the last decade of articles on a country like Poland, which is undoubtedly fundamental in the study of contemporary populisms. The same applies to the scarcity of case studies dealing with France (only one article in the 1990s and one in the 2010s). Most probably, part of the explanations is connected to the increased diffusion of populism in countries where they were previously absent and, hence, an increased attraction for new cases. To this, we can add the influence of different national traditions, for instance, the continuing relevance of publications in the national languages in certain countries.

Table 3. Specific country in case-study articles[a].

1990s		2000s		2010s	
Country	**%**	**Country**	**%**	**Country**	**%**
Germany	28.6	The Netherlands	25	The Netherlands	28.1
Italy	28.6	Italy	15	Belgium	12.5
Greece	14.3	United Kingdom	15	United Kingdom	12.5
Czech Republic	7.1	Austria	5	Germany	9.4
France	7.1	Belgium	5	Spain	9.4
Hungary	7.1	Bulgaria	5	Greece	6.3
Slovakia	7.1	Denmark	5	Czech Republic	3.1
		Hungary	5	Finland	3.1
		Ireland	5	France	3.1
		Poland	5	Hungary	3.1
		Slovakia	5	Italy	3.1
		Sweden	5	Sweden	3.1
				Switzerland	3.1
Total	100	Total	100	Total	100

[a]Note: N 1990=14; N 2000s=20; N 2010s=32
Source: Piccolino and Soare (2021), based on Clarivate Analytics and Elsevier (2021)

Looking at the geographical area of reference, the available data do not fully confirm our expectations (Figure 5). The data show that there is only a very small trend towards an increase of the analyses taking into account both Western and post-communist contexts. If no article of this kind was present in our dataset during the 1990s, the literature taking into consideration at least one country of both areas amounts to 8.8% of the reviewed empirical articles in the 2000s (13.5% without taking into account case study articles) and increases to 11.9% in the following decade (22.9% without taking into account case study articles). The most cited literature on populism in Europe is still dominated by research production dealing with Western Europe, which accounts for more than three-quarters of the articles reviewed in each decade. Finally, the studies with took into account Europe and other continents are still in their infancy. The highest value of such articles was reported during the 2010s, with 11.9% of articles with at least one case outside Europe (22.9% without taking into account case study articles).

**Figure 5. Geographical focus per decade (only empirically oriented articles, in %)[a].**
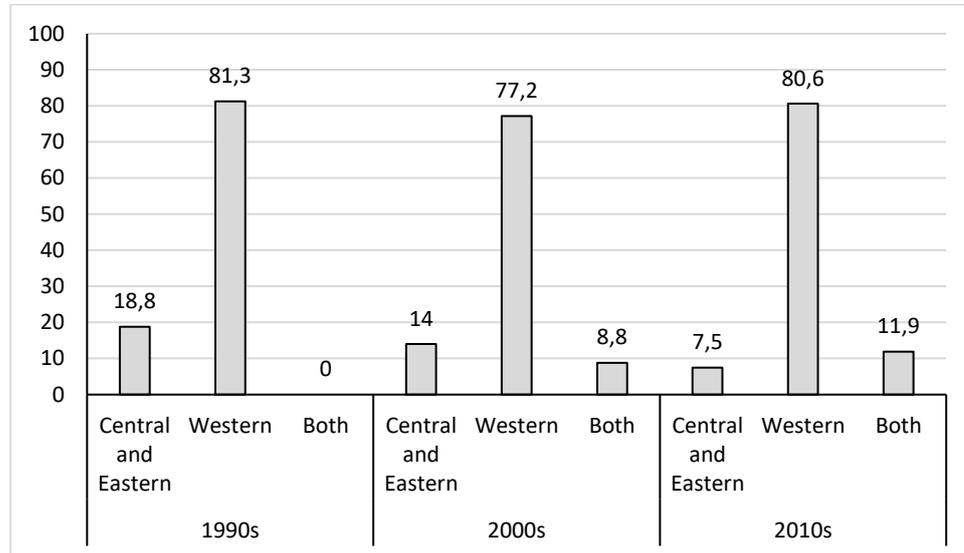
[a]Note: N 1990=32; N 2000s=57; N 2010s=67
Source: Piccolino and Soare (2021), based on Clarivate Analytics and Elsevier (2021)

Moving to the ideological focus, our expectations find mixed results (Figure 6). As in the previous case, we took into consideration exclusively empirically focussed articles. The articles dealing only with left-wing parties do not grow consistently over time. Rather, our data show a relevant increase in the number of articles dealing simultaneously with actors belonging to different ideological positioning. From 6.3% of articles in the 1990s, the frequency of these analyses rises to one-third of the reviewed articles in the 2010s. While, in the first two decades, radical-right populism dominates the research agenda (over 80% in both decades), in the last decade this percentage decreases, although it remains by far the most researched topic in the constellation of publications of populism we mapped.

**Figure 6. Ideological positioning of observations per decade (only empirically oriented articles, in %)[a].**
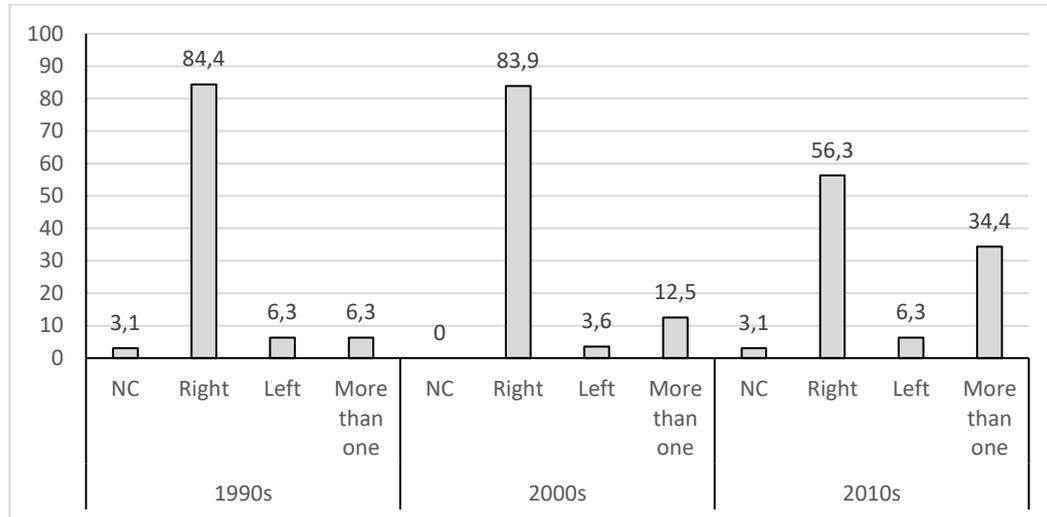
NC= Non-classifiable
[a]Note: N 1990=32; N 2000s=56; N 2010s=64
Source: Piccolino and Soare (2021), based on Clarivate Analytics and Elsevier (2021)

Finally, even though we did not formulate specific expectations about this variable, we present the data about the qualitative/quantitative research design of empirical-oriented articles. A particularly steep trend is observed: while quantitative articles amounted to just 12.5% during the 1990s, in the last decade they have (just) become the majority. This growth in quantitative articles is in line with the general trend of the literature (Schedler & Mudde 2010). However, in this particular case, this strong growth may also signal an increased interest in the study of populist phenomena within the mainstream of the discipline.

Figure 7. Quantitative research articles (only empirical-oriented articles, in %)[a].
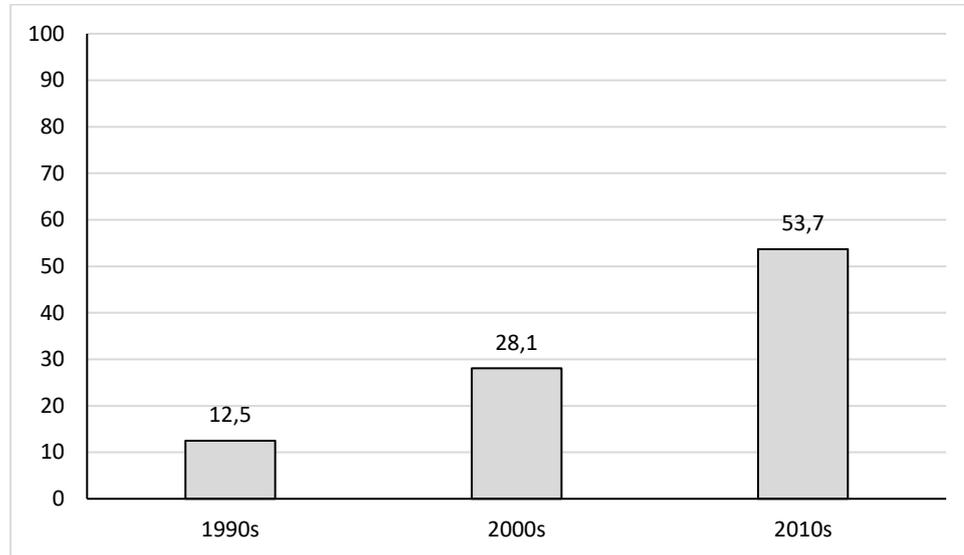
[a]Note: N 1990=32; N 2000s=57; N 2010s=67
Source: Piccolino and Soare (2021), based on Clarivate Analytics and Elsevier (2021)

7. Conclusions

The analysis of populism is a particularly fertile field of study in the social sciences. The literature agrees that the analysis of European populism has reached a high level of complexity and sophistication over the last three decades. However, a systematic meta-analysis, unwrapping the main analytical and conceptual trends in this prolific literature, was lacking. This article aims to fill this gap; though the results largely confirm our expectations, several counterintuitive findings have been noted.

Our results show that populism is much more defined than in the past. This undoubtedly signals increased attention for the phenomenon as a classifier. However, it also shows that its essential features and categorization remain debated. Among the definitions referred to, the interpretation of populism as a thin-centred ideology is clearly the prevailing one, even though it still faces lively competition from other approaches, once again illustrating the complexity behind the phenomenon.

The study of the more empirically oriented articles yielded several interesting results. It shows that the supply-side of politics is still more explored, even though an

increase in studies on the demand-side can observed. The meta-analysis also shows a clear interest in the varieties of populism. In more detail, our analysis shows that a higher proportion of studies takes into account parties from different ideological position. There is, however, no increase in respect of those analyses dealing with left-wing parties only. With regard to the geographical context, we did not observe a strong increase in the number of studies taking into account both Western and Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, the frequency of cross-country studies has, surprisingly, not increased over time, a finding which may be in part explained by the consolidation of populist parties in some areas, such as the Benelux countries – one of the most studied contexts of the rise and growth of populisms. Finally, yet importantly, a very strong increase in quantitative articles across decades was recorded.

Given these findings, we believe that future studies should use increasingly work on the interaction between the supply- and demand-side, as well as on cross-country studies that combine Western and Central and Eastern European contexts. Although not directly mapped by our meta-analysis, this recommendation is in line with various studies that argue in favour of increased inquiry into the sub-dimensions of populism in both new and old democracies. Even more promising, in our view, is the potential of analysis of all the variants of populisms identified by the literature: we see potential here for analyses that combine qualitative and quantitative data. All in all, more research is needed on this topic – a topic that will undoubtedly continue to capture the attention of voters and scientific research in the years to come.

Acknowledgements

Appendix

Primary search string (Title-Abstract-Author Keywords)
populis

Secondary search string (Title-Abstract-Author Keywords)
antielit OR *anti-elit* OR anti-establis* OR *antiestablish* OR *anti-immi* OR *antimmi* OR anti-party OR antiparty OR anti-parties OR antiparties OR anti-partitism OR antipartitism OR anti-partyism OR anti-partytism OR antipolit* OR anti-polit* OR "anti-system party" OR "anti-system parties" OR "authoritarian parties" OR "challenger party" OR "challenger parties" OR euroscept* OR euroskept* OR "extreme left*" OR "extreme right*" OR extremism* OR "extrem* party" OR "extrem* parties" OR "left extrem*" OR "left-wing extrem*" OR "right extrem*" OR "right-wing extrem*" OR "Far Left" OR "Far Right" OR *nativis* OR "nationalist part*" OR "New Right* parties" OR "New Left* parties" OR "post-communist part*" OR "post-fascist part*" OR "radical left*" OR "radical right*" OR radicalism OR "radical* party" OR "radical* parties" OR *xenophob* OR "Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs" OR "Freedom Party of Austria" OR "Bündnis Zukunft Österreich" OR "Alliance for the Future of Austria" OR "Team Stronach" OR "Vlaams Block" OR "Vlaams Belang" OR "Flemish Block" OR "Flemish Interest" OR gerb OR ataka OR "Most nezavisnih lista" OR "Bridge of Independent Lists" OR "ANO" OR "Akce nespokojených občanů" OR "Action of Dissatisfied Citizens" OR "Tokio Okamura" OR "Svoboda a přímá demokracie" OR "Freedom and Direct Democracy" OR "Dawn of Direct Democracy" OR "Úsvit přímé demokracie" OR fremskridtspartiet OR fremskrittspartiet OR "Dansk Folkeparti" OR "Progress Party" OR "Progress Parties" OR "Danish people's party" OR "Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond" OR "Conservative People's Party of Estonia" OR perussuomalaiset OR "Finns Party" OR "Front National" OR "National Front" OR "France Insoumise" OR "Unbowed France" OR "Die Republikaner" OR "The Republicans" OR "Die Linke" OR "Left Party" OR "Alternative für Deutschland" OR "Alternative for Germany" OR syriza OR "Coalition of the Radical Left" OR "Popular Orthodox Rally" OR "Laikós Orthódoxos Synagermós" OR "Independent Greeks" OR "Anexartitoi Ellines" OR fidesz OR "Hungarian Civic Alliance" OR jobbik OR "Movement for a Better Hungary" OR "Flokkur fólksins" OR miðflokkurinn OR "Centre Party" OR

"Sinn Féin" OR "Forza Italia" OR "Go Italy" OR "Five Star Movement" OR "Movimento 5 Stelle" OR "Northern League" OR "Lega Nord" OR "Who owns the state" OR "For a Humane Latvia" OR "Kam pieder valsts?" OR "Par cilvēcīgu Latviju" OR "Reform Party" OR "Reformu partija" OR "Order and Justice" OR "Tvarka ir teisingumas" OR "Darbo partija" OR "Lithuanian Labour Party" OR "Forum for Democracy" OR "Party for Freedom" OR "Forum voor Democratie" OR "Partij voor de Vrijheid" OR "Pim Fortuyn" OR "Centre Democrats" OR "Centrum Democraten" OR "Socialist Party" OR "Socialistische Partij" OR "League of Polish Families" OR "Liga Polskich Rodzin" OR "Law and Justice" OR "Prawo i Sprawiedliwość" OR korwin OR kukiz OR chega OR "Greater Romania Party" OR "România Mare" OR "Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti" OR "Ordinary People and Independent Personalities" OR "Slovak National Party" OR "Slovenská národná strana" OR "Sme rodina" OR "We Are Family" OR "Smer" OR "Direction -- Social Democracy" OR "Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko" OR "Slovenian National Party" OR "Slovenska Nacionalna Stranka" OR "Slovenian Democratic Party" OR "Slovenska demokratska stranka" OR levica OR podemos OR "Schweizerische Volkspartei" OR "People's Party" OR "Lega dei Ticinesi" OR "Ticino League" OR "Auto-Partei" OR "Automobile Party" OR "Swedish Democrats" OR sverigedemokraterna OR ukip OR "United Kingdom Independence Party" AND NOT *populis*

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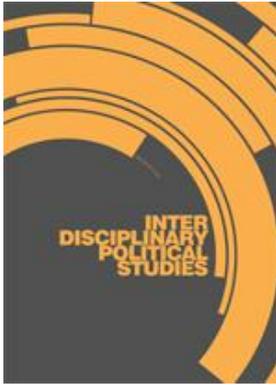
RESEARCH ARTICLE

If you cannot rule them, misinform them! Communication strategies of Italian radical right-wing populist parties during the pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The present research investigates the extent of misinformation and conspiracy theories in radical right-wing populist parties (RRPPs) in light of the pandemic. As the Covid-19 emergency progressively gave way to an 'infodemic' within the EU's domestic political systems, RRPPs made regular use of misinformation as a political tool to build consensus and to polarise the public debate. This strategy is further maximised within the realm of social media, which disintermediates communication and allows political actors to directly reach their preferred audience with personalised content. Relying on an original dataset based on fact-checked statements from politicians, our study conducts a descriptive mapping of the discursive tactics employed by the League and Brothers of Italy within the Italian political scenario throughout 2020.

KEYWORDS: Fake News; Media; Misinformation; Conspiracy Theories; Populism.

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1. Introduction

On 6 January 2021, as the joint session of the U.S. Congress was certifying the votes from the Electoral College, thousands of Donald Trump supporters gathered in Washington D.C. to protest an election they viewed as tainted by electoral fraud. Despite non-existing evidence to support those claims, the former President called on the thousands who attended the rally to "fight like Hell" in order to prevent an allegedly illegitimate result from being enforced.[1] Prompted in many ways by his speech, a mob of extremists eventually managed to break into the Capitol building. The unprecedented nature of this event clearly shows the true extent of the threat posed to contemporary democracies by the political exploitation of post-truth, alternative facts, and conspiracy theories (Brennen 2017).

In this sense, recent studies highlight how mis-, disinformation, and conspiracies have become ever-increasingly associated with a wide array of right-wing actors. Specifically, so-called 'fake news' has been incorporated in populist communication strategies (Waisbord 2018) to rail against the 'corrupt elites' who supposedly seek to undermine the 'pure people' (Jagers & Walgrave 2007). These arguments are especially relevant when it comes to the 'infodemic' (World Health Organization 2020) generated by the outbreak of Covid-19, with an "overabundance of information – some accurate and some not" plaguing the public debate around the pandemic. In this regard, populist actors have recurrently acted as misinformation transmitters, confusing and misleading the public by downplaying the seriousness of Covid-19 (Hatcher 2020).

At present, the amount of knowledge on the relationship between populism and misinformation is still under heavy academic scrutiny. Given these parameters, our study does inquire about the extent of the use of fake news and conspiracy theories by radical right-wing populists within the Italian political scenario. Relying on eight fact-checking organisations, we investigate the misinformative statements of the main Italian RRPPs, namely the League and Brothers of Italy (FdI), throughout 2020.

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[1] For the full transcript of the speech, URL: https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps- jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial?t=1621430152187.

These come mostly in the form of social media posts from the official accounts of the parties, their leaders (Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni), and other political representatives, as well as public declarations from newspapers, TV, and radio interviews. Our goal is to provide an exploratory analysis of the topical elements that characterised radical right-wing populist communication tactics in light of the health emergency.

2. Misinformation and conspiracy theories: the state of the art

The proliferation of hoaxes can hardly be considered a new phenomenon. However, while the conscious spread of misinformation was initially restricted to parody and political satire, it is now routinely used to mislead rather than to entertain the audience (for more, see Tandoc et al. 2018). In particular, researchers tend to distinguish between misinformation, which is propagated without damaging intent, and disinformation, which instead is characterised by the deliberate intent to harm. To avoid speculation about the intention behind any given inaccurate statement, our investigation shall generally speak of misinformation. In the same vein, misinformation and fake news will be used interchangeably, albeit acknowledging that the latter concept is somewhat controversial and often weaponised by misinformation transmitters to accuse their opponents of bias (McNair 2017).

Regardless of these theoretical peculiarities, it is now commonly assumed among scholars that the advent of information and communication technologies enormously changed the potential outreach of hoaxes. Social media and digital outlets allowed this fringe phenomenon to enter the mainstream, providing a channel for those willing to exploit misinformation for economic, political, and personal reasons (Brummette et al. 2018). This liberalisation process ultimately made (online) media more susceptible to conveying inaccuracies, also because the growing competition for audience attention demands that actors constantly ride the wave of virality and sensationalism (Mullainathan & Shleifer 2005).

