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POPULISM IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN POLITICS

Actors and processes in time of crisis

Edited by Enrico Calossi, Paola Imperatore

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CHAPTER ONE

Italian populism(s): leaderships, policy positions, and ideologies in political parties

Enrico Calossi and Lorenzo Viviani

1. Introduction

Populism is a chameleonic phenomenon, able to merge with existing and developing models of political organization, and thus underlying the politicization of new political movements (Taggart 2000; Mudde 2007; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). The rise of populism is accompanied, on the one hand, by the depoliticization of large segments of political regulation and the establishment of public policies, especially in the field of finance, that exacerbate the ‘crisis’ of representative politics (Fawcett, Flinders and Hay 2017) and, on the other, by the cartelization of mainstream political parties (Katz and Mair 1995; 2018). In Italy, as in other European democracies, populism goes hand in hand with an increased feeling of resentment towards the political elite. This is an integral part of the silent counter-revolution that determines the polarization of winners and losers of new social processes on a global scale (Kriesi et al. 2012). Other peculiar elements are the politicization of phenomena such as immigration, the process of European integration, a lack of safety and security, and the emergence of new right-wing parties that are not ideologically associated with traditional fascism (Betz 1993; Ignazi 2003; Mudde 2007). If populism emerges in periods of economic, financial and social crises, then the relationship with these crises is ambivalent to say the least and, in itself, does not exhaust the opportunities of the general phenomenon, given that in addition to the economy, “the union of an

ideological structure and a political situation” is decisive (Meny and Surel 2000: 151-152). Firstly, this is because populism indicates the existence of an illness originating from a lack of political integration even when there is no economic crisis, thereby highlighting the malfunctioning or, rather, the contraction of the quality of democracy in terms of the responsiveness of the system (Morlino and Raniolo 2017); and, secondly, because a crisis is itself a tool used as a permanent representation by leaders and populist political movements to de-legitimize the mainstream political class (Moffitt 2016). Therefore, in broader terms, populism rises not only during economic crises, but also as a result of political breakdowns, which may accompany or even precede economic crises, in a context where the structures of political intermediation are transformed, where precedent and traditional hegemonic political discourses are overcome (Laclau 2005). That notwithstanding, the Great Recession of 2008 marked a further acceleration in the deconstruction of political integration and, at the same time, the growth of politicized disenchantment and aversion towards the mainstream political class. This reveals different forms of populist manifestations, including not only the populist right but also the emergence of a new form of populism, the new ‘populist left’, particularly in the countries of Southern Europe (Kriesi and Pappas 2015; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014).

Italy represents a unique case for analyzing the relationship between populism and political breakdown. On the one hand, the Italian political system has experienced several transformations in the last 30 years, in the party system, in the electoral law and in the political supply. The most recent transformations included the entry of a new populist party, i.e. the Five Star Movement (M5S), which became the strongest Italian party in the 2018 elections, a new (mainly proportional) electoral law, and the end of Second-Republic bipolarism. On the other hand, Italy represents the only case in the ‘Old Europe’ in which populist parties succeeded in leading the government. Italy can be defined as an incubator of populisms of various kinds, which emerged after the breakdown of the political system in the 1992-1993 two-year period and subsequently following the economic and political crises that have taken place since 2008. Although they did not define themselves directly as populists, nevertheless since the mid-nineties the emergence of the leadership of Berlusconi and Forza Italia have been labelled as a form of tele-populism (Taguieff 2003). In the

second phase of Italian populism, moreover, following the elections of 4 March 2018, the M5S and the Lega formed a government, initiating a coalition consisting only of populist parties: an all-time first for Old Europe.

In this chapter we will analyse Italian populism by relying on an expert survey; in particular, we look at several party dimensions of the present Italian party system (leadership, policy positions, democratic views, and ideological inclinations). From this part of analysis, we will seek to assess whether populism is a specific feature of the self-defined populist parties (or those generally defined in this way by the literature), such as the Lega and the M5S, or whether this is becoming a more widely shared feature across parties.

The chapter is structured as follows: in the first section, we will reconstruct the two main branches of the literature on populism: one that interprets populism as an ideology and a party feature, and the other, which interprets populism as a communication strategy. In the second section, we will illustrate the method of our analysis, whose results will be presented and interpreted in the third section. In the conclusion, we will summarize the most important findings related to our research questions and discuss their theoretical implications.

2. Populism(s)

When considering the various forms that populism can take, the possible bias characterizing this phenomenon should be considered as well, with reference to the different structure of the opportunities that emerges, from a political and institutional perspective, in each national context (Aslanidis 2017). Also, by seeing populism as a strategy to politicize the collective resentment towards the establishment, it is necessary to access the different ways through which a political entrepreneur makes the cleavage between people and the political elite politically active (Moffitt 2016; Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Pappas 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to identify the various stages of the politicization of this cleavage, and how it starts in each national context, with regard to the relationship between ‘new parties’ and the traditional political system (Pappas 2012: 2-4). The failure of the representative capacity of traditional politics is followed by the populist political entrepreneurs’ attempt to trace the crisis back to the contrast between the people and the elite, by using the media in order to

foster the image of a lasting state of crisis (Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Moffitt 2016; Rooduijn, van der Brug, de Lange 2016). We try to avoid the wide debate that political and social sciences have dedicated to the theme of ideology. Here we assume that ideology is a belonging based on a system of coherent, explicitly expressed beliefs, equipped with a system for interpreting political phenomena, and capable of reproducing a sense of solidarity inside a group by way of shared symbolic codes, and a system of mutual recognition.

