

Populism and the (Italian) crisis: The voters and the context

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Abstract

This article, focusing on Italy, aims to broaden our understanding of the recent striking electoral fortunes of (differing types of) populism in the country, by locating them within multiple crises (political, economic, migration) that have shocked Europe in the last two decades **migrant ones**. By combining individual-level survey data on voters with organizational-level interviews conducted with national and local representatives and activists of the Five Star Movement and the League, the role played by these crises in the two different Italian populisms will be disentangled from ‘demand’ and ‘supply’ perspectives – which are usually treated in isolation. The findings indicate a coherence between the political parties’ message and their respective potential voters’ orientations and attitudes (with regard to the three crises), underlining the ability of different varieties of populism to intercept (and mobilize) different grievances: whereas the economic crisis of representation is a key ingredient of both the populists’ success, the cultural crisis is more salient for the exclusionary populist League, while the political crisis is more salient for the inclusionary 5SM. For both the mobilization and representation of those citizens unsatisfied with traditional politics seems crucial. These different causes of success appear to be a useful lens through which to examine the failure of an attempt to govern by combining two differing types of populism.

Keywords

causes of populism, frames, Italian crisis, varieties of populism

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Introduction

Europe has been rocked by multiple crises over the past decade. First, the economic and financial crises, then, the inflow of migrants and asylum seekers to Europe from 2015 called into question the legitimacy of national and European elites, and their ability to respond to important political matters. These crises not only contributed to party system de-alignment in many European countries, but also provided a ‘window of opportunity’ for the emergence and consolidation of populist actors, both old and new (Caiani and Graziano, 2019a, 2019b; Kriesi and Pappas, 2015; Pirro and Van Kessel, 2018). Populist parties and leaders successfully mobilized citizens who – in the shadow of a persistent economic crisis, with political parties suffering from a deficit of legitimacy, and a revival of cultural

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conservatism fuelled by the issue of migration – felt threatened and unsatisfied with the current (political) situation (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015; Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos, 2020).

Italy can be considered a paradigmatic case: In the 2018 national elections, its party system was disrupted by the striking and simultaneous success of two different populist parties: the ‘hybrid’¹ (Pirro, 2018). Five Star Movement, which – after its astonishing electoral debut in 2013 (with 27% of votes) – reached 32% of votes, and the right-wing League (since 2017, no longer the ‘Northern League’), renewed in its core-ideology and leadership, which achieved an unprecedented 17% (and 34% in the recent 2019 European elections). Together, they formed an ‘all populist government’ (Pirro, 2018). This article aims to explore the striking simultaneous success of these different types of populism in Italy, looking at both ‘demand’ and ‘supply’ sides (which are usually treated in isolation, Muis and Immerzeel, 2017) linked to the multiple crises. More specifically, by combining individual-level survey data on voters with in-depth interviews conducted with national and local political representatives and activists of the two Italian populist parties, this article focuses on three different, but not mutually exclusive (Van Der Brug and Fennema, 2007), sets of explanations for populism: a crisis of political representation (Mény and Surel, 2002; Taggart, 2000), an economic crisis (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015), and a ‘cultural clash’ crisis linked with immigration processes (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; for an overview, see Caiani and Graziano, 2019a), both from the perspective of voters’ attitudes and orientations and from the perspective of the party organizations as political ‘entrepreneurs’ (of the crisis) (Caiani and Della Porta, 2011). In fact, as noted, these parties could have not maintained such a high level of electoral and activist support and if they had not been perceived as actors able to express grievances that were otherwise unrepresented (Biorcio and Natale, 2018; Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013). What are the socio-economic profiles and the cultural and political orientations of these two populist parties’ potential voters? What kinds of crisis (economic, cultural or political?) have been ‘used’ (i.e. constructed in the political discourse) by the two different populisms, and to what extent has each kind been deployed?

In this article, we shall address these issues, trying to disentangle the respective role of these three crises in the success of the two Italian ‘varieties’ of populism (Caiani and Graziano, 2019b).

Although these causal factors are often quoted to explain the recent wave of European populism, they are sometimes treated as competing hypotheses, or used within approaches that focus, separately on the demand and supply side related to these crises (Akkerman et al., 2016; Corbetta et al., 2018; Heinisch and Mazzoleni, 2016; Brils et al., 2020). In addition, comparative empirical studies comparing ‘varieties of populism’ remain rare (for exceptions, see Kriesi, 2014; Lisi et al., 2019; Roberts, 2017). This article aims to make an empirical contribution in this regard.

The article first introduces the three sets of crisis-related theoretical explanations of populism’s success. After a section on methodology, the ‘demand side’ expectations linked to the three approaches are assessed, looking at the socio-economic, political, and cultural attitudes and orientations of (potential) 5SM and League voters. Second, interviews with local and national representatives, as well as activists, of the two organizations, accompanied by a document analysis, will shed light on the role of the three crises on the emergence and rise of these parties. In the conclusion, the centrality of the process of discursive reproduction of the crises (see also Caiani and Padoan, 2020) in explaining the ongoing ‘populist moment’ in Italy is emphasized, as is the intrinsic contradiction contained within it: different populisms contribute to the construction of ‘different crises’ and this can have (negative) consequences on populism itself (in the Italian case, jeopardizing the stability of the governmental alliance and success).