In this context, actors can directly produce content for their audience without being bound by editorial guidelines or deontological principles of good

journalism, often resulting in a lack of objectivity and fact-checking. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) highlighted how false and misleading news tend to drive more attention than actual information produced by mainstream media. In the past decade, scholars have also registered a negative attitudinal shift towards mainstream media (Esser et al. 2016; Mihailidis & Viotty 2017), as large sections of the citizenry discard genuine news in favour of products that are closer to their socio-political worldview (Pennycook & Rand 2019). Conspiracy theories lean on similar communication strategies (Uscinski & Parent 2014), psychological characteristics (Douglas et al. 2017), and partisan identities (Miller et al. 2016), although misinformation and conspiracies are to be understood as separate entities (for more, see Keeley 1999). As individuals tend to fill the gaps in their knowledge with information that confirms their beliefs, this process of drawing social inferences from one's surroundings potentially offers a breeding ground for false information (Nyhan & Reifler 2010).

In this regard, political misinformation is particularly sensitive due to its impact on short-term collective decision-making and long-term disruption of institutional stability (Bennett & Livingston 2018). From the initial breakthrough during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, these tactics have expanded their length to the entirety of Europe (for more, see Bergmann 2020). However, the relative novelty of the phenomenon also implies that academic interest in the connection between misinformation and politics is still somewhat tentative. As discussed in the next section, most of the existing literature focused on the strategic employment of misinformation by populist parties within the public arena.

3. Misinformation and populist communication strategies

In their publication on online news consumption, Pierri et al. (2020) show that belief-reinforcing tendencies favour the creation of closed communities. In particular, the formation of 'filter bubbles' (Pariser 2011) around audience-driving issues ultimately decreases one's tolerance of alternative attitudes and increases the likelihood to accept ideologically oriented news (Mihailidis & Viotty 2017), thus fostering polarisation and extremism (Gerbaudo 2018). Given these parameters, it is of little

surprise that online platforms ended up boosting populist appeals (Blassnig et al. 2019).

According to the ideational approach (Mudde 2004), the populist *Weltanschauung* is centred around the conception of the sovereign people as inherently virtuous. Within this framework, the people's authority is constantly undermined by self-serving elite personalities and groups such as the political establishment, certain intellectuals, and specific media outlets (for more, see Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013a; Mudde 2017). When it comes to the radical right, this framework assumes an even more exclusionary connotation by including those who are perceived as 'aliens' (Stanley 2008; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013b). This specific vision of politics and society finds fertile ground within the online public debate (Krämer 2018), where populists bolster conflictual narratives that rely on drama and controversy. The result is a Manichean struggle that relies on "the emotionally driven recontextualization of certain, pre-existing, meanings of a people and its enemies" (Kissas 2020, p. 269), while dismissing or circumventing political correctness and empirical evidence. In other words, populism constantly needs information – and misinformation – to corroborate its people-centric and anti-elitist axioms.

Regarding Italy, it can be seen how the League extensively employed this strategy. In particular, its leader Matteo Salvini strongly relied on emotionally charged messages to reinforce his nationalist rhetoric and personally attack or undermine individuals, their ideas, and their group of affiliation (Berti 2021; Berti & Loner 2021). In terms of nationalist discourses and *ad hominem* attacks, his communication style shares certain traits with Brothers of Italy's leader, although Giorgia Meloni's populist appeal seems to be somewhat more moderate (Mazzoleni & Bracciale 2018). Regardless, both parties have often seized the opportunity to employ misinformation to polarise the electorate, delegitimise their opponents, and pursue their political agenda (Caldarelli et al. 2021).

Although the above political actors' utilization of conspiracy theories remains somewhat of an uncharted territory, the similarities that the latter seems to share with the broader populist framework hint at a potential interaction between the

two. On this topic, Castanho Silva et al. (2017) highlighted that both seem to embrace the notion that a small group of individuals controls and manipulates world events to the detriment of the public. Despite the aforementioned parallelisms between populism and some aspects of conspiratorial beliefs, the above scholars also evidenced the marginality of conspiracies in the public sphere compared to the widespread circulation of populism, thus proving that their overlap only goes so far.

Notwithstanding the type of misinformation, it is undeniable that fake news and conspiracy theories have become quite a strategic asset in the hands of populist actors for generating political polarisation, sowing dissent, and blurring the boundaries that separate opinions from facts. This type of political engagement can assume many forms, ranging from voters' mobilisation regarding specific issues up to potentially influencing the electoral process of certain countries, as was the case during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017).

In this regard, the outbreak of Covid-19 added another volatile element to the equation, triggering a surge in false and inaccurate information due to its global geographic outreach and a thematic spillover that eventually included all aspects of societal life. In a brief review that is by no means exhaustive by the time of our writing, research on virus-related misinformation has mainly focused on the infodemic's frames (Posetti & Bontcheva 2020). While certain studies tackled the type, narratives, and diffusion of fake news at large (Brennen et al. 2020), others addressed Covid-19 conspiracies and their behavioural effects (Uscinski et al. 2020), the role of social media (Caldarelli et al. 2021), and the actors transmitting and amplifying these contents (Jamieson & Albarracín 2020).

Given the recent nature of the health emergency, relatively little research has been produced on the effects of false information regarding the pandemic within the partisan landscape at large, let alone for radical right-wing populist parties. Therefore, the following sections are dedicated to the provision of an initial assessment of this under-investigated topic.

4. Research design and methodology

Previous studies showed how conservatives have specific psychological traits that make them more susceptible to accepting fake news (Guess et al. 2019) and conspiracy theories (Oliver & Rahn 2016). *Ça va sans dire*, this also prompted researchers to investigate the connection between misinformation and the political actors that seem to attract these kinds of voters. Of course, right-leaning parties are not alone in engaging in misinformation within the Italian political context. However, recent studies (Mancosu et al. 2017; Van Kessel et al. 2020) demonstrated that supporters of right-wing populist parties are prone to showing higher levels of exposure to political misinformation. Therefore, our study draws from the above literature to set the stage for its analysis on the communication tactics of the League and FdI in 2020.[2] Aside from being recently characterised as both right-wing and populist (for more, see Akkerman et al. 2016; Chiaramonte et al. 2018), the two actors also stood in opposition to the Conte II cabinet (2019 – 2021). This is no second-order issue, for their parliamentary stance allowed them to scrutinize the executive's actions while being free from the necessary compromises that elected officials in government were required to make.

All the arguments presented on the connection between misinformation and RRPPs find some degree of confirmation within the Italian case, making it a suitable candidate for our investigation. Indeed, RRP leaders systematically accused the government of mismanaging the health emergency. As the 2020 crisis unfolded, the state-directed implementation of strict containment measures to curb the virality of the pandemic inevitably went at odds with the preferences of the public at large. In this regard, Italy was also among the first countries to be hit by Covid-19, as well as the first one to enforce a nationwide lockdown. This unfortunate primacy provided somewhat of a 'test bench' for political forces to react without being able to look at

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[2] Of the 295 statements by politicians that Pagella Politica fact-checked in 2020, 98 debunks (33%) originated from FdI and the League, with the latter being the most fact-checked party in Italy. Moreover, League's leader Matteo Salvini stands out as the most fact-checked politician, while FdI's leader Giorgia Meloni comes in third, *Pagella Politica*, 29/12/2020, URL: https://pagellapolitica.it/blog/show/892/il-2020-di-pagella-politica-in-oltre-300-fact-checking.

fellow actors across Europe for behavioural cues. Through the dissemination of false and inaccurate information aimed at challenging common-sense views on Covid-19, RRPPs instrumentally encouraged this dissonance by channelling and nurturing public resentment while providing alternative guidelines to understand the world. Eventually, this contributed to instil suspicion towards the authorities and reinforce the perception of the system as not being up to the task.

Although the pandemic constituted a novel and unique challenge to the Italian domestic political system, the aforementioned limited knowledge concerning the relation between unverified content and RRPPs ultimately prevented us from formulating a specific set of hypotheses. Instead, our study decided to follow the path traced by Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018) by presenting a tentative framework based on three research questions (RQs). This will serve as the main backdrop for our investigation, allowing us to exemplify a series of objectives and lay the groundwork for the next section's descriptive evidence:

- RQ1: What are the most widespread misinformative narratives prompted by RPPs in theframework of Covid-19?

- RQ2: Who are recurrent targets of the misinformation and, accordingly, what is the desired outcome that the misinformation is trying to achieve?

- RQ3: How does the fact-checked misinformation present itself?

To provide an accurate explanation to these RQs, we employ an original dataset based on 199 debunked statements from various members[3] of the aforementioned RRPPs during 2020. For our research, we opted to draw from the existing literature by defining radical right-wing populist parties as political formations that

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[3] Although this topic will be addressed in Figure 4, a few clarifications are in order. When we refer to 'members', we indicate: the leaders of both parties (Matteo Salvini for the League and Giorgia Meloni for FdI); politicians elected in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate (MPs); supranational representatives (MEPs); and sub-national officeholders (regional presidents, municipal mayors, members of regional/municipal executives/councils). We also include statements from the official accounts of both parties, as well as other less prominent figures (i.e. Figure 4's 'Other').

are non-centrist in their most important ideological stances and have a people-centric appeal (Akkerman et al. 2016).

The data is drawn from monitoring eight fact-checking websites and online news outlets with a dedicated fact-checking section,[4] which were then qualitatively scrutinised and coded by relying on a content analysis schema. In particular, this approach was used when dealing with most of the variables in our investigation (people-centrism, anti-elitism, conspiracy message, tone of the statement, narrative, target, and misinformation typology), while the remaining ones (platforms and transmitters) did not need any additional work. Concerning the validity of our sources, it ought to be highlighted that three of them (i.e. Facta, Pagella Politica, and Open.online) are active verified signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network's (IFCN) Code of Principles.[5] Signatory organisations commit their activity to non-partisanship and fairness, transparency of sources, funding, and methodology, as well as to an open corrections policy. These fundamental requirements for news verification are also followed by the other five outlets considered, making them eligible references in the Italian fact-checking ecosystem.

Of course, the statements in our analysis cannot cover the entirety of fake news and conspiracy theories manufactured and propagated by RRPPs, as the time-consuming process of tracking deceptive information leads fact-checkers to operate on the basis of selective criteria. That said, relying on debunkers can be a suitable proxy for random selection, which provides an exhaustive overview of how RRPPs use misinformation to foster their agenda and pursue their political goals.

Furthermore, this strategy allows us to bypass the potential shortcomings stemming from the adoption of a specific definition of fake news (for more, see Egelhofer & Lecheler 2019) and conspiracy theories (for more, see Bergmann 2018), which might open the flank to potential criticisms. Nonetheless, we decided to offer a more adapted exploration of RRPPs' use of misinformation by coding a variable

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[4] These are: Butac, Bufale.net, Facta, Giornalettismo, Next Quotidiano, Open.online, Pagella Politica, and Smask.
[5] The IFCN Code of Principles website, URL: https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/.

that relies on Wardle's (2017) seven-point typology. Similarly, we also produced a dummy variable aimed at investigating the effective presence of conspiracy messages, i.e. suspecting that an influential and powerful group is plotting a covert operation for an unlawful or harmful purpose, consequently causing damage to the community (coded as 1 if present).

Rather than embarking on a lengthy discussion on the nature of populism, we scrutinised every one of the 199 statements in our dataset for indications of its main core attributes: people-centrism and anti-elitism. Our approach aligns with the broader ideational approach, which essentially considers populism as a set of ideas (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013a; Mudde 2017). While we are aware of the ongoing debates concerning the most appropriate conceptualization of populism, we also feel compelled to point out that these scholarly arguments are often "[…] of secondary importance for many research questions […]" (Mudde 2017, p. 47). Although the current theoretical debate has not reached a consensus regarding populism's nature and its measurement, the employment of an ideational approach does not necessarily prevent our investigation from analysing its more discursive elements (Pauwels 2011). Several ideational scholars effectively relied on different methodologies to observe populist attitudes in specific instances (i.e. Jagers & Walgrave 2007; Rooduijn & Akkerman 2017), while still regarding the latter as either a thin-centred ideology or – more broadly – as a set of ideas. In view of that, we created two separate dichotomous variables tracking the presence of people-centric and anti-elite messages.

The dataset was further complemented by: the negative, neutral, or positive tone of the statement; the platform where the statement first appeared (i.e. social media, newspapers, TV, etc.); the name of the actors transmitting the message; the actors' partisan allegiance; the main narrative of the statement (i.e. Covid-19, migration, economic issues, etc.); and the message's target (i.e. a specific party, the national government, a foreign country, etc.). In addition to the debunks presented in the next section, a more detailed explanation of how our qualitative analysis was conducted is provided in Appendix A, where we include examples of fact-checked statements for each category of the most relevant variables in our dataset.

5. RRPPs, fake news, conspiracies, and COVID-19: a descriptive empirical framework

At first sight, our data already provides a first major piece of evidence, namely the disproportionality that characterises the overall amount of false content propagated by the two Italian RRPPs throughout 2020. More specifically, Table 1 shows that the League is responsible for a total of 171 (86%) misinformative assertions, as opposed to the 28 that were spread by FdI (14%). As for the other variables described in the table, the differences between the two political formations appear to be much less pronounced.

When considering the extent of populism in RRPPs, it is possible to discern how both parties heavily rely on forms of communication that entail either an anti-elite or people-centrist rhetoric, which respectively account for 67.3% and 30.6% of the total. For instance, in December 2020, Matteo Salvini tweeted: "I believe that wanting to upset Christmas traditions is the umpteenth act by this government against the identity and history of the Italian People".[6] The statement is both anti-elitist and people-centric, as it misrepresents curfew policies relative to the Midnight Mass while portraying the government as acting against the 'people' (capitalized), which *per contra* is seen as the keeper of national identity. In this sense, our dataset pictures a specific preference in terms of transmission strategies, as both actors are far more likely to rail against the elite rather than emphasise the inner virtues of the citizenry.

It should be highlighted that Brothers of Italy appears to be slightly less prone to populist discourses: only 25% of FdI's statements are people-centric, as opposed to the League's 31.6%, while anti-elite frames are roughly similar. On the one hand, this particular finding might be ascribed to the ongoing debate concerning FdI's populist status (see Tarchi 2015). On the other, these results seemingly confirm previous evidence highlighted by Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018) concerning the somewhat more moderate populist stance of Meloni's party. Given the tentative nature of

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[6] Matteo Salvini makes an inaccurate statement concerning the Midnight Mass, *Smask*, 8/12/2020, URL: https://smask.online/dio-e-patria/quali-tradizioni-non-esiste-attualmente-alcuna-messa-di-mezzanotte/.

our work, further research is advised in order to present a more clear-cut explanation of these particular findings.

Table 1 – Percentages of Italian RRPPs statements concerning populism, conspiracy, and tone (2020).

Party	People-centrism		Anti-Elitism		Conspiracy message		Tone of the statement			Total
	No	**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**	**Negative**	**Neutral**	**Positive**	
League	68.4	31.6	32.2	67.8	89.5	10.5	74.3	15.8	9.9	86
FdI	75	25	35.7	64.3	92.9	7.1	78.6	7.1	14.3	14
Total	69.4	30.6	32.7	67.3	90	10	74.9	14.6	10.5	100

N = 199
Source: authors' elaboration

When dealing with the thematic narratives that characterise each observation, Table 2 pictures how the plurality of RRP discourses is centred around the very occurrence of the pandemic. More specifically, the necessity to pass a series of restrictions to contain the virus granted RRPPs the possibility to admonish and criticise the actions of Giuseppe Conte's second cabinet. Their primary narrative involves harsh criticism over the government's alleged failure to provide reasonable and effective measures to face the challenges posed by Covid-19, which delayed the reopening of businesses and other facilities.[7] Similarly, Italian RRPPs blame the cabinet for not bringing much-needed relief to the financially struggling citizenry, an effort that is supposedly hampered by the overly bureaucratic processes that characterise the functioning of both the executive and the public administration.[8] Furthermore, RRPPs have often made use of unscientific sources to downplay the virality of the pandemic,

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[7] Matteo Salvini equates the containment measures imposed by the government to a terror strategy, *Smask*, 14/11/2020, URL: https://smask.online/famiglia-e-ordine/covid-e-visite-mediche-a-domicilio-i-dati-smentiscono-la-provocazione-della-bestia/.

[8] Giorgia Meloni shares an article titled 'It's forbidden to drown', *Bufale.net*, 13/05/2020, URL: https://www.bufale.net/divieto-di-annegare-e-di-respirazione-bocca-a-bocca-cosa-dice-il-docmento-iss-e-inail/.

while suggesting the alleged presence of medicinal solutions that were voluntarily side-lined by the government.[9]

Table 2 – Narratives of Italian RRPPs statements (2020).

Party	COVID-19	Economy	Migration	National-ism	Attacks & Misman-agement	Endorse-ments	Other
League	29.2	14	22.8	5.9	17.5	7	3.5
FdI	28.6	17.9	10.7	10.7	21.4	7.1	3.6
Total	29.1	14.6	21.1	6.5	18.1	7	3.5

N = 151
Source: authors' elaboration

Here lies the fundamental difference between fake news and full-fledged conspiracies. To illustrate this, in May 2020, League parliamentarian (MP) Paolo Grimoldi tweeted a video from December 2019, where the founder of the Five Star Movement (M5S) Beppe Grillo was pictured wearing a face mask.[10] The caption suggested that the former comedian was allegedly protecting himself from "the virus", but fact-checkers ultimately figured out this statement as a mere provocation towards reporters (i.e. journalism being equated to a virus). The episode had nothing to do with Covid-19, and the tweet could be simply marked as misleading. However, Grimoldi's post was also questioning whether or not the M5S founder knew "[…] things that Italians and the world were not told […]", hinting at Grillo's previous visit to the Chinese embassy. This suggestion can undoubtedly be marked as conspiratorial, for it implies that a prominent figure of the senior party in government was warned of the upcoming pandemic but opted to conceal this information from the public. But

[9] Matteo Salvini defends plasma-therapy as a cure to Covid-19, *Smask*, 30/11/2020, URL: https://smask.online/famiglia-e-ordine/il-plasma-iperimmune-e-ancora-una-terapia-sperimentale/.
[10] Paolo Grimoldi accuses Beppe Grillo of being tipped off by the Chinese about Covid-19, *Facta*, 4/05/2020, URL: https://facta.news/fuori-contesto/2020/05/04/non-e-vero-che-a-dicembre- 2019-beppe-grillo-indossava-la-mascherina-perche-avvisato-dai-cinesi-dellemergenza-covid-19/.

while the presence of conspiracy-related messages among Italian RRPPs is undeniable, their diffusion appears to be limited, as only 10% of the 199 assertions of our dataset effectively embraced purely conspiratorial rhetoric, with residual intra-party differences (Table 1).

So far, the overall communication strategies envisage a situation in which both political actors systematically praise their members and allies while at the same time lashing out against all those who are perceived as opponents on topics related (but not limited) to the pandemic. Through the exploitation of this extensively adversarial and hostile frame (Table 1, Tone of the statement, Negative: 74.9%), the League and FdI have also chastised the government for its management of the economy (14.6%), including the longstanding debate on the European Stability Mechanism.[11] Migration-related instances were also emphasised (21.1%), focusing on the danger allegedly posed by migrants in relation to the virus, or arguing that they were treated better than Italian citizens.[12] In other words, our findings on RRPPs' communication strategies depict a relatively homogeneous agenda, although different priorities seem to emerge as well. This is particularly evident for migration-related statements, where the League (22.8% as opposed to FdI's 10.7%) has traditionally held a dominant position (Gianfreda 2018), while Brothers of Italy is a stronger advocate for nationalist issues (10.7% as opposed to the League's 5.9%).

Although our single-country data does not allow us to estimate the level of ideological convergence with other European RRPPs, we can at least recognise that certain narratives were 'imported' from abroad. In particular, the unproven assertion that Covid-19 was manufactured in a Wuhan laboratory,[13] and the fabricated claim

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[11] Giorgia Meloni accuses the Minister of Economy of signing the European Stability Mechanism, *Pagella Politica*, 10/04/2020, URL: https://pagellapolitica.it/dichiarazioni/8573/meloni-sbaglia-litalia-non-ha-firmato-per-attivare-il- mes.

[12] The League claims migrants were quarantined on a luxury cruise ship, *Facta*, 21/04/2020, URL: https://facta.news/fuori-contesto/2020/04/21/alcuni-migranti-salvati-nel-mediterraneo- trascorreranno-la-quarantena-su-un-traghetto-tirrenia-ma-senza-alcun-comfort/.