Identifying populism as a political family of parties with its own internal coherence in terms of political programmes and identity contents is likely to be misleading. In fact, as part of its chameleonic ambiguity, the phenomenon of populism uses an instrument that can engage in dialogue and merge with existing political ideologies and families (Taggart 2000; Taguieff 2003; Mudde 2004). Populism has been defined in different ways: as an ideology, a mentality, a discourse, a movement, a syndrome, a social identity, a strategy (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013; Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo and Ostiguy 2017). In what has become one of the most cited perspectives for the analysis of populism, the common conceptual reference is connected to the vision of populism as a “thin ideology” (Mudde 2004: 543; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012: 8). This thin ideology is based on society being divided into two homogeneous and conflicting groups: on the one hand, the “pure people”, on the other the corrupt élites. This identifies and legitimises politics as an expression of the general will for the “good of the people”. The core of populist ideology essentially comprises an appeal to the people, holders of moral virtue, and an anti-establishment appeal, in favour of restoring popular sovereignty, which interprets and recovers the redemptive politics constituting democracy (Stanley 2008: 102). Populism has various manifestations, but certain common elements can be identified. The most important are: the centrality of the people and their uniformity, anti-elitism, the use of tools of direct democracy, the creation of an external enemy, the amplification of a ‘crisis’, the direct style of communication aimed at simplifying complexity, the polarization of political positions and, in reference to the leadership, the use of the image of an outsider and the plebiscitary bond between leader and voters (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Rooduijn 2014). The lack of a common platform, of a common reference to a social basis, and of a style of politicization on the part of leaders and parties leads to a

declension in the plural for populism (excluding the characteristics of the ideological family of parties). However, it is also true that there exist at least two common and constant elements in every manifestation of populism that define its identity: the appeal to the people, on the one hand, and the opposition to the establishment on the other (Canovan 2005). Despite not being comparable to an ideology in the traditional sense of the word, it is firstly due to the scarce reflexivity of its fundamental ideas. Populism, however, presents the characteristics of a thin-centred ideology (Mudde 2004: 544), that is, a centre restricted to concepts regarding politics, in which reference to the people is at the core of a Manichaeic vision of us/them, good/bad, friends/enemies. It is a morally oriented vision in which virtues and ‘purity’ of the people are contrasted to the corruption of the élite (Muller 2016; Urbinati 2018; Pappas 2019).

Nevertheless we also need to consider that not every appeal to the people from a plebiscitarian perspective is therefore attributable to the populist dimension, just as not every form of opposition to the political establishment – even in terms of anti-partyism – can be identified as the reason for a new populist family (Viviani 2019). The appeals to the people are declined in different ways according to the social, economic and political context in which they are made. They can be ethnic-nationalist, civic, collectivist or particularistic (De Raadt, Hollanders and Krouwel 2004). The different types of populism refer to the conceptions of the people, which, from time to time, refer to the people as sovereign, as belonging to different classes, or as a nation, or according to which the condition of the people is that of “underdogs” or “everyman” (Canovan 1984). In this sense, the construction of a people/nation, founded on the idea of *ethnos*, refers to the politicization launched by the populist parties of the new right, while the redefinition of the boundaries and contents of the people/class, from a post-Marxist perspective, connotes the populist parties of the new left (Laclau 2005). Lastly, the mythicization of the people (*dèmos*) leads to a sort of “civic populism” (Damiani and Viviani 2019). This can be interpreted as the radicalization of those counter-democratic powers that are substantiated by the power of surveillance, the power of interdiction, and the ability to express an opinion on the work of the institutions by sovereign citizens represented as a collective whole with political subjectivity (Rosanvallon 2020).

The challenge posed by populism to representation and to the traditional political system has been interpreted in terms of non-reconciliation between the democratic regime and the populist phenomenon (Abts and Rummens 2007). But this challenge is considered, alternatively, as an objection within democracy itself, with connections, compatibility and potentially positive aspects ‘for’ and ‘in’ representative democracies (Canovan 1999; Meny and Surel 2002; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). Populism ‘inhabits’ the internal periphery of democracy, it disputes the traditional political classes (of government and of the opposition), but it is not an “anti-system parties” element (Sartori 1976), as it is the case for those parties whose ‘sound’ ideology was based on the prediction of a system other than democracy, representative or direct. The appeals to the people by populists are not only a direct plebiscitarian call to replace a government of parties with a leader of a party. They are also a particular form of moralistic imagination of politics, in which the people of reference are not identified as *pars pro toto* but as an organic whole, which makes the majority an expression of the common good (Müller 2016; Diehl 2019). We are not only in the presence of a rhetorical or instrumental form of friend/enemy Manichaeism. The people of populism, the real people, the pure people, claim that they want an exclusive moral representation in democracy. It follows that populism is not only anti-elitist, which makes it similar to other political forms of protest against the ruling elite, but it is also anti-pluralist (Mudde 2004: 543), since it repudiates parties and the traditional political class as actors in a conflict that undermines the unity of the people. It is no coincidence that populism has been linked to a political theology – understood as the mythicization of the people according to the secular concepts found in theology – used to sacralise the identity between people and sovereignty, with a totalizing claim, even if the latter is not necessarily always attributable to an authoritarian project (Arato 2015). The relationship between populism and democracy is not, in fact, an expression of an anti-system principle of opposition, in the name of a totalitarian, dictatorial institutional project. The populist version of democracy acquires the connotation of “democratic illiberalism” (Pappas 2014; 2019). In this perspective, the illiberal component challenges the traditional political establishment in the name of a single relevant cleavage, i.e. between the elite and the people, with the radicalization of po-

litical conflict and the reaffirmation that the rule of the majority is more important than the rights of the minorities.