Populism and the crises

According to the *political* explanation, populism is caused mainly by the increasing dissatisfaction of citizens towards the traditional institutions and actors of representative liberal democracies (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015). Political parties in Europe have lost many of their traditional functions, providing growing space for the emergence of ‘new’ populist actors who are able to speak on behalf of the people and channel this dissatisfaction (Taggart and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015). Decreasing political trust has opened ‘windows of opportunity’ for new party actors, who are perceived not yet corrupted by the system (Fieschi and Heywood, 2004).

Other scholars pay more emphasis to *economic* hard times and economic inequality as factors that favour populism (Guiso et al., 2017). Economic crisis is seen as reinforcing the divide between globalization’s ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ (Inglehart and Norris, 2016: 11; Kriesi, 2014). Growing economic deprivation – either in general at the aggregated level or at the individual level – would lead to greater economic insecurity and fosters political discontent and mistrust in representative institutions – two factors strongly related with populism (Inglehart and Norris, 2016: 4; see also Hernández and Kriesi, 2015; Moffitt, 2015). However, the link between economic deprivation and populist voting is not always strong and positive (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006; Mols and Jetten, 2016). Finally, *immigration crisis explanations* are linked to broader cultural (or cultural backlash) phenomena. In this perspective, the rise of populist parties is a reaction (a ‘silent counter revolution’, Ignazi, 1997) against a wide range of rapid cultural changes that seem to erode the basic values and customs of Western societies (Inglehart and Norris, 2016: 30). The ‘new politics’ dimension (i.e. GAL-TAN, Green/Alternative/Libertarian vs Traditionalist/Authoritarian/Nationalist) refers to positioning on non-economic issues related with post-materialist values. Nevertheless, also the hypothesis linking immigration (i.e. the level of immigration in a country and refugee flows) with populism (i.e. voting for populist parties) only found contrasting empirical evidences (Roberts, 2017; Vadlamannati and Kelly, 2017).

Finally, scholars of comparative politics more recently emphasize that different factors favour ‘varieties of populism’ (e.g. left-wing vs right-wing) (Kriesi, 2014; Lisi et al., 2019; Roberts, 2017). Left-wing (or hybrid) populism would be linked to the intense economic crisis connected to an intense party system responsiveness crisis (Lisi et al., 2019; Roberts, 2014), whereas the latter would be mostly associated to the cultural dimension – and its success is said to be more likely when the salience of immigration is high (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Rooduijn, 2017). In countries strongly hit by economic crises, where materialist concerns are brought to the fore, the success of a left-wing, socio-economic populism that aims to defend the national welfare state and national economy is rendered more likely (Kriesi, 2014: 369–370), especially if mainstream left-wing parties were in government during the crisis as in the case of Italy.

As context characterized by a strong impact of all three crises (Di Mascio et al., 2014; Graziano, 2018), Italy appears as a ‘crucial’ case to examine how different populist parties have reacted to the same ‘political opportunities’ by mobilizing different ‘resources’ (Della Porta and Diani, 2006).

Method and data

In this study, we combine quantitative and qualitative data. To investigate the potential (citizens) demand for populism related to the three crises, we relied on the 2016

ITANES (Italian Election Studies)² survey, which was based on a representative sample of Italian voters.

To assess the salience within the Italian electorate of the different crisis-related discontent (economic, cultural and political) which can be linked with support for populist parties, we used several indicators concerning: (1) feelings of relative economic deprivation, (2) attitudes of cultural conservatism (Malka et al., 2017), and (3) political mistrust. ‘Economic deprivation’ has been measured through two variables referring to the evaluation of respectively own economic condition and the country economic situation in the last year.³ To measure cultural conservatism, we relied on two different variables: one concerning the respondent’s opinion on gender minorities’ rights⁴ (which we considered as a proxy for libertarian-authoritarian placement, Minkenberg, 2000); and a second one referring to attitudes towards immigration.⁵ To capture demand for populism related to the political crisis, we created two different variables. The first (‘trust in political parties’) was built as an index combining three different items.⁶ The second (‘pro-direct democracy’ attitude), ties to capture the potential anti-elitist orientations of citizens, asking them if they consider ordinary people able to take complex political decisions (addressing therefore the political dilemma between direct and representative democracy).⁷ Finally, within the political crisis set, we also added a variable measuring the pro- or anti-European attitudes of Italian voters,⁸ since ‘Euroscepticism’ (particularly towards the Euro currency) is an aspect on which populism can capitalize. Socio-demographic control variables (age, gender, education, and region), political ideology (self-positioning on the left-right axis), and professional occupation (job sector) were also added to the models. Through a multivariate analysis (two separate logistic regressions, in which the dependent variable is a dummy identifying those who expressed voting intention for the 5SM or the League⁹), we explored the link between the economic, political, and cultural attitudes and orientations related to the crisis and the probability of voting for the 5SM and the League.