[13] Matteo Salvini states in the Senate that Covid-19 came from a Wuhan laboratory while the WHO was either absent or complicit, *Giornalettismo*, 16/12/2020, URL: https://www.giornalettismo.com/salvini- e-il-virus-nel-laboratorio-cinese/.

that voter fraud occurred during the 2020 U.S. elections[14] did not originate within the Italian public sphere.

Figure 1. Targets of Italian RRPPs statements (2020).
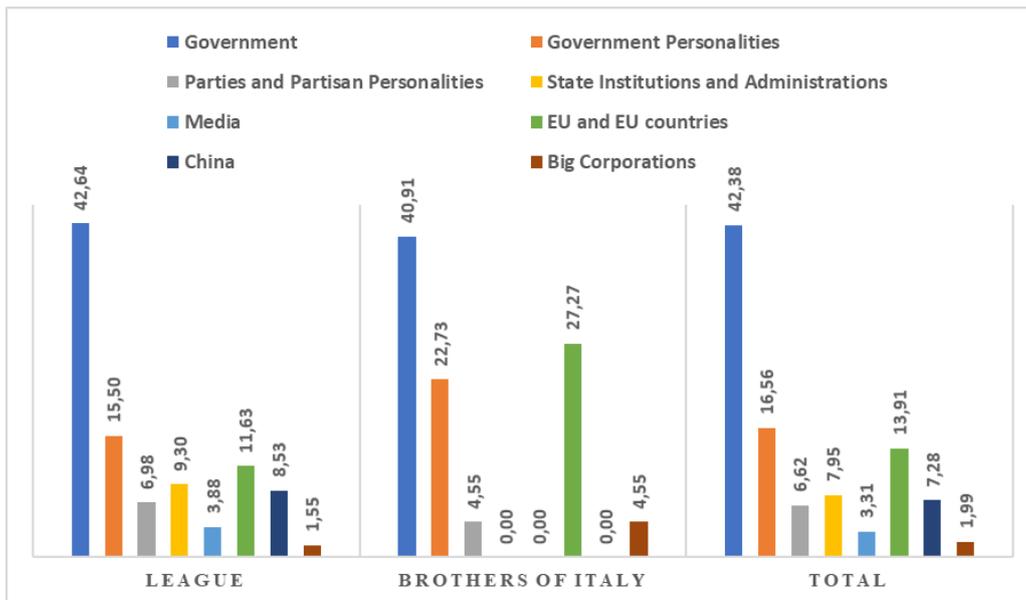

N = 199
Source: authors' elaboration

In light of the previous paragraphs, the main targets of the misinformation pushed by both RRPPs (Figure 1) can be identified with the executive at large (42.4%), its single personalities (16.6%), as well as actors and individuals of the Italian partisan landscape (6.6%). This particular tactic is ascribable to the populists' broader strategy of enemy vilification, which relies on the constant need for a scapegoat that ends up becoming an epitome of the 'corrupt elite'. Aside from notable institutional figures of the then cabinet (i.e. Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, Minister of the Interior Luciana Lamorgese, Minister of Foreign Affairs Luigi Di Maio, etc.), ideological opponents are also portrayed as enemies, with specific attacks targeting the political

[14] Matteo Salvini says that in some U.S. counties there were more ballots than voters, *Pagella Politica*, 6/11/2020, URL: https://pagellapolitica.it/dichiarazioni/8754/salvini-ha-fatto-disinformazione-sui-brogli-elettorali-negli-stati-uniti.

formations that supported the executive at the time (i.e. the Democratic Party, the Five Star Movement, and Italia Viva).

A closer look at intra-party differences reiterates the assessments on the two RRPPs' respective niches. Indeed, FdI relied on misinformation tactics to blame both the EU and its Member states more than twice when compared to the League (27.3% as opposed to 11.6%). On the contrary, the latter used false information as a means for highlighting the alleged Chinese responsibilities with respect to the pandemic (8.5%), as well as accusing both the mainstream media (3.9%) and other state institutions (9.3%) of bias and corruption.

Figure 2. Types of misinformation of Italian RRPPs (2020).
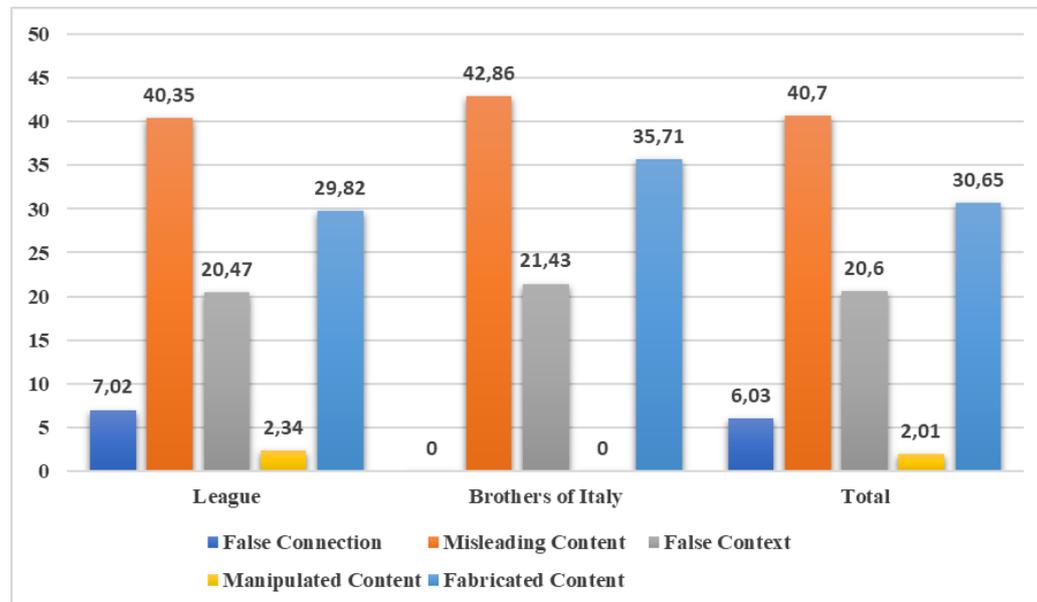
N = 199
Source: authors' elaboration

Moreover, it is crucial to understand how misinformation is propagated and what types of inaccuracies have been diffused. In this respect, we rely on the framework proposed by Wardle (2017) to classify misinformation (Figure 2). The scenario that emerges from our descriptive analysis underlines the absence of any satirical or parodic content, thus reinforcing the evidence provided by the literature. Conversely,

most of the fact-checked information consists of misleading content (40.7%), namely the ambiguous association of unrelated issues to lead the audience to an inevitable premeditated conclusion. Our dataset also registers the widespread use of genuine information with an incorrect or decontextualised background (20.6%). An example, in this sense, can be provided by Salvini and Meloni's exploitation of a video from a 2015 show (Tg Leonardo on Rai 3) in which the theory that Chinese scientists had created "a super-virus from bats and mice" was openly explored.[15]

Brothers of Italy also fostered a relatively high number of fabricated claims (i.e. unscientific claims that the prolonged use of masks causes hypercapnia).[16] Conversely, the League presented a more diversified array of misinformation typologies, including hoaxes with a highly visual impact such as false connection (7%) and manipulated content (2.3%), which are completely absent in FdI's political discourse. For example, the photo of a Brazilian school where students sat on the ground using chairs as desks was instrumentalised to blame then Minister of Education Lucia Azzolina, thus creating a mismatch between the caption and the actual visual.[17] As for content manipulation used to attack political opponents, the League misquoted then Vice-minister of Economy Laura Castelli, whose recommendation for restaurant owners to develop new skills to overcome the ongoing crisis was reported as an invitation to change jobs altogether.[18]

Moving on to the way in which misinformative messages are propagated (Figure 3), Facebook chiefly appears to be the preferred dissemination medium (53.6% for FdI, 45.6% for the League). The reasons behind the platform's success,

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[15] Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni revive a TV show that talks about Chinese lab-made viruses, *Facta*, 30/03/2020, URL: https://facta.news/notizia-vera/2020/03/30/il-tg-leonardo-del-2015-e-vero-ma-non- dimostra-che-il-virus-del-covid-19-sia-nato-in-laboratorio/.

[16] Brothers of Italy parliamentarian (MP) Federico Mollicone claims that masks cause respiratory problems, *Giornalettismo*, 26/05/2020, URL: https://www.giornalettismo.com/ipercapnia-e-mascherine-mollicone-fdi/.

[17] Matteo Salvini uses a photo of Brazilian students sitting on the ground to blame the Minister of Education, *Open.online*, 20/09/2020, URL: https://www.open.online/2020/09/20/accusano-salvini-di-bufala-creando-una-bufala- la-foto-delle-studentesse-sedute-a-terra-non-e-del-brasile/.

[18] Matteo Salvini misquotes Vice-Minister Laura Castelli, *Smask*, 02/08/2020, URL: https://smask.online/abbasso-le-tasse-viva-le-spese/come-la-bestia-ha-modificato-le-parole-di-laura-castelli-sulla-crisi-dei-ristoratori/.

in turn, can be explained by its ability to fulfil one's need for belonging and self-representation (Nadkarni & Hofmann 2012). Needless to say, this tendency to forge an in-group identity through these outlets is of great relevance to political communication. Unlike other notable social networks, Facebook also lacks a strict character limit, which allows for a more diversified way for the audience to engage with content through the posts' reactions and comments. At the same time, however, Twitter's concise messages allow parties and politicians to use social media as some sort of press office, through which tailor-make their own press releases for media professionals. For those reasons, Twitter has been deemed by scholars as a good predictor of party campaigns (De Sio & Weber 2020). In this sense, the evidence emerging from our descriptive analysis seems to support Twitter's overall importance, with the platform coming in as a strong second (33.2%). This, in turn, contributes to cement the two main social media platforms as the primary recipients of misinformative content.

**Figure 3. Platforms of Italian RRPPs (2020).**
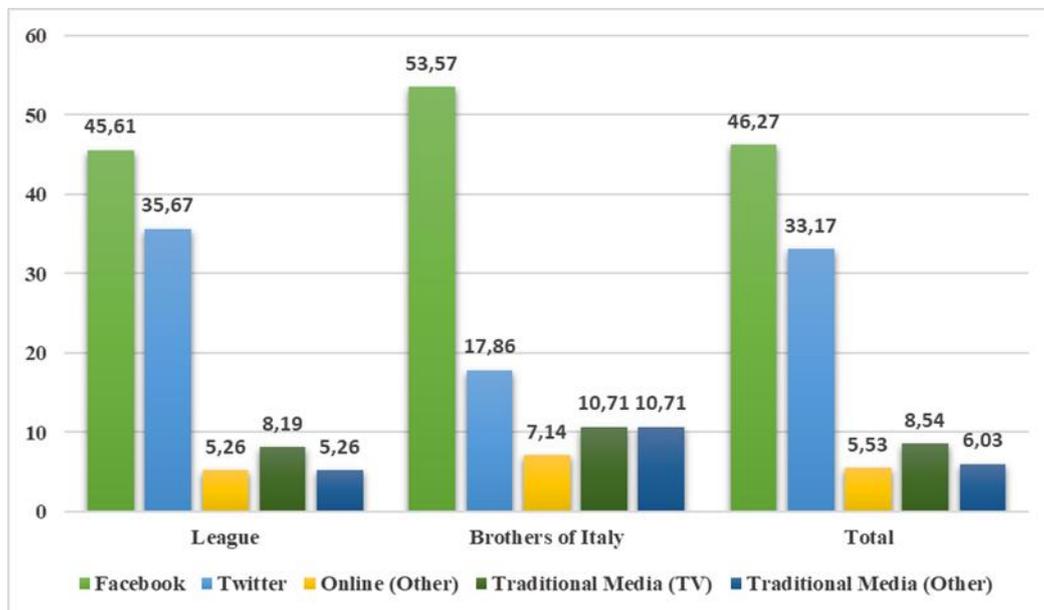
N = 199
Source: authors' elaboration

The remaining items that can be observed in Figure 3 are scattered around a wide plethora of outlets, ranging from traditional media (i.e. radio, TV, and newspapers) up to YouTube and other news websites. This does offer an interesting insight into the effective utilization of false content within political communication. Misinformation is propagated to a much lesser extent on newspapers and news websites, most likely due to the presence of editorial guidelines regarding news verification. Alternatively, it might be argued that social media do incentivise an overproduction of content when compared to more traditional sources. Despite the low percentage of televised misinformation, it can also be seen how TV still retains a significant outreach, making it a powerful tool for spreading false information across the public.

Figure 4. Transmitters of Italian RRPPs (2020).
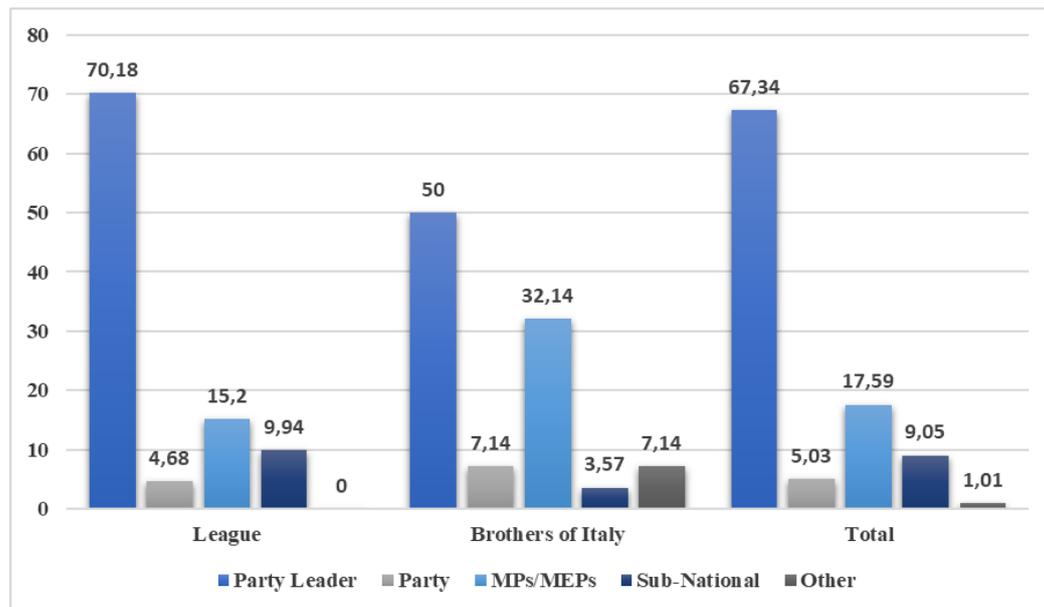
N = 199
Source: authors' elaboration

Finally, the last part of our analysis looks at the statements' transmitters. Given the direct relation that leaders try to maintain with their supporters within contemporary politics, the presence of a charismatic figure that is able to mobilise the masses is of paramount importance for populists (Mudde 2004), especially on the

right of the political spectrum (Van der Brug & Mughan 2007). This assumption finds confirmation in Figure 4, where it can be seen that roughly two-thirds of the observed statements in our dataset were produced by party leaders (67.3%), respectively Matteo Salvini (70.2%) and Giorgia Meloni (50%). Yet, the higher political exposure that party leaders possess nowadays might have also put them under the stricter scrutiny of fact-checkers.

In general, the number of collected statements appears to be proportional to the transmitter's level of visibility.[19] Aside from party leaders, the politicians propagating notable levels of misinformation come from the national and supranational sphere (17.6%), while sub-national officeholders account for a comparatively smaller percentage (9%). A separate argument should be made for the residual position held by official party accounts, perhaps due to the different outreach of these channels.[20] Another possibility can be traced back to the more immediate connection provided by the personal page of the leaders and their base, which allows politicians to offer a different and more 'unsanctioned' type of communication to their followers. Nevertheless, these topics ought to be further researched in order to go beyond mere speculation.

6. Discussion

The rise of the Internet represented a massive development for the realm of politics. However, while the enablement of new forms of democratic participation was initially met with relative optimism, the evolution of events in recent years significantly tempered those views. Nowadays, a wide plethora of political parties and personalities successfully harnessed the power of the new media to bypass traditional channels and propagate whatever information was deemed necessary to achieve their goals. As the world attempted to cope with the unprecedented challenge posed by Covid-19, relying on technology to remain informed and connected ultimately turned

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[19] While the transmitter is responsible for fabricating misinformation in 66% of the cases, in the other 34% the content was either quoted or reposted from a third party.

[20] Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni's official Facebook pages respectively have 5 and 2.3 million followers, compared to the 1.1 million of 'Lega – Salvini Premier' and the 409.000 of 'Fratelli d'Italia'.

this health crisis into an 'infodemic'. In other words, large sections of the public became constantly exposed to and/or actively consumed all kinds of information – and misinformation – concerning the pandemic.

Within this framework, our study sought to draw a tentative picture of this brand-new phenomenon by observing the discursive tactics of two RRPPs in the Italian political scenario. More specifically, we were interested to know how the League and Brothers of Italy managed to structure misinformation in their online communication, the style in which both parties articulated their narratives, the main targets of their messages, and how this ultimately shaped their political strategy. By limiting the scope of our inquiry to 2020, we wished to properly assess the overall impact of the pandemic within the public debate.

In view of this, our results (RQ1) show how the outbreak and subsequent management of Covid-19 granted Italian RRPPs the possibility to frame the health emergency to advance their own interests, bolstering their anti-elite positions by accusing mainstream actors to work against the people's best interests. Both parties did not shy away from occasionally employing conspiracy narratives to oppose state-led containment measures, challenge the effective threat posed by the virus, and make unsubstantiated claims about its origins. This relevant but limited presence suggests that parties are willing to tap into specific sections of their online audience, although they do not seek to alienate potential voters by overemphasising such views. Despite their communication being mostly pandemic-related, evidence shows how RRPPs still managed to foster their most salient topics, ranging from the customary criticism of migration policies to the detrimental state of the economy and up to more nationalist tones.

In terms of targets and desired outcomes (RQ2), RRPPs actively relied on misinformation to systematically criticise a wide array of subjects, from political formations to partisan personalities and from government officials to other state institutions. In other terms, both the League and FdI resorted to any means necessary to sow dissent by presenting the behaviour of said actors in an inherently negative fashion. By undermining the credibility and the legitimacy of those they perceived as

'elites', both parties sought to enhance their visibility and present themselves as a viable alternative. Despite their shared goals, it is also noteworthy to acknowledge the presence of specific differences between the two parties. Specifically, Brothers of Italy showed a substantially lower tendency to resort to fake news and conspiracy theories to pursue its political agenda. Furthermore, our findings were able to confirm existing findings on FdI's attention to conventionally nationalist issues. In comparison, the League employed a more leader-driven variety of misinformative messages, with its focus being centred around the subject of migration. Furthermore, the latter's usage of conspiracy theories appears to be slightly more pronounced, especially regarding China's involvement in the pandemic.

When it comes to misinformation (RQ3), our data indicate that Italian RRPPs widely exploited the main social media (i.e. Facebook and Twitter) to convey willingly deceptive strategies that mostly entail the decontextualisation of genuine information, as well as the misleading presentation of facts to serve their own frames. The two parties extensively characterised their misinformation according to traditionally populist narratives, as proven both by the remarkably high level of anti-elitism in their communication and the substantial (but minoritarian) presence of people-centric messages. This combination of elements – often found within the same statement – is typically accompanied by a disintermediated dynamic, with party leaders establishing a direct line of communication with their audience. At the same time, our data also managed to provide additional support to the notion that FdI is somewhat more moderate than the League when it comes to the implementation of a full-fledged populist discourse.

Despite the evidence presented, the explanatory power of our analysis remains quite limited. Given the novelty of both the misinformative phenomenon and the pandemic outbreak, the focus of our investigation was not set on an explicitly empirical venture. Our objective was merely to provide a first look at the peculiarities, similarities, and discrepancies that might exist between different RRPPs at a critical juncture. Hopefully, this preliminary outline might potentially set the ground for future endeavours, which ought to further expand the topic both in breadth and depth

by including other (radical right-wing populist) parties across the political spectrum from one or more EU countries.