It is the claim of a people according to a holistic vision that constitutes the distinguishing factor between populism and other forms of contestation of the political establishment. Compared to protest parties, anti-party parties, anti-political establishment parties and anti-austerity parties, populism uses distrust and disintermediation to affirm a democracy in which conflict is avoided from a standpoint of anti-elitism and anti-pluralism. At the same time, populism cannot be compared to other prospects of weakening representative democracy, whether participatory, deliberative or an expression of the personalization of politics and of leadership in a leader democracy. With regard to the latter, in particular, populism rises and develops as a means of dissolving the boundary between the sphere of the person and the sphere of power, as a push to “re-embody the body politics” for the sovereign people, relying on the unification of the latter thanks to the leader (Moffitt 2016: 64). Therefore, it is not a question of democracy shifting from the relevance of the collective actors to a direct relationship between voters and leaders with personalized parties, but of a particular declination of plebiscitary democracy in which ‘directism’, i.e. democracy exercised directly by the people, is useful for a democracy that is potentially without parties and without conflict (Urbinati 2019; Viviani 2017; 2019). Alongside the return of the ‘people’ and the ‘community’ as categories of politics, with the problems associated with their ‘re-semantization’ in Western societies and democracies (Lacclau 2005; Rosanvallon 2020), leadership becomes the main instrument for redefining politics in the transition from party democracy to audience democracy, in the perspective of modern politics that Weber described as marked by “leadership in action”. In particular, through the personalization of politics and leadership, an overall redefinition of accountability is initiated on three complementary dimensions, that of government, that of political parties, and that of electoral processes more generally (Poguntke and Webb 2005: 352). The populist leader does not merely politicize a growing collective resentment but enacts a more pervasive ‘invention of the people’ according to a particular image. Moreover, populist leaders present themselves not as a representative of the people, but as an integral part of the people, as a servant leader, as its spokesperson, as a member of the same “imagined community” that was constructed by

manipulating social representations. The populist leader does not “meet” the people but “creates the people of populism,” personifies their unity and embodies a substance that does not actually have its own dimension already developed in the social body (Moffitt 2016: 64). More generally, populist entrepreneurs create the legitimacy resource and a feeling of trust through the glue of an identity mobilization capacity that is the result of the ability to exploit the structure of political opportunities arising from the processes of social change.

In the vacuum of ideologies, populism challenges liberal-democracy by presenting itself as a salvific ‘identity’ and ‘redemptive’ form, assuming the connotation of a “political theology” centred on the mystique of the people enacted through the centrality of the leader’s role (Canovan 1999; Arato 2015). Populist plebiscitarianism represents an option that, while located within the personalization of post-partisan but not post-representative democracies, differs from both leader democracy and perspectives of participatory and deliberative democracy. The same recourse to referendums or the adoption of deliberative practices represent tools not to promote participation from below, but to undermine representative mediations. In this sense, populist plebiscitarianism radicalizes the perspective of post-representative politics (Keane 2018). The ‘body’ of the leader becomes itself the symbol of the opposition to representative politics, as an antidote to the democracy of corrupt and self-referential parties. In other words, populist democracy has an anti-elitist aspect and, at the same time, an anti-pluralist aspect, since it challenges traditional parties and the political class and, at the same time, undermines the legitimacy of a fractioning of the unity of the people in the name of different conflicting interests. However, while the personalization of leadership is a common horizon of post-representative democracies, plebiscitary populist linkage replaces ideological linkage (Roberts 2015; Pappas 2019), disfiguring and challenging representative democracy through a project of new identity politics (Urbinati 2019).

Such politics of disintermediation (Pizzimenti, Calossi, Cicchi 2020) claims that there is only one party entitled to ‘occupy’ the seat of power by virtue of denying the value of pluralist conflict and replacing the ‘pure people’ as opposed to the multiple social groups that coexist in society. In this perspective, populist plebiscitarianism as an “illiberal response to liberalism” restricts its substantive democratic nature (Mudde 2016: 68):

an illiberal democracy in which the pillar of popular sovereignty is separated from that of liberal constitutionalism, and which consists of a set of democratic, anti-democratic and counter-democratic tendencies (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Moffitt 2016). Regarding the potentially dangerous aspects for democracy, these can be attributed to the denial of the complexity of society. This simplification of social reality implies that the rule of the majority is imposed not in part but fully and that stigma is attached to the “others”. In addition, everything is allowed to the leader of a party that goes “beyond the Constitution” as a symbol and an integral part of the people (and therefore not simply a representative). Again, there is the failure to articulate the different interests and identities in society, and democracy is depoliticized through the hyper-politicization of the people. However, in the case of Western political systems, populism rises and develops within existing democratic institutions. It participates in elections (democratic proceduralism), takes the form of a party not unlike other party models (movement-parties, personal parties), and contributes to the public debate with some recurring issues.