For the ‘supply side’ of populism’s success in Italy, we explored the role played by the three crises in the official and unofficial political party discourse (i.e. in their definition of the ‘people’, the ‘other’ and the ‘leader’) of 5SM and the League, through 14 in-depth interviews of local and national political representatives and militants of the two parties (7 each)¹⁰ and a qualitative analysis of relevant party documents since the beginning of the crisis in 2008 (national and European electoral manifestoes,¹¹ Statutes and key leaders speeches¹² found on blogs) (for further details, see the section ‘party documents analysed’). In doing such a triangulation of sources, we tried to cover the ‘representative’ (official and unofficial) global discourse on how they symbolically construct and communicate the ‘populist’ identity of the party in relation to the three crises.

The demand for populism: Italian voters (and the crises)

Who are the potential populist voters? More specifically, when looking at the demand side for populism, what do populist voters in Italy think and feel in relation to the three crises?

First, as we can see from Figure 1(a) and (b) – which show the attitudes and orientations towards politics (mistrust), cultural conservatism and perceptions of economic deprivation – all-populist voters (regardless of the type of populism at hand) share some common characteristics, confirming widespread theoretical expectations regarding populism’s success in Europe. The potential voters of both the 5SM and the League score the

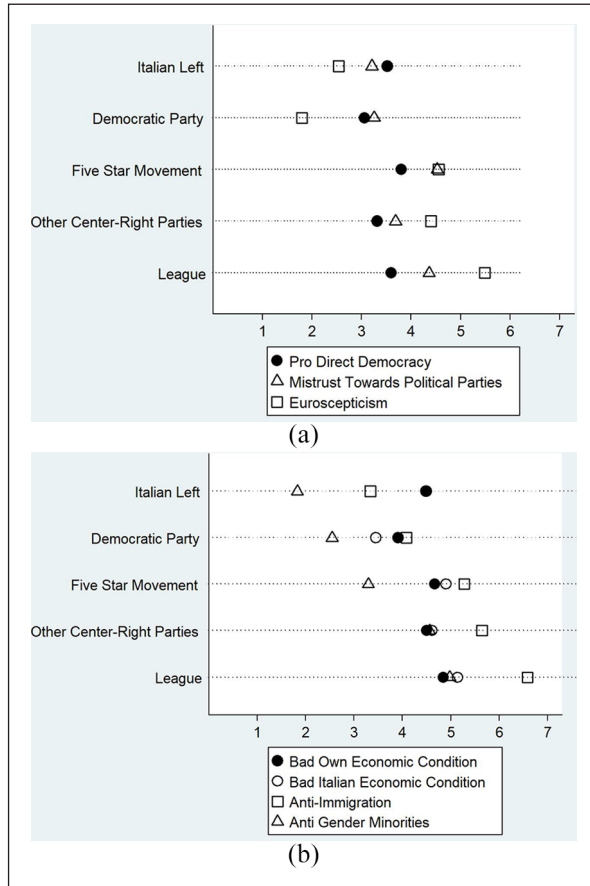


Figure 1. (a) Political orientations (mistrust towards political parties, pro-‘direct democracy’ attitudes, and Euroscepticism) among Italian voters. (b) Cultural conservatism and feelings of economic deprivation among Italian voters.

Note: Italian Left (*Sinistra Italiana*) = radical left party; Democratic Party (*PD, Partito Democratico*) = centre left; Other centre-right parties = *Nuovo Centro Destra* (centre-right), *Forza Italia* (centre-right), *Fratelli d’Italia* (right).

highest, across Italian parties, values on the index of mistrust towards politicians, display stronger pro-direct democracy attitudes, and feel the most threatened by worsening economic conditions (both personally and in terms of the country situation).

In addition, 5SM and (particularly) League voters are also more Eurosceptic than voters for other parties. However, when looking at the two populist electorates’ orientations towards gender and ethnic minorities (i.e. cultural conservatism), strong differences between League and 5SM voters do emerge, with the former strongly against both categories (and the latter closer to the values of leftist voters).

Second, Italian populist voters also seem to split into two camps in terms of socio-economic and political-ideological profiles (see Supplemental Appendix B, Table A and B). In terms of ideology, while 5SM voters are quite evenly distributed across the left-right political spectrum and are slightly skewed to the left (as well as prominent among those who refuse to locate themselves on the left-right axis),¹³ League voters overwhelmingly identify

Table 1. The ‘three crises’ and the probability of voting for the 5SM and the League: logit models.

Dependent variable: Voting intention for	Model 1: Vote for 5SM (%)		Model 2: Vote for League (%)	
<i>Independent variables</i>	Minimum Value	Maximum Value	Minimum Value	Maximum Value
<i>Bad Own Economic Condition</i>	31	28	11	14
<i>Bad Italian Economic Condition</i>	19***	37***	9	15
<i>Anti-Immigration</i>	26	31	2***	16***
<i>Anti-Gender Minorities</i>	33***	24***	10***	16***
<i>Pro-Direct Democracy</i>	26**	33**	13	14
<i>Mistrust Towards Political Parties</i>	18***	42***	16	11
<i>Euroscepticism</i>	22***	38***	9***	16***
Constant	29***		13***	
Pseudo R ²	0.17		0.38	
N	1793		1793	

Data ITANES 2016. Dependent variables: dummies (1/0), showing the share (%) of those expressing her or his voting intention for the 5SM (model 1) and for the League (model 2), where 1 is = ‘in case of elections tomorrow, I would vote for the 5SM/League’; vs zero = all the other political parties, excluded the categories ‘don’t know’ and ‘didn’t answer’.