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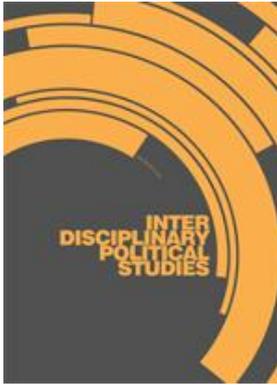
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Electoral and Executive Agenda in Time of Populism: A Solemn Oath or Coalition Politics as Usual?

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ABSTRACT

The translation of electoral pledges into the executive's agenda is all but a linear process. Parties that take office have to compromise on what issues will be prioritized in the governmental agenda, which never exactly matches parties' electoral platforms. Populists may further challenge this mechanism, as they pursue a more direct link with people and claim to be different from non-populist parties. This study, bridging the party mandate model and agenda-setting scholarship, analyses the congruence between electoral manifestos and the prime minister's investiture speech in Italy, both at the aggregate and individual-issue levels. By comparing the behaviour of parties in government (1994–2021), the analysis reveals that populist parties do not reinforce the 'transmission belt' from electoral pledges to the executive agenda.

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1. Introduction

Satisfaction with democracy is a desirable function of a democratic political system and depends, to a certain extent, on the level of convergence between citizens' priorities and policy outcomes (Reher 2016). This connection manifests itself through the so-called 'promissory representation': representatives make promises to their constituencies during the electoral campaign and try to keep them if elected (Mansbridge 2003). Due to its relevance, scholars have spent a significant amount of time investigating the program-to-policy link and have demonstrated that the mechanism between pledges and policies (Froio et al. 2017; Thomson et al. 2017; Naurin & Thomson 2020), and even between party manifestos and policy agendas (Carammia et al. 2018), is all but linear. The path from pledges to outcomes is paved with many pitfalls, and despite the increasing role of executives in the demand and supply of public policies, finding a compromise on the policies to carry out and then actually implementing them seems a rather hard task for any kind of government. Recently, the increasing fragmentation of party systems has made the situation even more complex, after a number of parties have been able to increase their parliamentary representation.

Among these, populist parties represent a serious challenge for political science scholars in many respects, especially when they enter in government. Populist parties claims to be the 'true' representatives of the people, implying that politics must exactly correspond to the general will, or *volonté générale* (Mudde 2004). However, it is still unclear whether populist parties in government take into account the promises made during the electoral campaign more than non-populist parties when forming the executive's agenda. This is primarily due to the fact that governments composed exclusively of populist parties have been absent in Western Europe until very recently. Thus, scholars have had the chance to study their behaviour only in terms of coalition formation (de Lange 2012) and policy effects (Minkenberg 2001), mostly focusing on very specific policies (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2015; Kaltwasser & Taggart 2016). Instead, the research on the agenda-setting process carried-out by populist parties in

government is still rather underdeveloped (with very few exceptions, see Borghetto 2018; Cavalieri & Froio 2021).

We aim to enter into this debate by studying the party mandate model through the agenda-setting perspective, where previous works have instead investigated this link from a positional perspective (see, for instance, McDonald & Budge 2005; Warwick 2011). Furthering previous studies, we analyse the link between party manifestos and executives' agendas in the Italian case over the last thirty years. We consider Italy an extreme case, in light of the level of populist party participation in its government. Indeed, populist parties have acted as main and junior partners in coalition governments, both in coalition with non-populist and other populist parties. Furthermore, Italy represents the perfect political system to look at since it has a long tradition of multiparty coalition governments, which are naturally forced to find a synthesis between different parties' electoral pledges when drawing the executive's agenda. We develop previous research on the Italian case (Borghetto & Carammia 2015) both by expanding the timeframe to the most recent years (from 1994 to 2021) and by focusing specifically on the behaviour of populist parties. Although exploratory, our analysis reveals that in terms of congruence between party pledges and government agendas, cabinets including populist parties do not differ from those formed by non-populist parties.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework and presents our expectations, and Section 3 reviews the main changes in Italian politics during the period of analysis and justifies the case selection. Section 4 describes the research strategy, and Section 5 presents the data and methodology. Section 6 presents the results, and Section 7 concludes with the most relevant implications and future avenues for research.

2. Party mandate and populist parties: strengthening or weakening the 'transmission belt'

Political parties are elected based on their policy programs by voters who confer them a mandate (McDonald et al. 2004) that they are then expected to carry

out by implementing the policies advertised in their manifestos. Among the many actors involved in the policy-making process, the government surely has a preeminent role in driving national agendas (Rasch & Tsebelis 2013). In this regard, the party mandate model (Budge & Hofferbert 1990; McDonald et al. 2004) expects a certain degree of convergence between parties' pledges and policy outcomes (Thomson et al. 2017; Naurin et al. 2019; Naurin & Thomson 2020). The translation of electoral promises into a governmental agenda represents a challenging process as it is the synthesis between various government members' policy preferences. This is especially true for multiparty coalition governments (Strøm et al. 2008), which face the challenge of controlling coalition members who often hold divergent policy preferences and goals and who will also potentially compete against each other in the next electoral competition. Moreover, the institutional setting wherein political parties operate, the emergence of new information, swings of citizen preferences (Stimson et al. 1995), media attention (Vliegenthart et al. 2016) and the party system agenda (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen 2010) force parties to adjust their strategies in a complex dynamic system where they act as 'agenda-setters' for most of the time but sometimes become 'agenda-takers' (Borghetto & Russo 2018).

Considering the crucial link between electoral pledges and the executive agenda, scholars have attempted to match the party mandate and the issue-attention models, exploring the degree of convergence between the government agenda and the promises made by political parties during the elections (Bevan et al. 2011; Bevan & Jennings 2014; Carammia et al. 2018). In this scenario, a novelty has emerged that may question the 'usual' system of transmission of electoral pledges into the governmental agenda: the takeover of populist parties in many Western democracies.

2.1. *Governmental agenda of populist parties: Expectations*

The logic of party mandate might be at odds with the conception of representation embodied by populist parties (Caramani 2017; Werner & Giebler 2019). Populist actors aspire to practice an unmediated style of representation by directly epitomizing the general will (*volonté générale*) and, thus, bypass the system of

checks and balances characterizing liberal-democratic polities (Meny & Surel 2002; Mudde 2004). At the theoretical level, their chameleonic nature (Taggart 2000) makes them more sympathetic to voter demands (Backlund & Jungar 2019; Kortmann et al. 2019) and more responsive to public opinion on the issues they own (Plescia et al. 2019) with respect to non-populist parties. Additionally, trying to give voice to widespread dissatisfaction with the existing representative system (Meléndez & Kaltwasser 2019), they promote a symbolic form of representation based on anti-establishment identities (Pitkin 1967; Werner & Giebler 2019), rather than a substantive representation regarding policy issues. Emphasizing their 'difference' from mainstream parties, populist parties are expected to maintain their focus on the 'core' issues that initially made their fortune, even when they enter a coalition government.

However, different policy venues obey different dynamics. Some are more suitable for sudden and strategic shifts of attention on the basis of voter preferences and other parties' attitudes (e.g. public debates or parliamentary discussions). Others are instead a snapshot of the policy intentions of parties at a very precise moment (e.g. prime minister's investiture speech, which already presents the agreement among coalition partners; see Bevan et al. 2011). In either of the two, populist parties in government face the same constraints as non-populist parties in terms of governing responsibilities, which bind executives to focus on a rather narrow bundle of issues (those pertaining to the 'core' functions of the state; see Jennings et al. 2011). This explains the strong degree of path dependency in issue attention, even when a full turnover occurs (Mortensen et al. 2011). Another serious constraint for cabinet parties is the electoral cycle, which affects the degree of congruence between parties' pledges and the executive's agenda (Borghetto & Belchior 2019). More specifically, the government agenda more closely resembles party pledges when the cabinet is formed just after the elections, whereas cabinets formed at distinct points of the legislature have weaker links to parties' electoral platforms (see also Brouard et al. 2018).

These pieces of evidence suggest that governing responsibilities force parties to adapt to their new role similarly, sometimes expanding their initial agenda (Greene 2015), despite the different ideological roots present in a coalition government. We imagine this to be even more true when populist parties are in office since they may try to show that they are as competent as policymakers of mainstream parties, releasing themselves from the image of inexperienced and incompetent politicians. Incidentally, previous studies on populist parties have found that they behave differently from non-populist parties when in opposition but not when in office (Louwerse & Otjes 2019; Cavalieri & Froio 2021) and that other characteristics (e.g. anti-elitism and ideological heterogeneity) provide better explanations than populism for their behaviour (Otjes & Louwerse 2021). Taking all these aspects into consideration, we expect that the congruence between parties' pledges and the executive's agenda is not affected by the populist/non-populist nature of the parties involved in government. This means that populist parties in government do not increase the convergence between the executive's agenda and the electoral pledges of those parties composing the coalition with respect to non-populist parties.

3. Case selection: Italian governments in the last thirty years

This article investigates whether populist parties have an effect on the transmission belt from party pledges to governmental agenda. We choose to focus on Italy because it represents an extreme case (Seawright & Gerring 2008) both in terms of populist party participation in government and the institutional context.

Since 1993, Italy 'has transformed itself into the site *par excellence* of populism's triumph over the classical parties' (Hermet 2001, p. 396). Scholars on populism have described the country as a 'populist paradise' (Zanatta 2002) or 'the promise land of populism' (Tarchi 2015). The success of populist parties has not been ephemeral or confined to the electoral arena, as it has produced several cabinets with populist parties in leading roles. Among Western European countries experiencing the participation of populist parties in government (Austria, Finland, Greece, Italy,

the Netherlands and Norway),[1] only two (i.e. Italy and Greece) witnessed the formation of full-fledged populist governments. Still, Italy represents an extreme case because governments with populist parties are not confined to one (or two consecutive) legislatures (as in Greece) but instead have directly and consistently participated in governments over an extended time frame (since 1994). Crucially, Italy shows the highest number of governments in Europe with the direct participation of at least one populist party (see Vittori 2021).

The second feature that makes Italy an extreme case when considering populist parties is the overall transformation of its institutional context in recent history, which has considerably affected the formation process of its executive agenda. Although the beginning of the 1990s and the transition from the 'First' to the 'Second Republic' is usually considered one of the most shattering moments of the Italian republican history, many other political shocks have characterized the past thirty years. Some fundamental changes altered the Italian political system, and these include changes to the electoral formula, the alteration of the patterns of government formation, and the transformation of the party system (Russo 2015), which eventually culminated in a moment of deep party system deconstruction and the ultimate transition to a tripolar pattern of competition (Chiaramonte & De Sio 2019).

The Italian tradition prior to 1994 saw a very vague process of coalition formation, which produced a misfit between what political parties promised during the electoral campaign and what they later implemented in government (Borghetto & Carammia 2015). After the new electoral law of 1993, which forced parties to form pre-electoral coalitions (D'Alimonte & Chiaramonte 1995), a bipolar season – imperfect, most of the time – was implemented and remained in place until 2013. This transformation increased the decisiveness of the elections, *de facto* providing clearer options for voters to choose from among a defined set of political alternatives. By introducing a credible sanction of government alternation, the new institutional setting strengthened the congruence between parties' electoral platforms and the

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[1] This count excludes parties giving external support to the cabinet.

executive's agenda, and the overall functioning of the party mandate model in Italy (Borghetto & Carammia 2015).[2]

Following the onset of the Great Recession and the resignation of the Berlusconi IV government, political parties appeared explicitly unable to the manage the crisis, which forced the appointment of Monti's technocratic government. The following 2013 elections caused the thundering collapse of the party system and, for the first time since 1994, the election results did not provide a majority in both chambers. The rapid upsurge of a new challenger party, the Five Star Movement (M5S), transformed the bipolar mechanic into a new tripolar one. The credible threat of government alternation inaugurated with the 1994 election ceased to function and the 2018 election did not provide any clear majority either. The process of coalition formation appeared to resemble the pre-1994 standards: the lack of a clear majority in both chambers in 2013 brought to a consociational grand coalition (*larghe intese*). Similarly, after the 2018 election the tripolar pattern of the party system favoured the formation of the first Conte government – the first fully-fledged populist government in Italy (D'Alimonte 2019) – composed of M5S (the main electoral force, 34%) and the League (the top party within the centre-right coalition, 17%). The rising degree of conflict within the Conte I cabinet led to its early resignation, after the 2019 European Parliament election. Again, the coalition formula radically changed: the role of the prime minister (PM) was preserved though the new coalition was formed by the M5S and the Democratic Party, with minor leftist parties. Following the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, the tension within the governing coalition provoked the end of the Conte II government and the formation of a new government led by the former president of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, and supported by all political forces except the Brothers of Italy and the Italian Left. The huge transformation of the Italian party system and changes in the pattern of the government formation suggest that, once again, the links between party pledges and

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[2] This pattern of higher stability is reflected also by the longer average length of the executive tenure, which increased from the extraordinary evanescence of the Italian cabinets, lasting on average less than one year (322 days) from 1948–1992, to a survival of about one year and nine months (639 days) during the period of the quasi-bipolar dynamics (1994–2011).

government priorities might also have been weakened. In summary, when considering the inclusion of populist parties in government, it is possible to consider Italy as an extreme case. Across the timeframe of our analysis (1994–2021), Italy shifted from a bipolar logic of coalition formation to a multipolar one (since 2013). In this period, populist parties acted both as junior and main coalition partners and have formed governments both with non-populist and with other populist parties. The allows for the study of the impact of populist parties on the degree of congruence between party pledges and the executive's agenda independent from the institutional setting and the coalition formation formula.

Clearly, our case selection influences the generalizability of our result. An extreme case method is explorative and aims to probe the possible effects of an independent variable in 'an open fashion' (Seawright & Gerring 2008, p. 302). In our article, we ascertain the potential impact of populist party participation on the congruence between party pledges and the executive's agenda. In light of both the strong involvement of populist parties and the variety of coalition formation logics, our results provide important insights for those European countries characterized by the routine participation of populist parties in the process of government formation (e.g. Austria, Denmark, Poland, Hungary). Still, for those contexts characterized by a more episodic involvement of populist parties in cabinets the current study provides important input to stimulate further comparative research.

4. Research Strategy

Our study builds on previous works regarding the transmission belt between parties' electoral pledges and government agendas by additionally comparing populist parties in government with non-populist parties. In this section, we discuss the sources used to measure party pledges and policy priorities expressed in the executive's agenda. Then, we clarify our ideational understanding of populism, discussing which political parties can be labelled as populist in the Italian political landscape and listing the governments that we consider populist.

A government's agenda can be studied by looking at different documents (i.e. coalition agreements, bills, investiture speeches), among which the PM's investiture speech is considered of notable interest and importance for the agenda-setting process, as it signals the policy priorities of the incoming government and helps uncover the effect of partisan characteristics and electoral mandates (Mortensen et al. 2011; Borghetto et al. 2017). The investiture speech is standard in almost all liberal democracies. In these speeches, the PM outlines the goals that the government intends to accomplish during its mandate. Because of the very nature of coalition governments, the PM's speech must provide a synthesis of the policy programs of parties composing the coalition (Mortensen et al. 2011; Green-Pedersen et al. 2018). The investiture speech serves the function of signalling the salience of the most important issues for the cabinet and provides a roadmap for the program that the cabinet aims to implement during its mandate (Jennings et al. 2011). Furthermore, the agenda that is represented in the prime minister's investiture speech indicates a set of priorities de-linked from the elections and the institutional calendar (Jennings et al. 2011). In Italy, the investiture speech is addressed to both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate before a new government asks for a confidence vote. In this respect, a government is first appointed by the President of the Republic and then must obtain positive votes of confidence from both houses of parliament.

In this work, priorities stated in the PM's investiture speech are compared with party manifestos. It has been argued that few voters actually read electoral manifestos. However, party manifestos represent the most comprehensive and authoritative documents containing information about parties' ideological profiles and issue priorities at the time of the electoral campaign. Through their manifestos, political parties assign a different degree of attention to their favourite issues, emphasizing selected issues as a tool for political competition.

In our analysis of the congruence between governmental agendas and party pledges, we explicitly adhere to a salience-based understanding of party competition (Budge & Farlie 1983). In terms of the formation of governmental agendas, a cabinet is guided by a problem-solving rationale and addresses the problems that appear the

most salient and urgent (Jones & Baumgartner 2005; Froio et al. 2017). We assume that political parties emphasize their favourite issues in order to preserve them as top priorities of the political agenda (Budge 2015).

As our main focus is on populist party behaviour, we need to clarify which political parties are considered populist in the Italian case. Here, we follow an ideational approach to populism, referring to a set of ideas or beliefs that conceives the society as divided into two homogeneous and mutually antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite' (Mudde 2004). A starting point to identify populist parties in Italy is provided by 'The PopuList' dataset (Rooduijn et al. 2019), which combines the expertise of several scholars with specific backgrounds in both populism and specific countries. In this respect, within the timeframe of our analysis the Italian populist parties in government[3] are the following: Go Italy/People of Freedom (*Forza Italia/Popolo delle Libertà*, FI/PdL),[4] the Northern League/the League, and M5S.

The inclusion of the League and M5S within the populist category is undisputed by the literature. Since its inception, the League has been the collector of northern malaise, pitting the (northern) people against the political elites and fighting to alter the Italian territorial structure (Biorcio 1991). After its process of nationalization, the regionalist framing decreased but the (new) League[5] continued to display a high degree of populism, moving the target from the national political class (often labelled through the heuristic: *Roma Ladrona*, literally 'Roma the Burglar') to the European Union institutions and embracing a nativist agenda (Albertazzi et al. 2018). M5S emerged in the 2013 election by politicizing a harsh antagonism against the whole political class (Bordignon & Ceccarini 2013). M5S's polyvalent ideological

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[3] Italy of Values (IdV) is also a populist party with governmental experience (Prodi II) (Tarchi 2015). However, its weight in terms of policy influence within the *Unione* coalition has been marginal.

[4] Following the creation of the Democratic Party (PD), National Alliance (AN) and FI started a conflation process. In the 2008 election they presented joint electoral lists, and in 2009 they officialised the PdL's birth. Despite the inclusion of the post-fascist AN political elite, the PdL has been also considered Berlusconi's personal party (McDonnell 2013).

[5] Starting with the 2018 elections, the Northern League also filed candidates in southern regions. The party dropped the word 'north' from the electoral list and has been relabeled 'Lega Salvini Premier'.

repertoire makes the party hardly categorizable within the classic left/right political spectrum, constituting an expression of eclectic populism (Pirro 2018).

Conversely, the inclusion of FI/PdL within the populist category requires some clarification. Since its appearance in the political arena, both Silvio Berlusconi and his political creature, Forza Italia, have been labelled by scholars, pundits, and political rivals as populist (Tarchi 2008). Indeed, Berlusconi portrayed himself as the sole and authentic defender of the *volonté générale*, wholly separate from political elites responsible for the country's dysfunctionalities (Tarchi 2015). Despite the fact that no scholar would doubt that Silvio Berlusconi can be classified as a populist leader, some hesitations might be found when weighing whether Forza Italia can be considered a populist party. As a matter of fact, the populism characteristic of FI is almost exclusively due to its leader (Tarchi 2008), while the party itself has always been characterized by a conservative ideological stance and includes among its ranks several politicians originally from other dissolved parties. However, the overall political weight of FI (and of the PdL from 2007 to 2013) as an organization independent from Berlusconi's will has always been negligible, making FI an almost ideal example of the type of personal party that is indissolubly linked to the leader's personality (McDonnell 2013).

In light of this discussion of Italian populist parties, we consider the following as populist governments: Berlusconi I, II, III, IV and Conte I. It could also be argued that the Conte II government should be included, since M5S remains the main party of the coalition. However, when forming the Conte II cabinet together with the PD, the M5S continued the process of progressive moderation and institutionalization within the party (Tronconi 2018; Bordignon & Ceccarini 2019). Furthermore, the PD represents the actor that more readily represents politicized anti-populist motifs, evidenced by both its unequivocal support for EU institutions and its constant emphasis on financial responsibility (Giannetti et al. 2017).