3. Method

The empirical analysis presented in this chapter is based on expert survey data. Compared with other methods, expert surveys are a relatively quick and costless way of collecting data on parties. Moreover, they provide scores for individual parties even when they contest the elections as members of pre-electoral coalitions. The survey was built to ask questions regarding seven Italian parties – Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), Partito Democratico (PD), Lega Salvini Premier (Lega), Forza Italia (FI), Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi), Liberi e Uguali (LeU), + Europa (+EU) – that played a significant role during the 2018 electoral campaign and soon after. The survey was divided into five different analytical dimensions, as follows: 1. Role of leadership; 2. Parties' position on specific policy issues (European Union, migration, welfare state, fiscal austerity, civil rights, environmental protection, constitutional/institutional reforms); 3. Ideological family (if traditional or new, and which one); 4. Idea of democracy (which model and the presence of a precise antagonist and electoral objectives); 5. Positioning in the cultural and left-right space. These analytical dimensions obtain results owing to specific questions to which experts must give pre-

defined answers. For certain questions, experts were required to give a categorical answer (for example, when asked to indicate what figure is the prominent party leader, and they have to choose among the party's president, secretary, parliamentary leader or other). For other questions, experts were asked to place the party on a 1-5 scale (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree). The scores used to estimate party positions are therefore the aggregated results of expert judgments. The survey was sent to a sample of 137 members of the Italian Political Science Association, 48 of whom completed the questionnaire, with a response rate of 35 per cent: answers arrived in a four-month time span, between February and June 2018. During this time, some crucial facts happened. By far, the most important event was the 4th of March national elections. Parties of our sample run faced these elections in different ways: Lega, FI and FdI were part of the same electoral centre-right coalition, while PD and +EU formed a centre-left one. On the other hand, M5S and LeU had standalone lists. Of these four different alliances, all but LeU had some hope of winning the elections. However, the election results indicated a hung parliament, in which no coalition or party was able to form an autonomous parliamentary majority. The moral winners of the election were the M5S, which got the most votes, and the Lega, which received the most votes in the centre-right coalition. These also had enough seats to form a parliamentary majority and to support a coalition executive. Therefore, the second important event in our four-month analysis time span was the formation of Giuseppe Conte's government with the support of M5S and Lega. That was also nicknamed the "Government of Change", in order to underline the absolute originality of such an alliance. In addition to this, the M5S itself did represent a complete novelty in the Italian political spectrum. From a time point of view, it had run in an election for the first time only five years before; from a political perspective, it was the first Italian political party with such a large number of voters claiming explicitly that they wanted to reject the left-right axis of competition. This latter was exemplified and amplified also by its sound stance of rejecting the definition of party for itself and its proud self-definition as being 'against all political parties'. Besides these, other minor events occurred, such as the breakdown of the centre-right coalition, as a consequence of the Lega's choice of forming a government with the M5S, and the resignation of the PD leader, Matteo Renzi. Obviously,

these events might have affected the answers we received. For the sake of this chapter, which is to measure the presence of populist parties in Italy, we do present data mainly coming from the first analytical section (the role of leadership) and the fourth one (the idea of democracy), for a total of six questions. The combined analysis of the six questions will allow us to place Italian parties on a continuum between the highest degree of populism employed in a party's strategy and the lowest degree of use of populist techniques.

4. Expert survey results

As for leadership, the first question simply asks who the real party leader is. Table 1.2 shows the results. For the three centre-right parties, only a minimal part of the respondents is not able to identify a clear leader. For the latter, while none of the respondents had problems in indicating the 'president' for FI, and the 'secretary' for the Lega (respectively, Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Salvini), greater difficulties arose in identifying the leading figure for Fdi. We argue no one has doubts in indicating Giorgia Meloni as the leader, while fewer have problems in indicating her formal role in the party ('president' or 'secretary'). The opposite happens for the three centre-left parties: many respondents have problems in identifying a precise leader (PD, 44%; LEU, 44% and +EU 20%).

However, while for the PD 52% of experts indicate the 'secretary' (Matteo Renzi till the 7th of July and Maurizio Martina later on) as the leader, lower values are registered for LeU and +EU. For the former, 20% indicate the 'secretary', while 26% specify the same for the latter. These difficulties are clearly due to the coalitional and ephemeral nature of these two parties, which were simply electoral lists formed by several political organizations, without any structured organizational roles, rather than being real organizations. In detail, LeU was formed by three small left-wing parties (Art1-MDP, Sinistra Italiana and Possibile), while +EU, as a progressive liberal list, was formed by several small organisations, the largest of which were the Centro Democratico and I Radicali.

Similar difficulties occur for the M5S, for which one fourth of the respondents is not able to identify a clear leader. But even those who can, do not agree on the precise figure: 20% indicates the 'secretary' (a figure that does not exist in the M5S), 22% a 'non-affiliated member' of the par-

ty, and 32% another figure altogether. This variance is obviously due to the unclear division of roles within the movement and the long-standing informal leadership of its founder Beppe Grillo. Only a few months before the elections, M5S members had elected Luigi Di Maio as their *capo politico*, but experts are probably not convinced by this and still identify Grillo as the leader. It is worth mentioning that M5S members and activists were still informally nicknamed *grillini* ('small crickets', from the surname Grillo, which means 'cricket').