** $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.01$.

with the Right. Moreover, although both populist parties, contrary than centre-left parties, are overrepresented among blue-collar and unemployed workers, the League attracts a more cross-class electorate (see also Cavallaro and Zanetti, 2020), whereas the 5SM appears to come more from a ‘popular’ sectors (blue-collar workers, the unemployed and unpaid domestic workers) and be less present among professionals and skilled white-collar workers – suggesting that the economic crisis might play a stronger role in the success of this latter party (which, as we will see in fact, articulates its ‘people’ in socio-economic terms).

The multivariate analysis largely confirms this picture. Table 1, which indicates the probability of the vote for both the parties (i.e. 5SM, first model and the League, second model), shows that voting for the League is highly related to the cultural aspects of the crisis (in particular negative attitudes towards immigrants and gender minorities). Instead, the preference for the 5SM appears more linked to the saliency of the economic and political crisis for voters (i.e. the insecurity concerning the country’s economic situation and distrust towards traditional politicians appear to influence positively the probability of the vote for this party), whereas League voters do not seem to be particularly driven by anti-political sentiments (distrust of political parties). Moreover, both the populist parties are strongly related to a Eurosceptic electorate, confirming that ‘Euroscepticism’ can be considered the real glue that held together (for a while) such different populisms in government in Italy (Pirro, 2018).

In sum, our analysis seems to confirm that ‘a populist voter does not exist’ (Rooduijn, 2017: 18); rather, there are ‘varieties of populisms’ (Caiani and Graziano, 2019a) each with their own voters and causal reasons (Kriesi, 2018). The discursive toolbox employed by the two different Italian populisms to exploit the three crises will be illustrated in the next section.

The populist supply: The party discourse

To which extent the cadres and the rank-and-file of these parties construct their political offer and identity in line with voters' demands? The meso-level organizational data of the political discourse of the two populist parties show actually that they respectively assign a relative importance to the three crises similar to their voters: the economic and political crises appears as more salient for the 5SM, whereas the cultural crisis for the League (for similar results in a quantitative study, see Caiani and Graziano, 2019a).

Cultural crisis and the league and 5SM

The League is clearly the party that owns the debate on immigration in Italy.¹⁴ Particularly under Salvini's new leadership, the party has placed the defence of national sovereignty and cultural homogeneity of the country at the centre of its populist discourse (downplaying its ethno-regionalism), employing highly xenophobic tones (e.g. Pirro, 2018). During the 2018 electoral campaign, for example, Salvini's propaganda, as testified also in the electoral manifesto (e.g. League, 2018: 8),¹⁵ was almost exclusively focused on migration issues (Massidda and Saccà, 2018) and this was also considered its 'winning formulae', making the anti-immigration stances the party able to extend its electoral appeal to all the country (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018: 112). Indeed, the League's activists, when asked about the major problems of the country, stress first of all the lack of immigration and immigrants ('we have to know how these people behave, what they do in our country' (ID.2, 13, 4); the defence of 'local cultures' (since 'immigration means cultural homogenization (. . .), namely some people who want to substitute our culture with another one', ID.13) and multiculturalism (strongly rejected since 'we don't want to become another France, a multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-problematic country', ID.4).

Through identitarian frames, the League voters (i.e. the people) are constructed ('our identity is tied to our territories', League, 2018: 64) and the anti-elite appeal is framed as well in terms of the inability of Italian political class to 'defend' Italians from EU's impositions (League, 2014: 3). The same is visible in the 2013 and 2014 party manifestoes (Caiani and Graziano, 2016: 248–249). Immigration is indeed often portrayed as a 'silent and planned invasion, aiming at destroying the identity of the Italian people' (ID.4, 6, 8), and Islam, in particular, is depicted as a 'conquering religion' (ID.4, 8).

Our interviews strongly confirm in fact the high salience of identitarian and cultural issues for party cadres and members when describing their political action and propaganda, as well as in their definition of the people the party aims to defend (see also Caiani, 2019). As a local representative of the League explains, 'immigration is the most important issue for Italy, since in the near future our country and society will be totally altered by it' (ID.8). Most interviewees insist on an exclusionary conception of 'the people' defined in ethnic and religious terms (ID.2, 8, 13), since 'Italian-ness is incompatible with Islam' (ID.2; also ID.6), whereas 'being Italian and being Catholic overlaps' (ID.2, 14). Along these lines, the League defines itself (and its political action) predominantly as a 'saviour' of the country against the many problems brought about by the immigration crisis (such as 'the rise of crime' ID. 6, 'unemployment', etc.).

However, immigration is also blended with socio-economic issues in the political official and unofficial discourse of the League, as, for instance, a local representative explains 'the main issue in Italy could be unemployment; however, immigration is strongly related with it' (ID.2). The antagonism between the (Italian) people and the 'Other' (i.e. the

immigrants) is often constructed and justified through references to the economic crisis, as ‘immigration is unacceptable, because there are many Italians who are unemployed’ and ‘forced to migrate’ (ID.4; similarly, 2, 6). Migrants are considered to take economic advantage of Italians, since ‘they are available to work for lower salaries, or even without any regular contract. Not caring about their pension, since they will leave the country’ (ID.14).¹⁶ Immigration and socio-economic issues are also linked together by portraying other important enemies of the people’, warning against a supposed alliance between ‘NGOs, big financiers, masonic lodges and migrants’ (ID.4, 6), and the Left ‘which accepted hosting migrants in exchange for budgetary flexibility from the EU’ (ID.6).