5. Data & Method

In this study, we measure the congruence between the investiture speeches (1994–2021) and the electoral manifestos (1994–2018) of those parties supporting the cabinets (see Appendix A1). Our analysis provides both aggregated and issue-level measurements of congruence, employing the widely used Duncan index. The government priorities expressed by the PM in the investiture speech are coded using the Comparative Agenda Project's (CAP) codebook (Baumgartner et al. 2019). In this respect, we expand upon an already existing dataset (Borghetto et al. 2017) by adding the last four investiture speeches in Italy (Gentiloni, Conte I, Conte II, Draghi). The CAP codebook is structured across 239[6] minor topics grouped into 21 major topics. In coding the investiture speeches, we consider only those quasi-sentences containing explicit policy content, excluding those with a rhetorical scope. The parties' electoral manifestos are measured through the Manifesto Project Database (MARPOR, Volkens et al. 2020). MARPOR covers over the issue preferences of 1000 parties from 1945 until today in over 50 countries on five continents. The dataset offers party issue salience by coding party manifestos and assigning each quasi-sentence to one of 56 categories. In order to match the CAP and MARPOR coding schemes, we apply the aggregation framework proposed by Conti, Pedrazzani, and Russo (2019). This means that we aggregate MARPOR's 56 categories and the CAP's 239 minor topics into 18 policy domains (see Appendix A2).[7] By doing so, we can compare the policy issue salience of investiture speeches with the one presented by governing parties in their electoral manifestos.

The governments analysed are all supported by more than one party. As a consequence, we follow three distinct models of parties' priority aggregation derived from the literature on coalition politics: the formateur, the veto-player, and the pure

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[6] The original CAP codebook consisted of 231 minor topics (Baumgartner et al. 2019). However, the Italian section of the CAP provides an adapted codebook that counts 239 minor topics (Borghetto et al. 2017).

[7] The marginal differences between the coding scheme presented in Table A2 and the one provided by Conti et al. (2019) are due to the fact that the latter employs the standard CAP coding scheme (Baumgartner et al. 2019), while we follow Borghetto et al. (2017), who employ the Italian version of the CAP scheme.

mandate models (see Borghetto & Carammia 2015). The formateur model assumes that the party leading the coalition formation (i.e. the PM's party) holds an advantageous position to stress his/her own priorities within the governmental agenda (Baron & Ferejohn 1989). Therefore, it is measured by employing the priorities expressed in the manifesto of the PM's party. The veto-player model argues that all parties forming a coalition have equal importance in determining the priorities of the coalitional agenda, regardless of their actual size (Tsebelis 2002). It is assessed by calculating the average position of the manifestos of parties supporting the cabinet. Finally, the pure mandate model asserts that the leverage held by each party in shaping the executive's agenda is proportional to its size. This means that while smaller parties contribute to influencing the agenda, their impact is lower than that of larger parties (Warwick 2001). This is measured through the weighted[8] mean of the manifestos of the parties supporting the cabinet.

To measure the congruence between parties' priorities and the executive's agenda, we rely on a widely used measure in these kinds of studies, that is, the Duncan Index of dissimilarity (Duncan & Duncan 1955). We compare the priorities exhibited in the investiture speech (at time t) with the priorities expressed in the electoral manifesto of the first election prior to government formation (i.e. time t–1) of: a) the PM's party (formateur model); b) all parties supporting the government by calculating the mean of the priorities (veto-player model); c) all the parties supporting the government by calculating the weighted mean of the priorities (pure mandate model). This can be mathematically expressed by the following formula:

$$1/2 \sum_{i=1}^{18} |m_{(i-1)} - is_i|$$

where, $i = 1…18$ indicates the issue domains of our coding scheme; $m_{(i-1)}$ represents the percentage of quasi-sentences contained in the party manifesto associated with an issue domain i at t–1 (with respect to the PM's investiture speech); is_i indicates the

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[8] The weights are constructed on the basis of parties' parliamentary seats.

percentage of quasi-sentences contained in the investiture speech associated with the issue domain i. The Duncan Index shows a lower bound of 0 when the investiture speech and the party manifesto are identical, that is, when an investiture speech focuses its attention on exactly the same issues emphasized by supporting parties during the electoral campaign. The maximum value of the index is 100 and indicates that there is no congruence at all between the investiture speech and party manifestos, which would indicate that the investiture speech addresses issues that are totally unrelated to the ones stressed by parties in their manifestos.

To investigate issue-level congruence on the 18 issue domains, we use a different indicator than the aggregate Duncan Index employed for the cabinet-level congruence. For this analysis, we calculate the absolute distance between the mean of the manifestos of all parties supporting the cabinet and the investiture speech on each issue by subtracting the emphasis of the latter from the former.

6. Results

We start by showing the aggregated congruence across governments through Duncan Index scores (Table 1). Although discrepancies among the three models are negligible, the veto-player model reveals a higher average congruence (lower value) compared to both the pure mandate model and the formateur model.[9] In this respect, the distance between the veto-player and the party-mandate scores is more pronounced in the post-2013 phase, potentially signalling a more consociational trend in coalition building. Because of the (historical) characteristics of the Italian party system, which assigns disproportionate power to smaller political allies, we refer to the veto-player model hereafter.

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[9] The presence of several coalition-wide manifestos makes the calculation of the pure-mandate or veto-players model substantially equivalent (i.e. Berlusconi II, Berlusconi III, Prodi II).

Table 1 – Duncan Index scores of congruence

	Model		
Cabinet	**Formateur[a]**	**Veto Player**	**Party Mandate**
Berlusconi I	32.7	35.4	29.9
Dini	–	40.2	34.9
Prodi I	–	40.2	37.3
D'Alema I	38.9	34.6	34.3
D'Alema II	41.6	37.6	37.7
Amato II	–	36.1	34.2
Berlusconi II	45.8	45.8	45.8
Berlusconi III	59.3	59.3	59.3
Prodi II	37.4	37.4	37.4
Berlusconi IV	34.6	32.5	29.6
Monti	–	43	41.8
Letta	48.4	25.2	33.5
Renzi	62.7	45.9	57.7
Gentiloni	41.2	35.1	37.4
Conte I	46.2	35.8	38.6
Conte II	50.4	40.4	38.3
Draghi	–	27.7	29.1
Average	**44.9**	**40.8**	**41.1**

[a] *Missing values in this model refer to technocratic governments (Dini, Monti, Draghi) or to governments with a PM that is not associated with any political party (Prodi I and Amato II).*
Source: authors' own elaboration.

At the aggregate level, the degree of congruence between the mean of the supporting parties' manifestos and the investiture speeches (i.e. the veto-player model) across governments (Figure 1) displays a relatively stable congruence throughout the whole period and an increase in congruence post-2013.

During the years of centre-left/centre-right alternation, the congruence values are relatively high and stable. The peak of incongruence can be seen during the Berlusconi III cabinet. This government followed the collapse of the Berlusconi II government after a disappointing electoral result in the 2005 regional elections, which triggered internal disputes and rapidly escalated into a governmental crisis. However, the new cabinet maintained the same coalition formula and PM, and the investiture speech was almost entirely tailored to simply leading the government towards the 2006 polls.

Figure 1. Veto-player congruence across governments
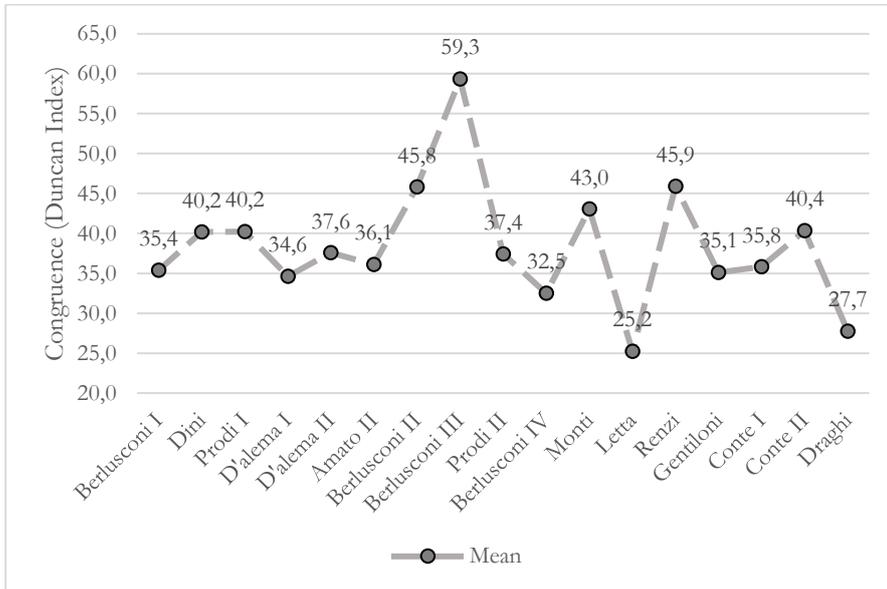
Note: Higher values indicate a lower degree of congruence.

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Figure 2. Congruence across populist/non-populist; first/following; pre/post-2013 governments
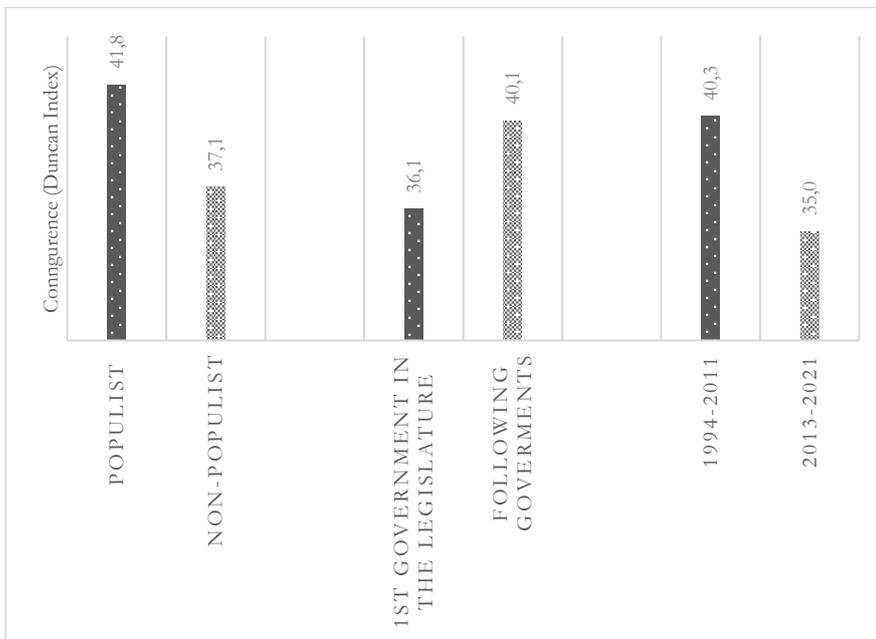
Source: authors' own elaboration.

In the post-2013 phase, the average congruence is higher than in the 'Second Republic' phase, with the exception of the congruence value represented by the Renzi government. Appointed as the secretary of the PD after the 2013 elections, Renzi took office in 2014 after the fall of the Letta government. In this case, the fact that the electoral manifesto of the PD was drafted following the social-democratic profile endorsed by the former secretary, Pierluigi Bersani, the coalition formula based on a grand-coalition architecture (*large-intese*) and Renzi's leader-centric approach to agenda formation all contributed to this low degree of congruence. A surprising finding is the high degree of congruence registered by the Draghi cabinet, which was inaugurated to cope with political parties' dysfunctionalities during the pandemic crisis.[10] This is surprising, not only because of its technocratic nature – usually considered almost unresponsive to electoral preferences (Caramani 2017) – but also because it is the third cabinet of the legislative term. In fact, governments formed at later stages of the legislative term tend to be less congruent than those formed immediately after elections (Conti et al. 2019), as highlighted also by our data (see Figure 2 and Table 2). The Draghi cabinet's peculiarity can be understood by considering the cabinet's composition. Different both from the Dini and Monti technocratic governments, entirely formed by technocratic ministers, the Draghi government is a 'technocratic-led partisan government' (McDonnell & Valbruzzi 2014), which has pulled together eight technocratic and fifteen partisan ministers. The complexity of the government's composition, epitomized by the willingness of almost all parliamentary parties to jump in, pushed Draghi to carefully emphasize all the core issues of each of the political parties supporting his cabinet in his investiture speech, as is evident also from the high degree of heterogeneity in the issues discussed.[11] To

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[10] After the governmental crisis stimulated by Italia Viva (IV) (a PD splinter party born during the XVIII legislature led by Renzi), which forced Conte to resign, the president of the republic urged the formation of a 'high profile government not identifiable with any of the existing political formulas' (quoted in Garzia & Karremans 2021, p. 107).

[11] To verify this stance, we calculated the entropy score of the PM's speeches using the Shannon Index (Shannon 1948). In our sample, the Draghi cabinet shows the highest value of attention dispersion across policy issues (0.92).

dig deeper into the analysis of congruence, Figure 2 splits governments according to their ideological nature, electoral cycle, and party system.

The evidence supports our expectation that populist parties in office do not increase the congruence between electoral promises and the executive's priorities; in fact, their congruence is lower compared to that of non-populist parties. Because the majority of non-populist governments have not been formed immediately after elections but during later stages of the legislative term (9 out of 12), we control for the government's temporal location in the legislative term to reveal any potential mismatch between populist and non-populist governments. Following previous studies that showed higher congruence during the 'Second Republic' (in respect to the 'First') – the consequence of a credible alternation in government that has incentivised parties to implement promises made during the electoral campaign once in government (Borgetto & Carammia 2015) – we look also at congruence from a temporal perspective. The previous trend in congruence observed in the transition from the 'First' to 'Second Republic' suggests that congruence would decrease after the end of the bipolar logic and with the tri-polarization of the political space. However, our data show the opposite, which, as we argue in the conclusion, signals the greater willingness of governments formed after 2013 to accommodate all preferences expressed by political parties during the electoral campaign.

When controlling for the government's timing within the legislative term, the alleged difference between populist and non-populist governments vanishes. Table 2 reveals that if we compare populist governments formed immediately after elections (Berlusconi I, Berlusconi II, Berlusconi IV, Conte I) with non-populist ones (Prodi I, Prodi II, Letta), we register an almost identical degree of congruence. When we look at governments formed at later stages of the legislative term, the mismatch of the congruence value is high; however, it only considers one particular cabinet (Berlusconi III), which lasted just one year (375 days) and bridged the former Berlusconi government and the 2006 elections.

Table 2 – Congruence across populist and non-populist governance by the timing in the legislature

		Duncan	N
Populist	1st Government of the legislature	37.4	4
	Following governments	59.3	1
Non-Populist	1st Government of the legislature	34.3	3
	Following governments	37.8	9

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Table 3 – Congruence across populist and non-populist governance by periods

		Duncan	N
Populist	1994–2011	43.3	4
	2013–2021	35.8	1
Non-Populist	1994–2011	38.4	7
	2013–2021	34.9	5

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Table 3 disentangles the impact of populism by controlling for different phases of the Italian party systems. Focusing on the 'Second Republic' (1994–2011), we register higher congruence for non-populist parties than for populists. This means that the average congruence of the centre-left government combined with two technocratic executives (Dini and Monti) is higher than the congruence displayed by Berlusconi's governments. In the post-2013 phase, the congruence of the fully-fledged populist cabinet, Conte I, is almost identical to the average of the non-populist ones (Letta, Renzi, Gentiloni, Conte II, and Draghi).

All things considered, the exploration of the aggregate congruence between party pledges and the executive's agenda reveals that in terms of party mandate, populist parties do not strengthen the transmission belt, in support of our expectations. Yet, it could be argued that aggregate congruence might hide a more substantive congruence occurring at the issue level. In this respect, populist governments could be more congruent for policies that are clearly associated with populist parties. To explore the 18 issue domains in our dataset, we leave the Duncan Index and look at the absolute distance between the mean of the manifestos of all

parties supporting the cabinet and the investiture speech for each issue. The difference is displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Average issue-level congruence across populist and non-populist governments.

Congruence (absolute distance between PM speeches and manifestos)

▨ Non-Populist   ▪ Populist
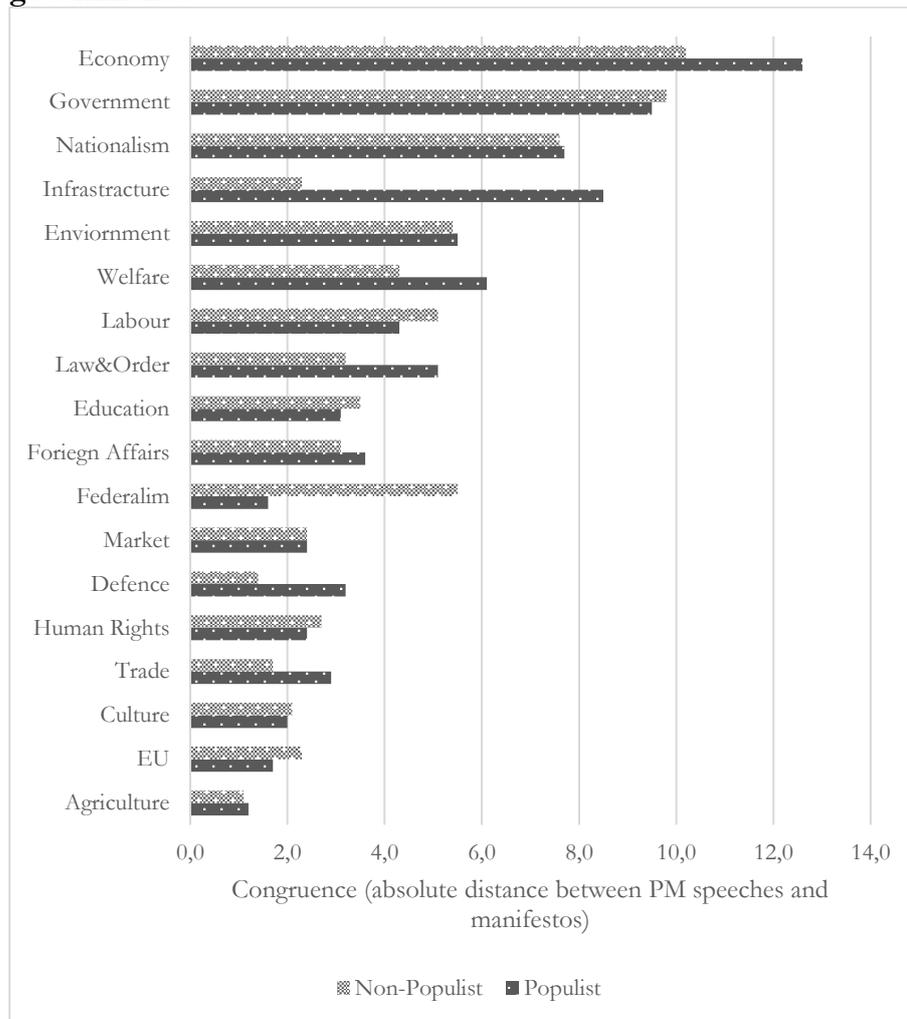
Source: author's own elaboration.

Even in this case, we do not find considerable differences in issue congruence between populist and non-populist governments. This suggests that relatively high incongruence on some specific issues (i.e. the economy, nationalism,

the environment)[12] exists, regardless of the executive's populist or non-populist nature. The only issue signalling a high mismatch between populist and non-populist government congruence is 'Infrastructure', which is mainly explained by FI's 2001 overemphasis on public works (*grandi opere pubbliche*), especially in the field of connective infrastructural projects.[13]

To better grasp the issue-level congruence for issues 'owned' by populist parties, we use longitudinal data on 'Federalism', 'Nationalism', and 'Environment', usually associated with the main populist parties in the Italian party system. More in depth, the Northern League (LN) – prior to its nationalization – together with FI exhibited a clear ownership of territorial issues and federalism (Basile 2015). Later, when turning into a radical-right populist party the League developed a nativist agenda and a consequential ownership of nationalist issues (Albertazzi et al. 2018). Finally, since its rise M5S has been characterized by specific attention to environmental protection and green energy. Starting from 'Federalism' (Figure 4), we notice that parties owning a federalist issue (i.e. LN) are able to minimize the distance between their electoral pledges and their government agenda. An almost perfect congruence value for federalist issues is exhibited by the Berlusconi I, Berlusconi III, Berlusconi IV, and Conte I governments. Furthermore, the average absolute distance between party and government salience on federalism issues is higher for non-populist governments (5.5) rather than populist ones (1.6).