Table 1.1. Main party leader (% of respondents).

	No clear leadership identifiable	Party President	Party Secretary	Party Parliamentary Group Speaker	A non-affiliated member of the party	Other
PD	44	2	52	0	0	2
FI	2	96	0	0	0	2
Lega	0	0	98	0	0	2
M5S	22	4	20	0	22	32
FdI	0	36	60	2	0	2
LeU	44	12	20	8	2	14
+EU	20	22	26	6	4	22

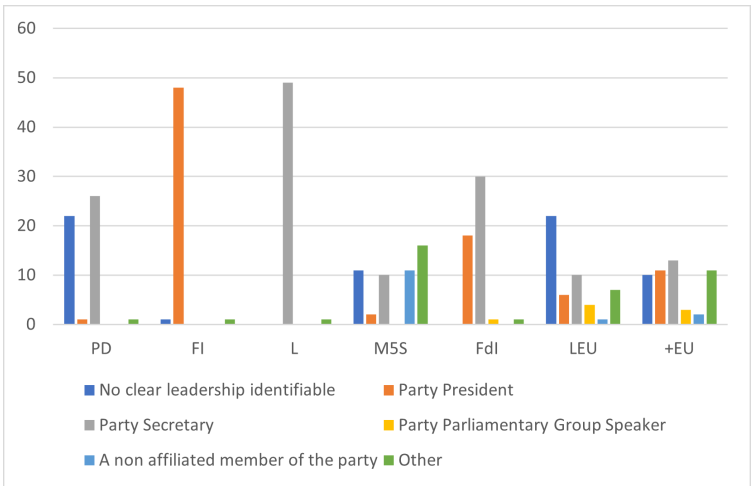


Fig. 1.1. Main party leader.

ITALIAN POPULISM(S): LEADERSHIPS, POLICY POSITIONS, AND IDEOLOGIES IN POLITICAL PARTIES

These results are coherent also with the results of the second question about the level of identification of the party with its own leader. For the experts, there is a clear correspondence between the leader and the party itself amongst centre-right parties: 94% for Berlusconi/FI and Salvini/Lega, and 86% for Meloni/Fdl. Among the other parties, only +EU shows similar values. In fact, for 86% of experts there is a clear identification between the leader Emma Bonino and the party. It is noteworthy that the name of the leader appears clearly in the electoral logo of these four parties. The opposite happens for PD and M5S, whose electoral logos make no mention of their leaders' names. In fact, for only 52% of respondents the M5S leader is clearly identifiable (but the doubt is whether it is Grillo or Di Maio), while the identification between the PD and its leader is even lower: 20%. In this case, the reason is the transition of the leadership between Matteo Renzi and the new secretary, Maurizio Martina, who was a pro-tempore leader after Renzi's resignation (summer 2018), i.e. overlapping the time span during which the experts were answering our survey. The provisional role of the new secretary may have cast a shadow over his role as representative of the party and highlighted the still effective role of the charismatic (and for two years Prime Minister) Matteo Renzi. However, the least level of identification between a party and its leader is registered for LeU and Pietro Grasso. The latter was the incumbent speaker of the Senate and was chosen as the *trait d'union* between the three component parties. He was named as political leader of the electoral list and his name was even inserted in the electoral logo of Liberi e Uguali. However, the fate of the alliance (few weeks after the poor electoral results, all the founding parties left the coalition) demonstrates to what extent the figure of Grasso scarcely identified the party.

	Totally identified	Highly identified	Partially identified	Poorly identified	Not at all
PD	2	18	20	36	24
FI	62	32	6	0	0
Lega	42	52	6	0	0
M5S	8	44	34	8	6
Fdl	20	66	12	2	0
LeU	2	8	18	52	20
+EU	20	46	14	18	2

Another important aspect of populist parties is how they conceive democracy, meaning not only their general idea about Democracy (i.e. how they would like to change the current democratic procedures applied in their country), but more specifically the model of democracy they apply in their own organization.

On this aspect – as already mentioned in the previous sections of the chapter –, rather than choosing non-democratic methods, populist parties preferred to adopt and promote forms of direct democracy, which are often implemented as forms of plebiscitarianism. According to our surveyed experts, all parties have a clear preference for ‘representative democracy’, even if the value varies from 98% of PD (the highest level) to 58% of the Lega (the lowest one). The only exception is represented by the M5S. In fact, the preference for ‘direct democracy’ (even if a significant portion of experts prefers to identify it as ‘participatory/deliberative democracy’) is a core identitarian element of the M5S, which, in the words of activists, differentiates the *Movimento* from the *Partiti*. Also, the slogan *Uno vale uno* (‘one is worth one’), which is used to synthesize its internal functioning, represents an evident inclination for the rejection of ‘representative democracy’, in which everyone counts for the many they are representing. However, on this aspect, the M5S is the only political organization preferring a kind of democracy that is coherent to those models that, according to the literature, are typical of populist parties.