The contrast with the 5SM is striking and our analysis showed a much lesser salience of the cultural-immigration aspect of the crisis in the political discourse of the party, either at the grassroots level and at the institutional level. As emerged from the interviews, for example, the political representatives and activists interviewed often complain about the ‘exaggerated priority given to migration issues in Italy’ and they mainly emphasize the socio-economic (and political) problems of the country (‘migration is not a national emergency (. . .), it is instead the Deutsche Bank, the most serious source of systemic risk in the world’) (ID.7; similarly, ID.11, 9). Immigration is interpreted as a ‘consequence of economic and environmental wars in the Third World’ and as ‘a phenomenon that you cannot stop, you can only – and should – manage’ (ID.11).¹⁷ The political role of the 5SM party is said to ‘to integrate the migrants, not just host them’ (ID.12). The few references to the cultural problems related to immigration refer to ‘the necessity of defending the secularization of the country’ (and concerns about immigrant women’s rights are often expressed) (e.g. ID.7, 11) and a peaceful coexistence between different cultures is often called for (as an ‘opportunity for Italy’ (ID.7, 11, 12). In the political discourse of 5SM party representatives and activists, immigration is instead often mentioned with reference to the *political* crisis of representation of the country and coupled with an ‘anti-caste’ (anti elite) rhetoric (‘immigration is an obscure process that has benefitted some politicians’, ID. 9).

However, the hybrid nature of the 5SM’s populism (and its success) also emerges in the official (leaders’) discourse of the party, which contrary than the local cadres and activists, makes use of many xenophobic appeals. They are particularly present in several Grillo’s speeches and posts since 2007 closely resembling the exclusionary framing of the League (e.g. Grillo, 2007, 2015a, 2015b) (see also Pirro and Van Kessel, 2018). Moreover, in the last 2018 electoral manifesto the party stresses the necessity to adopt a law and order position to dismantle the ‘hosting system’, formed by NGOs and private organizations, ‘draining public revenues and incentivizing illegal immigration’ (5SM, 2018). The EU is mainly criticized, in the party documents and leaders’ speeches for its lack of political legitimacy and accountability (as we will see in the next section), but also with some references to its inability to cope with the immigration refugee crisis (e.g. ID.5). Although the hybrid nature of the 5SM certainly shows a more limited use of cultural aspects of crisis (e.g. on immigration), however, some cultural references to a national and international (namely European) crisis are found.

Political crisis and the league and 5SM

The political crisis of representation lies at the core of the foundation of the 5SM. Since its birth, a vehement anti-establishment rhetoric, together with the call for an active participation of citizens in politics is at the centre of its political discourse (Pirro, 2018).¹⁸ As

Beppe Grillo emphatically stresses in his Blog, ‘the 5SM wants the citizens to become the State (. . .). The parties are dead, are outdated organizations, the movements are alive’ (Grillo, 2011). Similarly in the first party statute the mission of the 5SM is not ‘to be a party’, instead ‘give to Web users the role of governing, which is normally attributed to the few’ (5SM, 2009; similarly also 5SM, 2017, see art. 2.a), and also our interviews with party representatives and militants the traditional political parties are often blamed for the problems of the country (‘the 5 S movement wants to solve the deficiencies of the Italian political class *vis-à-vis* the country’ ID.10, 11). This is fully in line with the party’s official discourse. The 2018 party manifesto, for instance, widely discusses constitutional reforms aiming at ‘introducing forms of direct democracy and limit the power of political parties’ (5SM, 2018: 300) and the same word ‘political parties’ is very often used in all the documents analysed to attack the entire political spectrum (i.e. they are defined as ‘politically responsible for disastrous immigration policies, 302; ‘not credible’, 304, 323 and 335, etc.).

Many of the local and national interviewees indeed stress the necessity for the country to exit from the current crisis of political legitimacy and to re-new ‘the relationship between citizens and politics (. . .), fostering participation and engagement’ (ID.11). Forms of direct democracy and the benefits of the Internet in this sense are often underlined and also transferred at the EU level (ID. 11) (e.g. ‘we need more Europe, yet a radically different Europe. A democracy of the Peoples (. . .) more participation in our European democracy, and direct democratic tools’ (ID.12; also ID.7, 3 and 9).

Although the League had fewer political opportunities to exploit the *political crisis of representation* with a credible discourse regarding its ‘newness’ and ‘outsiderness’ (as it was one of the main protagonists of the Second Republic), the political crisis does however form part of its public discourse (even if at a lesser extent than in the 5SM).