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[12] Another issue prone to incongruence is represented by the 'Government' issue. However, here the incongruence is explained by an over-emphasis on this issue in party manifestos. Following our coding scheme, the government policy issue refers to the following MARPOR items: per303 ('Governmental and Administrative Efficiency'), per304 ('Political Corruption'), per305 ('Political Authority'). These items have been identified by MARPOR specialists as prone to miscoding and overemphasis by coders (see Klingemann et al. 2006; Mikhaylov et al. 2008). In our dataset, the incongruence is shared across almost all of the executives.

[13] Even though the issue alone occupied 16% of the centre-right coalition manifesto, it covers only 4.7% and 4.1% of the Berlusconi II and Berlusconi III investiture speeches.

Figure 4. Party and investiture speech emphasis on 'Federalism'
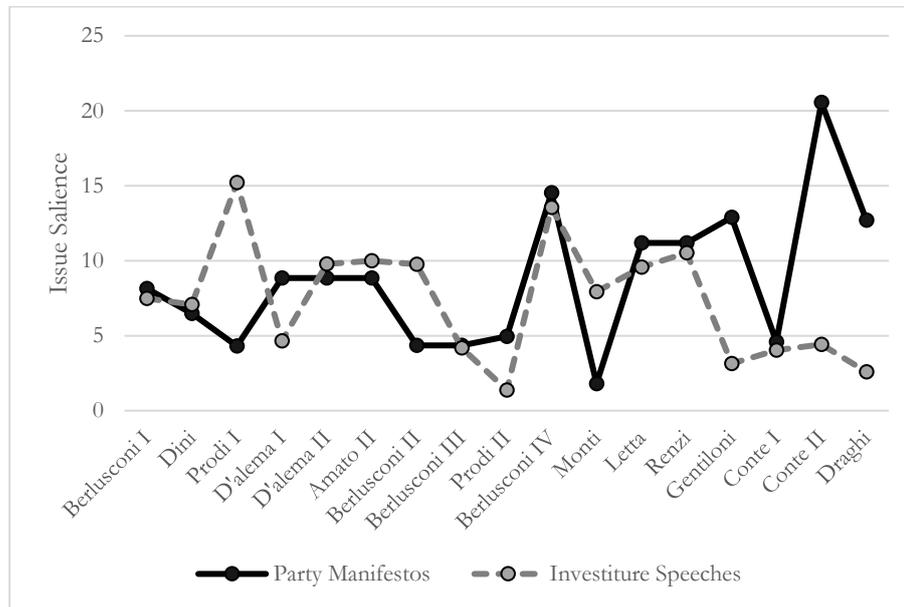
Source: author's own elaboration.

When focusing on 'Environment' (Figure 5), our attention is focused mainly on the Conte I cabinet, a fully-fledged populist cabinet, where the pro-environmental protection party M5S represents the majority shareholder of the government. Surprisingly, the distance between the emphasis of governing parties (M5S and the League) and investiture speeches on the topic is the highest of our sample (19.7%). The environmental issue has been traditionally under-emphasized by Italian governments in their agendas and, although it gained momentum when M5S competed in the polls, the party failed to politicize the issue within the cabinet, in contrast to the ability of the League to successfully strengthen the congruence of 'Federalism'.

Figure 5. Party and investiture speech emphasis on 'Environment'
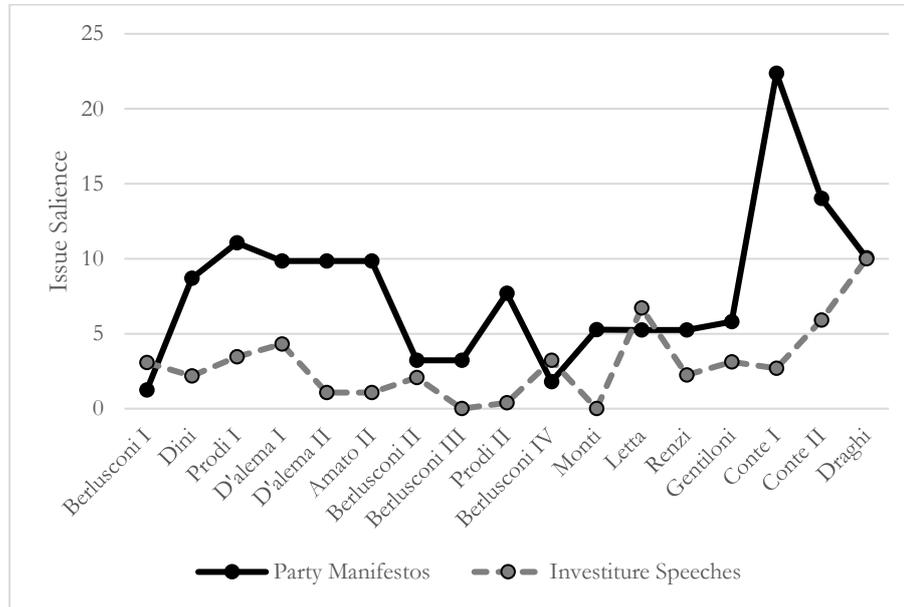
Source: author's own elaboration.

A different story stands out when looking at 'Nationalism' (Figure 6). The issue has become crucial for the League since Salvini's leadership, and the ethno-regionalist and populist stances adopted by the League also consistently emphasize anti-immigration sentiments and oppose the idea of a multicultural society (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2010). Furthermore, the opposition to migration flows has been a topic fiercely emphasized by all centre-right parties (Massetti 2015), which have all nevertheless failed to translate this focus into prioritization within the executive's agenda. However, an almost perfect congruence for this issue is realized by the Conte I government. This apparent tension can be explained by the overall high and ubiquitous political attention on migration ever since the migration crisis in 2015, which sprung the topic into the circle of the core issues within the Italian party system. This rationale is supported by the almost identical degree of congruence reached by the Gentiloni cabinet. In a nutshell, for 'Nationalism' as well, populist governments do not ultimately show any divergent trends relating to congruence than when compared to non-populist parties.

Figure 6. Party and investiture speech emphasis on 'Nationalism'
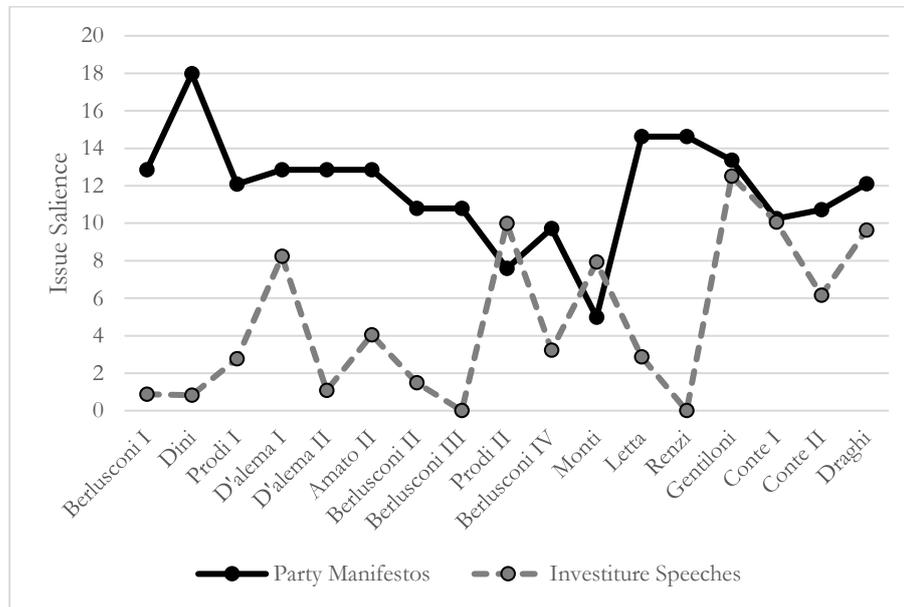
Source: author's own elaboration.

7. Conclusion

Political parties that take office after elections have to translate their electoral pledges and policy stances into the executive's agenda, bargaining with each other before drawing up the governmental agenda. In this study, we have investigated how the 'transmission belt' (Carammia et al. 2018) works in the Italian context, looking at the congruence between the PM's investiture speech and the party manifestos of the parties that composed each respective government during the last three decades. Building upon previous research on this topic (Borghetto & Carammia 2015; Carammia et al. 2018), we have improved our knowledge of the party mandate model by focusing on the potential impact of populist parties in government. More precisely, we investigated whether the presence of populist parties in government in Italy has increased the congruence between electoral manifestos and the government's agenda, in the name of an unmediated relationship with the electorate, or, in contrast, whether their presence has a negligible effect on congruence as they need to share and manage the same burden of governing responsibilities that non-

populist parties do. In this regard, we conducted a twofold analysis that looked at the congruence at both the aggregate level and the single-issue level.

At the aggregate level, we found that populist parties in government do not strengthen the party mandate, meaning that the overall congruence between party pledges and the governmental agenda does not increase when populist parties take office, which is in line with our expectations. This is probably due to the fact that even those parties that present themselves as 'different' from mainstream ones and that pursue an unmediated relationship with voters 'succumb' to coalition dynamics and governing responsibilities, just like non-populist parties. The negligible difference in terms of congruence when populist parties are in office or not signals that they need to cover a wide spectrum of issues in their governmental agenda, compared to the policy stances emphasized in their electoral manifestos. This is in line with previous research, which has uncovered a 'governing effect' on political parties that forces them to expand their issue agenda once they take office (Greene 2015) and a learning process of populist parties when they move from opposition into government (Cavalieri & Froio 2021). At the issue-level, the analysis dug deeper into specific policies to check if there is greater congruence exhibited by issues that populist parties usually own. However, we did not find a considerable difference between populist and non-populist parties in government at the individual issue level, which contrasts with other studies on the topic (Plescia et al. 2019).

Our results also shed light on context-specific factors, such as the transition from the 'Second' to the 'Third Republic' in Italy. The 2013 elections represented a true shock for the Italian party system and politics at large, with the collapse of the (almost) bipolar system in favour of a tripolar one. However, the higher number of actors and, in some way, the higher complexity of the system, has not eroded the already poor ability of political parties in government to translate their electoral pledges into the governmental agenda. Conversely, congruence increased overall after 2013. Although this may appear counterintuitive, we suspect that the peculiar nature of M5S, the sole party not previously present in the party system, has affected the behaviour of all political parties, which since the transition have tried to show a higher

degree of congruence towards their previous commitments. In this respect, we suggest that such a higher congruence might be interpreted as a political parties' reactions to the horizontal – and allegedly participatory – M5S techno-populism (Bickerton & Accetti 2018).

All in all, the literature on the varieties of populism underline how populist actors might differ not only on the basis of their host ideology but also in the way they frame the direct link between the people and the political process (Gidron & Bonikowski 2013; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013). In this respect, the plebiscitarian tele-populism embodied by Berlusconi involved a passive relationship between the people and their leader, mediated by the television medium, and anchored the concept of an audience democracy (Manin 1997; Taguieff 2002). The transparency between electoral promises and governmental actions was assured by the mere presence of the leader standing on the television screen. Conversely, the techno-populism of M5S involves an agonist struggle against the rituals of the political class. From this perspective, all political solutions can be found by following 'common sense', and new technologies allow the people to actively control the political elites (Bickerton & Accetti 2018). In the name of transparency, M5S promised to unveil all of the secret bargaining that occurred behind closed doors. This willingness to broadcast coalitional talks after the 2013 elections adheres precisely to their worship of political transparency. Still, all of the post-2013 governments have been formed in parliament, among parties that fiercely competed with each other during the electoral campaign. In this respect, the higher congruence after 2013 might be due to more binding post-electoral coalitional bargaining. A conclusive assessment of the potential ability of populist parties to increase the overall congruence of the party system should be conducted through a comparative design, selecting cases on the basis of the presence of relevant populist actors in government and focusing on the different pathways taken during coalition formation.

Although limited to the Italian case, the results of our analysis improve previous knowledge both on populist party behaviour in government and on Italian politics. As previously discussed, analysing an extreme case allows us to refine a

hypothesis deductively derived from the literature. Considering the variety of populist participation in government characterizing the Italian case, we conclude that our findings are likely to apply to other contexts where populist actors are well-integrated within the party system, which ultimately transforms their role in government from outsider to participant in 'business as usual'. Future studies on the topic should expand on our work by using more fine-grained tools and by also considering the policy positions of parties on the single-issue level to shed light on more specific dynamics of coalition politics. Crucially, subsequent research should verify whether our findings also apply in cases characterized by a more ephemeral rise of populist actors.

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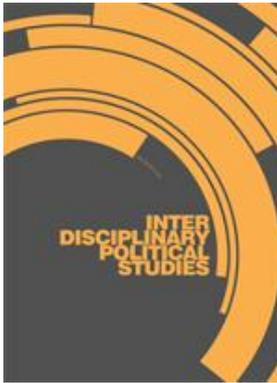
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Female Fighters and Deadliness of Terrorist Campaigns in Civil War

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ABSTRACT

We argue that rebel groups with a higher share of female fighters carry out more lethal terrorist operations using more female perpetrators. Rebels have incentives to exploit gender-specific tactical and propaganda advantages of their female operatives in terrorist operations to cause more damage to the opponents and to attract support. Gender stereotypes make female fighters more effective in terrorist operations, and common media narratives on female perpetrators discredit the government and allow rebels to shame men and encourage other female sympathizers to take up arms. We test this mechanism using casual mediation analysis against new data on the prevalence of female fighters in terrorist operations on a sample of 186 rebel groups fighting in civil wars. We find robust empirical evidence that rebels with a higher prevalence of female fighters employ a higher share of females in terrorist attacks leading to more lethal terrorist violence.

KEYWORDS: Terrorism lethality; Civil war; Female fighters; Gender; Quantitative methods

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1. Introduction

This study positions itself at the intersection of the literature on the determinants of terrorism in civil war and the literature on gender and terrorism and contributes to fill their gaps. Existing research on terrorism and conflict has found that rebel groups' characteristics, conflict dynamics and, structural factors incentivize the use of terrorist violence against civilians – where 'terrorism' is defined as the use of indirect attacks by non-state actors against a government targeting non-combatants (Sánchez-Cuenca & de la Calle 2009; Asal et al. 2012; Findley & Young 2012). Existing work has focused, for example, on the role of rebel groups' ideology, military strength, organizational size, resource availability, territorial control, external support, competition between and within rebel factions, battlefield losses, duration of conflicts, state repression, regime type and media freedom (see for example Crenshaw 1985; Kalyvas 2003; Bloom 2004, 2005; Kydd & Walter 2006; Asal & Rethemeyer 2008; Wood 2010; Stanton 2013; Polo & Gleditsch 2016; Belgioioso 2018; Polo & Gonzalez 2020). These studies make an important contribution to our understanding of the use of terrorism by non-state actors involved in violent conflicts, but they also leave important questions unanswered. For example, despite the fact that women fighters – women that engage directly in organized violence (UN Women 2012, pp. 22-23) – have been involved in 30-40% of all rebel groups worldwide (Wood & Thomas 2017), the extent of their inclusion in combatant roles has so far not been studied in relation to their use in terrorist violence.

This is particularly problematic because the literature on gender and terrorism have highlighted various strategic benefits of using female perpetrators in terrorist attacks. The growing body of research on gender and dynamics of violence, most notably in terrorism studies, conflict studies and feminist security studies (see for example Cunningham 2003; Eager 2008; MacKenzie 2009; Cohen 2013; Loken 2017; Warner & Matfess 2017; Gilmartin 2018; Trisko Darden et al. 2018; Loken & Zelenz 2018; Wood 2019; Asal & Jadoon 2020; Soules 2020) analyses female involvement in individual terrorist attacks, or focuses on rebel groups that perpetrate terrorism without an explicit comparison to rebel groups who do not resort to terrorism

(Cunningham 2003; Eager 2008; Bloom 2011; Davis 2017; Thomas 2021). These studies provide very valuable insights into the relationship between gender and the strategic use of terrorism; however, they do not provide direct indication on whether rebels in civil wars have gender-specific incentives to use as many female operatives as they can in terrorist attacks.

We add to the literature on the determinants of terrorist violence in civil wars and the literature on gender and terrorism by investigating whether rebels with a higher percentage of female fighters perpetrate more lethal terrorist violence using more female operatives in terrorist operations. We claim that rebels rationally exploit societal gender stereotypes and take advantage of their female operatives using as many of them as possible in tasks that maximize their strategic utility and effectiveness: such as terrorist operations. By doing so rebel groups aim to exploit gender-specific tactical and propaganda advantages of their female operatives. Therefore, we expect that rebels with higher prevalence of female fighters maximise the lethality of terrorism by employing a higher share of females in terrorist operations. Female fighters provide rebel organizations with decisive tactical advantages over their male counterparts, making them more effective and lethal, particularly in societies where women's role in public life is limited (Cunningham 2003; Speckhard 2008, 2009; O'Rourke 2009; Dalton & Asal 2011; Bloom 2011; Davis 2013; Thomas 2021). In addition, gendered narratives regularly adopted by the media when reporting on female perpetrators are used by rebels to discredit their opponent governments and encourage additional support for terrorist groups. In addition, rebel groups can exploit the news of successful female perpetrators to shame males and encourage other female sympathizers into taking up arms.

Our second contribution is that we present new data on the prevalence of female fighters in terrorist operations in a global sample of 185 rebel organizations active in civil wars between 1979 and 2009. We carry out causal mediation analysis to test whether a higher share of female fighters increases the lethality of terrorist operations via rebels' use of female operatives. The empirical results demonstrate that rebel groups take societal gender biases into account and that they exploit gender

stereotypes using more female operatives in terrorist operations to increase their le-thality and gain new support.

2. Incentives to use female fighters in terrorist operations

Women involved in rebel organizations routinely cover a variety of active roles such as fundraisers, first-aid providers, community organizers, and campaigners, in addition to being directly involved in perpetrating various types of political vio-lence. Empirical evidence suggests that the 30-40% of rebel groups worldwide include women that engage directly in organized violence (UN Women 2012, pp. 22-23). Fe-male fighters undertake various violent activities such as direct combat against mili-tary apparatuses, guerrilla warfare, terrorist attacks against civilians, have auxiliary fighting roles, operate artillery or anti-aircraft weapons, detonate mines or other ex-plosives, and conduct assassinations and suicide bombings (Wood & Thomas 2019, p. 2). We claim that rebel groups rationally exploit societal gender stereotypes and take advantage of their female operatives using as many of them as possible to per-petrate terrorist attacks in order to maximize their strategic utility and effectiveness. This hypothesis implies that we rule out potential alternative explanations underlying the relationship between female fighters and the deadliness of terrorist attacks. For example, rebels that are militarily weaker because of more female fighters in their ranks might carry out more lethal terrorist attacks against civilians to exert indirect pressure on the government, being unable to target state coercive apparatuses di-rectly. Our inferential goal is to test the extent and validity of our mechanism vs. plausible alternative explanations.

2.1. Gender-specific tactical advantages

Qualitative and quantitative literature on conflict and terrorism shows that gender stereotypes provide women fighters with the capacity of being more effective and deadly in terrorist operations than their male counterparts (Cunningham 2003; Bloom 2005; Thomas 2021). For rebels, female fighters present peculiar gender-

specific tactical advantages over male fighters both in the coordination and perpetration of terrorist activities.

For example, the mobility of female fighters tends to be less restricted than the mobility of male operatives, providing them with an important tactical advantage when carrying out terrorist attacks. Gender stereotypes evolving around women's assumed innocence often make female fighters less likely to be denied access to targets of terrorist operations. Several qualitative studies have provided evidence that females are effective suicide bombers because of their capability to avoid suspicion while approaching targets (O'Rourke 2009; Bloom 2011; Davis 2017). One notorious example is the attack against an Israeli checkpoint by a female operative of Hamas in Jerusalem. Reem al-Riyashi, a 22-year-old Palestinian walked freely up to her target: a checkpoint in Jerusalem, and exploded herself, killing four Israelis and injuring 10 other people (The Guardian 2021).