Table 1.3. The model of democracy supported by the party.

	No clear position identifiable	Representative democracy	Participatory/Deliberative democracy	Direct democracy	The party is against liberal democracy
PD	0	98	2	0	0
FI	12	86	0	2	0
Lega	22	58	2	4	14
M5S	2	4	22	66	6
FdI	26	60	0	2	12
LeU	2	72	26	0	0
+EU	8	78	8	6	0

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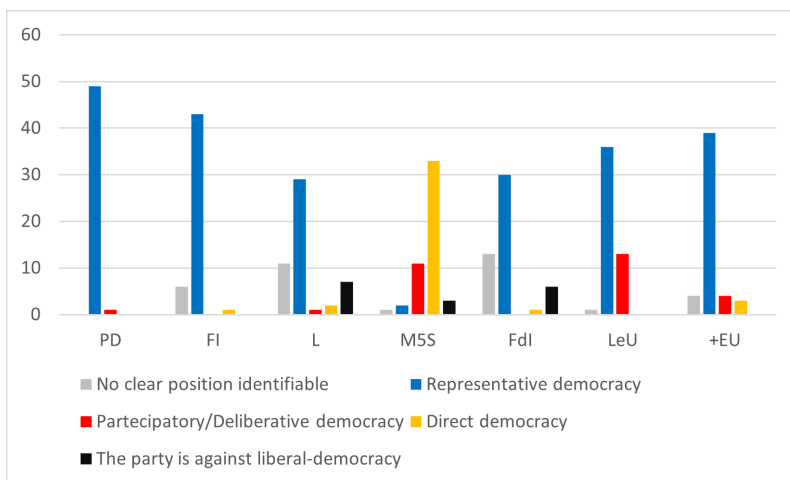


Fig. 1.2. The model of democracy supported by the party.

The meaning itself of the word ‘populism’ comes from ‘people’, as the primary target of party public appeals. However, as has already been mentioned in previous sections, the reference to the ethnic community (especially in those countries considered as ethnically homogeneous, as Italy is perceived to be, at least by its inhabitants with electoral rights) is also to be considered as part of a populist strategy. Therefore, by combining the two results, table 1.5 shows that Lega (74%), FdI (72%) and M5s (70%) are used to applying mostly populist appeals to the people of the nation at large. On the other side, all those parties that do target a specific social constituency or more (therefore, recognising the existence and thus the legitimacy of different social players) or, even more, that do not have a specific target, are to be considered as non-populist parties. The other four parties analysed do not seem to apply a populist strategy in their public appeals. Forza Italia is considered appealing to ‘the people’ only by 30% of respondents, PD by 18% and +EU by 18%. Finally, the least significant populist approach is assigned to LeU, which does apply to the nation/ethnic community only for 6% of respondents.

Table 1.4. Kind of primary targets of party public appeals.						
	No specific target identifiable	National comm. at large (the people)	A specific social constituency	More social Constituencies (inter-classism)	Ethnic comm.	Religious comm.
PD	8	18	6	68	0	0
FI	8	30	24	38	0	0
Lega	0	60	8	18	14	0
M5S	4	70	6	20	0	0
Fdl	2	66	10	6	16	0
LeU	12	6	48	34	0	0
+EU	20	18	16	46	0	0

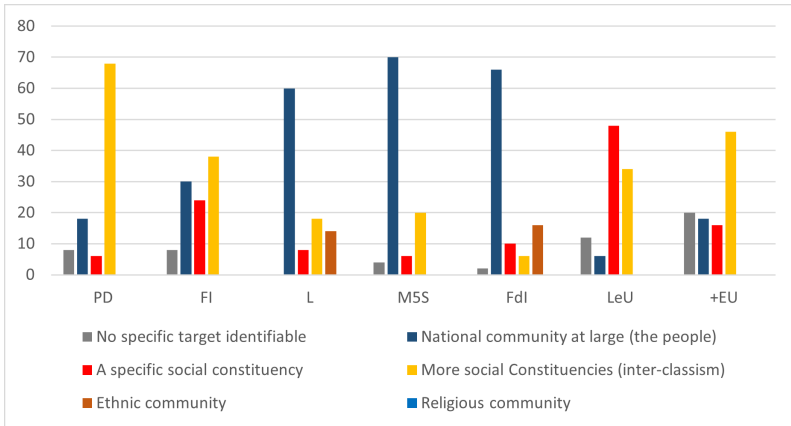


Fig. 1.3. The party electorally appeals to...

Another crucial element in the electoral strategy of populist parties is to identify a precise social sector as the most important enemy. In this case, three parties are defined as having a specific antagonist, and these are M5S, Lega and Fdl. About half of the experts identified three more parties as having a specific enemy: these are PD, LeU and FI. Therefore, only +EU is considered not to have a specific antagonist by more than half of the experts.