The party presents itself as on the side of ‘ordinary people’ (Canovan, 1999), ‘paying strong attention to know the real needs of the people, contrary to other politicians, who live in upper-class neighbourhoods and pretend to represent poor pensioners’, ID.2). Moreover, the political crisis of representation is mainly (but not only)¹⁹ mobilized through Eurosceptic claims (especially under Salvini leadership) – namely transposing the critiques against the lack of democracy and accountability from the national – as the 5SM does – to the European level. As a local political representative emphasizes indeed, ‘an integration process from below, based on the will of the people is positive, however what we see is a process from above’ (ID.8). In the 2018 League manifesto, for instance, the EU as ‘a gigantesque supranational institution, lacking any democratic legitimation, and organised through a tentacular bureaucratic structure that imposes its agenda to our Governments’ (League, 2018: 9) and according to many interviewees the EU is a ‘project imposed by above’ (ID.8), in order to ‘tell us what we have to do within our borders’ (ID.13), and ‘an institution whose cons are much higher than pros’ (ID.6). Contrary than in the 5SM’s discourse, the main focus of the League’s criticism of Europe and traditional politics is above all on cultural, rather than political arguments (i.e. the EU as ‘driver of immigration’), or on the EU’s negative economic effects for Italy. In sum, the political crisis of representation is often transformed by the League into a crisis of cultural identity and the consequent need for the ‘restoration of national [sovereignty]’ (e.g. ID.4). The solutions proposed by the party often bridge ethnic issues with political frames (e.g. ‘for instance, people belonging to Muslim communities should not have the right to be elected’, ID.2, similarly ID 4, 6). However, in the 2018 party manifesto a

more nuanced and encompassing (beyond the cultural aspects) understanding of the party Euroscepticism is offered.

Economic crisis and the league and 5SM

The economic crisis is present in the political discourse of both populist parties (and it is explicitly linked to the austerity policies imposed by the EU), although with some specificities.

Together with the high salience of the political crisis, the economic crisis is frequently referred to in the populist appeal of the 5SM, both in the official party discourse (see 5SM 2013, 2018, and also 5SM 2014, e.g. against the Fiscal Compact and pro balanced budgets at the national level) and in their representatives' and activists' narratives. Already during Monti's government, for example, the 5SM adopted a strong anti-austerity position, criticizing taxes increase and the lack of social protection for Italian citizens. Since 2011, the flagship policy of the 5SM has been the introduction of the *reddito di cittadinanza*, a conditional anti-poverty cash-transfer and anti-austerity and overtly Eurosceptic positions are also widely present in the 2018 party manifesto, particularly in its chapter on 'economic development', which is the longest and most detailed of the programme. The struggle against austerity is described as a 'painful and difficult path that nonetheless must be taken: the alternative option is people's famine, is the End' (5SM, 2018: 88). The prominence of economic and anti-austerity issues (together with political issues) in the political discourse and offer of 'identity' by the 5SM is confirmed by our interviews. Many interviewees indicate often 'poverty and inequality' (e.g. ID.9, 11), and 'unemployment' (e.g. ID.3, 12) as the most urgent problem of the country and emphasize that the battle against it is the main goal of the party ('to guarantee economic sustainment for everyone' ID.5). The definition of the enemy of (their) people is also couched in economic terms ('citizens, either migrants or not, have been condemned by a capitalist system that reduced all of them in slavery', ID.12; similarly, ID.7). Moreover, the cultural-migration crisis is often interpreted from an economic perspective as a 'war among poor peoples', whose 'main beneficiaries are the multinational groups (. . .). Our politicians are just selling out our economy' (ID.12). Similarly also the criticism against the EU elite is often framed in socio-economic terms (e.g. the EU process as merely 'a financial one, with no attention to social inequalities (. . .)'; we have to 'to create at the EU level a 'European solidarity'', ID.9).

In assessing the importance of the economic crisis for the League's populism, we must first of all note that, since 2014, this party and the 5SM²⁰ have campaigned on virtually the same 'anti-Euro' platform. In its 2018 electoral manifesto, for instance, the League calls for a 'new model of development' based on the 'recovery of the internal demands', against 'the German idea of competition at the expenses of workers' salaries and rights . . .' (League, 2018: 9) (similarly in the 2014 one the call is for 'out of Euro, now!' (League, 2014: 15). In general, the financial crisis is mentioned quite often also by the political representatives and militants of the party interviewed, with an emphasis on the link between economic and sovereignty concerns (mainly against Europe), as well as the bridging of the economic discourse with the immigration related one (i.e. economic problems as immigration problems', ID.2).

In sum, from the features emerged so far from the analysis of the political discourse and the voters' attitudes of the two parties, we can summarize (see Table 2) the relevance of the three crises for the two different Italian populisms as follows:

Table 2. Relevance of the three Crises in the League's and the Five Star Movement's political discourse: summary of empirical findings.

Type of crisis	The League	Five Star Movement
Political	Peripheral/minor	Very important/defining party's identity
Socio-economic	Important	Important
Cultural	Very important/defining party's identity	Peripheral/minor

Source: Own elaboration.

The results at the voter level appear to be in line with the political discourse constructed and deployed by the two populist parties in the official and unofficial public sphere, suggesting that the supply and demand sides of populism's success have matched in the Italian case. Both parties have gradually developed a comprehensive populist discourse (i.e. concerning the people, the elite and the leader) aiming at offering both a diagnosis and a solution of the multiple Italian crises, evidently 'resonating' with their potential constituencies.