Females also tend to be less frequently selected for thorough security checks than men (Cunningham 2003; Nacos 2011). This is often linked to cultural norms that prohibit physical checks of women by male security officers – and the lack of female staff amongst the security personnel (Cunningham 2003; Bloom 2005). In some conflict-afflicted zones, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, this has led to male rebels dressing up as women to avoid suspicion (Dearing 2010). Being a woman is also often advantageous for avoiding arrests and being convicted in court. Alison (2009), for example, suggests that, in Northern Ireland, one of the reasons the number of female detainees associated with the Irish Republican Army was relatively low is that women are less likely to be arrested, trialled and convicted than men. Alexander and Turkington (2018) have also shown that female terrorist suspects often experience more lenient treatment from government institutions.

Rebel organizations have often exploited these gender-specific tactical advantages of women fighters and employed female operatives as bomb-planters, plane-hijackers and hostage-takers, amongst others (Eager 2008). Rebels also exploit gender stereotypes making female fighters particularly effective as facilitators and enablers of terrorist violence. One such example includes the Palestinian woman Mona Najar,

who contacted Israeli teenager Ophir Rakhum online, assuming a fake identity, pretending to be in love, and convincing him to meet her in a secluded place in Ramallah in early 2001. Once Rakhum arrived at the meeting place, expecting to be welcomed by the woman he had met online, he was assassinated by Palestinian militants (Beaumont 2001). Even though the woman, in this case, was not actively involved in perpetrating the violence, her direct participation was essential in organizing the terrorist operation, which relied on dominant gender stereotypes.

In summary, female operatives have often proved more effective than male operatives in a wide range of roles in the facilitation and perpetration of terrorist operations on behalf of rebel groups across the ideological and geographical spectrum. Rebel groups actively use widespread gender stereotypes and the deriving tactical advantages. We claim that major effectiveness in terrorist operations constitutes an incentive for rebel groups with higher prevalence of female fighters to use a higher share of female operatives to perpetrate more lethal terrorist operations. However, rebel groups have yet another incentive to exploit the effectiveness of their female operatives in terrorist operations. This second incentive is related to a gender-specific propaganda effect.

2.2. Gender-specific propaganda value

The potential publicity generated by highly lethal spectacular terrorist attacks is often as important as the physical damage they inflict (Jenkins 1975). In many cases, female perpetrators receive a disproportionate amount of attention by media and general public compared to male perpetrators (Ness 2008; Speckhard 2008; Zedalis 2008). This disproportionate amount of attention is due to dominant gender stereotypes and the perceived contrast between women's gender and the immorality involved in terrorist violence (Warner & Matfess 2017). Women's participation in terrorism violence challenges many people's beliefs about what 'being a woman' means and, what a woman can do. This shocking effect is exacerbated the more effective and deadly the terrorist violence. Terrorism is considered to be an extraordinarily

extreme and ruthless form of violence because it targets civilians. When terrorism causes many civilian deaths, its alarming effect is bound to be more extreme.

Media reporting on female perpetrators of terrorist violence commonly builds gendered narratives around the motivations and identities of female suicide bombers, using mainstream gendered imaginary portraying women through the lenses of inner feelings, individual pathologies, relational matters, nurturance, and emotional support, to an extent that it is unlikely for the public to gain an accurate view of facts (Patkin 2004; Nacos 2007; Revital 2007). The leadership of rebel groups is likely to exploit these narratives as they let the decision of perpetrators using lethal political violence appear more relatable. Loken (2020), for example, has shown that rebels exploit gender stereotypes connected to motherhood as a mean to legitimize their use of political violence.

The gender-specific propaganda value of female fighters involved in terrorist operations is twofold. First, terrorist groups aspire to discredit the actions of the government, motivating new support. Second, when the news of lethal female suicide bombers emerges, terrorist groups aim to shame men and encourage female sympathizers to actively join the fight.

2.3. Discredit governments' actions

Krulistova (2016, p. 31) notices that media narratives of female perpetrators of terrorist attacks across nationality, age, location, and ideology commonly deny perpetrators' political agency and rationality behind their involvement in carrying out lethal violence. International and local media depictions of female attackers typically represent perpetrators through physical images and motivated by feelings of desperation and a desire for revenge (generated by government abuses against themselves, their families, and kin) rather than more explicitly political aims (Patkin 2004; Nacos 2007). Terrorist groups expect these gendered narratives to make perpetrators' motives more relatable, discrediting the actions of target governments, and ultimately generating additional support among potential supporters. Aggrieved citizens are

likely to sympathise with the self-sacrifice of women as a reaction to abuses and to perceive that the state is unable to manage the conflict.

For example, Chechen rebel groups fighting for the independence of Chechnya from Russia extensively employed their female operatives in terrorist attacks (Bloom 2005; Ness 2008; Eggert 2015). Crucially, the average number of people killed by female fighters in terrorist operations during the civil war was substantially higher than that of their male counterparts: female fighters killed an average of 21 people per attack compared to 13 for male operatives (Pape et al. 2010). Local and international media characterized Chechen female fighters involved in terrorist attacks as helpless, weak, and innocent. One of these accounts, for example, characterizes a woman who took hostages at the Moscow Theatre in 2002 ignoring her participation in violence and focusing instead on her femininity. The article described her as very normal, courteous, and as someone who would ask people about their children and "always say, 'everything will be fine. It will finish peacefully'" (Sjoberg 2010). An analysis of the public responses to female members of Chechen rebels involved in suicide bombings as opposed to their male counterparts demonstrates that the extensive use of female operatives in suicide bombings undermined public faith in the Russian government (Stack 2011, p. 91). "The pity the public feels for Chechen women can be used to discredit Russian operations in Chechnya. [These women] undermine public faith in the Russian government, because women's violence is seen as a symptom of a war gone out of control and a weak government" (Stack, 2011, p. 91).

2.4. Shaming men and encouraging women sympathisers into joining

In addition to discrediting government actions, rebel groups can exploit media gendered narrative on female fighters involved in successful terrorist operations to shame men and encourage female sympathisers to join the group. When the news that female operatives perpetrated successful terrorist attacks emerge, rebels can leverage widespread gender expectations according to which male members of their constituency have the duty to protect the women who are considered to be the 'weaker sex' (Goldstein 2001; Carpenter 2003, 2005; Cunningham 2003; Bloom 2011; Sjoberg

et al. 2011; Trisko Darden et al. 2018). Men are signalled out, not only because they did not step up and play the role prescribed to them by dominant gender norms, but also because women successfully carried out duties prescribed to them. Successful terrorist attacks by female operatives can also be used to inspire female sympathisers to join the rebel group. In fact, highly lethal terrorist attacks perpetrated by women represent efficacious exempla that even the 'weaker sex' can make a difference in direct armed struggles. Female terrorists transgressing stereotypical gender expectations are likely to become role-models for other women in the rebel groups' pool of potential supporters facilitating their active participation.

For example, in Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) "women combatants were commonplace" (Winter & Margolin 2017), mostly as suicide bombers, and are reported to have been heavily involved in very deadly terrorist operations (Davis 2013). AQI's terrorist attacks involving female fighters were systematically more lethal than terrorist attacks involving male operatives (Eggert 2015), and the majority of female perpetrators were sent to attack soft targets with the goal of creating a large number of casualties (Davis 2013, p. 287). AQI's leadership publicly and routinely celebrated the deadliness of female fighters in terrorist operations. For example, in 2005, AQI's spokesman Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi officially commemorated the suicide attacks of a female operative against the U.S. military base near Tal Afar. The attack killed at least five, injured more than 30 civilians (Spinner 2005) and was soon revendicated by the group. The bomber was declared 'a noble sister' who was acting 'heroically in the name of her religion' (Winter 2005). In the writings of Al-Zarqawi, AQI's leader and major ideologue, the involvement of female operatives in very deadly terrorist operations is justified both tactically, as a way to strike the adversary, and strategically, as a way to shame men and encourage women to take up arms (Eggert 2015; Winter & Margolin 2017).

Based on the above discussions, we hypothesise that: rebel groups with a higher share of female fighters are likely to perpetrate more lethal terrorist campaigns using more female attackers than rebel groups with lower prevalence of female combatants.

3. The question of female fighters' recruitment

Work on how and why female operatives are recruited into rebel groups have investigated the phenomena of conscription and voluntary participation in general and in relation to fighter roles (Eager 2008; Henshaw 2015, 2018). As far as organisational motivations for the recruitment of female fighters are concerned, several explanations have been advanced in existing literature. Most studies discussing the question of why rebels recruit female fighters focus on factors such as the security environment (for example, Dearing 2010) or the organisational attributes including a group's structure, age or size and military strength (see for example Dalton & Asal 2011). The ideology of rebel organizations has also been described as a strong predictor of the recruitment of female fighters (Gonzalez-Perez 2008; Ness 2008; Wood 2019).

Whether or not women have joined voluntarily and the reasons for rebels to recruit female fighters should not affect our argument on the strategic rationales for rebel groups to utilize more female fighter in very lethal terrorist violence when they hold a higher share of this resource. However, we carry out a mediation analysis to test for reverse causality: we test if a higher share of female operatives in terrorist operations leads groups to recruit more women in their fighting ranks, leading to more lethal terrorist campaigns. We do not find evidence that such a mediation effect is in place (see Appendix, Figure 3). In the section on confounder below, we also take into account the main determinants of female fighters' recruitment identified by the literature and empirically test whether the link between prevalence of female fighters on female involvement in lethal terrorist operations is confuted by organizational motivations and the circumstances under which women have joined the groups as fighters in the first place. Finally, we run sensitivity analysis to estimate the extent that unobserved factors might bias our results.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design and data

To test our hypothesis, we collect new data on prevalence of female operatives in terrorist operations in a global sample of cross-sectional data on 185 rebel organizations in civil wars active between 1979 and 2009, building on the Women in Armed Rebellion Dataset (WARD) (Wood & Thomas 2019). To collect data on prevalence of female fighters in terrorist operations, we follow a similar approach to Wood and Thomas (2019). More detail on the coding rules can be found in the Mediator Variable section below. Where reports explicitly state that women did not take part in terrorism as perpetrators or facilitators, or where it was not possible to locate any evidence of the existence of female perpetrators (despite locating substantial information regarding other group characteristics), the group was coded as not including female perpetrators.

WARD considers female members as fighters when they undertake combat against military apparatuses and civilians, have auxiliary fighting roles, operate artillery or anti-aircraft weapons, detonate mines or other explosives, conduct assassinations and suicide bombings (Wood & Thomas 2019, p. 2). WARD codes the presence of female fighters as being absent (in their best estimation measure) for those rebel groups that mainly employ female operatives in suicide bombings. This coding choice should work against our expectation in the quantitative test. For the purpose of this paper, we focus on the share of terrorist attacks in which at least one female operative was involved. We account for both female operatives who operated arms in terrorist operations and those who did not use arms, but facilitated their use by others functioning as facilitators of terrorist attacks.

Moreover, our dataset includes information reflecting the deadliness of terrorist attacks and the prevalence of female fighters in rebel groups. Rebel group is the ideal unit of analysis because it allows to test our argument on tactical and strategic choices, which need to empirically account for agency. To obtain data on the deadliness of terrorist attacks perpetrated by rebel organizations in civil wars, we merged the Terrorist Organizations v.2014 2.0 crosswalk (Asal et al. 2014), the Global

Terrorist Database by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START 2015), the Uppsala Conflict Data Program Dyadic Dataset v1-2015 (Harbom et al. 2008); the Non-State Actor Data 3.4 (NSA) (Cunningham et al. 2012) and the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset 0.4 (see Sundberg & Melander 2013; Croicu & Sundberg 2015). The TORG (v.2014 2.0) data comprises rebel organizations using terrorist attacks and identifiers found in the most recent versions of the GTD, UCPD Dyadic Dataset etc. (Asal et al. 2014).

4.2. Dependent variables

Our operationalization of terrorism relies on the GTD's three basic coding rules, and three additional criteria (START 2015): 1) attacks must be intentional; 2) attacks entail the use of violence or the threat of violence; 3) perpetrators are non-state actors; 4) attacks must be aimed at political, economic, or social goals (the exclusive pursuit of economic profit does not satisfy this criterion); 5) attacks must have the intention to coerce, intimidate or transmit some message to a larger audience then the immediate victims; 6) attacks must violate international humanitarian law's prohibition of targeting civilians or non-combatants.

The principal dependent variable is a continuous variable accounting for the deadliness of terrorist attacks. This variable measures the total number of civilian terrorism casualties by individual rebel groups during its active years in civil war. For robustness checks we also use a measure indicating whether terrorist attacks were perpetrated against high-casualty civilian targets (for a similar approach, see Stanton, 2013). This variable allows to capture the intentionality of the deadliness of terrorist attacks. High-casualty targets is equal to one when a given rebel group bombed or targeted populated civilian targets and zero otherwise. We consider populated civilian targets the following facilities: medical and pharmaceutical facilities, hotels and resorts, shops and markets, entertainment sites including theatres, exhibitions, stadiums and casinos, constructions sites, courts, political party's rallies and meetings, voting sites and government buildings. Police and military buildings are not included. However, for additional robustness checks, we include these two targets that fit a looser

definition of terrorist attacks, by creating the additional measure of high-casualty undergrounds attacks.

Finally, as one last robustness check, we generate a measure to proxy the willingness of rebels to provoke a high number of civilian casualties using a dichotomous indicator for the use of highly destructive explosives. Highly destructive explosive is equal to 1 if the rebels used grenades, mines, mail bombs, projectiles such as rockets mortars and missiles, remote explosive devices, bombs carried bodily by human being, time fuse, vehicle bombs and other unknown explosive devices, equal to 0 otherwise. While this proxy captures rebel capacity, the use of highly destructive explosives also represents a clear tactical choice to the extent that the rebel groups possess other, less sophisticated arms, which allows a higher level of targets discrimination.

4.3. Explanatory variables

We extract data on prevalence of female fighters in rebel groups using the best estimate of female fighters in WARD (Wood & Thomas 2019) 'cat4_prevalence'. Female fighters' prevalence is a categorical indicator accounting for the estimated proportion of a group's combat force that comprises women. The measure is categorical rather than a direct estimate of the proportion of female combatants in an armed group because "different sources sometimes provide varying estimates of the numbers of women serving as combatants and occasionally provide only qualitative descriptions of the extent of women's participation" (Wood & Thomas 2017, p. 38). Therefore, a blunter coding scheme is used to increase the confidence that the prevalence of female combatants within rebel groups is accurately captured, although doing so reduces the precision of the resulting measure. The variable ranges from 0 -no female fighters- to 3 -high prevalence of female fighters- (see Wood & Thomas 2017, p. 38). As a control variable, we also use 'cat4_prevalence_high' which uses a more lenient definition of combatant, accounting, for example, for women mainly employed in suicide bombings (Wood & Thomas 2019).

4.4. Mediator variable

Female fighters' prevalence in terrorist operations is a categorical indicator: 0 indicates no evidence of female fighters in terrorist attacks; 1 indicates that female fighters were involved in less than 5% of the terrorist attacks carried out by a group; 2 indicates that female fighters were involved in 5-20% of the terrorist attacks; 3 indicates that female fighters were involved in 20-40% of the terrorist attacks; and 4 indicates that female fighters were involved in over 40% of the terrorist attacks. Making a determination regarding the employment of female fighters in terrorist attacks requires information of three independent sources. This blunt coding scheme reflects a trade-off between precision and confidence in the measure. The sources utilized are official reports of international governmental and non-governmental organizations on terrorist attacks, terrorist convictions, and the roles of female fighters in rebel groups, and academic literature. We also used newspaper articles obtained from Nexis. To extract relevant articles, we used the name of the groups, the location(s) in which the group operate(s) and we include search words such as female perpetrators, female attackers, female terrorist suspects. The four categories were devised inductively according to the nature of available information on the prevalence of female perpetrators of terrorist attacks. Female terrorist attackers usually spur high media attention. Media outlets as well as academics, governmental and nongovernmental organizations tend to report specific information on the systematicity with which females are used by rebel groups as terrorist perpetrators the more frequent is their involvement in terrorist operations.

Therefore, we assumed that female fighters were involved in less than 5% of the total attacks when we found only individual reports of terrorist attacks carried out by females on behalf of a rebel group. When the sources provided only qualitative descriptions of the extent of female participation in terrorist operations (such as 'many' or such as 'increasing levels'), we assumed that female fighters were involved in 5-20% of the terrorist attacks. The differentiation between the last two categories is more subtle. We find that the participation of females in the 40% of terrorist attacks constitute a 'natural cutting point' in the available sources. While, sources reporting a

share of the 40% of total terrorist attacks in which females are involved are typically associated to other sources reporting smaller shares, reports of estimations higher than the 40% are more consistent across sources.

Where reports explicitly state that women fighters did not participate in terrorism as perpetrators or facilitators, or where it was not possible to locate any evidence of women taking part in terrorist attacks as perpetrators or facilitators (despite locating substantial information regarding other group characteristics), the group was coded as not employing female perpetrators. We include a list reporting the rebel groups found to use female perpetrators in terrorist attacks in the Appendix. Table 1 below shows the distribution of prevalence of female operatives in terrorist operations across levels of prevalence of female fighters in rebel groups. While this table shows a positive covariance between female fighters in rebel groups and their use in terrorist operations, we identified several rebel groups that exclusively used female fighters in terrorist attacks. These groups are coded as containing no female fighters in WARD.

To rule out that more females are used in terrorist operations as a result of the troops size of rebels and of rebels' military power vis a vis the government, we examine Kernel-weighted local polynomials smoothing with prevalence of females in terrorist operations as a regressor and rebels' military strength and fighting capacity as responses (Appendix, Figures 1 and 2). The results Figure 1 and Figure 2 (Appendix) show that the expected values of prevalence of female fighters in terrorist operations remain fairly stable showing no evidence of a general decrease in of the use of females as perpetrators of terrorist attacks when rebels possess more military troops or are militarily stronger relative to the government. Finally, we examine cross tabulations between the existence of females in terrorist operations and different ideologies (Appendix, Tables 1-3). These tables show that the percentages of groups using female fighters in terrorist operations are fairly similar across leftist and radical Islamist rebel groups (54.55% and 46.15% respectively). Nationalist rebel groups seem less prone to use females in terrorist attacks: only around the 15 % of them include females in terrorist operations.

Table 1 – Cross tabulation of prevalence of female fighters and prevalence of female fighters in terrorist operations.

Prevalence of female fight-ers	Prevalence of female fighters in terrorist operations				
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
0	112 89.60%	9 7.20%	4 3.20%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%
1	23 66.65%	3 8.82	0 0.00%	4 11.76	4 11.76
2	9 60.00%	0 0.00%	1 6.67%	4 26,67%	1 6.67%
3	5 45.45	0 0.00%	1 9.09%	2 18.18%	3 27.27%
Total	149 80.54%	12 6.49%	6 3.24%	10 5.41%	8 4.32%

4.5. Control variables

We control for several confounders that reflects rebel characteristics, conflict dynamics and structural factors that have been found to affect the use of terrorist violence and are also likely correlated to the share of female fighters and their prevalence in terrorist operations.

First, we account for the rebel group's military strength. Militarily weak rebels are more likely to use terrorism during civil wars (Wood 2010; Polo & Gleditsch 2016). Militarily strength is also likely to be connected to the willingness of rebel groups to deploy female fighters, although there exists contradictory evidence on the directionality of this relationship. For example, while Israelsen (2018) finds that weaker rebel groups are less likely to recruit female fighters, cases such as IS show how female fighters were deployed in military and terrorist operations at a time when

the group was at the lowest of its military power (Dearden 2017). Military strength is obtained using the variable 'rebstrength' from NSA (Cunningham et al. 2012). This is a categorical variable that measures rebel group's military capacity with respect to the opponent state. It takes the value of 1 when the rebel group is much weaker than the state; 2 when the rebel group is weaker than the state; 3 when the rebel group and the state are in parity; 4 when the rebel group is stronger than the state, and 5 when the rebel group is much stronger than the state.

We account for the employment of forced recruitment strategies by rebel organizations. On one hand, rebel groups that rely on forced recruitment are "often indiscriminate in their selection and may be more likely to recruit female fighters to fill resource needs" (Wood & Thomas 2017, p. 22), thus presenting a higher prevalence of female fighters than other groups. On the other hand, rebels using forced recruitment strategies might be more open to engage with other forms of coercion of civilians and civilian victimization such as terrorist violence. Groups such as Boko Haram, for example, extensively forced women to carry out suicide bombings (Thomas 2021). We use a binary measure extracted from Wood and Thomas (2017) which reflects whether abduction, press-ganging, or other forcible recruitment strategies were employed during a given conflict.