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Table 1.5. Presence of a specific antagonist.		
	Yes	No
PD	50	50
FI	50	50
Lega	98	2
M5S	98	2
Fdl	88	12
LeU	46	54
+EU	24	76

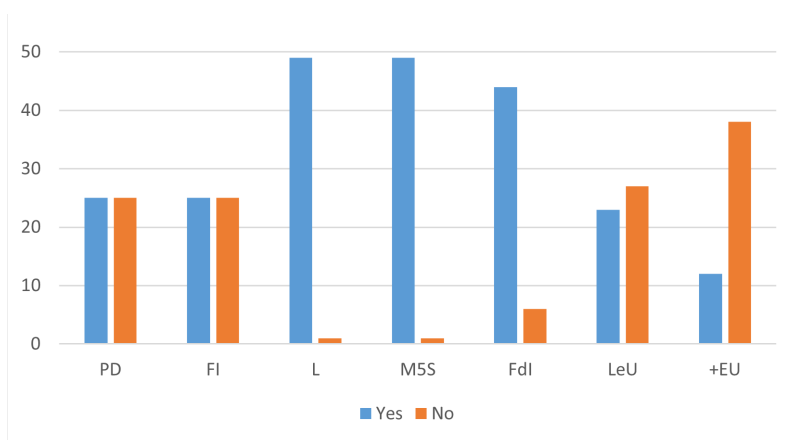


Fig. 1.4. Presence of a specific antagonist for the party.

More interesting is to check the kind of principal antagonist on which the party concentrates its negative campaigning. For four parties, there is no clear antagonist (Pd, FI, LeU and +EU), even if for two of them (PD and +EU) the principal antagonist (although with scores lower than 50% of respondents) are the populist parties themselves. This is extremely curious, as the identification of populist parties as the main enemy of democracy (or of the status quo) is, concretely, the reproduction of a populist technique by the often self-proclaimed pro-system parties (Schwörer 2018). For FI and LeU, the case is different. Although they also show a sort of anti-populist rhetoric, their principal antagonist is the judiciary power for Berlusconi's party and the economic establishment for the left-wing LeU.

At the other pole, are three parties that have a specific antagonist. For the M5S, the antagonist is represented by ‘political parties’. Actually, this is the only actor that focuses its criticism towards political parties (no less than 78% of respondents). The other parties only scored 8% at their maximum (LeU) on this aspect. These data clearly exemplify to what extent the M5S was able to almost monopolize the anti-party sentiment during the 2018 elections¹. The ‘control’ on the portion of the electorate interested in this issue (De Sio and Wever 2014) surely facilitated the electoral success of the M5S, also demonstrating the strength of this anti-party stance².

The other two parties with a clear antagonist (over 50% of respondents) are FdI and Lega. They both concentrate their negative campaigns on ‘immigrants’ (respectively 56% and 76%). Their behaviour is perfectly coherent with their appeal to the ‘national community’ as the preferred positive electoral target: immigrants represent, according to them, a threat to national identity. However, the fact that they based their electoral strategies on the same topic limited the potentiality of their electoral success.

Table 1.6. Principal antagonist.

	Pol. establishment	Econ. establishment	EU	Populist Parties	Immigr.	Mass-Media	Judiciary power	Cultural elites	None
PD	0	0	0	48	0	0	0	0	52
FI	0	0	2	18	0	0	24	0	56
Lega	6	0	16	0	76	0	0	0	2
M5S	78	4	14	0	0	0	0	2	2
FdI	6	4	14	0	56	0	0	4	16
LeU	8	24	2	14	0	0	0	0	52
+EU	0	0	0	28	0	4	0	0	68

¹ The M5S is not the only party, in the European context, that identifies its enemy with pre-existing political parties. The ‘family’ of anti-party populist parties is broader (Viviani 2019), even if in Italy the M5S covers this anti-establishment sentiment almost completely (Hartleb 2015).

² A similar conceptualization of the parties’ strategy to monopolize certain political issues was promoted by Snow and Benford (1988) and defined as “narrative fidelity”. An important study with a similar approach was conducted within the Italian case (for the then Lega Nord, in particular) by Mario Diani (1996).

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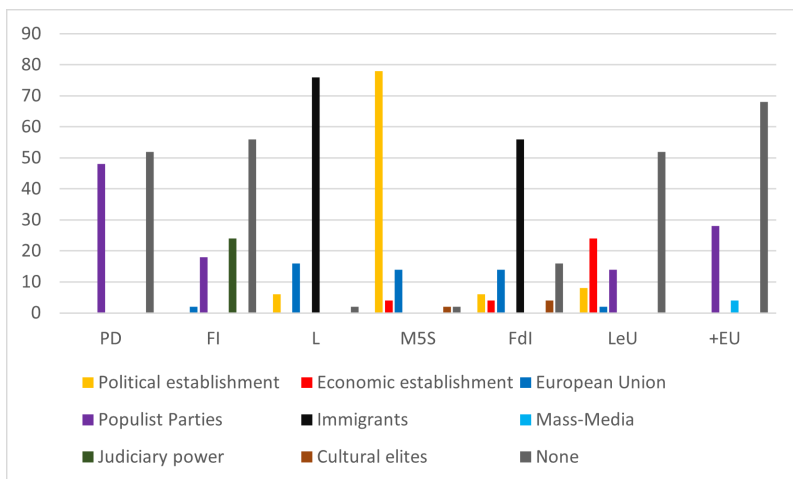


Fig. 1.5. Principal antagonist.

To conclude the analysis of this survey based on experts on Italian politics, we can try to create a ranking of the different degrees of populism in Italian parties in 2018. This can be done by classifying the seven parties according to their performance on the variables analysed. Table 1.8 offers a complete view of the presence of populist features in Italian political parties.