Conclusions: A conflictual compromise between two different populisms

In this study, we investigated, in a comparative way, the role played by the political, economic, and cultural-migration crises, in the success of varieties of populism in Italy, at a supply and demand side, which often are analysed in isolation. Triangulating various qualitative and quantitative data at the voters and party level (survey, party documents and interviews, leaders' speeches), the article underlines the importance of the distinction between different types of populism (their main aims and the main causes behind them), as well as the ways in which they complement (but also conflict) one another. The findings have indicated a coherence between the political parties' message and their respective potential voters' orientations and attitudes (with regards the three crises), underlining the ability of different varieties of populism to intercept (and mobilize) different grievances: while the cultural crisis is more salient for the exclusionary populist League, the economic and the political crisis of representation is more salient for the hybrid 5SM.

Our interviews with activists and representatives of the two different populisms in Italy have confirmed, in line with our expectations, that the economic crisis better explains the identity of the political message (and the successful appeal) of the 5SM (which aligns in this with other inclusionary populist parties born in Southern Europe in the shadow of the 2008 crisis: Font et al., 2019); whereas the cultural crisis is central to the identity of the League's populism, perfectly fitting the model of many other European right-wing parties (Muis and Immerzeel, 2017). On the other hand, the survey data stressed that the 5SM and League voters are those who most express a 'distrusting politics', largely considered as a fertile breeding ground to populism (Diamanti and Lazar, 2018: 138).²¹ Different populisms, given the same country-specific opportunities, were able to create their own 'winning formula', starting from the three crises, mobilizing specific resources (their 'own culture', circles of different potential supporters, which constrain the range of potentially useful arguments available to them (Caiani and Della Porta, 2011) and capitalizing on a specific 'mix' of the various crises ('the perfect recipe', Graziano, 2018).

Our comparison between different types of populist parties and (potential) voters in the same country showed also that ‘populism’ is far from being monolithic (Canovan, 1999; Mény and Surel, 2002; Taggart, 2000; on the Italian case in particular, see Diamanti and Lazar, 2018; Tarchi, 2016). The frame of reference provided by the emergent scholarly debate about ‘varieties of populism’ (Ivaldi et al., 2017; Pappas, 2016) seems to be a useful lens for understanding the internal politics in Italy as well as the subsequent crisis of government, with an emphasis on the importance of the ‘construction’ of the crisis (or crises) by the various actors. The fact that the crisis meant different things for the two different populisms, and that ‘different crises’ were therefore at the basis of their respective successes, certainly imposed serious constraints on the duration of a common government project of the ‘all-populist government’ (Pirro, 2018). Just to mention a few, if Euroscepticism has been – as our analysis showed – the strongest *trait d’union* between 5SM and League voters and activists: the League’s representatives attack EU institutions because they limit the Italian (ethno) national sovereignty and favour a process of cultural homogenization, whereas the 5SM mainly criticizes the democratic deficit. Moreover, being ‘populism in power’ proved to be difficult for both the parties (for a review on the consequences of populism in power, Muis and Immerzeel, 2017). The kind of ‘crises’ emphasized (and reproduced) by each party continued to be different also once in office, and different were the answers of the (respective) populist Italian constituencies to them. On the one hand, the League continued to strongly exploiting the migratory crisis, dominating the media agenda with this topic. This provoked several critiques from and within the governmental ally (for whose constituency the topic is not highly salient and partly ‘uncomfortable’). On the other hand, the 5SM, as a party which is considered the ‘essence of the populist mentality’ (Tarchi, 2016: 338), experienced increasing difficulties in maintaining its (electorally successful) image of ‘political outsider’, and discontent from part of its ‘people’ not in agreement with the compromises, in many ‘populist promises’ with the League (e.g. on immigration for the inclusionary wing constituency of the 5SM, on the moderated socio-economic and inequality initiatives, etc.). These tensions exploded with the different results of the two populist parties at the European elections 2019, and brought about the governmental crisis, as well as the following new ‘anti-Salvini’ alliance between the 5SM and the Italian Democratic party.²² As the literature over ‘varieties of populism’ implicitly suggests, sharing the ‘populist’ label does not seem to assure the basis for long-term (or even mid-term) alliances. Moreover, we propose that the different electoral fates of the two main Italian populist parties can suggest that whereas the ‘cultural crisis’ for populism success can be exploited for a longer period by these forces, the ‘political crisis’ of representation is electorally rewarding just in the short term, since it is strongly linked to their ‘credibility of anti-elitism once in power, that is, in government (Zulianello, 2017).²³ This is arguably our more intriguing finding: as also our 5SM’s interviewees implicitly confirmed, by betraying a certain irritation towards its (former) ‘populist ally’, the ‘failure as destiny once in power’ hypothesis (to use a paraphrases of Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015), seems therefore to affect less likely radical right-wing populist parties than ‘anti-political’ populist parties, such as the 5SM.

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Supplementary Information

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.