We control for the ideology of rebel groups. The ideology of rebel groups determines their potential audience. In turn, this determines what kind of terrorist targets might backlash. Nationalist and religious rebel groups representing a specific faith or ethnic community are less likely to attack hard and official targets than groups with a universalistic ideology and audience such as leftist and rightist (Stanton 2013; Polo & Gleditsch 2016). Rebel groups' ideology also affects the willingness of the leaders of the groups to recruit female fighters. In particular rebels with leftist, revolutionary ideologies are more likely to recruit female combatants than rebels with nationalist or Islamist ideologies (Ness 2008; Wood & Thomas 2017). We extract data on the ideologies of rebel groups from WARD (Wood & Thomas 2017). Leftist ideology is a dichotomous variable equal to 1 when rebel groups adopt a Marxist-inspired ideology (such as Socialist, Communist, Maoist, or Marxist-Leninist), 0 otherwise.

Religious ideology is also a dichotomous variable equal to 1 when rebel groups mobilize primarily or exclusively to promote the interests of a specific religion or religious sect and seek to either establish autonomy from the central government or impose their group's religious doctrine on the entire state, 0 otherwise. Nationalist ideology is a dichotomous variable equal to 1 when rebel groups pursue similar goals on behalf of a distinct ethnic or national community (Wood & Thomas 2017).

We control for competition between rebel organizations within conflicts. Competition among rebel groups increases the likelihood of terrorism because rebels expect to attract members and media attention with more militant actions (Bloom 2004; Taylor & Van Dyke 2004; Conrad & Greene 2015; Belgioioso 2018). Competition within civil wars brought on by the entrance of new factions contributes to an increase in civilian targeting in general and terrorism in particular (see for example Clauset et al. 2010; Cunningham et al. 2012; Wood & Kathman 2015; Dowd 2016). Rebel groups in more fragmented civil wars environments might also be militarily weaker compared to opponent governments and this, in turn, might be connected to systematic variation of recruitment of female fighters (as discussed above). We use the variable 'Splinter' from the UCDP Actor Dataset Version 2.2-2016 (Pettersson 2014) to obtain two alternative measures of competition: the first is a dummy variable equal to 1 when non-state actor was created by breaking away from another actor listed in the UCDP data, the second variable counts the number of splinter factions that a given rebel group faces within its conflict context.

We control for the duration of the civil war because longer civil wars tend to increase rebels' internal organizational pressure as leaders develop expectations of a decline in followers' commitment with protracted use of mass dissident tactics. This is likely to motivate leaders to initiate terrorist campaigns to secure organizational survival (Belgioioso 2018). Additionally, leaders may be reluctant to recruit women fighters at the beginning of an uprising but may permit their inclusion once the group becomes larger and more established (Wood & Thomas 2017).

We also control for a number of structural factors. First, *development*, measured as the natural log of national per capita GDP from Wood and Thomas (2019).

Widespread poverty may create grievances and a large pool of potential recruits for terrorism (Crenshaw 1981). Second, free and fair election and, third media freedom extracted from Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) (Coppedge et al. 2020). Countries with free and fair elections are held by some to provide a favourable environment for the use of terrorism because rebels can exploit the accountability of governments to the public opinion which increase their capacity to obtain concessions as a consequence of the indiscriminate targeting of civilians with terrorism (Pape 2003; Li 2005). Media freedom increases the likelihood of terrorism because free media are expected to extensively report about terrorist events thereby providing free publicity to rebels using such type of violence and exacerbating the fear these groups intend to create (Hoffman 2006; Gadarian 2010). Development, free and fair elections and media freedom are also likely to be correlated with societal gender equality and gender biases that might motivate rebels' leader to deploy female fighters in terrorist operations (see for example, Wood & Thomas 2017, p. 22). Because the data are time invariant, these measures represent the average values of the variables over the course of the conflict.

Finally, we include *Percent Muslim* which reflects the estimated percentage of the state population associated with Islam (Maoz & Henderson 2013). Accounting for countries with Muslim-majority population has been said to "isolate the effect of the Islamist ideology measure from broad cultural values" believed to be inherent in many Muslim-majority countries, which might affect the recruitment of women combatants (Wood & Thomas 2017, p. 23).

5. Empirical analysis

To test our proposed mechanism, we carry out causal mediation analysis. Mediation analysis seeks to quantify the effect of a treatment that operates through a particular mechanism. Following Imai et al. (2011), we define a causal mechanism as a process whereby one variable T causally affects the outcome Y through an intermediate variable or mediator M that operationalizes the hypothesized mechanism. In this study, the prevalence of female fighters in terrorist operations (M) transmits the causal effect of prevalence of female fighters in rebel groups (T) on the number of

civilian terrorism casualties (Y). Figure 1 below graphically illustrates this simple idea. The mediated effect combines two arrows 'a' and 'b', whereas the single arrow 'c' represents the direct effect. The direct effect represents the effect of the treatment on the outcome that is not transmitted by our proposed mechanism. For example, rebels that are militarily weaker because of more female fighters in their ranks might carry out more lethal terrorist attacks against civilians to exert indirect pressure on the government, being unable to target state coercive apparatuses directly. Our inferential goal is to test the extent and validity of our mechanism vs. plausible alternative explanations.

Figure 1. Diagram representing the casual mechanism
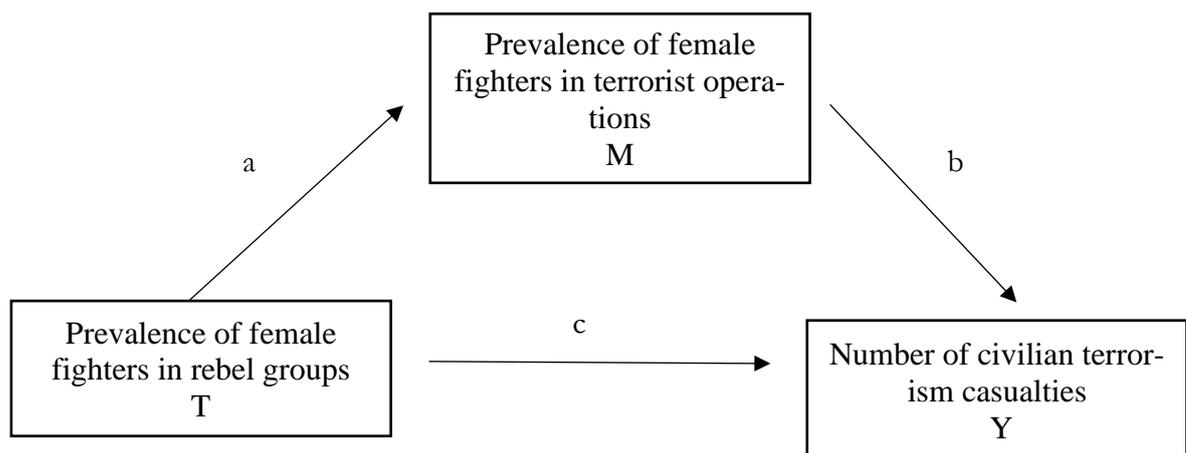
We use Hicks and Tingley's (2011) 'mediation' package to calculate the average mediation and direct effects of our treatments. We apply this package on our ordinal mediator and our continuous outcome variable using OLS models.[1] The results of the two-stage mediation models are reported in Table 1 below. The exposure-

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[1] The use of an OLS model for the ordinal mediator might rise concern over correctness of the estimated results. The mediation package, however, only allows for OLS and probit models for the mediator-outcome regression. To address this concern, we create a dichotomous variable equal to one when rebels use female fighters in terrorist attacks and equal to zero otherwise. Using this indicator, we re-run the analysis in the main text estimating a probit model for the mediator-outcome regression (Appendix, Figure 10). The main results remain consistent.

mediator models represent the first stage of the estimation and report the effects of prevalence of female fighters and prevalence of female fighters (high est.) on the prevalence of female fighters in terrorist operations. Both exposure-mediator models show a significant and positive relationship between the prevalence of female fighters and the prevalence of female fighters in terrorist operations providing support to the idea that rebels use as many female operatives as they can in terrorist operations hoping to exploit their tactical and strategic advantages. The mediator-outcome models test the effects of the mediator and exposure variables on the number of civilian terrorism casualties. Both mediator-outcome models show that while the prevalence of female fighters in rebel groups does not bear a direct effect on the number of terrorist casualties, the effect of the prevalence female fighters in terrorist operations is positive and significant. In particular, Model 1 Table 1 implies that at one ordinal scale increase of prevalence of female fighters, the prevalence of female operatives in terrorist operations increases by half a unit. Ultimately, any unit increase of prevalence of female operatives in terrorist operations lead to an average increase of 196 additional civilian victims of terrorist attacks.

We plot the main findings in Figure 2 below. Each pair of estimates reported in Figure 2 are produced by a single full mediation model where the explanatory variable represents WARD high estimation of prevalence of female fighters (top of Figure 2) and WARD best estimation of prevalence of female fighters (bottom of Figure 2). Figure 2 confirms that the mediated effect of prevalence of female fighters (for both the WARD's best and high estimation) on the expected number of terrorist casualties is positive and significant, while the direct effect is not significant. These results provide evidence that rebels rationally exploit societal gender stereotypes and take advantage of their female operatives using as many of them as possible in tasks that maximise their strategic utility and effectiveness: terrorist operations. Crucially, the direct effects of both indicators are not significant, showing that no alternative explanations underlay the relationship between prevalence of female fighters and lethality of terrorist operations.

Table 2 – Mediation models.

VARIABLES	Model 1 Exposure-mediator	Model 1 Mediator-outcome	Model 2 Exposure-mediator	Model 2 Mediator-outcome
Prevalence of female fighters	.66*** (.09)	39.84 (82.46)		
Prevalence of female fighters (high est.)			.50*** (.085)	35.45 (69.92)
Prev. of female fighters in terrorist operations		288.70*** (59.79)		288.90*** (58.78)
Military strength		92.50 (74.11)		90.12 (74.24)
Forced recruitment		-57.25 (106.70)		-59.63 (107.00)
Leftist ideology		-369.50* (197.90)		-351.50* (179.70)
Jihadist ideology		-48.17 (146.50)		-40.73 (149.70)
Nationalist ideology		-64.97 (105.10)		-65.23 (105.10)
Splinter groups		294.60* (151.60)		284.50* (151.90)
Civil war duration		11.80** (5.51)		11.21* (5.83)
GDP per capita (logged)		-73.42 (71.05)		-75.83 (69.98)
Free elections		32.53 (64.32)		33.76 (64.69)
Media freedom		-25.37 (62.78)		-24.77 (62.83)
Percent. Muslim		226.10 (143.50)		226.70 (143.40)
Constant	.20*** (.10)	367.90 (522.60)	.19** (.10)	389.10 (514.70)
Observations	146	146	146	146
R-squared	0.25	0.30	0.19	0.30

*Standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1*

Figure 2. Estimated average mediation effects and direct effects of treatment of interest on the expected number of civilian terrorism casualties.
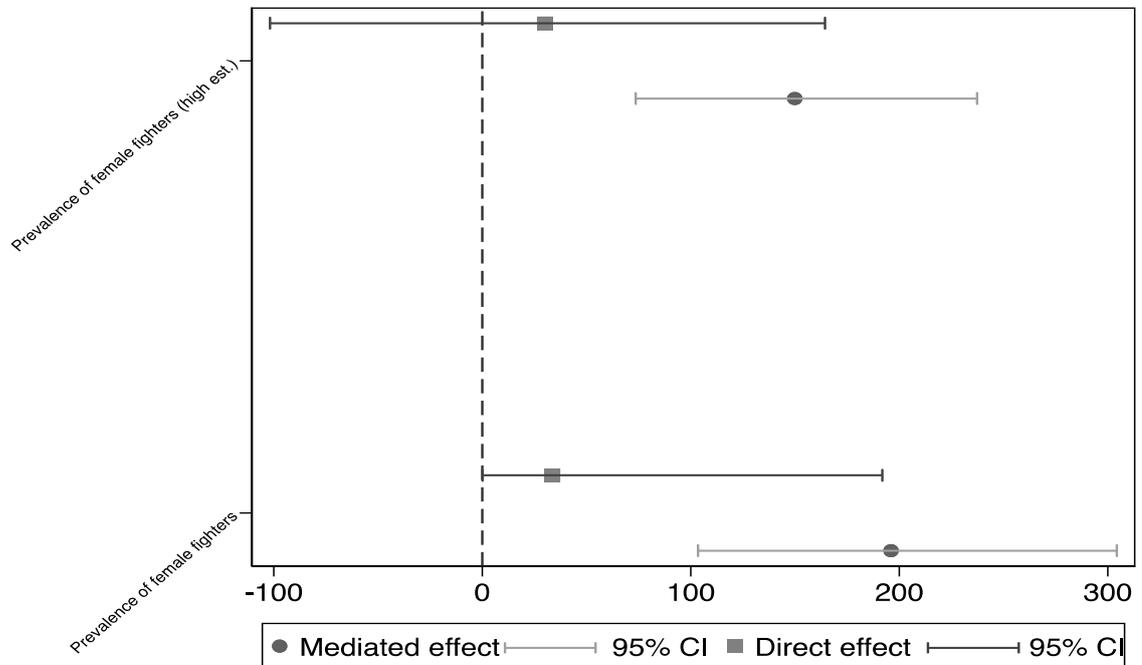
As a first robustness check, we test whether a higher share of female operatives in terrorist operations leads groups to recruit more women in their fighting ranks, leading to more lethal terrorist campaigns by, for example, weakening the military strength of the group. While the direct effect of female prevalence in terrorist operations on the number of terrorism causalities is positive and significant, we do not find evidence that a mediated effect of female prevalence in terrorist operations through the prevalence of female fighters is in place (Appendix, Figure 3). We also check that the control variables included in the full model with the best estimate are not driving the results by running a simple bivariate mediation model (Appendix, Figure 4). While the results remain consistent with those presented in the main text, excluding controls decreases the magnitude of the effect of our mediated mechanism on the outcome: the number of expected terrorist casualties decreases to 155 for one

unit increase of prevalence of female operatives in terrorist operations. We then re-run the mediation models using high-causality targets, high-causality undergrounds attacks and highly destructive explosive as alternative treatments (Appendix, Figures 5-7). We also re-run the mediation models proposed in the main text using an alternative measure of competition between rebel groups involved in civil war (Appendix Figure 8). Finally, we test whether the results remain robust when considering exclusively large-scale conflict reducing the sample to 125 rebel groups (Appendix Figure 9). The results presented in the main text remain robust to all these checks.

After robustness checks, across the control variables, only the duration of civil war seems to have a robust and positive effect. This is consistent with the literature suggesting that longer civil wars increase rebels' internal organizational pressure as leaders develop expectations of a decline in followers' commitment with protracted use of mass dissident tactics, leading to an increased use of terrorist strategies to maintain commitment (Belgioioso 2018).

6. Sensitivity Analysis

We conduct sensitivity analyses to investigate the extent to which our conclusions are robust to unobserved pre-treatment confounders using 'medsens' (Hicks & Tingley 2011). In our analysis we assume that we have fully accounted for any confounders that might have effects on both the mediator and the outcome, but this might not be the case. In other words, it might be that unobserved underlying features of rebel organizations affect both female affiliation in general as well as use of female fighters in terrorist operations in particular. If for example, unmeasured historical gender relationships of the society in which the rebel group operates make rebel groups both more likely to include more women in their ranks and to use more women in terrorist operations our estimations of the mediated effects are bias.

Figure 3 below plots the true mediated effect for our variables of interest (Y axes) against values of the sensitivity parameter which is equal to the correlation between the error terms in the mediated and outcome models (X axes). This parameter represents both the degree and direction of the unobserved confounding factor. As

the mediation analysis assume no correlation between error terms in the mediation and outcome models, the fitted value of the average mediation effects reported in Figure 3 below coincides to 0 on the X axes. The question that we are asking here is how large must the correlations between the error terms be for the average mediated effects to be indistinguishable from zero? A low value of this proportion indicates a more robust estimate of the mediation effect because there is less room for an unobserved confuter to bias the results (Imai et al. 2011). Across the models presented in the main text, the sensitivity analyses show that an omitted variable confounder would have to explain the .04 percent of the total variation not explained by the observed predictors for the average mediation effects to be biased.

Figure 3. Sensitivity analyses for models in Figure 2.
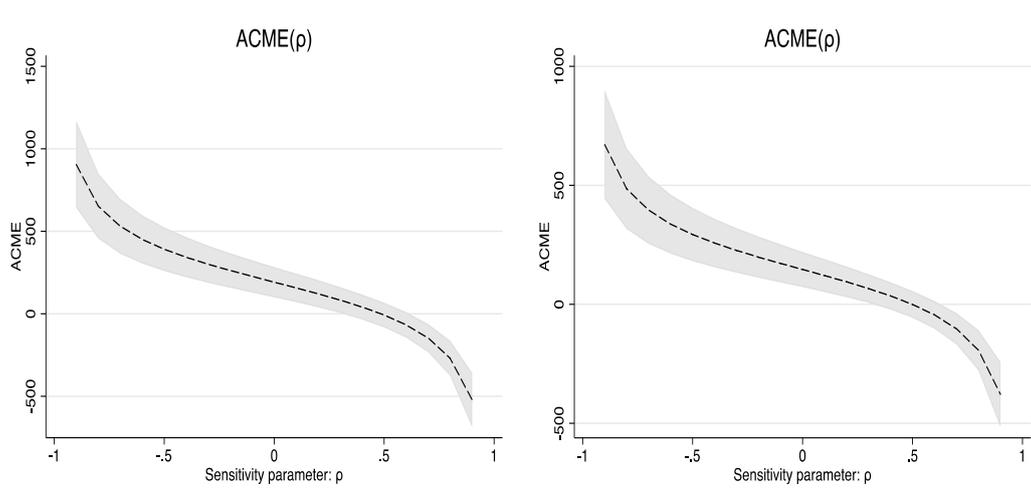
7. Conclusion

Whilst a substantial number of studies on the organizational determinants of terrorism in civil wars and on the role of female in terrorist operations have been published in recent years, substantial gaps exist in our understanding of the strategic logic of using female fighters in deadly terrorist attacks in civil wars settings. Particularly under-investigated is whether tactical and strategic violent behaviours of armed

groups in civil wars can be explained at least partially when accounting for considerations on societal gender biases. This is problematic given that women make up around 30-40% of many rebel groups (Wood & Thomas 2017; Henshaw 2018). Our study is the first to explore the relationship between women fighters and the deadlines of terrorist attacks in civil wars by focusing on incentives that societal gender stereotyping provides to rebel groups when employing female operatives in terrorist operations.

We have argued that rebel groups with a higher prevalence of female fighters have incentives to use their female operatives in terrorist attacks to exploit societal gender stereotyping and perpetrate more lethal terrorist operations. The capacity of female operatives to be more deadly than male operatives make up an incentive for rebel groups to use their female fighters in terrorist attacks. In addition, female perpetrators provide rebel groups with specific propaganda advantages. Their gender-specific propaganda value is two-fold: gendered narratives portraying female participation in terrorist operations (1) discredit governments' actions thereby increasing support for the rebel group, (2) allow rebels to shame men and encourages female sympathisers to join the fight.

From a methodological point of view, terrorism studies exploring the connections between gender and dynamics of violence have largely relied on unique case studies and comparative analysis focused on groups perpetrating terrorist attacks. To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore the employment of female fighters in terrorist operations across rebel groups that do and do not use terrorist attacks. More generally, much of the research on female fighters in civil wars is characterised by an absence of available sets of large-N quantitative data on roles of female operatives. Future research might depart from the evidence provided in this study to further test the links between gender stereotyping, female fighters and various types of violent behaviours used by rebel groups in civil wars. Further research might also attempt to use survey experiments to explore the latent sentiments of various audiences when the news of female operatives involved in very lethal terrorist violence became known depending on specific media narratives. This study provides evidence that rebels use

as many female fighters as possible as asymmetric weapons exploiting gender stereotypes to cause intense civilian losses and capitalize support. Therefore, measures for countering gender discrimination and negative gender stereotypes in civil wars might eventually contribute to decrease civilians' deaths.

Acknowledgements

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