	Main party leader	Identification with leader	Direct democracy	Kind of primary electoral appeal	Specific antagonist	Kind of antagonist
PD	N	N	N	N	Y/N	Y/N
FI	Y	Y	N	Y/N	Y/N	N
L	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
M5S	N	Y/N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Fdl	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
LeU	N	N	N	N	Y/N	N
+EU	Y/N	Y/N	N	N	N	N

By assigning a +1 for the presence of a populist feature, 0 for its absence and +0.5 for its partial presence, table 1.5 allows us to measure the degree of populism of the parties analysed. This ranking presents three parties with very high values (Lega, Fratelli d'Italia and Movimento 5 Stelle), which score respectively 5, 5 and 4.5 points on a 0-6 scale. Forza Italia presents itself in between the populist and non-populist parties, by scoring 3, mainly due to its highly personalised profile around the figure of Berlusconi. Not surprisingly, on the non-populist side are the three centre-left parties, which were also those (especially PD and +EU) that showed an anti-populist rhetoric.

Table 1.8. Operationalization of populist features in Italian parties.

	Main party leader	Identification with leader	Direct democracy	Populist appeal	Specific antagonist	Kind of antagonist	Tot
PD	0	0	0	0	0.5	0.5	1
FI	1	1	0	0.5	0.5	0	3
Lega	1	1	0	1	1	1	5
M5S	0	0.5	1	1	1	1	4.5
FdI	1	1	0	1	1	1	5
LeU	0	0	0	0	0.5	0	0.5
+EU	0.5	0.5	0	0	0	0	1

5. Conclusion

The analysis of experts' survey results seems to confirm the large part of the literature about populist parties in Italy. Lega and FdI lead the ranking of the degree of populism shown by Italian parties. They are both characterized by nationalist populism with a strong personalization of top leadership, with Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni releasing messages recalling the 'sovereignism' and 'differential nativism' peculiar to the parties of the new populist radical right. Despite these typical characteristics and the strong role of their leaders, the two parties do not adopt the democratic functioning of leader-oriented associations. In fact, they adopt the classical style of representative democracy, which is completely in line with the history of Italian political parties but at odds with the populist framework.

On the populist/non-populist continuum, near to the positioning of these right-wing parties, is the M5S, which, at that time, was defined by many scholars as the quintessential populist party in Europe. This is surely true for what concerns the presence of a primary electoral target, of a clear antagonist, and an antagonist typical of populist actors (i.e. ‘the established political parties’). However, the antagonists of the M5S are not the foreign elements who threaten the purity of the national community (as happens in right-wing parties). On the contrary, the M5S is characterized by ‘civic populism’ and in 2018 it was struggling with the (difficult) institutionalization of a typical counter-democracy movement, as it started as a party of opposition to the establishment of mainstream parties and then was the winning party in the 2018 general elections. However, in 2018, the M5S was still featured by its original kind of internal functioning (i.e. the direct/plebiscitarian style), which is typical of and in line with the populist model. On the contrary, some non-populist elements are present in the characteristics of its leadership. According to our experts, Di Maio’s leadership seems to be quite weak, especially if compared with that of the M5S charismatic founder (and maybe still shadow leader) Beppe Grillo. The difficulties of the official leadership reduce the personalization of the party and the identification between the party and the leader himself, which should be two of the fundamental characteristics of populist parties. The M5S thus finds itself having to balance a heterogeneous political identity with its own. It has a plural leadership, which is composed of more actors than the formally indicated political leader and which has his own glue in the reiteration of an anti-caste appeal, something that has become more difficult since May 2018, when the M5S entered government. Finally, we can affirm that the M5S is a populist party, but not for the same reasons as Fdl and the Lega³.

³ The M5S, among all the parties analysed in this chapter, is the one that would undergo the most substantial changes in the following years. While, at the time of our analysis (the first semester of 2018) and for many aspects, the M5S was considered universally as the quintessential populist party, its behaviour and political discourse changed rapidly in 2019, at the time of forming a ruling alliance with the anti-populist PD, in support of the Conte II Government. In addition, the non-populist turn was strengthened during the year of management of the Covid-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2021, during which the M5S tried to promote a responsible perception of its supported Prime Minister and of the *movimento* itself.

Halfway between populist and non-populist parties is Forza Italia, which was considered as a model for populist parties around Europe for many years (especially in the Nineties). In the second decade of the third millennium this is no longer the case and Forza Italia is often considered as a pro-system, moderate and responsible actor in the Italian political arena, although many features of the party (in particular those related to the role of the leader) still bear populist elements.

To conclude, three parties (all positioned in the centre-left political space) do not present a significant presence of populist elements, although no party is completely devoid of populist characteristics. The only traces of populism in these parties are the leader's role in +EU and, for PD and LeU, the characteristic of having a precise political opponent: that is, ironically, populist parties! This naive 'anti-populists populism' also gives an explanation to the fierce opposition that PD and +EU expressed against the Conte I Government, which explicitly labelled itself in a populist way (e.g. with the extensive use of expressions such as *l'avvocato del popolo*, 'the advocate of the people', for the Prime Minister and *il governo del popolo* for the Cabinet itself), and therefore received strong criticisms from the two anti-populists parties.