Notes

1. Admittedly, every classification of parties into categories is likely to raise questions and some objections. We prefer to talk about ‘hybrid’ instead of ‘left wing’ or ‘inclusionary populism’ with regard to the 5SM, since, although this latter classification is adopted by many comparative studies (Font et al., 2019; Ivaldi et al., 2017), it is still highly contested. Despite an initial left wing positioning the current ideological nature of the 5SM is rather ambiguous, eclectic, and ‘mutating’ (Ceccarini and Bordignon, 2016; Corbetta, 2018; Mosca and Tronconi, 2019; Pirro, 2018). The party is also defined as ‘valence populist party’ (Zulianello, 2019) and recognized to have adopted an ideologically mix of policy positions without clearly locating itself on either the left or the right flank of the party system, instead *mainly in opposition to the political establishment* (Roberts, 2017).
2. <http://www.itanes.org/dati/>
3. Scale 1–5: where 1 = ‘improved a lot’, and 5 = ‘got worse a lot’.
4. The respondents were asked to locate themselves on a 1–7 scale, where 1 = ‘the law should defend the traditional family model’ and 7 = ‘The law should recognise the new family models’.
5. Respondents were asked to locate themselves on a 1–7 scale, where 1 = ‘we are receiving too many immigrants’ and 7 = ‘we could easily host many more immigrants’.
6. How much do you agree on the following statements? (scale 0–10) ‘Political parties are necessary to defend the interests of different social groups’; ‘Thanks to the political parties, people can participate to democracy’; ‘There is no democracy without parties’.
7. How much do you disagree with the following statement? (scale 0–10) ‘People lack the necessary competence or interest to take a decision on important political issues’.
8. ‘For Italy joining the Eurozone was . . .’: ‘1 = beneficial’, ‘2 = neither beneficial nor detrimental’ or ‘3 = detrimental’.
9. The question was about the voting intention: ‘If elections for the Lower Chamber were scheduled for tomorrow, which party would you vote for?’ The answers were 33% for the 5SM and 14% for the League (very similarly with the electoral results of the last 2018 national election of the country).
10. The interviews were conducted from September to December 2018 (some months after the formation of the new government). The sample of the interviewee partners was chosen to provide for sufficient variation in terms of different types of populisms, age, gender, local vs national, political representatives of the party (i.e. party in the office) vs grassroot activists (i.e. party on the ground; Katz and Mair, 1993). For geographical location of the interviewees, for practical reasons we focused on two regions, Veneto (a League’s stronghold, where the 5SM is poorly rooted) and Tuscany (where 5SM’s militancy has somewhat deeper roots and where, in contrast, only recently League achieved substantial results).
11. We must note the different nature of the party programmes for the two parties (in terms of length, origin, base of approval, etc.). For example, whereas all of them are substantially drafted by the elites of the two organizations, they differ in length and therefore in elaboration of the content. For instance, the 2018 electoral manifesto of the 5SM consists of 556 pages divided into 17 ‘programmatic areas’, raised by the bottom up online platform *Rousseau*. However, both the 2013 national electoral manifesto and the 2014 European one were much shorter (7 and 1 page, respectively). As for the League the manifestoes analysed varied in length (with 11, 39, and 74 pages, respectively) and concretely they are drafted by the political secretariat, following the programmatic tenets indicated by the leader (League, 2015; Merli, 2017).
12. Speeches were selected because politically relevant for parties themselves (i.e. they express in relative detail the ideological basis of the party) and/or highly symbolic speeches (such as the New Year’s Eve speeches), see also (Font et al., 2019).
13. Confirming the uncertain ideological connotation of the 5SM party’s voters.
14. We are aware that the ‘cultural crisis’ can be hardly limited to the debate on immigration, and for this reason we captured this both with anti immigrants and cultural conservatism attitudes in the survey analysis. However, in the interview and analysis of party documents part we mainly relied on the parties’ positions towards immigration issues.
15. The 2013 national electoral manifesto (League, 2013) did not particularly focus on immigration (just a brief mention on ‘contrasting illegal immigration’), whereas in the European 2014 manifesto an entire section is dedicated to strong anti-Islam stances (e.g. ‘European solidarity on immigration is a fib for credulous people (. . .) we need much more national sovereignty on these issues’).
16. Migrants are even considered to lack the good ‘culture of work typical of Italians’ (ID.2).

17. In line with a socio-economic frame of interpretation immigration is indicated as ‘a source of labour exploitation’ (ID.2) and the ‘people’ that the 5SM aims to represent also includes immigrants (ID7, 12).
18. As a political representative emphasizes, ‘eco-feminism, participation from below and eco-pacifism’ have been a core value of the movement since its birth” (ID.12).
19. Anti-establishment and pro-direct democracy proposals are also present in the 2018 League’s electoral manifesto (p. 21), as the reduction of the number of MPs, and against the turnout threshold for the validity of popular referenda.
20. As for the 5SM, the proposal of a referendum on Italy exit from the Eurozone was the first programmatic point of the 2014 European election manifesto.
21. Similarly, as expected, the survey data showed that comparing to the other Italian political parties, economic concerns are more salient for the 5SM sympathizers, and cultural-immigration-conservatives one for the League voters.
22. We must note however that the very recent 2020 regional elections pointed out that also the 5SM strategy of alliance with its ‘archenemy’ Democratic Party is not electorally rewarding and further weakens its ‘anti-system’ (winning formulae) features.
23. If a populist party ceases to be anti-elitist, it also ceases to be populist. The key point is rather how the populists can remain credible in their anti-elitism despite integration, Zulianello (2019), interview.

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